



Out of darkness

How Biden can save America

—
By Fintan O'Toole

Review

Saturday 16 January 2021 - Issue No 156

The
Guardian



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Review

Saturday 16 January 2021 - Issue Nº 156

'Fiction is fundamentally an act of sharing, of intimate human communion. There's no limit to its intimacy, nor its candour. To be drawn into a story is like receiving an embrace, to know you are not alone.'

– Graham Swift, page 25

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The week in books

16 January

Book, interrupted

Even as a devoted pessimist, “global pandemic” was no higher than No 8 on my list of potential career-enders. (No 1 was always “I run out of ideas”.) But when Covid arrived it seemed obvious that *Exit* - due to be published last June - would be my last book. How could it not be, with that title and its theme of end-of-life choice?

However, my publishers, Transworld, took a more pragmatic view, and postponed publication - it comes out next week - to give it a better chance. “A better chance at what?” I initially wondered. “Being used as toilet paper in the post-apocalyptic moonscape where London used to be?” But eventually a delay seemed to make sense.

Six months on we are

back in lockdown but pressing pause allowed time for publicity and marketing teams to learn what could work in this grave new world. It gave readers time to readjust. The tiniest of bookshops learned to move mountains and kept serving loyal customers, and supermarkets have been stalwart in their support. All in all the experience has been humbling. Through a miserable year, people have

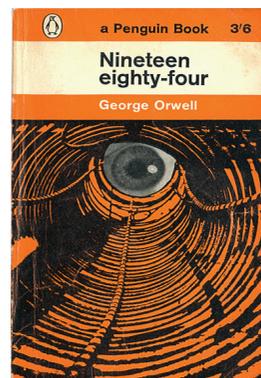
Through a miserable year, people have managed to reorganise themselves and maintain their enthusiasm for books

managed to reorganise themselves, refocus and - incredibly - maintain their enthusiasm. Not just for my book, but for *all* books. Do please buy them where and when you can. **Belinda Bauer**

Orwell, by George!

One gets used to words tugging free from their moorings and rampaging off into a linguistic stratosphere where they can mean anything that their user wants them to mean. Just like “Dickensian”, which in nine cases out of 10 these days is simply used as a synonym for “Victorian”, as employed this week by the Republican senator Josh Hawley after his book contract was cancelled by Simon & Schuster, has barrelled off into a debatable land far removed from its original meaning in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, morphing into what the literary theorists used to call a floating signifier.

So omnipresent is Orwell in our world and



our media that it seems instantly claimable by virtually anyone who has a grievance. Once precisely applied to a landscape in which any kind of individual spirit was routinely suppressed by vigilant, all-seeing and technologically enabled totalitarian authority, in Senator Hawley’s nimble hands it now seems to mean the exercise of any authority or judgment, legitimate or otherwise. Not that this should surprise us - after all, one of the insurrectionists who stormed the Capitol last week was wearing an Orwell T-shirt.

DJ Taylor

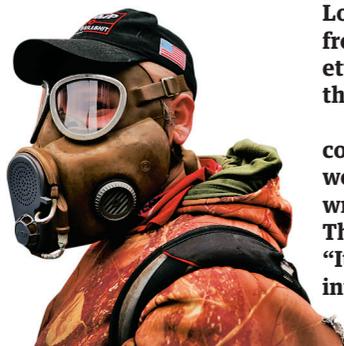
Insurrection

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

After Trump loyalists stormed the Capitol, observers talked of “insurrection” and speculated about a further attempt on inauguration day. But “insurrection” is an old word for an old thing, of which Britain does not lack historical examples.

The first recorded use of “insurrection” in English, indeed, is in parliamentary papers describing the armed **revolt** led by Jack Cade in 1450, who marched on London to protest against the corruption of Henry VI’s government. It comes from the Latin *insurgo*, meaning “to rise up within”: so insurrectionists are, etymologically, the same as “insurgents”, even if that is normally a word for those who do not meekly accept western military rule.

If, on the other hand, we approve of an **armed uprising** against another country’s government, we might call those involved “rebels”. Indeed any such word implies a moral evaluation, as the English historian Henry Thomas Buckle wrote in 1858: “Insurrections are **generally wrong**; revolutions are always right.” Thinking more metaphorically, his US contemporary James Russell Lowell wrote: “It is not the insurrections of ignorance that are dangerous, but the revolts of intelligence.” Had he lived to the year 2021, he might have changed his mind.



SPENCER PLATT/GETTY



'Jane Eyre made me almost keel over from boredom'

Jenny Offill

The book I am currently reading

Flights by Olga Tokarczuk. I knew nothing about it when I started and have been pleasantly surprised to find it is filled with weird anecdotes such as the one about the 17th-century Belgian anatomist who kept his amputated leg in the headboard of his bed so he could study it whenever he fancied.

The book that had the greatest influence on me

Jesus' Son by Denis Johnson. And yes, I know, I know, it's like the Velvet Underground thing. (Not that many people bought the first album but everyone who did started their own band.) *Dept. of Speculation* is written very much in its shadow. For his part, Johnson liked to claim he just ripped off *Red Cavalry* by Isaac Babel.

The book I give as a gift

I like to give people *The Principles of Uncertainty* by Maira Kalman because it is a serious book disguised as a whimsical one.

The book I think is most overrated

My daughter had to read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* over the summer and I gamely agreed to read it with her. Oh my god, I thought I would keel over from boredom. All the long monologues about truth and virtue. The endless part where she might marry her tedious cousin and become a missionary. The only interesting part was the wife in the attic but for that

bit you can read Jean Rhys's infinitely superior novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The last book that made me cry

No One Is Talking About This by Patricia Lockwood.

The last book that made me laugh

I just reread *Out of Sheer Rage* by Geoff Dyer and I love how he is so insanely cranky about his life.

The book I'm most ashamed not to have read

The one I promised to blurb that is sitting on my desk.

The book I'd most like to be remembered for

That super geniusy one I am no doubt any day now going to write.

My earliest reading memory

I had a book based on Hans Christian Andersen fairytales that someone gave me when I was little. There was one story I particularly loved. It was about a boy who went off to seek his fortune and traded his sheep for three dogs. The first dog was named Salt and his power was that he could always find him food; the second was named Pepper and his power was that he could tear attackers to pieces. The last one was Mustard, who could break iron or steel chains with his teeth. Oh, how I wanted these dogs! I can't even remember what happened in the story except that all the dogs were put to good use by the end. As a bonus, the book was illustrated in a wonderfully lurid way.

My comfort read

I like to read the listings for miniature foods and furniture and animals on Etsy sometimes late at night. I never buy anything, but I always think I will.

Weather by Jenny Offill is published in paperback by Granta on 28 January.



Remaking America

Biden's skills as an operator, a fixer, are finely honed - but they cannot restore a pre-Trump normality. He is a political horse whisperer who has to deal with mad dogs. As president, his private self, shadowed by time and loss, must come into its own. By *Fintan O'Toole*

Every year after 1975, Joe Biden, his second wife Jill, his sons Beau and Hunter and their growing families, would gather for Thanksgiving on Nantucket island off Cape Cod. Part of the annual ritual was that the Bidens would take a photograph of themselves in front of a quaint old house in the traditional New England style that stood above the dunes on their favourite beach.

In November 2014, when Biden was serving as Barack Obama's vice-president, he found, where the house should have been, an empty space marked out by yellow police tape. The building, he wrote in his memoir *Promise Me, Dad* had "finally run out of safe ground and run out of time; it had been swept out into the Atlantic".

This absence haunted him. On his return to Washington, Biden "kept seeing the little ... house, undermined by the powerful indifference of nature and the inevitability of time, no longer able to hold its ground; I could almost hear the sharp crack as its moorings failed, could envisage the tide as it washed in and out, pulling at it relentlessly and remorselessly until it was adrift on the water, then swallowed up by the sea."

CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY

If Biden were to write this now, it would read as a heavy-handed political metaphor. He is about to fulfil an ambition that has driven him for half a century by assuming the presidency of the United States.

But he arrives to find that great office a ruin, with police tape all around it. Donald Trump's demented last days have washed away the illusion of the US as a stable, settled democracy. On 6 January, a date that will live long in American infamy, all the entitled rage of the white nativism that Trump has channelled finally burst through the seawalls that protected the illusion of a healthy, functioning republic. The polity escaped complete inundation, but the breach is gaping.

Yet Biden, in 2014, was not thinking of the collapsing house as an image of American politics. It troubled him, rather, as a token of the fragility of human existence. Has there been, at least since Abraham Lincoln, an American president so melancholy? One so inclined to view the world through the lens, not just of history, but of eternity?

The impulse comes with the territory of Biden's Irish Catholicism, its fatalistic view of this earthly existence as, in the words of the rosary, a "valley of tears". This is, as Biden sees it, "the Irishness of life".

This rueful stoicism is, however, primarily shaped by intimate experience: the road crash 

that killed his first wife, Neilia, and their daughter, Naomi, in December 1972, shortly after Biden was elected to the Senate at the age of 29; Beau's death from cancer in 2015. When he was a young senator, the journalistic in-joke was to refer to him as "Joe Biden (D-Del, TBPT)". Those last four letters stood for "touched by personal tragedy", a label that clung to him like a clammy mist of perpetual mourning.

The odd thing is that this tragic vision just might be what his country needs right now. Perhaps the way that the old house acts as both a political metaphor and a personal memory points to a confluence of the man and the moment. Perhaps the dark shadow of TBPT that walks beside the triumphantly ascendant Potus is not so much a ghost and more a guardian angel.

The culture wars that have racked America, and the flags waved during the assault on the Capitol that said "Jesus is My Savior, Trump is My President", make it too easy to see the Republicans as religious zealots and the Democrats as rational secularists. Too easy, therefore, to miss the most obvious thing about Biden: his religious sense of mission.

