

# Review

Saturday 2 January 2021 - Issue N° 154

The  
Guardian



## A new chapter

What to read in 2021



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# Review

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*'For me the book is about desire, and what it means to try and seize the right to make art as a young black woman.'*

– Raven Leilani, page 14

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## Page Turner Candice Carty-Williams



I remember when I first met my editors to discuss this column; we were all so excited about what 2020 would bring and what I'd write about. Then, as we all know, the year went ... sideways and this column effectively became dispatches from lockdown.

Obviously not having as much to talk about every week was the least of my concerns. We lost so many, and so many fell ill and are still falling ill now. We are all grieving, in so many ways. We are grieving family, we are grieving friends, and we are all grieving life as we knew it.

Perhaps we've got through the worst of it now that the vaccine is being rolled out, but the trauma still remains while we get used to

this new normal. The masks are fine, but I have one meeting a fortnight on Zoom, and even that is too much. I still haven't figured out where you're meant to look when you're on camera.

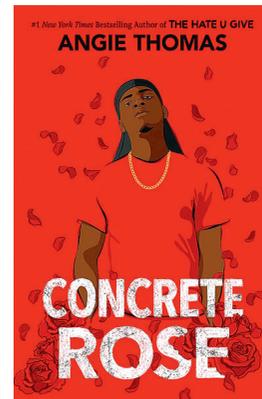
I should say now, before I say anything else, that this is my final column. I have loved every word I've written; but with my second novel, *People Person*,



coming out in 2021, I'll be chained to my desk (my bed/my sofa/ the chair in my room I sit on when I need to think about things) with very little time to keep an eye on what's happening in the literary world.

I'm not going to leave though without telling you what I'm looking forward to in 2021. A few books spring to mind: the novels *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson; *Luster* by Raven Leilani; *Diary of a Film* by Niven Govinden. And in young adult releases, *Concrete Rose* by Angie Thomas, author of the smash *The Hate U Give*; and *Front Desk* and *Three Keys* by Kelly Yang. I'd pre-order them now if I were you.

In terms of film and TV, I'm looking forward to the adaptation of *Dune* by Frank Herbert and *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* by Jenny Han - the third and final instalment of her *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* series will drop



on Netflix and I'll watch it the very second it does. And the film version of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, an examination of racial identity set in 1920s Harlem - with Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga in the lead roles - is tipped to be sublime.

Mainly, though, I'm looking forward to the world being OK again. It's going to take a lot of time and a lot of patience, and it will need a continued collective effort to be aware of, and look after, each other. Thank you all for joining me in 2020. Here's to a better 2021.

# Humaning

WORD OF THE WEEK  
Steven Poole



In business news, Mondelez International, the multinational food company that owns Cadbury, recently announced that its new marketing strategy was called "humaning". Eh? This is what linguists call a **verbing of a noun**, which enrages some language fanciers though it has been going on for a very long time. ("Love" and "rain" were both nouns before some inventive soul decided to use them as verbs.)

"Human" comes to us, via French *humain*, from the Latin *humanus*, which is related to homo as in sapiens. In English, "human" and "humane" used to be the same word, as though it were a particular quality of human beings to **act with kindness**; the modern distinction was not made until the 18th century. (The Royal Humane Society, which rewards courageous acts, was first incorporated as the Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Drowned in 1774.)

You might think that people who engage in humaning are simply all humans, though "humanists" have often congratulated themselves on humaning better than others. Still, perhaps humaning, like "adulging", is a useful way to name a certain aspiration for all of us at the end of this **inhuman** year.



## 'I read *Naked Lunch* when it was still quasi-illicit'

*William Gibson*

### The book I am currently reading

Hari Kunzru's *Red Pill*. Topical (to say the very least)!

### The book that changed my life

So many have! I don't think of this in terms of landmark game-changers, but as a matter of cumulative effect. One very early example would be Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*. It was my introduction to the idea that the sort of book I was looking for didn't necessarily have to be labelled as science fiction.

### The book that had the greatest influence on my writing

One of them, certainly, though I'm still not quite sure how, was *Naked Lunch*, by William S Burroughs, which I read in second-hand hardcover when it was still quasi-illicit.

### The book I think is most underrated

One of the most unrecognised, for me, would be Jack Womack's *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*. A near future that chillingly predicted the foulest possible outcome of our past four years in the US.

### The book that changed my mind

Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*, which admitted me, long into adulthood, to the adult culture and time of my childhood in the American south. Until discovering *Suttree*, I'd not found the voice that could do that for me, Faulkner having always felt instinctively too

much like a part of the problem he was describing (if indeed he thought it a problem).

### The last book that made me laugh

M John Harrison's *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*. Though I suppose not every reader would. Not to say that I'd consider it comedy. When it's funny, though, it's much funnier than that.

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

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, perhaps? Actually, I'm more embarrassed by starting to feel as though I *have* read it, but that is only through following an account on Twitter that daily posts some brief and evocative snippet of the book. Might this not be the way our descendants, such as they may be, experience literature?

### The book I give as a gift

Kellow Chesney's *The Victorian Underworld*, that most steampunk of all works of British history (and if you know of better, let me know). With its own intensely hierarchic organisation, the Victorian criminal underworld dizzily mirrored proper Victorian society in wonderfully revelatory ways. Entirely serious, but hypnotically entertaining.

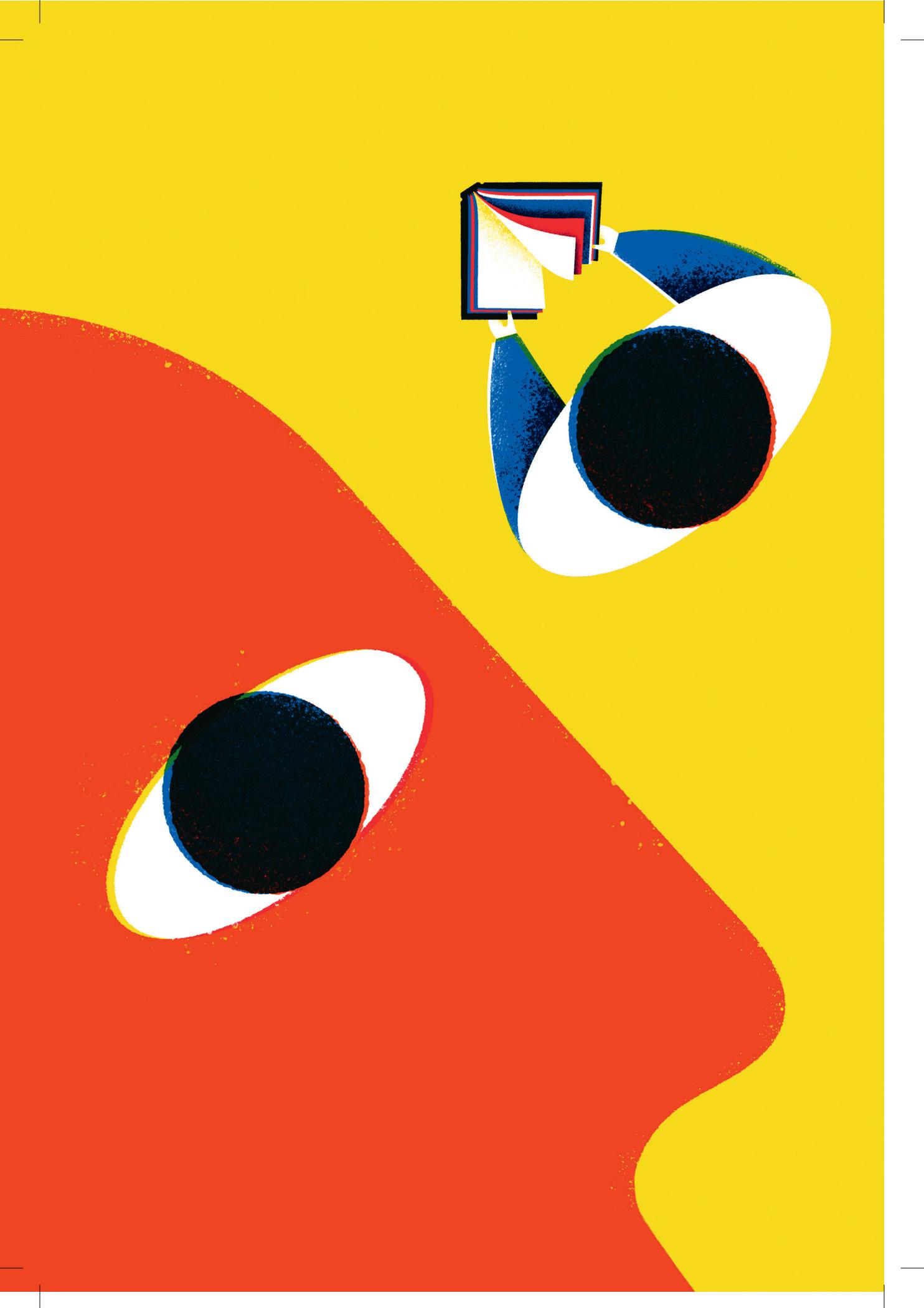
### My earliest reading memory

Pogo comic strips by Walt Kelly. My mother had to teach me to read, as I wasn't doing well at it in school.

### My comfort read

"No More Yoga of the Night Club", by Iain Sinclair, in his collection *Slow Chocolate Autopsy*. I associate it with being jet lagged in London, though somehow in a wonderfully comforting way.

*Agency by William Gibson is published by Penguin.*



# JANUARY

**11** TS Eliot prize for poetry.

**19** Centenary of the birth of Patricia Highsmith.

**22** Netflix adaptation of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Release of film *Chaos Walking*, based on first book of Patrick Ness's trilogy.

**26** Costa awards ceremony.

## Fiction

**Luster by Raven Leilani** (*Picador*)

A black American millennial tackles the difficulties of work, love, sex and being seen for who you really are in this much anticipated debut. (See interview, p 14)

**The Living Sea of Waking Dreams by Richard Flanagan** (*Chatto*)

A family grapples with mortality while Australia burns, in a magic realist fable about extinction from the Booker-winning author of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

## Memorial by

**Bryan Washington** (*Atlantic*)

His story collection *Lot* won the Dylan Thomas prize; this deft debut novel explores family and a gay relationship on the rocks.

## A Burning by

**Megha Majumdar** (*Scribner*)

Three lives entangle in contemporary India, in a debut about class and aspiration that has been a sensation in the US.

## The Art of Falling by Danielle

**McLaughlin** (*John Murray*)

Debut novel about a woman rebuilding her marriage, from the celebrated Irish short story writer.

## A River Called Time by

**Courtia Newland** (*Canongate*)

Ambitious epic set in an alternative London where slavery and colonialism never happened.

## People Like Her by

**Ellery Lloyd** (*Mantle*)

Smart, gobble-at-a-sitting thriller about a yummy mummy influencer and the dark side of Instagram.

## The Stranger Times by

**CK McDonnell** (*Bantam*)

Pratchettesque romp set around a Manchester newspaper dedicated to the paranormal whose reporters get sucked into a battle between good and evil.

