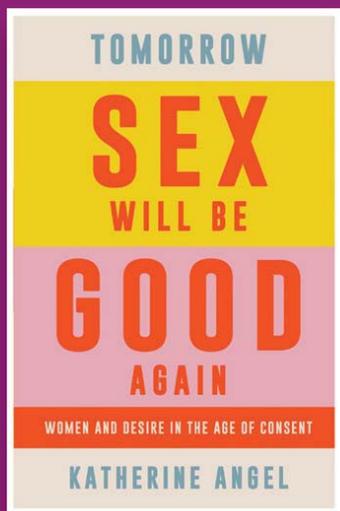


# Review

Saturday 27 March 2021 - Issue N° 166

## Maggie O'Farrell

The Hamnet author on grief, art and writing a Shakespearean love story

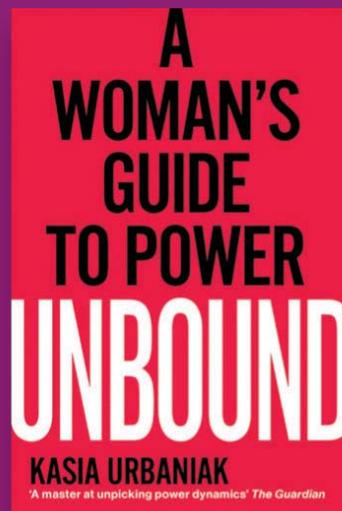


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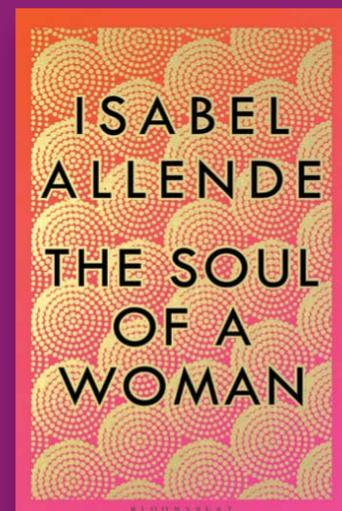


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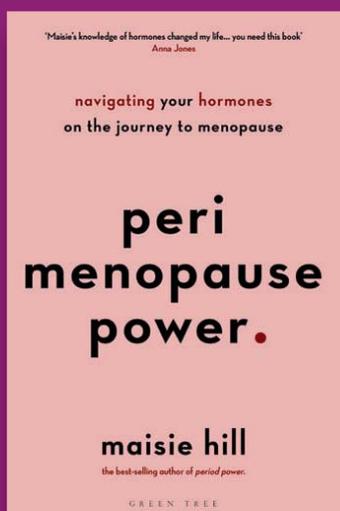
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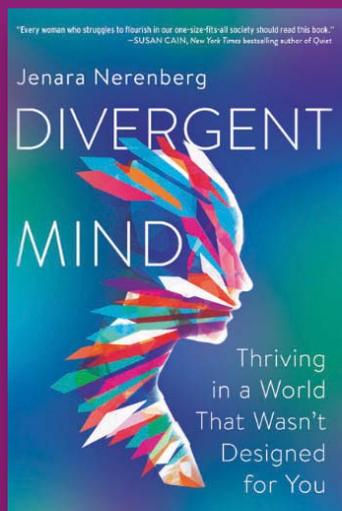
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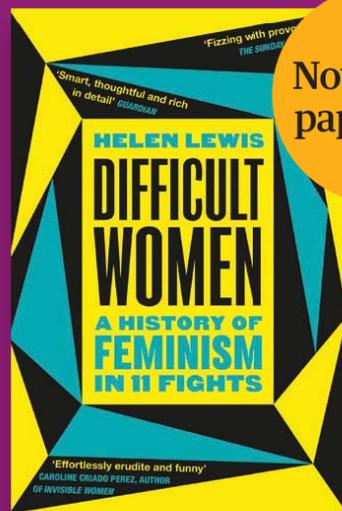
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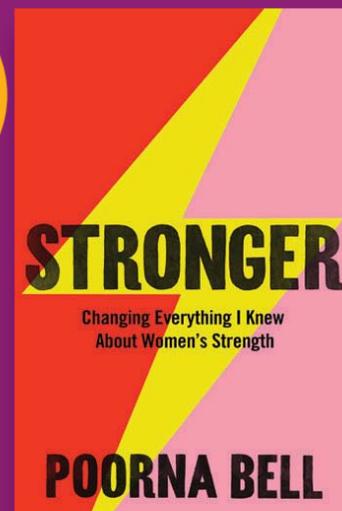


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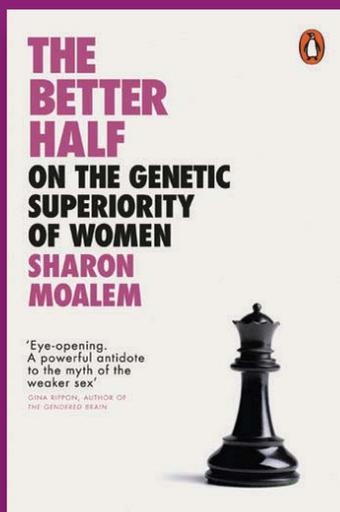


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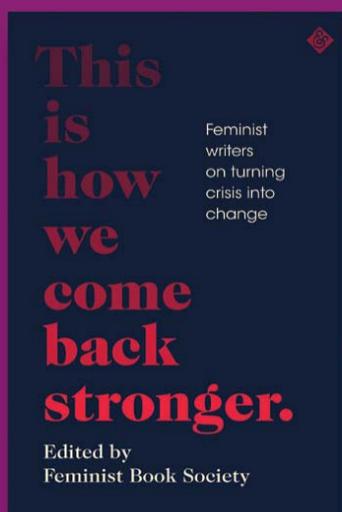
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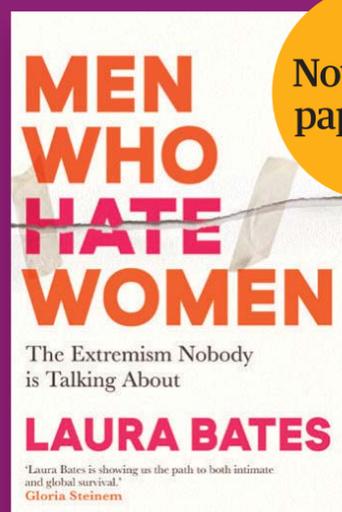
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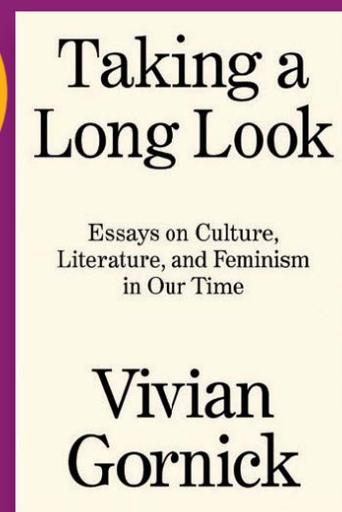


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# Review

Saturday 27 March 2021 - Issue N<sup>o</sup> 166

*'If there is one deep regret of my life, it is that I've never done a book of a big idea. Nature works in small ideas, little adjustments.'*  
— Richard Mabey, page 25

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# The week in books

## 27 March

### Rathbones Folio prize is a Dream

Ask writers to read 80 books in four months and not everyone will jump at the chance, but the opportunity to encounter work you might have missed is hard to resist. The most enjoyable aspect of judging the Rathbones Folio prize is also the most challenging: novels and memoir are considered alongside poetry collections, short stories and essays. Apart from the huge sweep of styles and form, there's a dizzying mix of brevity and expansiveness (a 46-page pamphlet, a 900-page novel by a previous Booker prize winner).

The books on this year's shortlist differed in every way - subject matter, format, language - but were united by their narrative commit-

ment and lyricism. From eight, we whittled down the list to just one. Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* was on my and my fellow judges Jon McGregor and Roger Robinson's lists from the start.

Memoir has always been such an intransigent term, implying a unilateral, confessional story, but more recently, writers have begun to

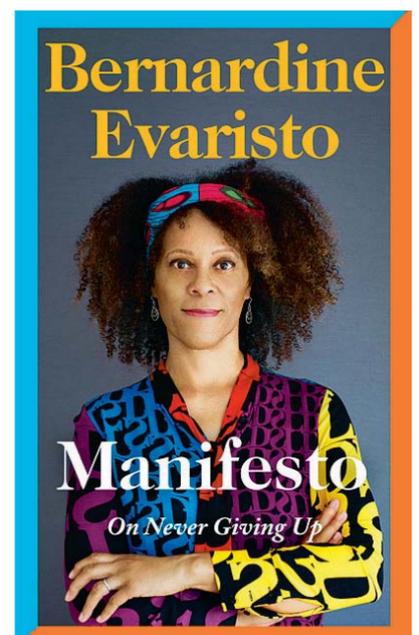


dismantle its tropes and limitations, in inspiring and experimental ways. *In the Dream House* does this in such an explosive, deft manner. It is both a memoir of abuse and coercion, with all the attendant pain and horror (but this doesn't acknowledge its ambition, or resistance to conformity), and a queer love story that turns toxic. Memoir is one genre, but Machado (below left) splinters her story into many shards: stoner comedy, *Star Trek* episode, lesbian pulp, road trip. It's an unforgettable, often uneasy read, and was unanimously chosen to become our deserving winner.

**Sinéad Gleeson**

### A manifesto from Evaristo

Bernardine Evaristo, who became the first black woman to win the Booker prize for *Girl, Woman, Other* in 2019, is turning to nonfiction in the forthcoming *Manifesto*. Hamish Hamilton said that



Evaristo had always rebelled creatively against the mainstream in her career, as she sought to explore "untold" stories, and that *Manifesto* would see her using her own experiences to offer "a vital contribution to current conversations around social issues such as race, class, feminism, sexuality and ageing". Out in October, it is "a unique book about staying true to yourself and to your vision", and in it Evaristo will reveal "how to be unstoppable - in your craft, your work, your life". **Alison Flood**

GETTY/ISTOCKPHOTO; NIALL CARSON/PA

# Shedding

WORD OF THE WEEK  
**Steven Poole**



Have you checked whether you're shedding lately? It was recently reported that "viral shedding" of Sars-CoV-2 is strongest in the afternoon. Pleasingly, the *OED* notes that "shedding" can also mean "a collection of sheds", such as David Cameron might compose his memoirs in - but that is not the sense we want now.

Whereas your garden variety "shed" is an old English variant of the word "shade", the verb "to shed" derives from **Old English** *scēadan*, from a Germanic root meaning "to divide or separate". An early sense in English was agricultural, as farmers would (and might still) speak of shedding sheep into **separate pens**, or shedding calves from cows. From there "shed" acquires other senses, of parting hair, pouring forth (as fishes do their spawn, observed a 16th-century commentator), spilling liquid (or shedding blood, or tears), or emanating sound or heat.

In modern times, companies often speak euphemistically of "shedding jobs" instead of **firing people**, as though human beings are dead leaves or pet hair. We might also shed our misconceptions, but shedding virus does not, lamentably, rid us of it.



## 'I couldn't finish Michelle Obama's *Becoming*' Vivian Gornick

### The book I am currently reading

*Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life* by Hermione Lee. I had never read anything by Lee before. I've only read 50 or 60 pages, but her style is immensely appealing. She hits that marvellous conversational style. I like Fitzgerald's work and it's a pleasure seeing how she developed. I'm enjoying it very much.

### The book that changed my life

I was well into my 30s when I read *The Little Virtues* by Natalia Ginzburg and as soon as I began I felt myself deeply connected. It isn't that it's the greatest book in the world at all, but for me it was vital. I felt she was showing me the type of writer I had it in me to be. I reread it quite a lot, and I'm always amazed by what she is able to accomplish. She is a great writer.

### The book I think is most overrated

*A Sport and A Pastime* by James Salter is immensely overrated. I could have picked 100 books like that, but this one has been stuck in my craw for a long time.

### The last book that made me laugh

*Out of Sheer Rage* by Geoff Dyer is a brilliant book. For me, the best thing he ever wrote. A little bit of genius, it made me laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

### The last book that made me cry

*Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. It's written by an Ivy League educated, middle class black lawyer who

went to work for a non-profit organisation set to defend the people on death row in the south. The story is enough to break your heart 15 times over. His description makes it sound like South Africa before apartheid ended. A nightmare. A wonderful book.

### The book I couldn't finish

Michelle Obama's autobiography, *Becoming*. Yes, she's a very nice woman but I found the book tedious, and it just didn't hold my interest.

