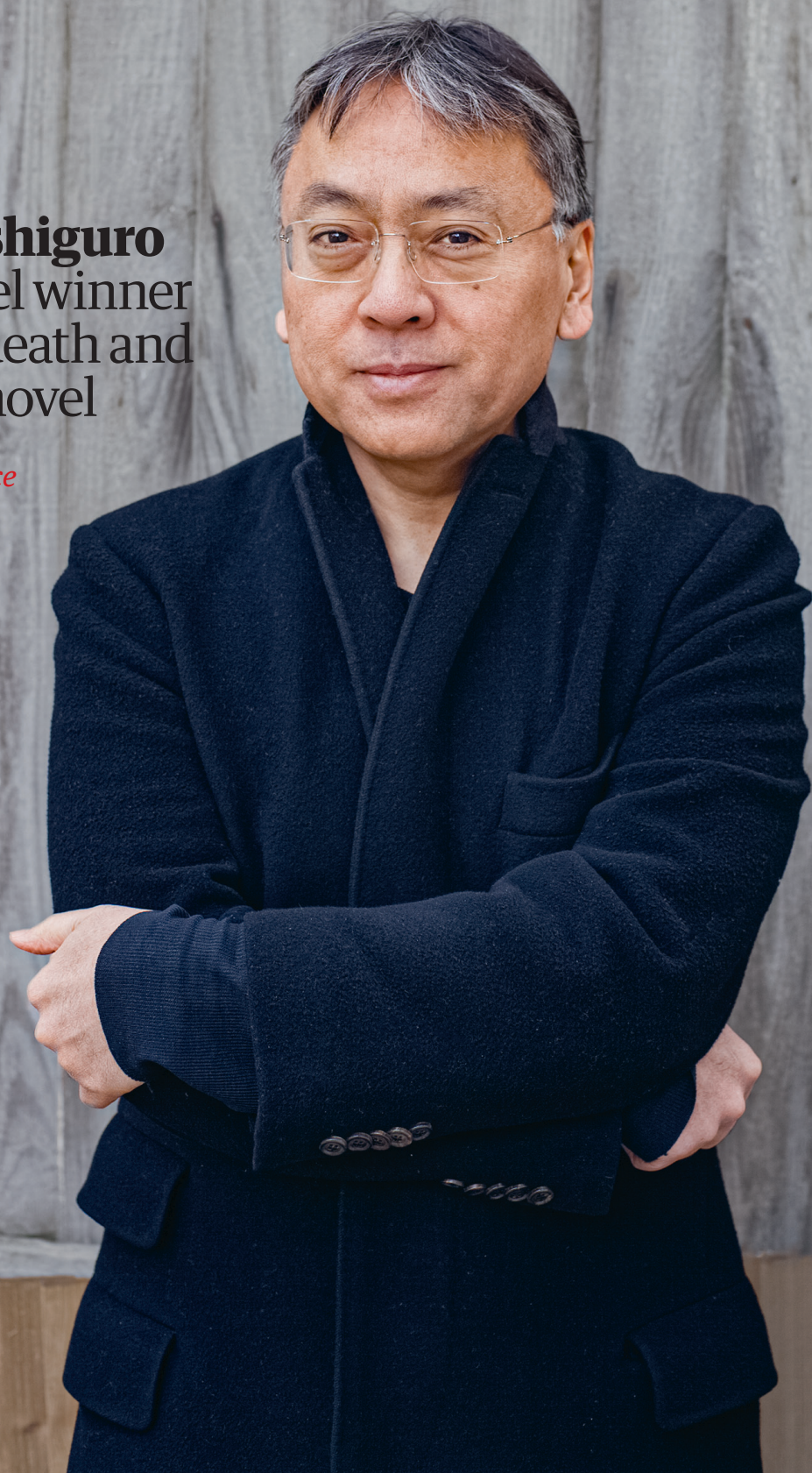


Review

Saturday 20 February 2021 - Issue N° 161

Kazuo Ishiguro The Nobel winner on love, death and his new novel

—
By Lisa Allardice





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Review

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'I can't connect with my imagination. My whole brain is tied up with processing, processing, processing what's going on in the world.'

– Linda Grant, page 25

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The week in books 20 February

In Search of more Proust

For everyone who decided to bite the madeleine and read all 4,000-odd pages of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) during lockdown, what's one more book? French publisher Gallimard has announced that it will be releasing a never-before-published Proust book: *Les Soixante-quinze feuillets*, or *The Seventy-five Pages*, on 18 March.

The texts in *The Seventy-five Pages* were written in 1908, around the time Proust began working on *In Search of Lost Time*. The papers were part of a collection of manuscripts held by the publisher Bernard de Fallois, but thought to be lost until they were rediscovered after De Fallois's death in 2018.

In a statement on its website, Gallimard called *The Seventy-five Pages* the "Proustian grail", describing their rediscovery as a "thunderclap". Without revealing details of the writings, the publisher said the book would be an "essential piece of the puzzle" and would shed new light on Proust's seven-volume magnum opus. An English translation has yet to be announced. **Sian Cain**

Ode to Keats

John Keats died believing his name was "writ in water", as it says on his gravestone in Rome, but the 200th anniversary of his death on Tuesday is set to be marked with new poems and various events, including an immersive tour of the Keats-Shelley House in

Rome with Bob Geldof, the musician and ambassador for the house.

The Poetry Society commissioned Ruth Padel (below), Rachael Boast and Will Harris to write poems acknowledging the anniversary, with Padel's inspired by "Ode to a Nightingale". "Sleepless in lockdown, I heard a robin belting out its song in the middle of the night and thought of Keats," said Padel. "A beautiful song, and a little spark of hope. A perfect example of where poetry can take us, why we need it."

At the Keats-Shelley House, a programme of special events begins

with the launch of a video tour of the house by Geldof. He will also narrate a video story, *The Death of Keats*, in which he recounts, reading from letters, Keats's trip to Italy, the poet's time in the house and death from tuberculosis at the age of 25.

Alison Flood

Wallace reprieve

The Wallace Collection's library and archive are to remain open to members of the public after a backlash over proposals to close them prompted more than 10,000 people sign a petition. "It has been heartening to hear so many voices who find the library and archive at the collection a valuable resource for research and study," said the historic collection's director, Dr Xavier Bray. "We welcome this support, and hope that they might consider making a donation to help the museum in these challenging times." **AF**



REX FEATURES; MURDO MACLEOD/THE GUARDIAN

Henge

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole



In archaeological news, researchers have recently unearthed evidence to suggest that Stonehenge was originally built in Wales, before being taken and re-erected at its present site in Wiltshire. But what is a "henge" anyway?

Since "henge" was an old English word for "hang", it is thought that the place name "Stonehenge" meant "the hanging stones", ie the lintel pieces suspended across two columns. In 1932 the British archaeologist Sir Thomas Downing Kendrick proposed the back formation "henge" to describe any such neolithic monument in a circular or oval earthen enclosure, including Woodhenge, a site discovered in 1926 where concentric rings of timber poles were once erected.

From then on the henge industry adopted the term for the standing stones at Avebury, the Ring of Brodgar in Orkney, etc, while its scholars tweedily quarrelled over whether European sites such as Golring in Germany also deserved the name. Most peculiarly, however, it is now generally agreed that, since its ditch lies outside its perimeter mound, Stonehenge itself is not actually a proper henge. What indeed would the druids and "the little people of Stonehenge", as the Spinal Tap song has it, say to us if we told them that?



'Reading *A Little Life* I didn't just cry, I bawled - in public'

Vick Hope

The book I am currently reading

There are 57 of them on the go at the moment as I'm a judge on the Women's prize for fiction panel this year.

The book that changed me

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee taught me that we are not equal and we should be and that we must speak up for what is right.

The book that changed my mind

There was a low point at uni, when I felt as if I'd made a huge mistake applying to read languages, and that they'd made a huge mistake accepting me. Studying Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) reminded me why I loved Spanish so much.

The book I wish I'd written

Mum has told me many stories of growing up during the Nigeria-Biafra war in the late 1960s, of coming to the UK, and becoming a part of a culture so unfathomably different ... but as with any childhood memories, there are gaps. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie helped me fill them: *Half of a Yellow Sun* taught me so much about my heritage and the history of our family's land.

My comfort read

David Almond's works: *Skellig*, *Kit's Wilderness* and *Heaven Eyes*. Almond is from my hometown of Newcastle upon Tyne and at the age of 12 nothing had

ever been so exciting for us at our school than the fact that he was coming to visit for a signing. He captured my imagination as he created worlds and characters that were at once magical, but also acutely recognisable.

The book I'm ashamed not to have read

I have Barack Obama's *A Promised Land* and Michelle Obama's *Becoming* sitting side by side on my bookcase and it is frankly ridiculous that I haven't read them yet. Obamas, I'm sorry.

The last book that made me cry

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara. I didn't just cry, I bawled. Nay, I wailed. In public.

The book that had the greatest influence on me

Exploring themes of racism, oppression, rebellion and political dissidence, Malorie Blackman's *Noughts & Crosses* was a thought-provoking and mobilising read in my early teens, but it was the story of forbidden love at its core that nourished me the most. Having grown up as part of a mixed race family in 90s Newcastle, we didn't know anyone else who looked like us, and it was in the pages of *Noughts & Crosses* that for the very first time I heard of an interracial relationship like that of my parents. The book showed me that representation matters and made me want to give a voice to other young people through writing.

My earliest reading memory

We didn't have a TV, so story time before bed was really special, and I remember my dad reading Roald Dahl's *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*.

The Women's prize longlist will be announced on 10 March.

'AI, gene-editing, big data ... I do worry we are not in control of these things any more'

The Nobel-winning author talks to *Lisa Allardice* about scaring Harold Pinter, life after death - and his new novel. Plus, read an exclusive extract

For the Ishiguro household, 5 October 2017 was a big day. After weeks of discussion, the author's wife, Lorna, had finally decided to change her hair colour. She was sitting in a Hampstead salon, not far from Golders Green in north London, where they have lived for many years, all gowned up, and glanced at her phone. There was a news flash. "I'm sorry, I'm going to have to stop this," she said to the waiting hairdresser. "My husband has just won the Nobel prize for literature. I might have to help him out."

Back home, Kazuo Ishiguro was having a late breakfast when his agent called. "It's the opposite to the Booker prize, where there's a longlist and then a shortlist. You hear the rumbling thunder coming towards you, often not striking. With the Nobel it is freak lightning out of the blue - wham!" Within half an hour there was a queue of journalists outside the front door. He called his mother, Shizuko. "I said: 'I've won the Nobel, Shon.' Oddly, she didn't seem very surprised," he recalls. "She said: 'I thought you'd win it sooner or later.'" She died, aged 92, two years ago. His latest novel *Klara and the Sun*, in part about maternal devotion and his first since winning the Nobel, is dedicated to her. "My mother had a huge amount to do with my becoming a writer," he says now.

