

Review

Saturday 17 April 2021 – Issue N°169

Body politics

**Olivia Laing on
the sexologist who
sought to set us free**

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Review

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‘It wasn’t the first time I had been mistaken for a defendant and perhaps wouldn’t be the last. Every black barrister and/or solicitor I know has experienced something similar, and we all know why.’
— Alexandra Wilson, page 25

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The week in books

17 April

Save our school libraries

This week all of the children's laureates, including the current laureate Cressida Cowell (pictured), sent a letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, calling for £100m to be ringfenced for primary school libraries every year. Several laureates have previously campaigned to improve the shabby and unloved libraries they have seen on their tours but little has changed - and one in eight schools still has no library at all.

In a pioneering effort to demonstrate the benefits of a good reading room, Cowell is overseeing the renovation of six primary school libraries in deprived areas around the UK. Each will be given 1,000 books, new furniture and technology; staff will receive training, and wall art will

make the spaces more appealing. The impact on students will be monitored over 12 months when the libraries open in June.

Kate Chisholm, the headteacher of Skerne Park primary in Darlington, said the school was thrilled to be taking part in the scheme, and that the library's current stock was "old and well used, and not very enticing for children".

"I wish I could do this for every school in the UK," said Cowell. "It is so exciting to have a chance to show how transformative a good school library can be." **Sian Cain**

The Jhalak prize at five

Literary prizes are about celebration, and this year's Jhalak prize for writers of colour has more to celebrate than most. Five years after it was founded by authors

Sunny Singh and Nikesh Shukla, the prize is to launch a range of anniversary initiatives, including its Books to Readers promotion of British writers in bookshops and online. From now on the prize will have not one but two winners, due to the creation of a separate category for children's and YA books.

It has been my great privilege to be one of the judges, alongside Yvonne Battle-Felton and Peter Kalu. Throughout our deliberations we have all agreed on one thing: the standard was so high it was agonising. There were more than 150 entries in the adult category alone, covering



all genres of nonfiction, fiction and poetry. On Tuesday our shortlist was announced - and it's a corker. In a field of such excellence, as Peter put it: "The winner is literature itself."

Louise Doughty

Million-dollar memoirs

Mike Pence, the former US vice president, has reportedly secured a \$3-4m, two-book advance for his "reve-latory" autobiography, but this is nothing compared to previous presidents and associates. The Obamas were paid a record \$60m for their memoirs in 2017, while Bill Clinton earned \$15m in 2004 for *My Life* and Hillary Clinton \$14m in 2014 for *Hard Choices*. George W Bush was paid \$10m in 2010 for *Decision Points*. Donald Trump's *The Art of the Deal* was worth \$500k in 1987, split between Trump and his ghostwriter, who has since disowned the book. Donald Trump Jr self-published his second book last year.

Katy Guest

ALAMY; ANTONIO OLMO/THE OBSERVER

Divisive

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole



The report from the UK's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities was rapidly criticised as "divisive", something that one should never be in politics unless it is to one's advantage, as it was for those who **agitated** to divide Britain from the EU. But when was the golden age in which we all were of one mind on any topic?

It was once possible to be admirably divisive: exercising potent discrimination, as the sciences do; "to devise" - to imagine or invent - comes from the same Latin root. But the newfangled word was just as soon adopted, in the 17th century, to mean encouraging of **dissent** or discord, as when in 1649 the poet John Milton ridiculed the claims of Ulster Presbyterians that they were not "sowers of Sedition, or authors of divisive motions".

One reliable way to avoid being "divisive" is to speak in nothing but pleasant cliches. In the meantime we may reflect on the wisdom of Thomas Carlyle, who in 1829 remarked: "**Vanity** is of a divisive, not of a uniting nature." In that case, some portion of British divisions are surely being driven from the top.



'Lonesome Dove' by Larry McMurtry is like the gift of reading itself'

Geoff Dyer

The book I am currently reading

I'm in the rereading phase of my life. Just finished Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* for the third time. Quite something, to be freshly overwhelmed by the greatness of a book you've read twice before.

The book that changed my life

A play in the form of a book in the form of a record, to be precise: Shakespeare's *Richard III*. We were doing it for O-level. A woman my mum worked with at my old school had an LP with one of those Hammer horror actors, Peter Cushing or Christopher Lee, as Richard. She lent it to me and that, combined with lessons by a wonderful teacher at grammar school, led to my becoming swallowed up in the language. The nice thing about this story is that my mum and her friend weren't *teachers* at the school; they were dinner ladies.

The book that influenced my writing

John Berger, without a doubt, but I can't narrow it down to a single book since the influence was, precisely, his range and endless formal innovation.

The book I wish I'd written

Impossible to answer honestly except by saying "None". Naturally, I often find myself wishing that one of my poxy books had sold as many copies as an even poxier one by someone else but, as Walt Whitman put it: "I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones."

The book I think is most underrated

In 2000 I was a judge for a prize and we shortlisted *The Name of the World* by Denis Johnson. The other two judges wanted Philip Roth to win for *The Human Stain* but I persuaded them to give it to Michael Ondaatje for *Anil's Ghost*. Looking back I wish we'd chosen *The Name of the World* in recognition of the unfettered wonder of Johnson's vision.

The book I think is most overrated

The Adventures of Augie March by Saul Bellow. Both a total bore and an example of the influencer being so much less interesting than the influencee, Martin Amis.

The last book that made me cry

Voyage in the Dark by Jean Rhys, which I recently reread.

The last book that made me laugh

Voyage in the Dark. The point being that a book has to do both, ideally at the same time. Like when we hear that the protagonist, Anna, sent "a postcard from Blackpool or some such place and all she said on it was, 'This is a very windy place,' which doesn't tell us much about how she is getting on." God, I love Jean Rhys.

The book I'm ashamed not to have read

I've failed to read all the usual ones - Proust, late James, Musil - but nope, no shame.

The book I give as a gift

Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry. It's like the gift of reading itself.

My comfort read

David Thomson's *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. An inexhaustibly wonderful cosmology.

Geoff Dyer's See/Saw: Looking at Photographs is published by Canongate.

The renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich coined the term ‘sexual revolution’. His utopian ideas on the body have fallen out of fashion, but they are vital in our age of protests and patriarchy, argues *Olivia Laing*

A naked source of power

There are certain people who speak directly into their moment, and others who leave a message for history to decipher, whose work gains in relevance or whose life becomes uncannily meaningful decades after their death.

It’s hard to think of a better example of the latter right now, in this year of protests and plague, than the renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, one of the strangest and most prescient thinkers of the 20th century.

What Reich wanted to understand was the body itself: why you might want to escape or subdue it, why it remains a naked source of power. His wild life draws together aspects of bodily experience that remain intensely relevant now, from illness to sex, anti-fascist direct action to incarceration. The writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin read Reich, as did many of the second-wave feminists. In the late 70s Susan Sontag wrote *Illness As Metaphor* as a riposte to his theories about health, while Kate Bush’s 1985 song “Cloudbusting” immortalises his battle with the law, its insistent, hiccupping refrain – “I just know that something good is going to happen” – conveying the compelling utopian atmosphere of his ideas.

Reich believed that the emotional and the political

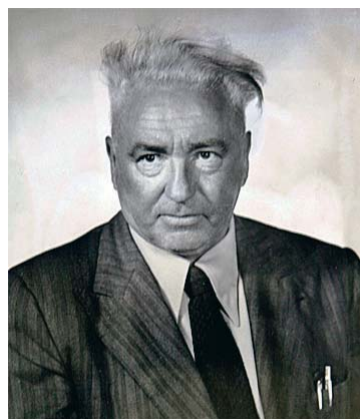
directly affect our bodily experience, and he also thought that both realms could be improved, that Eden could even at this late juncture be retrieved. He was vilified in his own era, sometimes for good reason, but many of his ideas still hum and wriggle with life.

¶

His story begins in Vienna, in the wake of the first world war. As a young man, he was Freud’s most brilliant protege (*der beste Kopfe*, the best mind in psychoanalysis). But in the early 1920s, he had a heretical revelation. As he listened to his patients speak, his attention kept straying to their bodies, lying guarded and rigid on the couch. What if they were communicating information that couldn’t be said in words? Maybe the past wasn’t just housed in the memory, as Freud believed, but stowed in the body too.

What Reich was seeing was not a hysterical symptom to be decoded, but rather a kind of clenching and clamping that pervaded a person’s entire being: a tension so impenetrable it reminded him of armour. He thought it was a defence against feeling, especially anxiety, rage and sexual excitement. If experiences were too painful and distressing, if emotional expression was forbidden or sexual desire prohibited, then the only alternative was to tense up and lock it away. This process created a permanent physical shield around the vulnerable self, protecting it from pain at the cost of numbing it to pleasure.

Over the next decade, he began to work with his patients’ bodies, first verbally and then by touching them; an act totally prohibited in psychoanalysis. To



Strange and prescient Reich in the mid-50s; Olivia Laing, right



MATT WRITTE/EVENING STANDARD/EYEVINE; AP/COURTESY REICH FAMILY

his amazement, he found that when he worked on these regions of tension – the habitual expressions of fright, the clenched fists or rigid bellies – the feelings lodged there could be brought to the surface and released. Patients remembered long-ago incidents of shaming or unwanted invasion, experiencing the fury or despair they had been unable to feel at the time. This emotional release was often accompanied by a pleasurable rippling feeling Reich called “streaming”.

It was because of this therapy that I first encountered Reich. In the final year of the 20th century, I came across an advert in a herbal pharmacy in Brighton for a body psychotherapist. I’d had a strong sense since childhood that I was holding something, that I’d locked myself around a mysterious unhappiness, the precise cause of which I didn’t understand. I was so rigid and stiff that I flinched when anyone touched me, like a mousetrap going off. Something was stuck and I wanted, nervously, to work it free.

The therapist, Anna, practised in a small, soupy room at the top of her house. There was a professional-looking massage bed in the corner, but the overwhelming impression was of slightly grimy domesticity. Whenever I could, I’d suggest we ditch talking in favour of a massage. I didn’t have to undress completely. Anna would lightly work at odd places on my body, not kneading but seeming instead to directly command muscles to unclench. Periodically she’d lean over and listen, the bell of her stethoscope pressed against my stomach.

More often than not, I experienced a sense of energy moving through my abdomen and down my legs, where it tingled like jellyfish tentacles. It was a

nice feeling, not sexual exactly, but as if an obstinate blockage had been dislodged. I never talked about it and she never asked, but it was part of why I kept coming back: to experience this newly lively, quivering body. When I first read Reich, I immediately recognised his description of streaming. Even now, I can still remember how it felt: as if something too, too solid had been induced to melt, as Hamlet once implored.

Reich had always been intensely interested in sex, and he wondered whether the energy he’d unleashed was what Freud had termed libido. At the time, Freud taught that all symptoms sprang from disturbances in sexuality, a premise Reich’s patients certainly bore out. If undischarged sexual energy caused neurosis, might it not follow that the discharge of sexual energy was in itself a healing force? Reich suspected the orgasm was the body’s own innate way of releasing tension, dissolving the rigid armour of trauma and unhappiness in a rush of fluid, libidinous energy.

