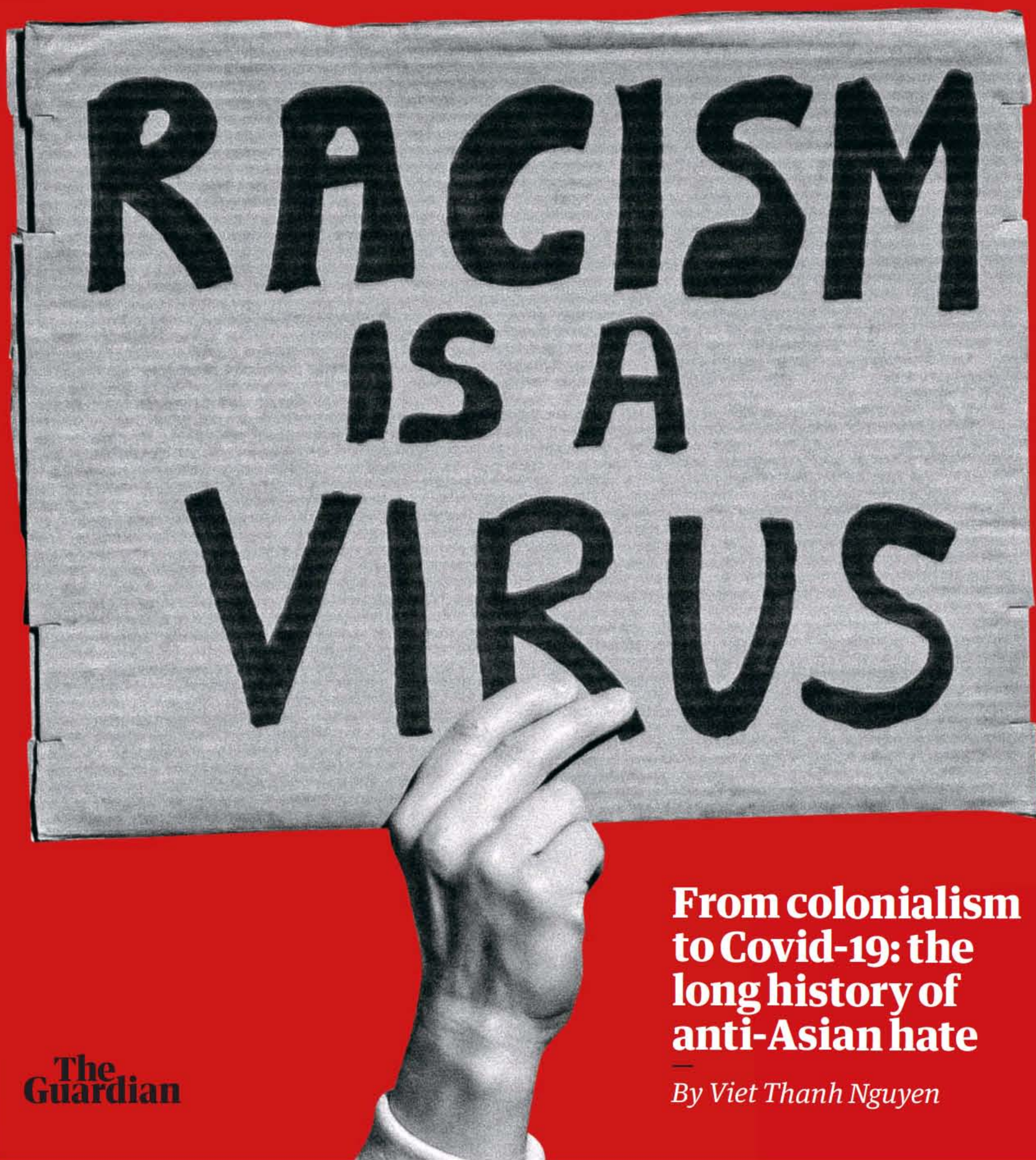


Review

Saturday 3 April 2021 - Issue N° 167



**From colonialism
to Covid-19: the
long history of
anti-Asian hate**

By Viet Thanh Nguyen

**The
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Review

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'Do we make history, or does it make (or unmake) us? Are we the masters or victims of our times?'
— Salman Rushdie, page 20

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The week in books

3 April

An International longlist with legs

At one of our International Booker prize judging meetings, someone asked me how come I'd been sending emails at 3.16am. "Well," I said, "my sleep patterns have gone a bit haywire." No one getting eight hours a night could have read as much as we have.

That reading has been revelatory. There were a handful of familiar names on our 123-strong list of submissions, but many more authors previously unknown to me, whose work turned out to be thrillingly strange, beautifully crafted or deeply moving.

Locked down, we've been travelling. We've also been reminded that migration shapes the modern world. And as authors and their characters cross frontiers, so

do books. Many of our favourites occupy the borderlands between genres - not quite essays, history or myth.

Thank you to the translators who unveiled these wonderful books. And thank you Aida Edemariam, Neel Mukherjee, Olivette Otele, George Szirtes. You are the best book group imaginable.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett
For more information, go to theguardian.com/books/man-booker-international-prize.

Housebound Martin

After the success of *Game of Thrones* (right), George RR Martin has signed an eight-figure deal to develop several television series for HBO and its streaming arm, HBO Max, over the next five years, according to the Hollywood Reporter.



These will include multiple projects expanding on his fantasy series, with *House of the Dragon*, a prequel set 300 years before, to be the first to air in 2022.

Some fans will welcome the news, but many are waiting for Martin to write something else: *A Song of Ice and Fire* (AKA *Game of Thrones*). The sixth book in the series, *The Winds of Winter*, has been anticipated since the show began in 2011, and there was no sign of the novel when the show ended in 2019. Martin wrote that if he did not finish *The Winds of Winter* by July 2020, fans could imprison him

in a cabin above a lake of acid. When that didn't happen, he promised he would not write any scripts for *House of the Dragon* until he finished *The Winds of Winter*. So we may end up watching the former before reading the latter. **Sian Cain**

Rebels with a cause

Rebellion is in the air in April's new releases - so much so that "revolt is the new status quo", according to Nadav Eyal in *Revolt. Why Rebel* by Jay Griffiths is "a passionate, poetic manifesto for urgent rebellion" to save the environment, while *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* by Mona Eltahawy is about "how to defy, disrupt, and destroy the patriarchy". Rachel England's *Everyday Activism* will show readers "How to Change the World in Five Minutes, One Hour or a Day". Fortunately, according to Kate Silverton, for underfives at least, *There's No Such Thing As 'Naughty'*.

Katy Guest

Nudge

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

Should entry to pubs and other houses of mirth be restricted to people with vaccine passports? Government figures have argued that this would be a strong "nudge" to youngsters to get jabbed. But why a nudge rather than an incentive, or **blackmail**?

The origins of the word "nudge" are unclear, possibly from Norwegian *nugge*, to push, but we know it first appears in English via the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes's translations of Homer in 1675: "When a third part of the night was gone, I nudg'd Ulysses (who did next me lie)," says **Ulysses** himself, cunningly disguised. Thenceforth it could also mean to move gradually, or to remind, but the modern political sense derives from the realm of behavioural economics, as popularised in Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's 2004 book *Nudge*.

Here, though, a "nudge" is conceived as a way of influencing someone's choice without their knowledge, by appealing to their **subconscious biases**. Threatening to ban someone from pubs unless they get a vaccine is definitely not that kind of nudge. Happily at least, in Australian English "to nudge" can also mean "to drink", so let us hope there will be "nudging of the turps" for all soon enough.





'I've managed 10% of War and Peace during lockdown'

Tracey Thorn

The book I am currently reading

Tango: My Childhood, Backwards and in High Heels by Justin Vivian Bond. A memoir of trans/queer childhood from the cabaret performer whom I've been lucky enough to see on stage at Joe's Pub in New York. I wish I could be back in that room right now, but in the meantime, this book will suffice.

The book that changed my mind

There were books I read at university that completely opened my mind. I would count among them Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, the poetry of William Blake, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

The book I wish I'd written

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I still can't get over the fact that an 18-year-old, on holiday with two radical poets, came up with an idea for a gothic horror novel that was so successful it has endured for 200 years.

The last book that made me laugh

Kevin Barry's *That Old Country Music*. This recent collection of stories is beautiful, and filled with lines that made me shout with laughter.

The book I think is most underrated

Billie Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues*. For years it was out of print, and also semi-dismissed for its inaccuracy, and its omissions, legal threats having forced her to leave out some of her liaisons with

famous men and women. I read it as a teenager when I was discovering Holiday's music, and learning things about different ways to sing powerfully.

The last book that made me cry

In the End, It Was All About Love by Musa Okwonga: a story of heartbreak, loneliness and racism in Berlin. The unflinching honesty moved me so much.

The book I give as a gift

It varies according to the giftee. For Christmas I gave Ben [Watt, her husband] a copy of *Bass, Mids, Tops: An Oral History of Sound System Culture* by Joe Muggs and Brian David Stevens. I gave one daughter a Joan Didion, and the other a book about the brain, and, as he's a fan of Joy Division and New Order, my youngest received *Record Play Pause* by Stephen Morris.

The book I'd like to be remembered for

I think it's more likely that I'll be remembered for a single line of a song, about deserts and rain, than for anything else I'll ever write. And far more likely that in fact I won't be remembered at all, which is fine.

The book I couldn't finish

I started Tolstoy's *War and Peace* during lockdown, and got 10% of the way through it according to my Kindle, which didn't seem bad going, all things considered. My brain just doesn't have the stamina right now.

My comfort read

Lolly Willowes by Sylvia Townsend Warner. A woman gets tired of being used as a doormat and so, reaching a certain age, she goes to live alone in the country, where she finds true happiness and discovers she is a witch. I take great solace in this idea.

My Rock'n'Roll Friend by Tracey Thorn is published by Canongate.

‘I remember that the barrel was thin and long. We did as we were told and knelt’

The pandemic has seen a global spike in anti-Asian racism and violence. Novelist *Viet Thanh Nguyen* reflects on his own experiences as a Vietnamese American - and the dark history that continues to fuel the current hate

On 16 March eight people were killed in Atlanta, Georgia, by a 21-year-old white man: all but one were women, and six were Asian. The shootings take their place in a much longer story of anti-Asian violence. The Covid pandemic has given us a particular insight into this phenomenon: verbal and physical assaults against Asians have accelerated in the US over the last year, with 3,800 documented incidents involving spitting, knifings, beatings, acid attacks - and murder. The majority of the victims have been women.

Though the Atlanta killings took place in Asian massage parlours, the shooter has said he did not target the women because of their race. Instead, he claimed to be a sex addict bent on “removing temptation”. Regardless of his denial - whether it is a lie or self-deception - it is obvious that he targeted these women because they were Asian. “Racism and sexism intersect,” says Nancy Wang Yuen, a sociology professor. This intersection has been a driving force in western attitudes towards Asia and Asian women, who are routinely hypersexualised and objectified in popular culture.

Ever since Puccini’s 1904 opera *Madame Butterfly*, which inspired the hit 1989 musical *Miss Saigon*, Asians have been portrayed in romantic terms as self-sacrificing women who prefer white men to Asian men, and who willingly die for the love of

white men. A more brutal version of this orientalist fantasy is found in many American movies about the war in Vietnam. Perhaps the most striking example is Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* of 1987. Young US Marines arriving in Vietnam are immediately greeted by a Vietnamese sex worker who sashays before them, saying: “Me so horny.” That line was turned into a massive hit by 2 Live Crew in 1989, and a generation of Asian American women would be subject to hearing it, along with “me love you long time”, over and over.

Underneath the sexual objectification of Asian women lurks something much more threatening, as Kubrick made clear by the end of the movie, when the Marines are picked off by a sniper. When they finally capture the shooter, they discover she is a

Underneath the sexual objectification of Asian women lurks something much more threatening

Vietnamese teenager. The movie concludes with the Marines surrounding her, and though only one of them pulls the trigger, it is clear this is a gang killing. The Asian woman, who began as a sexual temptation, ends as a mortal threat that must be eliminated by young men trained in boot camp to march with their rifles on their shoulders while they





Viet Thanh Nguyen won a Pulitzer prize for his 2015 debut novel, *The Sympathizer*; below left, *Madame Butterfly*

clutch at their crotches, chanting: “This is my rifle, this is my gun, this is for fighting, this is for fun.”