In his speech accepting the Democratic party's nomination for the presidency he evoked "a battle for the soul of this nation". He conjured Trump as a malign demiurge who has "cloaked America in darkness", plunged the country into "this season of darkness", and written "this chapter of American darkness". He promised to be "an ally of the light, not of the darkness".

In normal times, this rhetoric would seem ludicrously over the top, all the more so coming from a garrulous, glad-handing old Irish pol, who spent 36 years in the Senate and eight as vice-president. Biden is not obvious casting for the role of apocalyptic warrior.

In fact, however, as 6 January made all too clear, Biden's oratory is understated. The darkness of Trump's presidency has not been a season or a chapter. Biden's own presidency cannot, therefore, be an American spring that naturally succeeds the Trumpian winter, or a happy resolution to a grim but temporary twist in America's narrative of democratic progress.

The darkness, as Trump's antics and the violence of his most loyal supporters have demonstrated, is not going to go away at the flick of a switch. Biden's great strength may be that, because of what life has done to him, he knows his way around in the dark.

There are, in effect, two Bidens: the politician and the person. The second is more interesting than the first. The paradox is that the more personal his presidency is, the more politically potent it can become.

Trump abolished the distinction between the private and public selves of the presidency, embodying the principle of personal rule, government by whim, instinct, gut feelings and above all by self-interest. The logic would seem to be that Biden has been elected to do the opposite. But it is a logic he has to resist.

There are, of course, many basic ways in which Biden must indeed restore the idea of a government of laws, not of men. The rule of law itself has to be re-established after Trump's flagrant delinquency,

corruption and treachery. The commitment to competence and expertise, so wilfully trashed by Trump, has to be renewed. The tools of democratic deliberation - truthfulness and evidence-based rationality - have to be refashioned.

As the mob took control of the Capitol, Biden called for "the restoration of democracy, of decency, of honour, of respect, the rule of law. Just plain, simple decency." No doubt in that moment, these words resonated with the majority of Americans.

The danger though, is that this idea of restoration slips too easily into Biden's instinct, forged over five decades of deal-making, for doing business as usual. It dismisses Trump as a wild, one-off deviation, a freakish fever after which the body politic can return to its natural, healthy condition of consensual bargaining.

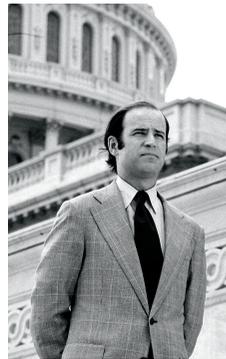
What makes this temptation so attractive is sheer relief. After the relentless torrent of toxicity that has poured out from Trump, even the sound of silence would be a joy. Biden offers the chance to exhale. But the pleasure, however deep, will be brief. Consensus is not on offer.

Biden the Irish pol is a revenant from a dead era. His skills as an operator, a fixer, a problem-solver, are finely honed - but they are redundant. He is a horse whisperer who has to deal with mad dogs. He is a nifty tango dancer with no possible partners. There is no reasonable, civilised Republican opposition with which he can compromise. There can be no such thing as a unilateral declaration of amity and concord.

If he did not know this already, the Republicans' support for the nullification of the November election, maintained by its leaders in the House of Repre-

sentatives even after the storming of their citadel, has surely brought it home to him. The most basic rule of the old order - the acceptance of the result of an election - can no longer be taken for granted. There has been an open attempt to turn the US into an authoritarian regime in which elections exist merely to endorse the eternal strongman. What has happened once can happen again.

And this is not just about Trump. Nearly 75 million people voted for him knowing (because he so repeatedly told them so) that he would never accept defeat. Almost the entire Republican party in Congress either explicitly supported his attempt to subvert democracy or sat



Biden has to create a bold departure away from the hollow promises of the American dream and towards a new, real equality

silent for months while it unfolded. For Biden to pretend that he can restore a pre-Trump normality would be disastrous. Trump and the Republican base he still owns will simply exploit conciliation to make Biden look weak and foolish.

In that sense, the political Biden is not the man who can change America. It is that other, richer persona, the private self, shadowed by time and loss and a sense of tragedy, that must come into its own. His supporters understood this in November - they voted for him in unprecedented numbers, less because of what he said he would do and more because of who he is: a man of sorrow acquainted with grief.

Biden's tragic self now rises to meet two American tragedies, one very immediate, one long and slow. The immediate one is the malign mishandling of the pandemic. Trump, at his inauguration four years ago, spoke of "American carnage". He did not say that he would cause it. The most powerful country in the world, with vast scientific and logistical capacities, has allowed close to 400,000 of its people to die from Covid-19, very many of them because of lies and misgovernment.

Trump did not feel this pain, either personally or electorally. Biden does feel it. His own sorrows have made him deeply attuned to the meaning of death, but also profoundly resilient in the face of its deprivations. If the purpose of tragedy in art is to allow us to look death in the eye and not be defeated by it, Biden's life experience has uniquely fitted him to fulfil that purpose in public life. He can allow Americans to grieve, while also restoring their faith in science, reason and good government.

If he does this successfully, he will also have the authority to address the other, historical American tragedy: the irony of great republican ideals built on foundations of cruelty, oppression and structural inequality. He will have a moment in which he can confront the other truths that are self-evident: that gross racial, social and economic inequity has always disfigured the US. If the tumult of the last two years has made anything clear, it is that the denial of this truth cannot persist.

In this, his familiarity with the dark can be Biden's great strength. In his own life, he has been there and come back. He knows that it cannot be denied, but that it can be transcended. He can invite America to encounter its own darknesses - the legacy of slavery, the persistence of official and unofficial white supremacist violence, the failure to provide the access to education and healthcare necessary for the equal dignity of citizens - while reassuring its citizens that after such acknowledgement can come real change for the better.

The great problem of American political discourse has always been - strangely for such a biblical culture - a refusal to accept the idea of original sin. Tragic narratives are driven by some version of this idea: something went wrong at the beginning and, until it is confronted and expiated, it will continue to play itself out in havoc and pain.



**Entitled rage
Trump's demented
last days have
washed away the
illusion of the US as
a stable democracy**

The mainstream American narrative has worked in the opposite direction. The foundational acts are sacred. If the present has gone wrong, it is because we have deviated from

our origins. We must return to those foundations and we will be great again. Trump repeated exactly this story; Biden must break from it once and for all.

The current conservative image of the American polity is as a solid house unfortunately invaded by a boor, who took possession of it for four years and wrecked the joint. It is time to call in the restorers: Joe Biden & Co.

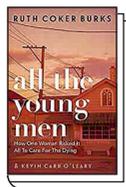
The truth is closer to that vanished house in Nantucket that so haunted Biden. The Trump years represented the crumbling of a building "no longer able to hold its ground". His increasingly deluded and destructive ramblings are "the sharp crack as its moorings failed". The ramparts of law and order that were supposed to protect it failed and it has been flooded by a high tide of proto-fascism.

You don't try to rebuild on land that has been washed away. You move elsewhere. In his own mad, intuitive way, Trump has already done this for his followers. He no longer even pretends to occupy the terrain of democracy. He has built his own new piece of real estate in which the US is a demagogic despotism, wholly owned by himself and his family. Even after the deadly debacle of 6 January, a huge part of the American polity is content to up sticks and follow him there.

Biden has to create an equal and opposite space, with an equally bold departure, away from the hollow promises of the American dream and towards a new awakening of real equality. He has, after all, little to lose, not just in the political sense of having no second term to win, but in the personal one of having already endured so much loss. He has the paradoxical freedom of knowing that nothing that lies ahead of him is likely to be as bad as what lies behind him. In that freedom lies the possibility of a courage adequate to the fight he has promised to engage in - a relentless struggle for America's soul ●

Book of the week

{ Biography } A renegade Florence Nightingale cares for the ill in an uplifting tale of combating prejudice *Olivia Laing*



All the Young Men: How One Woman Risked It All to Care for the Dying
by Ruth Coker Burks,
by Ruth Coker Burks,
Trapeze, £16.99

In the spring of 1986, Ruth Coker Burks was in the medical centre in Little Rock, Arkansas, visiting a friend with cancer, when she noticed three nurses drawing straws to see which one would have to enter a patient's room. Curious, she snuck down the corridor to take a look. The door was hung with a scarlet tarpaulin and a biohazard sign. Food trays

were piled on the floor outside, along with a cart of isolation suits and masks. Inside, she found an emaciated young man calling for his mother.

When Coker Burks challenged the nurses, one of them told her she was crazy to go in. "He's got that gay disease," she said. "They all die." They refused to contact the patient's mother, and so Coker Burks made the call from a payphone herself. "My son is already dead," the woman told her. "My son died when he went gay." Appalled, she went back to the room and sat with the young man, holding his hand until he died a few hours later. But when she told the nurses he was dead, they insisted that she was now responsible for the body. It took hours of phone calls before she found a funeral home willing to perform the cremation. As for the ashes, she buried them herself in a cookie jar at Files Cemetery in Hot Springs, where her family owned some land.

This was Coker Burks's introduction to Aids, the disease that would come to shape her life. In 1986, Aids was a death sentence. Five years after the New York Times had reported the first cases under the famous headline "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals", there was still no reliable treatment, let alone a cure. The fear, ignorance and stigma were so great that hospitals regularly refused to treat patients. Informal networks of care were predominantly urban, centred in the gay capitals of New York City and San Francisco. The pressure group Act Up would not be founded for another year. In the south,

people were coming home sick and terrified, hoping for refuge with their families, only to be rejected and die alone.

Coker Burks was 26 that year, a bottle-blonde Methodist and divorced single mother in a hyper-conservative town where divorce meant "social death". In Arkansas, consensual sex between two men was punishable by up to a year in prison. She knew that helping people with Aids put her at risk of losing custody of her four-year-old daughter, never mind being shunned by other parents, co-workers or members of her church. But, as she explains, there was literally no one else. Within weeks of her first deathbed encounter, she was rung up by a nun who told her a patient had been dumped on the doors of the Catholic hospital and they were "not equipped" to treat him and anyway didn't "want the reputation". Once again, she sat by his bed, holding his hand until he died.