We are talking on Zoom; he is holed up in the spare bedroom, his daughter Naomi's undergraduate books on the shelves. His own study is tiny, he says, just big

enough for two desks: one for his computer, the other with a writing slope - no one goes in there. Encouragingly, he compares the interview process to interrogation, borrowing from a scene in John le Carré's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* that explains how agents are trained to withstand torture by having layers of plausible backstories, "until they are just a shrieking head". Yet he submits to questioning with good humour; in fact talking for several hours with the exacting thoughtfulness you'd expect from his fiction.

In Nobel terms, at 62 Ishiguro was a relative whippersnapper. Precocity is part of the Ishiguro myth: at 27 he was the youngest on Granta's inaugural best of young British novelists list in 1983 (with Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes et al), appearing again the following decade. In between he won the

'Literary novelists are defensive about being repetitive. I think it's justified: you keep doing it until it comes closer and closer to what you want'

Booker prize for *The Remains of the Day*, which was given the full Merchant Ivory treatment in 1993.

Indeed, his claim that most great novels were produced by writers in their 20s and 30s has become part of literary legend. "It is Martin Amis who goes round repeating this, not me," Ishiguro says, laughing. "He became obsessed with the idea." But he still



HOWARD SOOLEY

maintains that your 30s are the crucial years for novel writing: “You do need some of that cerebral power.” (Which is lucky for Naomi, who at 28 has her first novel, *Common Ground*, out this month, much to her father’s delight.) Whenever anybody brought up the question of the Nobel, his standard line used to be: “Writers won their Nobel prizes in their 60s for work they did in their 30s. Now perhaps it applies to me personally,” the 66-year-old notes drily.


He remains the supreme creator of self-enclosed worlds (the country house; the boarding school), his characters often under some form of lockdown; his fastidious attention to everyday details and almost ostentatiously flat style offsetting fantastical plot lines and pent-up emotional intensity. And *Klara and the Sun* is no exception.

Set in an unspecified America, in an unspecified future, it is – ostensibly at least – about the relationship between an artificial “friend”, Klara, and her teenage owner/charge, Josie. Robots (AFs) have become as commonplace as vacuum cleaners, gene editing is the norm and biotechnological advances are close to recreating unique human beings. “This isn’t some kind of weird fantasy,” Ishiguro says. “We just haven’t woken up to what is already possible today.” “Amazon recommends” is just the beginning. “In the era of big data, we might start to be able to rebuild somebody’s character so that after they’ve died they can still carry on, figuring out what they’d order next online, which concert they’d like to go to and what

Kazuo Ishiguro wanted to be a singer-songwriter

they would have said at the breakfast table if you had read them the latest headlines,” he continues.

He deliberately didn’t read either the recent Ian McEwan novel *Machines Like Me* or Jeanette Winter-son’s *Frankissstein*, which also take on artificial intelligence, but from very different angles. Klara is a sort of robotic parent, “Terminator-like in her determination to look after Josie”, but she is also a potential surrogate child. “What happens to things like love in an age when we are changing our views about the human individual and the individual’s uniqueness?” he asks. “There was this question – it always sounds very pompous – about the human soul: do we actually have one or not?”

The book revisits many of the ideas behind *Never Let Me Go*, his 2005 novel about three teenage clones whose organs will be harvested, leading to certain death before their 30s: “only a slight exaggeration of the human condition, we all have to get ill and die at some point”, he says now. Both novels hold out the possibility that death can be postponed or defeated by true love, which must be tested and proved in some way; a fairytale bargaining that is also made explicit in the boatman’s challenge to Axl and Beatrice in his previous novel *The Buried Giant*. This hope, even for those who don’t believe in an afterlife, “is one of the things that makes us human,” he reflects. “It perhaps makes us fools as well. 

◆ Perhaps it is a lot of sentimental hogwash. But it is very powerful in people.”

He is unapologetic about repetition, citing the “continuity” of great film directors (he is a huge cinephile), and likes to claim that each of his first three books was essentially a rewrite of its predecessor. “Literary novelists are slightly defensive about being repetitive,” he says. “I think it is perfectly justified: you keep doing it until it comes closer and closer to what you want to say each time.” He gets away with it, he says, by changing location or genre: “People are so literal they think I’m moving on.” For him, genre is like travel, and it is true that he has enjoyed genre-hopping: *When We Were Orphans* (detective fiction); *Remains of the Day* (period drama); *The Unconsoled* (Kafkaesque fable); *Never Let Me Go* (dystopian sci-fi) and *The Buried Giant* (Tolkienish fantasy). Now, as the title *Klara and the Sun* hints, he visits what he calls “children’s storyland”. But be warned, we are still very much in Ishiguroland.

Based on a story he made up for his daughter when she was small, the novel was originally intended to be his first foray into the children’s market. “I had this very sweet story,” he says. “I thought it would fit one of those lovely illustrated books. I ran it past Naomi and she looked at me very stony-faced and said, ‘You can’t possibly give young children a story like that. They will be traumatised.’” So he decided to write it for adults instead.

He is always slightly surprised by people’s responses to his work, he says. “I was actually quite taken aback by how bleak people found *Never Let Me Go*.” He received a postcard from Harold Pinter on which was scrawled “I found it bloody terrifying! Harold” in his trademark black felt tip. He’d underlined “bloody”. “It’s supposed to be my cheerful book!”

His wife has always been his first reader; often, as was the case with *Klara*, having “a dismayingly large influence after I thought I’d finished”. Now he also has Naomi as an editor. Once a writer gets to his position, he says, editors are reluctant to touch his work, worrying he will storm off “in a flaming temper” to another publisher. “So I’m very thankful that I’ve got these rather strict members of my family that do that for me.” Winning prizes, of which he gets “an absurd” number, “happens in a parallel world out there,” he says. Even the Nobel: “When I’m sitting in my study trying to figure out how to write something, it’s got nothing to do with it. I have my own private sense of when I’ve succeeded and when I’ve failed.”

Each novel takes him around five years: a long build-up of research and thinking, followed by a speedy first draft, a process he compares to a samurai sword fight: “You stare at each other silently for ages, usually with tall grass blowing away and moody sky. You are thinking all the time, and then in a split second it happens. The swords are drawn: wham, wham, wham, and one of them falls,” he explains, wielding an imaginary sword at the screen. “You had to get your mind absolutely right and then when you drew that sword you just did it, wham! It had to be

the perfect cut.” As a child, he was mystified by swashbuckling Errol Flynn films when he first came to the UK, in which the sword fights consisted of actors going “ching, ching, ching, ching for about 20 minutes while talking to each other,” he says. “Perhaps there’s a way of writing fiction like that, where you work it out in the act, but I tend towards the ‘Don’t do anything, it’s all internal’ approach.”

Ishiguro’s mother was also a gifted storyteller, telling stories from the war (she was injured by a roof tile in the Nagasaki bombing) and acting out scenes from Shakespeare at the dinner table. He holds up a battered copy of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, a present from her when he was around 16. “Because I was a would-be hippie, she said something like: ‘You should read it - you will feel like you are going out of your mind.’ So I did read it, and was completely riveted from the start.” Dostoevsky has remained one of his greatest influences. His mother introduced him to many of the classics: “She was very important in persuading a boy who wasn’t interested in reading

and wanted to listen to albums all the time that there might be something in some of these books.”

The family moved from Japan in 1959 to Guildford when Ishiguro was five; his father, Shizu, a renowned oceanographer, had a two-year research contract with the British government. Ishiguro describes him as a strange mix of scientific brilliance and childlike ignorance about other things, which he drew on to create *Klara*. After his father



Keira Knightley
in the 2010 film
adaptation of
Never Let Me Go

retired, his machine to predict wave surges spent many years in a shed at the bottom of the garden, until 2016 when the Science Museum in London asked for it to be part of a new mathematics gallery. “Along with Naomi becoming a published writer, that was a very proud moment for me.”

His parents bought him his first portable typewriter when he was 16, but he had “firm plans to become a rock star by the time I was 20”. In particular, he wanted to be a singer-songwriter, like his great hero Bob Dylan, writing more than 100 songs in his bedroom. He still writes lyrics, collaborating with the American jazz singer Stacey Kent, and today owns no fewer than nine guitars. (He accepted an honorary degree from St Andrews University in 2003 solely for the chance of meeting his hero, who had also been awarded one - “I would be in a green room getting dressed up in a robe with Bob Dylan!” But the musician postponed until the following year. “I was very happy to get it with Betty Boothroyd!”) Amid the establishment harrumphing when Dylan was awarded the prize for literature the year before him, Ishiguro was delighted. “Absolutely he should have

had it," he says. "I think people like Dylan and Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell are in a sense literary artists as well as performance artists, and I think it is good that the Nobel prize recognises that."

His Nobel lecture, "My 20th Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs", concludes with an appeal for just such a breakdown of artistic silos, along with greater literary diversity in general. "It is not enough just to look at the ethnicity question," he clarifies now, "if it is just a variation on that old joke that the BBC is open to people of every religious belief, race and sexual orientation - as long as they've been to Oxford or Cambridge." Reflecting on his own status as "a literary poster boy for multicultural Britain", as he was introduced in one TV news interview in 2016, he is always at pains to stress that he feels "slightly on the outside of the conversation" about the English colonial experience as depicted by novelists such as Salman Rushdie or VS Naipaul. "I just happen to be somebody who looks a bit different so I get lumped with these other writers," he says. "But it is not a very deep categorisation. In library terms, I'm being put in there because of the jacket." He would like to see more diversity not just in terms of ethnicity, but also class. As he points out, he is unusual among his literary contemporaries in having attended a state grammar school and studied at Kent, one of the then relatively new campus universities.

Always a master of the polite "No" to journalistic requests, he is cautious about falling prey to "the Nobel syndrome" of pontificating on the world. He describes himself as "an exhausted writer, from an intellectually exhausted generation". His daughter accuses him, and his liberal-minded peers, of complacency about the climate emergency. "I plead guilty to that," he says. "I always say to her it is partly just an energy problem, that people of my age spent so much time worrying about the postwar situation - about the battle between communism and capitalism, and about totalitarianism, racism and feminism - that we are too tired to take on this." *Klara and the Sun* is his first novel to touch on the crisis, but he concedes the children's story framework allowed him to avoid engaging with it deeply.

For the first time, he is beginning to fear for the future, not just the consequences of climate change, but other issues raised in *Klara*: artificial intelligence, gene-editing, big data - "sorry to bang on about this" - and their implications for equality and democracy. "The nature of capitalism itself is changing its model," he says. "I do worry that we are not in control of these things any more."