## Children's and teens

**Amari and the Night Brothers**

by **BB Alston** (*Egmont*)

Film rights have been snapped up for the first in a new supernatural series with a black heroine.

## Concrete Rose by

**Angie Thomas** (*Walker*)

From the US YA sensation, this hard-hitting prequel to the award-winning *The Hate U Give* focuses on Starr's father as a young man.

## Poetry

**Living Weapon by Rowan**

**Ricardo Phillips** (*Faber*)

The award-winning American

essayist and poet's first collection to be published in the UK combines civic awareness with an interrogation of language and self.

## Nonfiction

**A Swim in a Pond in the Rain by George Saunders** (*Bloomsbury*)

The Booker-winning author of *Lincoln in the Bardo* considers the art of fiction through seven classic Russian short stories by Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Gogol.

**Francis Bacon: Revelations by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan** (*William Collins*)

A "definitive" biography, written with the full cooperation of the Bacon estate and with unrivalled access to the artist's papers.

**Begin Again: James Baldwin's America by Eddie S Glaude Jr** (*Chatto*)

This blend of biography, criticism and memoir with the writer at its heart is an indictment of racial injustice in Trump's America.

**Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain by Sathnam Sanghera** (*Viking*)

From the likable journalist and author of *The Boy with the Topknot*, this study looks at the legacy of empire from the NHS to Brexit and Covid.

**Breathtaking: Inside the NHS in a Time of Pandemic by**

**Rachel Clarke** (*Little, Brown*)

The palliative care doctor and author of *Dear Life* gives an insider

Kazuo Ishiguro returns with a novel about an artificial friend, Zadie Smith brings the *Wife of Bath* bang up to date, Bill Gates takes on the climate crisis ... what to look forward to this year

# 2021

## Cover story

account of hospital life as Covid-19 changed everything.

### **Saving Justice by**

**James Comey** (*Macmillan*)

The former FBI director and author of *A Higher Loyalty* looks into how institutions of justice in the US were eroded during the Trump presidency.

## FEBRUARY

4 Centenary of the birth of Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*.

### **Fiction**

#### **Light Perpetual by**

**Francis Spufford** (*Faber*)

The author of *Golden Hill* imagines the lost futures of children killed in the blitz in a humane panorama of miraculous everyday life.

#### **No One Is Talking About This by**

**Patricia Lockwood** (*Bloomsbury*)

Following her acclaimed comic memoir *Priestdaddy*, a fast and furious debut novel about being embedded in the digital world.

#### **Mother for Dinner by Shalom**

**Auslander** (*Picador*)

Outrageous comedy about identity politics and family centred on the Cannibal-American Seltzer clan.

#### **Maxwell's Demon by**

**Steven Hall** (*Canongate*)

Long-awaited follow-up to ultra-inventive cult hit *The Raw Shark Texts* features a man being stalked by a fictional character.

#### **Open Water by Caleb**

**Azumah Nelson** (*Viking*)

Black British artists fall in love in an intense, elegant debut.

#### **Voices of the Lost by**

**Hoda Barakat, translated by**

**Marilyn Booth** (*Oneworld*)

In a war-torn country, six characters share their secrets, in this international prize for Arabic fiction winner.

### **Teens**

#### **How to Change Everything**

**by Naomi Klein with**

**Rebecca Stefoff** (*Penguin*)

A guide to climate change billed as “the young human’s guide to protecting the planet and each other”.

### **Nonfiction**

#### **Fall by John Preston** (*Viking*)

The author of *A Very English Scandal* turns his attention to the last days of disgraced media tycoon Robert Maxwell.

#### **What Does Jeremy Think?**

**by Suzanne Heywood**

(*William Collins*)

A set of revealing insider political accounts, written up by the author after conversations with her late husband, the former cabinet secretary Lord Heywood, who died of cancer aged 56 in 2018.

#### **Consent: A Memoir by Vanessa Springora, translated by Natasha Lehrer** (*HarperCollins*)

The memoir, by the director of one of France’s leading publishing houses, of her sexual relationship as a teenager with a leading writer.

#### **Brown Baby by**

**Nikesh Shukla** (*Bluebird*)

A memoir from the Bristol-based editor of *The Good Immigrant*, which is also an exploration of “how to raise a brown baby in an increasingly horrible world”.

#### **The Code Breaker by Walter**

**Isaacson** (*Simon & Schuster*)

The biographer of Leonardo da Vinci and Steve Jobs returns with a book about Crispr, the revolutionary tool that can edit DNA.

#### **How to Avoid a Climate Disaster by Bill Gates** (*Allen Lane*)

The co-founder of Microsoft discusses the tools needed to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

## MARCH

### **Fiction**

#### **Klara and the Sun by**

**Kazuo Ishiguro** (*Faber*)

An “Artificial Friend” considers humanity and the meaning of love in Ishiguro’s first novel since winning the Nobel literature prize.

#### **Double Blind by Edward**

**St Aubyn** (*Harvill Secker*)

The author of the Patrick Melrose books investigates themes of inheritance, knowledge and freedom through the connections between three friends over one tumultuous year.

### **Transcendent Kingdom**

**by Yaa Gyasi** (*Viking*)

This follow-up to her debut *Homegoing*, focusing on an immigrant Ghanaian family in the American south, has been a huge hit in the US.

#### **Painting Time by Maylis**

**de Kerangal, translated**

**by Jessica Moore** (*MacLehose*)

The French author took the Wellcome science prize for her bravura novel about a heart transplant, *Mend the Living*; this new book is set in the world of *trompe l’œil* painting.

#### **Hot Stew by Fiona Mozley**

(*John Murray*)

Her debut *Elmet* made the Booker shortlist; the follow-up explores class and money through the inhabitants of London’s Soho.

#### **Kitchenly 434 by Alan Warner**

(*White Rabbit*)

*The Sopranos* author’s tale of a rock star’s butler at the fag end of the 1970s promises to be “*Remains of the Day* with cocaine and amplifiers”.

#### **The Committed by**

**Viet Thanh Nguyen** (*Corsair*)

In the sequel to Pulitzer winner *The Sympathizer*, that novel’s conflicted spy finds himself in the underworld of 80s Paris.

#### **The Absolute Book by Elizabeth Knox** (*Michael Joseph*)

From the New Zealand writer, a propulsive parallel-worlds fantasy epic about the power of stories and storytelling.

#### **The Mysterious Correspondent**

**by Marcel Proust, translated by**

**Charlotte Mandell** (*Oneworld*)

Nine previously unseen stories illuminate a young writer’s development.

#### **The Last House on Needless**

**Street by Catriona Ward** (*Viper*)

A woman believes she has found the monster who snatched her younger sister as a child ... Full of twists and turns, this high-concept gothic horror is going to be huge.

### **Children’s**

#### **The Wild Before**

**by Piers Torday** (*Quercus*)

Can one hare change the world? A prequel to the Guardian prize-winning *The Last Wild*.

**Poetry**

**Too Young, Too Loud, Too Different, edited by Maisie Lawrence and Rishi Dastidar** (*Corsair*)

An anthology celebrating 20 years of writers' collective Malika's Poetry Kitchen featuring work by now well-known alumni including Warsan Shire, Inua Ellams, Roger Robinson and Malika Booker.

**Nonfiction**

**Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life by Jordan Peterson** (*Allen Lane*)

After a year in rehab in Russia, the controversial Canadian psychologist, self-styled "professor against political correctness" follows up his global bestseller *12 Rules for Life*. **Under a White Sky by Elizabeth Kolbert** (*Bodley Head*)

The Pulitzer prize-winning writer of *The Sixth Extinction* meets scientists and researchers and asks: can we change nature, this time to save it?

**The Soul of a Woman: Rebel Girls, Impatient Love, and Long Life by Isabel Allende** (*Bloomsbury*)

An autobiographical meditation from the bestselling novelist on feminism and what women want.

**New Yorkers by Craig Taylor** (*John Murray*)

The sequel to Taylor's bestselling *Londoners* is another work of oral history, drawing on hundreds of interviews.

**APRIL**

**9** Bicentenary of the birth of Charles Baudelaire, author of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

**Fiction**

**Lean Fall Stand by Jon McGregor** (*4th Estate*)

An inquiry into the meaning of courage in the aftermath of a disastrous Antarctic research expedition, following the Costa-winning *Reservoir 13*.

**My Phantoms by Gwendoline Riley** (*Granta*)

Fearless, darkly witty novel anatomising a toxic mother-daughter relationship.



**Yaa Gyasi**  
A huge hit in the US

**Civilisations by Laurent Binet, translated by Sam Taylor**

(*Harvill Secker*)

A "counterfactual history of the modern world" from the author of *HHhH*, exploring the urge for power across time and space.

**The High House by Jessie Greengrass** (*Swift*)

*Sight* was shortlisted for the Women's prize in 2018; in *Greengrass's* second novel, an ordinary family prepares for climate catastrophe.

**This One Sky Day**

by **Leone Ross** (*Faber*)

Set on a magical archipelago, a big, carnivalesque novel that takes on desire, addiction and post-colonialism, but is also a celebration of food, love and joy.

**First Person Singular by Haruki Murakami, translated by Philip Gabriel** (*Harvill Secker*)

A new collection of eight stories that play with the boundary between memoir and fiction.

**Hummingbird Salamander by Jeff VanderMeer** (*4th Estate*)

A climate change conspiracy thriller about ecoterrorism.

**Monsters by Barry Windsor-Smith** (*Cape*)

The US army runs a secret genetics programme in this epic graphic novel from the Marvel and *Conan* artist, 35 years in the making.

**Children's and teens**  
**Weirdo by Zadie Smith and Nick Laird, illustrated by Magenta Fox** (*Puffin*)

This first picture book from the

husband and wife writers celebrates "the quiet power of being different" through the story of a guinea pig in a judo suit.

**Bone Music by David Almond** (*Hodder*)

The *Skellig* author's new novel focuses on a young girl who moves from Newcastle to rural Northumberland and finds herself "rewilded".

**Poetry**

**A God at the Door by Tishani Doshi** (*Bloodaxe*)

The novelist, dancer and poet deploys rage, wit and sharp analysis against the injustices of the word around us.

**A Blood Condition by Kayo Chingonyi** (*Chatto*)

The second collection from the Dylan Thomas prize-winner explores both the personal and cultural influences of inheritance.

**Nonfiction**

**Philip Roth: The Biography by Blake Bailey** (*Cape*)

Renowned biographer Bailey was appointed by the American novelist, who died in 2018, and granted independence and complete access to the archive.

**Go Big: How To Fix Our World by Ed Miliband** (*Bodley Head*)

Inspired by his "Reasons to be Cheerful" podcast, the former Labour leader investigates 20 "transformative solutions" to problems as intractable as inequality and the climate crisis.

**How to Love Animals in a Human-Shaped World by Henry Mance** (*Cape*)

The journalist works in an abattoir, talks to chefs and philosophers and looks to a better future.