The calls kept coming, first from hospitals, and then from the men themselves. With no treatment, people were dying with terrifying rapidity, a life expectancy counted in weeks, not months. She educated herself about the virus by sneaking into the library at the local teaching hospital. She helped people get on disability benefit and found them places to live. In between her shifts at a sawmill, she cooked nutritious meals for her patients, begging for vegetables from neighbours and bone marrow from local deer-hunters. When the antiretroviral drug AZT was approved in 1987, she set up an ad hoc home pharmacy in her pantry, filled with stockpiled pills left behind when people died. Realising early diagnosis meant a longer lifespan, she got a friend to teach her to take blood, stole needles from nurses' stations and took the samples in a minnow box to the state health department, getting them tested anonymously under names like Ronald Reagan and Minnie Mouse.

I admit I was sceptical of a narrative about an angelic straight woman saving helpless gay victims, the Hollywoodisation of the Aids crisis that runs all the way from 1993's *Philadelphia* to 2013's *Dallas Buyers Club*. But it's hard not to be disarmed by Coker Burks (ably ventriloquised by her ghostwriter Kevin Carr O'Leary). She dresses prettily in floral frocks to charm doctors, whom she then browbeats with statistics about cytomegalovirus and pneumocystis - anything to improve the treatment of her "guys".

If she needs to feed them, she has no compunction about climbing into the dumpster at the Piggly Wiggly and helping herself.

Although her pastor did not agree, she believed she was doing God's work and refused to stop, even though she and her daughter Alison were systematically isolated by their community.



Ruth Coker Burks



ALLSTAR/FOCUS FEATURES; CAROLINE M HOLT

A sample incident: after Alison's father was killed in a car crash, the pastor refused to let them participate in the family advent service, explaining to Ruth: "You're not a family. You don't have a husband." Later, after she started appearing on TV, people burned crosses on her lawn.

They found a new community at Our House, a gay bar two doors down from the police station. Here Ruth met Billy, AKA Miss Marilyn Morrell, a ravishing drag queen who became her closest friend. For the first time, she and her daughter had a family who loved them, who'd babysit and do the school pickup. Her own mother had been abusive, and it's evident that her sense of solidarity with the sick came from an intimate knowledge of what it meant to be hated and excluded. Drag balls also provided her with a vital infusion of fun. Later, visiting a strip club, she can't help but be shady about the girls' lacklustre dancing compared to the manifest glories of Mother Superior and Cherry Fontaine.

Over the years Coker Burks buried more than 40 people at Files Cemetery in secret, and sat at the bedside of hundreds more. But as Aids care became increasingly professionalised in the 90s, she was left behind. It isn't clear why this competent woman was repeatedly turned down for jobs, but maybe she

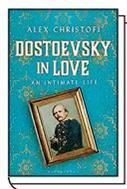
Hollywoodising the Aids crisis
Jared Leto, left, and Matthew McConaughey in Dallas Buyers Club

functioned best as a renegade, doling out condoms at the cruising ground, a sex-positive Florence Nightingale.

It is not to diminish her story to say that heterosexual angels weren't the dominant narrative of the Aids crisis, but a vanishingly rare exception to a rule of homophobia, cruelty and prejudice. That said, there's something immensely uplifting about her decision to involve herself in the travails of a community not her own, simply because she could see that there was a need. It's a brighter story of human nature, an analogue to this winter's tale of good Samaritan Sikhs bringing curry to stranded Bulgarian lorry drivers in Kent. There are other stories of the Aids epidemic that foreground activism and community (look out for Sarah Schulman's forthcoming history of Act Up, *Let the Record Show*), but this is a paean to making friendships across boundaries, to being kind even when the cost is nearly unbearable.

Olivia Laing's Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency is published by Picador. To buy All the Young Men for £14.99 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Biography } Unpredictable, dangerous and thrilling ... a Russian novelist's epic life is expertly captured
Frances Wilson



Dostoevsky in Love: An Intimate Life
by Alex Christofi,
Bloomsbury, £20

The first time he fell in love, Fyodor Dostoevsky was in his mid-30s. He had written two famous novels, *Poor Folk* and *The Double*, been arrested for treason, suffered a mock execution, and served four years of hard labour in Siberia. He was now, in 1854, serving as a private in the army and the object of his desire, Maria

Isaeva, was the capricious and consumptive wife of a drunkard called Alexander.

When the Isaevs moved to the mining town of Kuznetsk, 700 versts away in southwestern Siberia (roughly 750km), Dostoevsky's love seemed doomed. Then Alexander died, leaving Maria alone in poverty. Dostoevsky sent her his last roubles and a proposal of marriage, telling the coachman to wait for her answer before making the week-long journey back through the snow. She turned him down: she could never marry a penniless private. She then fell in love with a man who was just as poor, and a simpleton: "I barely understand how I go on living," Dostoevsky wrote, aware this melodrama was repeating the plot of *Poor Folk*.

He eventually married Maria, and had his first full epileptic fit on their wedding night. She never recovered from the sight of his writhing, crumpled body: "The black cat has run between us," as he put it in *The Insulted and the Injured*. The couple shared not a single day of happiness, but then it is hard to find many days of happiness in his story at all.

The life of Dostoevsky was nothing if not Dostoevskian. It was suffering, he believed, that gave value to existence: "Suffering and pain are always mandatory for broad minds and deep hearts," he explained in *Crime and Punishment*. "Truly great people, it seems to me, should feel great sadness on this earth." His mother, also called Maria, had died of TB when he was 15; soon after his father was found dead in a ditch, possibly murdered by the serfs on his estate. *Poor Folk* made him a literary sensation but earned him no money, and the little he did earn was lost on the

roulette wheel. While his novels mined the psyche, he did battle with his body: myopia, haemorrhoids, bladder infections, emphysema. By the time he was writing *Devils*, his seizures had become so severe that he had no memory, when he regained consciousness, of either the novel's plot or the names of his characters.

Dostoevsky, who died aged 56, did not write an autobiography but "buried his heart", as Alex Christofi puts it, in his fiction. Christofi, also a novelist, describes *Dostoevsky in Love* as less a biography than a "reconstructed memoir". His method has been to "cheerfully commit the academic fallacy" of eliding Dostoevsky's "autobiographical fiction with his fantastical life". This is achieved by blending his authorial voice with that of Dostoevsky, in sections lifted from the letters, notebooks and fiction and stitched seamlessly into the text.

One example of how Christofi deals with the facts can be seen in the account of the mock execution with which his book begins. The effect is of having Dostoevsky in the room with us, reliving the horror of it all while also being aware of what a good story it makes. What becomes clear is that Dostoevsky the lover was not dissimilar to Dostoevsky the epileptic, Dostoevsky the gambler, or Dostoevsky facing his death: each was unpredictable, dangerous and thrilling.

In addition to Maria, he had two further serious love affairs. Polina, the beautiful, unhinged daughter of a serf caused him nothing but grief, while Anna, the stenographer who became his second wife, stood by him while he repeatedly pawned their few belongings then lost the money at the casino. The way he proposed

to her, Christofi writes, "is so quietly bashful that you can't help wanting to hug him". He is quite right, but I won't give away the plot.

The life of Dostoevsky was nothing if not Dostoevskian - it was suffering, he believed, that gave value to existence

Christofi's interest, however, is not only in Dostoevsky as a lover of women. It is also in Dostoevsky as a believer in Christian love. This belief lay at the heart of his novels and by the end of his life he was regarded as a prophet, spreading the

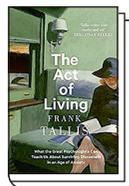
gospel of universal harmony. After his rousing speech in honour of Pushkin, "strangers sobbed, embraced each other and swore to be better people, to love one another". Two old men came up to tell him that "for twenty years we've been enemies ... but we've just embraced and made it up. It's all down to you."

Novelists tend to make good biographers, not least because they know how to shape a story, and it is no mean feat to boil Dostoevsky's epic life down to 256 pulse-thumping pages. *Dostoevsky in Love* is beautifully crafted and realised, but it is the great love that Christofi feels for his subject that makes this such a moving book.

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

{ Psychology } We need a strong sense of self to feel safe, to be loved. Can reading Freud and other analysts help?

Lisa Appignanesi



The Act of Living: What the Great Psychologists Can Teach Us About Surviving Discontent in an Age of Anxiety
by Frank Tallis,
Little, Brown, £18.99

An old man with a shaggy white beard and matching hair stands in front of an audience of seekers and flower children. They are looking for ways of amplifying their human potential, of becoming more aware of their sense perceptions. It's the tail end of the 1960s and the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, is where it's happening.

Throughout the decade, the fame of Fritz Perls soared. Perls's "Gestalt

Prayer" was doing the rounds: "I do my thing and you do your thing, / ... You are you, and I am I, / and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful." Though it's likely that Gestalt, by this time, had lost its intellectual oomph, having moved away from its earlier therapeutic intent into the world of yogis and platitudes.

When he was a student in Vienna in the late 20s, Perls had attended Wilhelm Reich's "technical seminars". Reich, who wrote *The Function of the Orgasm* in 1927, was to serve as his supervising analyst in Berlin in 1930. The book was dedicated and personally presented to Freud, who liked the talented Reich: he had done much good work in the outpatient Ambulatorium, providing therapy for the poor, and then with his mobile clinic bringing advice and contraception to working-class areas. But, as Freud wrote to a friend with his customary dryness, Reich had somewhat oversimplified the human psyche by finding

the antidote for all neurosis in one genital function.

Perls and Reich are not part of the same chapter in Frank Tallis's genial book, in which he sets out to familiarise the reader with thinkers (almost all male here) in the psychotherapeutic tradition. This is because he orders the many voices neither chronologically nor according to particular schools of thought, but according to the various ways psychotherapy has addressed the difficulties of living a "fulfilling" life.