Kubrick clearly understands that war, in the masculine imagination, is erotic. The novelist Larry Heinemann understood that, too. Reading his novel *Close Quarters* as a boy, I was shocked by a scene in which American soldiers gang-rape a Vietnamese sex worker whom they call only Claymore Face because of her acne scars. Immediately afterwards, the soldiers go to battle against their Vietnamese enemies. Heinemann wanted to disturb his readers because war, which he experienced as a combat soldier, is disturbing. In *Close Quarters*, idealistic young men go to war and become monsters.

My novel *The Sympathizer* is the story of “a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces”, whose task in 1975 as a communist agent is to flee with the remnants of the South Vietnamese army to the US and undermine efforts to recapture Vietnam. In writing it, I too wanted to question noble fantasies of heroism and war, to show that they are inseparable from cruelty and hatred - to force the reader to see what patriots and politicians too often deny. My aim was to attack an American exceptionalism that pretends that it has nothing to do with European-style colonialism. But the US is a colonising country. The difference is that Americans call their colonialism “the American Dream”.

So when it comes to the American fetishisation of the Second Amendment, let’s destroy the myth that

the right to bear arms is simply about fighting off tyrants real or imagined. As I wrote in *The Sympathizer*: “Nothing was more American than wielding a gun and committing oneself to die for freedom and independence, unless it was wielding that gun to take away someone else’s freedom and independence.” How else to characterise the founding of the US, built on land stolen from Native peoples?

Bearing arms was crucial for European settlers in their violent colonisation of the so-called New World, and for American settlers as they conquered the west, all the way to California. According to the historian Richard Slotkin, American mythology casts white settler violence as “regenerative”, versus the “degenerative” violence of Native peoples, enslaved black people, and their descendants. In this mythology, a black man with a gun is a threat, even if it is only a 12-year-old black boy with a toy gun, as in the case of Tamir Rice, killed by police. A white man with a gun - coloniser, settler, cowboy, soldier, or cop - is a hero.

My parents and I fled from the war-torn Vietnam depicted by Kubrick and came to the US, where it did not take long for us to encounter guns. My parents opened a Vietnamese grocery store in San Jose, California, in the late 1970s, where they were shot one Christmas Eve. Flesh wounds, fortunately. A few years later, a gunman pushed his way into our house and pointed a gun in our faces. I remember that the barrel was thin and long. My father ➤➤

◆ and I did as we were told and knelt. My mother saved us all by running past the gunman and into the street, screaming for help.



There is a long history of anti-Asian violence in the US. The positioning of Asian Americans as a model minority since the 60s - in other words, as desirable neighbours, classmates, co-workers and sexual partners - has masked the latent anti-Asian feeling that has existed in this country as long as there have been Asian immigrants and Asian Americans.

I write from Los Angeles, where, in 1871, 19 Chinese men were massacred by an armed mob of hundreds. Throughout the American west of the 19th century, Chinese immigrants were targeted for murder, beatings and violent evictions. They had been brought to the US to help build the transcontinental railroad, but when their usefulness was over, newspapers and politicians stoked white working-class fear of Chinese economic competition; the result was violence. This climaxed in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. This act was prefaced by the 1875 Page Act, which prevented women suspected of low morality from entering the country, the assumption behind it being that all Chinese women were potential sex workers.

This idea that Chinese women specifically, and Asian women in general, are both sexual temptation and sexual threat, to be used or to be punished, or both, seems directly connected, a century and a half later, to the self-proclaimed impulse that drove the Atlanta gunman to Asian massage parlours. Over that century and a half, with American wars in Asia bringing hundreds of thousands of American servicemen

into contact with Asian women, both as sex workers and as brides, “the Asian woman became an object of hatred, and lust, a thing to loathe, then desire, the distance between yellow peril and yellow fever measured in flashes”, as the journalist May Jeong puts it.

Yellow peril and “yellow fever” - the fear of an Asian invasion, on the one hand, and the desire for Asian women, on the other - are not exclusively American phenomena. The fusion of these opposites arose through orientalism: as Edward Said argued, British and French colonisers justified their conquest of the east with narratives of oriental inferiority, docility, lust and treachery. Said was mostly thinking about the Middle East and north Africa, of Arabs and Muslims, but these exoticising and eroticising narratives extend to east and south-east Asia. The oriental as Other is a mask that can be slipped on many different people for different reasons.

Before the pandemic, for example, the Chinese in France already felt that they were being racially targeted as victims of crime. During the pandemic, Chinese and other Asians have protested against being called bearers of Covid-19, even adopting the hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (I’m Not a Virus). The spike in anti-Asian sentiment has been global. “From the UK to Australia, reports of anti-east and anti-south-east Asian hate crimes have increased in western countries as the pandemic took hold this past year,” CNN reports, including a 96% increase in hate crimes against people of east Asian appearance in the UK between June and September 2020. In Germany, where Vietnamese migrant workers were the subject of racist riots in the 90s, there has been a rise in anti-Asian sentiment, verbal assaults and physical threats. There has been harassment, shunning and bullying of Asians in Sweden, and

ALLSTAR/WARNER BROS; BITA HONARVAR/REUTERS; LUKE MACGREGOR



Left: Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 film, *Full Metal Jacket*; *Miss Saigon*, below



more of the same in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, with women being the majority of the victims in the latter two countries. And these are only the reported incidents.

The pervasiveness of these verbal and physical attacks, triggered in part by Donald Trump and others characterising Covid-19 as the “China virus” and the “Kung flu”, suggests a deep well of anti-Asian racism. When I was a child, a couple of my pre-teen classmates were familiar enough with Asian stereotypes to pull their eyes into slants and ask me if I had carried an AK-47 in the war in Vietnam (I was four years old when it ended). During the 15 months I have spent in France over the years I was called *Chinois* by both a black woman and a white woman and mocked with a ching-chong accent by teenagers in Provence, which was more times than I had been called “Chink” in a lifetime in the US.

In America, of course, as elsewhere, I was bombarded by long-distance racism in the form of jokes on the radio, clichés in the movies and the fear-mongering of politicians. All of this occurred while Asian Americans were also being portrayed as the “model minority” that knew how to study hard, work diligently and keep quiet. My new novel, *The Committed*, continues the story of the man of two faces as he relocates to the immigrant quarters of Paris in the early 80s. The French people of Vietnamese descent that I spoke to mostly agreed that the French, as a whole, liked them because of these qualities. Almost no one discussed the idea that their acceptability was due not only to who they were, but who they weren't: Arab, Muslim or black, the usual targets of French racism.

Asian acceptability has always been contingent, whether we are the model minority in the US or the “good immigrant” in the UK. Racism and sexism spin like coins, two-faced. With one spin of the coin, we can be the model minority and the object of “yellow fever”. With another spin, we can be the Asian invasion and the yellow peril. The French who colonised Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were just as prone to these fevered fantasies as the Americans.



The ease with which “racist love” can turn to “racist hate” for an Asian minority or the Asian colonised is mirrored, according to the writer Frank Chin, in the way that Europe and the US have often looked to Asia as the source of wealth and danger. Take the American attitude towards China. In the 19th century, China was the ultimate goal of US expansionism; now that it is not so much a country to be exploited but a major competitor, the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations have adopted a consistent anti-China stance.



Positioning China as America's No 1 threat will inevitably produce anti-Chinese feeling. And since many Americans - and Europeans - cannot tell the difference between Chinese and other Asians, all Asian Americans and Asian Europeans will suffer the consequences. In the US, the most notorious incident of such racist misidentification occurred in 1982 in Detroit, when two white autoworkers beat Vincent Chin to death, mistaking the Chinese American for Japanese. The autoworkers were upset at Japanese

A massage parlour in Acworth, Georgia, where four people were killed

economic competition in the auto industry, a fear stoked by widespread discussion of a trade war with Japan.

The systemic violence of a US foreign policy designed

to kill Asians in large numbers, or threaten to kill them, from the Philippines to Japan, from Korea to Vietnam, from Laos to Cambodia, reinforces the domestic, everyday racism and sexism with which many Asian Americans are familiar. The acceptability of microaggressions, racist jokes, casual sexual fetishisation lays the groundwork for an explosion of racist and sexist violence that can be literally murderous.

Calls to stop anti-Asian hate will have limited impact without an awareness of the enduring history of anti-Asian violence carried out in American wars in Asia and European colonisation. The French navy shelled Haiphong in 1946 and killed 6,000 Vietnamese people. I mention the shelling in *The Committed*: “The French saw our shared past as a tragic happenstance of history, a romantic love story gone wrong, which was half correct, whereas I saw our past as a crime that they had committed, which was completely correct.” Ironically, many Asians fled or migrated to the very countries that had colonised them or fought wars on their lands.

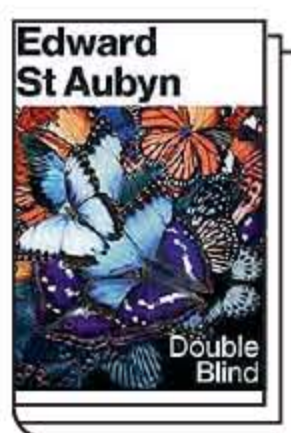
Following these paths, the gunman's Asian victims came to the US from South Korea and China and found varying degrees of success. A few were working class, a couple were on the lower end of the middle class, with only one - Xiaojie Tan - the owner of her own business, Youngs Asian Massage. Of the two other victims, Delaina Ashley Yaun was a customer at Youngs and Paul Andre Michels was its handyman. Youngs is located in a shopping centre called Cherokee Village, named after the Cherokee people that once lived in Georgia. The American military forcibly expelled the Cherokee from Georgia in 1838 and compelled them to migrate west on what became known as the Trail of Tears, or, as the Cherokee called it, the Trail Where They Cried. More than 4,000 perished.

Yong Ae Yue, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Daoyou Feng and Xiaojie Tan may or may not have known of this history. But when Asian immigrants and refugees come to claim our share of the American Dream, this history is also what we claim. And sometimes this history claims us ●

The Committed by Viet Thanh Nguyen is published by Corsair.

Book of the week

{ Fiction } This novel of ideas from the author of the Patrick Melrose books is overstuffed with information
Blake Morrison



Double Blind
by Edward St Aubyn,
Harvill Secker, £18.99

A double-blind research study is one in which both the researchers and the participants are in the dark: since no one knows who is receiving the drugs and who the placebos, there's less risk of the result being skewed by prior knowledge. In an ideal world, the double-blind principle also holds good for fiction: every novel is a thought experiment with an unpredictable outcome. The difficulty - a double-bind rather than double-blind - is that prior knowledge invariably plays a part: the novelist knows what readers are hoping for, and the blurb and the dust jacket tell them what to expect.

What defined Edward St Aubyn's quintet of Patrick Melrose novels was their bitter comedy and sadistic wit, and though his two subsequent novels (one a satire on literary prizes, the other a reworking of *King Lear*) were attempts to alter the template, their tone remained much the same. *Double Blind* opens in unfamiliar territory, as an earnest, unworldly young botanist called Francis wanders through a country estate, Howorth, where he lives off-grid and is employed as part of a wilding project. Seemingly purged of irony, the tone is more DH Lawrence than Evelyn Waugh and almost rapturous in its pantheism ("He felt the life around him and the life inside him flowing into each other"). Francis's pure-mindedness extends even to his drug-taking, magic mushrooms being his hallucinogen of choice: "How could pharmaceutical companies, messing about for the last few decades, hope to compete with the expertise of fungi?" Where Patrick Melrose's trauma was childhood abuse and neglect, for Francis it's abuse and neglect of the planet, for which a new interconnectedness with nature is the only cure.

He's not the only one looking to build a brave new world. There's his girlfriend Olivia, a biologist on the verge of publishing her first book, and her best friend Lucy, newly back in the UK to head up Digitas, the company founded by a rapacious venture capitalist

called Hunter, who has also roped in his fellow Princeton alumnus Saul, now a professor of chemical engineering, artificial intelligence and the realisation of human potential. Whether from noble, careerist or mercenary motives, all of them are engaged in the advancement of human knowledge - as indeed are Olivia's adoptive parents, who are psychoanalysts.