If he was right, then sex mattered, and not simply as a procreative force. In the early 1930s, Reich coined the term “the sexual revolution” to describe the universe of happiness and love that would arise once people had shaken off their shackles, divesting the world of its punitive, prurient attitudes. He was undoubtedly naive in this, as the French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault observes in *The History of Sexuality*. If the orgasm is so powerful, Foucault asks, why is it that the vastly expanded sexual liberties of the intervening years have failed to dissolve capitalism or topple the patriarchy, despite all Reich’s ardent predictions to the contrary?

It’s an easy criticism to make, but it doesn’t



◆ mean Reich's utopianism was completely without solid, practical foundations. If people had access to safe sex, and especially to contraception and safe, legal abortion, they were far less likely to produce unwanted children, or to find themselves trapped by poverty or unhappy marriages. As he pointed out in *The Sexual Revolution*, 20,000 women a year died in Germany because of illegal abortions between 1920 and 1932, while 75,000 became ill with sepsis. You don't need to believe in the magical power of the orgasm to see why a sexual revolution might be desirable, especially for women.

But Reich's *Steckenpferd* (hobbyhorse), as Freud called it, might not have had such grave consequences for their relationship had it not coincided with his growing conviction of the need for social change. Many of his patients were working class. Listening to their stories, he realised the problems he was seeing weren't simply a consequence of childhood experience but social factors such as poverty, poor housing, domestic violence and unemployment. Each individual was plainly subject to larger forces, which could cause just as much trouble as Freud's central site of interest, the crucible of the family.

What Reich longed to do was treat the cause. "From now onward, the great question was: *Where does that misery come from?* While Freud developed his death instinct theory, which said 'the misery comes from inside', I went out, out where the people were." In 1927, he read *Das Kapital* with as much amazed recognition as he had once read Freud. He was gripped by Marx's account of capitalism as a brutal system of exchange that converted people into commodities, objects of arbitrarily fluctuating value. The notion of alienated bodies, estranged from their own needs and desires, chimed with what he'd seen in his own patients, lying stiff and rigid on the couch.

Both psychoanalysis and communism were full of potential for understanding human unhappiness and expanding human freedom, Reich thought, but each had major blind spots. The problem with psychotherapy was that it insisted on treating the individual as if their pain occurred in a vacuum, unmediated by the society they inhabited or the politics that governed their lives. As for Marxism, it failed to recognise the importance of emotional experience, not least the trouble caused by shame and sexual repression, especially to women. Therapy was not enough. Politics was not enough. Only sex was a sufficiently powerful force to reshape society. As he explained in his memoir, *People in Trouble*, he believed freeing sex from centuries of repression would change the world.

In 1930 he moved to Berlin, where out of the wreckage of war there had arisen a great flowering of new ideas about sexuality. He was a prominent, passionate figure in the city, lecturing crowds of thousands. Young people in particular came to him in droves, seeking help with the difficulty of reconciling their own desires with their anxiety and ignorance around pregnancy and disease.

This liberation work came to an abrupt halt when Hitler seized power in 1933. The free expression of sexuality was immediately a target of the new Nazi regime, and many of Reich's allies were arrested and imprisoned. A known communist and anti-fascist, Reich went on the run, spending weeks hiding in hotels under false names before escaping over the mountains to Austria, then coming back, perversely, mysteriously, to his watched apartment in Berlin to pack a suitcase and escape again.

He spent that autumn in Denmark, poring over *Mein Kampf* and writing *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, his landmark work of analysis of the Nazis' appeal. In it, he explained how the patriarchal family acted as a unit of indoctrination, training people from childhood to submit to authority. The Nazis burned it on pyres, alongside all his other published work.



People in Trouble was the first of Reich's books I read, and it bowled me over. Reich was not a beautiful writer, like Freud. He often sounded boastful, even paranoid, but there was an urgency that tugged me in. It was as if he was writing from the battleground, hunched over his notebook, sketching out high-stakes possibilities for enlarging the freedoms of real people's lives. His account chimed with my own experiences of activism, the excitements and frustrations of trying to agitate for political change.

I'd grown up in the 1980s as a gender non-conforming child in a gay family, under the malign rule of Section 28, a homophobic law that forbade schools from teaching "the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship". To know that this was how the state regarded your own family was to receive a powerful education in how bodies are positioned in a hierarchy of value, their freedoms privileged or curtailed according to more or less inescapable attributes, from skin colour to sexuality. Each time I went to therapy I could feel the legacy of that period in my own body, as knots of shame and fear and rage that were difficult to express, let alone dissolve.

But if my childhood taught me about the body as an object whose freedom is limited by the world, it also gave me a sense of the body as a force for freedom in its own right. I went to my first Gay Pride event

I went to my first Gay Pride at the age of 11, and it seemed obvious that bodies on the streets were how you changed the world

at the age of 11, and the feeling of all those marching bodies on Westminster Bridge lodged inside me, too, a somatic sensation unlike anything I'd previously experienced. It seemed obvious to me that bodies on the streets were how you changed the world. As a teenager terrified by the oncoming apocalypse of the climate crisis, I started attending protests,



becoming so immersed in the environmental direct action movement that I dropped out of university in favour of a treehouse in a Dorset woodland scheduled to be destroyed for a new road.

I loved living in the woods, but using my own body as a tool of resistance was gruelling as well as intoxicating. The Criminal Justice Act had drastically curtailed the right to protest, just as the police, crime, sentencing and courts bill threatens to do now. Policing had become more aggressive and several people I knew were facing long prison sentences for the new crime of aggravated trespass. Freedom came at a cost, and it seemed that the cost was bodily, too, the loss of physical liberty an omnipresent threat. Like many activists, I burned out. In the summer of 1998, I sat down in a graveyard in Penzance and filled out an application for a degree in herbal medicine.

Reich's ideas seemed so relevant to my times that I couldn't understand why I hadn't heard about him, either in protest circles or during my training as a herbalist. It wasn't until much later that I realised the reason he isn't more respected or discussed is that the excesses of the second half of his life have overwhelmed the first. The radical, incisive ideas about sex and politics that he developed in Europe before the war have been almost buried beneath the far more dismaying notions developed in his years of exile, which range from pseudo-scientific theories of disease to a "spacegun" that controls the weather.

When Reich emigrated to the US in 1939, a refugee from Hitler's Europe, he didn't establish himself as a psychoanalyst or an activist, but as a scientist; albeit one proudly uninterested in the process of peer review. Shortly after his arrival, he claimed to have discovered the universal energy that animates all life. He called it orgone, and in the laboratory of his house in New York he developed a pseudoscientific machine to harness its healing powers. Given the consequences it would have for its maker, it's ironic that Reich's universal healing device was a wooden cell slightly smaller than a standard phone booth, in which you sat in stately self-confinement.

Reich believed the orgone accumulator could automate the work of liberation, obviating the need for laborious person-to-person therapy. He also hoped it might cure disease, particularly cancer. This

'Something good is going to happen'
Kate Bush's 'Cloudbursting' was inspired by Reich

latter claim triggered an exposé, which in turn drew him to the attention of the Food and Drug Authority, initiating an investigation into the medical efficacy of the orgone accumulator that lasted almost a decade.

On 7 May 1956, he was sentenced to two years imprisonment for refusing to stop selling his invention. His books were burned, in what remains the only federally sanctioned book burning on American soil. The following spring he was sent to Lewisburg Penitentiary in Pennsylvania, where six months later he died of a heart attack in his cell, a brutal end for somebody whose life was dedicated to enlarging the freedoms of others.

¶

There's a lot more to Reich than his latter-day reputation as the orgasm man. When he was 11, his mother had an affair. His father found out, and was so physically abusive that after a year she killed herself to escape him. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the horrors his mother underwent drove Reich's work as a sexual liberationist, opening his eyes to the consequences of patriarchal models, as well as restrictive attitudes to sex. As Andrea Dworkin put it, he was "that most optimistic of sexual liberationists, the only male one to abhor rape *really*". None of the revelations of the #MeToo movement would have surprised him. When he talked about the sexual revolution, he didn't mean a fantasia of endless ejaculation so much as a world in which women could experience sexual pleasure without fear of retribution, violence or death.

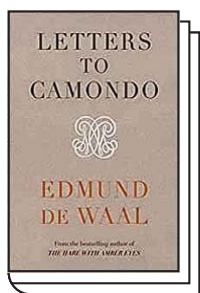
Violence also woke Reich up to the ways in which not all bodies are protected by the state, a truth that Black Lives Matter has viscerally demonstrated continues in our own era. In 1927, he witnessed a workers' uprising in Vienna that was viciously suppressed by the police. The spectacle of the brutalised crowd and the robotic policemen haunted him. What he saw on the streets of Vienna was not, he was certain, the natural or inevitable order of being. It was the product of patriarchal capitalism, which established a rigid, immobilising, authoritarian model of relationships from the moment a child was born.

The tragedy of Reich's life is that, nearly a hundred years later, these systems remain as powerful as ever. Does this mean the dream of freedom has failed? No. It is possible to remake the world. What you cannot do is assume that any change is permanent. Everything can be undone, and so every victory must be refought. Freedom is a shared endeavour: a collaboration built by many hands over many centuries. The free body isn't just a beautiful idea. As Reich knew, it requires work, a labour every single living person can choose to hinder or advance ●

Everybody by Olivia Laing is published by Picador on 29 April.

Book of the week

{ History } From Proust and Parisian riches to the horror of the Holocaust ... the superbly told story of an art collection *Nicholas Wroe*



Letters to Camondo
by Edmund de Waal,
Chatto & Windus,
£14.99

The potter Edmund de Waal's multi-prize winning 2010 family memoir *The Hare With Amber Eyes* uncovered the story behind a collection of 264 Japanese netsuke - small, intricately carved ivory figures including the eponymous hare - and along the way became a subtle investigation of

inheritance, the Jewish diaspora, the glories and horrors of European history and the relationship between objects and memory. This new book features several of the people first encountered in *Hare* and again De Waal uses objects - this time the lavish collections of 18th-century French art, porcelain and furniture assembled by Moïse de Camondo in early 20th-century Paris - to explore a richly dramatic era.

While *Letters to Camondo* would most obviously be described as a companion to the earlier book, perhaps more accurately it should be called a neighbour. It was while living on the Rue de Monceau in Paris that De Waal's great-great-grandfather's cousin, Charles Ephrussi of the banking family, bought the netsuke. It was also on the Rue de Monceau that Camondo put together his collections and where he

built the mansion in which they are housed to this day. It was no coincidence that the two men, linked by friendship and family ties, lived so close to each other. Part of an 1860s development of a then undistinguished area of Paris, the Rue de Monceau and the park it bounds attracted many very wealthy, often Jewish, families seeking to find a place in "secular, republican, tolerant, civilised Paris".