### The book I'm ashamed not to have read

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. I've started it 100 times over - I just can't get into it.

### The book I give as a gift

Giving a book is like giving any other kind of gift, you try to keep in mind what the recipient will like - not what you like. But it always has to be something I consider substantial.

### My earliest reading memory

*Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. Our house was full of books, but I don't remember any childhood stories like *Winnie-the-Pooh*. I remember fairytales like the Grimms', but the first time I was really impressed with the experience of reading was *Little Women*. It went right into me.

### My comfort read

*The Odd Women* by George Gissing. There was a time when I read that book every six months - usually in the winter - for quite a number of years. It's a book that I treasure to this day.

*Vivian Gornick's Taking a Long Look is published by Verso. She has received a Windham-Campbell prize 2021 for nonfiction.*

# ‘Severe illness refigures you – it’s like passing through a fire’

Maggie O’Farrell reflects on the life-threatening virus that shaped her writing, the superstitions that held her back, and why her prize-winning novel *Hamnet* speaks to our times. *By Lisa Allardice*

**M**aggie O’Farrell found the prospect of writing the central scenes of her prize-winning novel *Hamnet*, in which a mother sits helplessly by the bedside of her dying son, so traumatic that she couldn’t write them in the house. Instead, she had to escape to the shed, and “not a smart writing shed like Philip Pullman’s”, she says, “but a really disgusting, spidery, manky potting shed, which has since blown down in a gale”. And she could only do it in short bursts of 15 or 20 minutes before she would have to take a walk around the garden, and then go back in again.

The novel, a fictionalised account of the death of Shakespeare’s only son from the bubonic plague (his twin sister Judith survived) and an at times almost unbearably tender portrayal of grief, was first published a year ago. An interlude halfway through, which follows the journey of the plague in 1595 from a flea on a monkey in Alexandria to a cabin boy back to London and eventually to Stratford, was referred to by an American journalist as “the contact tracing chapter”. “It certainly wasn’t conceived as that when I wrote it,” the author says of the extraordinary coincidence of her novel, set more than 400 years ago, landing in the middle of the pandemic.

*Hamnet* went on to beat Booker-winning novels by Hilary Mantel and Bernardine Evaristo to win the

Women’s prize last year. “I felt as if I’d been in the coolest gang all summer,” she says of being on the shortlist, the final announcement of which was delayed until September due to the virus. She found out she had won after being persuaded to “pop back” on to a Zoom call (she was in her pyjamas and the cat had just been sick). It was the first time she had been shortlisted, which seems remarkable for an author of eight elegant novels, whose writing life spans the 25 years of the prize itself. It is undoubtedly *the* novel of O’Farrell’s career so far (there was much indignation on Twitter that it didn’t make the Booker longlist) and its release in paperback this week is sure to break the hearts of many more readers.

“I think I’ve written three books instead of writing *Hamnet*,” she jokes, from her living room – she lives in Edinburgh with her husband, the novelist William Sutcliffe, and their three children. Her study is too untidy to do interviews, she says, and I’m guessing too private – she describes herself as a “very secretive” writer. We are talking on the first morning that Scottish schools are allowed to open, and the house is “weirdly quiet”. As writers, she and Sutcliffe are both

**‘If I’m able to spend an hour a day with my book, then I can just about stay sane’  
... Maggie O’Farrell**

used to working from home, but she survived the last year by insisting on a sacrosanct daily minimum: “If I’m able to spend an hour a day with my book, ➔



◆ then I can just about stay sane," she says.

This is not the first time she has written the story of a life seen through the lens of death. Her offbeat memoir *I Am, I Am, I Am* - which documents her own 17 brushes with mortality, including a binoculars-wielding strangler, a couple of near-drownings, a botched caesarean, and acute encephalitis as a child - was a surprise bestseller in 2017. Reading between the near-misses, you learn that the now 48-year-old Irish-British author (she calls herself "a hyphenated person") was born the middle of three sisters in Northern Ireland, but that much of her childhood was spent in south Wales, until the family moved to Scotland when she was 12. She attended two comprehensives, "one frightening and bewildering, one less so", before going to Cambridge to study English, where she met her future husband (referred to as "my friend" or "a man" - rather like that other Will, who remains nameless throughout *Hamnet*).

Her subjects have included motherhood, marital breakdown and madness - the lives of girls and women, to borrow an Alice Munro title (a copy of Munro's *Collected Stories* was O'Farrell's castaway book choice when she was a guest on *Desert Island Discs* this week - a sure sign of cultural approbation; she also chose the Pogues, Chopin and Radiohead). Her other most straightforwardly historical novel, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*, explores the plight of women incarcerated in 1930s Ireland and England for the crime of being different; *The Hand That First Held Mine*, which interweaves the stories of a dazed new mother in present-day London and a young graduate looking for adventure in arty 1950s Soho, won the Costa novel award in 2010.

Although she bristles at the term "domestic fiction", *Hamnet* is an undeniably domesticated take on the Shakespeare story, with much of the action set not in the Globe or a London tavern, but in the kitchen, bedroom and garden of an Elizabethan Stratford cottage. Like Mantel, who in her own words, "decided to march on to the middle ground of English history and plant a flag", O'Farrell pulls off the equally audacious trick of making a historical giant (the greatest English writer of all time - no pressure) intimately real, both novelists deftly deploying the continuous present tense to compelling effect: "A boy is coming down a flight of stairs." But where Mantel's Thomas Cromwell remains a public as well as a private figure, O'Farrell's Shakespeare is relegated to a supporting role, known only as "the Latin tutor", "her husband" or "the father".

She first had the germ of the idea at school, when an English teacher mentioned the existence of Shakespeare's son, called Hamnet, who had died aged 11, four or five years before the playwright wrote *Hamlet*. She remembers sitting in a chilly Scottish classroom and putting her finger over the letter "L" on her copy of the play (the two names "were entirely interchangeable" at the time). "The idea of this boy and of his name being used by his father just got under my skin. I could never forget about it."

After years of compulsive reading around the subject (she has a *Hamlet* shelf in her study), she grew increasingly frustrated both by the way in which Hamnet had been overlooked by scholars, his death often dismissed as an inevitability of the high child mortality rate and their unwillingness to recognise the personal significance of Shakespeare naming his greatest tragedy after him. "Come on! It's the same name." *Hamnet* is her attempt to give this boy, "consigned to being a literary footnote ... a presence and a voice. To say he was important and that he was not just another Elizabethan child statistic, and that without him we wouldn't have *Hamlet* and we probably wouldn't have *Twelfth Night*."

She may have intended to place Hamnet centre stage, but the character who steals the show is undoubtedly Agnes (more usually known as Anne) Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, in O'Farrell's incarnation a bewitching free spirit, who is more than a match for the "Latin tutor". She got "slightly derailed" with anger at the way in which scholars "and writers of Oscar-winning films" have misrepresented her (with the notable exception of Germaine Greer's "brilliant" *Shakespeare's Wife*). "We are constantly told this narrative about her: that she was a peasant; that she was illiterate; that she trapped this boy genius into marriage. She was this older woman, she was a strumpet. There are lines in books by very respected biographers saying she was ugly. He hated her. There's not a single shred of evidence for any of that."

The novel is not just a fictional rehabilitation of Agnes but also of their relationship, rejecting the notion that he ran away to London to escape his family: "I think he was devoted to them." O'Farrell's joyful version of their love story, told in flashback alongside the painful last days of their son, offers the reader some reprieve. "I thought, I've got to pull out all the stops here," she admits. "This is the man who wrote the greatest lines about love in all its forms."

It was a sweltering day when she finally sat down to write, which seemed fitting as Hamnet died in August; although the cause of death is uncertain, "it was probably a plague year, which usually meant a hot summer". Abandoning an earlier version, she wrote the opening scene with Hamnet entering the house of his glove-maker grandfather, and "it was like a key turning in a lock ... It was the right time in my life and it was the right time in the chronology of the story."

**'I wanted to ask questions about where art comes from, where writing comes from, or why we need to do it - how it can come from a painful place'**

One factor preventing her from writing *Hamnet* was "a kind of weird maternal superstition": like Shakespeare she has a boy and two girls. The novel cleverly subverts his comic gender-swapping, mistaken-identity tricks to tragic effect when Hamnet takes his twin Judith's place on her death bed. O'Farrell couldn't



begin writing until her son, now 17, was safely past the age at which Hamnet died and she thinks she might not have written it at all had it been Judith. Her eldest daughter was born with an immunological disorder. “We live in a state of high alert,” O’Farrell writes in her memoir. “I have to know where she is and who she is with at all times.” She is also a surviving twin, an IVF baby, born after O’Farrell was told she wasn’t pregnant. “In any fairytale, getting what you wish for comes at a cost,” she writes. “It was quite conscious in my mind that the female twin lives,” she says now.

The vivid descriptions of the twins’ feverishness surely recall her own experience of viral encephalitis as an eight-year-old, when she woke up one summer morning with a headache and “the world looked different”. Later in hospital, she overheard the nurse whisper to another child: “Hush, there’s a little girl dying in there,” and was shocked to discover that she was talking about her. “I think anyone who has been through a really severe illness knows that it completely refigures you,” she says. “It is a bit like passing through a fire.” A journalist recently asked her if she could turn back time would she erase the illness. She replied: “No, because it is who I am. It made me who I am in a lot of ways.” She believes her long convalescence (endless audio books, reading and rereading) and resulting stammer (thinking hard about every word) helped to nurture writerly habits.

Last November she published her first children’s book, *Where Snow Angels Go*, about a girl called Sylvie, who, like O’Farrell (and Nina in her 2004 novel, *The Distance Between Us*), suffers a long illness. The snow angel is a metaphor for anaphylactic shock, she says, and appeared to her in the back of an ambulance when her daughter was having a severe allergic reaction, a dangerous symptom of which is to suddenly become extremely cold. “When my daughter asked ‘Why is this happening?’ I just said: ‘It’s OK. It’s a snow angel, he’s wrapping his wings around you.’” This character whom she had conjured up in desperation “sort of took up residence”. O’Farrell thinks she may have encountered him years earlier when she woke up freezing in the night and decided to check on her son, who was then four and had been unwell, and found that he had meningitis.

Picture book publishers “talk about making a

book”, and she enjoyed working with illustrator Daniela Terrazzini. She is just finalising the edits on her second children’s book and has already started on a third. “It uses completely different muscles to writing a novel.” She likes to say that a novel “chooses you” rather than the other way round. “I always try to write the one that I can’t not write. The one shouting the loudest.” But after finishing *Hamnet* she wasn’t sure where to go next: she had two ideas and began writing both up at two different desks in her “very small” study. This trick had worked for her before, but one day just before the first lockdown she was waiting in the car to pick up her daughter after a play date, when she was struck by another idea. “I thought: ‘Oh

**‘Shakespeare named his greatest tragedy after his son Hamnet’ Patrick Stewart, front, and David Tennant in an RSC production of *Hamlet***

my God, that’s what I need to do! Forget these other two novels, I’ll just write this one.’” So she is now deep into her ninth.

That is an impressively productive year, not to mention homeschooling three children. “I think all books are written against completely impossible odds,” she says. “The odds change.” She wrote her first two novels while working full-time on the arts desk of the Independent on Sunday: “I was in my 20s, in London, out every night and didn’t get to sleep before two in the morning. I look back and think: ‘How the hell did I do that?’”

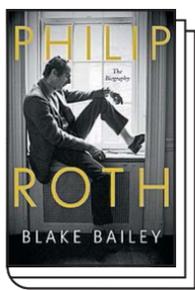
Her husband is always her first reader: she keeps a cast of his teeth on her desk to remind her that he can be quite a harsh critic. “You need somebody who is going to tell you where it is working and where you are making an absolute idiot of yourself.” But in general, she loves writing. “I find it very sustaining rather than depleting. It gives me a means in which to make sense of life.”

It is not giving too much away (the tragedy happens in the middle, after all) to say that *Hamnet* ends with a performance of *Hamlet*. “I wanted to ask questions about where art comes from, where writing comes from, or why we need to do it,” she says. “How it can come from a very painful place, but that’s why we need to do it.” The play is the thing: like Hamlet eliciting Claudius’s guilt in the mousetrap scene, *Hamnet* reveals the “huge chasm of grief” behind the play, which takes on a whole new perspective. “It seems very much a one-sided message of a father in one realm to a son in another.”