Humans have complex needs, he writes. "We need to talk, to be understood, to have a cohesive sense of self, to have insight, to be loved, to feel safe, to satisfy biological appetites, to resolve inner conflicts, to be accepted, to overcome adversity, to have purpose, to find meaning and to accept our own mortality."

Tallis has set himself a daunting task, but this catalogue of needs explains why Perls is handled in an early section to do with talk, while Reich comes on the scene later, with the discussion of sex. It also explains how a single book can contain so much. Among its subjects are inkblot tests, cognitive behavioural therapy, Hans Eysenck's notorious IQ tests, ECT regimens, the discredited treatments of William Sargant, RD Laing and evolutionary psychology.

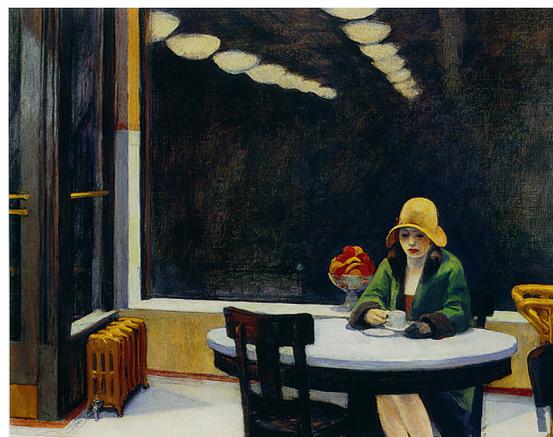
Tallis also reflects on a number of paintings by Edward Hopper, in particular the famous *Automat* (below), with its solitary female figure, lonely against the city night. Finally, there are snippets of case histories culled from his own years as a practising clinical psychologist. These are evocative and sometimes read like scenes from Tallis's crime fiction sequence set in 1900s Vienna, *The Liebermann Papers*. (Liebermann, his hero, is a student of Freud.)

Tallis's premise in the book is that, although many people can name a number of philosophers, few are familiar with any psychotherapeutic thinkers apart from Freud. We live in an era of widespread mental illness, in which, as Tallis claims, more people take their own lives worldwide than perish from war and terrorism, and in which the provision of proper treatment in the UK has become impossible due to the sheer number of people with mental health problems. So why aren't the great psychologists better known?

Inadvertently he provides something of an explanation. Only a small number - Freud and Donald Winnicott among them - are particularly interesting thinkers, let alone writers, whatever the efficacy of their recommended treatments. The few engaging psychoanalytic writers that are alive today, such as the British psychotherapist Adam Phillips and a number of French thinkers, go unmentioned here.

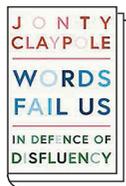
Psychology and psychotherapy are applied disciplines, the theories of which are most often examined in universities and specialised institutes. Always excepting Freud, the need Tallis identifies in his subtitle - "Surviving Discontent in an Age of Anxiety" - is probably better met by reading fiction, philosophy and poetry, than by, say, deciphering the protocols of rapid eye movement therapy.

To buy a copy for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.



{ Society } We are too obsessed with fluency - a writer with a stutter makes the positive case for 'speech disorders'

Sam Leith



Words Fail Us: In Defence of Disfluency

by Jonty Claypole, *Wellcome/Profile*, £14.99

When Jonty Claypole was growing up with a stutter, the role models available were not encouraging: Porky Pig; Ronnie Barker in *Open All Hours*; and the novelty single "Stutter Rap". A condition that humiliated many people was seldom played for anything but laughs in popular culture.

That may have changed a little, but it has not changed enough. This book unravels

the cultural and medical history of, and explains the varied conditions that affect, what are usually called "speech disorders" - and argues that their impact on those who have them is worsened by a society that insists on seeing them as disorders in the first place.

Claypole's broad argument is that not only the

disfluent, but all of us would benefit from overcoming the default prejudice in favour of verbal fluency.

As he argues, people with disfluency are often more creative and linguistically able than those without. People such as Claypole, with an "interiorised stutter" (ie "passing" for fluent) become adept at finding the easier-to-pronounce synonym, or the run of syllables that will let them jump into a tricky word. Where the "hyper-fluent" can sound convincing by stringing together set phrases, if you're trying to avoid stuttering, you really have to think about what you're saying.

Inasmuch as this book has a single villain, it's Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysts with little or no therapeutic experience built tottering edifices of bullshit on foundations of horse manure. Stuttering on consonantal sounds, pronounced Sándor Ferenczi, indicated "sphincter action ... with anal inhibition".

Claypole would have benefited from a tighter focus and a more rigorous grounding in linguistics. He doesn't make a clear enough distinction between spoken and written language. But if its assault on "fluency" is too scattershot and utopian, his book is nevertheless humane, thought-provoking and rich in experiential detail. I especially enjoyed a nugget from an interview with the writer Colm Tóibín, who recalled "a little fucker called Titch Hogan. He would follow me home from school going 'dud-duh-duh-duh' the whole way. I put his mother into one of my books."

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

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{ Society } The system is at fault, not individuals: why it's wrong to condemn millennials as flimsy, fickle or lazy

Sian Cain



Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation

by Anne Helen Petersen, Vintage, £14.99

Sometimes, while in the supermarket, Anne Helen Petersen likes to test herself: she purposefully stands in the biggest checkout queue, to observe how long she can live in her own head without distraction and frustration. "I'm addicted to stimulation," she admits in *Can't Even*, her meticulously researched study of burnout among millennials. "I've forgotten not just how to wait, but even how to let my

mind wander and play." Some readers may see this as a horrifying indictment of modern life, but to others, it will be completely understandable. When was the last time you simply stood in silence, rather than putting on a podcast or scrolling endlessly through Instagram or responding to an email or notification?

Burnout is a symptom of feeling overworked and undervalued, resulting in what Petersen calls "alienation from the self, and from desire". Some might recognise it in themselves: an underlying anxiety, an inability to relax, a general fuzziness in the brain. Petersen's book, born from a BuzzFeed essay that went viral in 2019, has a slightly misleading subtitle: "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation". It is really focused on American millennials, and doesn't argue that only those born between 1981 and 1996 suffer burnout. Rather, millennials are the generation to bear the brunt of economic, social and political decisions made by their parents and grandparents, or generation X and the baby boomers; everyone is feeling the strain.

Petersen is at her best when drawing a line through history, showing how previous generations thrived within a framework of protections in the workplace and wider society, then dismantled them all while pushing the myth of the self-made man: hard work means success. The older generations didn't spoil us, Petersen writes, "so much as destroy the likelihood of our ever obtaining what they had promised all that hard work was for".

The sections on leisure and social media, and why millennials can feel exhausted by rest, are astutely observed. In the 1980s and 90s, their parents steered them towards "concerted cultivation" - extracurricular "enrichment" activities such as tennis, debating and singing in choirs - that would hopefully get them

into prestigious schools, which would later land them white-collar work, then success, stability and happiness. Regardless of whether or not they went to Harvard, many millennial children developed a warped attitude towards leisure, as play became work and work became constant.

After the financial crisis, American millennials graduated into the worst job market in 80 years, while boomers and generation X continued to hold most of the power, first as their parents and teachers, now as their policymakers and bosses. As it stands, millennials will be the first generation since the Great Depression to be worse off than their parents. Yet, frequently characterised in the media as fickle and lazy, they have internalised their precarity as a personal failure, rather than recognising that the problem is capitalism.

Social media is "uniquely aggravating"; the more it feels compulsory - or like work - the more social media becomes "frustratingly unrestorative". Similarly, the 24-hour news cycle has created a continual sense of needing to "catch up". "We're desperately, continuously confused," Petersen writes, "and each click promises something approximating meaning."

For many, myself included, Petersen's book will lead to excoriating self-reflection. I am a millennial child of gen X parents and boomer grandparents, all of whom worry that I will not be better off than they are. I found my last holiday exhausting because I felt nervous without tasks; I did attend university and saddle myself with debt because I assumed it was necessary for my

Social media is uniquely aggravating: the more it feels compulsory, or like work, the more it becomes frustratingly unrestorative

success; I am still always anxious about money, years after making myself destitute as an intern; for me, too, checking email has become a nervous tic - I'll even do it while brushing my teeth or preparing for sleep.

Petersen has a foreword acknowledging the impact of the pandemic, calling Covid-19 "the great clarifier". Work was "shitty and precarious before;

now it's *more* shitty and precarious. Parenting felt exhausting and impossible; now it's *more* exhausting and impossible." She is reluctant to recommend actions to the reader - other books have, she says, and they were useless. "Actual substantive change has to come from the public sector - and we must vote en masse to elect politicians who will agitate for it tirelessly," she argues.

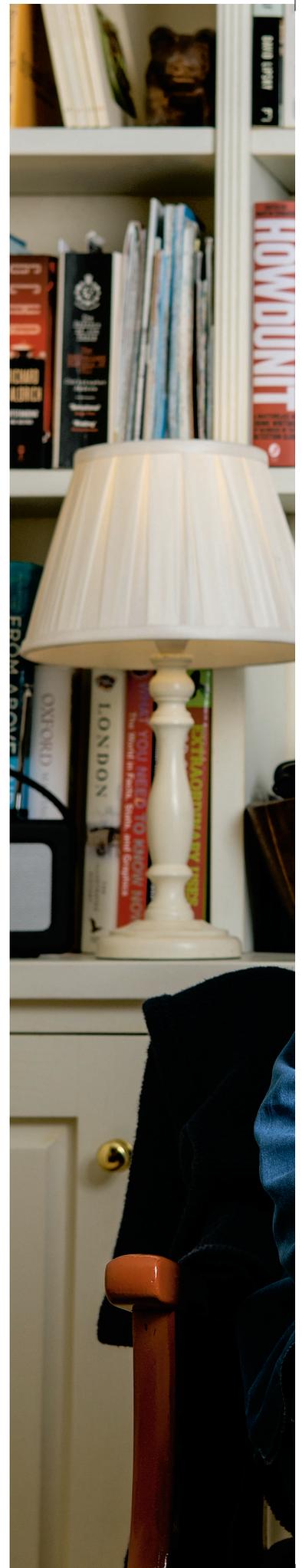
The epilogue contains some fascinating details on Japan, where they have a word, *karoshi*, for literally dying from burnout, but it is only really there to provide contrast. Much of the book is not so much about millennials as being American. Regardless, *Can't Even* is extremely enlightening - I can only hope that millennials, and Americans, won't be the only ones to read it.