The Ephrussis had come from Odessa via Vienna. The Camondos were bankers in Constantinople. Both bought plots on the Rue de Monceau in 1869. Moïse was nine when they arrived and the neighbours included "a couple of Rothschilds" as well as members of the Reinach family, who were "absurdly rich, even by Camondo standards". Émile Zola, in *La Curée*, his 1871 novel skewering nouveau-riche excess, described the mansions as "still-new and pale" and "an opulent bastard of every style". But these families embraced culture as well as commerce and, among other things, immediate members were variously the subject of portraits by Renoir (Camondo's future wife when she was a girl) and buyers of paintings by Manet "straight off his easel". Proust, who lived round the corner, was an acquaintance, and they were in correspondence with Rilke, and exchanged poems in their letters.

It is through 58 imaginary letters to Camondo that De Waal tells the story of the man's life and death, his house, his collections, his world and what became of it. The author reassures the old man of his knowledge of the Dreyfus Affair and the antisemitic French press, of "duelling, Bizet, beards, moustaches, flâneurs" and the fact he knows "far too much about who my cousins slept with a century ago". Unadvertised, but consistently illuminating is also his artist's, and connoisseur's, eye for the practical details of how and why things are made, bought, collected and displayed.

The house at 63 Rue de Monceau that now houses the Camondo collections was not the first on the site. As soon as Moïse inherited his father's home he demolished it and in 1911 built a new one of his own, supervised by the architect René Sergent, who had just finished refurbishing Claridge's hotel in London. He also disposed of most of the treasures his father had brought from Constantinople, including many precious Jewish religious artefacts. But this wasn't a straightforward erasure of his roots. Camondo remained a prominent figure in the Jewish community, prominent enough to be accused of "trespass" by an antisemitic newspaper when hunting in ancient "French" forests.

Camondo's own overwhelmingly French treasures - carpets and clocks, silver cutlery made for Catherine the Great, porcelain aviaries - fitted well with his view of himself in which Jewishness was just one part of an identity that also entailed being a French patriot, and more specifically a Parisian. He was a

Camondo's own overwhelmingly French treasures - carpets and clocks, silver cutlery made for Catherine the Great, porcelain aviaries - fitted well with his view of himself in which Jewishness was just one part of an identity that also entailed being a French patriot, and more specifically a Parisian. He was a



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member of dozens of eminent societies and clubs and a benefactor to many public causes. “You become part of the street, the neighbourhood, the city, the country, so perfectly, so delicately aligned,” muses De Waal, “that you disappear.”

Camondo made a high society marriage to Irène Cahen d’Anvers, complete with an eight-month honeymoon in Cannes, before going through a high society divorce. Both of their children, Nissim and Béatrice, stayed with their father. Nissim was thought not suited to banking but was “charming and devoted and loyal” and his father was proud when he enlisted in the nascent French air force during the first world war. He was soon promoted but, while on a reconnaissance mission in 1917, his plane went missing. The family received a letter from Proust expressing the hope that Nissim would be found safe and well, but a few weeks later news came through that he had been killed and was already buried.

His death marked the beginning of the transition of 63 Rue de Monceau from a home into a monument. Camondo decreed that his son’s rooms were to be left untouched, and over time what had been a dynamic collection became ever more fixed. When Camondo died in 1935 the house and everything in it were donated to the nation, a gesture echoed by many of the neighbouring Jewish families. These donations are explored in James McAuley’s recently published *The House of Fragile Things* (Yale), which is a more conventionally scholarly study than De Waal’s, but a

comprehensive and accessible account of one of the great communal acts of generosity – and then betrayal – in modern history.

The ceremony handing over the new Musée Nissim de Camondo took place at the end of 1936 with daughter Béatrice, by this time married to a Reinach with two children of her own, representing the family. The event made the papers with photos of the dignitaries. In the same paper that day were reports of the pact between Germany and Japan and Hitler’s support for Franco.

The cataclysm that arrives a few years later is dealt with in De Waal’s longest letter, all sense of politesse gone, his cold anger delivered in almost bullet-point directness as the Nazis and the French state first remove rights and property from Jews – the Renoir portrait was soon passing through Goering’s private collection – before removing freedom and lives. The Camondo-Reinach’s efforts to avoid their fates, from seeking intercessions from powerful friends to divorce and conversion to Catholicism, fail. Like all Holocaust stories, theirs is both unique and familiar. Among the last photographs in an excellently illustrated book are those of the simple manila arrival cards issued to the four members of the family at a French internment camp ahead of their murders in Birkenau, Auschwitz and Monowitz. Irène survived the war and inherited Béatrice’s fortune. She died in 1962.

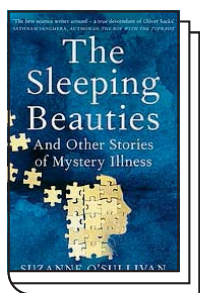
De Waal’s excavation of the meanings of assimilation is considered, compassionate and appreciative of its costs, not only in blood and treasure, and its benefits, “a welcome of sorts and tolerance, a place to settle, a hill of friends and cousins, conversation among equals”. As an artist best known for his installations of multiple porcelain vessels, he is authoritative on how objects work together and what they can mean to the people who own them and see them. But it is his own history, quietly revealed as he probes Camondo’s life, as much as his knowledge and expertise, that enriches this book.

We learn of his father’s application for Austrian citizenship 82 years after leaving the country and that De Waal has donated part of the netsuke collection to the Jewish museum in Vienna and sold the rest in aid of the Refugee Council. With a family story spread over continents and centuries, allied to his Jewish ancestry, Anglican upbringing, Quaker sympathies and Buddhist reading, he is a wise guide to people and things that are dispersed and are collected. As he concludes: “I think you can love more than one place. I think you can move across a border and still be a whole person.” This book is a wonderful tribute to a family and to an idea. Later this year, Covid restrictions allowing, De Waal will be the first living artist to have his work displayed at the Musée Nissim de Camondo.

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

{ Health } A neurologist's investigation of psychosomatic illness recognises the limits of western medicine

Katy Guest



The Sleeping Beauties: And Other Stories of Mystery Illness
by Suzanne O'Sullivan,
Picador, £16.99

In Sweden in recent years, hundreds of children of refugee families have fallen into coma-like states, sometimes for months or years. Dozens of people in three Nicaraguan communities had tremors, convulsions, breathing difficulties and hallucinations. Diplomats in Cuba, experiencing headaches, dizziness, tinnitus and fatigue, became convinced that they were victims of a new and

terrifying sonic weapon. Older victims in two small towns in Kazakhstan blamed toxic mines for their sleeping sickness and strange behaviour, while fainting high school girls in Colombia were told they were crazy, attention-seeking and sexually frustrated.

While local communities give these symptoms distinct names and have very different opinions about their causes, neurologist Suzanne O'Sullivan is convinced that they are the same type of disorder. What this book is far less clear about is what exactly we should call it. We may know it as "psychosomatic" illness, but in modern neurology the word "functional" has largely replaced that term. What was once known as "mass hysteria" is now more carefully described as "mass psychogenic illness" (MPI). O'Sullivan refers at different times to "functional neurological disorders" (FND) and "biopsychosocial" disorders, which seems a sensible label for symptoms that exist in the body as a result of activity in the brain and the influence of culture and environment. Whatever we call them, there are many reasons why these disorders are difficult to identify and treat - not least that many patients would rather be diagnosed with almost anything else. Fortunately, O'Sullivan is convinced that they can be helped.

In this illuminating and often challenging book, she travels the world, bringing her expertise and curiosity to some astonishing MPIs. In Sweden, she hears that children begin to fall asleep when their

families' asylum applications are rejected: "The children are the ones who open the letters." Her brief history of ex-Soviet Kazakhstan helps to explain why older people are falling ill in two cold, run-down towns that they still remember as "paradise"; with a genuine, physical illness associated with the location they can finally give themselves permission to leave.

Throughout her travels, O'Sullivan acts with humility about the limits of western medicine. At times, she clearly feels conflicted about her role and what is expected of her. In Nicaragua she notes that the MPI, known locally as *grisi siknis*, "looked very much like the dissociative (psychosomatic) seizures I see every day of my working life", but acknowledges that here, benzodiazepines and epilepsy drugs don't work, "while shamanism is largely successful". In westernised society, on the other hand, we drive people who are suffering psychologically "to get a disease label that will earn them the help and respect they are asking for".

Like any specialist, O'Sullivan is passionate about her area of medicine and frustrated by the misunderstanding around it. She bristles when journalists write that "medical tests have not been able to provide any answers", arguing that "there are numerous neurological conditions for which we don't know the cause ... A migraine doesn't show up on scans, but it is not usually referred to as a mystery illness."

Repeatedly, she is forced to explain to communities and doctors that FNDs are "real". As recently as 2018, an academic paper dismissed MPI as a diagnosis for the diplomats in Cuba because "neurological examination and cognitive testing did not reveal any

By making social problems visible on the body, O'Sullivan believes, these conditions allow voiceless people to make themselves heard

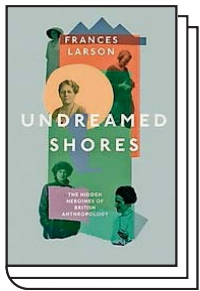
evidence of malingering", and insurance companies are less likely to pay out for conditions that are related to "stress". Interestingly, MPIs tend to be rejected as an explanation for symptoms in adults, especially men, but caricatured as "just" mass hysteria when they are observed in women and girls.

More controversially, she suggests that MPIs have a purpose. "Psychosomatic and functional disorders break the rules of every other medical problem because, for all the harm they do, they are sometimes indispensable," she writes. In Nicaragua, she asks a local: "Do you have any thoughts about why young girls are more likely to be affected by *grisi siknis*?" He replies: "I don't know ... but I think maybe the girls are weak and *grisi siknis* makes them strong." By making social problems visible on the body, O'Sullivan believes, these conditions allow voiceless people to make themselves heard. Perhaps this eloquent and convincing book will be the start of making people in authority listen, make change and help.

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

{ Biography } Adventures in the Nile Valley and on Easter Island – but these female pioneers faced tragedy at home

Kathryn Hughes



Undreamed Shores: The Hidden Heroines of British Anthropology

by Frances Larson,
Granta, £20

When Maria Czaplicka first encountered the indigenous hunters and herders of northern Siberia it wasn't clear who was studying whom. The Oxford-based scholar had spent much of 1914 sledging over the Arctic steppes to reach the Evenks in order to ask them about their kinship structures, marriage customs and the right way to eat a reindeer. They in turn wanted to

know which tundra she had come from and how she made a living without any fox skins to trade. And why did such a young person have such old hair (her blondness struck them as the grey of middle age), and then, the question that women still get: where were her children? The queries that hurtled back and forth were fearless but fertile and produced the rich data that Czaplicka marshalled so brilliantly in *My Siberian Year* (1916), the hit book that she published on her return to Britain.

It sounds as though Czaplicka was poised for success, if not celebrity. And yet, as Frances Larson explains in this enthralling group biography, the first generation of professional female anthropologists faced far more prejudice back home than they ever did out in the field. Funding, career progression, access to academic publishing (*My Siberian Year* was actually brought out by Mills & Boon) all remained tantalisingly out of reach. While it's true that in 1916 Czaplicka was appointed Oxford's first female lecturer in anthropology, it was made clear that she was to keep the post warm until the right man came home from the war.