He hopes that *Klara and the Sun* will be read as "a cheerful, optimistic novel". But as always with Ishiguro, any consolation has to be earned. "By presenting a very difficult world you can show the brightness, you can show the sunniness."

Kazuo Ishiguro will discuss Klara and the Sun with Alex Clark at a Guardian Live online event on 2 March at 7pm. Book tickets at membership.theguardian.com/events.

Exclusive extract


from *Klara and the Sun*

That was one reason why we always thought so much about being in the window. Each of us had been promised our turn, and each of us longed for it to come. That was partly to do with what Manager called the "special honour" of representing the store to the outside. Also, of course, whatever Manager said, we all knew we were more likely to be chosen while in the window. But the big thing, silently understood by us all, was the Sun and his nourishment. Rosa did once bring it up with me, in a whisper, a little while before our turn came around.

"Klara, do you think once we're in the window, we'll receive so much goodness we'll never get short again?"

I was still quite new then, so didn't know how to answer, even though the same question had been in my mind.

Then our turn finally came, and Rosa and I stepped into the window one morning, making sure not to knock over any of the display the way the pair before us had done the previous week. The store, of course, had yet to open, and I thought the grid would be fully down. But once we'd seated ourselves on the Striped Sofa, I saw there was a narrow gap running along the bottom of the grid - Manager must have raised it a little when checking everything was ready for us - and the Sun's light was making a bright rectangle that came up onto the platform and finished in a straight line just in front of us. We only needed to stretch our feet a little to place them within its warmth. I knew then that whatever the answer to Rosa's question, we were about to get all the nourishment we would need for some time to come. And once Manager touched the switch and the grid climbed up all the way, we became covered in dazzling light.

I should confess here that for me, there'd always been another reason for wanting to be in the window which had nothing to do with the Sun's nourishment or being chosen. Unlike most AFs, unlike Rosa, I'd always longed to see more of the outside - and to see it in all its detail. So once the grid went up, the realisation that there was now only the glass between me and the sidewalk, that I was free to see, close up and whole, so many things I'd seen before only as 

Cover story

◆ corners and edges, made me so excited that for a moment I nearly forgot about the Sun and his kindness to us.

I could see for the first time that the RPO Building was in fact made of separate bricks, and that it wasn't white, as I'd always thought, but a pale yellow. I could now see too that it was even taller than I'd imagined - 22 stories - and that each repeating window was underlined by its own special ledge. I saw how the Sun had drawn a diagonal line right across the face of the RPO Building, so that on one side of it there was a triangle that looked almost white, while on the other was one that looked very dark, even though I now knew it was all the pale yellow colour. And not only could I see every window right up to the rooftop, I could sometimes see the people inside, standing, sitting, moving around. Then down on the street, I could see the passers-by, their different kinds of shoes, paper cups, shoulder bags, little dogs, and if I wanted, I could follow with my eyes any one of them all the way past the pedestrian crossing and beyond the second Tow-Away Zone sign, to where two overhaul men were standing beside a drain and pointing. I could see right inside the taxis as they slowed to let the crowd go over the crossing - a driver's hand tapping on his steering wheel, a cap worn by a passenger.

The day went on, the Sun kept us warm, and I could see Rosa was very happy. But I noticed too that she hardly looked at anything, fixing her eyes constantly on the first Tow-Away Zone sign just in front of us. Only when I pointed out something to her would she turn her head, but then she'd lose interest and go back to looking at the sidewalk outside and the sign.

Rosa only looked elsewhere for any length of time when a passer-by paused in front of the window. In those circumstances, we both did as Manager had taught us: we put on "neutral" smiles and fixed our gazes across the street, on a spot midway up the RPO Building. It was very tempting to look more closely at a passer-by who came up, but Manager had explained that it was highly vulgar to make eye contact at such a moment. Only when a passer-by specifically signalled to us, or spoke to us through the glass, were we to respond, but never before.

Some of the people who paused turned out not to be interested in us at all. They'd just wanted to take off their sports shoe and do something to it, or to press their oblongs. Some though came right up to the glass and gazed in. Many of these would be children, of around the age for which we were most suitable, and they seemed happy to see us. A child would come up excitedly, alone or with their adult, then point, laugh, pull a strange face, tap the glass, wave.

Once in a while - and I soon got better at watching those at the window while appearing to gaze at the RPO Building - a child would come to stare at us, and there would be a sadness there, or sometimes an anger, as though we'd done something wrong. A child like this could easily change the next moment and begin laughing or waving like the rest of them,



Only when
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but after our second day in the window, I learned quickly to tell the difference.

I tried to talk to Rosa about this, the third or fourth time a child like that had come, but she smiled and said: “Klara, you worry too much. I’m sure that child was perfectly happy. How could she not be on a day like this? The whole city’s so happy today.”

But I brought it up with Manager, at the end of our third day. She had been praising us, saying we’d been “beautiful and dignified” in the window. The lights in the store had been dimmed by then, and we were rear store, leaning against the wall, some of us browsing through the interesting magazines before our sleep. Rosa was next to me, and I could see from her shoulders that she was already half asleep. So when Manager asked if I’d enjoyed the day, I took the chance to tell her about the sad children who’d come to the window.

“Klara, you’re quite remarkable,” Manager said, keeping her voice soft so as not to disturb Rosa and the others. “You notice and absorb so much.” She shook her head as though in wonder. Then she said: “What you must understand is that we’re a very special store. There are many children out there who would

love to be able to choose you, choose Rosa, any one of you here. But it’s not possible for them. You’re beyond their reach. That’s why they come to the window, to dream about having you. But then they get sad.”

“Manager, a child like that. Would a child like that have an AF at home?”

“Perhaps not. Certainly not one like you. So if sometimes a child looks at you in an odd way, with bitterness or sadness, says something unpleasant through the glass, don’t think anything of it. Just remember. A child like that is most likely frustrated.”

“A child like that, with no AF, would surely be lonely.”

“Yes, that too,” Manager said quietly. “Lonely. Yes.”

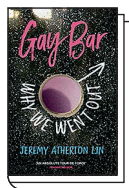
She lowered her eyes and was quiet, so I waited. Then suddenly she smiled and, reaching out, removed gently from my grasp the interesting magazine I’d been observing.

“Goodnight, Klara. Be as wonderful tomorrow as you were today. And don’t forget. You and Rosa are representing us to the whole street” ●

Klara and the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro will be published by Faber on 2 March.

Book of the week

{Memoir} An incisive history of London, LA and San Francisco that brilliantly evokes gay life from the 1990s to today *Colm Tóibín*



Gay Bar: Why We Went Out
by Jeremy Atherton Lin, *Granta*, £16.99

Saturday, 23 May 2015 was an important day in Irish history. It was the day when the votes were counted in the same-sex marriage referendum, with 62% in favour. There was a big celebration in the grounds of Dublin Castle, with politicians on a platform, all miraculously on our side. On Irish television

news, the headlines informed the nation that Panti Bliss, a brilliantly articulate campaigner, had arrived at Dublin Castle, as indeed she had.

Being gay was all the rage just then. Leo Varadkar, minister for health, soon to be taoiseach, had announced that he was gay, as did a former minister from the other main party, as did a well-known TV news journalist. That day it would not have been surprising had all the bishops of Ireland arrived in their finery to let us know that they, too, wanted to join our club.

In *Gay Bar*, a brilliantly written and incisive account of gay life in Los Angeles, San Francisco and London, Jeremy Atherton Lin quotes the critic Ben Walters on gay history that is “fragile from fear and forgetting, too often written in whispers and saved in scraps”. While the Irish Queer Archive is housed in the National Library, it was hard not to feel on the day of the count that, with all the new freedom, much will be lost and forgotten.

I imagined a walk that two men of my generation - I came to Dublin in 1972 - might do to revisit the gay places that have gone, such as The Gym, a sauna just a stone's throw from Dublin Castle, or Incognito, another sauna, much favoured by priests. Or the front part of Rice's pub at the corner of Stephen's Green and South King Street, or Bartley Dunne's on Stephen's Street. Soon, no one will remember when the owners of Minsky's on Ely Place, believing their clientele to be too stuffy, changed its name overnight to The Shaft, and the place rocked for a while. And then it closed. I pass

it sometimes. There is no sign that it was ever there.

The arrival of the big, loud gay venues in Dublin came at the same time as other freedoms. In Barcelona in 1975, when Franco died, there was not a single bar that was clearly designated as gay in the city. In Buenos Aires, a decade later, as military rule ended, it was the same. The explosion of gay bars in both cities came with democracy. They were a sign of the times.

Atherton Lin writes as though he himself is a sign of the times. With gusto and a sense of abandon he describes his own hunger for excitement, with scenes that are gloriously locked in the present moment. He loves what he called “the *never enough* of nightlife”. He comes into his own when he notices someone in the crowd, such as a boy “both bashful and blithe” in the London club Popstarz: “He had a retroussé nose, and a mouth that was small but with pillowy lips. His eyes looked as dark as night.” In gay bars, he became someone on whom nothing was lost. “Gays,” he writes, “can relax in a gay bar, people will say, but I went out for the tension in the room.”

His book is also haunted by the dotted line in the gay story, the gaps in the narrative. He moved to LA in 1992, the year when “over four thousand new cases of Aids were diagnosed in the county ... Men who slept with men constituted the vast majority of those cases.”

Later, when he lived in San Francisco, he was aware of the ghosts of those who had so recently made the Castro into a sort of mecca. He writes about



BEN BLACKALL/CHANNEL 4; DAVID M BENNETT/GETTY

a DJ in his 40s called Bus Station John who “played ecstatic sets of arcane disco ... He was there to bear witness, to testify, using rare tracks from what he called ‘the golden age of gay’, the period between Stonewall and Aids. The music was our time machine. We were conscious the discs on the turntable may have come from the collections of deceased gay men.”

But the ghosts in his book are also those who created gay San Francisco itself, where there were 18 gay bars in 1964 and “an estimated hundred and eighteen within a decade”. Atherton Lin registers the nostalgia that came with all this change, quoting Foucault: “I actually liked the scene before gay liberation, when everything was more covert. It was like an underground fraternity, exciting and a bit dangerous.”

In LA, Atherton Lin is as alert to the past as he is the next prospect of fun, writing about the history of resistance to the police. But nothing comes simply. Some things give him the creeps, like a gay thrift shop: “I cringed when I passed it, imagining the store to be filled with stuff scavenged from the homes of dead queens ... I hadn’t found a way to consider the multifarious story of my people - and to read it with, but not *through*, the disease.”

Atherton Lin’s book is a history lesson, a travelogue, but it is also a display of a rich sensibility, a kind of autobiography using bars as its thread. Although we learn few facts about the author and his boyfriend, referred to throughout as Famous, they have a vivid presence.