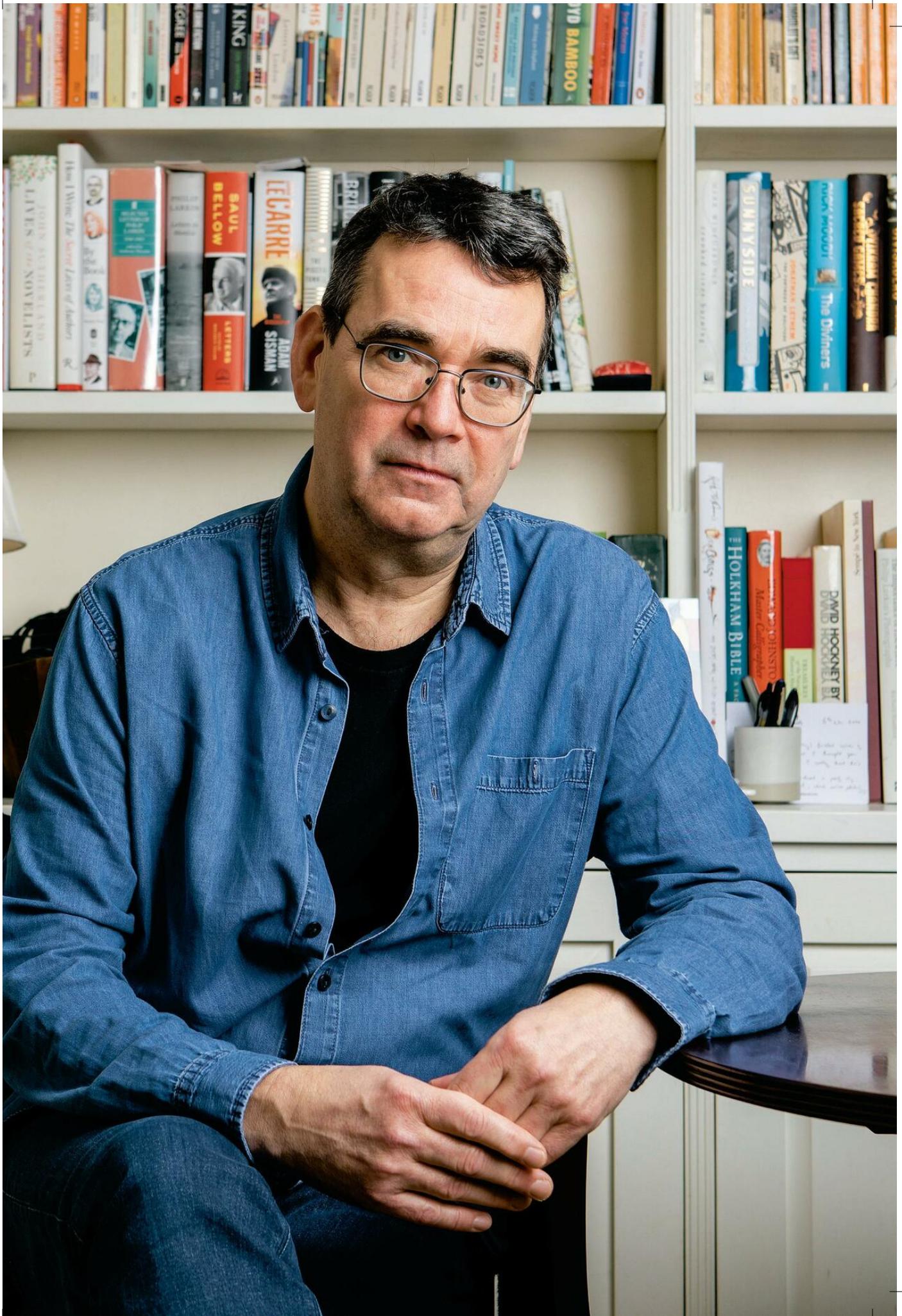
To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.

As his Jackson Lamb spy series is made into a TV drama, Mick Herron tells *Charlotte Higgins* about his slow-burn success - and the likeness of a certain blustering villain to our PM

'I look back at some of those lines and think: My God, did I write that? My mother reads this stuff!'

'Rescue author'
After the publication of his first book it was 16 years before Herron became a full-time writer





Were it not for the packed bookshelves - everything from Len Deighton to the complete Philip Larkin - you could almost imagine spy novelist Mick Herron's flat as a safe house, plain and modest as it is, tucked away in a rather anonymous modern block in Oxford. The other immediate impression given by his home is of - how shall I put it? - antiquity. He's still buying CDs (there's a soaring Gavin Bryars choral work playing on the stereo) and at one point he produces his mobile, which, like the vast Toshiba laptop enthroned on a side table, seems suspiciously elderly. "It's not a smartphone. I switch it on and it works. I don't like having to learn new things, I'm too lazy," he says. Before lockdown he had no wifi, either. "Obviously there are things I would need to check, and I would go out and do that." At this point I look at him as if he's just told me he gathers information by examining the entrails of birds. "In libraries," he explains, gently.

He is clearly not lazy, not at all, about the stuff that matters to him. Herron is the author of the hugely entertaining Jackson Lamb series, about a stunningly inept collection of secret agents. These mess-ups and headcases have been banished from the sleek MI5 headquarters in Regent's Park, London, to the secret service's institutional oubliette, a grotty office block near the Barbican called Slough House. Which is also the title of the seventh and latest novel in the series, published next month.

The books have become critical and commercial successes, and when I pay Herron a socially distant visit, filming is under way on *Slow Horses*, an adaptation for Apple TV. The Oscar-winning actor Gary Oldman is playing Lamb, Kristin Scott Thomas the steely apparatchik Diana Taverner, and Jack Lowden the disgraced young agent River Cartwright. For someone used to working in solitude, Herron has had an unexpectedly enjoyable time as script consultant: "There's an awful lot of laughter in a writers' room," he says. But for the greater part of a decade, until the books took off, Herron - whose quiet, measured speech is inflected by a gentle Newcastle accent - was writing the series at nights, while commuting to London to work as a subeditor on a legal journal based, as it happens, near the Barbican. He'd be on the 6.30am train from Oxford, and back at the dining room table by 6pm to get 350 words down before the day's end. This sense of commitment strikes me as extraordinarily single-minded. But, he says, "I was doing it for myself; if I'd been doing it for the money I would have stopped long ago".

Though it would be unfair to imagine that the day job had influenced the Jackson Lamb novels unduly (Slough House wouldn't pass the most cursory health and safety inspection), it's certainly clear that Herron's years in the workplace have given him a deep well of material to draw on. Much of the pleasure of the books lies not so much in the thriller plots (excellent

as they are) as in his conjuring of the textures and dissatisfactions of office life. "Plotting is pretty much secondary to me," he says. "What really interests me is the characters and getting to grips with them, and them getting to grips with each other." I hope none of us has worked in an environment so comfortable as Slough House; and yet the passive aggression over kettle use, and disgust at irksome perfumes emanating from the office fridge, are eminently recognisable.

Over this squalor, veteran agent Jackson Lamb presides - or perhaps "squats" would be a better word. He is the Falstaff of the spying world: obese in body; revolting in personal habits; gratuitously insulting in manner. Lamb is the id, perhaps, to Herron's own deeply courteous ego. "He says things I would never say," Herron tells me. "I look back at some of those lines and think: 'My God, did I write that? My mother reads this stuff!' He's become unstoppable - I can't have him suddenly becoming nice, or showing that he has a heart of gold - neither of which I believe, anyway."

Herron's Regent's Park and Slough House - the whole machinery and bureaucracy of his secret service - are created from a patchwork of elements, some newly invented, some drawing on previous fictions. The late great John le Carré has been an important influence: the day after le Carré's death is announced I call Herron, curious to know if his character Molly Doran, the ferociously sharp queen of the Regent's Park archive, draws on le Carré's unforgettable Russia analyst, Connie. "Absolutely," he says. "After I'd written Molly, I realised she'd come lock, stock and barrel from Connie Sachs." Le Carré was, he says, one of those authors who "gave me permission to become a writer ... He showed me you could invent an entire world, invent its language too." Part of the appeal of the spy novel for Herron is that "authenticity" is really a question of creating a fully imagined, credible world. Unlike the police procedural novel, it's not as if anyone's really going to be in a position to contradict you, at least openly.

Nevertheless, Herron's novels are fixed to reality in a certain way. If le Carré's early spy novels reflected a cheerless postwar world full of moral uncertainty, Herron's fictional universe is an expression of our own chaotic and friable times. *Slough House* is underpinned by the real Skripal poisoning case.

'John le Carré gave me permission to become a writer - he showed me you could invent an entire world, invent its language, too'

The Catch, a recent novella picking up loose threads in the Lamb books, draws on the murky story of Jeffrey Epstein. As Herron says: "In the past couple of years, no matter how far you push [the story], something stupider and even worse is going on in the real world."

One of his characters, Peter Judd, an unscrupulous, ambitious and amoral politician, seems

strangely familiar. A quotation from the first book, *Slow Horses*, needs, I think, no further explanation: “With a vocabulary peppered with archaic expositions - Balderdash! Tommy-rot!! Oh my giddy aunt!!! - Peter Judd had long established himself as the unthreatening face of the old-school right ... Not everyone who’d worked with him thought him a total buffoon ... but by and large PJ seemed happy with the image he’d either fostered or been born with: a loose cannon with a floppy haircut and a bicycle.”