Working on her current novel, she needed to know something about embroidery, which she’s never done in her life, so she asked a friend. “We were looking at this beautiful thing she had made and she turned it over and the back was much more complicated, quite messy,” she says. “In a sense that’s what grief is: you turn love inside out, like a sock or a glove, that’s what you find, isn’t it? Grief is just the other side of love” ●

*Maggie O’Farrell will be talking to Lisa Allardice about Hamnet for the Guardian Live Bookclub on 22 April. See [membership.theguardian.com/event](https://membership.theguardian.com/event) for details.*

## { Biography } An impressive account of a literary giant does not excuse his shocking attitude towards women *Blake Morrison*



**Philip Roth:**  
**The Biography**  
by Blake Bailey,  
Jonathan Cape, £30

lovers, accumulates a stupendously diverse body of work (comic, surreal, metafictional, naturalistic), comes to be seen as the greatest English-language novelist of his day yet never, to his chagrin, wins the Nobel. But Roth wanted nuances, not headlines, suggesting that Bailey call his biography “The Terrible Ambiguity of the ‘I’”. Luckily, that isn’t the title. But ambiguity is central to the story, particularly in relation to Roth’s treatment of women, in life and in fiction, which is where the issue of rehabilitation arises and, as with his peers (Saul Bellow, John Updike and Norman Mailer), can’t really be avoided, least of all now.

“Always it came back to the women,” Bailey writes, the first of them Roth’s mother Bess, who if not as suffocating as Alex Portnoy’s mother, was so adoring that no subsequent woman in his life could match up. While sharing Bess’s devotion to Philip and his brother Sandy, her husband Herman left a mark in other ways, not least through his work ethic (12-hour days, six days a week). “He who is loved by his parents is a conquistador,” Roth liked to say.

At college he discovered the fun of writing satire and, dropping plans to become a “lawyer for the underdog”, poured his energy into short stories. “Bibliography by day, women by night” was the idea, but at 23 he met Maggie Martinson, the first of his two marital “catastrophes”. A “hard-up loser four years my senior”, whose two kids lived with her ex-husband, Martinson was worldlier and more turbulent than any previous girlfriend. But that was the point: he saw her as a test of his maturity. By the time his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, made him famous, he’d had

“I don’t want you to rehabilitate me,” Philip Roth instructed Blake Bailey. “Just make me interesting.” The headline story can’t fail to be interesting: lower middle-class grandson of immigrants writes scandalous bestseller about masturbation, is vilified as a self-hating Jew, has two disastrous marriages and many

enough. “It isn’t fair,” Maggie said, rightly suspecting that he was sleeping with other women, “You have everything and I have nothing, and now you think you can dump me!” In a ploy to hang on to him, she persuaded a pregnant woman to urinate in a jar as part of “a scientific experiment”, used the positive result to trick Roth into thinking that she was carrying his child, then agreed to have an abortion if he promised to marry her - which he duly did.

It was three years before he discovered the truth and, furious at being conned so easily, began divorce proceedings. Arguments about alimony were still going on when Maggie was killed in a car crash. Though relieved that the “goyish chaos” she’d wreaked was behind him, he continued to feel vindictive towards her, and took his revenge in fiction. Bailey’s version of events leans on Roth’s but he tempers it with extracts from Maggie’s diary, the most plaintive of them when she realises “Philip doesn’t care for me - he’s sorry for me”.

Roth’s second catastrophe, with Claire Bloom, wasn’t so much the failure of their marriage but how she wrote about it in her memoir *Leaving a Doll’s House*. In the flush of first love he described her as “a great emotional soul-mate” who’d rescued him from a period of excruciating pain (a back problem which plagued him throughout his life). The domestic harmony didn’t last. He disliked Bloom’s daughter Anna living with them in London. And Bloom felt isolated at Roth’s 40-acre farmhouse in rural Connecticut. Among many points of contention was the pass Roth made at Anna’s friend Felicity, which outraged all three women but didn’t merit much of an apology from Roth (“What’s the point of having a pretty girl in the house if you don’t fuck her”).

Most of Roth’s other relationships were with younger women: “I was forty and she was nineteen. Perfect,” he said of one, though his ideal age gap grew as he got older (“A mature woman wouldn’t take your shit,” his analyst told him). He had a theory that sexual interest wears off after two years, but his 18-year affair with “Inge”, the model for Drenka in *Sabbath’s Theater*, disproved it. Among those he flirted with or knew as friends were Jackie Kennedy, Mia Farrow, Ava Gardner and Barbra Streisand. Other lovers here go unnamed, though not the Playboy pin-up Alice Denham (Miss July, 1956), who called him, approvingly, “a sex fiend”, and not Ann Mudge, who was dropped because her “meek gentility had begun to bore him” (she subsequently attempted suicide).

**“To let the repellent in’ was a manifesto of his. If honesty about sexual desire got him into trouble, he accepted it as a price worth paying**

and not Ann Mudge, who was dropped because her “meek gentility had begun to bore him” (she subsequently attempted suicide).

Bailey doesn’t deny Roth’s “breathtaking tastelessness towards women”. And there were always goatish buddies happy to normalise the misogyny, from disgruntled divorcees whining that their wives



GETTY

**‘Just make me interesting’**  
**Philip Roth in**  
**New York, 2007**

had fleeced them, through the teaching colleague who “pimped” for him, to the artist RB Kitaj who would fax him “dashed-off sketches of the decorous Anita Brookner, say, giving blow jobs”.

If Roth admirers will find this hard to take, detractors can’t ignore how connubial and generous he could be; how ex-lovers spoke warmly of him and visited his bedside when he was dying; and how female writers (including Zadie Smith, Nicole Krauss and Mary Karr) are among his biggest fans. “I don’t like the way he writes about women,” Nell Freudenberger said in a 2012 poll that voted him America’s greatest living novelist, “and I don’t like the way I sound complaining about it”.

“To let the repellent in” was a manifesto of his. And if honesty about male sexual desire got him into trouble, he accepted it as a price worth paying. *Portnoy’s Complaint* began the process and *Sabbath’s Theater* rounded it off. In later novels – *American Pastoral*, *The Plot Against America* and his last, *Nemesis*, a plague novella – the libido plays less of a part and the books are arguably the better for it. Where the young Roth determinedly killed off the Nice Jewish Boy he’d been brought up as, the ageing Roth was nostalgic for his childhood and adolescence.

Bailey’s account of the last years is touching. Having announced his retirement from writing, Roth talked of “rambling happily into oblivion”, his battles behind him. New awards came. Old friendships were revived. Young women still appeared on his arm but nothing happened in bed beyond cuddles. Asked for his thoughts on the Nobel prize for literature going to Bob Dylan rather than to him, he joked: “It’s OK, but next year I hope Peter, Paul and Mary get it.” When Lisa Halliday’s portrait of him as the elderly Ezra

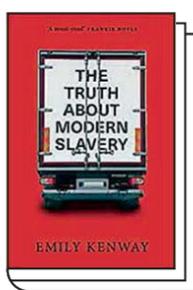
Blazer appeared in her novel *Asymmetry* shortly before his death, he approved.

He would approve of this biography, too, not because it’s partial but because Bailey’s industriousness is on a par with his own. With a “mile of files” and boxes to work through, it’s a miracle that he has published so lucid a book just three years after Roth’s death. Among the documents he quotes from is “Notes for My Biographer”, a 295-page rejoinder to Bloom that Roth planned to publish till friends and lawyers talked him out of it. Bailey relies on this more than he should, unfairly dismissing her memoir as “scurri- lous”. But given how determined Roth was to control his posthumous reputation, it’s an achievement for Bailey to have gained as much distance as he has.

The frequency with which Roth fell out with people he loved is just one of the many ambiguities here. The man who liked to quote Flaubert’s dictum “Be orderly and regular in your life like a bourgeois” was drawn to the manic and bacchanalian; published 31 books but found writing novels “a ghastly protracted slog”; studiously avoided having children but doted on other people’s; spoke only English but was passionate on behalf of non-English writers. Above all there was his attitude to women, which a hagiographer would try to excuse as typical of the era and an enemy would liken to Harvey Weinstein’s, but was too uniquely Rothian to be either. “Why do you want to characterise me ... as some sort of heartless rapist manqué?” the Roth character, Tarnopol, scolds his psychiatrist Dr Spielvogel in *My Life As a Man*. Some critics will use this biography to do just that. But the story is more complex – and a lot more interesting.

To buy a copy for £26.10 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

## { Politics } Governments and celebrities urge an end to 21st-century slavery. But is their talk hollow? *Amelia Gentleman*



**The Truth About Modern Slavery**  
by Emily Kenway,  
*Pluto, £14.99*

During her time as home secretary and prime minister, Theresa May spoke repeatedly about her quest to eradicate the scourge of modern slavery. She described it as the “greatest human rights issue of our time”, and in 2013 wrote an article outlining the importance of her modern slavery bill, headlined “Modern

slave drivers, I’ll end your evil trade”. When she left office, her supporters pointed to this legislation as her key legacy.

How could anyone find fault with such a cause? Everyone is against slavery; the new abolitionists include pop stars, supermodels, billionaires and philanthropists. Criticising the campaign is like saying one is against motherhood and apple pie, Emily Kenway writes, before comprehensively unpicking the hypocrisy that runs through the government’s work in this sector. Her powerful treatise argues that modern slavery does not really exist as a clear phenomenon, but has been seized on to divert attention from the underlying causes of labour exploitation, and to provide moral cover for tighter immigration policies.

Kenway, who worked as an adviser to the UK’s first anti-slavery commissioner (a position created by May), has spent years watching, up close, as the issue has been weaponised by politicians for their ulterior motives. The experience has made her very cynical about the new abolitionism.

Once people-trafficking has been established as a serious problem that the Home Office needs to tackle, introducing hostile environment immigration legislation can be presented as a reasonable reaction. It is a logic used also by Donald Trump, whose response to what he described as an “invasion” by human traffickers on the US-Mexico border is well known. “You need a physical barrier. You need a wall,” he declared. But increased border checks at Calais did not deter the people smugglers responsible for the deaths of 39 Vietnamese migrants in 2019; the extra security simply

pushes people towards ever more dangerous journeys.

At a Global Slavery Index event in 2016 (where Russell Crowe, Tony Blair, Bono and Richard Branson all expressed their commitment to eradicating the evil), the figure of 45.8 million people living in modern slavery was cited, but Kenway argues that the numbers are “dodgy” because the concept is so hard to quantify. The catch-all notion of modern slavery embraces people working as forced labourers in brick kilns in India, garment factories in Bangladesh, European brothels and in British nail bars. Some of those workers may have been bought and sold, but most of them could more accurately be described as the poorly paid victims of exploitative employers.

Her book is written with the furious impatience of someone who has had to sit through too many hollow, worthy political speeches on the subject. Kenway notes wearily how references to the “heroic” achievements of William Wilberforce in ending the legal trade in human beings are scattered throughout the speeches of modern politicians who are keen to associate their own endeavours with the work of 19th-century campaigners. Everyone wanted to be an adviser on May’s modern slavery bill, an official tells Kenway; “It was the race to be the next Wilberforce.”

The narrative around modern slavery is “ignorance cloaked as knowledge”, Kenway argues. Workplace exploitation could be reduced by better minimum wage enforcement and strong union action. But the Conservative politicians fighting against modern slavery are also committed ideologically to reducing levels of business regulation, hostile to migrant workers and dislike trade unions.

Inspection teams have seen funding cuts at just the time when they are most needed. The average employer can expect an inspection from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ wage unit once every 500 years. In 2019, the Employment Agencies Standards Inspectorate had 13 staff to cover around 18,000 employment agencies and 1.1 million workers. “This is madness if we supposedly want to ‘end modern slavery’, that is, reduce exploitation,” Kenway writes.

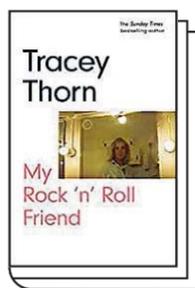
She highlights an official confusion over whether the victims of modern slavery are victims who need rescuing, or if they are in fact immigration offenders who need to be deported. If Britain was really concerned about assisting the people affected, then it would have a better track record on looking after them. But between April 2017 and end of 2018, the Home Office rejected 310 applications for discretionary leave to remain and 65 asylum claims made by child victims of modern slavery; in 2015 only 12% of adults who were officially recognised as modern slavery victims were given discretionary leave to remain.