One gay group in San Francisco ‘could be detected from a distance by the stink ... Each seemed to have a magnificent ass and be writing a book’

He writes passionately about smells. One venue “smelled of all the places where a man’s body folds”. From a guy they took home, “we learned the distinctive scent of blonde males”. When they stop shaving, their beards “were perverted, their bristles perfumed with the sudor of scrotum”.

One gay group, observed in San Francisco, “could be detected from a distance by the stink ... Each of them seemed to have a magnificent ass and be writing a book”

Atherton Lin wants to reimagine a connection between “the golden age of gay” and the future. Early in his book, he quotes Patrick Califia, who wrote in 1998: “When there is a vaccine or an effective treatment or, please Goddess, both, some will return to pre-Aids sexual behaviour. And that’s as it should be. Because there was nothing wrong with that behaviour in the first place.”

In London, where he comes to live, the author continues to enjoy the smells. In one bar: “The room did smell of penis, maybe. Like fog machine or nitrates, syrupy lager spilling over thick fists, smoker’s breath, someone’s citrusy cologne ... It stank of the clammy skin of white Englishmen, which is like wet laundry hanging to dry without wind.”

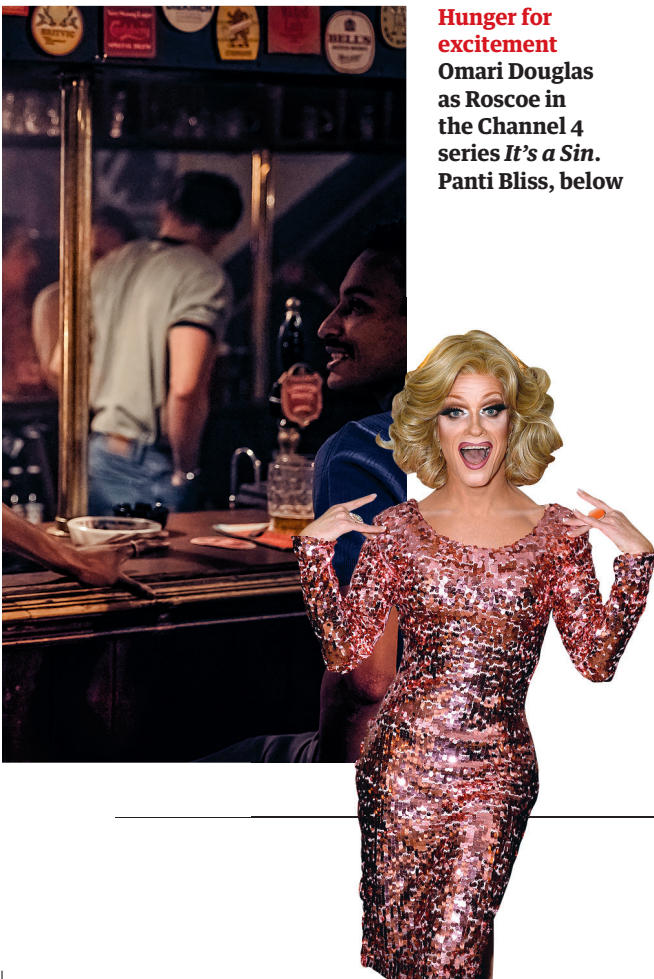
He and his partner moved to Shoreditch in 2007 and stayed for seven years. This allows him to invoke a phenomenon called “the Shoreditch twat” now, of course, part of history. There were three bars that he and his partner called the Triangle: “jolly George and Dragon, sordid Joiners Arms and laid-back Nelson’s Head - a respective five-, ten- and fifteen-minute walk from our building”.

He writes well about another haunting in these London years, the spectre of gay-bashing, quoting Neil Bartlett: “Those nights out were inspiring - but the solitary walks home were foolish. London, in 1986, was not a safe place for a visibly gay man like my twenty-eight-year-old self to be out alone after dark - or even by daylight for that matter.”

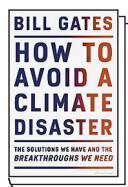
The closing of Atherton Lin’s favourite gay venues in London seems to make the city come alive for him. He gets the right to feel nostalgic, which grants him a sort of honorary citizenship. When the last of his Triangle, the George and Dragon, is to close in 2015, he gets to attend the final night, like a rite of passage, or a way to know that he was growing older: “Everyone had come out of the woodwork. *I mean look at us*, I said to Famous, *two termites*. We were far removed from the boys we used to be.”

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Hunger for excitement
Omari Douglas as Roscoe in the Channel 4 series *It’s a Sin*.
Panti Bliss, below



{ Environment } The co-founder of Microsoft looks to science and tech to end climate crisis ... but can nations cooperate? *Gordon Brown*



How to Avoid a Climate Disaster: The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need

by Bill Gates,
Allen Lane, £20

Bill Gates has changed our lives through his Microsoft software; he has improved countless lives through his foundation's work to eliminate polio, TB and malaria; and now he proposes to help save our lives by combating climate change. *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* details the transformation necessary to reverse the effects of decades of catastrophic practices. We need, Gates calculates, to remove 51bn tonnes of greenhouse gases

from the atmosphere every year. Failing to do so would cost more than the 1.5 million lives already lost to Covid-19 and could cause, he observes, five times more deaths than the Spanish flu a century ago.

Ever the technologist, Gates sets out a spreadsheet for getting rid of those 51bn tonnes of greenhouse gases and achieving net carbon zero emissions by 2050. We would need to use more renewables and fewer fossil fuels (which would account for roughly 27% of the reduction needed in emissions), and change how we manufacture our goods (31%), grow our food (18%), travel (16%), and keep our buildings warm or cool (6%).

To achieve this, Gates presents a set of measures that could, if the UK government is listening, be transposed point by point into the formal agenda for this year's 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, Cop26, in Glasgow. He favours a green new deal, carbon pricing and heightened corporate responsibility. But Gates's most important proposals involve new technologies. Just as his global health initiatives specialised in scientific solutions to combat disease - "show me a problem and I'd look for a technology to fix it," he writes - his principal interest is in a technological breakthrough, the environmental equivalent of the Manhattan Project or the moon landing.

Gates is right about the scale and urgency of the problem. Global carbon emissions are now 65% higher than they were in 1990, and the term "global

warming", with its cosy overtones and accompanying stories of vintners making English and even Scottish champagne, does not adequately explain the intensity of storms, hurricanes, floods and severe droughts that are putting our planet on course to reach temperatures not seen in millions of years.

Taken together, his suggested measures (from solar to nuclear fusion) could meet the world's objective of net carbon zero. But if politics was simply the application of reason and science to contemporary challenges, we might have not only solved the climate crisis by now but easily cured Covid-19 and other infectious diseases too.

So we have to ask why, when what needs to be done seems obvious, we have been so slow to act. And why, when it is more cost-effective for advanced economies to fund the total cost of mitigation and adaptation in the poorest countries than to suffer decades of worsening pollution, has the world simply failed to come together?

Gates clearly prefers science to politics - "I think more like an engineer than a political scientist" - and his touching, admirable faith in science and reason reminds me of a similar faith, this time in economic rationality, held by the great prewar economist John Maynard Keynes. His breakthrough in economic thinking offered a way out of the world depression and mass unemployment of the 1930s. But he was unable to persuade the political leaders of the day, and in frustration decried politics as "the survival of the unfittest". "The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones," he concluded.

Gates is modest enough to say: "I don't have a solution to the politics of climate change." But he too knows that the solution he seeks is inextricably tied up in political decisions. Seemingly unanswerable scientific evidence can be torpedoed by powerful vested interests, or sidelined by bureaucratic indifference, or undermined by weak and incompetent political leaderships that make commitments they do not honour. Or they can be sabotaged by geopolitical rivalries or simply by nations clinging to old-fashioned and absolutist views of national sovereignty. As a result, the multilateral cooperation necessary to deal with a global problem does not emerge, and the very real tensions between economic and environmental priorities, and between the developed and developing world, go unresolved.

I look back on the Copenhagen climate change summit in 2009, when the UK and Europe's enthusiasm for a deal failed to overcome both the reluctance of the US to make legally binding commitments, and the

deep suspicion of China, India and the emerging economies of any obligations that they believed might threaten their development. So determined were they to avoid binding commitments that they rejected Europe's offer to



Bill Gates



PETER BYRNE/PA

unilaterally bind itself to a 50% cut in its emissions. So bitter were the divisions that the Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, who bravely stood out for an ambitious deal, had to be physically restrained from punching the Chinese negotiator.

The Paris accord of 2015 helped reverse many of the setbacks of Copenhagen. Agreement was reached on a global target: to prevent temperatures rising to 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels - preferably 1.5 degrees. And we created new obligations on each country to report, monitor and continually review their emissions. And while we could not bind the major economies to precise commitments on carbon reductions, they agreed to a ratcheting up of their ambitions every five years.

The importance of Glasgow's Cop26 in November is that it is the first of these "ratchet" points, and, with 70 countries already committed to net zero carbon emissions, it represents the best opportunity in years to make progress. It also comes at a time when the science is more definitive, the technology more cost-effective, and the price of inaction far clearer. What's more, President Biden and his new climate envoy John Kerry are promising a renewal of American leadership, and corporations and cities are on board for change.

In addition to accepting Gates's proposals for more funding of new technologies, I envisage advances in Glasgow on four major fronts. First, the globally coordinated fiscal stimulus we now need for a post-Covid economic recovery should have, at its heart, a green new deal, centred around a massive expansion in environmentally sustainable infrastructure and the creation of millions of much needed new jobs.

Second, new corporate laws should be agreed, to be applied worldwide, that ensure global companies disclose their carbon footprints, adopt impact-

A wind farm in Merseyside

weighted accounting that would reveal the full environmental cost of their operations, and break with business-as-usual by publishing transition plans to a zero net carbon economy.

Third, we should advance the cause of carbon pricing by agreements to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies and by taking up Biden's plan for border adjustment mechanisms that, for the first time, tax carbon-intensive imports and exports. And fourth, we could agree a big boost to nature-based solutions from afforestation to the better land use now championed by the World Resources Institute. In doing so we could finally make a reality of the promised \$100bn green climate fund that was planned 10 years ago to collect and allocate payments for climate mitigation and adaptation in the developing world.

But to limit warming to 1.5 degrees requires countries to halve their CO₂ emissions by 2030. So vested interests like big oil will have to be enlisted for change. The populist nationalist and protectionist rhetoric of irresponsible demagogues will have to be taken head on. And supporters of a stronger set of commitments will have to show why sharing sovereignty is in every nation's self-interest, and that coordinated global action is indeed the only way to end the mismatch between the scale of the environmental problems we face and our current capacity to solve them. Success will come by demonstrating that the real power countries can wield to create a better world is not the power they can exercise *over* others but the power they can exercise *with* others.