A decade and several novels on, Judd has graduated into a manipulative, cynical villain, happy to ally himself with the nationalist far right in his endless pursuit of personal power. Herron, as it happens, was a student reading English at Balliol College, Oxford, at the same time as Boris

Johnson. Did you know the prime minister then, I ask? “I saw him once or twice in the junior common room. I wasn’t mixing in that kind of circle,” he says, drily. “I don’t think the Bullingdon Club opened its arms to northern comprehensive types, somehow.” Herron seems a little sheepish at the resemblance between the fictional PJ and the all-too-real BJ. “When I started,” he says, “I didn’t have a readership, so I could say what I liked and it didn’t matter.”

Slough House was finished just as the first lockdown began. Coronavirus does not feature in the book, though we learn that Britain has recently been through a shock referred to only as “you know what”, as if Brexit is, like JK Rowling’s Voldemort, too terrible to be named. “I don’t want to write a book about Covid, because who wants to read that? And the one I’m writing now won’t appear until 2022, when, let’s hope, this will all be a dim memory.” Nevertheless, he says, he’s furious about the government’s bluster, the “chest-beating” and the endless claims that Britain is “world-beating and everyone else was looking on in envy”. It’s not something he’ll address head-on, he says, “but I will find, to my own satisfaction, a way of converting into prose how angry I feel”.

When Herron began working on the Jackson Lamb series, at the back end of the 2000s, he’d already written an entire series of thrillers featuring an Oxford-based investigator, Zoë Boehm. They weren’t especially commercially successful, but “I was fulfilled, because I was doing what I wanted to do”. Oddly enough, the whole concept of the Jackson Lamb thrillers - its cast of failures and dropouts - depended on his own lack of fame and fortune. “I could happily empathise with people not having a stunningly successful career, it’s fair to say.”

When *Slow Horses* was brought out by Constable in 2010, it didn’t do well. The publisher turned down the next book, *Dead Lions*, and its successor *Real Tigers*, were published only in the US, by Soho Press. But then an editor from John Murray publishers - Mark Richards - got in touch. He wanted to see if

Gary Oldman and Kristin Scott Thomas will star in the TV adaptation of the Jackson Lamb series, *Slow Horses*



RICH GOLD/ALAMY

there was a way of having another crack at putting out the novels in Britain. “He came to plead his case, took me out to lunch. He seemed a nice guy, seemed to know what he was doing. But I genuinely thought nothing would come of it - I thought he’d republish the books and they’d sink just like they always had before.”

That same year, 2015, John Murray published *Slow Horses* and *Dead Lions* in paperback. And indeed, just as Herron had predicted, “they sank without trace. But Mark kept on at it. He decided the reading public had got it wrong and he was going to keep reprinting these books until people noticed.” Eventually they did. In 2016, Herron was in a position to take four months unpaid leave from his job. After that, he resigned. A real turning point came in 2017, when Waterstones named *Slow Horses* thriller of the month - a full seven years after it was first published. Herron calls himself “a rescue author”. I sense, from our surroundings, that he’s not exactly flinging money about, unless he’s bought a fancy car. But no: he can’t drive, he tells me. “For a long time I didn’t really trust the money that was coming in. I felt like someone might ask for it back.” And anyway, his tastes are pretty simple. “I like books, I like music, I like food and wine - but I don’t want toys,” he says.

The 16 years of office work between the publication of the first Zoë Boehm book and becoming a full-time writer were not wasted, he says. The commute was “good thinking time ... Sitting down and writing was the end product of a day in which at least part of my brain was thinking about what would go on the page.” The work itself was useful: subediting, he says, “is as good a discipline as you can have for writing prose of any kind. You learn how to treat your own stuff as if it’s someone else’s - it just becomes the material that you’re working with.” Progress was necessarily slow, “but I wasn’t in a hurry; it’s not like I had a readership knocking on the door. I worked at my own speed and the satisfaction was in the work.” What is absolutely clear to me is that Herron would have written, doggedly and enjoyably, for the rest of his life, with or without the success he has happily achieved now. “This is what I do,” he says, simply. “I’m a writer” ●

Fiction

A young Muslim woman is accused of terrorism in an impressive debut about poverty and aspiration in India *Sukhdev Sandhu*



A Burning
by Megha Majumdar,
Scribner, £14.99

Megha Majumdar's excellent debut novel begins with a pile-on, the kind of digital public shaming Jon Ronson has written about. A young Muslim woman named Jivan reads on her phone about a terrorist attack at a railway station near the slum in Kolkata where she lives. More

than a hundred people were killed in the blaze. She posts a question - simple, pointed, instinctive: "If the police didn't help ordinary people like you and me, if the police watched them die, doesn't that mean the government is also a terrorist?" Her question spreads across social media like a forest fire. Monstrous accusations are hurled at her. She is alleged to have been spotted at the station carrying a bulky package and, worse, chatting online with someone the local police declare is a known terrorist recruiter. Charged with the heinous crime, she's sent to jail to await trial.

A Burning isn't just about Jivan. Her fate lies in the hands of two people who might be able to vouch for her character. One of them is Lovely, a young *hijra* (a long-established class of intersex and transgender people in India) to whom she has been giving English lessons. The other is a PE teacher, known as PT Sir, who sometimes fed her when she was one of his pupils. Both are set on changing their lives: Lovely is taking acting lessons to become a movie star; PT Sir is courted by a political party that wants to be known for its law and order credentials. The novel is both a crime thriller in which Jivan battles to avoid execution, and a moral drama: will her old acquaintances risk their burgeoning careers to speak up for a vilified Muslim woman?

The world all three of them want to leave behind is corrupt and choking. In the good old days, which were slightly less rotten than the present, Jivan's mother eked out a living by shovelling lumps of coal from a pit. Then a company bought the land and bulldozed the homes of protesting residents. They

were resettled in government housing that had damp walls and open gutters. PT Sir knows that bribes and backhanders are the order of the day at many schools, where teachers complete their students' exams for a few rupees and administrators pocket funds assigned for pupils' meals. Lovely saw one of her friends die after undergoing gender reassignment surgery without anaesthetic at a dodgy dental clinic.

A self-declared "half-half" who narrates her adventures in the first person, Lovely lives up to her name. She has never recovered from her lover rejecting her in favour of a family-pleasing marriage; slum dwellers laugh at her; but she exudes sass and social defiance. As for PT Sir, he could be a VS Naipaul invention - the middling apparatchik who is given one opportunity after another to climb the political ladder and sell his soul. He is at once strong and weak, self-knowing and blinkered.

Little escapes Majumdar's roving eye for detail. Jivan takes her sick father to see a doctor who treats the pair of them with condescension; in his penholder, "a pen printed with the name of a pharmaceutical company shined". The holy water into which Lovely dips flowers before blessing babies comes straight from a municipal pump. Every monsoon season, local schools get flooded, the rainwater drives cockroaches to the surface, and alarmed girls in "uniform

and Hawaii slippers" stomp them dead. These small, apparently trivial details are noted with anthropological dispassion.

In their different ways, all Majumdar's characters are drawn to gadgets and appliances that can help them transcend their surroundings. Their shiny phones offer textures of another life, one that's modern and urban, at once connected and individualistic, zingy



Moral drama
Megha Majumdar

and fast paced rather than traditional. Is this other realm just a fantasy?

The more Kolkata changes, the more it stays the same. Rumours spread like viruses. Anti-Muslim hatred can be whipped up from nowhere. Villagers are tantalised by - and weaponised with - chimeric promises of reform. Caught in the middle is a young woman who dreams of being "not even rich, just middle class". As a schoolgirl, Jivan once walked by a butcher and saw herself amid the skinned goats hanging from hooks - a vision, fleeting but potent, of existence stripped bare, and of how near to violence she and hundreds of millions of other Indians are forced to live their lives. *A Burning* is immaculately constructed, acidly observed and gripping from start to finish.

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

Set across nine decades in an Edinburgh tenement, this haunted panorama is a dazzling outsider history

M John Harrison



Luckenbooth
by Jenni Fagan,
William Heinemann,
£16.99

Jenni Fagan's savage 2012 debut novel, *The Panopticon*, was notable for characters whose resilience in the face of homelessness and socio-economic defeat got them through. That resilience, with its accompanying anger and self-celebratory humour, re-emerges in the instantly recognisable

denizens of her third novel, *Luckenbooth*. Society is in the process of discarding them, and failing. Marginal but never marginalised, they start out with plenty of energy. Whether that will survive their encounter with the world is always at issue, yet never in doubt. That's why we care for them: gallant one moment, mad the next, glamorous the one after that, they feed so cheerfully off their apparent defeats and limitations, refusing to acknowledge adversity except as an environment.

From the start, *Luckenbooth* gives the feel of a legend or fairy story. It's 1910, on an unnamed island in the North Sea. Jessie Macrae and her father have had a falling out, and now he's dead; or, given that he's the Devil, he may still be alive. Jessie, who has been growing horns herself of late, launches into the surf in the coffin he forced her to sleep in and begins to row. Three days later she lands on the Edinburgh shore, where she finds herself at 10, Luckenbooth Close, a tenement building on nine floors, "with catacombs below". There she'll meet Mr Udnam - gangster, property speculator and, surprisingly, minister of culture - and his wife; and become the surrogate mother of their child. She is pregnant within hours, or perhaps minutes, as you might be in a folk tale. The spiritual disaster thus ignited - the torn seam between the supernatural and capitalist reality - will haunt the tenement and its subsequent inhabitants for the rest of the century.