Kenway damns modern slavery legislation with faint praise, concluding it has had “some positive effects”. Committed workers in the sector may bridle at her harsh conclusions, but this assessment of the Conservative party’s crusade offers little to celebrate.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

# {Music} Shy singer meets gobby drummer - a vivid memoir of friendship and sexism in pop

## Fiona Sturges



**My Rock 'n' Roll Friend**  
by Tracey Thorn,  
Canongate, £14.99

In March 1983, the singer and author Tracey Thorn was sitting in a dressing room at London's Lyceum theatre when a woman strode in and asked to borrow a lipstick. Lindy Morrison, drummer in Brisbane art-rockers the Go-Betweens, made an instant impression on Thorn, who was in her second year at university and whose band, Marine Girls, were on the same bill. On the surface, the pair didn't have much in common. Thorn was shy, quiet and sensible; Morrison, who was 10 years her senior, was loud, full of confidence and sometimes reckless bravado. "It doesn't occur to me," Thorn explains, "that this woman who seems to be my opposite might in fact be my reflection, that she might have started out very like me - awkward, insecure, isolated - and has had to fight every step of the way to get to where she is now."

*My Rock'n'Roll Friend* is both a biography of Morrison and a memoir of their friendship during which they bonded over books, films and being women in a world of men. In her next band, Everything But the Girl, Thorn would write the song "Blue Moon Rose" ("I have a friend and she taught me daring / Threw back the windows and let the air in") about Morrison. "I am both inside and outside this story," she observes.

When, in 1979, Morrison met the Go-Betweens' singer Robert Forster, she was a part-time actor, a social worker, and a drummer in and out of assorted jazz and punk bands. Her worldliness stood in contrast to this bookish former boarding-school boy, seven years her junior, with whom she began a relationship. With her presence, the band - which also included guitarist Grant McLennan - set about recording their first album. It's with some amusement that Thorn notes how the two men imagined having a woman in the band would soften its image, even though Morrison was "about as soft as a right hook". A friend called the lineup "two wimps and a witch".



As the Go-Betweens' career progressed, they were praised by critics and fellow musicians, but this didn't translate into sales. If building a career felt like an uphill struggle for Forster and McLennan, for Morrison it was tougher still. To be a female drummer in the early 1980s was seen as transgressive, and, what with the muscles, the sweat and the manspreading pose, deeply unfeminine. Thorn recalls how Morrison struck fear into male interviewers whose sexist assumptions she frequently challenged.

If this makes *My Rock'n'Roll Friend* sound deeply serious, it isn't. The author brings wit, candour and vividness to her storytelling, which delights in the more ludicrous aspects of musicians' lives. She recalls a winter in London during which the Go-Betweens shared a flat with fellow Australians, including members of the Birthday Party. On Christmas Day, Morrison decided to make dinner and, when it was ready, called everyone to the table. As they sat down, she realised they'd all just shot heroin. "Eyes roll and heads loll," Thorn writes. "One of them falls forwards, face squashed flat against the tablecloth. The others follow, one by one, slumping in their chairs or resting heads on elbows. Soon she's the only one left sitting upright, staring ahead at the blasted triumph of the meal ... She pours a glass of red wine, knocks it back, and then another. Happy Christmas, you fuckers."

Thorn and Morrison's letters to one another prove rich material in recording their respective triumphs and disappointments. Although they have gigged together, holidayed together and got drunk together, their lives have unfurled at a distance, sometimes on opposite sides of the world.

**Thorn recalls how Morrison struck fear into male interviewers whose sexist assumptions she frequently challenged**

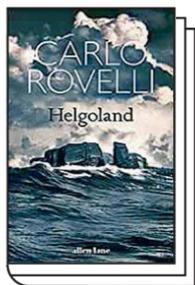
But Thorn's interest in Morrison's story goes beyond documenting a friendship. As well as providing a portrait of a brilliant musician, the book exposes the sexism and hypocrisy of an industry, and attempts to right a terrible wrong.

Morrison split up with Forster in 1989 and says she was sacked from the band over the phone. In the years since, the history of the Go-Betweens has been reframed as a duo featuring Forster and McLennan, with Morrison relegated to a supporting cast member, or worse, "the girlfriend". None of this is uncommon: women have been written out of history for centuries, their contributions to culture diminished, or viewed solely in relation to the men in their lives. But through her entertaining, affectionate and righteous book, Thorn invites us to witness her friend in all her gobby glory. In explaining her connection to Morrison, she writes, "When I meet her I feel seen." Now she has returned the favour.

To buy a copy for £13.59 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

# { Physics } The genius of Werner Heisenberg, who developed the quantum theory that explains our world

*Manjit Kumar*



**Helgoland**  
by Carlo Rovelli,  
translated by  
Erica Segre and  
Simon Carnell,  
Allen Lane, £20

There are two kinds of geniuses, argued the celebrated mathematician Mark Kac. There is the “ordinary” kind, whom we could emulate if only we were a lot smarter than we actually are because there is no mystery as to how their minds work. After we have understood what they have done, we believe (perhaps foolishly) that we could have done it too. When it comes to the

second kind of genius, the “magician”, even after we have understood what has been done, the process by which it was done remains forever a mystery.

Werner Heisenberg was definitely a magician, who conjured up some of the most remarkable insights into the nature of reality. Carlo Rovelli recounts the first act of magic performed by Heisenberg in the opening of *Helgoland*, his remarkably wide-ranging new meditation on quantum theory.

Rovelli has taken the title from the name of the rocky, barren, windswept island in the North Sea to where the 23-year-old German physicist fled in June 1925 to recover from a severe bout of hay fever and in need of solitude to think. It was during these few days on the island (also called Heligoland) that, on completing calculation after calculation, Heisenberg made a discovery that left him dizzy, shaken and unable to sleep.

With the light touch of a skilled storyteller, Rovelli reveals that Heisenberg had been wrestling with the inner workings of the quantum atom in which electrons travel around the nucleus only in *certain* orbits, at *certain* distances, with *certain* precise energies before magically “leaping” from one orbit to another. Among the questions he was grappling with on Helgoland were: why only these orbits? Why only certain orbital leaps? As he tried to overcome the failure of existing formulas to replicate the intensity of the light emitted as an electron leapt between orbits, Heisenberg made an astonishing leap of his own. He decided to focus only on those quantities that are *observable* – the light an atom emits when an electron jumps. It was a strange idea but one that, as Rovelli points out, made it possible to account for all the recalcitrant facts and to develop a mathematically coherent theory of the atomic world.

For all its strangeness, quantum theory explains the

functioning of atoms, the evolution of stars, the formation of galaxies, the primordial universe and the whole of chemistry. It makes our computers, washing machines and mobile phones possible. Although it has never been found wanting by any experiment, quantum theory remains more than a little disturbing for challenging ideas that we have long taken for granted.

One of the most well-known counterintuitive discoveries was arguably Heisenberg’s greatest act of quantum conjuring. The uncertainty principle forbids, at any given moment, the precise determination of both the position and the momentum of a particle. It is possible to measure *exactly* either where a particle is or how fast it is moving, but not both simultaneously. In a quantum dance of give-and-take, the more accurately one is measured the less precisely the other can be known or predicted. Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle is not due to any technological shortcomings of the equipment, but a deep underlying truth about the nature of things.

According to some, including Heisenberg, there is no quantum reality beyond what is revealed by an experiment, by an act of observation. Take Erwin Schrödinger’s famous cat trapped in a box. It is argued that the cat is neither dead nor alive but in a ghostly mixture, or superposition, of states that range from being totally dead to completely alive and every

combination in between until the box is opened.

**There is no quantum reality beyond what is revealed by an experiment. Take Erwin Schrödinger’s famous cat trapped in a box**

Rovelli admits he is not an innocent bystander; he has skin in the game when it comes to trying to understand the quantum nature of reality. He is the champion of the “relational” interpretation that maintains quantum theory does not describe the way in which quantum objects manifest themselves to “observers”,

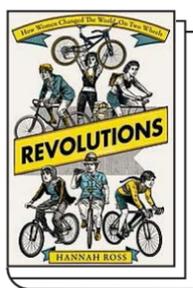
but describes how every physical object manifests itself to any other physical object.

Rovelli reveals that he is not afraid to mix quantum physics and eastern philosophy, something that others have done in the past with little success and attracting some derision. It says much about him and his thesis that he is not so easily dismissed. He has help in the form of one of the most important texts of Buddhism, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or *The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*. Written in the second century by the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna, it argues that there is nothing which exists in itself, independently from something else. It’s a perspective that Rovelli believes makes it easier to think about the quantum world. He may be right, but the words of Niels Bohr still come to mind: “Those who are not shocked when they first come across quantum theory cannot possibly have understood it.”

To buy a copy for £17 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

# { Sport } From the Pankhursts delivering newsletters to a racing team in Saudi Arabia ... a history of women on bikes

## *Eliane Glaser*



### **Revolutions: How Women Changed the World on Two Wheels**

by Hannah Ross,  
W&N, £16.99

I've been cycling for decades - as a student, commuter and partygoer. I've sallied forth in strappy heels and dorky helmet: returning home late, I've dodged foxes while flying drunk and euphoric down deserted streets. I've cycled with one hand holding closed my wrap dress, and with skirt tucked into tights, or tied in a knot. I've cycled into a lamppost

at the side of the road while admiring spring trees in bloom. I've carried a boxed trumpet and a large houseplant in my basket, and flashing bike lights in my mouth. I've balanced a week's shopping on handlebars, and kneed myself in the bump when pregnant. And many journeys have been spent furiously pondering esprit de l'escalier retorts following altercations with taxi drivers.

Cycling for me has never been boring or neutral. A male cyclist is just a bloke on a bike, but a woman appears political, independent, a bluestocking, egregiously sporty, or suspiciously saucy. In this likable, informative and barnstorming book, Hannah Ross tells the story of how such meanings have become attached to what is often just the most efficient way of getting from A to B.

The historical sections are the most eye-opening. The invention of the boneshakers of the 1860s and penny farthings of the 1870s opened up new vistas of transport and recreation: sociologists credit the bicycle with a decrease in genetic faults associated with inbreeding. The late 19th century witnessed a global "bike boom": there were weddings on wheels; even a christening with baby and nurse arriving on a tandem.

Women were active participants in the new cyclo-mania: the American feminist Susan B Anthony called bicycles "freedom machines" that did "more to emancipate women than anything else in the world". Enthusiasts were often well-heeled: the Duchess of Somerset and friends enjoyed night rides through London, Chinese lanterns lighting the way.

There was resistance. Pioneers were pelted with bricks, eggs and rotten vegetables as they rode. Opponents claimed cycling led to infertility, a manly gait, or promiscuity: Robert Dickinson, an American gynaecologist, suggested women positioned their saddles so as to "bring about constant friction over the clitoris and labia". The sit up and beg position - hardly aerodynamic - was designed to avoid women developing a "bicycle hump".

Clarion cycling clubs, linked to the socialist weekly newspaper of the same name, admitted women from the start. Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst were Clarionettes, and they rode around distributing newsletters. The Women's Social and Political Union's arson attacks were also administered on wheels, including the so-called "pillar-box outrages" of 1913, when suffragettes poured ink and flammable liquids - sometimes using an inner tube - into post boxes.

Then there are the racers such as Tessie Reynolds who, in 1893, aged 16, broke the Brighton-London-Brighton record in her wool knickerbockers. In a 1967 mixed race, Beryl Burton was up against the men's favourite Mike McNamara. In one of the most legendary moments in cycling history, Burton overtook him and as she did so offered him a Liquorice Allsort (he took it and thanked her).

Colourful characters populate this book: in the 1990s, the American mountain biker Missy Giove was notable not only for her doughty off-roading - she endured an estimated 38 broken bones during her career - but also for her tattoos, piercings and lucky charms, including the desiccated body of a pet piranha that hung from a necklace. Reading these stories juxtaposed with those of 19th-century trail-blazers reminded me that where gender equality is

### **Photo finish** **Female cyclists in the Road World Championships**

concerned, society has done some back-peddalling. We're familiar with the restrictions of the past, but not how they produced vibrant acts of defiance.

In the 1880s, around a third of British and American bike owners were female. That proportion is lower today. As a sport, women's cycling is marred by fewer racing opportunities and less prize money, sponsorship and coverage. Ross highlights inspiring attempts to challenge the under-representation of women - from Mexican-American women reclaiming their LA neighbourhood on wheels, to efforts to set up a women's racing team in Saudi Arabia, to a Rwandan non-profit (Africa Rising) recruiting black women into the sport. But there's still a long road ahead.

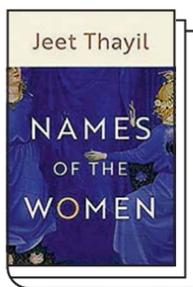
To buy a copy for £14.78 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).