To buy copy for £17 go to guardianbookshop.com. Gordon Brown's *Seven Ways to Change the World* will be published by Simon & Schuster in June.

{ Politics } The writings of James Baldwin spark a timely and absorbing engagement with US history

Sara Collins



Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Today
by Eddie S. Glaude Jr, Chatto, £16.99

In 2018, two years after the “disastrous” 2016 US presidential election, Eddie Glaude Jr, professor of African American Studies at Princeton, made a pilgrimage to the house in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, in the south of France, where James Baldwin had lived for almost two decades, and which was now being knocked down to make way for luxury flats.

Glaude, who has taught

Baldwin for many years, had come in search of any surviving traces of the writer’s refuge, and found most of it crumbling to dust. Against the backdrop of bulldozers, it “looked like the excavation of an ancient ruin”, and called to mind “what Baldwin saw in the latter part of his life in the United States ... decay and wreckage alongside greed and selfishness”. It became the impetus for Glaude to undertake an excavation of his own.

He resolved to engage deeply with Baldwin’s work, to try to think “with” him, in order to interrogate “how an insidious view of race, in the form of Trumpism, continues to frustrate any effort to ‘achieve our country’”, and then to write about it. The result is a book that is perfect for Baldwin aficionados or anyone experiencing staggering disbelief at America’s state of disarray. What sets this account apart is that Glaude understands how Baldwin’s writing becomes a pathway for one’s own thoughts; he’s able to synthesise the novelist’s work in a way that transcends summation or homage and becomes instead an act of literary assimilation that acquires its own generative power.

Early on, he quotes Baldwin’s 1963 speech at Howard University: “It is the responsibility of the Negro writer to excavate the real history of this country ... We must tell the truth till we can no longer bear it.” Baldwin took his own exhortation seriously, producing, according to Glaude, nearly 7,000 pages of writing distinguished by its astute, unflinching elegance, including *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) - which established him as the liter-

ary consciousness of the African American resistance at a critical moment. Glaude tracks an argument that originates in Baldwin’s 1964 essay “The White Problem”: “The idea of America is an outright lie” that has fostered a state of wilful blindness, involving not only a refusal to acknowledge that the US was founded on notions of white supremacy, but an interrelated insistence on the innocence of white Americans.

Merging his own thoughts with Baldwin’s, Glaude posits that the reason for America’s troubles since the arrival of the first group of enslaved Africans has been its unwillingness to confront this lie: “any attempt” to do so “would be sabotaged by the fear that we may not be who we say we are”. Instead of facing the truth about the genocidal horrors of its past, Americans pine for “national rituals of expiation”. Thus, in the wake of any attempt to expose it, the lie always moves “quickly to reassert itself”, prolonging a long practice of historical gaslighting.

For Glaude, two turning points in American history - first, the civil war and reconstruction, and second, the black freedom struggle of the mid 20th century - attempted to grapple with the lie, and were occasions of “betrayal”. Barack Obama’s election represented another turning point, but hopes were “betrayed”, just as the civil rights movement was betrayed by the turn towards Reaganism. Now, the US faces another “moment of moral reckoning”, and Glaude suggests it should look to Baldwin’s “navigation of his own disappointments” for guidance.

He traces how the brutal response to the freedom struggle - in particular the murders of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr - led to a shift in Baldwin’s thinking, a recognition of the need to eschew “the burden of having to save white people first”. Glaude concludes that the answer now is the same as it was then: the urgent need to “rid ourselves of the idea of white America”, which is the only way to get off the “goddam racial hamster wheel”.

In form, *Begin Again* is an essayistic marvel, circling and folding back on itself as Baldwin’s musings in the past and Glaude’s analysis of the present give meaning to each other. Glaude’s style works the same way Baldwin’s did, achieving the kind of mimetic evocation of a mind at work that Montaigne described as “*la peinture de la pensée*” (the painting of thought), except that here we get two great minds for the price of one.

In the US, the book was published in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. In the UK, it was released just after the attack on the Capitol, after which “the lie” was still everywhere, particularly the loud condemnatory chorus crying out: “This is not America!” It’s a persistent refrain, but as always it only raises the question: if it isn’t America, why does it keep happening there? Glaude’s attempt to answer this, via Baldwin, points to a way for his country to “imagine ourselves anew”. It is a scholarly, deeply personal, and yet immensely readable meditation, a masterful reckoning with the “latest betrayal” of the American ideal.

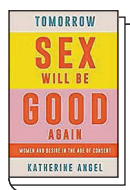
To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.



‘The idea of America is an outright lie’ Baldwin in 1965

WALTER DARAN/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

{ Society } From 'No means No' to #MeToo - original thoughts on consent and the complexities of female desire
Hettie O'Brien



Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent

by Katherine Angel,
Verso, £10.99

"In recent years, two requirements have emerged for good sex: consent and self-knowledge," Katherine Angel writes. Judging by the number of freshers' week workshops and op-ed articles devoted to the subject, consent is vital for better sex. This seems like progress - it takes women at their word and defuses the potential for sexual violence. But its conceit

of absolute clarity, Angel argues, "places the burden of good sexual interaction on women's behaviour".

Faced with the hurt that many experience as a result of sex, the idea of transparent self-knowledge is appealing. Angel marks the development of consent from the "No means No" slogan of 1970s anti-rape campaigners through to the sex-positive "post-feminism" of the 1990s and early 00s (with obligatory reference to the Spice Girls). As consent culture has evolved, it has assumed some of the characteristics of Sheryl Sandberg-style confidence feminism, prizing sassy self-expression and individual empowerment over political transformation. The risk for Angel is that exhorting women to know and express their desires in the language of positive affirmation places the responsibility for preventing sexual violence on women's conduct, rather than examining why violence occurs in the first place. As such, "rape ... and responses to it, are privatised".

Part of what bothers Angel is that formalising such an idiosyncratic, unwieldy thing as desire is practically impossible. Desire doesn't work like a legal contract: it's difficult to always know what you want, a sense of intimacy changes in the heat of the moment, and a "yes" given at one point may be retracted soon afterwards. The language of consent is asked to stand for so much it begins to strain under the weight of its significance. It becomes unable to reflect the truth that, so long as sex is had under unequal conditions, people may feel compelled to say "Yes" when they really mean "No!" (Or as Angel puts it: "Repression can operate through the mechanisms of speech.")

Angel borrows the title of her book from a sardonic line in the first volume of Michel Foucault's extensive study of sexuality. The French philosopher was paraphrasing the stance of countercultural progressives in the 1960s and 70s, who mistakenly cast

sexuality and pleasure as a proxy for political emancipation, thinking this would help throw off the moralising tendencies of their parents' generation. Angel is equally concerned that simply saying something doesn't amount to anything beyond saying it: "Speech and truth-telling are not inherently emancipatory." If someone tells you confidently about their sexual proclivities, it doesn't make them politically enlightened (or interesting).

One might be surprised by this perspective, given that Angel has written a book of passages about her sex life. Her 2012 *Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell* refracts the unruliness of desire through allusive monologues and truncated aphorisms (some occupy no more than three words on a page - "*Am I pornography?*"). Though it sounds strange it works, but where *Unmastered* seems as though it was written in opposition to most things (sex positivity, the idea that pornography is necessarily degrading, taking out the recycling), this new book feels like the elaboration of an argument for something, the outlines of which could previously only be half-glimpsed. "I like there being no words! No method. No rules. I don't like taking instruction," Angel wrote in 2012. Words exist to protect people, but in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* she is reaching towards something else: a world where desire does not have to be known and fixed in advance to protect people from violence. That this is an unlikely prospect doesn't make it any less attractive.

As this is a nonfiction book about the politics of desire, Angel is almost obliged to reference #MeToo, Brock Turner and the trials of Harvey Weinstein. These

Part of what bothers Angel is that formalising such an idiosyncratic, unwieldy thing as desire is practically impossible

stories have already been picked over, and the challenge is to interpret them in a way that doesn't feel stale. Angel succeeds: she also considers the history of scientific research about sexuality and the people who thought their research was at the cutting edge of liberation, such as William Masters and Virginia Johnson, who tirelessly catalogued female desire using

implements such as the intriguing "penis camera"; and Alfred Kinsey, a former entomologist who studied sex much like he did insects, carefully quantifying the number of orgasms people reached and how.

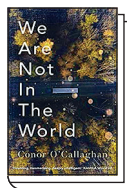
But people don't want what they say they want, nor what their better selves might want to want. In *Unmastered*, Angel quotes the philosopher Jonathan Lear, who wrote: "A person is, by his nature, out of touch with his own subjectivity. Thus one cannot find out what it is like for a person to be just by asking." That Angel still has no answer to this problem is beside the point - it's the conviction of those who pretend they do that troubles her.

To buy a copy for £9.56 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Fiction

This memorably disturbing novel from the Irish poet is a road trip rich in family secrets and unnerving encounters

Ian Sansom



We Are Not in the World
by Conor O'Callaghan,
Doubleday, £14.99

Nothing on Earth, his acclaimed debut novel published in 2016. Like its predecessor, *We Are Not in the World* is truly a poet's novel. Consider this:

The cargo door opens. It opens incrementally. It falls forward, away from us, into foreign day. There are men down there, stevedores in hi-viz and hardhats shouting to one another. I rotate the ignition to half-way, to check for evidence of light. The instrument panel flashes and falls still. There are chains. There is shrieking of iron like gates of hell. Then this fluorescence gradually floods the floor between rows and creeps towards us and feels warm.

If you don't like the sound of all that fine writing just to describe some fella driving his lorry off a ferry, then *We Are Not in the World* is probably not going to be the novel for you - in which case, you'd be missing



JUAN AUNION/ALAMY

Conor O'Callaghan is a fine Irish poet, author of half a dozen volumes, such as the brilliant *Live Streaming* (2017), which is a kind of compendium of what he describes as the "traumatic quotidian". He also writes prose, including the non-fiction football memoir *Red Mist: Roy Keane and the Irish World Cup Blues* (2005), and

Nothing on Earth, his acclaimed debut novel published in 2016. Like its predecessor, *We Are Not in the World* is truly a poet's novel. Consider this:

out. Stylish, deft, dense and delightfully depressing from start to finish, the book tells the story of Paddy, who is rather miserably and mournfully trucking his way from England to France. Paddy is accompanied on his journey - we are led to believe - by his stowaway twentysomething daughter.