The connections don't end there. An opponent of genetic fundamentalism, Olivia is exasperated that so much effort and money has gone to waste on the search for "missing heritability" and whether, say, there's a "candidate gene" for schizophrenia. As it happens, her father Martin's latest patient is a schizophrenic called Sebastian, who like Olivia was adopted and who Martin comes to believe is probably her brother. The reader suspects so, too, since they share their names with two characters coupled together in *Twelfth Night*. And is it just chance, or a knowing literary reference, that the neurosurgeon who treats Lucy, when she's diagnosed with a brain tumour, is called McEwan (a neurosurgeon having been the central figure in Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*)?

Connections and coincidences drive the plot of *Double Blind* and inheritance is a recurrent motif. But it's the connection (or lack of connection) between different scientific disciplines - and the "explanatory gap" between experiment and experience - that pre-occupy the cast of talking heads. The entrepreneurial Hunter wants science to be a pyramid, with a unified vision of the world. Saul tells him it's impossible, that science is an archipelago of specialisms with no bridges in between: "Nothing they discover at CERN is going to shed light on EO Wilson's seminal account of life in an ant colony, let alone the other way round." The two of them have to get stoned together for the prospect of creating "a single super-mind" of top scientists to seem attainable.

With his addictions, risk-taking and manic energy, Hunter is the closest the novel comes to introducing a Patrick Melrose figure - someone so ferociously driven and fucked up as to dominate proceedings. In one passage he recalls an episode from childhood, when in an effort to solve a Zeno-like paradox - how could someone sit in the back seat of a car travelling at 90 miles an hour and yet be motionless? - he forced his parents to pull over on the hard shoulder of a motor-

It's bold of St Aubyn to write a novel that's so much about science and about so much science: physics, genetics, botany, quantum mechanics ...

way while he paced up and down beside the rushing traffic. Three decades on, despite his extravagant drug taking and the lows that follow ("he felt as if a mafia enforcer had thrown him out of a helicopter into a rat-infested landfill site, among shards of broken china and twisted metal, cushioned only by illegal hospital waste and bulging diapers"), he's still



J BORRUEL/ALAMY

intellectually curious - part of a super-rich enclave, but with ties to scientists labouring away in academia, with its “oppressive sociology of funding and peer review and publication and profit”.

It's bold of St Aubyn to write a novel that's so much about science and about so *much* science: physics, genetics, epigenetics, botany, soil science, quantum mechanics, psychiatry, microbiology, neuroscience, immunotherapy and evolutionary theory (theology, too, if it counts). “Science is mostly common sense with a lot of uncommon words snapping at its heels,” one character suggests, but St Aubyn allows the uncommon words to stand: “the level of resolution of these computational artefacts depended on voxels”; “in the extreme case of 22q11.2 deletion syndrome there were one hundred and eighty clinical associations”. The science isn't smuggled in by way of extracts from learned papers; it's there in the mindset of the characters (“he was hearing exciting stuff about improved delivery systems for the health benefits of infrared light on mitochondrial cells”) or how they speak: “We call it personal haptic gap closure therapy, or PHGCT”, said Hunter sagely.”

Divided into three parts, and moving between Sussex, London, California and the south of France, the novel isn't lacking in narrative momentum. And as it unfolds, the tone shifts back towards the caustic satire of the Melrose novels. But too many passages consist of characters cataloguing what they know or hope to profit from. It's only Francis who gets his hands dirty, and he goes about his task itemising species and collecting soil samples in such a state of

‘How could pharmaceutical companies hope to compete with the expertise of fungi?’

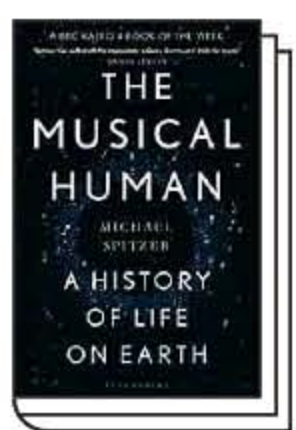
reverie (highlighted in the text by Sebaldian paragraphlessness) that you start to wonder how efficient he can be.

His occupation of the moral high ground is eventually put to the test when a *dea ex machina* shows up in the shape of Hope, a polyamorous Californian with a “sinisterly flexible” body, immense wealth (“My family made a fortune in pretzels and I'm laundering the money with philanthropy”) and a desire to pierce Francis's “ethical armour”. What she sees in him is a mystery but what she's offering - not just her body but the chance to make a difference in the Amazon - is deeply tempting, even if it means abandoning Olivia, now heavily pregnant.

The temptation takes place at a London party, the kind of set piece we associate with St Aubyn, when he brings all his characters together and plays them off against each other. There's a similarly swanky party earlier, as if he can't get away from his comfort zone. It's not through lack of effort and he can't be blamed for wrestling with issues he clearly cares about; ideas matter and so does the novel of ideas. If only the characters weren't so cerebral and the prose wasn't so crammed with data. When you find yourself feeling grateful for phrases such as “Olivia was chopping the vegetables” or “Lucy lay on the sofa” you realise the experiment hasn't come off.

To buy a copy for £16.14 go to guardianbookshop.com

{ Music } From the first rhythms to Whitney Houston and Arvo Pärt - how music has evolved over 165m years
Richard Lea



The Musical Human: A History of Life on Earth
by Michael Spitzer,
Bloomsbury, £30

Music has been a lifeline during this year of Covid, but we haven't all dabbled in drumming or taken up the trombone. Instead we've sparked up Spotify, soundtracking our constricted lives with a mood-changing playlist of uplifting beats or chill-out classical. This surge in listening has been little comfort to professional

musicians, struggling while live venues are shuttered. Lockdown has boosted streaming by 22%, but with digital distributors keeping the lion's share of the proceeds, some artists have found themselves delivering takeaways and stacking shelves.

As Michael Spitzer points out, this shift towards isolated listening is only the latest stage in a transition from active participation in music to our passive consumption of it that has been going on for thousands of years. His global history of music is split into three movements, spinning the story of a turn away from nature across a single human life, world history and hominid evolution. He starts with the individual, charting how music begins for most of us in intricate duets of cooing and peek-a-boo on our parents' knees. Nursery rhymes, recorder groups

and school choirs keep us making music during our primary years, but before reaching adulthood most westerners choose not to pursue it - a development Spitzer blames on the cult of genius, the church and Guido d'Arezzo, the Italian monk who invented staff notation in the 11th century.

The same story plays out again over the course of world history. Spitzer rewinds 40,000 years to a bone flute discovered in a cave in south-west Germany, drawing on the musical practice of contemporary hunter-gatherers to suggest that it was used to play "atoms of music", which were repeated alongside other independent voices to the accompaniment of handclaps, body slaps and rattles. For Spitzer, music has always played a role in religion, so he finds it in the standing stones of Göbekli Tepe, a religious site in Turkey around which the first settlements were established 12,000 years ago, and in the poetry of the Sumerian priestess Enheduanna - "the first recorded name of a composer in the history of the world". Notions of progress and tradition arrive with the Old Testament, and the resolution of dissonance with Greek tragedies.

The stage is now set for western music's flight into abstraction. When Guido strung the notes of plainchant across four parallel lines, it allowed the church to standardise music across a continent and composers to preserve their work for future generations. Armed with the ability to compose on the page, they pushed its logic ever further, launching successive waves of revolution that took us from Renaissance polyphony to Arvo Pärt. Enshrining these sounds in scores broke the "great chain of master-apprentice relationships", leading to the canonisation of genius composers, the professionalisation of performance and a gradual decline in audience numbers.

Spitzer widens his lens to explore how we share rhythm with insects, melody with birds and a sense of musical tradition with whales. Combine these capacities with the social intelligence of apes, he suggests, and all the ingredients for a musical primate are there.

With such a broad canvas, there are inevitable gaps.

Whales share our sense of musical tradition

Spitzer says he's more interested in our "universal predisposition to music" than "elite accomplishments", and that he's wary of pitting

classical music against pop, but pop mostly plays second fiddle in this account. He can discuss Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" with the same acuity as Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, but his heart is clearly in the concert hall.

After following the evolution of music over 165m years, he greets the contemporary split between professional performers and passive consumers with little more than a shrug: "We are where we are, and it is where it is." But if music is as central to human existence as he suggests, we can't leave musicians dancing to the tune of Deliveroo.

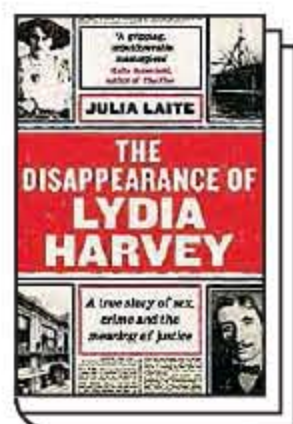
To buy a copy for £26.10 go to guardianbookshop.com.



TONY WU/NPL/ALAMY

{ Biography } Her testimony brought a trafficker down ... recovering the story of a sex worker in Edwardian London

Sarah Watling



The Disappearance of Lydia Harvey: A True Story of Sex, Crime and the Meaning of Justice
by Julia Laite,
Profile, £16.99

There is a moment in this study of Edwardian sex trafficking when the murk of history parts at the sound of a voice. It is a voice so arrestingly poignant that the hidden briefly becomes visible. Picked up for soliciting on the streets of London, Lydia Harvey explains to police why, months before, she failed to solicit a customer on her first night working as a prostitute: “I was thinking

too much of home,” she tells them. And there she is, vivid on the evening that a grim reality dawned on her: a girl too far from home to hope for rescue.

Before she was trafficked to London via Argentina in 1910, Harvey was a photographer’s assistant in Wellington, New Zealand. She had come from a provincial home crowded with seven younger sisters and had already quit a position as a live-in maid. She was in search of the wider world. A fellow lodger in her boarding house offered to introduce her to people who could help her to travel. She was promised a job of “seeing gentlemen” and her glamorous new associates helped her compose a letter to her mother with news of work as a nursemaid abroad.

Six months later, when Harvey was arrested, she had been sold on to another pimp, was penniless, had suffered rape and venereal disease, and was still anxious that her mother should never discover the truth. The account she gave police made her the key witness in a trafficking trial, which is why any record of her ordeal survives. A century later, her legal statement set Julia Laite on a journey to recover the rest of the story.

The author extracts six characters involved in the case and with each complicates a stock figure: Harvey herself, the victim; the Soho police detective; the young journalist who breaks the story; the middle-class, female social worker into whose care Lydia is delivered after her arrest; the trafficker, Antonio Carvelli, whom Laite tracks through numerous reinventions; and the woman who sold sex alongside Harvey and helped to recruit her - Carvelli’s wife, Veronique.

The Carvellis arranged Harvey’s passage to Buenos Aires and paid for her upkeep there: when the 16-year-old tried to refuse men she deemed “old,

dirty and very repulsive” they reminded her of her debt. The city proved less lucrative than hoped, so they moved on to Britain, arriving just as public outrage over the international trade in young girls put London’s police force under scrutiny. Harvey’s testimony was valuable because she was the kind of victim a jury might accept: white, English speaking and plausibly “respectable” before she met Carvelli.

In recovering these six perspectives, Laite tracks an entire phenomenon. She paints a picture of an increasingly connected world that offered myriad opportunities both licit and illicit for exploiting women. If elements of Harvey’s trajectory sound depressingly familiar, it is because, as Laite points out, our flawed modern approaches to migration and trafficking, women and sex, have their roots in the prejudices, assumptions and priorities of the early 20th century.

For all the hysteria surrounding the “white slave trade” (a term loaded with racialised priorities), few were prepared to acknowledge, as some early feminists did, that prostitution was perhaps the only well paid and relatively independent employment available to working-class women. Migration provided employers with impoverished workers to fill sweatshops and break strikes. Unregulated employment agencies and steamship companies collaborated to entice girls away from home and into domestic service abroad. Trafficking prompted the kinds of transnational policing we know today but convictions - like the ones Harvey helped secure - remained rare. Sensational stories of virgins lured from home by dark-featured foreigners articulated a profound discomfort with migration and with the new mobility of women.

Laite paints a picture of an increasingly connected world that offered myriad opportunities for exploiting women

Laite is frank about the challenges of tracing lives that leave few documentary records. There are huge lacunae in what we can know about Harvey: no letters or diaries written by her survive. But this book demonstrates how, with determination, sensitivity and a careful dose of imagination, extraordinary recoveries are possible.