Obligated to move to Bristol University, the final straw came in 1921 when the Polish-born scholar failed to win a fellowship that would have allowed her to return to Siberia. Exhausted after years of begging and scraping together money for her field work, the 36-year-old fatally poisoned herself.

This story isn't even the saddest of the five that Larson brings us here. Ironically the invisibility and marginality that made Czaplicka's contemporaries Katherine Routledge, Winifred Blackman, Beatrice Blackwood and Barbara Freire-Marreco such good observers of other peoples' culture hobbled them when it came to making a mark in their own. It wasn't just a case of not getting the jobs that were earmarked for men, but something more subtle and therefore harder to contest.

When Blackwood set off for the Solomon Islands in the 1920s determined to find a tribal community in which to immerse herself, the man in charge, Australian anthropologist Ernest Chinnery, consistently assigned her settlements that were within hailing distance of the local police station. He was obsessed with the idea of European women getting raped by local men, even if there was no record of it ever happening.

She ended her career as the chief cataloguer at the Pitt Rivers Museum, much loved and hugely valued, yet when her colleagues lobbied for Oxford to award her an honorary doctorate, she was passed over.

Even when the money was sorted it didn't mean that a female fieldworker felt free to do and speak as she pleased. Routledge was rich enough to fund her own work on Easter Island, kitting out a boat to get there and a scientific team to support her. But once on shore she found herself prey to uncharacteristic self-doubt. The indigenous people told her that the monumental moai statues that guard the shoreline had "walked" there from the inland quarry where they had been made. But this sounded so fanciful that Routledge refrained from making too much of it for fear of appearing credulous. It took the ceaselessly self-confident Norwegian ethnographer Thor

Did they walk? Moai statues on Easter Island

Heyerdahl another 60 years to work out that the statues were built with such a low centre of gravity that it was indeed quite possible that

they had "walked" there, with the islanders rocking and twisting them forward, much as you might move a heavy fridge.

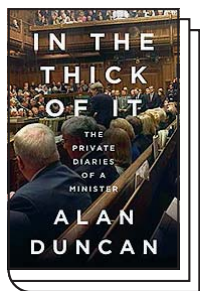
Routledge finished her days in a mental institution, as did Blackman who worked in the Nile valley in the 1920s. Larson is too sensible to suggest that it was anthropology that sent them over the edge, but she is clear-eyed about the collateral damage they accrued along the way. All five women had to put up with some truly ghastly men, including needy fathers, patronising brothers, rapacious husbands and lovers who would secretly have been happy to see them fail.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.



{ Memoir } Johnson is a 'buffoon' and Gove is a 'freak', but Britain's stagnant politics is the real target here

Gaby Hinsliff



In the Thick of It: The Private Diaries of a Minister

by Alan Duncan,
William Collins, £25

Serious times call for serious people. If living through a global pandemic had somehow failed to underline that, then the sight of violence returning to the streets of Northern Ireland in recent weeks should. The argument for grownups in the room could hardly seem clearer. But until recently you might have got good odds against

Alan Duncan emerging at its standard bearer.

Still, cometh the hour, cometh the diarist. *In the Thick of It*, this former Tory minister's account of the four years running up to Boris Johnson's landslide election victory in 2019, initially grabbed the headlines thanks to the sheer gleeful bitchiness of the insults littered throughout. But there's a more serious message at the heart of this book, reeking as it does of decline and despair.

"Parliament is dead. Government is bureaucratic. Political leadership barely exists. We are stagnant and ossified," Duncan writes at one low point for Theresa May, whom he had supported for the leadership. By 2019, now under Johnson's leadership, he thinks the Conservative party is visibly disintegrating; poisoned by Brexit, eating itself from within, increasingly incapable of grappling with the challenges facing the country. "Half of my fellow MPs are intolerant ideologues and we just don't share the same principles. They are throwbacks and nationalists ... their actions will diminish Britain," he writes in April, resolving to quit parliament. In December he did just that, disenchanted after 27 years as an MP.

Many readers will be drawn by the tantalising promise of revelations from Duncan's spell as Johnson's "pooper scooper", or more formally as his deputy at the Foreign Office, resigned to sweeping up the mess the then foreign secretary left behind. He paints a withering picture of a man apparently liked but never respected by Foreign Office civil servants - they knew too much about the complexities of Brexit to be fobbed off with waffle about thinking positively. To Duncan, Johnson's arguments for how Britain can flourish even after a hard Brexit are "puerile junk". He depicts his boss as an "embarrassing buffoon with an untidy mind", a stain on Britain's reputation.

Yet there is little new scandal of substance here. If Duncan does know of some smoking gun, or

diplomatic disaster behind the scenes, then he isn't telling. As with all ministerial diaries, this one was vetted, and one gets a faint occasional sense of something missing in the background.

Nor is Duncan a wholly disinterested witness. He is a man whose time never really came. After making his money in oil trading, he entered parliament in 1992 and slogged away on successive opposition and government front benches without ever quite reaching the very top. By the time the diary begins in 2016, he is a backbencher again, sitting through meetings on reducing unnecessary road signs, which is "one of my passions". (More than once, the book teeters close to Alan Partridge territory.) Duncan himself was a Eurosceptic, wooed hard by Vote Leave in 2016. If he'd succumbed, instead of backing remain on the rather prescient grounds that Brexiters couldn't convincingly explain how Brexit was supposed to work, perhaps he'd have been in the cabinet too. Instead he is doomed to watch what he regards as lesser talents climb high enough to mess things up. Some of Duncan's greatest vitriol is reserved for those who leapfrogged him into cabinet. Gavin Williamson is a "venomous self-seeking little shit", Priti Patel a "brassy monster", and Michael Gove an "unctuous freak". Duncan has warm praise for many of his civil servants and for Jeremy Hunt, who succeeded Johnson as foreign

Duncan's scorn for his own party can make for a sour read, relieved by unexpectedly touching vignettes of domestic life with his husband

secretary and is portrayed here as the thoughtful leader the Tories never had.

Duncan's claim that he kept the diary as a way of letting off steam in private rather than venting to journalists will surprise many journalists, especially the ones whose meetings with him are detailed here with a candour bound to leave some blushing. Nor is self-awareness his strongest

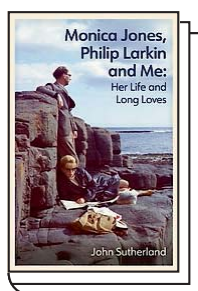
suit. One moment he is privately savaging Gove's "creepy and arse-licking" newspaper interview of Donald Trump in his diary, the next telling Gove it was "quite a coup". And his scorn for so much of his own party can make for a sour read in places, relieved towards the end only by unexpectedly touching vignettes of domestic life with his evidently beloved husband James.

But what saves the book from descending into bitterness and pomposity, despite flashes of both, is the feeling that Duncan frankly has a point; that after four years of purging remain supporters from the Tory ranks, what's left is hardly a government of titans. And as he notes in the foreword, winning a majority has not solved the fundamental problem of reconciling their promises with reality. We may be in the thick of it for a while yet.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Biography } In thrall to Philip Larkin's genius: racism, drink and despair in a generous account of a poisonous love

Blake Morrison



Monica Jones, Philip Larkin and Me: Her Life and Long Loves by John Sutherland, Weidenfeld, £20

Poor Monica Jones. She would have liked to marry Philip Larkin but he kept her at arm's length (or the 100 miles between Hull and Leicester) for more than 30 years. An academic, she loved her subject, English literature, but failed to publish any books and, as a result, was never promoted by her university department. She dressed with flair and flamboyance but was dismissed by Larkin's friends as "a grim old bag", "a *beast*" and "frigid, drab and hysterical", and appeared, thinly disguised, as the appalling Margaret Peel (her own middle name was Beale) in Kingsley Amis's debut novel *Lucky Jim*. "I dread the whole of the rest of my life," she wrote in her 30s, and death has done little to rescue her reputation.

Enter, like a shining knight, John Sutherland, who was taught by Jones as an undergraduate, became a good friend and drinking partner, and rightly believes she has been hard done by. "In crucial ways Monica made me," he says, and his book pays generous tribute to the woman who kick-started his prolific academic career. As the first scholar to see Jones's letters to Larkin (all 54 boxes of them in the Bodleian Library), he has also learned things about her he didn't know, some of them hard to take.

Born in Llanelli, south Wales, the only child of upwardly mobile working-class parents, Jones was the archetypal school swot, a keen reader and occasional writer of poetry (a few of the lines Sutherland quotes aren't bad). A scholarship took her to Oxford at the same time as Larkin, but they didn't meet until he joined the library at what was then University College, Leicester shortly after she'd been appointed as a lecturer. To begin with, the English department consisted of just her and one other lecturer; by 1960, when Sutherland arrived, there were 15, with Jones still the only woman, a distinction she enjoyed. (A victim of misogyny, she was a bit of a misogynist herself.) With



Monica Jones

her blond hair, horn-rimmed specs and elegant legs, she was considered sexy, and had a habit of matching her dress to her lecture topics - tartan for *Macbeth*, pearls for *Cleopatra*.

No feminist, with a particular aversion to George Eliot, she had a passion for boxing and cricket. The evenings she spent in pubs with Sutherland and other favoured male students ("my boys" as she called them) were among her happiest, as she was careful to let Larkin know: "I'd never have expected I'd be a great success with a lot of young men but I can see that they all like me." If his jealousy was piqued, it wasn't enough to lure him into marriage; he had another woman on the go by then, Maeve Brennan, as Jones would painfully discover. When Sutherland and other proteges moved on, she boozed alone at home and would turn up drunk to 9am staff meetings. Only for the last couple of years of his life did she and Larkin live together, "in mutual collapse". Till then, for decades, her time with him was rationed to weekends (roughly one in every four), annual holidays on Sark and test matches at Lord's.

Sutherland's memories of Jones - as loud, witty, inspirational - are in stark contrast to the letters he quotes from, which are full of suffering, paranoia, despair and self-loathing. She wrote to Larkin late at night and would run on for 30 pages, with brave attempts to entertain him, before lapsing into grievance and reproach. The low point came when she was lampooned in *Lucky Jim*: rather than spring to her defence, Larkin proclaimed the novel (which he'd helped to edit) the funniest book he'd ever read. His one piece of gallantry, or cowardice, was to abandon the novel he'd been working on himself: "If it is to be written at all," he told another of his lovers, "it should be largely an attack on Monica, & I *can't* do that." She felt rejected even so - and destroyed all the letters he sent in the months after *Lucky Jim* came out.

When he died she destroyed his journals, too, before her co-executors could intervene. It seems unlikely that she did so protectively, to conceal evidence of his racism, since her own was even more extreme. Sutherland experienced a little of it in their Leicester days and reproaches himself for not calling her out. But the extent of it in her letters - from virulent antisemitism to endorsement of Enoch Powell - came as a shock. It wasn't just Larkin's poetry Jones nurtured but his bigotry too.