It's a road trip, but not as you know it. The book veers constantly from present to past, steering from near-miss revelations of family secrets ("the thing we never mention") to nasty encounters with dodgy geezers, with plenty of ill-judged, ill-timed and occasionally highly disturbing sexual encounters along the way. "His breath tasted of Colombian and citrus. You bit the hard muscle of his tongue's stub. He groaned 'fuck'. You tasted blood, his, like battery acid on the tip of yours." On this literal and metaphorical journey poor old Paddy is "forced incrementally to the core of this nothing that I increasingly feel". It's Beckett, on wheels.

Paddy's family life is an absolute mess: his marriage is in ruins, there's a torrid love affair behind him, and he seems both tormented and aroused by memories of his mother, Kitty. His younger brother has turned out to be the great success, and godfather to Paddy's wild and wayward daughter, also named, significantly, Kitty, and who likes to wear her granny's mink coat. Paddy's only refuge - and promise of future happiness - is Tír na nÓg, the old family home on a shingle beach somewhere slightly vague and grim in Ireland. He is both running away and in the process of returning: to his country, to his family, and indeed to his sanity.

This is not an easy read, but it is a fascinating novel. It has nothing to do with the pandemic, and was presumably written before, but is very much of the moment. O'Callaghan's big themes in his poetry and his prose are related always to thwarted desire, to loss, to feelings of disorientation, anger and disassociation - and in particular to questions of sibling rivalry, and the ache of being separated from one's parents, one's children, and oneself.

I've lived all my adult life with this floor of underlying homesickness. Not for our mother, nor the seascape in which we grew up, nor any mythical golden age. It's more a homesickness born of absence [...] It feels the way certain illnesses or functional syndromes must feel. A walking low-wattage virus you live with for decades and stop noticing, like the hungover whirr of a fridge in the small hours.

Sound familiar? *We Are Not in the World* - the title alone - seems a perfect description of where we find ourselves now. But whatever its current relevance or significance, and whatever it is we eventually learn about Kitty, the book throws up page after page of memorable and disturbing passages and episodes, as all the while voices are drifting in and out, engaged in "aimless remembering", "ephemera tossed between you and me". It's bitter, horrible, brilliant.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.

The long-awaited follow-up to *The Raw Shark Texts* falls into some plot holes, but remains ingenious fun

Sandra Newman



Maxwell's Demon
by Steven Hall,
Canongate, £16.99

Thomas Quinn, the protagonist of *Maxwell's Demon*, is a novelist who has failed both artistically and commercially; he is also the son of a great and famous writer, now dead. As the book opens, we find Thomas still haunted by his estrangement from his father - but even more

so by another writer, the enigmatic genius Andrew Black, who was his father's protege. Black's only book, *Cupid's Engine*, was a masterpiece and an industry-changing bestseller. Years ago, Black vanished after refusing to fulfil a publishing contract because his publisher would not agree to his demand that they never publish any ebooks again. The existence of ebooks, according to Black, is going to bring about the apocalypse.

Then Thomas receives a letter from Black that consists of a single line - *What do you think this is?* - with a photograph of a mysterious black sphere. Despite a warning from the agent he shares with Black ("He will walk you right over a cliff," she says), Thomas sets out to find him and solve the mystery. Soon characters from novels are showing up in real life and entire towns are turning out to be fictional constructs. By the time Thomas is finished, everything he thinks he knows about the world will be shattered.

Like Steven Hall's debut, 2007's *The Raw Shark Texts*, this book is showily postmodern, full of odd typographical elements, altered realities and intertextual jokes. Everything that happens is not just a plot point but a reference to that kind of plot point in other narratives.

The psychology of the characters is deliberately stylised and artificial; the world they live in is supposed to be a comic-book universe with little plausibility. Even the sloppiness of the plot can be seen as an extended joke about the theme of entropy that runs through the book, and a play on *Cupid's Engine*, the novel as a perfect, completely orderly



Pulling rugs out at breakneck speed
Steven Hall

machine. All this may seem convoluted, but Hall's remarkably charming voice carries him past plot tangles that would have felled a less confident author, and the story develops in genuinely startling and ingenious directions.

When *The Raw Shark Texts* came out, a common complaint among reviewers was that such post-modern games were already old hat. Interestingly, this feels like less of a problem in 2021. Presumably every genre must go through a phase of being old-fashioned on its way to becoming part of the landscape. Now postmodernism feels less thrilling and transgressive than it once did, but also less ephemeral, and it's easier to see that Hall is not failing at inventing a new form but using an existing form well.

The book does have consequential flaws. Hall devotes many pages to a tour of cool ideas so overfamiliar they've become stock jokes about the kinds of things stoned freshers discuss at parties: Easter Island, the Gnostic Gospels, the Hero's Journey. The narrator (an adult writer in

Soon characters from novels are showing up in real life and entire towns are turning out to be fictional constructs

the 21st century) reacts to these things with naive fascination, as if they're brand new. One assumes this is meant as a self-referential joke about the cool ideas typical in this kind of book, but these sections are still likely to be tiresome for anyone with the cultural literacy to get the joke.

More importantly, when the book begins to tear away the veils from reality, revealing other and different realities, it goes too far on too little fuel. We never get a strong sense of most of the characters, so eventual revelations about them are a series of damp squibs. Proposed realities are torn away before we get them into focus. At the very end, it feels as though Hall is pulling rugs out from under himself at breakneck speed, one after another, until he and the rugs are wrestling alone on the floor in a frenzied heap. One may still be impressed by the sheer number of rugs and the speed of their dispatch, but by the end, you are rooting for the rugs, and when the rugs lose (I swear this metaphor will make sense to people who read the book), you go away feeling cheated.

Despite all this, *Maxwell's Demon* is consistently fun and often impressive. I suspect a reader's experience of it will largely depend on their appetite for its genre. It's doubtful it will appeal to people who find Thomas Pynchon irritating and roll their eyes at Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, but readers who love that kind of thing will probably love this too.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.

A love affair between a photographer and a dancer is intertwined with a celebration of black exuberance and artistry

Michael Donkor



Open Water

by Caleb Azumah Nelson, Viking, £12.99

The unnamed protagonist of Caleb Azumah Nelson's debut novel, a young black photographer, often reflects on his artistic process: he is principally trying to compose images that "portray a rhythm".

The central plot of *Open Water*, set in 2017-18, may at first glance seem familiar:

two young people (in this instance, a female dancer and a male photographer) fall in love when perhaps they shouldn't (the dancer has "romantic history" with a close friend of the photographer). After a brief period of will they/won't they, the couple can no longer resist the attraction they feel for one another. Challenges soon test their newly formed relationship.

It is Azumah Nelson's expressive style that most startlingly reanimates this formula. His presentation of the narrative in sensual but precisely paced sentences with elegant refrains and motifs imbues *Open Water* with a rhythm of its own. His descriptions of his lovers' physicality provide the clearest examples of his supple prose. At the beginning of their relationship, the photographer and dancer are tentative in their interactions with one another - and yet these moments are freighted with possibility.

The arm which isn't trapped between her body and yours stretches towards her, and she pulls it across her body like a blanket, curling in tight. With her foot, she traces a line across your own, finally settling her lower limb between your calves. She slides down her bed a little, so she can tuck herself in the space between your chest and your chin, the mane of soft curls ticklish against your neck ...

While an elegance of style is a hallmark of Azumah Nelson's storytelling, there is bold risk-taking in his choices too: he writes in the second person, using its immediacy and potency to create an emotional intensity mirroring the intensity with which the protagonist experiences his bond with the dancer and his wider world. The fissures that emerge in their relationship partly arise because he struggles to communicate the depth of his suffering



Risk-taker ... Nelson

and feelings of loss prompted by the racialised inequities of his south-east London neighbourhood.

In its interweaving of the romantic arc with meditations on blackness and black masculinity, this affecting novel makes us again consider the personal through a political lens; systematic racism necessarily politicises the everyday experiences of black people. The police profiling that the photographer endures as a young black man moving through the city is recounted with painful emphasis on the effects of feeling constantly observed. Azumah Nelson emotively demonstrates how these pressures influence black men's psychic lives and their forging of connections with others.

Running alongside is a glorious celebration of the exuberance of blackness. The photographer stresses that he and his community are "more than the sum of [their] traumas". As the protagonist explores the influences underpinning his own work, and in tender dialogue between the lovers, Azumah Nelson name-checks black artistry of all kinds, often drawing attention to its immersive power and transcendental effect. This is beautifully shown in a vignette early on in the novel. During a tube journey, when speaking to the dancer about the American rapper Isaiah Rashad, the photographer is circumspect in expressing the impact this music had on him.

You don't tell her that the album had soundtracked your previous summer. You don't tell her that you had repeated the song 'Brenda', an ode to the artist's grandma, so much that you knew when the bassline would begin to slide under the strum of guitar chords, when the trumpet would riff and reverb, when there was a break, a slight pause where the music fell loose ... You don't tell her that it was there, in the slight pauses, that you were able to breathe, not even realising you were holding in air, but you were.

Dizzee Rascal, Kendrick Lamar, the painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and film-maker Barry Jenkins are also referenced as Azumah Nelson suffuses the narrative with the achievements of black creativity. There is a lovely Zadie Smith cameo, too: the photographer goes to hear the author read and is inspired by her banter as he nervously waits for her to sign his copy of *NW*.

Given its slim size, the novel sometimes seems slightly crowded - not just with these enthusiastic references to black artists, but in other ways too. Alongside the main narrative, other topics fleetingly referred to include the difficulties of being a black person in a private school, curling at the Winter Olympics, the Notting Hill Carnival, basketball, Kierkegaard, the loss of grandparents ... This engaging breadth of interest might make us wish the book, at 176 pages, were a little longer to accommodate its investigative spirit. However, this range and the desire to record the variety of a particular black perspective demonstrate a key feature of Azumah Nelson's work: his exciting ambition.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Books of the month

{ Crime and thrillers } ‘Slow horses’ under attack, murder in the pleasure gardens, a Nigerian town-and-gown mystery
Laura Wilson



Mick Herron’s acclaimed spy-cum-political-satire series now stands at seven novels; the latest, **Slough House** (John Murray, £14.99), is named after the dilapidated building to which failed spies are consigned. Condemned to boring and thankless tasks under the sardonic auspices of the repulsive and increasingly cartoonish Jackson Lamb, in this instalment the “slow horses” are alarmed to discover that not only have their details been wiped from the spooks database, several of their number have met their deaths in ways that may not be as accidental as they appear. Meanwhile, at the Regent’s Park HQ, chief Diana Taverner has been frustrated by the government’s gutless response to the novichok poisoning of a British subject. So she has made a bargain with the manipulative and - with his fluffy hair and archaic expostulations - strangely familiar Peter Judd, a former home secretary turned PR man. As the slow horses wonder whether they are being targeted, Taverner realises quite how long a spoon is needed by those who would sup with the devil. The book is set against a background of “You Know What” (Brexit, like Lord Voldemort, is not to be named) and yellow vest protests, and Herron’s formula of misdirection and multiple viewpoints still works like a charm.