Facts and inferences drawn from newspapers, court records, memoir and even fiction are stitched into (often novelistic) narrative.

The book’s structure - taking each character in turn - risks repetition but also demonstrates the web of interconnected interests and trends behind its subject’s disappearance. For these various people, Harvey was little more than a money-spinner or a useful witness, a titillating story or a morality tale. Laite has taken her slim archival trace and immeasurably enriched it; she has reclaimed a woman’s life and restored a more complex reality to the record.

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

{ Memoir } Born in Tanzania, educated in Surrey: sudden displacements drive this author's search for home

Rebecca Liu



Aftershocks:
Dispatches from the
Frontlines of Identity
by Nadia Owusu,
Hodder & Stoughton,
£16.99

For Nadia Owusu, the question “where are you from” does not have a straightforward answer. Rather it prompts an eight-paragraph rundown of numerous cities and countries; lists of family members spread out around the world, and half-sisters and half-brothers with multihyphenated identities – “Armenian-Somali-American”. “Confused?”

she writes in the opening of this memoir. “Me too.” The sudden displacements in her life – from Tanzania to England, then to Italy, Ethiopia and Uganda – can feel like earthquakes that shake the ground beneath her feet, threatening to unleash chaos. Meanwhile, Owusu’s mind has developed a seismometer of its own, always on the lookout for threats, guarding against her persistent fear of plunging into an “all-consuming abyss”.

Aftershocks begins with the author, now 39, recalling a week spent in a blue rocking chair at her New York apartment: at the time she is 28 and the abyss feels near. Her stepmother, Anabel, has recently visited from Tanzania, and at a restaurant in Chinatown has broken the news that Owusu’s father who died when she was 13, she believed from brain cancer, had actually died of Aids. “You think your precious father was so perfect?” she asks Owusu, suggesting he must have had affairs. The revelation – the truth of which is unclear – is too much for Owusu to handle; she wonders whether she really knew her father. Walking around the city one afternoon, she happens across the frayed rocking chair. Her father liked this shade of blue, she remembers. She brings the chair home and sits on it, not leaving for days. It is home.

Aftershocks is not organised chronologically, and instead dips back and forth as we see Owusu as a graduate student in New York, a party-hopping international school teenager in Uganda, a child trying to escape racist bullying in Surrey. “Time, for me, is not linear,” she writes. Instead, the memoir is structured around the different stages of an earthquake. We begin with “foreshocks” – small earthquakes, such as that meal with Anabel – then move to “topography”, in which Owusu looks at her family’s roots, and “faults” – the long cracks in the surface along which her life splits apart.

In “topography”, we learn about the meeting of Owusu’s parents in Massachusetts. After studying the future of food aid in sub-Saharan Africa as a graduate student, her father, Osei, gets a job at the UN, a position that will eventually move the family around the world. He meets and marries Almas, a woman in her 20s, and they have two children. Owusu remembers the one remaining photograph of the family all together. In it, she is a one-year-old in a frilly dress; her baby sister Yasmeen is cradled by her father’s friend in the background. She understands that the photograph can represent “what is possible when love wins and freedom rings and the pendulum swings toward justice” – such that “a young black man from Kumasi, Ghana, can move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and marry a young woman of Armenian descent whose grandparents escaped genocide and arrived in America with little more than the clothes on their backs”.

Their story is testament to what can happen when borders are porous and opportunities abound. But people can only remain paragons of virtue in myth. A year after the photograph is taken, Owusu’s parents divorce. She sees her mother less and less, until she moves out of view entirely. Besides, Owusu notes,



Nadia Owusu

while much attention in stories of immigrant life is paid to “the dream, achieved or deferred, of a new life in the new world”, little is said of what they’ve lost.

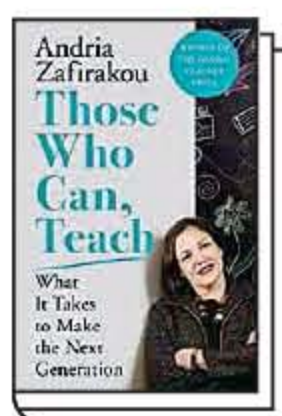
The memoir is written against the usual narrative of “onward-and-upward” migration. Owusu recalls being taken on a tour as a child to see the sacred throne of the kings of the Ashanti people in Ghana. This, it turns out, is her ancestral clan, but the seven-year-old Owusu is more interested in watching Yasmeen play on their GameBoy. Reflecting on the visit, she considers what the Nigerian activist and musician Fela Kuti called “colonial mentality” – the tendency of the colonised to aspire to be their colonisers, even after gaining independence. She remembers her great-grandfather, who always wore a three-piece suit with white gloves. As a 12-year-old at boarding school in Surrey, she joined her white classmates in bullying a black student. Like so many desperate children have done and continue to do, Owusu traded in self-hatred to secure the safety offered by proximity to whiteness.

In the end, she finds slices of herself in all the places she has lived. *Aftershocks* offers an incisive and tender reminder that life does not take place in neat categories, no matter where you are from. We are many-sided and infinitely malleable, and all the better for it. “I am made of the earth, flesh, ocean, blood, and bone of all the places I tried to belong to and all the people I long for,” Owusu reflects; and with that, “I am home”.

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

{ Education } A prize-winning teacher makes clear how little government understands what goes on in schools

Lamorna Ash



Those Who Can, Teach: What It Takes to Make the Next Generation
by Andria Zafirakou,
Bloomsbury, £16.99

At the start of March, Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, called for a “transformative” reform of the schools system in the wake of the pandemic, involving the introduction of a five-term year and longer days to ensure children catch up with their studies. He compared the scope of his “radical” reform to RA Butler’s Education Act of 1944, which had the

ambitious aim of abolishing childhood inequality by providing free secondary education for all. Butler’s introduction of the 11-plus exam and tripartite system of secondary schools - grammar, secondary modern and technical - proved controversial. Williamson’s proposals are equally problematic; head teachers have labelled them “chaotic and confusing”.

Of the 49 individuals in government who have had control over the English schools system since 1900, only four previously taught in schools themselves. As Andria Zafirakou, the winner of the 2018 Global Teacher prize, expresses it: “The people who sit in 10 Downing Street are like gods to us teachers.” That’s to say, they seem so remote, their actions so unintelligible to those who actually work within schools that they might as well be gazing down from Mount Olympus, arbitrarily firing lightning bolts on to asphalt playgrounds.

In many ways *Those Who Can, Teach*, Zafirakou’s first book, is a response to the government’s scatter-gun approach to education, a plea for them to take notice of the pressures teachers are increasingly placed under, and how education policy is damaging young

people. Her simple, direct style often feels close to a manifesto: “We are the ones who go above and beyond the duties we were employed for,” she writes.

Zafirakou drives her students home from school when there are gangs lying in wait for them outside the playground, washes and mends their school clothes when others mock them for smelling, and runs weekend and holiday art clubs so pupils who find it hard being at home have somewhere to go. It is no wonder that the profession has a burnout problem. She watches many teachers around her give up; 15.3% who started working in 2017 were no longer in teaching by the following year.

“We are the ones alerting social services to child-protection issues, severe poverty, or the fallout of police intervention,” Zafirakou writes. It is this kind of granular information, she believes, that cannot be “captured by the facts and figures” the government focuses on, and which makes the idea of solving the issues faced by today’s students by way of more rigorous exams (as Michael Gove did in 2010) or ensuring children remain silent in corridors (another Williamson proposal) appear laughable.

Zafirakou has worked for more than 15 years as an arts and textiles teacher at Alperton community school in Brent, one of the most deprived London boroughs. As the daughter of Greek migrants, “it is written into my blood and bones how isolating it can feel to arrive in a different country”. To ensure those at Alperton understand that their diverse backgrounds are recognised and respected, she has learned to greet parents and pupils in dozens of languages. *Those Who Can, Teach* is a record of the forces of empathy and energy that drive her as a teacher.

As Kate Clanchy’s celebrated memoir *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* does so well, *Those Who Can, Teach* relies on case studies of students to illustrate, for instance, the impact of social media, of poverty, of mental health or learning difficulties on young people today. Both books demonstrate how leading lessons is but a small portion of what it means to be a teacher in 21st-century Britain. At times, perhaps, Zafirakou’s narrative would have benefited

Exams are not the solution to the issues faced by students

from the depth Clanchy achieves - the bringing alive of both pupils and the lessons she taught them through evocative

descriptions and a distinctive, discursive style.

Those Who Can, Teach is bookended by Zafirakou’s experience of winning the Global Teacher prize, which provided her with a platform and the funds (\$1m prize money) to enact lasting change in teaching. She has since set up a successful charity, Artists in Residence, which arranges for professional artists to spend time in schools across the UK. Though her book is clear and informative, it is her wonderful achievements as a teacher, made evident in this account, that remain the more impressive feat.

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



A dissatisfied woman challenges society with her fierce and filthy interrogation of limits and taboos

Sam Leith



Come Join Our Disease
by Sam Byers,
Faber, £16.99

“*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur,*” St Augustine of Hippo is credited with remarking. “We are born between shit and piss.” But in most societies, most of the time, we strive to keep those things out of sight and out of mind: there are deep taboos settled on these most basic human commonalities. Why might that be?

Sam Byers’s third novel poses the question in earnest. Not since Timothy Mo’s *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard*, I think, has there been a mainstream literary novel so fiercely and lovingly committed to the feculent: whole paragraphs are dedicated to mucus, vomit, slicks of warm diarrhoea, puddles of piss, maggoty sores and liquefying rotten meat. You may find that disgusting. There again, you may be part of the problem. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Byers’s protagonist, Maya, has been homeless for a year, and is living in a squatter camp when she’s picked up by the police in a raid. We don’t learn too much about her background - only that she had a white-collar job and loving parents before suffering an existential crisis (something to do with living under capitalism, and the intolerable expectation of others that she be happy) and steadily withdrawing

from her own life. Anyway, because she scrubs up well, seems essentially sane and isn’t a hopeless addict, capitalism wants her back.

While she’s in custody, a couple of unctuous tech company PR men show up to offer her a deal. She gets a flat, a phone, a laptop and a job; and in exchange she’s to document her new life in an Instagram feed called “Maya’s journey”. The job is at a company where she helps to filter “inappropriate” material from the internet. Byers’s humour, lower in the mix than in his previous novels *Idiopathy* and *Perfidious Albion*, comes out here: she spends every working day watching a stream of vile images and swiping left or right to accept or reject them.

On returning from a retreat - full of kale smoothie and whalesong, and craving cheap white bread and chocolate - Maya goes on a binge, whereupon a long-delayed and very substantial poo sparks an epiphany: “What I’d produced was glorious. My shit was so abundant, so strong ...”

At last, Maya feels alive. And when she then makes herself spectacularly ill by dipping a bit of bread in her own shit and eating it, she feels still more alive. Late capitalism sent her on a “wellness retreat”; but it’s on her own initiative that she burns her bridges and heads off on an illness retreat. She falls in with an eccentric and equally marginalised woman called Zelma; they squat in an industrial estate and, well, roll around in their own filth. Soon - “Come join our disease!” - they attract a handful of acolytes.

An enthusiastic embrace of everything that normal society tends to disapprove of (crapping where you eat, wearing necklaces of dead rats and, worse, doing nothing obviously economically productive) becomes the substance, as they see it, of a connection with a more essential truth and a deeper freedom; as well as being a surprise hit on Instagram.

The question that the novel chews over, or at least makes available for consideration, is whether this behaviour is a form of radical anti-capitalist resistance, a deeper sort of existential heroism - or whether it’s simply a manifestation of mental illness. Those things may not be mutually exclusive; nor

Byers’s rebels squat in an industrial estate may the answer be the same for each of the women - and it’s one of the novel’s strengths

that it allows for a complicated answer.

Byers is a keen and effective stylist, and he’s superbly astute about the complex shifts and negotiations between his characters. But the big ideas here - the repressions and paradoxes of “civilisation”, the loops of resistance and co-option and commoditisation - are so big and clunking that they overshadow the subtler work that his prose is doing. For amid the lurid colour and the grand theoretical gestures is a poignant story of friendship and isolation, of human connections made and lost. There is something interesting growing in all that filth.