The relationship was sad and sometimes toxic, as Sutherland's excellent biography shows. Jones's awareness of her lover's damaging effect - how she "sparkled" in the company of young men whereas with him "I'm always hopeless, cut eye in the first round" - left him, in return, consumed by guilt: "It seems to me I am spoiling yr life in a hideously ingenious way." A woman would have told her where to stick him. But Jones had no female friends. In thrall to his genius, her love for Larkin endured - and so did the misery that went with it.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.



Jeff VanderMeer, author of the bestselling Southern Reach trilogy, talks to *Sam Leith* about growing up in Fiji, taking notes on leaves and his new ecological thriller

'It's useful that a novel can be a laboratory of things that haven't happened and maybe shouldn't happen'

VanderMeer
at home in
Tallahassee, Florida



In Jeff VanderMeer's new novel, *Hummingbird Salamander*, the unnamed protagonist is presented in the opening pages with the key to a safety deposit box. Inside, she finds a taxidermied hummingbird and a note with just three words (and six dots) on it: "Hummingbird Salamander –Silvina".

That gnomic communication sets off a paranoia-laced near-future conspiracy thriller; but one in which the hard edges and would-be gritty realism of the traditional thriller melt into something more bewildering, more evocative and more surreal; an inquiry into identity, a gothic family drama, a fable about ecological catastrophe and the ethics of terrorism.

As the stuffed hummingbird will indicate, those three words are nothing so prosaic as a secret code. "Jane Smith", as she calls herself for the reader's benefit ("if that helps"), coolly informs us straight off: "Assume I'm dead by the time you read this." And for most of the novel, the mysterious Silvina whom she's pursuing seems to be dead, too. There's no obvious reason why "Silvina" should have reached out from beyond the grave to "Jane" – a middle-aged family woman with a job in systems security.

In a way, the unfolding of that mystery is a figure for how VanderMeer himself, a leading light of weird fiction and the fantastical, finds his way through his novels. He starts with what John Fowles called a "maggot": "an image that is very charged – I wouldn't say 'symbolic' because people then think of Freud and stuff like that, and I don't like a set symbolism – that I feel has a weight, an extra meaning, connected to some sort of character in an initial situation or dilemma."

The work is then done not at the desk, but under the duvet. "Sometimes I will tell my subconscious, you know, I want to explore this thing more. And before I go to bed, I will think consciously about the character and then wake up in the morning with some revelation." He laughs: "Which seems like a pretty lazy way but it's how it goes for me. I'm really a big believer in being very rigorous in the things that can be mechanical about writing and leaving to the subconscious or the organic those things that can't."

VanderMeer makes notes, sketches scenes, starts to get a feel for where it might go – most often while he's gardening or hiking near his home in Florida. It's only when he has "enough of this detritus" that he starts to shape it into a story. He means "detritus" literally: "possibly notes on leaves: I have had the weird experience out hiking, running out of notes, and having to figure out the right kind of leaf that will survive the rest of the week".

Drafting his work on leaves is almost too perfect an image for VanderMeer, whose SF (if you can usefully call it that) seems to be in counterpoint to the science-fictional tradition that emphasises technological mastery over nature. He is much more Swamp Thing than Robby the Robot. The work that brought him to

a mainstream audience was the Southern Reach trilogy, about a wilderness area of the US that starts to return to nature in the spookiest of ways – coming under the control of a sort of quasi-sentient fungus that plays tricks with time and space – and the subsequent novel *Borne*, which has as its protagonist a giant, flying bear.

"I didn't think a lot of writers were really grappling with the non-human," he says. "We were not doing it that well. I keep up on animal behaviour studies; I read a lot of this stuff. And I would read a lot of fiction where I would like the book a lot but it was clear that, while the writer had done a lot of research on physics, they were relying on an idea of animal behaviour from their childhood. So I specifically [decided] I'm going to have a huge environmental library of books on the non-human: I'm going to let this seep into my subconscious, so that I don't have to think about it as research, and kind of go from there."

Even the most fantastical elements of his work are undergirded by the thing itself. For *Hummingbird Salamander*, for instance, he corralled a biologist friend – a colleague from a college in upstate New York where VanderMeer was a writer in residence – to design a species of hummingbird and salamander: "It was very important to me that an actual biologist create them, because it's a more realistic novel. But then it was interesting from a narrative point of view to have to react to facts that I couldn't change. That was the rule: I couldn't change the facts."

Those animals give the novel its frame: "These are two creatures that really epitomised something about the climate crisis – the hummingbird because it has to take such a long migration, which means it's really susceptible to areas that are under drought or that have been developed. And salamanders, because they're so susceptible to pollutants as they basically breathe through their skin. I like the idea of one thing that kind of stays put, and one thing that travels very far. And then there was the thing that 'Hummingbird salamander' felt right when I said it, as opposed to, say, I don't know, 'Hummingbird capybara'."

The success of Southern Reach, he says, was both a boon and a source of slight irritation: "How can you look askance at something that does so well? But you know, I'd been a full-time writer for seven years; and

in some ways, those seven years are what I'm most proud of. I had books that did well enough to continue publishing, which is the usual state for a writer. In the US, I think, the Southern Reach trilogy ... there's over a million copies in print. In my book before that, I think it's maybe 20,000 copies. It was still very jarring to have had a career where I won a number of awards and had

VanderMeer's science fiction is in counterpoint to mastery over nature – he is much more Swamp Thing than Robby the Robot

ALLSTAR/PARAMOUNT PICTURES



Rewriting the book
 Alex Garland's 2018
 film adaptation of
 VanderMeer's novel
Annihilation

books that got critical acclaim, and have an interviewer say: so what does it feel like being a success after being a failure?"

Annihilation, the first book of the trilogy, was made into a trippy and widely acclaimed 2018 film by Alex Garland, though VanderMeer laughs cagily when I ask what he made of it: "That's always such a weird question," he responds eventually, in a notably high-pitched voice, "because I love Alex Garland's body of work ... but it was so unfaithful to the book. There were no environmental themes, and some other things I thought were important were missing ..." He goes on to say generous things about the film, and the way it expanded his audience, but it sounds to have been filed under "lessons learned".

That said, as he sees it, Southern Reach's success "definitely changes who I could reach with an environmental message". VanderMeer's environmentalism is at the heart of his work and his life. He has just joined the board of the Apalachicola Riverkeepers, which works to defend a vital US river system, has used social media to crowdfund the purchase of sensitive parcels of land, and royalties from *Hummingbird Salamander* are going to an organisation called Trespass, which campaigns against wildlife trafficking. He says he hasn't the temperament to stand for elected office, but politics - of a deep green stripe - are a close concern.

"I try hard not to turn it into a coherent story about my life," he says when I ask him how his ecological concerns and his fiction developed. "But it is true that growing up in Fiji, as a kid, all I remember is this amazing bounty of nature, and being raised by the sea. And then moving to Florida ... we live in a place in north Florida here where - I didn't even know this a couple years ago - it is the 10th most biodiverse place in the US, and 30th in the world. It's getting up there to, like, Amazon rainforest density.

"But there's also this weird feedback loop with

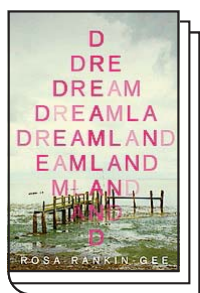
Annihilation, where I began to get these invites to science departments to talk about environmental issues in a way I hadn't before."

The plot of *Hummingbird Salamander* draws its protagonist into a world where wildlife trafficking and environmental terrorism are complicatedly entwined. Its pole star, Silvana, is a figure who seems to be involved in both. At one point, his narrator writes: "It was hard to think of Silvana as 'terrorist' or 'murderer' compared to the people she'd been fighting." How far outside the law, I wondered, does the need to save the planet give you licence to go?

"It's useful that a novel can be a laboratory of things that haven't happened and maybe shouldn't happen," he says. "But it's still useful to explore." VanderMeer points out that a plethora of "new restrictions and laws", some of them opportunistically hatched after 9/11, constrain environmental protest: "Even things like chaining yourself to a tree might mean you're in prison for 10 years. In Florida this very week they're trying to pass an anti-protest bill that means that if you even step into the street from the sidewalk, you could be arrested during a protest about anything, including environmental issues, and be in jail whether you were in any way violent or not." (The bill was passed by the Florida house of representatives on 26 March.)

That hummingbird, by the way, goes way back. When VanderMeer was eight years old, he had what he calls a "hallucinogenic experience" in a hotel on a mountainside in Cusco, Peru. Ill with altitude sickness and asthma, spaced out with oxygen treatment, he looked out of the window and saw two hummingbirds courting on the wing. "It really felt fantastical just because I was completely out of it while I was seeing that - and they disappeared before my parents came into the room. I think I've been kind of trying to make sense of that experience ever since" ●

A story of first love in near-future Margate faces up to the collective losses of climate crisis *Lucy Scholes*



Dreamland

by Rosa Rankin-Gee,
Scribner, £14.99

Rosa Rankin-Gee's first novel, *The Last Kings of Sark*, explored the fraught emotional fallout of an idyllic summer in which three young people run wild together on the small Channel island. While two of the trio are quick to move on from the experience, Jude finds herself

mired in the past, unable to let go.

Keenly attuned once again to the heady sensations of those caught between adolescence and adulthood, Rankin-Gee's second novel, *Dreamland*, is an equally enthralling coming-of-age story. But whereas in *The Last Kings of Sark* her characters retreated from the wider world, no such respite is possible here. Jude was mourning the end of something almost impossibly intimate, but *Dreamland* faces up to much broader, collective losses in the story of 16-year-old Chance, discovering life and love while all around her the world is crumbling.

To call the novel dystopian is a stretch, not least because socio-political and ecological collapse seem to creep closer every day. Instead, *Dreamland* is set in an instantly recognisable near-future Britain just a few degrees removed from our own. We are in the once refined but now rundown seaside town of Margate. This is an area already steeped in a strange, singular

psychology, slightly out of step with the rest of the country. David Seabrook's 2002 book *All the Devils Are Here* depicted Kent's coast as both a bolthole and a blind alley for a motley, menacing band of eccentrics. "Planet Thanet" is how Chance explains their environs to an outsider; an increasingly isolated ecosystem in decline.

Across the entire country, heatwaves are becoming more relentless, but Margate also has to contend with the immediate issue of rising sea levels. At high tide the streets are flooded, evidence of the ocean's ingress left behind when it retreats again. The dank lobby of a high-rise block is strewn with debris from the deep: "mountains of damp sand. Broken shells and rubbish, all the colours faded. Seaweed." "Who needs Thailand, eh?" jokes Chance. "We got all the sun, sand and tsunamis you could want right here."

This may not be Britain as we know it, but much of what's described has been put in motion already - not just the climate crisis, but government policies displacing social tenants. "London was too expensive to be the future," Chance's mum explains to her and her brother JD when, in the backstory at the beginning of the novel, a non-government-run organisation offers them cash to relocate to the coast. London is "a hotbed, a bomb waiting to go off. That, and an island for rich Russians." In recent years Margate has already welcomed plenty of homegrown refugees.