In her second novel, **Daughters of Night** (Mantle, £14.99), Laura Shepherd-Robinson takes a minor character from her award-winning debut *Blood & Sugar*, and puts her front and centre to great effect. We are in 1782 London and society beauty Caro Corsham, whose politician husband is abroad, makes a visit to the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, only to encounter a mortally wounded woman there. The official investigation comes to an abrupt halt when the authorities at Bow Street discover that the woman was a high-class prostitute. Despite the danger to her reputation, Caro enlists the services of former magistrate Peregrine Child - another

character from *Blood & Sugar* - to uncover the truth. An utterly fascinating trawl through the Georgian demimonde ensues, covering everything from the bestselling directory of London sex workers, *Harris’s List*, to the auctioning of maidenheads, the appalling ravages of venereal disease and a lightly fictionalised version of the notorious Hellfire Club. Niftily plotted, vivid and thoroughly researched, this immersive - if wrist-spraining - 569-pager is highly recommended.

Inga Vesper’s remarkably assured debut, **The Long, Long Afternoon** (Manilla, £14.99), takes us into *Stepford Wives* territory: the California suburb of Sunnylakes in 1959, where housewives have to be tranquillised up to the eyeballs in order to bear the smallness and isolation imposed on them by the American dream. The racism is as systemic as the sexism: when Joyce Haney vanishes, leaving behind two young children and a bloodstained kitchen, the police promptly arrest her black maid, Ruby. Along with Detective Mick Blanke, recently arrived from New York and tasked with working out what happened, the two women take it in turns to narrate this tale of inequality, broken dreams and quiet desperation behind a picture-perfect facade.

Mormon polygamist Blake Nelson and his three wives may not have a perfect life on their rundown former cattle ranch in the Utah desert but, despite being shunned by other members of the Latter-day Saints, they believe they are righteous in the sight of God. However, it’s clear from the very start of Cate Quinn’s **Black Widows** (Orion, £12.99) that He must have been looking the other way, because Blake has been found murdered and the police reckon that one of the three must be the culprit. Obedient senior wife Rachel, whose background is so traumatic that life on a remote smallholding with a depressive survivalist is “paradise on Earth”, has nothing in common with either naive 19-year-old Emily who self-harms or worldly ex-junkie Tina - other than their now deceased husband. The three women pass the narrative baton between them and, as the investigation proceeds, we learn about their backgrounds and their relationships with their “sister wives”. What’s fascinating about this well-researched mystery is the window it offers on the extraordinary and disturbing world of people who believe they have found the true faith, even if the conclusion is a bit too feelgood to be entirely plausible.

Set in and around a Nigerian university, Femi Kayode’s exciting debut, **Lightseekers** (Raven, £14.99), appears to be a town-and-gown mystery: three students, accused of stealing, are set upon and killed by a mob. However, when psychologist and expert in crowd behaviour Philip Taiwo is persuaded to investigate, he discovers that the reality is considerably more complicated. There is a great deal going on here - college fraternities, drugs, corruption, societal division, quite a lot of Nigerian history and an unhinged second narrator who appears occasionally in sections written in *serial killer italics* - and although the result is tonally uneven it is certainly gripping, with an appealing protagonist and a strong sense of place.

Mirror image

Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch were once the two biggest power brokers in British politics. *John Preston* charts their fierce rivalry – and how it paved the way for Maxwell’s demise

The dinner dances hosted by Robert and Betty Maxwell at their Italianate mansion in Oxford, Headington Hill Hall, were reckoned, even by hardened partygoers, to be in a class of their own. Every year on Maxwell’s birthday, the great and good would descend in their droves to enjoy his hospitality. Labour party grandees would rub shoulders with captains of industry, leading scientists with newspapers editors.

But the party to celebrate Maxwell’s 65th birthday in June 1988 was confidently predicted to outdo them all in terms of both opulence and pomp. The US president, Ronald Reagan, sent a telegram of congratulations: “Nancy and I are delighted to join in the chorus of appreciation.” So did the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, who extolled Maxwell’s “sense of direction and decision” – very similar, she noted, to her own. As far as the then Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, was concerned, “If Bob Maxwell didn’t exist, no one could invent him.” Kinnock went on to pay tribute to Maxwell’s “basic convictions of liberty and fair play”.

Garlanded with medals, beaming his wolfish smile and with Betty by his side, Maxwell made his entrance to a fanfare of herald trumpeters. After dinner was over, a huge flaming sign spelled out the words “Happy Birthday Bob” across the night sky as guests bopped away on the specially laid dance floor.

Among them was the Labour party’s then director of communications, Peter Mandelson. “It was very strange because you’d simultaneously want to be at Maxwell’s parties and at the same time shrink away from him,” he remembers. “Because he was such a bully and so unpredictable. To be honest, I was frightened of his company. He had that ability to make you feel completely small and inadequate, and that just scrambled my head.”

Mandelson wasn’t the only guest nursing ambivalent feelings towards his host. Watching from the sidelines was the former British ambassador to Washington Peter Jay, who spent three years as Maxwell’s “chief of staff”. “It was as if people came because they wanted to see Maxwell; it was a spectacle. And although they sucked up to him and enjoyed his hospitality, you could see them raising their eyebrows at the same time.”

In 1988, Maxwell appeared to be the king of all he surveyed. From Headington Hill Hall, he gazed out over a publishing empire that stretched all the way from Oxford to Osaka. As he had recently taken to boasting: “The banks owe us money; we have so much on deposit.” Four years earlier, he had bought Mirror Group Newspapers for £113m – thereby securing what he had always longed for: a newspaper of his own. A mouthpiece through which he could proclaim his opinions to the world.

But there was rather more to it than that. Owning the Mirror meant that Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch were now the two biggest power brokers in British politics. Just as the Conservative party depended on the support of Murdoch’s Sun, so the Labour party was equally reliant on the Mirror – something that made life extremely tricky for Kinnock.

However much he may have extolled Maxwell in public, in private Kinnock was a lot less effusive. “I was in this constant dilemma of not wanting to defer to him, and not wanting to lose his support either,” he recalls. “How do you deal with this extremely capricious man with an overwhelming sense of his own power ... While I knew I couldn’t afford to lose his support, I knew too that he could change in an instant; it was like walking on eggshells.”

As Kinnock would discover, Maxwell’s ways were not his own – and never would be. Shortly after Maxwell bought the Mirror, Kinnock and his wife Glenys invited the Maxwells to an informal supper in their local Italian trattoria. To the Kinnocks’ astonishment, Maxwell and Betty each turned up in their own Rolls-Royce. By coincidence, the TV playwright, Dennis Potter happened to be in the same restaurant. “I remember after the Maxwells had gone, Dennis came over and said: ‘I hope you ate your meal with a very long spoon.’”

Kinnock wasn’t the only one with an oppressive shadow hanging over him. For almost 30 years Maxwell and Murdoch had been locked in a titanic struggle, each hellbent on becoming the world’s

From left
Robert Maxwell
and Rupert Murdoch

largest media baron. As the late Sir Harry Evans put it: “Maxwell thought he had entered the ring with another boxer, but he hadn’t. In fact, he’d entered the ring with a jiu-jitsu artist who also happened to be carrying a stiletto.”

The two men had first met in 1963 when Maxwell tried to interest Murdoch in a company marketing encyclopedias. By his own admission Murdoch was “a bit spellbound” by Maxwell and agreed to stump up A\$1m to become his partner. But before the deal could be signed, Murdoch learned that the encyclopedias were not all they seemed to be. In fact they were bankrupt stock that the publishers had offloaded - free - on to Maxwell.

“He was trying to con me,” Murdoch remembers. “I must say I thought it was quite funny, but the man was obviously a crook.” As far as he was concerned, Murdoch never expected to see Maxwell again. Here, though, he turned out to be quite wrong. This wasn’t the end of their acquaintance; it was only the beginning.

On four occasions during the 1960s and 70s, Maxwell tried to buy a Fleet Street newspaper. Each time Murdoch got the better of him. For Maxwell, this turned into a kind of running sore. The more Murdoch thwarted him, the more determined he was to get his revenge. For his part, Murdoch insists he never regarded Maxwell as anything more than an irritant, albeit one he could never quite manage to shake off. Constantly, the two men would be mentioned in the same breath; to make matters

**‘Maxwell thought he’d entered the ring with another boxer - in fact, he’d entered it with a jiu-jitsu artist carrying a stiletto’
Harry Evans**

worse, they even shared the same initials.

“You’d switch on the TV in some hotel bedroom and there would be Maxwell in his dark suit and bow-tie telling you about his global communications company. It was all bullshit. I never spoke about him, but he couldn’t stop talking about me. Whatever we did, he wanted to do it too ... He was a total buffoon really.”

But if there was no shortage of irritation on Murdoch’s part, there was something far more consuming on Maxwell’s. In time, his attitude towards his arch-rival would topple from jealousy into full-blown paranoia. After he had bought the Mirror, Maxwell summoned members of the Labour front-bench to lunch at Maxwell House, as he had named his headquarters on Holborn Circus.

However much they may have detested him, they had no choice but to go. Roy Hattersley, then deputy leader of the party, remembers being shown into the dining room with his political adviser, Dave Hill. Maxwell was sitting at the head “of a huge dining table drinking from a silver goblet. He did not get up”.

Shortly after the meal started, Maxwell told the butler to leave the room and close the door. Once the butler had left, he explained what he had done: ➡



Books essay

◆ “I feared that you were going to discuss intelligence reports, and that man” - he pointed at the door - “is a spy planted by Rupert Murdoch.” When Hill, not unreasonably, asked why he continued to employ him if that was the case, Maxwell retorted: “That just shows how little you know about business. I don’t waste my time worrying about who is appointed as my butler.”

In his increasingly desperate quest to prove that he held his own in the same arena as Murdoch, Maxwell set in train a course of events that would lead to his physical and mental disintegration, his downfall and ultimately his death. When he bought the American publishers Macmillan, in 1988, Maxwell ended up paying roughly a billion dollars more than anyone - including the company’s directors - thought it was worth.

His friend Gerald Ronson, chief executive of the property developers Heron International, tried in vain to talk him out of it: “Maxwell had to be in America and he had to be bigger than Murdoch. He was like a child at Hamleys; he had to have his toy right away.”

When he was in the UK, Maxwell continued to throw his - ever-increasing - weight around with characteristic abandon. If Kinnock and Hattersley knew they had to try to keep him onside, Glenys Kinnock saw no reason to follow their example. Discovering that she had been placed next to Maxwell at the banquet he always threw at the Labour party conference, she sneaked in early and changed the name cards around.