TIM DE WAELE/CORBIS/GETTY

## A fascinating but patchy attempt to reclaim the misrepresented women of the New Testament

### Marcel Theroux



**Names of the Women**  
by Jeet Thayil,  
Jonathan Cape,  
£15.99

In *Names of the Women* Jeet Thayil reclaims the story of not only Mary Magdalene but of 14 other women who play different roles in the gospels. Thayil, best known for the Booker-shortlisted *Narcopolis* and raised among adherents of the ancient Christian community in Kerala, has read his Bible carefully. He also draws on

non-canonical texts such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, the *Acts of Pilate* and a fascinating fragment that turned up in the 19th century called *The Gospel of Mary*.

Alongside Mary Magdalene, we meet Jesus's sisters, Assia and Lydia; his followers Susanna and Joanna; Mary of Bethany and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. There are female baddies too: Herodias and her daughter Salome, who call for the head of John the Baptist.

Thayil's argument is with the systemic misogyny that has marginalised and misrepresented the female characters in the New Testament. We wrongly remember Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Her key role in the narrative - retold here in a wonderful moment of hair-raising strangeness - is to be the first witness to the resurrection. "They will build the Church on the witness of the women," Thayil writes, "but they will refuse to record their names."

Where there is no extant material, he fictionalises,

naming and filling in the backstory of the adulterous woman Jesus saves from stoning, the maidservant of Caiaphas the high priest, and the wife of the penitent thief crucified alongside Jesus.

It's fascinating to be reminded how little we properly understand one of the foundational stories of western civilisation. And there are moments where the much-pondered events are reframed in a new light. Lazarus comes back from the dead emotionally scarred and turns to drink to blot out the experience. Salome's dance to win the head of John the Baptist becomes a weird, Cirque de Soleil-like display of erotic contortion.

In another nice and oddly plausible touch, Jesus's sisters characterise him in completely different ways. To Assia, he's a narcissistic, would-be influencer, minting "seductive phrases designed to win him more fame and followers". Lydia, meanwhile, recalls "the soft and halting speech that sounds as if it is unsure of itself and doubts its own existence".

Interspersed between the vignettes of the women are chapters containing the utterings of Jesus on the cross, seemingly dictated to Mary Magdalene as part of a gospel that never made it down to us. "I say unto you who hear these words two hundred or two thousand years after me, what good are the victuals if you cannot eat them, but a stranger eats and is satisfied. That is the way of vanity and darkness."

A little ersatz scripture goes a long way and there is a great deal of this in the book. The Jesus of Thayil's novel isn't quite the unpleasant character his sister Assia describes, but he's a less complex and more sanctimonious figure than the Biblical Jesus, at times coming across as a hysterical adolescent with a martyr complex. I was also baffled by this Jesus's doctrine. "Forgiveness is the recourse of the weak and we are not weak and we must not forgive," he tells Mary. That is definitely not supported by the gospels, though it may be in Donald Trump's *The Art of the Deal*.

While Thayil takes aim at the systemic sexism of the Bible, there are other Biblical assumptions he doesn't question. *Names of the Women* follows the traditional narrative that Jesus represents a break with Judaism

for which the Jewish elders can't forgive him. "His story makes Jews want to leave the synagogue and join Christ," says Martha. Well, that's an interesting assumption.

The fascinating question of Jesus's Jewishness - first broached seriously in nonfiction by Geza Vermes in *Jesus the Jew* and explored in Naomi Alderman's novel *The Liars' Gospel* - isn't touched on here.

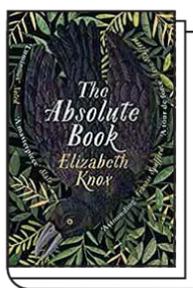
And once the design of the book becomes clear, there are diminishing returns to unearthing additional neglected female characters. In fact, it reminded me that RM Lamming's 2005 novel *As in Eden* had done a similar thing, but with both Old and New Testament women. *Names of the Women* could do with a few more moments that share its simplicity and obliqueness.

To buy a copy for £13.59 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).



ALLSTAR/ICON

**{ Fantasy }** Politically engaged and packed with literary allusion, this epic of parallel worlds is an instant classic  
*Nina Allan*



**The Absolute Book**  
by Elizabeth Knox,  
Michael Joseph,  
£14.99

Elizabeth Knox is the recipient of a multitude of literary honours in her native New Zealand, with the kind of popular following that befits the luminous quality of her writing. That international success has thus far been denied her is something of a scandal, but with her latest work the tide could

be about to turn. *The Absolute Book* has the feel of an instant classic, a work to rank alongside other modern masterpieces of fantasy such as Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series or Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.

When Taryn Cornick is still a teenager, her older sister Beatrice is killed in a hit-and-run. The perpetrator, Timothy Webber, is sentenced to six years in jail; Taryn remains convinced that her sister's death was not an accident, but murder. Soon after his release, Beatrice's killer is found dead in a ditch not far from the site of the original accident.

Meanwhile, a missing witness to Beatrice's death has finally resurfaced. His name is Shift, and he is not quite human. He explains to Taryn that the world she knows is not the only world, and that the equilibrium between human reality and the fairy realm is becoming unstable. The rupture is centred on an object, a wooden casket containing a book known as the Firestarter due to its habit of surviving disastrous and often inexplicable library fires. Shift insists that Taryn alone holds the key to its whereabouts. As she is drawn into an adventure of trans-dimensional magnitude, Taryn comes increasingly to suspect that her sister's death was collateral damage in a secret war for possession of the casket's contents.

It is books, more than anything, that form the beating heart of *The Absolute Book*. This is a text that seethes with literary allusions: classics of ancient literature, fairy stories, crime capers, philosophical treatises and radical polemics, novels of manners and revenge, heroic quests and big books-about-books such as *The Shadow of the Wind*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Night Train to Lisbon* and *The Saragossa Manuscript* – “arcane thrillers”, as Knox has called them.

*The Absolute Book* is a tongue-in-cheek homage to these overblown literary detective stories as well as a triumph of literary fantasy, and this knowing, feisty, humorous contribution to the genre is a hefty piece

of work. There is a lot to keep track of here, not only in terms of characters but in terms of worlds. As Taryn, Shift and a police detective called Berger duck and dive between realities they encounter demons, fairy folk, the semi-immortal hybrids known as the Taken, human souls in Purgatory and godly entities in avian form. The strands of real-world myth, folklore and fairytale from which Knox weaves the philosophical rationale behind what is in its appearance and mechanics a classic portal fantasy are as richly diverse as her characters.

Fantastic literature is often decried for being escapist, and while traditional sword and sorcery is alive and well, a book like Knox's offers the assurance that a more forward-thinking, experimental strand of fantasy is possible, and thriving. The greatest fantasies have always held up a mirror to quotidian reality, and it is to this politically engaged, reality-critical, Swiftian strand that *The Absolute Book* belongs. While Knox is generous and playful in the worlds she creates, her purpose lies in revealing the limits of enchantment and the moral danger inherent in allowing ourselves to be seduced by easy narratives of power and entitlement.

There is a genuine feeling of jeopardy, and Knox shows consummate skill in weaving together the mimetic and the fantastic; with its surveillance

**While Knox is generous and playful in the worlds she creates, her purpose lies in revealing the limits of enchantment**

drones, server farms, mobile phones, police procedure and celebrity culture, this is a 21st-century narrative whose social and political ills (Brexit, rightwing populism, climate catastrophe) are not simply topical background but central concerns.

*The Absolute Book* is everything fantasy should be: original, magical, well read. Its language is assured, lyrical yet never overwrought, and in its surprising twists of fate, its deft characterisation and constant forward momentum, it is both accessible and compelling. At 600-plus pages, a book makes demands on the reader simply at the level of how much time they are prepared to devote to it. Yet that very ambition – the sweep and heft of its ideas – ensures that effort expended is amply rewarded.

“Jacob was tired and a little nostalgic for the surety of his own wounded pride,” Knox tells us of her sceptical policeman, Berger. “But wasn't what was happening to him now the kind of change he'd been waiting for his whole life?” Thus Knox invites us to open our minds to the possibilities that fantasy offers. The daring complexity of her art confirms that reading is itself an act of the imagination worth investing in.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

## Books of the month

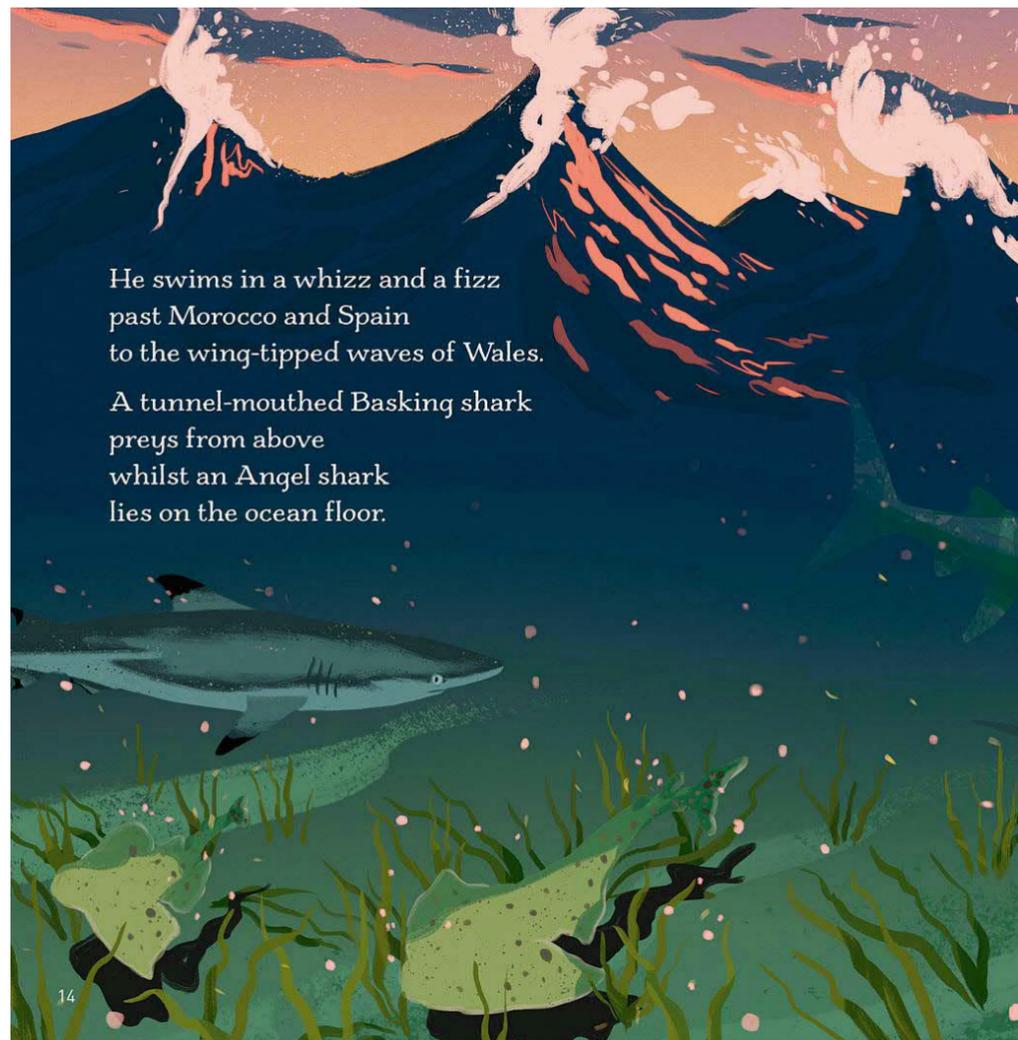


{ Children } Wisecracking corvids; the biology of the brain; and the dangerous beauty of sharks  
*Imogen Russell Williams*

World Book Day tie-in titles are especially strong this year, from Katherine Rundell's **Skysteppers** (Bloomsbury), a nail-biting scramble across the skyline of Paris and prequel to the bestselling *Rooftoppers*, to the crazed fun of Humza Arshad and Henry White's **Little Badman and the Radioactive Samosa** (Puffin), illustrated by Aleksei Bitskoff, in which a box of irradiated triangular treats confers superpowers on a trio of kids.

Other brilliant books for eight-year-olds and up this month include **Show Us Who You Are** (Knights Of) by Elle McNicoll. Cora, who is autistic, loves hanging out with Adrien, son of the CEO of Pomegranate Technologies - until an accident leaves Adrien in a coma. Pomegranate makes holograms of people, preserving memories for grieving families. But what modifications might be made to the holograms in a spurious quest for "perfection"? This is a startlingly original speculative novel, and a moving, passionate interrogation of prejudice against neurodiversity.