**The Adventures of Miss Barbara Pym by Paula Byrne** (*William Collins*)

The biographer of Jane Austen takes on another much-loved English novelist who specialised in social comedy.

**One of Them: An Eton College Memoir by Musa Okwonga** (*Unbound*)

Okwonga spent five years at Eton in the 1990s and recalls that time, as well as engaging with such

## Cover story

related issues as privilege, the political right and the “boys’ club” of government.

### Letters to Camondo by

**Edmund de Waal** (*Chatto*)  
The author of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* tells the story of Count Camondo, a prominent Jewish banker and the creator of a vast collection of decorative arts.

## MAY

**7** Release of *Black Widow*, starring Scarlett Johansson as the Marvel comic book character.

**21** Release of *Lawrence: After Arabia*, depicting the final phase of TE Lawrence’s life.

**27** Hay festival opens, running until 6 June.

### Fiction

#### Second Place by

**Rachel Cusk** (*Faber*)

Following her *Outline* trilogy, Cusk explores relationships, male privilege and the power of art through an encounter between a woman and a famous male artist.

#### China Room by Sunjeev

**Sahota** (*Harvill Secker*)

From the author of *Year of the Runaways*, the twin stories of a bride in rural Punjab in 1929, and a young man travelling there from England 70 years later, traumatised by addiction and racism, looking for a sense of home.

#### The Rules of Revelation by

**Lisa McInerney** (*John Murray*)

Further misadventures in Cork from the Women’s prize winning author of *The Glorious Heresies*.

#### Whereabouts by

**Jhumpa Lahiri** (*Bloomsbury*)

Lahiri fell in love with Italy as a young woman; she wrote this novel about a woman at the midpoint of her life in Italian before creating an English version.

#### Great Circle by

**Maggie Shipstead** (*Doubleday*)

The second novel by the Dylan Thomas prize-winner is a big, ambitious narrative about a vanished female aviator.

#### Red Milk by Sjón, translated

by **Victoria Cribb** (*Sceptre*)

The story of a young neo-Nazi in post-second world war Iceland sheds light on the far-right global movement today.

#### Panenka by Ronan

**Hession** (*Bluemoose*)

The follow-up to cult hit *Leonard and Hungry Paul* features a man who has suffered half his life for the mistakes of the past.

#### Last Days in Cleaver Square by

**Patrick McGrath** (*Hutchinson*)

An old man who fought in the Spanish civil war is haunted by the ghost of General Franco, in a novel about reckoning with the past set in 70s London.

#### Malibu Rising by Taylor

**Jenkins Reid** (*Hutchinson*)

Family secrets fly in the follow-up to bestseller *Daisy Jones and the Six*, as a glamorous clan in 80s Malibu throws a party that gets out of control.

### Children’s

#### The Swallows’ Flight by

**Hilary McKay** (*Macmillan*)

A companion novel to the Costa-winning *The Skylarks’ War*, following friends on both sides of the conflict in the second world war.

### Poetry

#### Pandemonium by

**Andrew McMillan** (*Cape*)

The Guardian first book prize-winner, acclaimed for his studies of bodies experiencing pressure and pleasure, now turns his attention to stresses placed on the mind.

### Nonfiction

#### The Secret to Superhuman

**Strength by Alison Bechdel**

(*Jonathan Cape*)

A graphic memoir exploring the American cartoonist’s obsession with exercise and fitness fads.

#### Noise by Daniel Kahneman,

**Olivier Sibony and Cass R**

**Sunstein** (*William Collins*)

Three authors, known for *Thinking Fast and Slow*, *Nudge* and other books, combine in a study of how to improve decision-making by reducing “background noise”.

#### Empire of Pain: The Secret

**History of the Sackler Dynasty by**

**Patrick Radden Keefe** (*Picador*)

An American investigative

### Edinburgh Book lovers at the festival



journalist uncovers the secrets of the controversial pharmaceutical family.

#### Burning Man: The Trials of DH

**Lawrence by Frances Wilson**

(*Bloomsbury*)

A sparkling biography that focuses on Lawrence between 1915 and his diagnosis with TB in 1925.

#### Real Estate by Deborah Levy

(*Hamish Hamilton*)

The final instalment in the award-winning “living autobiography” series following *Things I Don’t Want To Know* and *The Cost of Living*.

#### Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe

**by Niall Ferguson** (*Allen Lane*)

The historian takes a timely look at disasters, and how nations cope with them.

## JUNE

International Booker prize winner announced.

**7** Fifty years since the publication of Frederick Forsyth’s thriller *The Day of the Jackal*.

**10** Centenary of publication of first full edition of DH Lawrence’s *Women in Love*.

**16** Women’s prize for fiction winner announced, 25 years after Helen Dunmore won the inaugural Orange prize.

### Fiction

#### A Shock by Keith Ridgway

(*Picador*)

This long-awaited follow-up to

*Hawthorn & Child* focuses on marginal figures on the fringes of London life.

**Tokyo Redux by**

**David Peace** (*Faber*)

The third novel in Peace's Tokyo trilogy follows a missing persons investigation during the postwar US occupation.

**The Wife of Willesden by**

**Zadie Smith** (*Hamish Hamilton*)

Smith translates Chaucer's "Wife of Bath" to northwest London in a rollicking dramatic monologue.

**The Promise**

**by Damon Galgut** (*Chatto*)

From a twice Booker-shortlisted author, the story of South Africa from apartheid to Jacob Zuma, through the decline of one Afrikaner family.

**The Other Black Girl by Zakiya**

**Dalila Harris** (*Bloomsbury*)

Buzzy debut set in publishing that explores race and class in the workplace.

**Monument Maker by David**

**Keenan** (*White Rabbit*)

Genre-straddling epic set around France's great cathedrals from the author of *This Is Memorial Device*.

**Should We Stay or Should We Go**

**by Lionel Shriver** (*Borough*)

A married couple decide on a suicide pact to avoid the indignities of old age, in a satire on society's attitudes to ageing that plays with multiple endings.

**Hard Like Water by**

**Yan Lianke, translated**

**by Carlos Rojas** (*Chatto*)

Love and sex during the Cultural Revolution, from the author of *Serve the People!*

**The President's Daughter**

**by Bill Clinton and James**

**Patterson** (*Century*)

Another outing for the high-profile thriller writing duo.

**Teens**

**Ace of Spades by Faridah**

**Abiké-Íyimidé** (*Usborne*)

"Gossip Girl meets *Get Out*": the debut thriller about high-school racism by a British student that netted a million-dollar deal in the US.

**Nonfiction**

**12 Bytes by Jeanette**

**Winterson** (*Cape*)

A dozen essays on AI from the writer and feminist.

**Rememberings by Sinéad**

**O'Connor** (*Sandycove*)

A "revelatory" memoir from the Irish singer-songwriter, known for her controversial political gestures and conversion to Islam.

**All in It Together: England**

**in the Early 21st Century**

**by Alwyn Turner** (*Profile*)

A history of modern times, ranging from the smoking ban and Grindr to Brexit and Covid.

**An Extra Pair of Hands by**

**Kate Mosse** (*Wellcome*)

A "deeply personal" memoir from the bestselling novelist about finding herself, in middle age, caring for her relatives.

**Consumed by Arifa**

**Akbar** (*Sceptre*)

A memoir from the Guardian chief theatre critic about her sister who died of TB, which also considers the history of the disease.

**The Nature of Middle-earth by**

**JRR Tolkien, edited by Carl F**

**Hostetter** (*HarperCollins*)

A collection of previously unpublished scholarly companion pieces to the novels, covering such topics as Elvish immortality and the geography of Gondor.

## JULY

**Fiction**

**Animal by Lisa Taddeo**

(*Bloomsbury*)

The debut novel from the author of nonfiction hit *Three Women* is a road trip featuring a woman who is driven to kill.

**The Cuckoo Cage:**

**British Superheroes,**

**edited by Ra Page** (*Comma*)

Derek Owusu, Courttia Newland and more draw on folk heroes from protest history to imagine a new generation of radical changemakers.

**Jane Is Trying by Isy Suttie** (*W&N*)

The comic's debut novel features a woman in her late 30s whose life is going off the rails.

**Poetry**

**Bless the Daughter Raised**

**by a Voice in Her Head**

**by Warsan Shire** (*Chatto*)

A first full collection by the poet best known for featuring in Beyoncé's *Lemonade* film engages with "sex, death, race, religion and feminism".

**Nonfiction**

**Things Are Against Us**

**by Lucy Ellmann** (*Galley Beggar*)

Essays on sex strikes, Trump, Hitchcock and other subjects from the author of the acclaimed novel *Ducks, Newburyport*.

**The Comfort Book**

**by Matt Haig** (*Canongate*)

The bestselling author returns with a blend of "philosophy, memoir and self-reflection", described as "a hug in written form".

## AUGUST

It's 25 years since Bloomsbury accepted JK Rowling's first Harry Potter novel in 1996.

**14-30** Edinburgh international book festival.

**Fiction**

**The Women of Troy**

**by Pat Barker** (*Hamish Hamilton*)

In this sequel to *The Silence of the Girls*, former queen Briseis observes the aftermath of the fall of Troy.

**The Morning Star by Karl Ove**

**Knausgård, translated by**

**Martin Aitken** (*Harvill Secker*)

His first novel since the autobiographical *My Struggle* series will be very different, with a range of characters reacting to the appearance of a new star in the sky.

**The Country of Others**

**by Leïla Slimani, translated**

**by Sam Taylor** (*Faber*)

In the first volume of a trilogy about a French family after the second world war, a French woman falls in love with a Moroccan soldier.

**What Strange Paradise by**

**Omar El Akkad** (*Picador*)

The author of *American War*

## 📖 Cover story

gives a child's view of the global refugee crisis.

**Waiting for the Waters to Rise** by **Maryse Condé**, translated by **Richard Philcox** (*World Editions*) From the “alternative Nobel laureate”, a love letter to the Caribbean islands, in which a child is in search of their family in Haiti.

**A Slow Fire Burning** by **Paula Hawkins** (*Doubleday*)

A man is murdered on a London houseboat in the new thriller from the *Girl on the Train* author.

### Teens

**Endgame** by

**Malorie Blackman** (*Penguin*) The final volume in the groundbreaking Noughts & Crosses series.

### Nonfiction

**The Right to Sex** by **Amia Srinivasan** (*Bloomsbury*)

An investigation into male sexual entitlement, porn and other areas where sex and politics meet, by the youngest ever Chichele professor of social and political theory at Oxford, who is also the first woman and person of colour to hold the post.

**Four Thousand Weeks** by **Oliver Burkeman** (*Bodley Head*)

If you live to 80 your lifespan is four thousand weeks ... an uplifting and original exploration of how to use our time well by the former Guardian columnist.

**Tunnel 29** by **Helena Merriman** (*Hodder & Stoughton*)

The story, already told in a successful podcast, of Joachim Rudolph, who dug a tunnel underneath the Berlin wall to rescue people from GDR.