Despite her high hopes, the fresh start Chance's mother dreams of never quite materialises. She, like so many others, struggles to find work, and anger towards a government that's all but abandoned them begins to fester. In the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, those with the resources to do so have long since fled; the only people left are the ones with nowhere else to go. When Chance falls in love with Franky, a middle-class Londoner volunteering with a humanitarian project that runs food banks - do-gooding gap-year students are like cockroaches, it seems, still standing even at the end of the world - the possibility of a different kind of life opens up. Little does she know, however, that she and Franky are caught up in something much bigger than themselves.

'Sun, sand and tsunamis' Margate, Kent

Although Rankin-Gee's nuanced, astute world-building deserves applause, it's this relationship that holds the novel together, in

large part because it feels so real. She vividly captures the balance between ferocity and vulnerability as the two girls explore their burgeoning desire; one minute they're greedy for each other, the next they're proceeding more gingerly. Theirs is a great first love, blazing bright and furious amid the poverty and the pain, the perfect counterweight that's needed to make the novel sing. *Dreamland* brings us face-to-face with much of what we're on the threshold of losing; nevertheless, it manages to convince us that its characters have everything still to live for.

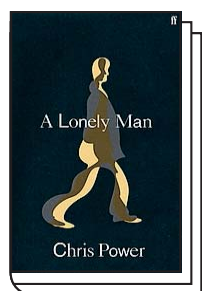
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LUKE HAYES-VIEW/ALAMY



The debut novel from an excellent short-story writer interrogates geopolitical peril and creative theft

Edward Docx



A Lonely Man
by Chris Power,
Faber, £14.99

Many readers will immediately warm to a novel that begins in a bookshop. We're in Berlin, and things couldn't be more bookish. Our protagonist, Robert Prowe, has just met Patrick, a drunken ghostwriter, while reaching for the same book on one of

the tables. A reading is about to begin. And then a story. A story about stories, books, writers.

A Lonely Man is Chris Power's first novel and is an interesting addition to the recent corpus of Berlin-based fiction. Power's shimmering short-story collection, *Mothers*, was longlisted for the Folio prize, and this book deliberately draws separate narrative strands (and moods) together – partly to emphasise and play with the differences, partly to offer a consideration of the creative process itself.

Robert is a fortysomething writer. He's late for his deadline and desperate for an idea. After the opening scene in the bookshop, he and his Swedish wife, Karijn, save Patrick from a beating. Robert then meets up with Patrick and decides to “steal” his story. At the end of a trip to his Swedish lakeside retreat, Robert's creative block finally eases and by fictionalising Patrick he starts to write more purposefully.

Patrick's story is that he has been very gainfully employed by a Russian oligarch, Sergei Vanyashin, to write a book “about Russia, about our friend in the Kremlin and his money ... who he takes it from and who he gives it to”. During the course of this assignment, he has been given a computer file containing details of financial transactions and offshore accounts. Vanyashin, however, has died – suicide is the verdict, but Patrick is certain it's murder. And so Patrick is now alone in Berlin, believing that he is likewise being pursued by lethal factions of the Russian state because he knows too much.

A Lonely Man never asks us to choose which lonely man is the loneliest, but clearly this is a book about masculine solipsism and astute readers will already have gleaned that we have three candidates for the eponymous role. There's also an interesting fourth: Liam, an old friend of Robert's from his partying days in London. Liam has killed himself, and Robert returns to London in the middle of the novel to attend his friend's wake.

There is some fine descriptive writing in Power's novel. Throwing back his head as he swims in the lake, Robert “felt the frigid water clutch his skull”. When he is talking to Liam's mother during the wake, “two tears fell down her cheeks, one fast, the other slow”. And there can be no doubt about it: Power (if not Prowe) has all the talent and skill he needs to write something great. But somehow this novel felt inhibited to me. There was a little too much hesitancy, circumspection, a debilitating self-consciousness. Sure, that's partly the point; but the meta-meaning cannot be a justification for losing focus in the actual text. Robert asks Karijn to “forgive the wallowing”, all the “writerly” self-absorption; but as she says to him elsewhere: “Write, don't write, but leave us out of the pity party.”

More than once, I found myself urging Power to deploy his talent and just commit to one thing or another. That funeral scene is great; but now I wanted more of the friend-monster, romantic-nihilist, Beckett-loving Liam. Live scenes, not wistful report. Show us *why* Liam wants to annihilate himself and intercut *that* with his mother's tears. Or, if not Liam, then don't have Robert run away from Molly, the stranger he meets – but have him catastrophically sleep with the kind of person who's going to turn up for dinner with Karijn and the kids. If you want

The book draws separate narrative strands and moods together – partly to offer a consideration of the creative process itself

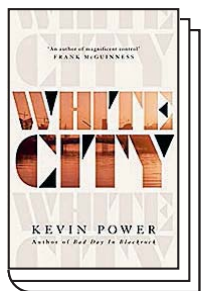
to do a European-German breakdown novel, then you're in the same arena as *Insane* by Rainald Goetz, or *The Clown* by Heinrich Böll, or *Homo Faber* by Max Frisch, or “Kleist in Thun” by Robert Walser. To put it another way: you can't just have unsettling encounters and go home, you have to become a beetle.

The Russian story felt occluded, stalled. Again, if that's the point, it's not a good enough point to detain so good a writer. Vanyashin never really escapes Power's research, and thus what we already know. You have to go past the supermodels and the super Tuscan wine. So many Russians in Europe live heightened lives of terror, fatalism, cynicism, romanticism, loss, disguise, excess, alienation, abandon. And they are all enmeshed in a hundred-year nightmare that makes Brexit look like a minor bidding error in a game of bridge. The challenge is to do them justice in fiction.

That said, the last scene of this book is superb, not least because the logic of Power's plot has required a decision to be made to which he has to commit. My advice: buy the short stories and then buy this book and read them back-to-back.

Edward Docx's latest novel is *Let Go My Hand* (Picador). To buy a copy of *A Lonely Man* for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.

The story of a disgraced banker's son, Power's second novel is part rogue's confession and part post-Celtic Tiger satire *John Self*



White City
by Kevin Power,
Scribner, £14.99

The Irish author Kevin Power took time to follow up his 2008 debut, *Bad Day in Blackrock*, and his new novel, while lighter in tone, lifts up similar rocks to shine its beam on what lies beneath. Both are interested in the privilege of what F Scott Fitzgerald called “careless people”,

and the messes they leave for others to clean up.

White City synthesises familiar forms into a whole: the rogue's confession, the young man finding his way, the post-Celtic Tiger satire on puffed-up, self-perpetuating bullshit businesses. Our guide is 27-year-old Ben, son of a disgraced Dublin banker, languishing in rehab and writing an account of his wrong turns as therapy. He's half-bookish, half-lazy, really just wants to write his terrible-sounding novel (“Decay: A Report”), and

only gets a job when his father is charged with embezzling €600m and the money tap is turned off.

Ben encounters an old schoolfriend, Mullens, who seduces him into joining a dodgy property deal in Serbia via the promise of a few million euros and lashings of meaningless banter. This leads to a certain amount of capering with a bunch of Serbs who are mostly portrayed as sinister: but the Irish characters are stupid or corrupt, so there's equality of insult.

As you might expect from an author who teaches creative writing, *White City* is steeped in literary references: the rehab clinic is St Augustine's, and we open with a riff on Dostoevsky. But almost all of the book reads as a homage to Martin Amis's *Money*, complete with stylistic ticks (“Confidence is a confidence trick. Confidence is a confidence man, and we are all his dupes”), a plot that turns on the narrator signing documents he doesn't understand, and even a postscript in italics.

Fortunately the book works its way free of this demanding model, and Power shows his own capacity for comic timing and pithy aperçus: “Having lots of money,” writes Ben, “is like being one of those kids who are born without nerve endings and, feeling no pain, hurl themselves recklessly against the world, relying on other people to tell them when they're damaged.” He even makes us care for his narrator in the end, which is more than Amis ever did.

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

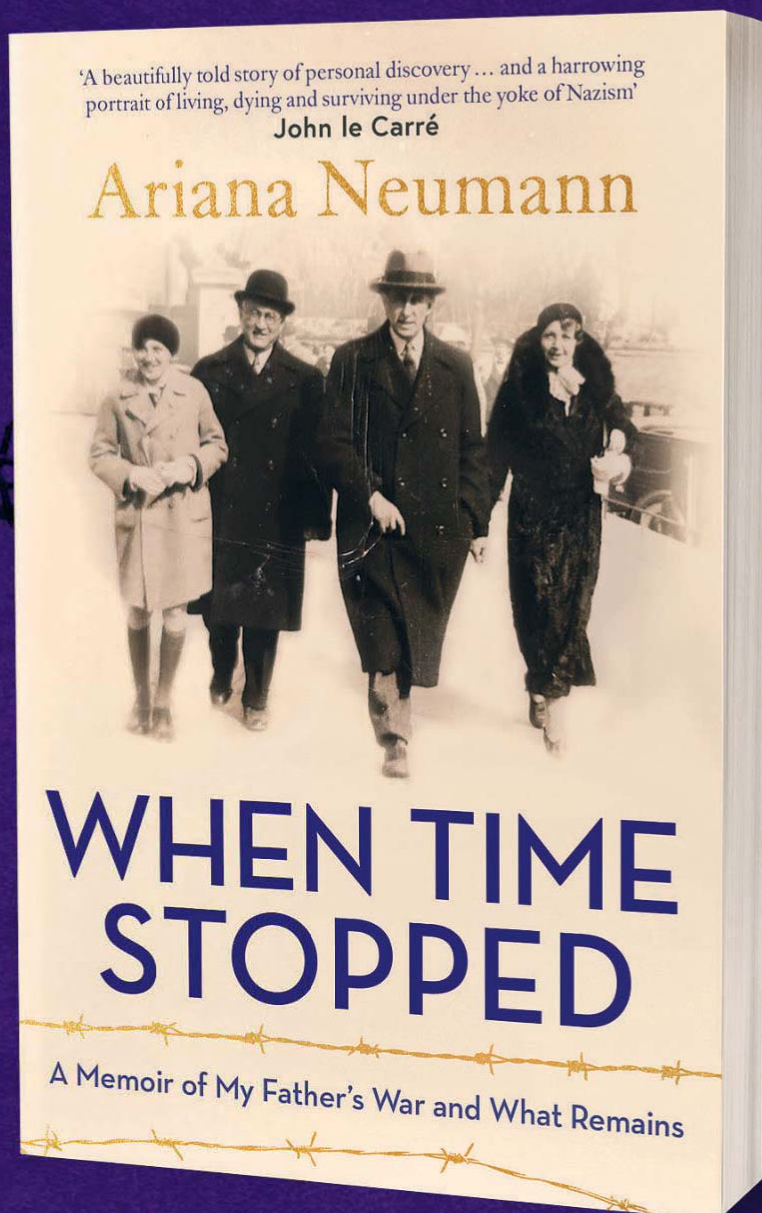
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and love in the midst
of tragedy



‘Truly exceptional’

JON SNOW

‘Absolutely remarkable’

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Books of the month

{ Crime and thrillers } A reworking of *The Godfather*; a 'cool' sociopath; religion and wrath; and assassins on a train
Laura Wilson



Set in an unnamed city in northern England, journalist Saima Mir's debut novel, **The Khan** (Point Blank, £14.99), is a south Asian reworking of *The Godfather*. Successful lawyer Jia returns to the childhood home she fled as a young woman and takes over the family's organised crime business when her father, Akbar Khan, is murdered. Jia's life is one of permanent cognitive dissonance: a second-generation British Pakistani, she knows that she must be not only "twice as good as men" but "four times as good as white men" in order to combat misogyny and racism. She must also negotiate clashing cultural expectations of how a woman should behave, the contradictions inherent in faith and criminal activity, and generational conflict as the old order gives way to the new. As if all this were not enough, the delicate balance of power in the city is threatened when a more recent set of immigrants, this time from eastern Europe, tries to muscle in. Mir offers us a fascinating glimpse into a world rarely portrayed in fiction, as Jia's opponents, both inside and outside the family, start to learn that they underestimate her at their peril.