**Two Sisters: A Story of Freedom** (Scholastic) by Kereen Getten features inseparable 18th-century half-sisters Ruth and Anna, who are sent on a voyage from Jamaica to England. Anna's almost white skin means she is always treated differently, while Ruth must fight



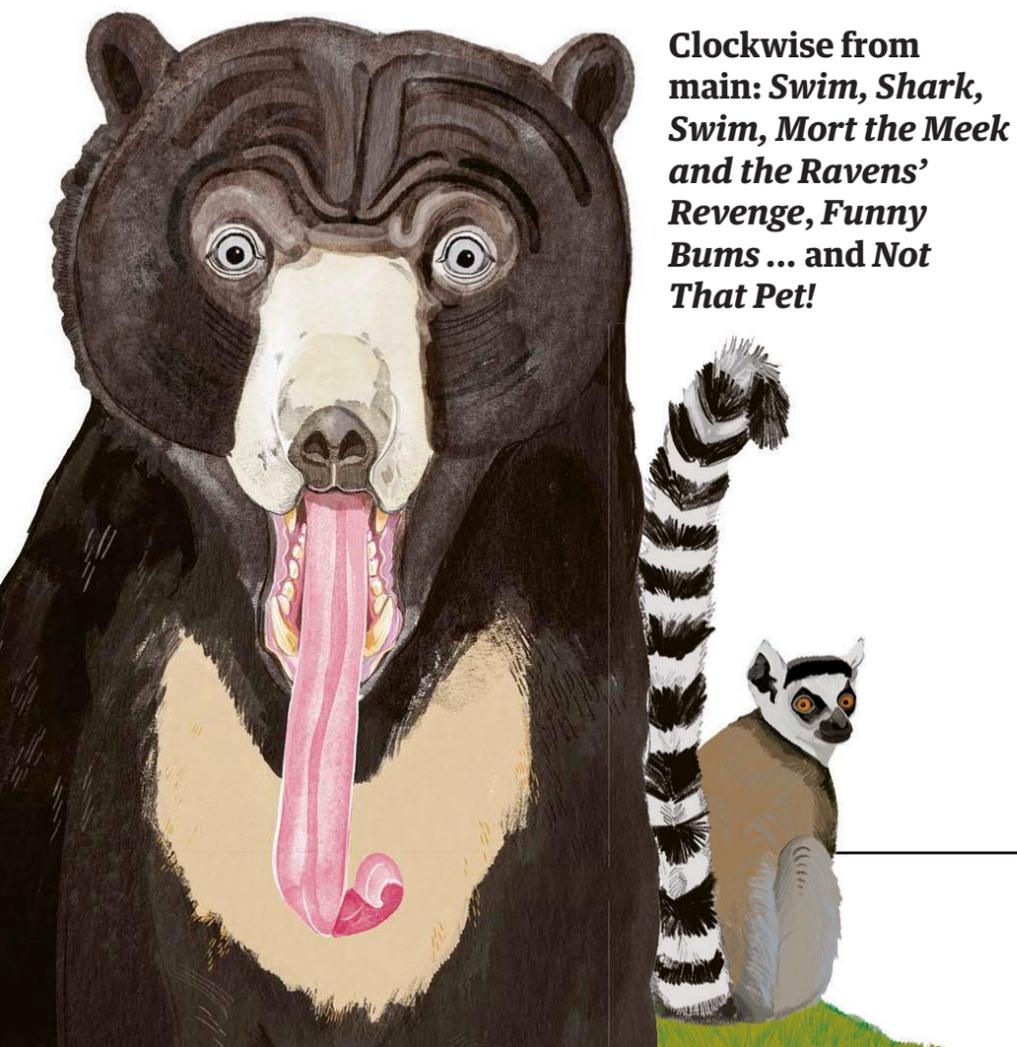
He swims in a whizz and a fizz  
past Morocco and Spain  
to the wing-tipped waves of Wales.

A tunnel-mouthed Basking shark  
preys from above  
whilst an Angel shark  
lies on the ocean floor.

for what should be hers. A hard-hitting, gripping read, told from both girls' perspectives, which is full of fierce courage in the face of injustice.

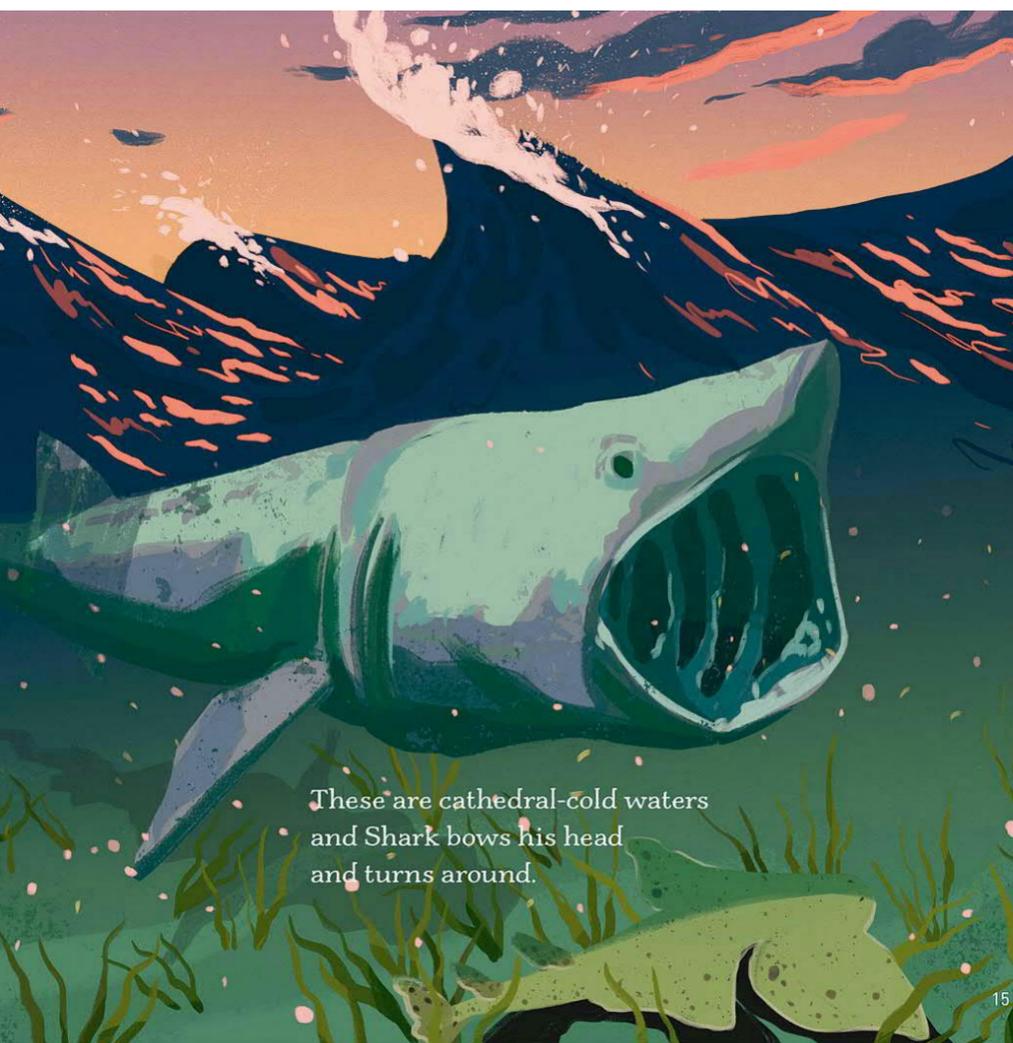
Meanwhile, **Mort the Meek and the Ravens' Revenge** (Stripes) by Rachel Delahaye, illustrated by George Ermos, is the tale of hapless Mort, the only pacifist in a distinctly brutal kingdom, who's just been made Royal Executioner - and told to bump off his best friend. Crammed with wisecracking corvids and outrageous wordplay, it's an engagingly light-hearted, Pratchettesque comic fantasy.

For those aged seven and above, and also illustrated by George Ermos, there's **Harley Hitch and the Iron Forest** (Scholastic) by Vashti Hardy, a joyful mash-up of robots, conservationism and school story. Inventive Harley is determined to win "pupil of the term"; but



Clockwise from main: *Swim, Shark, Swim*, *Mort the Meek and the Ravens' Revenge*, *Funny Bums ...* and *Not That Pet!*





These are cathedral-cold waters and Shark bows his head and turns around.

when a rogue fungus begins killing off the cogs and hinges growing in the Iron Forest, can Harley and new pupil Cosmo come up with a solution - or will they just make matters worse?

In nonfiction, **The Usborne Book of the Brain and How It Works** by research scientist Betina Ip, strikingly illustrated by Mia Nilsson, is a funny and fascinating wander through the biology of the brain. From emotions to the sleep cycle, it's pitched just right to hold the reader enthralled.

The child-appeal of **Funny Bums, Freaky Beaks and Other Incredible Creature Features** (Welbeck) isn't limited to the title - this compelling compendium of animals is grouped by body parts from strange toes to perplexing necks, with lively text from Sean Taylor and Alex Morss, and Sarah Edmonds's intricate, vibrant illustrations.

In picture books, Dom Conlon and Anastasia Izlesou collaborate on **Swim, Shark, Swim!** (Graffeg), a sumptuously illustrated, powerful poem with a repeated refrain ("he opens a tunnel / of bubbles and light and / swim, Shark, SWIM!"). It circumnavigates the globe, brushing fins with various shark species and conveying the dangerous beauty of their lives.

In **The Forgettery** (Egmont) by Rachel Ip and Laura Hughes, Amelia's granny forgets things, big and little - but everything ever forgotten is stored in the Forgettery. A tender, humorous look at the idea of dementia for very young children, it boasts some of the poignant sweetness of Julia Donaldson's *The Paper Dolls*.

Finally, **"Not That Pet!"** (Walker) by Smriti Halls and Rosalind Beardshaw combines a rollicking quest for the ideal animal companion with a feast of visual and verbal jokes and a delightful mixed family - sari-clad Grandma battling away rogue worms is a highlight.

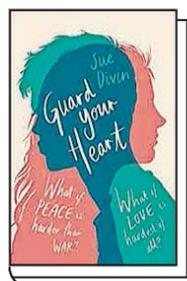
## { Teenagers } An undercover investigation; love blossoms in the wake of the Troubles; sisters provoke the spirit world



### **Firekeeper's Daughter**

by Angeline Boulley, Oneworld, £12.99

Biracial and proudly Native American teenager Daunis Firekeeper has never felt wholly at home either in her hometown or on the Ojibwe reservation. When she witnesses her best friend's murder, Daunis is drawn into an FBI drugs investigation, in which she reluctantly agrees to play a covert part - but as death follows death, what cruel truths will she discover at the heart of her beloved community? This fat, satisfying novel ably conveys a sense of place and complex feeling; it's both an interrogation of racist misogyny and a swift-paced, compelling thriller.



### **Guard Your Heart**

by Sue Divin, Macmillan, £7.99

Eighteen years after the Northern Ireland peace agreement, two Derry teenagers share a birthday, but nothing more. Aidan is Catholic and

republican, and his dad is a former political prisoner; Iona's family is Protestant, her father and brother in the police. When Iona sees Aidan being assaulted on the Peace Bridge, the two are drawn to one another - but the wounds of history remain open. This superb debut evokes the deep-rooted mistrust, anger and antagonism lingering in the wake of the Troubles, as well as a new, tentative flowering of hope and love.



### **We Played With Fire**

by Catherine Barter, Andersen, £7.99

When teenager Maggie Fox was involved in a sinister accident, the family moved away to rural isolation in New York state. Now Maggie and Katie have started playing with the idea of spirits; and then Leah, their big sister, sees a way of making money from their games. But has the make-believe become more than play. Where will it end? Based on the true story of the Fox sisters and the 19th-century origins of spiritualism, Barter's second novel is atmospheric, unsettling and laced with political and feminist observation.

**IRW**

## 'It's magic': poetry and power

As Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb* is published, the current young people's laureate for London and her predecessors share their own ambitions and inspirations

### Cecilia Knapp

I came to poetry by accident, through a workshop at Camden's Roundhouse. I was 18 at the time, had no money, and was living alone in London. Poetry had not been in my life before. I was awful when I started. But I was so thirsty to get better.

I'm working on my first collection now. I lost my mum at a young age, so a lot of the collection looks at how that might impact a young woman. And I lost my older brother to suicide in 2012. He had a long battle with addiction, and also his sexuality, and I was a carer for him for a really long time. A lot of the poems in the book that I'm working on look at his life. I've always used writing as a way to figure things out: not necessarily to find answers, more to ask questions.

When young people see a poem or film on YouTube or social media, it gets rid of that preconception that poetry has to be this isolated, solitary act of opening a book and reading something old fashioned.