## SEPTEMBER

### Fiction

**The Magician** by **Colm Tóibín** (*Viking*)

*The Master* focused on Henry James; here Tóibín explores the life and work of Thomas Mann.

**Harlem Shuffle** by **Colson Whitehead** (*Fleet*)

Whitehead describes his follow-up



**Dune**  
**Chalamet and Ferguson** in the forthcoming adaptation

to *The Nickel Boys* as a “lively heist” novel set amid the crime syndicates of 1960s New York.

**Bewilderment** by **Richard Powers** (*William Heinemann*)

His tree epic *The Overstory* was Booker shortlisted; now Powers focuses on an astrobiologist searching for life on other planets.

**Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth** by **Wole Soyinka** (*Bloomsbury*)

The Nobel laureate's first novel in almost 50 years promises “murder, mayhem and no shortage of drama” in contemporary Nigeria.

**The Thursday Murder Club 2** by **Richard Osman** (*Viking*)

Last year the *Pointless* co-host's cosy crime debut set in a retirement home broke sales records; here comes the sequel.

**Oh, William!** by **Elizabeth Strout** (*Viking*)

Following 2019's much loved *Olive, Again*, a new novel from the Pulitzer prize winner.

**Matrix** by **Lauren Groff** (*Heinemann*)

The follow-up to US hit *Fates and Furies* features a 12th-century Frenchwoman who becomes the prioress of a failing abbey in England.

**Snow Country** by **Sebastian Faulks** (*Hutchinson*)

A new novel from the *Birdsong* author, set against the build-up to the second world war.

**A Calling for Charlie Barnes** by **Joshua Ferris** (*Viking*)

A novel of fathers and sons

from the Booker-shortlisted US author of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*.

**People Person** by **Candice Cary-Williams** (*Trapeze*)

Estranged half-siblings come together to save the most sensitive of the bunch in this follow-up to her huge debut hit *Queenie*.

**Untitled** by **Bernard Cornwell** (*HarperCollins*)

The historical novelist's first Sharpe novel since 2006's *Sharpe's Fury*.

### Poetry

**All the Names Given** by **Raymond Antrobus** (*Picador*)

Antrobus examines his own ancestry to trace how the long legacies of colonialism and the more immediate influences of childhood play themselves out.

**The Owl and the Nightingale** by **Simon Armitage** (*Faber*)

After *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, the poet laureate returns to Middle English verse and the argument between two birds that was captured in literature's first “debate poem”.

### Nonfiction

**Rationality** by **Steven Pinker** (*Allen Lane*)

A “toolkit for thinking rationally” from the psychologist and outspoken atheist convinced that everything is getting better.

**Untitled** by **Eileen Atkins** (*Virago*)

A memoir from the award-winning actor and co-creator of *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

**Untitled** by **Ai Wei Wei** (*Bodley Head*)

A memoir and cultural history from the Chinese artist and activist, who has taken critical stances against his country's government.

**Foragers and Kings** by **David Graeber** and **David Wengrow** (*Allen Lane*)

A new history of humanity, finished three weeks before the death last year of the anthropologist and anarchist Graeber.

**Terry Pratchett: The Official Biography** by **Rob Wilkins** (*Doubleday*)

The life of the much-loved author of the Discworld series by his assistant and friend for 25 years.

**On Freedom by Maggie Nelson** (*Cape*)

*The Argonauts* writer considers how the concept of freedom is used and abused in relation to art, sex, drugs and climate.

**Greek Myths by Charlotte Higgins** (*Cape*)

An inspired retelling by the Guardian journalist of the labours of Heracles, the Trojan war and other stories – as if they were scenes being woven on to textiles by women.

## OCTOBER

**1** Release of *Dune*, based on Frank Herbert's sci-fi classic, starring Oscar Isaac, Rebecca Ferguson and Timotheé Chalamet.

**3** 25 years since the premiere of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*.

**8-17** Cheltenham literature festival.

### Fiction

#### Crossroads by

**Jonathan Franzen** (*4th Estate*)  
A hat tip to *Middlemarch* in the first of the *A Key to All Mythologies* trilogy, examining the myths and realities of American life through the story of one family in the 1970s.

**Burntcoat by Sarah Hall** (*Faber*)  
A dying sculptor looks back on her erotic life during lockdown in a new novel from the acclaimed short story writer.

**The Thing That Changes Everything by Jennifer Egan** (*Corsair*)

New fiction from the author of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Manhattan Beach*.

**Case Study by Graeme Macrae Burnet** (*Saraband*)

From the Booker-shortlisted author of *His Bloody Project*, a metafictional investigation into analysis and responsibility focused on a controversial 60s psychotherapist.

**Another Name: Septology VI-VII by Jon Fosse, translated by Damion Searls** (*Fitzcarraldo*)

Concluding volume in a major series from the great Norwegian writer.

### Diary of a Suburban Lady

**by Lucy Mangan** (*Souvenir*)  
Comedy of domestic life in the Guardian journalist's first novel, inspired by EM Delafield's classic *Diary of a Provincial Lady*.

**The Selfless Act of Breathing by JJ Bola** (*Dialogue*)

Raw novel about a young Londoner facing police brutality and political angst, who must decide if his life is worth living.

### Poetry

**Winter Recipes from the Collective by Louise Glück** (*Carcanet*)

2020 Nobel literature laureate's first poetry collection in seven years.

### Nonfiction

#### Orwell's Roses

**by Rebecca Solnit** (*Granta*)  
The American writer takes a distinctive approach to Orwell's life and messages, centred on his love of nature and gardening.

**A Carnival of Snackeries by David Sedaris** (*Little, Brown*)

More funny vignettes and revelations from the American humorist in a second volume of diaries, following *Theft by Finding*.

**Untitled HG Wells biography by Claire Tomalin** (*Viking*)

The renowned biographer has long been at work on this study of the author of *The War of the Worlds* and *The Invisible Man*.

**This Book Is a Song by Jarvis Cocker** (*Cape*)

The Pulp frontman and broadcaster writes about creativity.

**Spiderwoman by Lady Hale** (*Bodley Head*)

A memoir from the spider-brooched senior judge, known for her bombshell ruling that proroguing parliament in the run-up to the Brexit deadline in 2019 was unlawful.

## NOVEMBER

Booker prize awarded

**11** Bicentenary of the birth of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Russian author of *Crime and Punishment*.

### Fiction

**Untitled by John Banville** (*Viking*)  
A new novel from the Booker-winning author of *The Sea*.

**Peaces by Helen Oyeyemi** (*Faber*)  
The story of a mysterious train journey from the ingenious author of *White Is for Witching* and *Mr Fox*.

**Twelve Percent Dread by Emily McGovern** (*Picador*)

Second graphic novel from the *Bloodlust and Bonnets* author, in which two young women navigate the anxieties of modern life in London.

**The Gardener by Salley Vickers** (*Viking*)

The follow-up to 2019's *Grandmothers*.

### Poetry

**Howdie-Skelp by Paul Muldoon** (*Faber*)

Muldoon's capaciousness here takes in a remade *The Waste Land*, an elegy for his fellow Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson, sonnet responses to lockdown and translations from 9th-century Irish.

### Nonfiction

**Silent Catastrophes: Essays on Literature by WG Sebald** (*Hamish Hamilton*)

A collection of literary criticism from the author of *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*.

**The Waste Land: TS Eliot, Ezra Pound and the Making of a Masterpiece by Matthew Hollis** (*Faber*)

The poet, editor and Costa biography award-winning author of a study of Edward Thomas considers the writing of one of the 20th century's most famous poems.

## DECEMBER

**12** Bicentenary of the birth of the French novelist Gustave Flaubert, best known for *Madame Bovary*.

**27** 150 years since the publication of *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll's second Alice novel ●

Raven Leilani's buzzy debut novel *Luster* follows a young black artist drawn into an open marriage. *Lisa Allardice* talks to her about losing her faith, writing sex - and a year of family tragedy

# 'I try to replicate a version of sex on the page where you as a reader feel like a voyeur'

A couple of months before graduating from New York University's MFA fiction programme, Raven Leilani was in Zadie Smith's class when she got a text from her agent saying that an offer had been made on her first novel, *Luster*. When it was published in the US a year later, last summer, it went straight on to the New York Times bestseller list and was given an admiring review in the *New Yorker*. Its publication in the UK this month has been heralded with interviews in glossy magazines, including *Vogue*.

The novel has been "received in a way that I honestly couldn't even hope for", Leilani says from her Brooklyn apartment. Like Edie, the artist protagonist of *Luster*, the author, now 30, had spent many years "doggedly practising her craft", writing in between whatever nine-to-five job she was doing to pay the rent, all the while updating a spreadsheet of rejection letters. But while finally having her book "out in the world" has been "incredible and surreal", it has also been a very difficult year. In April, she lost her father to coronavirus. Her brother died of a rare neurodegenerative disease in September. "Am I allowed to curse?" Leilani asks politely. "It's been a true mindfuck."

*Luster* confronts racism, sexism and capitalism in a feverish blast of sex, smart observations and fury that owes as much to TV hits *Girls* and *Fleabag* as to acclaimed literary contemporaries Sally Rooney and Ottessa Moshfegh. Written in a high-voltage register, the novel takes gleeful delight in subverting literary expectations. Edie, a 23-year-old publishing assistant, is having an affair with fortysomething Eric (who sweetly corrects her online typos). So far so 19th-century with broadband. "The first time we have sex, we are both fully clothed, at our desks during working hours, bathed in blue computer light," it begins. But

Edie has been recruited to sex-up a suburban couple's open marriage, in which the rules have been laid down by Eric's wife, Rebecca. In a narrative of shifting power, Edie ends up moving into the family home while Eric is away, borrowing Rebecca's clothes and befriending their adopted daughter, Akila, the only black kid in the neighbourhood. Rebecca, a medical pathologist who wields garden secateurs like her bone cutter, could have been a stock vengeful scorned wife. Instead Leilani brings the two women together "to create a kind of unstable and combustible union, which was really fun to write".

The title is a play on "lust" and lustre, a type of glaze. "For me the book is about desire, and what it means to try and seize the right to make art as a young black woman," she explains. "I had those two main poles of the book - there's the body and then there's art." Leilani is also an artist; art was her "first love" - lockdown has sent her back to her easel. "It was like a switch flipped and I started painting like crazy." Above all, she wanted "to faithfully depict a black woman's consciousness", to write a character "who has opted out of respectability", who "lives in defiance of the experiment of containment that I think all black women are trying to live against". In short, a young woman who was "human, by which I mean fallible. Edie's journey is brutal. Not only does she personally mess up a lot on the page but in pursuit of her art she fails constantly. It takes a lot to retain that lustre, that yearning in the midst of an environment that is invested in quietening you, dampening that spirit." The novel is driven by "a rage of having this self that is sublimated as you try to project the most curated and palatable form to the world".