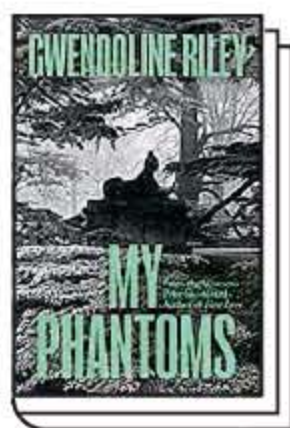
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GREGORY WARRAN/GETTY

In this bitterly funny tale, a toxic relationship between a mother and her daughter is mercilessly dissected

Justine Jordan



My Phantoms
by Gwendoline Riley,
Granta, £12.99

Over two decades and six novels now, Gwendoline Riley has refined her material; a writer/academic, called Aislinn or Carmel or Natalie or Neve, kicks away from the claustrophobia and emotional incontinence of her childhood in the north of England in search of a self-contained, auto-

nous existence in Manchester or Glasgow, the US or London. Often she recounts vignettes from her early years; her mother's flight from her father, weekend access visits to be suffered through with a sibling. She fixes her parents on the page with darkly comic precision, mercilessly attendant to their tics and repetitions: a monstrous bully of a father; a mother who bleats in book after book, "Well, it's a long time ago now, isn't it?" "Well, it was just what you did."

Other themes drift through the novels - art, friends, cities, alcohol, lovers, and in the Women's prize-shortlisted *First Love* a toxic husband - but these parent figures repeatedly haunt them. In *My Phantoms*, Bridget, a fortysomething academic, faces down her ghosts. There is a fascinating tension between Riley's concision - the books are slim, and her honed sentences can encapsulate a character in a few short words - and this expansive reworking of her subject area. Repetition is key to damaged psychology, of course; the worst thing about dealing with screwed-up people is that each interaction is exactly like the ones before. In *First Love*, Neve suggested therapy to her habitually unhappy mother. "I mean, if you feel disappointed, or stuck." In *My Phantoms*, Bridget does the same: "That's something you can do if you feel stuck or frightened." As Riley might write, does the mother ever try therapy? She does not.

One solution to the endless roundabout of toxic relationships is withdrawal: "I don't do 'family' these days," writes Bridget's aunt merrily, informing her of her estranged father's death. Bridget has simply waited her father out, as she waited out those ghastly weekend outings.

But it's easier to outrun a bad father than a bad mother, and the figure of Helen Grant here is more complicated, nuanced and interesting - to Bridget as well as to the reader - than her awful dad. Like all Riley's narrators, Bridget has worked hard to resist her parents' incursions into her adult self. Her boundaries are a fortress. But where her father would gleefully

trample those boundaries - pulling down her trousers, snatching her book - her mother endlessly contests them, negotiating the fault lines between parent and child, appealing to the court of normality. "Bridge?" she said. "Bridge? Why aren't I allowed to meet John?" "Everyone meets their children's boyfriends", she points out; "it's so embarrassing when people ask". "I wanted to say, What bloody people? But that would have been cruel, wouldn't it? So she had me there."

This is a brilliant portrait of a mother-daughter relationship in which every encounter is a battle because both sides want more than the other will give, or something different. The mothers in Riley's books are always baring their teeth to their daughters, like angry dogs or frightened chimps. They bring intimacy, and its trailing twin, shame; in *First Love*, when the child Neve kisses her mother's bare foot, she recoils. "That's like what a ... boyfriend would do," she said. "Not your daughter. No."

There is a vigorous outpouring of revulsion towards the mother figure in *First Love*, and Neve is a stylish, aphoristic declarer of her truth. *My Phantoms* is a more sober, understated, subtle reckoning with an unfixable problem. Bridget has engineered the relationship to a manageable once-a-year birthday dinner. But as Helen ages, suffering a fall and illness, she is inevitably drawn closer. The previously unthinkable happens, because it has to - a stay in Helen's flat, sorting

All of Riley's novels are about authenticity - the difficulty of being true to yourself, when you have been raised in bad faith

through clutter together. Emergency phone calls. Attempts at hugs.

All Riley's novels are about authenticity - the difficulty of being true to yourself, when you have been raised in bad faith. In her debut, *Cold Water*, Carmel states, "What I don't like is when these people need to make others complicit in their big lie." How to avoid remain-

ing complicit in your family's big lies? Therapy is the usual means of escape; Bridget deploys its soothing rhythms when talking to her mother - "Of course. I'm sorry. That's a shame, isn't it".

Bridget's partner, John, is an analyst, which allows for a professional's evaluation of Helen - life for her, he opines, is a performance that is "desperately committed but gratingly false". This exterior perspective doesn't feel necessary: Helen is starkly illuminated through every exchange with Bridget, every feint and failure of communication. She condemns herself, as we all do, out of her own mouth. And yet the forensic quality of Bridget's attention is fuelled by imaginative sympathy as well as distance and disgust. As the book goes on, in all its horrible, funny, uncomfortable truthfulness, it feels increasingly like a complicated act of love.

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

{ **Short stories** } In meditations on ageing and memory, the female characters are mere pretexts for male epiphany
David Hayden



First Person Singular
by Haruki Murakami,
translated by
Philip Gabriel,
Harvill Secker, £16.99

Eight stories are told in the first person, with each narrator a man in late middle age who shares interests, such as jazz and baseball, with his author. Only one narrator is given a name: “Haruki Murakami”. Murakami, by his own account, is less interested in creating complex characters than in the interaction his characters have with

the world in which he imagines them. Even so, the women in this book are remarkably less complex, less individual, than the men, existing primarily as a pretext for the male characters to find out, or fail to find out, about themselves.

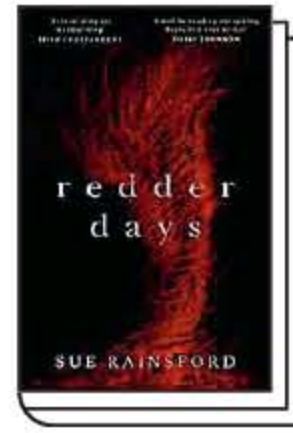
This playfulness with the identity of the narrator might be more rewarding, were it not for the stretches of tepid, underpowered writing. The conversational style can be slack and clichéd, speckled with reflections on philosophical questions about ageing, identity, memory. It is hard not to read “It’s true that life brings us far more defeats than victories” as merely trite. When the situation repeats of the older man surprised by ageing, and having learned very little, the reader, too, learns very little, and might begin to conclude that these are tales of the slightly remarkable, which one would not be tempted to read more than once.

There is a point in each story where the narrator judges the attractiveness of a woman or girl with a disquieting urgency and an unexamined sense of entitlement. Such a gaze is never turned on the narrator, and only rarely, and comedically, on the men.

The last story is the most taut and unsettling. The narrator meets a woman in a bar, with whom he shares a mutual female friend. She accuses him of a serious, but unnamed, offence against this friend. He is abashed and cannot recall the woman or his actions. He leaves. The world outside has become hostile, bitterly cold, semi-buried in ash, inhabited by slimy snakes and faceless people. In the final line of the book, the narrator recalls her words: “You should be ashamed of yourself.” In a collection so dominated by a male point of view, this striking, admonitory tone might be read as the key to the book.

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

This eerie story of twins growing up in an end of days commune casts a rich, dystopian spell
Catherine Taylor



Redder Days
by Sue Rainsford,
Doubleday, £14.99

Sue Rainsford’s debut novel *Follow Me to Ground* was a substantially imagined work, featuring a fatally conflicted, non-human father and daughter: part folklore, part fable. Her follow-up, *Redder Days*, has a similarly thrilling force, gradually pushing a familial bond to breaking point. In

this case twins Anna and Adam, along with their former leader Koan, are the apparent sole survivors of the end of days commune into which they were born.

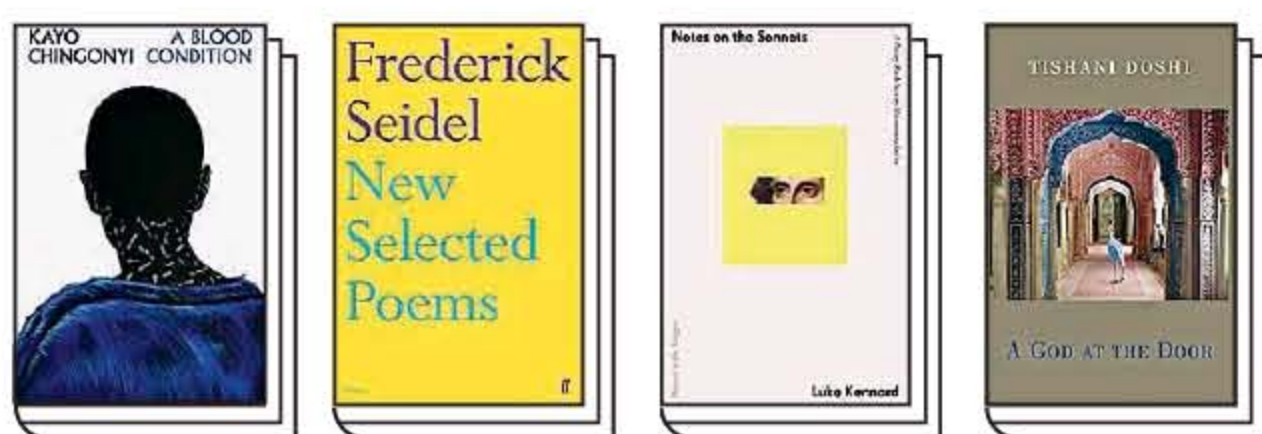
The commune’s habitat comprises an unnamed landscape of ruined dwellings, a forest with mysterious “crying trees” and a shoreline devoid of life apart from the occasional bird - until two incidents shatter the isolation and test the twins’ certainty. The washing up of a glaucous mass of jellyfish is followed by the unexpected return of Matthew, a former member. Anna and Adam have grown up believing, through the now elderly Koan’s pronouncements, that they are somehow the conduit to a future event known as Storm, a final rapture that will herald the end of the world.

Told in interlocking and sometimes confusing narratives as the story moves back and forth in time, *Redder Days* conjures a rich, dystopian spell. Anna is the strong, forthright sibling, who hunts not only for food but for the “red” people whose presence the commune has been taught to fear. A dark stain on the floor of their cottage is the only physical reminder of the twins’ mother, Eula, who left the commune when they were small children. Now they are on the brink of adulthood, acutely aware of a confined sexuality and with a hunger for knowledge.

Rainsford has a pacy, invigorating style and retains determined control of her material, despite some glitches (the multiple narrative voices can sometimes appear too undifferentiated). Imagery is what makes this book sing, and it is taut and sleek, never overdone: Anna’s special hawk, one of several beautifully realised affinities the twins have with the natural world, is a “shapely, vicious bird”; she and Adam move stealthily throughout the “fresh night, still and viscous”. Obvious comparisons with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood abound, in a novel that is as much about the impossibility of innocence as it is about corruption and authoritarianism.

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

Carefully weighed sorrows; shock tactics and laughter; Shakespeare at a party; and hope in a war-torn landscape *Aingeal Clare*



Kayo Chingonyi's second collection, **A Blood Condition** (Chatto, £10), takes its title from an unnamed illness that claimed the lives of his parents when he was a young adult. A deep thread of loss runs through these poems, and an attempt to reintegrate a past that spans Zambia, Newcastle and London. In "Hyem", we learn of the young poet's Geordie speech being interpreted as "demotic Bemba" in Zambia, while "The last night of my 20s" is an affecting elegy for the Scottish poet Roddy Lumsden. These fine poems weigh their sorrows carefully, reminding us how best we might "carry a well of myth / in the pit of our pith".

Frederick Seidel turns 85 this year, and with **New Selected Poems** (Faber, £18.99) we have a chance to weigh up half a century of his *oeuvre*. Hyperbole and shock tactics have long been central to his art. Often he will begin a poem with an outrageous statement

such as "I want to date-rape life"; then, as we roll our eyes at the provocation, he will relax into wistful odes to vintage motorbikes or his favourite London tailor. Other targets include suicide bombers, the decline of the west, and women ("a naked woman my age is just a total nightmare"). Readers who fail to laugh at all this can only be proof of a prime Seidel article of faith, that you can't say anything these days - unless of course you're Frederick Seidel.