But the Maxwell who showed up at the Labour conference in October 1991 was a changed man from the Maxwell of old - sickly, despondent and mired in debt. At a lunch at the Metropole Hotel for senior Mirror journalists, the paper’s recently appointed political editor, Alastair Campbell, was surprised to be invited on to the balcony by his new boss.

“That struck me as odd because I must have been the most junior person there ... Maxwell started to tell me how everyone was out to get him. How I had to understand that if these people destroyed him, they would also destroy the Labour party. He was really ranting. He kept saying that it was vitally important that Neil Kinnock understood



Maxwell with Elizabeth Taylor at the 70th birthday party of US tycoon Malcolm Forbes in 1989; and below, on board his yacht

that. I remember there was a very narrow balustrade on the balcony and I had this feeling that Maxwell sort-of wanted to tip over. It even half crossed my mind that I was going to have to reach out and grab him.”

The same evening there was a large party at the hotel hosted by Maxwell. Campbell invited a friend of his to come along - a man who happened to have bipolar disorder. “My friend was going through a particularly manic phase at the time,” Campbell recalls. “He ended up having a chat with Maxwell and I remember afterwards him saying to me: ‘My God, that guy is off his fucking head.’”

A month later, Robert Maxwell was dead, having disappeared off the back of his yacht, the Lady Ghislaine - named after his favourite child - in circumstances that have never been fully explained. Again the tributes could hardly have been more fulsome. “He was and will remain unique,” said Mrs Thatcher. President Gorbachev was “deeply grieved”, while President George Bush Snr extolled Maxwell’s “unwavering fight against bigotry and oppression”.

But within three weeks the tide had turned more dramatically than anyone could have predicted. At the beginning of December 1991, the Guardian reported that at least “£350m appeared to be missing from the Mirror pension funds”. Just four days later, the Maxwell empire collapsed.

Thirty years on, Maxwell, in many people’s eyes, remains the embodiment of corporate villainy. Likewise, speculation over his death shows no sign of abating. But one man at least has no doubt what happened. “I remember I got a call one morning when I was in Los Angeles saying that he had disappeared off his boat,” Murdoch recalls. “I said straightaway: ‘Ah, he jumped.’ He knew the banks were closing in, he knew what he’d done and he jumped. I can’t give any other explanation” ●

Fall: The Mystery of Robert Maxwell by John Preston is published by Viking.

RON GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY; RICK MAIMAN/SYGMA VIA GETTY



Writer's lockdown

Alison Flood

Time at home is surely an opportunity to write, so why are so many novelists struggling?

In early February, after a month of lockdown, William Sutcliffe wrote on Twitter: "I have been a professional writer for more than twenty years. I have made my living from the resource of my imagination. Last night I had a dream about unloading the dishwasher."

If the first lockdown was about finding space to write (along with a blitz spirit and a Tesco delivery slot), the second has been far bleaker and harder for creativity. Whether it is dealing with home schooling, the same four walls, or anxiety caused by the news, for many authors, the stories just aren't coming.

"Stultified is the word," says novelist Linda Grant. "The problem with writing is it's just another screen, and that's all there is ... I can't connect with my imagination. My whole brain is tied up with processing, processing, processing what's going on in the world."

Her mind is not relaxed enough, she says, to connect with her subconscious. "My subconscious is basically screaming: 'Get us out of this'," she says, so there's no space to create fiction. "I don't have the emotional and intellectual energy to give to these shadowy people to bring them out of the shadows."

Sutcliffe, who is married to the novelist Maggie O'Farrell and has three children, has been dividing his time between writing and home schooling, which they share. During the first lockdown, he was in the middle of a novel and found it "a relief" to get his turn at the keyboard. In the second, he has been trying to dream up his next book, and "that kind of work is really incompatible with lockdown and with this stage of pandemic fatigue". After putting out that call on Twitter, he says, "I was inundated with responses from other authors who were struggling."

The science fiction writer Jon Courtenay Grimwood sees the irony: "It's weird as all hell. We spent our lives

saying if only we could be locked away in a cave then inspiration and deadlines would be no problem and then it happens and it's a disaster."

Sutcliffe agrees: "Of all the people to be complaining about not being able to work, writers feel like the strangest group, because compared to everyone else our lives have changed the least. It's interesting to see why it's pushed so many off kilter."

While adding caveats about being thankful for roofs over heads, many will say that childcare is proving the biggest challenge. The novelist Natasha Solomons sends me a picture of the five-year-old "co-worker", with whom she is now sharing an office. "She hates her headphones so [during lesson time] I hear another 26 five-year-olds also yelling their phonics as I attempt to write a new novel of dark delights. Trying to write a sex scene at 9am is never my favourite, but with my daughter beside me yelling 'Do you have any nouns on your desk, mummy?' it's pretty much impossible. Mostly I have to give up," she says.

The author Holly Seddon, who has four children, has turned her laundry room - which is "a bit bigger than a cupboard" - into a mini-office. The constant noise, she says, is what is crushing her creativity. "It's hard to let my characters speak to me when someone is always asking me to print their stuff off, or what's for lunch or where their thing is. It's hard to paint a fictional setting when the constant drone of my actual setting is scrambling my thoughts."

Other writers, such as Gillian McAllister, are most affected by the lack of serendipitous glimpses of other lives. "Authors take so much inspiration from things like the clothes a stranger is wearing, the smell of their perfume, seeing a couple interact in a bar," she says. "I'm having to mine my memories for this stuff, which is less authentic and lacks a kind of specific detail."

Holly Watt, author of the thriller *To the Lions*, says: "I have realised that I magpie a lot of my friends' jokes and need the conversation of normal life. The other day, my partner and I had a fairly long chat about the different noises the dishwasher makes - I don't think that's the sort of thing my heroine would notice. I have learned to accept that on some days, I just can't write."

And how to research, when libraries are shut and travel is impossible? Children's author Tom Mitchell's next book is set in the "wild countryside", but he's "ended up having to go on Google Maps to get inspiration and to take a break from staring out of the window of my spare room on to the tiny garden below".

So are we likely to be deluged, in a year's time, with locked-room mysteries, or stream-of-consciousness novels about unloading the dishwasher? "It's a problem for contemporary novelists, most of whose novels are set in a non-specific version of now," says Sutcliffe. "You can write a novel set in 2013, 14, 15, but 2019, 20, 21, these are three completely different worlds. We can't have every novel being about the pandemic, but [assessing] the degree to which you acknowledge it is really hard."

And, will people even want to read about it? "Maybe in a few years," Grant muses ●

MURDO MACLEOD/THE GUARDIAN

Stultified
William
Sutcliffe and
Linda Grant



Books for LGBT+ history month

Michael Cashman



Russell T Davies's brilliant TV series *It's a Sin* has ensured that right on time for LGBT+ history month comes a story of the HIV/Aids pandemic. It is a powerful reminder of bereavement, hope, abandonment and callous opportunism by the anti-LGBT brigade - including politicians and the media - and of misrepresentation on a gargantuan scale. It also shows how a community fought back against deniers as well as those in power.

But this is not history for us who lived through it. I still see the faces of the friends who died, and vividly remember Ian Charleson's last heroic performance as *Hamlet* in the final weeks of his life. I still feel the support and love that were shared. Eighteen months before the pandemic I'd been in New York, a centre of the HIV virus,

so I waited to see whether I was infected; but I had been lucky.

So, my reading list is dominated by love, loss, diversity and friendship - but above all, by themes of identity. **The House of Impossible Beauties**, by Joseph Cassara, reminds me of that trip to New York; a place of hope and refuge, where everything was possible as long as you had the rent for the landlord and the wit to survive. And how these boys - some transitioning - survive; the love, camaraderie and support is both uplifting and heart-breaking. Heartbreak is also what we get from Tomasz Jedrowski's exquisite debut novel, **Swimming in the Dark**. Set in 1980s Poland, this love story is so beautifully written I return to it again and again.

My obsession with connecting with the

rights and plights of others is reflected in the family memoir **East West Street**. Written by the human rights lawyer Philippe Sands, it takes us back via the Nuremberg trials to Nazi Europe, as he seeks to understand what his relatives went through, uncovering heroism, sacrifices and the terrifyingly ordinary overture to genocide.

Against the Law is Peter Wildeblood's account of events leading to the 1954 trial in which he was open about his homosexuality and convicted on charges relating to gross indecency between males. I grew up in the 1950s and knew I was "queer" but quickly realised I had to hide it or face punishment. The scandal shook the establishment and shaped the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, though the arrests continued.

Sebastian Barry's **Days Without End** is a spellbinding tale that intrigued and moved me - the story of men who dare to love in a harsh and unforgiving world.

To live out one's true identity goes to the core of equality and what makes us human. We can't live on equal terms until we have this freedom, as is seen in **Three Women** by Lisa Taddeo and Bernardine Evaristo's **Girl, Woman, Other**.

Finally, I'm alternating between the sad, heroic and emotional: **All the Young Men** by Ruth Coker Burks and Matthew Lopez's breathtaking play **The Inheritance**. Both examine Aids and HIV in the US, highlighting the people at the centre of the crisis who saw such unfathomable cruelty, stigma and discrimination. Coker Burks witnessed it first-hand and took action. In Lopez's play, we see what happens when we stand in the shoes of the other, connect and reach out, making the world better for others and ultimately for us all.

One of Them: From Albert Square to Parliament Square by Michael Cashman is published by Bloomsbury.

Tom Gauld

SOME LITERARY COLLECTIVE NOUNS

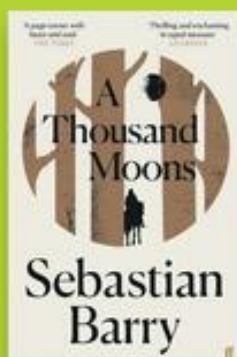




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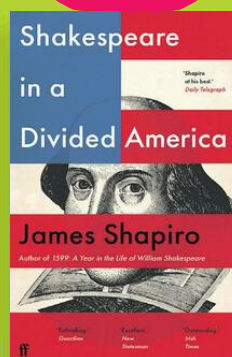
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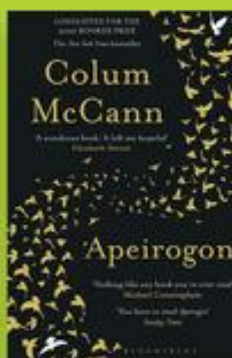
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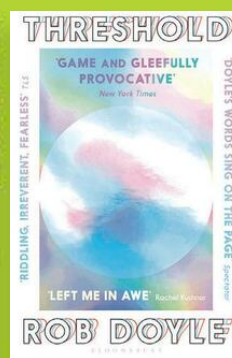
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