**Raven Leilani in Brooklyn, New York**

As has been enthusiastically noted, the novel doesn't shy away from 

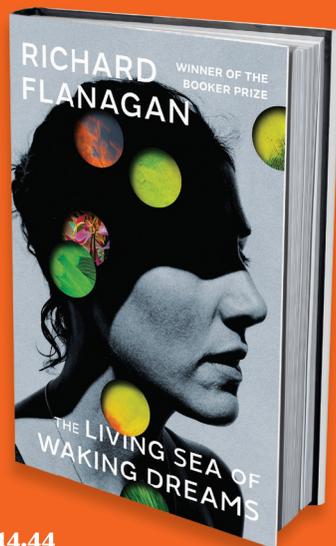




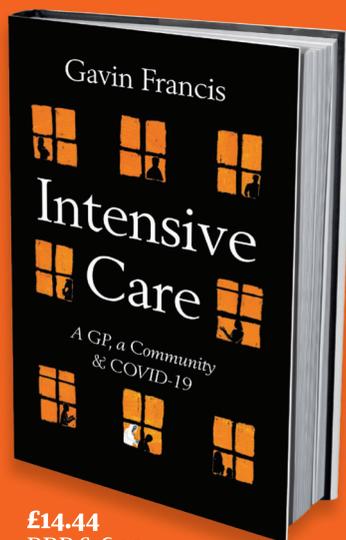
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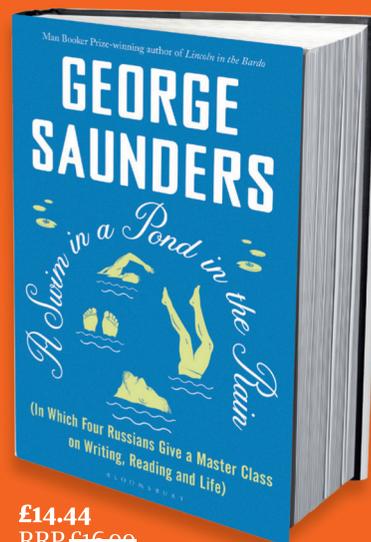
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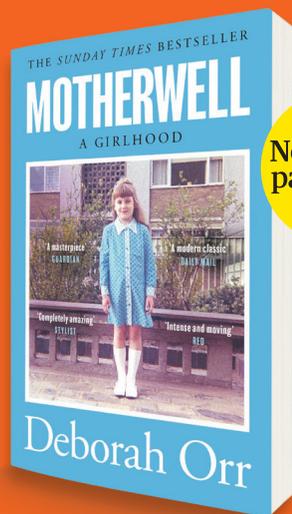
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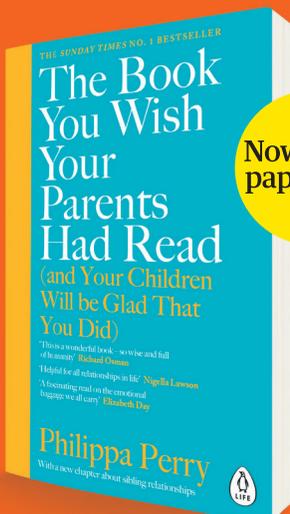


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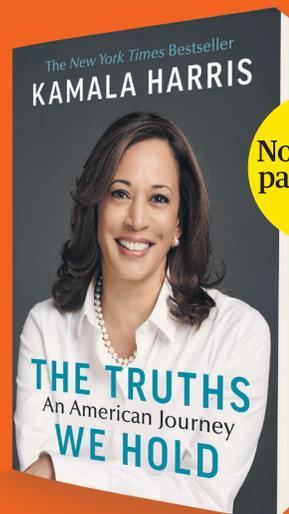
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# The Guardian Bookshop

◆ what Leilani calls “the sticky logistics of sex”. She credits an Audre Lorde essay with giving her “permission to splay and to be overt with my feelings”. For her, a “special ingredient in sex that really jumps off the screen or the page is an oscillation of power”. It is here that the imbalances on which the novel rests are most obvious: from the workplace sexism, where Edie is fired for “sexually inappropriate” behaviour, despite the eager participation of everyone from Jake in IT to art director Mark; to her relationship with Eric, as partial to a spot of violence as to the use of semi-colons; and the erotic frisson between Rebecca and Edie. “Sex was really important to me,” she says. “I try to portray it in the way that moves me when I see it, when it is awkward and silly, which it often is. To depict it that way is to make it tender; what it looks like when two bodies that are very different, get to know each other. So I try to replicate a version of sex on the page where you as a reader feel like a voyeur, because for me that is the most enjoyable kind of sex to watch and to read.”

While the novel is 100% fiction, she did “what all writers do. I used the data that was there.” This data includes everything from a passion for comics and disco, in particular Donna Summer (“I needed that bit of joy”); the grisly technicalities of Rebecca’s job (her mother was a mortuary technician); to her own experiences working in a library, in a low-paid publishing job and a stint in the gig economy as a Postmates delivery person to fund her MFA. When we meet her, Edie is “the managing editorial coordinator” for a children’s imprint, “meaning I occasionally tell editorial assistants to fact-check how guppies digest food”.

The publishing scenes are among the sharpest in the novel, including a tirade on the “Diversity” offerings – a joyless list of slave narratives, white martyrs and urban gang violence – all the more acute in a year when the industry has been criticised for its lack of inclusivity. Leilani wanted to include “what it was like to be writing and trying to carve out space to do that while I was working my jobs and dealing with the kind of war on all fronts that you deal with as a black woman”. And the novel is at pains to depict the precariousness of being a young person one student loan repayment away from destitution, where the excitement of a date is not so much the sex but a decent dinner.

Leilani was born in the Bronx, but the family moved to a small town near Albany in upstate New York when she was seven. Their deeply religious West Indian household comprised just her mother and father, a veteran the same as Edie’s; her two brothers were much older, “they were grown and gone”. The younger of her brothers gave her her first comic book, setting her on the path to fandom: “Like Akila I was a real geek.”

She came to books late; as a child the Bible was her main reading. When she was 17, in her first year of college she was sent on a study year to Florence; it was the first time she had been away from home and had to maintain her faith on her own – “It didn’t go well.” Abandoning the church was “a hard and formative

moment” in her life. “I really was a person who believed deeply,” she says. “But it felt like the right thing to do. So I left my faith, after much agony.” As a lapsed believer (again like Edie) she is fascinated by the relationship between grief and God: “I’m always really interested in how the godless make sense of human tragedy, how people make sense of the senseless.”

She shows off a tattoo from Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle ...” on her wrist, “the first piece of real writing that touched me”. She began writing poems, and her prose is charged with an intensity and rigour, aiming for “a voice that is sensitive to language, that is really particular at the sentence level”. These long, looping sentences begin in one place and often lead somewhere unexpected. “I think that surprise is central especially to poetry but also to comedy,” she says, always asking herself: “What is the most true but surprising way to frame this?” And this is nowhere more evident than in the sex scenes, such as this snippet from a page-long Molly Bloomish sentence: “For a moment I do rethink my atheism, for a moment I consider the possibility of God as a chaotic, amor-

**The novel might be ‘as filthy as it is because of my years of being so pious’, she laughs. ‘It’s course correction’**

phous evil who made autoimmune disease but gave us miraculous genitals to cope ...” The novel might be “as filthy as it is because of those initial years of being as pious as I was”, she laughs. “It’s course correction.”

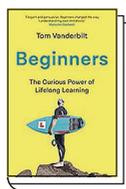
Her experience of growing up in a small town where there were “only a handful of people of colour” is replicated in the novel. Edie feels surveilled the moment she enters suburbia, and Edie and Akila are harassed by the police, who don’t believe they live in the smart district. “Black people have been recording our reality for a long time,” she says of the Black Lives Matter moment, into which her novel has landed. “It feels like a mixed blessing that it would take so much carnage, that it would take endless footage for us to get here.” But she is hopeful “because I do feel like more people are deciding not to look away”.

She is also cautiously optimistic about Joe Biden’s victory. “These last four years have been catastrophic,” she says. She holds the Trump administration’s handling of the pandemic responsible for her father’s death. “That is one thing I can take personally, a direct result of government neglect and the complete apathy this administration has for its people, especially for its people of colour. The consequences have been vast and dire.”

*Luster* was published after her father’s death. Both he and her brother made it possible for her to have written it: “I’m grateful that I got to show them through my work how much they both meant to me.” For the first time she is able to devote herself to writing full time, and she has “tons” of ideas for future novels. “It’s where I’m happiest,” she says. “On the page” ●

## Book of the week

### { Self-help } Singing, juggling, surfing, playing chess ... a year of gaining new skills shows why it's never too late to learn *Joe Moran*



**Beginners: The Curious Power of Lifelong Learning** by Tom Vanderbilt, Atlantic, £16.99

Most highly skilled fields have rude names for beginners. In surfing you are a “kook”, in chess a “patzer”, in competitive cycling a “Fred” and in the US army a “boot”. “Dilettante”, from the Italian *dilettare*, to delight, has come to mean a frivolous dabbler. “Amateur”, with its roots in the French word for love, now often

means inept, bungling, uncommitted.

And yet there has never been a better time to be a beginner. Learning platforms such as Coursera, Skillshare and Duolingo sell you an experience that you can fit around your busy life, achieving mastery in short bursts. The enforced inertia of lockdown seems to have led to a wave of intellectual and creative self-improvement, at least for the first few weeks. As a man arrested for illegally performing cosmetic surgery put it: “Pretty close to anything you want to learn you can learn off YouTube for free.” More than 100 “Smule babies” have been reported by couples who met performing duets on the online singing app.

In this book, Tom Vanderbilt joins the growing army of beginners. Stuck in a gentle rut of mid-career competence, he decides to spend a year learning new skills. He hires a singing teacher and joins the Britpop Choir, which performs songs by Blur and Oasis. He takes up drawing, then surfing. He learns to juggle. With the help of a jeweller, he even makes his own wedding ring. None of these projects turn into life-altering passions. They are simply “capricious and tenacious enthusiasms”, in James Dickey’s phrase, done for the fun of it.

The spur for all this comes from Vanderbilt’s experience of parenthood, an “epistemically unique” activity which can only be learned in the doing of it. All parents are beginners, and beginner teachers, clumsily passing on knowledge to their children (never more so than in the past year). As he watches

his daughter effortlessly picking up how to swim or play chess, Vanderbilt worries that he has left it too late. “It’s hard to be old and bad at something,” as a friend, returning to hockey in middle age, puts it.

The same doubts have plagued me as, in the last couple of years, and at a similar age to Vanderbilt, I too have taken up singing. Is it worth investing so much effort in my voice when it will already be succumbing to gentle, age-induced decline? Vanderbilt doesn’t try to gloss the hard facts about learning and ageing – babies learn best of all – but he offers some cautious reasons for hope, and shows that learning at any age is good for you.

He also passes on plenty of good technical advice. For instance, we tend to fixate on the idea of a “high” note as something just that – vertically high – when it is nothing of the sort. So when straining for a “high” note we lift our heads up, tighten our shoulders and even stand on tiptoe, reaching for that note on the ceiling – all things that make it harder to reach. The tongue, Vanderbilt finds, is the singer’s worst enemy because it gets in the way of exhaled breath and sound. So focus on the vowels; vowels are the voice and consonants are its interruption. Even if you’re not a singer, this is all fascinating.