The protagonist of Luke Kennard's **Notes on the Sonnets** (Penned in the Margins, £9.99) meets a man at a party who claims to be able to recite any Shakespeare sonnet from memory. How about number 66? "Not 66", he replies, "Anything but that." With a line from a sonnet introducing each prose poem, we get a Shakespeare recital of sorts in this joyously unclassifiable book. The party drags on: tedious conversations are endured and escaped, a Bible study group randomly convenes, and the meaning of love is thrashed out, often via the sonnets. "We will give each other a disease to which we alone are the cure," the narrator announces, which seems both trite and brilliant at once, like many a party conversation. "You want to disappear into the night with all the apology of a firework," we read as the end of the party approaches, a perfect epitaph for the book itself.

The poems of Tishani Doshi's **A God at the Door** (Bloodaxe, £10.99) operate on the grand scale, reaching for visionary responses to their often troubling subjects. They etch articulate outrage deftly on to ecological backdrops; the grubby human world of political and misogynistic violence is rendered in images of an orchard detonating "its crimson fruits, / its pomegranates and poppies and tart mulberries" in a besieged Kabul maternity clinic. A poem shaped like a menstrual cup skewers Pliny the Elder, that "Big Daddy of Mansplainers", and everywhere these poems are caustic and comic in turn, "unbelted, unbuttoned", shimmering and bright. Though "hope is a booby trap" in the war-ravaged landscapes, it is nevertheless offered up and renewed throughout this stunning and ambitious collection.

Poem of the month

Don't Marry Johnny Panic

by Mizzy Hussain

From *Crossing Lines: An Anthology of Immigrant Poetry (Broken Sleep)*.

Brahmacari Monica, don't marry Johnny Panic
nor meet his trickster of a sister at the station.
She's the mistress orchestrator. O she's a
meesni one. She'll sew sequins and wax on a
duck-egg blue dress for you. She'll tell you
it's not the chicken season and you'll believe her.
She'll hide bones in the kebab and the grey
in her beard. Brahmacari Monica, don't marry
Johnny Panic, don't shine his curly-toed shoes
or wash the jittery white turban he never removes;
they claim it patches up his low-volume
migraine, but if you look closer, it's a weather-
beaten bandage for a brow-beating brain. Brahmacari
Monica, don't marry Johnny Panic. Take sequins
and wax and dress and go somewhere green.

'Then, all of India belonged to all of us'

Forty years after his Booker-winning novel *Midnight's Children* was first published, *Salman Rushdie* reflects on how he set out to capture the Bombay of his childhood - and how India has changed since

Longevity is the real prize for which writers strive, and it isn't awarded by any jury. For a book to stand the test of time, to pass successfully down the generations, is uncommon enough to be worth a small celebration. For a writer in his mid-70s, the continued health of a book published in his mid-30s is, quite simply, a delight. This is why we do what we do: to make works of art that, if we are very lucky, will endure.

As a reader, I have always been attracted to capacious, largehearted fictions, books that try to gather up large armfuls of the world. When I started to think about the work that would grow into *Midnight's Children*, I looked again at the great Russian novels of the 19th century, books of the type that Henry James had called "loose, baggy monsters", large-scale realist novels. And at the great English novels of the 18th and 19th centuries, *Tristram Shandy* (wildly innovative and by no means realist), *Vanity Fair* (bristling with sharp knives of satire), *Little Dorrit* (in which the Circumlocution Office, a government department whose purpose is to do nothing, comes close to magic realism), and *Bleak House* (in which the interminable court case Jarndyce v Jarndyce comes even closer). And at their great French precursor, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, which is completely fabulist.

I also had in mind the modern counterparts of these masterpieces, *The Tin Drum* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Catch-22*, and the rich, expansive worlds of Iris

Murdoch and Doris Lessing. But I was also thinking about another kind of capaciousness, the immense epics of India, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the fabulist traditions of the *Panchatantra*, the *Thousand and One Nights* and the Kashmiri Sanskrit compendium called *Katha-sarit-sagar* (*Ocean of the Streams of Story*). I was thinking of India's oral narrative traditions, too, which were a form of storytelling in which digression was almost the basic principle; the storyteller could tell, in a sort of whirling cycle, a fictional tale, a mythological tale, a political story and an autobiographical story; he - because it was always a he - could intersperse his multiple narratives with songs and keep large audiences entranced.

I loved that multiplicity could be so captivating. Young writers are often given a version of the advice that the King of Hearts gives the White Rabbit in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, when the Rabbit becomes confused in court about how to tell his story: "Begin at the beginning," the King said, very gravely, "and go on until you come to the end; then stop." It was inspiring to learn, from the oral narrative masters of, in particular, Kerala in south India, that this was not the only way, or even the most captivating way, to go about things.

The novel I was planning was a multigenerational family novel, so inevitably I thought of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and, for all its non-realist elements, I knew that my book needed to be a novel deeply rooted in history, so I read, with great admiration, Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel*. And, because it was to be a novel of Bombay, it had to be rooted in the movies as well, movies of the kind now called "Bollywood", in which calamities such as babies exchanged at birth and given to the wrong mothers were everyday occurrences.

As you can see, I wanted to write a novel of vaulting ambition, a high-wire act with no safety net, an all-or-nothing effort: Bollywood or bust, as one might say. A novel in which memory and politics, love and hate would mingle on almost every page. I was an inexperienced, unsuccessful, unknown writer. To write such a book I had to learn how to do so; to learn by writing it. Five years passed before I was ready to show it to anybody. For all its surrealist elements *Midnight's Children* is a history novel,

I wanted to write a novel in which memory and politics, love and hate would mingle on every page. I had to learn how by writing it

looking for an answer to the great question history asks us: what is the relationship between society and the individual, between the macrocosm and the microcosm? To put it another way: do we make history, or does it make (or unmake) us? Are we the masters or victims of our times?

My protagonist, Saleem Sinai, makes an unusual assertion in reply: he



believes that everything that happens, happens because of him. That history is his fault. This belief is absurd, of course, and so his insistence on it feels comic at first. Later, as he grows up, and as the gulf between his belief and the reality of his life grows ever wider - as he becomes increasingly victim-like, not a person who acts but one who is acted upon, who does not do but is done to - it begins to be sad, perhaps even tragic. Forty years after he first arrived on the scene - 45 years after he first made his assertion on my typewriter - I feel the urge to defend his apparently insane boast. Perhaps we are all, to use Saleem's phrase, "handcuffed to history". And if so, then yes, history is our fault. History is the fluid, mutable, metamorphic consequence of our choices, and so the responsibility for it, even the moral responsibility, is ours. After all: if it's not ours, then whose is it? There's nobody else here. It's just us. If Saleem Sinai made an error, it was that he took on too much responsibility for events. I want to say to him now: we all share that burden. You don't have to carry all of it.

The question of language was central to the making of *Midnight's Children*. In a later novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, I used the acronym "Hug-me" to describe the language spoken in Bombay streets, a melange of Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi and English. In addition to those five "official" languages, there's also the city's unique slang, Bumbaiyya, which nobody from anywhere else in India understands. Clearly, any novel aiming for readability could not be written in Hug-me or Bumbaiyya. A novel must know what language it's being written in. However, writing

Shriya Saran as Parvati and Satya Bhabha as Saleem in the film adaptation of *Midnight's Children*

in classical English felt wrong, like a misrepresentation of the rich linguistic environment of the book's setting.

In the end I took my cue from Jewish American writers such as Philip Roth, who sprinkled their English with untranslated Yiddish words. If they could do it, so could I. The important thing was to make the approximate meaning of the word clear from the context. If Roth talks about getting a *zetz* in the *kishkes*, we understand from context that a *zetz* is some sort of violent blow and *kishkes* are a sensitive part of the human body. So if Saleem mentions a *rutputty* motor car, it should be clear that the car in question is a ramshackle, near-derelict old wreck.

I eventually used fewer non-English words than I originally intended. Sentence structure, the flow and rhythm of the language, ended up being more useful, I thought, in my quest to write in an English that wasn't owned by the English. The flexibility of the English language has allowed it to become naturalised in many different countries, and Indian English is its own thing by now, just as Irish English is, or West Indian English, or Australian English, or the many variations of American English. I set out to write an Indian English novel. Since then, the literature of the English language has expanded to include many more such projects: I'm thinking of Edwidge Danticat's Creole-inflected English in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for example, or Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie's use of Igbo words and idioms in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, or Junot Díaz's slangy, musical, Dominican remake of the language in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

I found myself in conversation, so to speak, with a great forerunner, EM Forster's *A Passage to India*. But as I began to write my "India book" - for a while I didn't even know what it was called - I understood that Forsterian English, so cool, so precise, would not do for me. It would not do, I thought, for India. India is not cool. India is hot. It's hot and noisy and odorous and crowded and excessive. How could I represent that on the page? I asked myself. What would a hot, noisy, odorous, crowded, excessive English sound like? How would it read? The novel I wrote was my best effort to answer that question.

The question of crowdedness needed a formal answer as well as a linguistic one. Multitude is the most obvious fact about the subcontinent. Everywhere you go, there's a throng of humanity. How could a novel embrace the idea of such multitude? My answer was to tell a crowd of stories, deliberately to overcrowd the narrative, so that "my" story, the main thrust of the novel, would need to push its way, so to speak, through a crowd of other stories. There are small, secondary characters and peripheral incidents in the book that could be expanded into longer narratives of their own. This kind of deliberate "wasting" of material was intentional. This was my hubbub, my maelstrom, my crowd.

When I started writing, the family at the heart of the novel was much more like my family than it is now. However, the characters felt oddly lifeless and inert. So I started making them unlike the people on whom they were modelled, and at once they began to come to life. For example, I did have an aunt who married a Pakistani general, who, in real life, was one of the founders, and the first chief, of the much feared ISI, the Inter-Services Intelligence agency. But as far as I know he was not involved in planning or executing a military coup, with or without the help of pepper pots. So that story was fiction. At least I think it was.

Saleem Sinai went to my school. He also lived, in Bombay, in my childhood home, in my old neighbourhood, and is just eight weeks younger than me.



His childhood friends are composites of children I knew when I was young. Once, after a reading in Bombay, a man came up to me and said: "Hello, Salman. I'm Hairoil." He wasn't wrong. The character of Hairoil Sabarmati, or at least Hairoil's neatly oiled and parted hair, had indeed been based on him. But he had never been nicknamed

Hairoil in real life. I couldn't help thinking how strange it was that my childhood friend introduced himself to me by a fictional name. Especially as he had lost all his hair.

But in spite of these echoes, Saleem and I are unlike. For one thing, our lives took very different directions. Mine led me abroad to England and eventually to America. But Saleem never leaves the subcontinent. His life is contained within, and defined by, the borders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As a final proof that my character and I are not one and the same, I offer another anecdote. When I was in Delhi to do one of the first Indian readings from *Midnight's Children*, I heard a woman's voice cry loudly as I walked out on to the stage: "Oh! But he's got a perfectly ordinary nose!"

Forty years is a long time. I have to say that India is no longer the country of this novel. When I wrote *Midnight's Children* I had in mind an arc of history moving from the hope - the bloodied hope, but still the hope - of independence to the betrayal of that hope in the so-called Emergency, followed by the birth of a new hope. India today, to someone of my mind, has entered an even darker phase than the Emergency years. The horrifying escalation of assaults on women, the increasingly authoritarian character of the state, the unjustifiable arrests of people who dare to stand against that authoritarianism, the religious fanaticism, the rewriting of history to fit the narrative of those who want to transform India into a Hindu-nationalist, majoritarian state, and the popularity of the regime in spite of it all, or, worse, perhaps because of it all - these things encourage a kind of despair.