The struggle towards the revelation of what actually happened between the minister, his wife, their surrogate and their tiny daughter, Hope, narrates itself upwards, floor by floor. The building ages towards Hogmanay, 1999. Hooves are heard in the night. Time periods slip about, gleefully penetrating one another. A multistorey horror story reveals itself obliquely in fragments across a number of years and viewpoints, weirdly paced, the action rushed and breathless, generalised, then freezing

and focused for a moment on an unexpected scene or event. It's like the speech of an excited child; but you soon discover that the perspective is much, much more experienced than your own.

Along the way the novel takes in the stories of a score of families, together with nine decades of ridiculous gangsters, dazed stoners and puzzled loners. In 1928, Flora, intersex and stunning, takes another bump of coke and looks herself over in her mirror before leaving for a party. In 1939, young, black and a long way from home, Levi from Louisiana catalogues animal bones at the Royal School of Veterinary Studies. He is learning to connect them, while impulses he doesn't understand compel him to build a mermaid skeleton. In 1943, Ivy Proudfoot - 17, bisexual and obsessed with revenge - yearns to kill men the way men have always killed women. Every night she hears a little girl, trotting up and down all nine floors of the building. Agnes the spirit medium moved into Luckenbooth in 1926, and since then the dead have never left her alone. By 1956 they have colonised everything from the loo to her husband's armchair. During the coalfield strikes of 1989, meanwhile, Ivor the miner, allergic to light, is listening out for his little niece Esme's invisible friend, tap-tapping away in the walls.

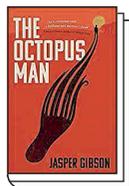
Luckenbooth's history of social and economic deprivation is paralleled by its history of the outsider life. William Burroughs himself, doyen of junk and personal interplanetary travel, makes an inexplicable, suavely puzzled appearance out of the fog in 1963. It turns out he's been living on the sixth floor, rearranging "the fabric of existence in twenty-six letters of the alphabet". Even where they aren't

horned women or home-made mermaids, everyone in the novel is a chimera of one sort or another, caught between forms, illuminated from inside by the light of their own unkempt ideas and desires. "There's a fine line," Fagan has one character say, "between sparkle and psychosis." She revels in that understanding, running it as close as she can in pursuit of her Gnostic sublime.

Historically, a luckenbooth was a place from which to trade, a lock-up booth on the Edinburgh Royal Mile; or often, by metonymy, the traditional heart-shaped brooch you might buy from one, to pin to the clothes of your firstborn and ward off evil. But whatever the word meant a hundred years ago, *Luckenbooth* the book is about now. Fagan's booth of stories - her Cornell box of frenzies, tragedies and delights - offers the present moment in the endless war between love and capital. It's brilliant.

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

An engaging novel about a man with a voice in his head evokes the radical politics of the anti-psychiatry movement *Houman Barekat*



The Octopus Man
by Jasper Gibson,
W&N, £14.99

Set in a leafy parish town in East Sussex, Jasper Gibson's second novel tells the story of Tom Tuplow, a former lawyer who has endured two decades of mental ill health as a result of heavy psychedelic drug use in his youth. He hears voices - or rather, one voice: that of the "Octopus God" Malamock,

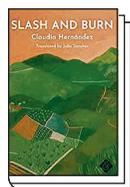
an overbearing presence that taunts and rebukes him in mannered language. (It says things such as: "The caprice of experience ... shall silver the death chamber.") On the advice of his long-suffering sister, Tom participates in a trial for a new anti-psychotic drug, and tries to rebuild his life.

Gibson's narrator-protagonist is an affable and engaging companion. Tom is lippy with doctors and huggy with strangers; one minute he's officiously articulate, the next a jabbering wreck. Surprisingly, there is little interiority here - it's mostly action and dialogue, delivered in brisk and lively prose. Sprinklings of gallows humour and dry bathos riff on the absurd human comedy of mental illness. ("I stand up and headbutt the television. It is crunchier than expected.") The portrayal of mental health facilities is pointedly unflattering: during a stint in a psychiatric unit in north London, Tom witnesses staff using excessive force to subdue patients, and being trigger-happy with sedatives; one nurse is secretly sleeping with a patient.

Tom likens his treatment to the persecution of heretics in the middle ages: "It's about getting rid of my faith, the fundamental essence of who I am." Sure enough, when the drug does its job and the voice is temporarily banished, Tom is left rudderless. The reader is invited to wonder if Malamock had actually been a benign influence all along - the voice of Tom's better self. This is a brave position to take insofar as it pushes against received wisdom on mental health, evoking the radical politics of the anti-psychiatry movement. *The Octopus Man* trades heavily on the easy emotive pull of its subject matter - the poignant melodrama of disrupted lives and frayed friendships - but its allegorical point is well made: perhaps, as a society, we are too quick to medicalise madness, and overly wedded to psychiatric interventions whose long-term effects can be even more harmful than the conditions they are meant to cure.

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A former insurgent and her daughters navigate life after wartime in an intense narrative of hope and despair *John Self*



Slash and Burn
by Claudia Hernández,
translated by Julia
Sanches, *And Other
Stories*, £11.99

In her 1983 book *Salvador*, Joan Didion wrote that El Salvador during its 13-year civil war was "not a culture in which a high value is placed on the definite", but that "terror is the given of the place". Both characteristics are vividly honoured in Claudia Hernández's *Slash and Burn*. It shares with Anna Burns's *Milkman* a focus on how women

cope in a conflict made by men; like *Milkman*, this is a story that could come from only one place, but is carefully unspecific in its details, leaving country and characters unnamed. At its heart is a woman who joins a guerrilla movement, becoming a *compañera* in the war after suffering abuse by soldiers who terrorise the locals. But the horrors of her experience are a prelude, and most of the book is about the future that during the fighting seemed unreachable.

Several years after the war, the woman has four daughters, though one of them lives in Paris, having been sold to a French family to fund the insurgent cause. When she does come home for a time, it's only to tour the country talking to other families who have also lost children.

The novel is controlled and defined by its style: long, tightly knitted paragraphs of intricate memories with no direct speech. The sustained interiority of the narrative makes for an intensive reading experience, but it's a tribute both to Hernández's careful structure and to Julia Sanches's translation that the reader is only briefly disoriented each time the narrative passes from mother to daughter to sister. Men, whose best option during the war was to be a deserter, remain largely absent afterwards.

What *Slash and Burn* - named after a method of agriculture both destructive and regenerative - shows is the difficulty of creating a new life after war or other trauma. The mother is unsure how to identify herself: with her *nom de guerre* or her birth name? Has life returned to normal, or begun anew? Her daughters struggle with the opportunities for education and travel that the "success" of the war has opened for them. Because all in all, we are powerfully reminded, "none of it was under their control. It may never have been."

To buy a copy for £10.43 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Books of the month

{ SF and fantasy } A winning gonzo romp; 25th-century wasteland America; the sequel to *Ready Player One*
Eric Brown



Standup comedian and writer Caimh McDonnell's first novel as CK McDonnell, **The Stranger Times** (Bantam, £14.99), has already been optioned for TV, and it's not hard to see why. It's a filmic romp with great characters, a jet-propelled plot and a winning premise. *The Stranger Times* is a down-at-heel newspaper staffed by a gallery of lovable hacks and edited by a cynical, splenetic alcoholic. Based in a derelict Mancunian church, the paper covers wacky supernatural, occult and bizarre stories - think the *Fortean Times* run on a shoestring. Fleeing a failed marriage, university dropout Hannah Willis is taken on by the paper - and promoted to assistant editor within two hours of landing the job. After investigating a series of strange deaths, Hannah and her colleagues learn that the tall stories they trade in might have some basis in fact, and soon find themselves on the receiving end of malign forces. McDonnell combines gonzo humour and neat character studies in the first volume of an urban fantasy series.

Derek B Miller's fourth novel, **Radio Life** (Jo Fletcher, £16.99), is a gritty, post-apocalyptic sci-fi thriller set in a 25th-century wasteland America. Elimisha is a 16-year-old "archive runner" working for the Commonwealth. Its aim is to record knowledge of the Gone World in the hope of resurrecting the technology of the past. Opposed to the Commonwealth are the Keepers, fanatics who will stop at nothing to ensure the destruction of old technology, which they claim was responsible for the apocalypse. On her 10th mission to deliver old tech to a Commonwealth archive, Elimisha is pursued by Keepers and takes refuge deep underground, where she stumbles across a cache of Gone World tech, a Pandora's box whose opening will have far-reaching repercussions. *Radio Life* is a complex mosaic novel filtered through the viewpoints of a large cast that builds a convincing

picture of a future world riven by opposing ideologies.

Canadian HM Long's **Hall of Smoke** (Titan, £8.99), the first book of a duology, blends epic fantasy and a Viking-inspired culture in an assured, fast-paced first-person narrative. Hessa, a priestess of the goddess of war, has the ability to turn her enemies' bones to dust with a single scream. When tasked by her goddess to slay a traveller, Hessa disobeys and is banished to the mountains. She returns to her village only to find it pillaged and her loved ones slaughtered. In a bid to atone for her disobedience, she sets out to track down and slay the traveller, thus ensuring herself a place in the afterlife realm of the High Halls where she will be reunited with the souls of her family. Set against a backdrop of nations at war, Hessa's labyrinthine quest of redemption and self-discovery pitches her against not only blood-thirsty soldiers sacking her homeland, but a pantheon of vengeful gods and demons. By turns gripping and poignant, *Hall of Smoke* is a compelling debut.

Following three successful fantasy novels written with her parents Mike and Linda Carey, Louise Carey switches genres with the hi-tech, cyberpunk-flavoured **Inscape** (Gollancz, £14.99). The setting is a post-meltdown future world where society is governed by competing technology companies barricaded in affluent "affiliated zones", outside which are the bandit-riddled "unaffiliated zones". Tanta works as a trainee agent for the InTech company, and her first assignment is to lead a team into an unaffiliated zone to retrieve stolen software files. Despite the mission failing with the loss of three colleagues, Tanta finds herself promoted to fully accredited agent. Her first job is to investigate how the software was stolen; what follows is a page-turning thriller in which Tanta soon discovers that trusted colleagues are not playing by the same rules. *Inscape* is the first of a trilogy.