Vanderbilt learns that beginners within any given pursuit are all alike: they make the same mistakes. Novice archers always grip the bow too tightly and aim too long. Novice chess players always move their pawns too much and bring out the queen too early. Novice artists always overstress the things that are important to them. When drawing a face, they make the eyes too big and higher up than they are actually are, and the forehead too small. They draw the object they see in their heads, not the series of lines and angles in front of them. The good news is that, since beginners all fail in similar ways, they can all get better in similar ways.

There is a certain bitterness to this book, with each section on a particular skill feeling self-contained. This is partly because, as Vanderbilt concedes, skill learning is specific. Nothing about trying to stand up on a wobbly surfboard will help you learn to draw. Even skills such as surfing and cycling, which both require good balance and body strength, have little crossover.

Gradually, though, an overall argument emerges, even if Vanderbilt is overfond of supporting it with

**Being a beginner is good for the brain, because you are putting it through the equivalent of high-intensity workouts**

the standard formulae “according to research” and “studies have found”. He believes, like Zen Buddhists, that we should all cultivate a beginner’s mind, as an encouragement to creativity, openness and humility. Being a beginner is good for the brain, because you are putting it through the equivalent of “a variety of high-intensity interval workouts”.



GUY LEVY/BBC/PA WIRE

Absorption in any new activity is meditative and makes you see the world differently. After his drawing classes, Vanderbilt finds himself stopping in the street to study “the subtle dynamics of a cityscape reflected in a car’s hood, or the textural pattern on the peel of an orange”.

Hearteningly, he achieves tangible results with relatively little painful effort. People appreciate his inexpert but improved singing, because most people can’t sing very well. The title of one scholarly paper he cites – “Imprecise singing is widespread” – says it all. The acid test is “Happy Birthday”, the most familiar song in the language and yet quite hard to sing, because it spans an octave and moves up and down it dramatically. Juggling is another crowd-pleasing skill that can be learned in just a few days, once you teach your brain that it is less about throwing individual objects than “throwing to a pattern, like tossing to a little algorithm in the sky”. He quickly establishes that juggling gains you instant kudos among any group of seven-year-olds.

This story mirrors mine. After you have been doing your job for as long as Vanderbilt and I have, people simply expect you to be proficient and stop praising you for your work. This is especially true in my own field of academia, where most of the feedback you get is critique; unqualified praise is rare and viewed,

**New steps**  
**Karen Hauer and**  
**Jamie Laing in *Strictly***  
***Come Dancing***

I have long suspected, as vulgar. But when I resolved recently, in lockdown, to learn how to play the spoons, I found

out how easy it was to impress people with little clips posted on YouTube. After a couple of months spent learning a superficially difficult skill, I was receiving the kind of affirmation that I had not had since primary school.

But it’s not really about the praise. As someone who, like Vanderbilt, mostly “pushes electrons for a living”, the tactility of learning a new skill is itself comforting and grounding. This is Vanderbilt’s great revelation – that in a world where apps constantly rate us and measure our performance, so that learning anything becomes another form of work, we should enjoy the process more and worry less about the product. All he achieves in the end is a modest competency in various unrelated activities. But it has brought him “an immense and almost forgotten kind of pleasure”. This book conveys that pleasure and is itself a pleasure to read. It made me want to get back to my singing, and my spoons.

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

## { Health } Do we think of people who keep fit as more successful? The rise of a modern obsession

*Steven Poole*



**The Age of Fitness**  
by Jürgen Martschukat,  
translated by Alex Skinner, Polity, £20

When did “fitness” become a pastime in itself, an interest separated from any particular physical activity? When people employ a “personal trainer”, what are they training for? And when did “fitness” become not just a physical but a moral good, the obligatory aim of every citizen? Luckily this book enables one to approach such

mysteries from the comfort of one’s armchair.

The word “fit” appeared in English (as “fyt”) in the 15th century, meaning appropriate or well suited. In Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII*, when the king sends for his new secretary, Gardiner, saying “I find him a fit fellow”, he doesn’t mean that the man has admirable cardiovascular capacity. Early on, too, “fitness” acquired a moral patina, as it could mean a person’s worthiness rather than simply suitability, and “the eternal fitness of things” was an 18th-century catchphrase about humans’ correct (“fitting”) relationship with a divinely ordered universe.

Only in the 19th century does “fit” acquire the sense of having some athletic capacity, apparently influenced by Darwin’s employment of the term “fitness” in *On the Origin of Species*, where it describes the likelihood of an organism’s leaving offspring in a particular environment. According to the *OED*, the first animals to be described as “fit” in the athletic sense were racehorses in the 1870s, followed a decade later by “men and camels”. The word became fashionable: by 1891 a dictionary of English idioms notes that if asked how one is, one may reply “Very fit, thank you; never felt better”.

Fitness as we now understand it became fashionable then too, as Jürgen Martschukat’s fascinating history shows. By 1915 the expression “keep fit” was in widespread use, a US sports magazine reported. Especially in America, Martschukat argues (in Alex Skinner’s translation), “the activation of the body, and especially the white male body”, was the necessary response to the threat to white supremacy represented by

increasing immigration to the US. This equation of physical exercise with national purity, of course, reached its apex in Nazi Germany, as the author describes. But that does not mean our modern concept of fitness is ideologically neutral, or indeed freely chosen.

Darwin did not originally write of the “survival of the fittest” under the pressures of natural selection, but he approved of the phrase after it was first used by Huxley, and social Darwinism embraced the idea fully. Our own hyper-individualist age also portrays the world as a merciless battle of all against all, and so “fitness” as we understand it today becomes another obligation of the precarious worker and a way to disaggregate the social spreading of risk: hence, for example, employee health programmes and insurance discounts offered to people who go regularly to a gym.

This development, too, has long roots, as Martschukat shows: already in the early 20th century, “the enfeebled body of the neurasthenic, male white-collar employee became a symbol of the threats and crises besetting modern societies”, and subsequent fitness crazes, from the invention of jogging in the 1970s to the discovery of Viagra (which the author interestingly analyses as another pharmacological invention in “fitness” writ large: a fusion of health and “performance”) were all marketed first to middle-aged men.

These days, as the author reminds us, there is almost nothing that doesn’t impinge on “fitness”. Everyone should be taking supplements, and even sleep has been app-ified so that the obedient worker in the age of the quantified self might maximise her productivity during the next workday. “In neoliberal times,” Martschukat writes, “preventive self-care is the

**The combative or militarised tone of many fitness regimes – boot camp, boxercise – encourages customers to think of them as heroic**

task of each and every one of us.” But the combative or militarised tone of many modern fitness regimes (boxercise, boot camps, Tough Mudder) encourages their customers to think of doing so as actually heroic. “If the fitness aficionado strives for a higher good, as befits a true hero, then this good is their own success, raised to the status of social principle.”

One irony in all this is that the success of hypermuscular actors Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone in the 80s helped create modern gym culture, and yet the torsos of Rocky or Conan the Barbarian are not exactly models of what we now desire as “fitness”: they are too extreme. Martschukat views them as ugly, even monstrous, but one might agree more with Arnie, who in the era of his pomp described himself as a sculptor: his body was a countercultural work of art, beautiful yet in some profound sense useless. In these times, just to slump back and eat crisps while watching *Predator* might, too, be a precious form of resistance.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

## { Society } An examination of capitalism's hold over us, from trading Pokémon cards to planning for retirement

### Aminatta Forna



#### Having and Being Had

by Eula Biss,  
Faber, £15.99

As a writer Eula Biss has two great gifts. The first is her ability to reveal to the reader what has, all along, been hidden in plain sight. She did this in *Notes from No Man's Land*, her collection of essays that ruminate on the pervasiveness of racism in everyday life in America. Her other talent is for laying bare our submerged fears.

In her 2015 book *On Immunity*, Biss traces the history of vaccinations, and the fear many Americans have of inoculation, and connects them to the anxieties of modern motherhood.

In *Having and Being Had*, both gifts are on display. Biss traces the roots of our assumptions about wealth, work and property, and reveals the ways in which capitalism is inculcated and internalised - how we subscribe to its demands from the moment we are born. We have been saturated in it for so long we no longer feel it. If you are over 40 and ever wondered what exactly happened to your life, Biss puts her finger on it, and then presses hard.

In 2014 she bought her first house, with her husband John. This should have made her happy, instead it made her uncomfortable in a way she couldn't describe, so she bought a diary and tried to figure it out. That diary eventually became this book, which takes the form of a collection of vignettes that capture her work as a writer and teacher, and her role as a wife and mother - all viewed through the lens of capitalism.

She reads books, she talks to people - everyone from her own mother, who has rarely had money, to economists. For Biss, money was once something she saved in order to buy time, specifically time to write. She

travelled light. Suddenly she found herself locked into a game she couldn't escape. She must furnish the house, she must maintain the house, which is not just a house but an asset. "Middle age is really all about maintenance," her mother once told her. Her area is gentrifying. An older black woman, who is being evicted from the house her grandfather built because she can't afford the soaring property tax, orders Biss off her lawn. A bank regulator, who owns a house on the same street, somehow manages to arrange the eviction of boys who live in a house to which the police have been called. "He's not concerned about his safety," John says to Biss. "He's concerned about his property."

To keep the house, she must keep her job. Working for the Man, she has less time to write. She sees a financial adviser about retirement planning. The financial instruments are complicated and replete with moral issues - a company she might invest in may treat its workers well, but endangers the environment. None of the possibilities seem truly ethical. "I ask him if he can imagine this system of investment coming to an end. No, he says, your money is safe. But that's not what I'm asking. I'm asking if there is any way out of this."

The pervasiveness of consumer capitalism once seen cannot be unseen. Her son starts trading Pokémon cards at school and a squabble breaks out between the kids over their value. The cards are only worth what someone will pay for them, much like a Picasso. The interdependent relationship between work and art vexes. Virginia Woolf treated her cook, Nellie Boxall, poorly, underpaying her and firing her after Boxall was hospitalised. For a few decades after the second world war, regulations were enacted to protect workers from this kind of treatment. No more.

Biss watches *Scooby-Doo* with her son. The gang are on the track of villains trying to scare people with phoney ghosts so they can get their grasping hands on riches. A father in the playground says the show is "about dysfunctional capitalism, right? Capitalism gone wrong. People who are trying to game the system." But, Biss thinks, isn't that just capitalism?

She doesn't so much prescribe as describe. There have been rebellions against capitalism, though

**Rookie traders**  
**Children swapping**  
**Pokémon cards**

none ultimately successful. Communism, of course, but also gift economies. The Diggers arose in England in the mid-17th century after

the English civil war: "Their plan was to give the food away to anyone who worked with them, and to forge a new economy - not feudalism and not capitalism either." Ultimately the Diggers fled England - to America, where their ideas have been forgotten.