When I wrote this book I could associate big-nosed Saleem with the elephant-trunked god Ganesh, the patron deity of literature, among other things, and that felt perfectly easy and natural even though Saleem was not a Hindu. All of India belonged to all of us, or so I deeply believed. And still believe, even though the rise of a brutal sectarianism believes otherwise. But I find hope in the determination of India's women and college students to resist that sectarianism, to reclaim the old, secular India and dismiss the darkness. I wish them well. But right now, in India, it's midnight again ●

Mumbai, left; and Salman Rushdie, above



GALIT SELIGMANN/ALAMY; JOEL SAGET/AFP VIA GETTY

This must be the place

With travel restricted to the imagination right now, *Henry Eliot* reflects on his favourite literary locations - and chooses some classic destinations to discover

As a child I once found a set of old photographs of my home, with unknown people posing. I stood in the exact same spots, imagining a shiver of communication. I have since had the same experience standing in Virginia Woolf's writing lodge at Monk's House, or surveying the fields of Waterloo from Napoleon's headquarters, or looking up at the empty sky above Ground Zero. Sharing the same airspace as another human from another time, standing on the same patch of the planet, is a profound feeling. It is similar to the effect of reading a novel: your imagination bridges the gulf between someone else's experience and your own, and expands your understanding in the process.

That's why I get a particular thrill from visiting literary locations. Reading is a creative collaboration, so being in the environment that inspired a novelist enhances both the place and the novel: the setting is overlaid with the events of the book and the book becomes more tangible and memorable as a result. Lyme Regis, in Dorset, for example, is famous for its ancient harbour wall, the Cobb. I am particularly fond of a set of precarious steps on the Cobb, known as "Granny's Teeth". They recall that dramatic moment at the centre of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*,



Jura seen from the west coast of Scotland

◆ when Louisa Musgrove runs up them so as to be jumped down by Captain Wentworth: “He put out his hands; she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless!”

London, where I live, is especially rich in literary associations and sometimes they overlap, creating unexpected dissonances. The top of Primrose Hill, for instance, is the location of both the Twilight Bark in Dodie Smith’s *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* and where the last Martians are torn apart by dogs in HG Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*. In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* by GK Chesterton blood runs in the streets past Bridget Jones’s local cafe; and Chaucer’s Miller tells his bawdy tale in what is now Greenwich Park, where the bomb explodes in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*. My favourite is Senate House in Bloomsbury, which is both the sinister Ministry of Information in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the survivors’ stronghold against a surging mass of flesh-eating flora in John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids*.

Reading certainly enriches the places you know, and it can overpower less familiar settings. I don’t know Paris, Venice or St Petersburg as well as I know London or Lyme, but since visiting those cities I have read Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and my sense of all three has radically altered. In my mind the streets of Paris now ring with carriages ferrying *le beau monde* between glittering salons; Venice is a palimpsest of maps and fables; and St Petersburg is sweating in claustrophobic self-recrimination. In many ways the worlds of these books have become more vivid than my own fading memories. Conversely, I had read Kafka’s *The Castle* and Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* before I visited Prague or the Salinas valley in California, so from the start both locations were deeply coloured by my experience of those books. Prague was mysterious and impenetrable, with streets and cemeteries huddled around the castle on the hill, whereas Salinas was epic and open, a great canvas on which archetypal narratives might play out.

Of course there are many locations around the world that I have never visited and yet they still form strong impressions in my mind.

I feel I know the dark winters of rural Norway, where the lakes freeze so thick they crack like gunshots, because I have read *The Ice Palace* by Tarjei Vesaas; I have felt the suburban Tokyo seasons turn full circle in the pages of *Territory of Light* by Yūko Tsushima; learned about a societal and religious crisis in rural 19th-century Nigeria through Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. One of the joys of reading is that it gives us this strong physical sense of a place we may never visit. For example, I know how it feels to walk the dark corridors of Gormenghast Castle; I know the dust of its rooms, its towers and courtyards and its fields of stone in the sky, because Mervyn Peake’s prose is so evocative, but I will never visit

St Petersburg is vividly captured in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*

I know how it feels to walk the dark corridors of Gormenghast Castle; I know the dust of its rooms, its towers and its fields of stone in the sky

because it’s a pure fantasy.

Often, I select my next book based on where I am. In 2015, on a sailing holiday in Greece, I read the *Argonautica* (about Jason and the Argonauts) by Apollonius of Rhodes. The holiday should properly have been a voyage through the Dardanelles and along the coast of the Black Sea; instead it was a gentle week of island-hopping, but

still it was wonderful to read about Greek heroes, clashing rocks, harpies, monsters and armies sprung from dragon’s teeth with the gentle sound of lapping waves and a soft pine-and-salt tang in the air, just as Apollonius would have known.

The following year I was walking with friends across the Isle of Jura in the Inner Hebrides: we skirted the magnificent conical mountains known as “the Paps”, camped by the shore and enjoyed a euphoric sense of remoteness. Jura is three times the size of Manhattan but only 200 people live there; the red deer outnumber humans 40 to one. Towards the end of our walk we visited Barnhill, the remote house near the north of the island, where Orwell lived on and off between 1946 and 1949. The house is almost unchanged: it is still miles from the nearest road and there is a typewriter in the room where Orwell sat coughing in bed, dying of tuberculosis as he completed the typescript of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I reread his dystopian masterpiece as we made our way across the island. The novel is set in a crowded, urban, grubby version of London, of course, a world away from the empty natural grandeur of the Hebrides, but there was something about Winston Smith’s loneliness, his stubbornness, his belief in the strength of being an outsider that chimed with the location. Later I discovered that Orwell’s working title was *The Last Man in Europe*.

The experience of layering landscapes and literature can also be shared with others. I have twice organised walks from Southwark to Canterbury Cathedral with a motley group of pilgrims, on which we retold the stories from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*.



ALEXANDER NIKIFOROV/ALAMY

I have led similar communal readings of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* around Cadbury Castle and Glastonbury in Somerset, and the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey in Grasmere, Keswick and other parts of the Lake District. The combination of text and topography is always special, but reading and walking in company brings increased focus: it allows both space to contemplate the words and time to discuss their effect. I have a fond memory of walking with friends from Epping Forest in Essex to Northborough in Cambridgeshire, tracing the footsteps of the poet John Clare and reading from his poems. Clare made the walk in 1841, absconding from his asylum at High Beach and covering 90 miles in four days, looking for his first love, Mary Joyce, who had been dead for six years. You can pick out his route from his remarkable account of the walk, which swings between joy and despair. Covering the miles ourselves gave us a new appreciation of his state of mind, as we dealt with exhaustion and blisters and revelled in the liberty of the open road. We tried eating some roadside grass at one point, as Clare did, but that was less of a success.

Perhaps my most memorable experience of visiting a literary location was in early 2018, when my wife and I were in Argentina. We were visiting friends, and as part of our trip they organised a day in Buenos Aires, themed around Jorge Luis Borges, the blind poet and librarian. We saw the apartment block on Avenida Maipú where he had lived with his aged mother; we drank coffee in Café La Biela where he would meet his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares. (Today there are plaster statues of Borges and Bioy sitting at a table in La Biela; the waiting staff lay fresh napkins and coffee cups each morning.) We visited the old National Library, where Borges worked and where the reflected octagonal rooms seem to have inspired "The Library of Babel". We visited the new National Library building where we were allowed to sit at his desk. The greatest thrill, however, came from standing on Avenida Juan de Garay in the barrio of Constitución, where Borges set his 1945 story "The Aleph".

In the underground basement of an unremarkable house on this unremarkable street, Borges imagined something extraordinary: his "Aleph" is an iridescent sphere, about an inch in diameter, which contains every other place on Earth. "I saw the teeming sea," marvels the narrator; "I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me ..." The passage is one of the strangest, most brilliant and kaleidoscopic that I have ever read. We were standing in the very location where Borges had imagined every other location on Earth. The effect was vertiginous and completely exhilarating ●

An editor at Penguin Classics, Henry Eliot is the presenter of their new podcast, On the Road.

From Japan to Barbados ... Five novels to transport you

***The Woman in the Dunes* by Kōbō Abe, translated by E Dale Saunders**

This unsettling 1962 novel is set amid the shifting Tottori sands, northwest of Kyoto in Japan - an otherworldly landscape, halfway between sea and solid ground. An amateur entomologist on a beetle-hunting trip misses the last bus home and seeks shelter in a strange village where the houses are half-buried by sand and only accessible by rope ladder. In the morning he discovers that his ladder has disappeared.

***Lust, Caution* by Eileen Chang, translated by Julia Lovell**

Set in occupied Shanghai during the second world war, this 1979 novella tells the story of an actress, Wang Chia-chih, recruited by the Chinese resistance to seduce a Japanese collaborator and facilitate his assassination. It captures the intrigue and romance of wartime China. Ang Lee, who directed a 2007 film of this book, describes Chang as "the fallen angel of Chinese literature".

***Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin, translated by Michael Hofmann**

This monumental 1929 novel recreates the city of Berlin through a dazzling montage of multiple points of view, sound effects, newspaper reports, Bible stories,

drinking songs and urban slang. In its scale and ambition it has been compared to both James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. It follows the story of Franz Biberkopf, a murderer, who is drawn back into the murky underworld of pimps and thugs that he had hoped to escape. In 1980 it was adapted by Rainer Werner Fassbinder as a 14-part TV series.

***Jagua Nana* by Cyprian Ekwensi**

The eponymous heroine of this 1961 novel is a brassy, big-hearted, chain-smoking sex worker in 1950s Lagos, Nigeria. She enjoys parties, scandals and wild nights at the Tropicana club, but then she falls for young Freddie and must use all her charms to secure his future. Ekwensi was born in Nigeria, the son of an Igbo storyteller. He worked briefly as a pharmacist in Essex before returning to west Africa and writing more than 40 books.

***In the Castle of My Skin* by George Lamming**

In the 1930s, nine-year-old G is growing up in a sleepy village on Barbados, overseen by an English landlord. G becomes gradually aware of a distant mother-country across the sea and a legacy of historical injustice. Lamming wrote this 1953 coming-of-age novel while living in England: "In the desolate, frozen heart of London, at the age of 23, I tried to reconstruct the world of my childhood and early adolescence." **HE**

Books about female friendships

Lucy Jago



What I miss most about pre-lockdown life is not festivals, or even foreign travel, but time with my female friends. The malaise, I believe, is widespread, so here are some books in which to immerse yourself in complex, occasionally wounding, but always irreplaceable female friendships.

In **Sula**, by Toni Morrison, Nel and Sula are best friends in a poor, black Ohio community, where women can take many roles but not that which Sula chooses, free from social and sexual restraint. She is shunned by everyone, even Nel, whose marriage crumbles in the face of Sula's seductive presence. Nel mourns for years but comes to understand, as Sula does before her, that it was not her husband she was missing but the relationship with

her best friend. Morrison says that it was the women around her, all struggling, all poor, who inspired the book. "The things we traded! Time, food, money, clothes, laughter, memory - and daring. Daring especially."

In her **Neapolitan quartet** Elena Ferrante analyses the ebb and flow of love and loathing between Lila and Lenù, in the violent, repressive culture of a district of Naples after they meet in the 1950s. "Lila pushed me to do things that I would never have had the courage to do for myself," says Lenù, her friend providing the grist that allows Lenù to escape and become a writer. Ferrante does not flinch from the destructive side of their powerfully catalytic friendship.

A frenemy element also seeps into Vera

Britain's **Testament of Friendship**. At first glance it is a glowing portrait of her best friend, writer and activist Winifred Holtby, who died at 37. In the epilogue, Britain admits that she exploited Holtby's generous nature to pursue her own talents, an honest recognition of the fact that, for women to create, they often require the sacrifice of other women's time.

In Sebastian Barry's **Annie Dunne**, such interdependency gently and movingly unfolds. Annie and her cousin Sarah live and work on a small farm in a remote part of Wicklow, Ireland, in the 50s. Over the course of a summer, the two women come to realise that only they truly see the other's qualities. Their friendship is what makes their lives matter. "I see there is something in Sarah that no one can gainsay, the unremarked quality of her courage, the beauty of her considerable soul."