I've worked with young people for almost a decade now, and I've experienced first-hand the effect poetry can have on them - something happens when you let yourself be free and creative, it is magic. Someone who I use as a springboard for young people is Danez Smith, a non-binary African American poet who talks a lot about race, class, sexuality and gender in their collections *Don't Call Us Dead* and *Homie*. Roger Robinson's book *A Portable Paradise* responded so amazingly to the injustice of Grenfell, as did Jay Bernard's book *Surge*. There are so many amazing writers at the moment.

### Theresa Lola (2019)

I always loved writing, I just wanted to tell stories. Then when I was about 13, living in Nigeria, I went on a school trip to a poetry festival and it became poetry that I wanted to write. The laureateship was one of those emails you get that you're like, "What?" I knew my focus was going to be wellbeing. The epidemic has exacerbated this, but at the time there was a lot of focus on the mental health crisis among young people and I wanted to address that - and to write about our joys, too: the things that bring us happiness. Poetry has this wonderful gift of allowing us to be imaginative and allowing us to articulate even the most complex feelings. And there's a power in that, especially when you're writing about things that make you feel powerless. There is a power in having your own voice, and having some sort of control over how you share that story.

To have poetry make national headlines after Joe Biden's inauguration was just so exciting. Let's be honest, that particular inauguration was one like no other, so to have Amanda Gorman's poem being able to articulate everyone's feelings, the feelings of the past, the present and the future - that was just the perfect example of what poetry can do.

### Caleb Femi (2016)

When I was offered the laureateship, I had just left teaching and had no idea what I was going to do for work. I just knew that I wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to engage with young people in a way that was a lot freer than the confines of the curriculum. When the gig was offered to me, I was ecstatic.

Sometimes when you mention poetry to the general public they wince, because people haven't had the best experience in school, whether it was the way that it was taught, or the content not being widely reflective of the human experience. So I wanted to contribute to a rehabilitation of poetry. It was also about putting young people at the forefront of everything. I was particularly interested in looking at the outer boroughs of London, because I feel, in terms of engagement of the arts, those are the areas that are usually the most disenfranchised and overlooked.

For me, what poetry affords you is a chance to interrogate how you feel about yourself, your insecurities, fears, wonders, happiness. It allows you to articulate that, and by doing so, you're able to fully understand it. This is very important as a young person, as you can find your tribe that way. It also allows you to empathise and understand somebody else's experience. I think it really enriches you as a human being.

### Selina Nwulu (2015)

A lot of what I do within the poetry world is thinking about the role of art and poetry within conversations



**London pride**  
**Clockwise from far left: Caleb Femi;**  
**Selina Nwulu; Theresa Lola;**  
**Aisling Fahey; Cecilia Knapp**

around social change. It's no coincidence that the popularity of poetry has risen in recent years, with the way things have been going politically.

I'm the youngest in a large family, so I was often encouraged to write poetry as a way to distract me for a bit. In school I didn't really gravitate towards it, and my writing was almost like a diary entry, never anything I imagined that I would share, just a way of processing things. I started doing open mics, and it grew from there. It was never anything I would have expected, but once I was there I rode the wave.

As laureate, I wanted to be an ambassador for what poetry could be. Part of what I was doing was encouraging young people to write about what they care about, but also it was me doing that by example.

I write to understand the sweet spot between the personal and the political, how to talk about something difficult in a way that is engaging. My motivation is to talk about politics, race, climate change, the social injustices that surround us, but in a way that is beautiful and personal. That's how you disarm the reader. When I started, it was very important for me to be known as a political poet. Now I'm seeing the politics in everything. Amanda Gorman is an incredible example of the power of poetry and activism.

### **Aisling Fahey (2014)**

I've had a very enriching experience with poetry over the years. But my breakthrough moment came when I was 13, when I entered a competition via school. Through that, I was really lucky to meet poets such as

Jacob Sam-La Rose, Malika Booker and Nick Makoha. For the first time, I was listening to living poets telling their stories. I saw the effect they had on their audiences. Poetry became something with power and purpose. That was it for me.

It was so exciting to be asked to be a laureate. There were lots of pinch-yourself moments. I was able to travel. I went to literature festivals. I ran workshops for people across the globe. I wanted to challenge people's perceptions of poetry.

Amanda Gorman's performance was completely mesmerising. I watched it live and she transported me with her words. She really connected with people across the world - she shone! People turn to poetry in moments of high emotion: a birth, a celebration, a tragedy. We often see poems go viral because they have captured people's thoughts. But any viral poem is just the tip of the iceberg. In the UK, we have so many great young poets just coming up, and so many poets who have been working for years. I devoured Rachel Long's *My Darling from the Lions*, and am currently reading *The Air Year* by Caroline Bird. I often return to Eavan Boland, including *Outside History* and *A Woman Without A Country*. It's wonderful when you see signs that more collections are being sold or getting published, that there's a need for poetry from the public. The talent is there - it's just up to people to discover it ●

*The Young People's Laureate for London programme is run by Spread the Word, London's writer development agency. Visit [spreadtheword.org.uk](http://spreadtheword.org.uk).*

# 'We will have to choose our apocalypse'

Sam Byers

In his latest novel, the *Perfidious Albion* author explores the tension between personal and collective freedom. To remake society after the pandemic, he argues, we must swap Insta self-improvement for something more radical



**A**cross much of the west, March is a milestone both surreal and distressing: a full year of life in Covid-19's shadow. Twelve months ago, we couldn't imagine what we were about to experience; now we can't process what we've endured.

This was a year of seemingly irresolvable contradictions. Our grief was collective, yet rituals of communal mourning were denied us. We hymned the "global effort" to produce a vaccine, then recoiled into vaccine nationalism the moment that effort bore fruit. Even as Zoom held us together, Covid denial and conspiracy theories in the family WhatsApp tore us apart. We clapped for carers and then, clinging to a Christmas we refused to cancel, some turned viciously against them.

On one thing, at least, we were all in agreement: we wanted to be free. The problem was that we couldn't agree on what that freedom looked like, or who should enjoy it. Even as new horizons of collective action and mutual support seemed possible, the urge to do whatever we wanted took hold with renewed force. Set against the freedom from infection was the freedom to endanger others by leaving lockdown; the freedom to do away with masks and exhale deadly airborne droplets in the supermarket; the right to spread dangerous, divisive fictions. When finally the halls of US government were stormed and occupied, it wasn't civil rights activists or eco-warriors posing for a selfie in the chamber, it was a loose conglomeration of angry and often baffled conspiracy theorists, splinter Republicans and Nazis, freely subverting the democracy they claimed to defend.

I'd spent 2018 and 2019 exploring the challenges and contradictions of personal and collective freedom in what would become my third novel, *Come Join Our Disease*, which I completed in March 2020. The novel follows Maya, a homeless woman "rehabilitated" through a programme of traumatising work, exhausting wellness-based self-improvement, and the hollow affirmation of daily Instagram posts charting her "transformation". Trapped between the hell of exclusion and the exhausting labour of belonging, Maya comes to feel that only one freedom is available to her: the liberation of letting herself go completely. Occupying an abandoned industrial building with a group of other women, she embraces a lifestyle that is part dirty protest and part mystical experience.

My growing feeling is that those of us whose daily reality is shaped by capitalism's latest and most virulent strain find ourselves caught between duelling and equally intolerable experiences. On the one hand, we long for a better world. On the other,

we fear that an evolved world will hold no place for us. In the middle is our great doomed project: the self.

**Personal utopias**  
Yoga, social media  
and baking; above  
right, Sam Byers

To see at work the contradictory impulses and injunctions we're daily expected to reconcile, you might begin by immersing yourself, as Maya does, in our collective online existence. Here, through a kaleidoscope of inspirational Instagram quotes, revolutionary praxis, artfully prepared food and effortless-seeming yoga poses, profound contradictions are reconfigured as a series of seductive adjacencies. We are encouraged to challenge power, punch up, resist. And yet at the same time we are exhorted to grow and glow, strive, achieve, *become*.



The result is an excruciating double bind. Only through a more robust sense of self, we believe, can we muster the rebellious energy by which the unjust world around us might be changed. And yet, deep down, we know the truth: that our unjust world depends for its survival on the very project of selfhood in which we're all so overinvested.

Many of these tensions collide most spectacularly in the world of wellness, where disciplines such as yoga and meditation, which once took as their goal the dissolution of the self, are pressed into the service of a bolstered ego and enhanced productivity. In this telling, freedom, like the equally mythologised idea of "happiness", is no longer a collective goal but a small and fiercely defended box of personal space.

But if our conception of a free future is simply a series of tiny, personalised utopias, all we will create is a world in which only the strongest and most fully evolved selves assume dominance. A world, in short, very much like the one we have now.

In the course of *Come Join Our Disease*, Maya comes to embrace a worldview in which liberation is not about what we gain, but what we are willing to abandon. Far from the freedom to "be ourselves", true freedom in this sense would mean an end to ever needing to be ourselves again. This is why, when faced with even the possibility of a better, more just, more liberated world, we claim to long for it, only to reactively stifle its emergence. It's because we know that real freedom would entail the erasure of all the boundaries and signifiers by which we have defined and comforted ourselves; that it would, in effect, destroy us.

When we speak of Covid's tragic legacy, we focus on the incomprehensible death toll, the long emotional and economic shadow, the coming era of vaccine inequality. But there is also, I think, an existential legacy. Briefly, a series of alternatives became visible to us. But having seen them, we rejected them, and returned to what we knew. Last spring, the freshness of the lockdown air struck us like a revelation. By summer we were

back in our cars, flocking to beaches we despoiled with trash and human shit, dreaming of the day we could not only drive but fly cheaply.

As whole areas of work and remuneration were eroded, we spoke briefly and hearteningly about the need for a universal basic income, a fairer system, an economy based on something other than numbing work fuelled by takeaway coffees. Now the Labour party tells us that "the only way to deliver social justice and equality is through a strong partnership with businesses". Where once 20,000 deaths was the

**On the one hand, we long for a better world. On the other, we fear that an evolved world will hold no place for us**

metric by which we might measure our success, now it might just become the annual toll we're willing to accept, the price for our refusal to change.

The state of transcendental decay Maya reaches in the novel is extreme, but what she finds as she unravels is the very thing so few of us can bear to accept: that what we live amid, however repugnant, is our

own creation. If we want, finally, to change it, then we will have no choice but to change ourselves. That process of change will not be blissful. At the end of it, we will not be beaming and aglow. We will be wrecked, raw. Somewhere in all of us is the very totemic figure we loudly claim to loathe: the lockdown-breaking Covid sceptic, the bloviating opinion columnist or gaseous radio host, the self-satisfied centrist or sneering ideologue, the diarrhoeic polluter, the bigoted, raging, punitive cop. Until we excise them from ourselves, we'll continue to create them in the world. The more privilege we embody, the messier the process will be. Because what is privilege, really, if not the continual distortion of the world to reflect our comfort?

This is not to say that we should entirely replace a project of structural critique and opposition with a project of inward exploration. Nor is it to say that abuses of power should go unchallenged or that for some of us the work of rebuilding self-esteem and personal resilience is not vital. It is that we are going to have to accept an ugly, inconvenient but necessary truth: that the price of the life each of us wants is a world we are all collectively able to live in, and so sustaining a world we can all safely inhabit may very well depend on dismantling the individual life we desire.

Ordinarily, in the time that follows a book's completion, the characters seem to wander further from view, until one day they vanish completely. But Maya feels closer to me than ever, and what felt speculative at the time of writing now feels painfully real. In the world to come we will have to choose our apocalypse. Either we will annihilate, finally, the sense of ourselves we cling to, or we will redouble our faith in it, feed it, build it until it dwarfs all else, and then watch, hopelessly, as it destroys the world we live in ●

# Terms of engagement

A pioneer of British nature writing, Richard Mabey has always been years ahead of his time. So how does he think the pandemic will change our attitude to nature, asks *Patrick Barkham*

**A**fter a year of virus-plagued humans observing with new wonder how wildlife boosts our wellbeing, the conclusion of the man who invented the burgeoning “nature cure” genre is unexpected. Nature, declares Richard Mabey, makes us ill. He was first told this by a fellow writer, Kathleen Jamie, and it made Mabey “think very much more deeply about the whole panoply of what ‘nature’ means,” he says. “Bacteria and viruses and man-eating tigers and predatory Asian hornets are also all part of nature. At times we need to defend ourselves from ‘nature’ but also row back from the value judgments we make about certain parts of the natural world, because we need the whole thing kicking together if the biosphere, including us, is to survive.”