"If a person is not a liberal when he is 20, he has no heart; if he is not a conservative when he is 40, he has no head," goes the saying, ascribed to Churchill and also John Adams. And if you are not deeply discomfited by the time you finish reading *On Having and Being Had*, you have no conscience.

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



## Fiction

### The complications of love, race and family are expertly untangled in a novel of shifting perspectives *Ian Williams*



**Memorial**  
by Bryan Washington,  
*Atlantic*, £14.99

Put yourself in Benson's shoes. Your partner's mother, whom you've never met, arrives from Japan, just as your partner is leaving to see his dying father. You're left in an odd-couple situation with a woman who, over breakfast, asks: "So, how long have you been sleeping with my son?" Your relationship

with her son, Mike, is possibly disintegrating or settling into monotony or whatever it is heterosexuals also dread. And finally, your own family is so fractured that you can't approach the pieces without hurting yourself.

This is how we enter Bryan Washington's *Memorial*, a novel in three sections. It flies us from Houston to Osaka and back to Houston, transporting us from Benson's head to Mike's and back to Benson's.

A writer in his 20s, Washington already shows poise with his subject matter and cool control over his formal options. What I really want to say is, he's a *chill* writer. Characters haunt dating apps; they text, and Washington reproduces them on the page without fanfare or self-congratulation at how contemporary his novel is. His first book, *Lot*, a collection of short stories, won the 2020 Dylan Thomas prize and the Lambda award for gay fiction, among others. In that book Washington wrote with big love for Houston; here he adds an intimate knowledge of Japan, writing from places and positions that we haven't seen before in literature.

Now put yourself in Mike's situation. You've left your partner behind with your mother while you take up residence in Japan with your estranged father, a man who previously abandoned your family, and has cancer, but continues running his bar as if nothing's wrong. You're in an interracial relationship with Benson, a black man. It's wilting. When you first met, he was a mystery and a challenge, but now he is understood. You're in a rut.

The seduction of the first person is irresistible: it mimics the real-life tendency to favour our own point of view. Because the novel begins with Benson, our loyalties and sympathies are trained on him. But when

the novel shifts to Mike's perspective, our loyalties realign. In this little manoeuvre lies the novel's secret power. *Memorial* reveals our incredible openness to believe, excuse, or empathise with whoever we feel closest to at a given moment. Naturally, by the time we shift back to Benson in the novel's closing section, we do so a little reluctantly, knowing he's not entirely the person he makes himself out to be.

What is so impressive about Washington is his restraint. He knows how to temper and balance. He does not indulge character and voice - or other pampered aspects of the literary novel - at the expense of plot. He tugs his plot forward by braiding the past with the present, home with work, Houston with Osaka. Race, sexuality, grief, trauma and class are timely subjects and Washington handles them with seriousness but not reverence. He can be funny without clowning around for approval. Characters fight physically; they hurt each other in so many ways. Yet none of it goes reported to authorities. *Memorial* reads like the unreported lives of people getting by without the mediation of police, social workers or therapists - in some ways the true undocumented people of the country.

The book's short sections can feel staccato. Perhaps Washington mistrusts our attention span. When Ximena, Benson's colleague at the school childcare centre, gets the last word in these short episodes, she delivers them with a scene-stealing hunger: too much well-timed wisdom and wit. At other points, the dialogue flattens out into Cormac McCarthyish rhythms. OK. OK. OK? Yeah. OK. OK then. Yeah.

**By the end, we want for Benson and Mike what we want for ourselves: a little happiness, a little love**

All in all, though, Washington's instincts lead in the right direction. He transforms revelations into cliffhangers, like Elena Ferrante. He writes layered sex scenes, like Garth Greenwell. He delights in describing intricate food prep, but without an impending Virginia Woolf dinner party. By the end, we want for Benson and Mike what we want for ourselves: protection from the

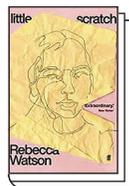
battering of life, a little happiness, a little love.

The achievement of *Memorial* is not in its mainstreaming of gay sexuality but its accomplishment of something far simpler: what is it like to see the world from Benson's perspective? What is it like to see the world from Mike's? Only in shifting perspectives, in temporarily relinquishing our own, can we inhabit a relationship from two sides. After a year that has formalised the appropriate distance between humans, Washington offers that fundamental skill, so lacking in American politics - to attend to another person's subjectivity as if your life depended on theirs.

*Reproduction by Ian Williams (Dialogue) won the Giller prize. To buy a copy of Memorial for £13.04 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).*

## We inhabit a young woman's mind over the course of a single day in an experimental debut about power and agency

### Alex Clark



**Little Scratch**  
by Rebecca Watson,  
Faber, £12.99

Rebecca Watson's debut novel started life as a piece that was shortlisted for the White Review story prize in 2018; in it, we follow the narrator's thoughts during her lunch break, as she ladles canteen soup into a takeaway cup, goes blank when a colleague asks her what she's read recently and

then repairs to the office loos to scratch - and try to stop herself scratching - the skin on her legs until they bleed and, eventually, scab over. Afterwards, she returns to her soup, and reads a corporate email about sexual harassment, which provokes a stream of thoughts and feelings that seem connected to the scratching.

The story was a glimpse into the two different systems of being that most people experience simultaneously most of the time: the scheduled, material, almost mechanical flow of time (here, a lunch break, a conversation); and the private, interior anarchy of emotion, sensation and semi-articulation that unfolds in each moment. It was rendered in daringly disrupted form: prose that fragmented into something more like poetry; sudden shifts in the typography; staccato repetitions and bracketed text; a narrative that appeared to split, like a peloton of cyclists separating to go either side of a roundabout, before reconfiguring, subtly altered.

Watson has now extended her story to run through-out a single day, from the moment the narrator wakes, groggy, mildly hungover, late for work, until the moment she surrenders herself to sleep. Nothing truly exceptional happens to her - she commutes into central London, waits out the hours at work and then meets her boyfriend for a Friday night out - and yet every moment feels filled with life and with jeopardy.

This is partly because of the story that Watson gives her protagonist, which is revealed in fits and starts, sometimes obliquely and at others with forceful directness. The narrator has recently been raped by her boss, a fact that appears to remain entirely private - certainly, she has not told her boyfriend, or the mum with whom she exchanges



quick catch-up texts on the way to work. She imagines telling him as they sit drinking pints in a pub:

*me softening, him softening, me not needing this, him not needing this, unable to still him how I used to but still, him softening, head tight my head tight tight tight tight why always this when I need it least, if I told him I was raped would he dismiss it? shrug his shoulders say good for you I know he would not be like that really really (and yet my head says he would) (well why don't I try it then hey)*

She is unable to speak for a variety of confused and confusing reasons: fear that he will not understand; an internal conflict between a self that seeks to mitigate what has happened to her (she hasn't been killed, she wasn't chained up in an underground room) and another that is loudly, angrily insistent on naming what has been done; a desire to keep the world as it was before, and herself in it, unharmed - not least so that she can preserve herself as a sexual being.

What is striking about *Little Scratch* is Watson's ability to connect her character's inner monologue with her physical existence; she is never less than fully embodied. Her mental meanderings and digressions never feel like abstract exercises in portraying thoughts or testing language. Moments of self-harm or appalled recognition of the trauma that the narrator is living through are refracted through the commonplace experiences of drinking water or walking up a flight of stairs; Watson neatly sketches the alienation from one's environment that carries over into the body, occasionally making her appear to us like a figure in a game, navigating space, avoiding pitfalls, getting through to the next level.

Writing like this is often described as something that one should surrender to in order to properly appreciate, almost as if it were a kind of Magic Eye picture that will yield its real form if you allow yourself to de-focus. But while it's true that rhythm, cadence and suggestion can be stifled by the rigid pursuit of literal meaning, experimental fiction demands the reader's rigour and attention. (Put more prosaically,

**Rebecca Watson**  
**Prose fragments**  
**into something more**  
**like poetry**

when a writer takes up most of a page by repeating the word "filling" because her character is, indeed, filling a water bottle, it can really speed up getting to the end of the book. But then you'd miss wondering, like me, whether it's a sort of joke about filling a page.)

Experimentation aside - and it is not to everyone's taste - *Little Scratch* is an extremely perceptive depiction of power and agency: in the modern workplace, where age-old and patriarchal hierarchies persist; in the modern world, where communication is truncated even when we have too much to say; and in the modern novel, where a character must find a way to name her own experience, even if only to herself.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

# This speculative epic set in a world where colonialism never happened shines with energy and verve

## Adam Roberts



**A River Called Time**  
by Courttia Newland,  
Canongate, £16.99

It speaks to the hold TV still has over our culture that Courttia Newland, the author of seven novels and co-editor of *The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain*, is best known today for the scripts he wrote for Steve McQueen's BBC series *Small Axe*. Excellent scripts they are, too, and there is

something televisual in the way Newland pitches his new novel: lots of visual description, busy with incident and plotty twists and turns. Where *Small Axe* grounds its stories in the lived experience of real people from the 1960s and 70s, *A River Called Time* reaches forward into a near-future alternative reality. If there are aspects of this world-building that don't entirely work, then maybe that reflects the broader influence on fiction of TV. Newland is certainly not the only contemporary writer trying to reproduce the immediacy and kinetic hustle of visual drama; but TV and novels tell stories in quite different ways, and sometimes that difference jars.

*A River Called Time* is set in Dinium, a version of London where most live among squalor, disease and violence, although a wealthy few occupy "the Ark", an elite enclosure in the centre of the city. Our protagonist, Markriss Denny, grows up poor in the suburbs but has special powers: he can astrally project himself. He wins a place inside the Ark, but once there he finds his troubles are only just beginning. It turns out that his oldest friend, Ayizan, is actually his astral rival, and must be destroyed if the world is to be saved.

Newland gives his dystopia an extra spin by making it an alternative history. In this world European interactions with Africa, stretching back to ancient Egypt, were treated as opportunities to learn and mingle,

not to exploit and enslave. As a result, magical African abilities (squashed in our timeline, the implication is, by the horrors of colonialism) have flourished, becoming a kind of world religion. Not that the global garden is rosy. A mega-corporation called E-Lul dominates, using *Matrix*-like pods to sedate the populace via "crystal energy" that fills people's nights with "dreams of tranquil places". As for Dinium, it was wrecked by a mysterious "War of Light" in 1814-18 and has never really recovered.

Alt-history is a venerable science-fictional mode, but usually the moment where the story's timeline diverges from "real" history is relatively recent: the South wins the US civil war, Hitler prevails, that kind of thing. The problem with setting that hinge point thousands of years into pre-history is that the subsequent divergence must perforce be so huge as to lead to an utterly different, unrecognisable "now". But while Newland's dystopian London is vividly rendered, it's always recognisably our London, only a little scuffed and distressed from its glorious-grubby actuality. In this novel the Thames is called the River Azilé, but Charlton FC are still called Charlton FC.