Misogyny also rears its head in Anna Bailey's first novel, **Tall Bones** (Doubleday, £14.99). Whistling Ridge in Colorado is an insular community presided over by a Christian fundamentalist pastor who considers it entirely legitimate to tell a victim of domestic violence that she should pray for understanding about what she did to deserve it. Over the years, Dolly Blake has become a dab hand with the concealer, as her unstable Vietnam-vet husband, Samuel, frequently assaults his family. Elder son Noah, who is in love with Romanian immigrant Rat, is a frequent target of his wrath – Pastor Lewis preaches homophobia along with other forms of intolerance. The family's reputation is such that, when Noah's 17-year-old sister Abigail goes missing after a party, it's generally assumed that she has run away. As her friend Emma

tries to discover what happened, long-held secrets and resentments come to light. Beautifully written and very moving, this is an assured debut.

The characters in Katherine Faulkner's first novel, **Greenwich Park** (Raven, £12.99), inhabit a more enlightened and privileged universe, but we know from the beginning – a letter written from prison some 16 months after the main action of the book takes place – that they have made a thoroughgoing mess of things. Helen and Rory, children of a famous architect, met their future partners at Cambridge; Rory inherited Daddy's practice, Helen got the Grade II-listed house and is now, after four miscarriages, delighted to be pregnant once more, despite husband Daniel spending ever longer hours at work. When he fails to turn up to her first antenatal class, she buddies up with bumptious rule-breaker Rachel, who soon insinuates her way into Helen's life to the extent of moving in. Meanwhile, Helen is fielding strange phone calls from the mortgage company ... With multiple narrators and italicised inserts detailing a secret sexual tryst in the eponymous green space, this is a tense, pacy read.

Gone Girl meets *Mean Girls* and *The Secret History* in Canadian YA author Laurie Elizabeth Flynn's **The Girls Are All So Nice Here** (HQ, £14.99). Narrator Ambrosia "Amb" Wellington is thrilled to win a place at the prestigious Wesleyan College, where, as the title sarcastically suggests, quite a few of the female students are mean as hell and, in the case of the "effortlessly cool" Sully Sullivan, sociopathic to boot.

Long-held secrets and resentments come to light in Anna Bailey's beautifully written and moving debut

Desperate to be like Sully, Amb willingly acts out for her – drink, drugs, hook-ups – and is happy to join in the bad-mouthing of her sweet, wholesome roommate, Flora, but things take a more sinister turn when she falls for Flora's boyfriend. Flipping between "Then" (college days) and "Now" (the 10-year reunion, heralded with anonymous threatening messages),

this adult debut keeps the tension bubbling nicely.

The Shinkansen may be a high-speed marvel with not a single passenger fatality in its entire history, but Japanese bestseller Kotaro Isaka's fictional iteration in **Bullet Train** (Harvill Secker, £12.99, translated by Sam Malissa) is altogether more dangerous, with no fewer than five assassins travelling on the line from Tokyo to Morioka at once. Thugs for hire Lemon and Tangerine are supposed to be guarding a notorious gangster's son and a cash-filled suitcase; Nanao, the self-styled world's unluckiest killer, is supposed to be stealing it; and alcoholic former hitman Kimura is seeking revenge for a near-fatal injury to his young son, which was instigated by schoolboy sociopath Satoshi. Part high-octane thriller, part farce, this is an unusual and thoroughly enjoyable read.

'I'm not a defendant. I am a barrister'

Stopped and questioned by the police, forbidden by security from entering a courtroom ... *Alexandra Wilson* writes about race and law, and asks why people assume she belongs in the dock

I remember the first time that I was stopped by police officers simply because of the colour of my skin. It was a dark winter night and I was in east London, driving Jermaine, my boyfriend at the time, home. I'd driven through the area a number of times, often in daylight, but this was my first time driving there at night.

We had almost reached his house when I noticed a police van following closely in my rear-view mirror. "Why is this van so close? We're in a 30 zone!" Jermaine turned his head and looked behind us. He nudged my arm: "Erm, Alex, I think the police are tailing you. You might want to pull over."

I checked that my lights were turned on and that my speed wasn't exceeding the limit. All was fine, I told myself. Flickers of blue light bounced around the car. I looked up again at my mirror. The van seemed to be getting closer. We were approaching our turn and I slowed my car to steer left. I pulled into the road and found a parking space.

The police van did not pull in behind us but stopped next to me in the middle of the road. The lights continued to flash and a number of officers got out of the van and surrounded my car. My heart started to beat wildly. I switched off the engine. A police officer approached and motioned for me to wind down the window. I did so obediently and tried to sit on my hands, which were shaking uncontrollably. The officer lowered his head and lent forward into my car so that his face was just centimetres from mine. He asked why I was in

Presumed guilty
Alexandra Wilson

the area and I explained that I was dropping off my boyfriend. Jermaine chimed in and pointed

out his flat to the officer. The officer didn't look up, he remained focused on me.

The officer asked for my name. I could see the other officers still surrounding my car. I was petrified. He asked whether I had been drinking or had taken any drugs. I of course shook my head and tried to hold back the tears. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, but I couldn't control my fear. The officer asked whether I would be willing to take a breathalyser test and I nodded.

He took a few steps away from my car and made some notes. He seemed to confer with a colleague briefly, and they both looked up and stared at me for what felt like a few minutes. He approached the car again and asked how long I had held my licence. "I think two months and a few days," I replied shakily.

I watched him converse with the officers surrounding my car but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I glanced at Jermaine, who was sitting there tapping his fingers. He looked back at me: "See what I mean now? They just love wasting our time." I ignored the comment and looked back at the officer, who now seemed more relaxed. The other officers were retreating from my car and were climbing back into the van. The main



LAURIE LEWIS

officer returned to my window: “That will be all. Drive safely.”

They switched the flashing lights off and drove away. It was the first time that I understood what it felt like to be criminalised. I will never forget it.

The same feeling has returned on a number of occasions in my work as a criminal barrister. I made international headlines one afternoon in the summer of 2020, when I tweeted about my experience of being mistaken for a defendant in a magistrates’ court multiple times in one day.

The day had begun like any other, though I hadn’t visited this particular court before. My client was there for a driving offence. We didn’t need long to discuss the case because she had accepted most of the charges. I hoped that a short discussion with whoever was prosecuting that day would mean that she would be able to plead guilty to some of the charges, have the others withdrawn, be sentenced and thus be able to move on with her life.

I was wearing a new suit that morning, which felt appropriate for a new court. I was keen to make a good impression. I walked in through the main door and stopped shortly before the security scanner. I looked up and smiled at the officer, who was holding a clipboard with sheets of paper. He glanced at me and then back at the paper. He looked up again: “Could you please tell me your name so that I can mark you as here for your case?”

I looked over at the piece of paper, which contained a list of all of the defendants due to appear in court. “I’m not a defendant. I am a barrister, here to represent a client,” I replied.

The security officer lowered his clipboard and apologised. He ushered me through the scanner. I felt a little flustered as I went upstairs to meet my client. I put it out of my mind and met with my client. As I had expected, she accepted the bulk of what was alleged and so I explained how I hoped we could progress the case. I headed out of the conference to ask the prosecutor whether he would be willing to accept her pleading guilty to some but not all of the offences charged.

From the courtroom door, I could see that the magistrates’ chairs were empty, suggesting that now was an appropriate time to step in to speak to the prosecutor. “No. You mustn’t go in there!” a member of the public shouted out at me from across the hall. I narrowed my eyebrows in confusion. “Only lawyers must go into the courtroom, not journalists!”

I looked down at my new black suit. My loafers were polished and my black leather handbag matched. I was clutching my notebook and my laptop was peeping out of my bag. I couldn’t think of anything that could make me look more lawyer-like. I turned again to see the court usher standing behind me and holding the door to the courtroom open. She whispered that I should ignore the woman’s warning and should head on into the courtroom. I smiled appreciatively. I could see the grey-haired

I was the only person being treated like this. There were young and old people present, male and female lawyers. I was the only black lawyer

prosecutor leaning over his desk, presumably tapping away at his laptop. Followed closely by the usher, I stepped into the courtroom. “You need to wait outside and sign in with the usher.”

The voice came from a woman sitting on the bench beside me. She was similarly dressed to me, clad in a black suit, and had a laptop in front of her. She was clearly another legal representative. I remained where I was and she continued: “The usher will come outside and sign you in. The court will call you in for your case.”

“I’m a barrister,” I stuttered. “I’m here to represent a client.” The woman’s jaw dropped and her face flushed red. She looked embarrassed. “Oh, I see,” she muttered under her breath.

I could feel a lump growing in my throat as I walked across the courtroom towards the prosecutor. What was it about my appearance that day that had made it so difficult to appreciate I was a lawyer? I took a deep breath and stepped towards the prosecutor. He was only about five metres away from me now. “You need to leave the courtroom!” a voice bellowed at me from the front. I lifted my gaze to see the court legal adviser on her feet and pointing at the door. She continued: “The usher will be out shortly.”

I stared at her blankly, thinking surely she must be joking. “Are you represented today?” she inquired, looking at me with a concerned expression. I sighed in disbelief. I explained again that I was a defence barrister and I was just trying to speak to the prosecutor about my case. She looked me up and down and then took a seat. “Oh, right, OK,” she said quietly. She, too, turned back to her computer and began tapping away.

I couldn’t understand why she had shouted at me in that way. Even if I had been a defendant who had entered the courtroom too early, that did not justify being screamed at and ordered to leave immediately. Many of my clients are terrified on their day in court and being shouted at must exacerbate their fears. I was frustrated. I was the only person being treated like this. There were young and old people present, male and female lawyers. I was, of course, the only black lawyer.

While this hadn’t happened so many times in one day before, it wasn’t the first time I had been mistaken for a defendant and perhaps wouldn’t be the last. Every black barrister or solicitor I know has experienced something similar, and we all know why: some court staff see black people as criminals before they even enter the courtroom ●

In Black and White: A Young Barrister’s Story of Race and Class in a Broken Justice System by Alexandra Wilson is published by Endeavour.

The best books about the sea

Emma Stonex



I miss the sea. Through lockdown in particular I have envied people who live on the coast, and have read tales of wild swimming on cold mornings with deep longing, able almost to taste the salt and hear the waves.