This witnessing and acknowledging, that

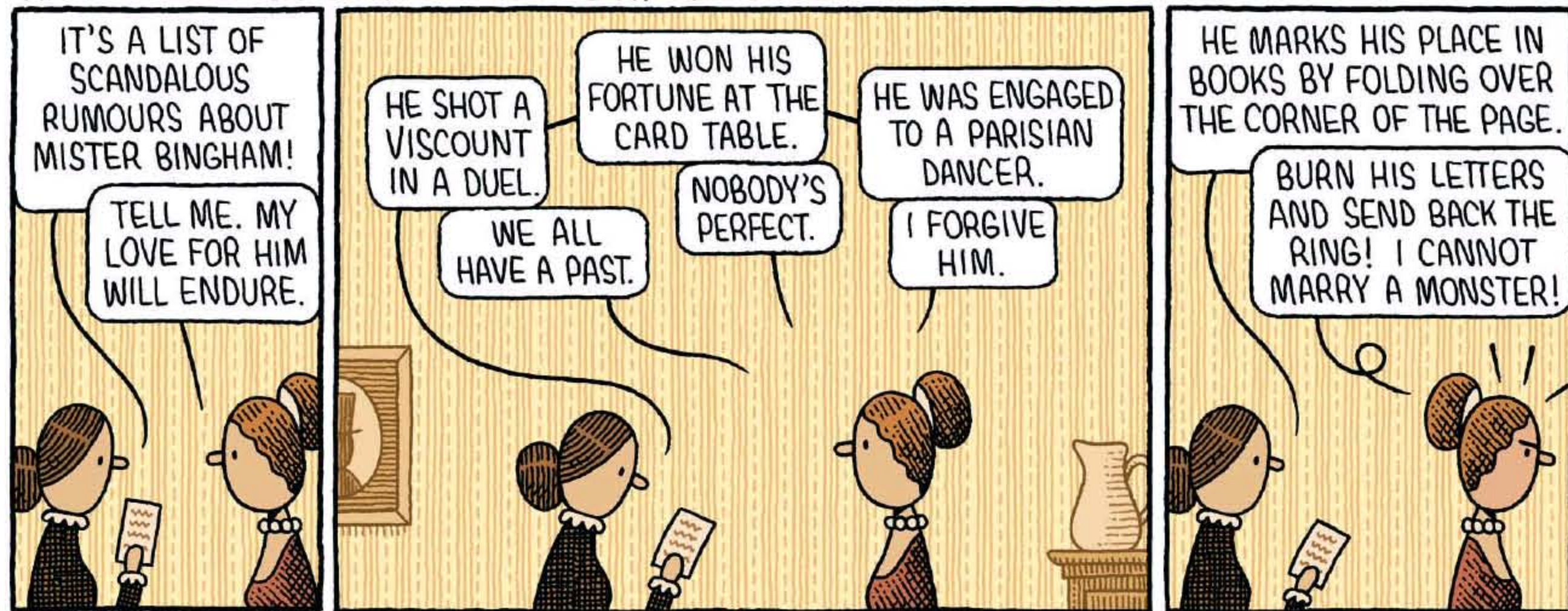
women do so well for each other, is at the heart of Bernardine Evaristo's delicious verse novel **The Emperor's Babe**. Zuleika, a third-century, first-generation immigrant to Londinium, is spotted aged 11 in the Cheapside baths by a Roman nobleman thrice her age and girth to whom she is quickly married. His absences and unwelcome presences are made bearable by Alba, who encourages Zuleika to fulfil her dream of becoming a poet and experiencing love. As is often the case, in life as in art, such daring must be paid for.

In these sad, perplexing days, explorations of female friendships provide wisdom and nourishment without escaping political reality. In Morrison's words, "snatching liberty seemed compelling. Some of us thrived; some of us died. All of us had a taste."

Lucy Jago's *A Net for Small Fishes* is published by Bloomsbury.

Tom Gauld

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER ARRIVES AT THE HALL...

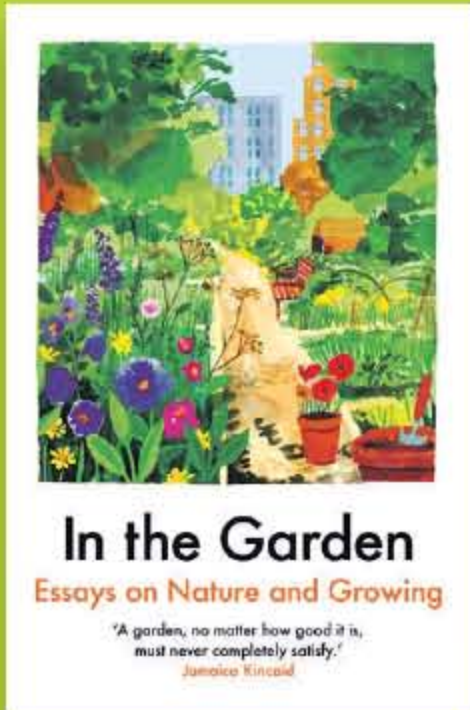




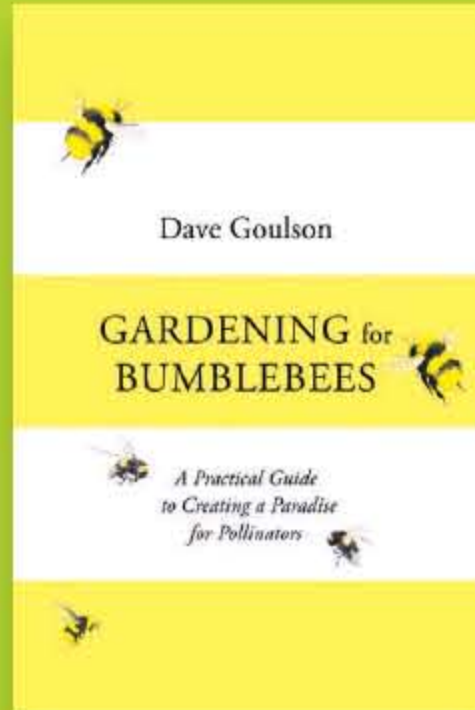
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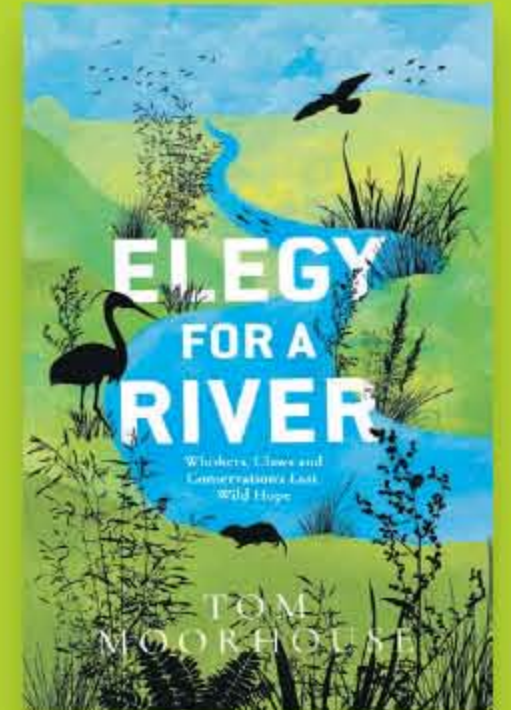
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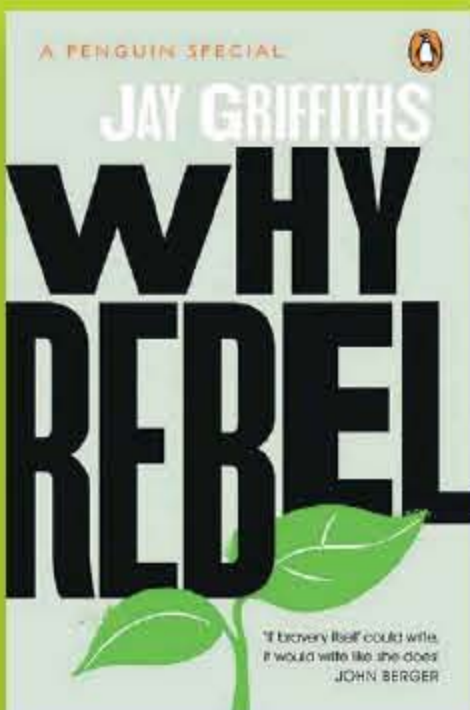
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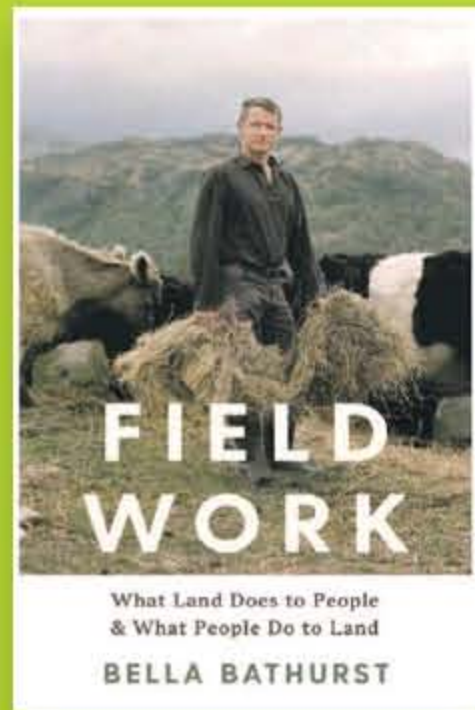
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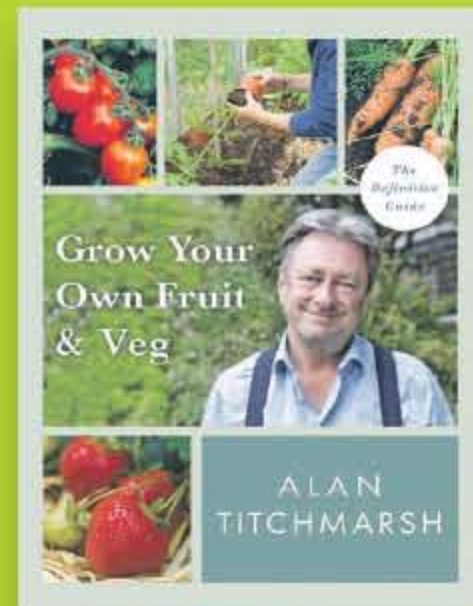
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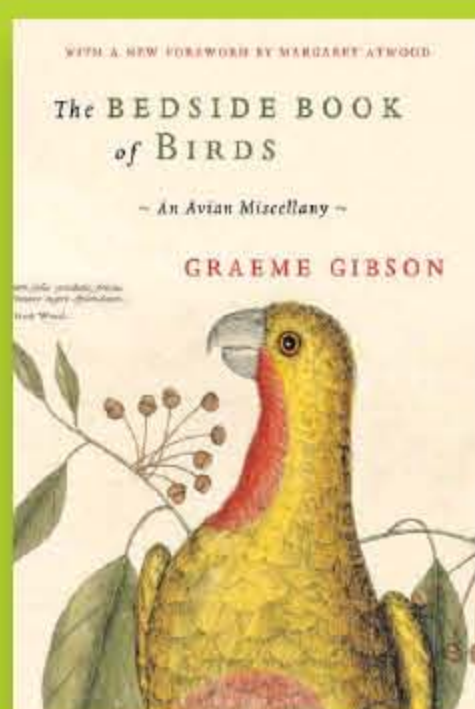
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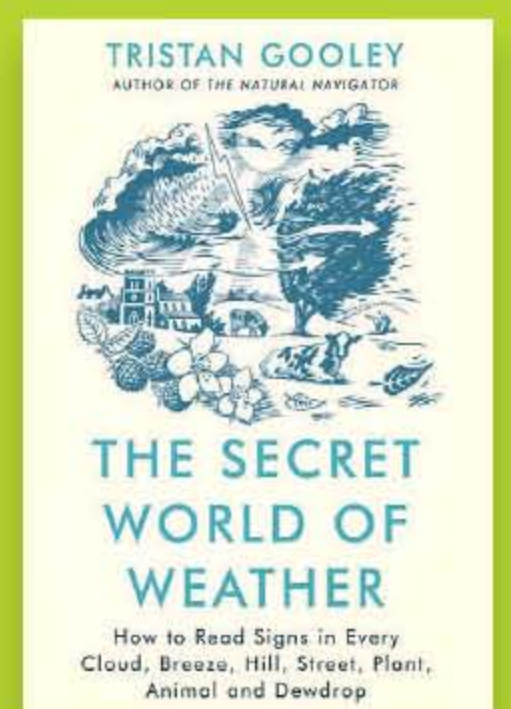
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