Ernest Cline's 2011 debut *Ready Player One* was a publishing sensation, and fans have had to wait almost 10 years for the sequel, **Ready Player Two** (Century, £20). At the end of the first novel, set in a bleak, ravaged 2045 where humankind sought refuge in a virtual world known as OASIS, teenager Wade Watts won the ultimate virtual reality supergame and inherited the fortune of OASIS creator James Halliday. Now a multimillionaire, the lonely and reclusive Watts discovers that he has been bequeathed more than he bargained for: Halliday has left him the secret of the OASIS Neural Interface, which directs VR straight into the user's brain. Watts releases it to the waiting world, and Cline charts the implications in a virtual picaresque that overstays its welcome by a hundred pages. *Ready Player Two* showcases characters the reader will come to care nothing about amid tedious info-dumping: diehard fans of *Ready Player One* might find this retread satisfying, but readers new to Cline will wonder what all the fuss is about.

Eric Brown's latest novel is Murder by the Book (Severn House).

Time at the bar *Graham Swift*

Twenty-five years after his Booker prize-winning novel, *Last Orders*, was first published, the author explains how its story of a dark day trip to Margate became a celebration of life

When I wrote *Last Orders* in the early 1990s I was in my early 40s. My father had just died. The novel was my response and is dedicated to him. It was my first real recognition that “in the midst of life we are in death”, something that the pandemic now teaches us daily.

I’ve always felt that my literary journey began even when I was small, that the seeds of my desire to be a writer were sown in childhood. If it was no more at the time than an infant’s naive wish, it stuck and became lifelong. There were no writers in my family and I didn’t grow up in an environment that would have led me towards writing or anything artistic. My father was a minor civil servant in a dull office in London. In those days he might have called himself a “pen pusher”. In the war he’d been a fighter pilot. When my own puzzling urge to be a pen pusher of a different kind emerged he did not stand in its way. It was all my idea.

But I did grow up in the 1950s, before TV was prevalent and when the main forms of domestic entertainment were radio and reading, both word-based. I must have read my first storybooks – I mean the first ones I would have read solely for pleasure, not just for learning how to read – and, like many kids, been enchanted by them, but, unlike most kids, I must have said to myself: wouldn’t it be great to be one of these people who can produce this stuff to be found in the pages of books? Not much thought would have gone into this and of course it had nothing to do with any known ability, so it was



ALLSTAR/SCALA PROD; JANUS VAN DEN EIJNDEN

no different from wanting to be an engine driver.

But it stuck. It could be said I formed the dream of becoming a writer and the rest of my life was about making that dream come true. I wasn't born a writer - is anyone? - I had to become one. I've never regretted either the dream or the long and sometimes tough process of turning myself into a writer. They've given my life meaning and fulfilment.

And they've given my life - I know this from many readers' letters - something that can be shared meaningfully with the lives of others. I think fiction is fundamentally an act of sharing, of intimate human communion. There's no limit to its intimacy, nor its candour. To be drawn into a story is like receiving an embrace, to know you are not alone. Readers may begin a novel feeling at first that they're entering a foreign country. Who are these people? What has all this got to do with me? But then, if the story works, there will be a point when they say to themselves: "Hold on a moment, I've been there too."

Last Orders is set, like many of my novels, in a small corner of England. It involves a journey from London to Margate on the north Kent coast - barely 50 miles. Most people outside England won't have heard of Margate. But my novel can't just be about a small corner of England or about Margate, because in the 25 years since it was published it has been translated into many languages and people from all over the world have written to me after reading it to say, in their own way, "I've been there too."

It seems I'm attracted to the seaside. It features in several of my books. A large part of my latest novel, *Here We Are*, is set not just in Brighton, but in a theatre on Brighton Pier. But then we are all, surely, drawn to the seaside. It's a deeply compelling - and paradoxical - place. We go there for enjoyment, yet at the same time it is an elemental zone where land and water meet and thus, with or without the presence of cliffs, it is implicitly precarious. Nothing could more embody this than the seaside pier - a flimsy-looking structure dedicated to fun and frivolity, deliberately constructed over the crashing waves.

Last Orders isn't just a day trip to the coast through the so-called "Garden of England", but a primal journey, internal as well as external, through our common territory of mortality, its specific but timeless purpose that of the living to deal with the dead. But it would be wrong to say it's a novel "about" death or that it's particularly grim. In many ways it's about life getting in the way of death, a frequent occurrence in the narrative and one that can be highly comic. I'd even go so far as to say that *Last Orders* is essentially a comic novel. It taught me a lot about how the deeply serious can also be funny. Neither the tragic nor the comic view of life will ever be complete and correct, but perhaps the mixture of the two can be.

The language of the novel is the language - the street language - of London. Or it's that language, now somewhat changed and faded, as it was in the early 90s - the street language I'd heard all my life. *Last Orders* doesn't transcribe it directly, but it



Above: Graham Swift; below left, Michael Caine and Bob Hoskins in the 2001 film adaptation of *Last Orders*

honours it and weaves it into its fabric. It uses it as an internal language, a language of thought as much as speech. It's a language, I discovered, capable now and then of great eloquence and directness. And humour. It's not the language of "education". The characters in the novel aren't educated in any formal sense, but they're educated by life. The language of the book is the language of their education.

I'd add something rather personal about the characters - not just the men who gather in a Bermondsey pub to go on their journey, but also one or two other characters who don't accompany them, including one central female one. Since I first "met" them they've never gone away from me. They're just as present now as when I began the novel. This is true too of other characters in other novels. They don't recede. My earliest books remain as close to me as my most recent ones. They have a way of existing outside the normal passage of time, and the characters even have a way, for me, of existing outside the books in which they appear. I wouldn't be surprised if I were actually to meet them.

Similarly, I don't think I've ever lost touch with the enchantment of reading those first stories, long before I'd written any myself or even knew how to. Looking back over 14 books, I'm not sure I can say what the "knowing how" consists of. The pattern of my beginnings as a writer has only repeated itself with each individual work I've begun. I start with a mere glimmer, a dream. It's then my task to make this dream come true. Nine times out of 10 it fades, as dreams do, but just occasionally, and always to my amazement, it turns into the extraordinarily concrete, complex and permanent thing that is a written narrative.

I think my appreciation of fiction's magic has only intensified through my career. It's thus not wholly surprising that my latest novel, *Here We Are*, should have a magician among its characters and be, at least in part, about magic. "Fiction" is a curious, deceptive word. It means of course what is unreal, artificial, made up. Yet we all know that when we're in the grip of a good story it becomes real for us, it comes alive. We may feel it has the ring of truth. We may even say to ourselves: "I've been there too." Thus fiction has the uncanny power to transform itself into the very opposite of what it purports to be. And if that's not magic, what is?

But more than this. If fiction can come alive in this way then it will always be on the side of life, it will always have vitality, even when dealing, as it often does, with the more painful aspects of human experience. At best it will be a celebration of life and at least, when times get hard, it will be a glow in the dark ●

Historical fiction to escape to

Harriet Evans



Along with the rest of “the Ton” I am enjoying the Netflix adaptation of Julia Quinn’s series of **Bridgerton novels**. What makes it so good is not a strict adherence to historical facts (guys, it’s not and never will be “Your Dukeship”) but producer Shonda Rimes and her team’s understanding of storytelling.

Had it been given a more traditional British costume drama treatment, *Bridgerton* would not have worked. Instead, in an early episode, the string quartet at the ball of the season strikes up with a version of Ariana Grande’s “thank u, next”. Underlining the savagery of the Regency marriage mart, *Bridgerton* exposes the double standards for men and women and the casual brutality and hypocrisy of life at that time.

If you want to fully

immerse yourself in the era, I would urge you to start with the all-time queen of Regency romance: not my fellow Bath-based novelist Jane Austen, but the peerless Georgette Heyer. Heyer loathed being thought of as a frothy, “feminine” writer and it’s a shame that all too often she’s labelled as one. She is as effective as Patrick O’Brian at depicting the same times but shamefully not as celebrated, because she wrote about women in drawing rooms, not men at war.

Heyer’s novels are delicious: meticulously researched, deftly plotted and hugely romantic, but never sentimental. Start with my favourite, **Venetia**, or else try **Bath Tangle**, **Frederica**, or **Regency Buck**, where the heroine has her own #MeToo moment with the Prince Regent.

“Penitence Hurd and the Plague arrived in London on the same day ...” One of the joys of historical fiction is finding an era you knew little about and losing yourself in it. **The Vizard Mask** by Diana Norman (also known as Ariana Franklin) is one of those books. It’s about a Puritan orphan who becomes a player on the London stage and features the Restoration, Aphra Behn, a heart-stopping production of Shakespeare’s most romantic play, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and there’s even a lockdown.

The late Helen Dunmore’s final book, **Birdcage Walk**, is a remarkable novel, set after the French Revolution in Bristol, where radical ideas were nurtured by those both profiting from and virulently opposed to the slave trade. You walk the streets of the 18th-century city as you read.

In **The Visitors** by Sally Beauman a young English girl, Lucy, is sent to Egypt in 1922 to convalesce and witnesses

the obsessive hunt for Tutankhamun’s tomb. The thudding sense of fear as the opening of the tomb draws closer, the personalities involved, the desert heat - it is all told so well. It reawakened my interest in that extraordinary period, in the history of Ancient Egypt, and even gave me an idea that inspired a novel of my own.

The Morning Gift is one of Eva Ibbotson’s historical romances, about Ruth and her family and their flight from Nazi Austria. The beauty of their old life in Vienna and the descriptions of their refugee existence in north London are heart-rending; the feeling of not belonging to your new home, of wanting to love where you live, stayed with me long after reading. It is also sweetly romantic if you want cheering up. And who doesn’t at the moment?

The Garden of Lost and Found by Harriet Evans is published by *Headline Review*.

Tom Gauld

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