In times of crisis – individual and collective – the sea reminds us that all is not lost. Nature is reckless and beautiful; all this shall pass; she knows what she’s doing.

We talk about feeling “all at sea” as a way of capturing confusion or loss, but for me it’s the opposite – a shimmering line between earth and sky, it offers consolation and perspective. We have needed this more in the last 12 months than at any time I can remember.

Ironic, then, that for many of us, the sea is tantalisingly out of

reach. During this time, I’ve sought escape and reassurance that the shipping lanes will open again. Like the many moods of the ocean, its representation in literature overflows with variety: the sea means different things to us all.

When I think of the coast, it’s Cornwall, and, in fiction, Daphne du Maurier. I bought my copy of **Jamaica Inn** at Shrew Books, Fowey, and read it in the bath at our rented cottage, listening to a storm gain pace. For young Mary Yellan, the sea is restless and stinging, foaming with smugglers and shipwrecks; it’s a savage, intimidating sea, echoing her surfacing passions.

In the same way, John Fowles’s **The French Lieutenant’s Woman** offers the sea

as a mirror, tense with yearning as Sarah Woodruff stands and stares on Lyme Regis’s famous Cobb, awaiting her lover’s return.

Sea as psychology is hardly better explored than in Iris Murdoch’s **The Sea, The Sea**, in which Murdoch employs its instability as a way of charting her protagonist’s deteriorating mental state. Shapes that Charles Arrowby imagines to be solid swiftly dissolve; the water shifts, regurgitating ghosts from his past.

For action on the waves, **Treasure Island** by Robert Louis Stevenson, with its brigands and buccaners, takes the pot of gold. Survival at sea is elegantly judged in Charlotte Rogan’s **The Lifeboat**, in which the indifferent ocean plays witness to humanity’s struggle to balance compassion with self-preservation.

In **Life of Pi**, Yann Martel presents the sea as a magical, illusory,

all-seeing pool from which dreams and nightmares spawn miracles.

In nonfiction, Raynor Winn’s **The Salt Path** harnesses the wildness of rock, sky and coastal walking in life-affirming prose. And I greatly admire **Seashaken Houses** by Tom Nancollas, which illuminates the struggles faced by those who built the first lighthouses in Britain centuries ago.

But my all-time favourite is **Lighthouse**, Tony Parker’s portrait of a handful of lighthouse keepers, which intensified my appreciation of the sea through the voices of ordinary people: our connection with it; our fear or love or awe in its presence; and how its vast, wild splendour speaks to something ancient in us of endurance, strength and survival.

Emma Stonex’s novel, The Lamplighters, is published by Picador.

Tom Gauld

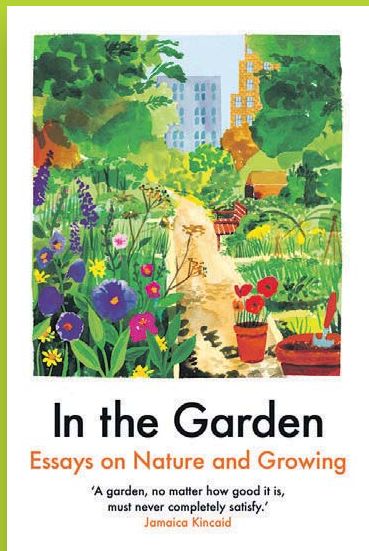




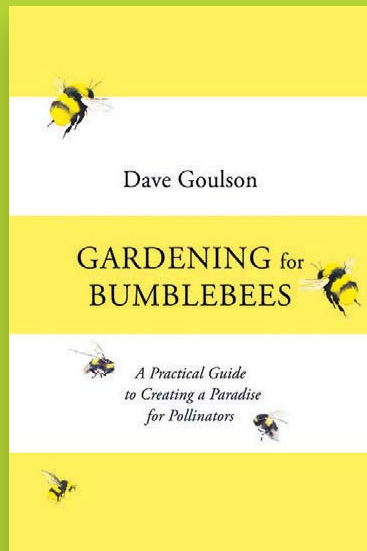
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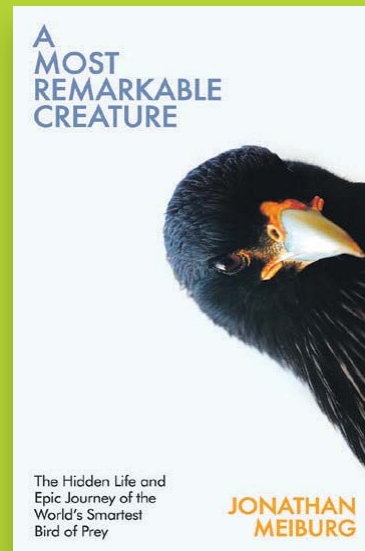
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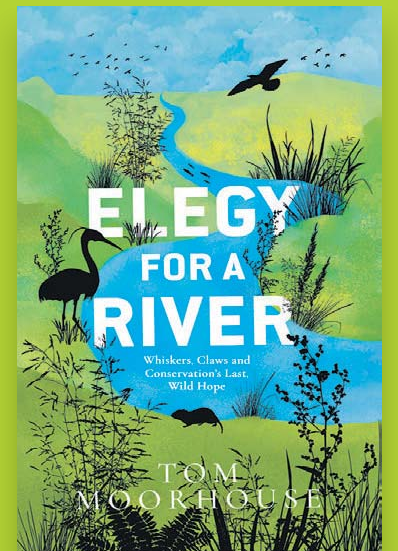
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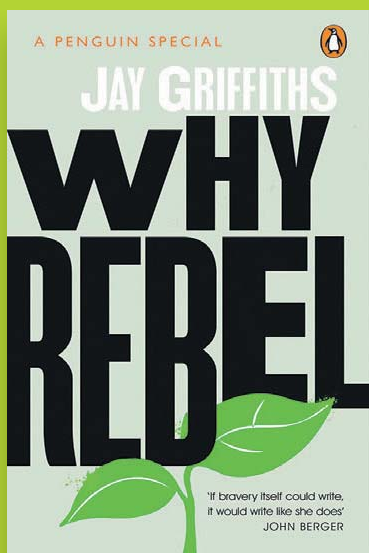
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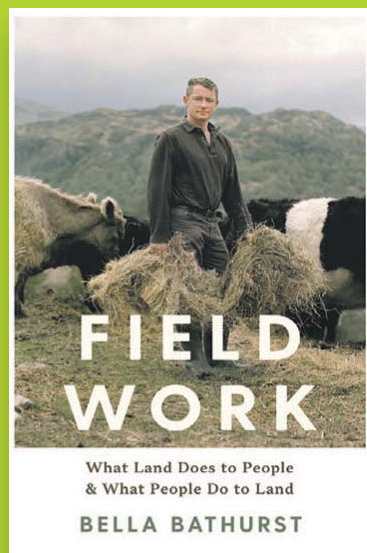
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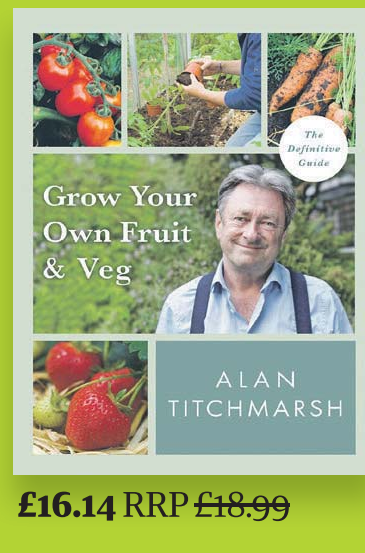
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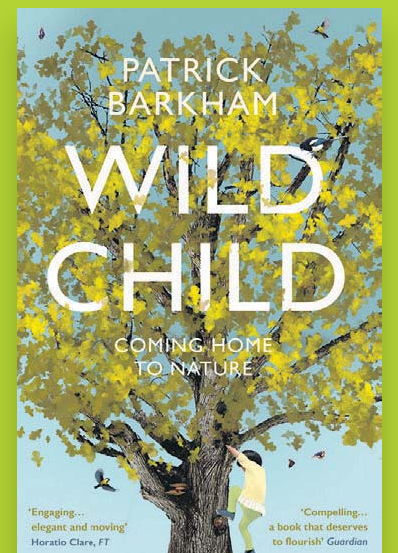
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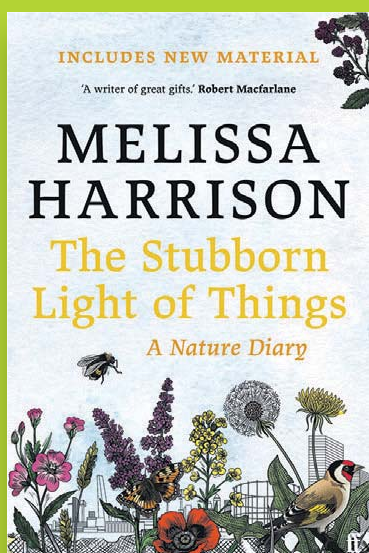
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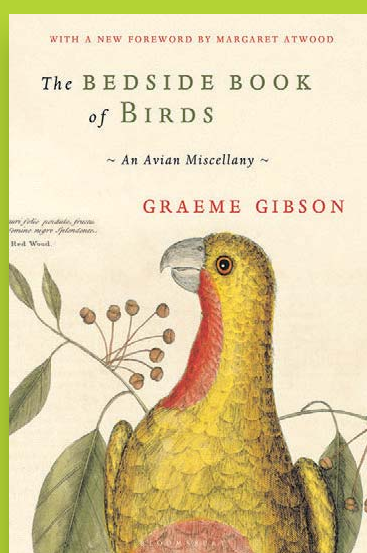
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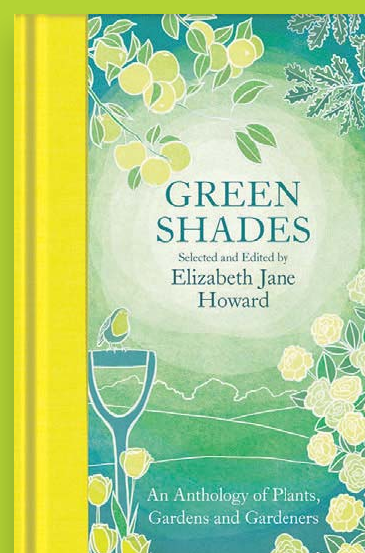
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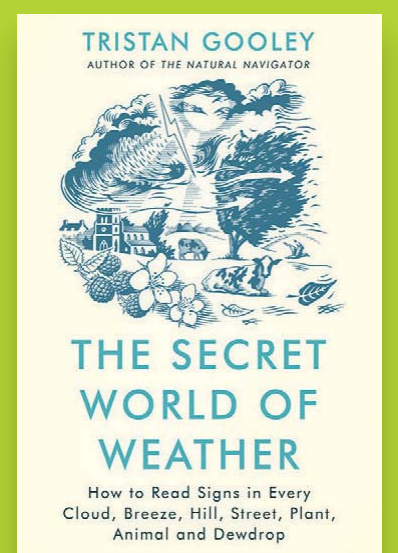
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