Mabey, who has just celebrated his 80th birthday, has been a pioneer in British nature writing and environmental thinking for five decades. He is not a contrarian but has consistently interrogated and challenged prevailing patterns of thinking in more than 30 books. Nature is a “criminally abused word”, he says. And he criticises the simplicity of the assumption that we have been reconnecting with nature in the wake of the pandemic’s lockdowns. “I’m particularly aroused by this term ‘reconnection with nature’, given that we are all every moment, every breath of our lives very connected with it. I hate to say any words in support of our great leader but at one point during lockdown Boris Johnson used the phrase: ‘We

must be humble in the face of nature.’ He was thereby putting the pandemic on the side of nature. As we hopefully mature in our understandings of our relationship with the world outside, we have to move towards a much more broad-based concept of what nature means. When people say: ‘Yeah! Go out and reconnect with nature! Nature makes you well!’ in fact they are just talking about a cherry-picked selection - trees and birds and flowers.”

While many of us have spent the pandemic worrying hugely, Mabey, who describes himself as “naturally a really quite anxious person” has been mentally untroubled by coronavirus. Instead, locked down at his home with his partner, Polly, on the Norfolk-Suffolk border, he’s been thinking. Now, invigorated by #Mabeymonth on Twitter - an appreciation devised by fellow writers Tim Dee, Mark Cocker and Jamie - Mabey is ready to start the book of big ideas he regrets not writing sooner.

In an era when bookshops are thickly forested with new nature tomes, it is easy to forget that for decades Mabey, in Britain, was a lone voice in an empty field. He grew up a “hedge kid”, roaming the Hertfordshire countryside around Berkhamsted, for whom nature was a refuge from a bed-ridden, alcoholic father who ruled the household as if by remote control. Writing has always been how Mabey makes sense of things, and keeps well. When his father died, “I thought that I really wouldn’t care less whether he was alive or not”, but two hours after the funeral Mabey “sat in my room and just wrote pages and pages on blue Basildon Bond paper about what I’d been feeling. I couldn’t have gone through the rest of the day if I hadn’t done that.”

In the early 1960s, Mabey joined the political protests of the day - arrested during street demos against the Cuban missile crisis - but it was visiting the Norfolk coast where he encountered traditional foraging for food such as samphire that moved him to write *Food for Free* (1972), which pre-dates by three decades Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s advocacy of wild food. Mabey, who cites Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as his key texts, has been consistently trailblazing. His second book, *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973), is a memorable celebration of wildlife in rubbish dumps and waste ground that foreshadows by 40 years other British writers’

**‘You’re face to face with a violet helleborine. What might it be perceiving about your presence? There’s a transaction going on’**

interest in “edgelands”. His biography of Gilbert White (1986) and epic cultural history of plants, *Flora Britannica* (1996), are key texts in the revival of nature writing in Britain. More recently, Mabey’s *Nature Cure* (2005), detailing his mental breakdown after finishing *Flora Britannica* and the succour he found by belatedly leaving behind his childhood home in the



big ideas because they tend to lead to dogmatism and ideology, and nature works in small ideas, little adjustments. But I think there is a germ of a big idea about how we frame our relationship with these other beings on our planet.”

He wants to probe these relationships more closely in a book rooted in the plants of his “home acres” around the Waveney valley. “OK, you’re face to face with a violet helleborine in a wood you know very well. What is going on between you and it? How are you framing its existence in relation to your own? Do you have any thoughts about what the violet helleborine may be perceiving about your presence - your scent molecules, your carbon dioxide emissions? There’s a transaction going on, which is different from the transactions we have with other conscious beings but which is there nonetheless.”

For all his scepticism about the idea that “nature makes us well”, to my surprise Mabey does not dismiss the view that we are currently enjoying a changed relationship with other species. “I’m absolutely sure that it’s a real phenomenon. It’s quite plain that people

**Left, Richard Mabey, whose book on foraging predated the recent trend by 30 years. Below, a violet helleborine**

did have an unusual response to the natural world during lockdown and are still having that,” he says.

He identifies two new aspects to this. One is the feeling that nature is doing “marvellously well without us” - trees blooming, birds singing - and isn’t that wonderful. In the past, says Mabey, signs of nature prospering during human suffering were resented. “I’m thinking of TS Eliot’s ‘April is the cruellest month’ after the first world war. He was suggesting that the spectacle of lilacs blooming was offensive to people



who wanted to wallow in the misery of what was happening.” When Mabey researched *Weeds* (2010) - another book a decade ahead of its time - he found that the spectacle of rosebay willowherb blooming in the ruins of bomb blasted British cities during the second world war was again greeted as if “nature” was adding “insult to injury”.

“The second thing that’s new is the minuteness of the attention brought to bear on other species,” says Mabey. “I’ve found this myself. Wandering around the garden, I’m seeing things that I’m ashamed to say I’ve not focused on before - the particular mechanisms of a leaf bud opening up, or dozens of Harlequin ladybirds scurrying on a lichen-covered ash tree. They looked like herbivores grazing on a lichen forest. This seems to be tied to the first thing. When you admit that nature in the very broadest sense seems to be doing OK - and isn’t that hopeful for the whole planet - it draws you into a more wondrous attention to what it is doing” ●

Chilterns for the bleaker south Norfolk countryside, heralded the genre of nature misery memoir.

Eighteen months ago, after a period of poor physical health, Mabey published what sounded like his last ever book, with a suitably elegiac title, *Turning the Boat for Home*. An expanded collection of 20 years of writing, he calls it “an intellectual autobiography” but admits it sprang from failure. “I badly wanted to write what I thought would be a last book. Some sort of summing up of a life. But I very quickly confirmed that I don’t have the right sort of mind or memory to do what people regard as autobiographies.”

The collection is a reminder of his essayistic talents, from a gorgeous ferret into his bookshelves, which possess “the rampant wildness of an ecosystem, with an agenda of its own”, to an examination of how we might better relate to barn owls, birdsong and whirligig beetles. The most respectful terms of engagement, he argues, are not “anthropomorphism or manufactured empathy” but “a sense of neighbourliness”. This is not friendship but “based on sharing a place, on the common experience of home and habitat and season”. “It might provide a bridge across the great conceptual divide between us and other species.”

Neighbourliness is “just scratching the surface” Mabey says. He is delighted by his friend Robert Macfarlane’s essay exploring “the new animism”. “I think this is the new intellectual frontier,” he says. “If there is one deep regret of my life, it is that I’ve never done a book of a big idea. I’ve always been frightened of them, partly because a bit of me doesn’t believe in

## 'I wrote it as a fugitive' Tsitsi Dangarembga



*Nervous Conditions* is a novel about yearning and wanting, about black girls - in this case Zimbabwean girls - desiring better for themselves and their loved ones. I wrote it as a fugitive. A fugitive from my first memories and of what my life had become.

Early memories were of a foster home in Dover, then of returning to a Rhodesia that had just removed itself from the British empire. After school I returned to England to study for a BSc in medicine at the University of Cambridge. The idea was to proceed to a teaching hospital after I graduated, such as the hospital at the mission in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe where I'd spent several years of my childhood. But the nationalist liberation struggle escalated while I was at college, and in the

summer of 1979 a peace treaty resulted in a road map to independence.

I was in London, where I'd spent all my summers since arriving in England, during the peace talks. The bleakness of the Zimbabwean students' lives, their self-medication with various drugs and episodes of mental collapse related to reliving a war from which they'd fled indicated to me how the mind needed as much treatment as the body.

I decided there was no point in being the only black girl in my college, reading for a degree I was no longer interested in. I returned to Zimbabwe in the winter and enrolled at the University of Zimbabwe.

I flourished in the new independent country. Looking back, I realised I'd been singularly unprepared to manage

the circumstances I'd encountered in England. I'd experienced racism growing up in Rhodesia and hadn't expected it in England. I didn't suffer it. But I suffered from lack of interest in and ignorance of a bloody war that had affected my family. At Cambridge, I suffered from sexual predation when I looked for holiday digs, and ended up in cheap B&Bs.

It became evident to me that differences between how my elder brother and I had been brought up had impacted on our coping strategies. Standing up for oneself, knowing what one wanted and asking for it were not part of my daughterly repertoire. I thought young women looking to take advantage of the opportunities an independent Zimbabwe offered had to be warned about this.

I wanted to write about a girl many young Zimbabwean women would identify with, someone who was grounded in a Zimbabwean experience, so I

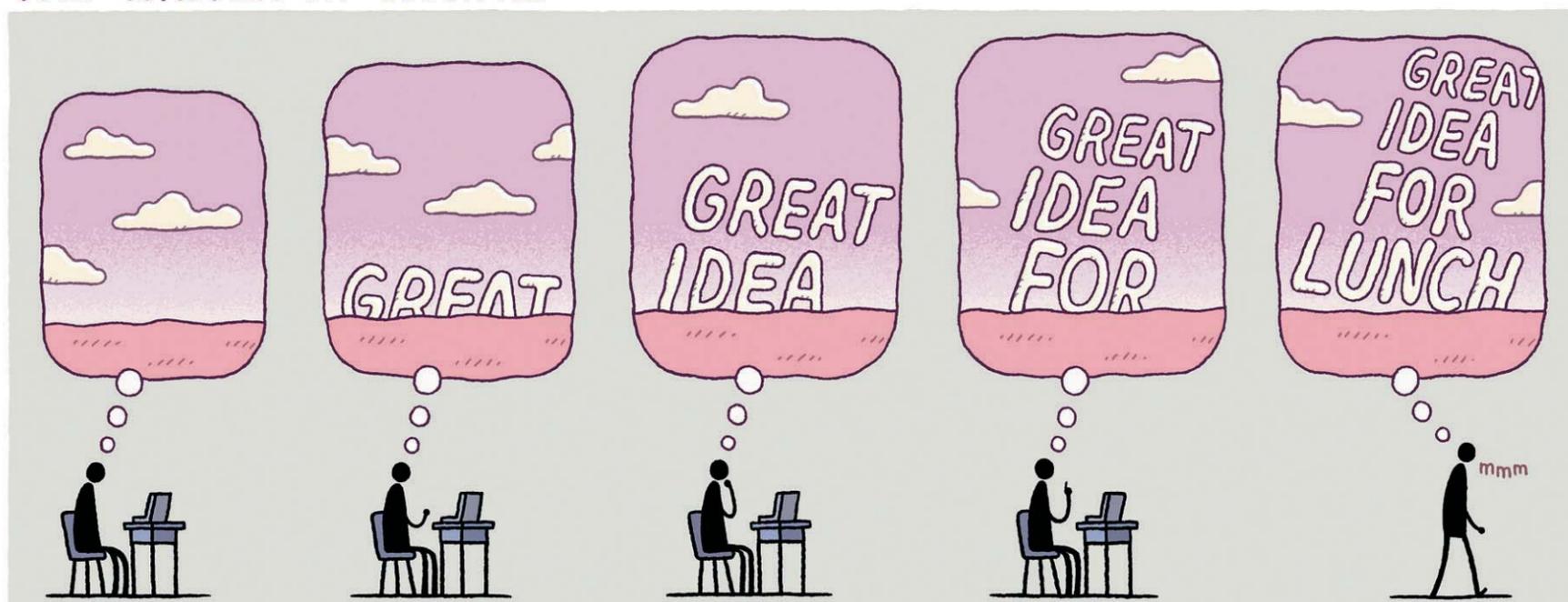
chose the character of a rural girl, Tambudzai (the country's population was more than 70% rural at the time). Babamukuru, her well-off uncle, came to me easily. The extended family, with more and less well-to-do branches, is still a reality and a source of frustration and contention caused by demands, expectations and obligations today.

At first, I didn't have a clue what I was writing. Then I read Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, which gave me permission to critique what I thought of as my culture. Discarding all previous pages, I started over, writing longhand in A4 exercise books, a fresh one for each chapter. Finally I allowed Tambudzai to want something for herself - her education. I encouraged her to fight for it, and enjoy it. Six months later, the manuscript was ready to send to the typist.

*Nervous Conditions* is reissued by Faber.

## Tom Gauld

### THE WRITER AT WORK...



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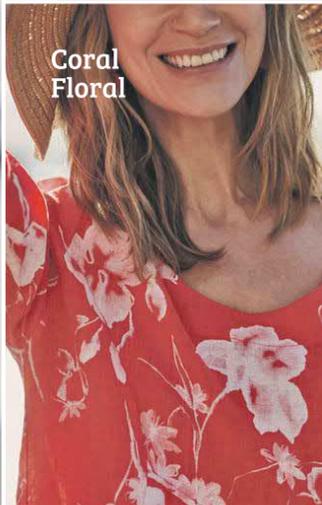
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