But perhaps this is to nitpick. The story is readable and absorbing. There's a fair amount of astral gubbins ("this is uraeus, a weapon that uses your sixth and seventh naardim to harness psychic force", and so on), which some readers will find more congenial than others, but which Newland carries off with likable chutzpah. His dialogue is good, as you might expect, but the descriptive prose is sometimes overfruity. The desire to avoid cliché is commendable, but sometimes effortful stylistic ingenuity backfires. When he is turned away by a butler, we're told that "an out-of-depth feeling lapped at Markriss's chin". His *chin*?

A stranger rushes Markriss with a knife, "blade phallus-ready". "Eyes hidden, cast at their feet" suggests eyeballs, not glances, hitting the ground. "Nesta's tears obeying gravity's rules, not those of teenage boys, falling to the concrete regardless of his wish" is an over-fancy way of saying "he wished she wasn't crying".

"The woman's legs stretched gantry high" isn't as sexy as it thinks it is. Such moments are symptomatic of a writer straining for effect - aiming, perhaps, for a televisual vividness rather than resting content in more literary restraint.

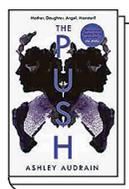
Where the novel really comes into its own is the final quarter, when various diverging timelines are gathered into a multiverse bouquet. It almost makes up for the disbelief I couldn't quite suspend in the earlier stages. Conceivably these latter sections work best because here Newland is back in the "real" world, and that's where he is best fitted as a writer. But if *A River Called Time* left me with some reservations, no one can doubt the sheer energy and verve of Newland's vision.

*Adam Roberts's Purgatory Mount will be published by Gollancz in February. To buy A River Called Time for £13.04 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).*



HOWARD KINGSNORTH/GETTY

A gripping debut that explores and manipulates the fears and insecurities of mothers everywhere  
*Christobel Kent*



**The Push**  
by Ashley Audrain,  
Michael Joseph, £12.99

Ashley Audrain's block-busting debut about the dark side of motherhood opens with Blythe literally on the outside of her own daughter's life, standing on the pavement outside her ex-husband's new home, gazing at what she must accept as the happy family within.

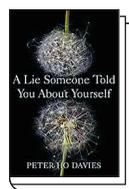
Audrain then takes us back to Blythe's beginnings as a mother, and her earlier abandonment by the icy Cecilia, who was herself the daughter of abusive, psychotic Etta. We learn of Etta's life, and of Cecilia's, their stories of trauma and neglect interwoven with Blythe's. "The women in our family, we're different," Blythe says. And yet, like her mother and grandmother before her, she falls in love and gets pregnant - with a daughter, Violet.

From the start Blythe feels her family history threatening to overwhelm the stability for which she has struggled. She can't love her daughter, and Violet proves to be a difficult child: contrary, unsettling and eventually frightening. And then Blythe gets pregnant again, with a son, and what began as anxiety turns into terror. Well thought out, vividly realised and gripping, this is a clever concept novel that manipulates the fears and insecurities almost every mother has, however happy her own childhood. Its fierce gothic energy comes in part from the dark stories of Blythe's antecedents and in part from the ever-present, primal fear of the Bad Mother: the one who surrenders to her worst impulses. And then there is Violet: does she represent the newest manifestation of what begins to feel like a family curse, or is Blythe projecting her fears about herself on to an innocent child? This is the tightrope the novel walks, and it is a largely successful balancing act, due to the sheer compelling power of its narrative drive.

Lacking the toxic sociological heft of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the book can feel exploitative and occasionally overwritten (a new mother's eye bags are "plum-coloured hammocks"), but given the strong meat that is its subject matter, that is hardly surprising. To say that the ending left me flabbergasted and incensed would be an understatement, but this could well be Audrain's intention. One of the messages she urgently conveys is, after all, that this reproduction business does not end simply, easily - or, indeed, ever.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

Wet wipes, popsicles and terrible loss ... a frank account of fatherhood, told with fearless honesty  
*James Smart*



**A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself**  
by Peter Ho Davies,  
Sceptre, £14.99

This powerful account of fatherhood begins with tests, chromosomes and complications; the chance that the birth might be "normal", and the chance that it might not. More tests come, and a choice is made: to terminate the pregnancy. The couple return home and, slowly, start to think of what might come next. "Will you write about it?" asks the wife. "You can, if you want."

Peter Ho Davies's narrator is, like him, a US-based author and creative writing professor. And so he writes about what might have been, and what is: a boy, conceived months later. There are tests for him too - this time for autism - and then sleep training, wet wipes, popsicles and Harry Potter. The parents have their own trials: fatigue, arguments, reconciliations, the slow creep of age.

At times, Davies's autofiction has the easy cadence of a stand-up set, of shared laughter at "Cheerio squalor" and poos in the local pool. The father tells stories in silly voices; the boy, reared on blooper clips, goes to a wedding and is shocked when no one tumbles off the dancefloor into the cake.

But this is a complicated story, told with fearless honesty. The prose is rueful, spare and matter-of-fact, but emotions churn beneath the clean surface. It can be very funny, but it can also stop you in your tracks. "How do you mourn something you killed?" wonders the father, after a counsellor suggests a ceremony for their aborted foetus. He goes on to volunteer at an abortion clinic, where he holds an umbrella to shelter pregnant women from protesters' spittle.

The narrator wonders if it's OK for a man to have views on abortion. He writes about it - and about his doubts writing about it - with a thoughtful frankness that runs right through this account. There's no certainty here, no right choices and precious few epiphanies. It's a book about getting by, and about loss: the loss of one pregnancy, then the slow loss of a child, as their son grows into a man. It's a reminder that parenthood cannot be tied into a clean knot or wrapped up with a pithy joke; an acknowledgment that raising a child can be baffling, traumatic and transformative - and that once the hard work is done, it leaves an ache.

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

## Books for a new year

Sophie Hannah



I have a suspicion about 2021. Even though it has only just started, I'm guessing it will turn out to be a year that contains joy, pain, excitement, fear and every other possible human feeling. If I am right, then 2021 - despite being a new beginning - will be very much like 2020, which also contained the full range of wonderful-to-terrible emotions.

I've heard many say "Good riddance to 2020" and I understand why, but it also makes me want to correct the misunderstanding. A year is a moral-value-free and agenda-free unit of time. It has neither agency nor culpability. It is merely a container inside which we have experiences.

For anyone keen to turn over a new leaf in their reading life, I have some recommendations.

I would urge every sentient being to read all six of Agatha Christie's gripping Mary Westmacott novels: **Giant's Bread**, **Unfinished Portrait**, **Absent in the Spring**, **The Rose and the Yew Tree**, **A Daughter's a Daughter** and **The Burden**. Each of these is, in its own way, concerned with a new beginning, for good or ill - and sometimes very ill indeed. They are often described as romantic novels. In fact, they are fascinating explorations of interpersonal relationships and the human condition. Discovering them has enabled me to experience a new form of Christie fandom. I had not read these books until very recently because I assumed they couldn't possibly be as brilliant as her crime novels; I was wrong.

I would strongly recommend that everyone pre-orders **Girl A** by Abigail Dean, about a girl whose new life starts when she escapes from an abusive family. It's a riveting page-turner, and full of hope in the face of despair.

Another superb novel about creating a new life with a new identity is Philippa Gregory's **Zelda's Cut**. I first read it more than a decade ago and it's still vividly imprinted on my memory, as is its lesson: that we can always choose who we want to be, and never have to let others define us.

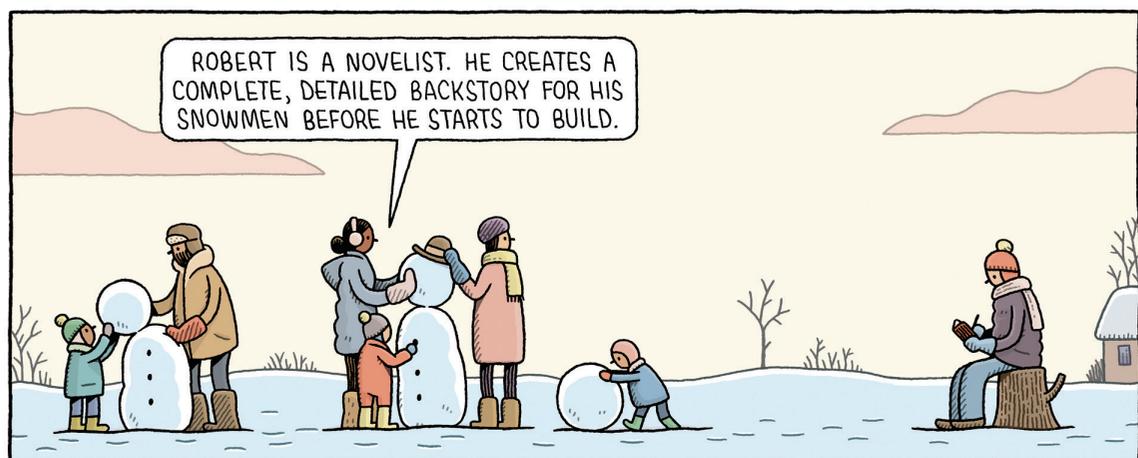
New starts require new thoughts and beliefs, for which I recommend **Finding Your Way in a Wild New World** by Martha Beck, a self-help book about how to move more deeply into experience-without-language-and-opinion. One of the routes to enhanced peace of mind, Beck argues, is to work out the precise way in which the opposite of whatever you believe

is also and equally true. I tried it. It worked!

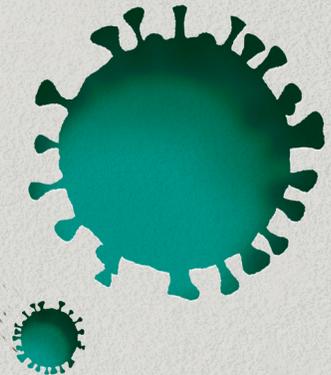
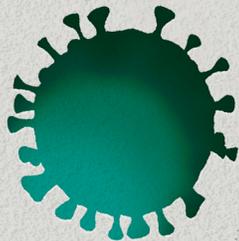
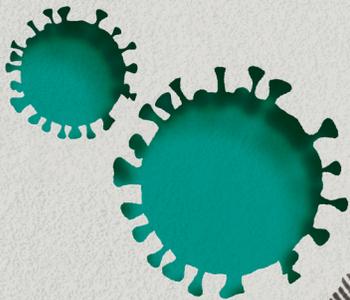
I also had a love-at-first-read experience with **The Enchiridion** by Epictetus (to whom I was introduced by the brilliant podcast *Philosophize This!*). Epictetus was a slave and a Stoic who believed that "men are disturbed not by the things that happen, but by the opinions about the things". We can't control what happens in the world, or even to our own bodies, but Epictetus believes we can always control our own minds by, for example, deciding to like (or at least be at peace with) whatever we cannot prevent from happening. And yes - Hellenistic philosophers and American life coaches really do sit side by side on my shelves, and I am delighted to see them hanging out there together.

*Sophie Hannah's Happiness, a Mystery: And 66 Attempts to Solve It is published by Wellcome Collection.*

## Tom Gauld



# Covid is tearing a hole in young people's lives



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appeal  
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