

Review

Saturday 13 February 2021 - Issue N° 160

The
Guardian



Poison

Russian novelist
Sergei Lebedev on
Putin's toxic regime

By Luke Harding



“Thank you, again, for everything you and Vitsoe have done for us over the years. If only each shelf could talk...”

So wrote Marta, a customer since 2004.

Her shelving system started out modest – and has grown over the years. It travelled with her across London (above), to Valencia, and now Amsterdam. Every time she needs help, she speaks with her personal Vitsoe planner, Robin.

In fact, this is the fifth time

she has bought from Vitsoe ... and we're fairly sure it won't be the last.

Marta has been able to buy an extra shelf or two when needed, while Robin has replanned her shelving to fit her Spanish walls and her Dutch huis.

He's even sent her more packaging to protect her shelves when moving to each new home.

You could say that over the years their relationship has become one of friendship. Marta knows she is valued as a customer and trusts the advice she is given.

If your shelves could talk, what would they say?

Design Dieter Rams
Founded 1959
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VITSOE

Review

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'I have learned in years of writing that I have to be patient. I can write about anything except politics and football, so I know that if I give myself time, and relax, it will happen. If I'm tense and calling the muse desperately, the muse won't come.'

– Isabel Allende, page 19

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The week in books

13 February

The write stuff

The Guardian and 4th Estate's short story prize dedicated to writers of colour has been running for five years now. And as the Black Lives Matter protests and the subsequent boom in reading lists and publishers' statements showed, more than ever, UK publishing must do more to elevate and celebrate a more diverse range of voices in literature - every year, not just when it is in the news.

Back with a new name, the 4th Write Short Story prize is now open for entries, with all writers of colour invited to submit a short story of up to 6,000 words by 30 April. This year, the stories will be judged by Nelle Andrew, literary agent at Rachel Mills Literary; Liv Little, writer and founder

of gal-dem; poet and playwright Inua Ellams; Aimée Felone, co-founder of the publisher Knights Of; Anna Kelly, the editorial director at 4th Estate; and Claire Armitstead, the Guardian's associate culture editor.

In previous years, the prize has been won by writers including Kandace Siobhan Walker, who won last year for her story "Deep Heart", a poignant exploration of kinship and community, and the 2019 winner Yiming



Ma, for his "deeply melancholy" work, "Swimmer of Yangtze".

The 2021 longlist will be announced on 24 June, with the shortlist revealed on 22 July. The winner will be announced on 2 September and will receive £1,000 and a one-day publishing workshop at 4th Estate, and their story will be published on the Guardian website.

Submit your story to 4thEstate.co.uk/PRIZE. All queries can be sent to 4thWritePrize@harpercollins.co.uk
Hibaq Farah

On fine Folio form

As the judges, our task was to choose the best book submitted to the 2021 Rathbones Folio prize. Of course there would be snags in the judging process if you are comparing a 70-page poetry book with a 500-page historical tome, or even in simply judging poetry in competition with fiction.

However, with



Roger Robinson

consensus leading the way the judges Jon McGregor, Sinéad Gleeson and I all agreed on a shortlist that we believe to be the best eight books: Sara Baume, Amina Cain, Elaine Feeney, Caleb Femi, Rachel Long, Carmen Maria Machado, Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Monique Roffey are all pushing at the edges of their forms in interesting ways, without sacrificing narrative or execution. We hope new readers will enjoy these books as much as we have.

Roger Robinson

Sceptic

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

FACT
THERE IS NO SCIENTIFIC
PROOF THAT A MASK WILL
PROTECT YOU FROM A VIRUS



Are you one of the "lockdown sceptics"? They are a vocal but largely inexpert minority of commentators who argue that **Covid lockdowns** are doing more harm than good, or don't work at all. But is to believe that really to be sceptical?

The Greek *skeptesthai* means "to look out" or "consider" ("scope" as in "telescope" is from the same root). The ancient Sceptics, or "inquirers", followed the heroic example of their inspiration Pyrrho, a man who was determined to **withhold judgment** on everything unless absolute certainty could be achieved. So much so that, on some accounts, his friends constantly had to prevent him from walking into the path of speeding wagons or off cliffs.

Since then, "scepticism" has also meant the philosophical doctrine that true knowledge of anything is impossible, or irreligiousness. In general modern use it is a reasonable sort of doubting, and one that arguably undergirds all of science. Political scepticism, though, is often one-sided. Global heating "sceptics", for example, reject the consensus in climate science, yet they appear naively credulous of all contrary claims by **cranks or shills**. So, too, might one diagnose the "lockdown sceptics" as being insufficiently suspicious of their own supposed evidence.



'Carrie Fisher's Postcards from the Edge is a tonic'

Emma Jane Unsworth

The book I am currently reading

Paradise Block by Alice Ash - a collection of searingly brilliant short stories all set in the same tower block. She is a witch with words.

The book that changed my life

The Republic of Motherhood by Liz Berry. My friend Stef put me on to this after we had a conversation about postnatal depression and I realised I probably had it. It's a collection of raw and beautiful poems about how hard motherhood can be. I reread it often.

The book I wish I'd written

I honestly don't wish I'd written anyone else's book, how could I? Books are ripped from your soul, and your soul alone. But if you're asking which book I most admire I would say *The Panopticon* by Jenni Fagan. A true literary masterpiece.

The book that had the greatest influence on me

Cat's Eye by Margaret Atwood. An old frenemy introduced me to it, which is terribly apt. It made me want to write about intense female relationships.

The book I think is most underrated

Problems by Jade Sharma and *Fast Lanes* by Jayne Anne Phillips are two books I hugely admire that you don't hear talked about so much. I often dip into the Phillips when I need a style injection. It spurs me on to write good sentences when I lose heart.

The book that changed my mind

The Mental Load: A Feminist Comic by Emma. My

husband gave me this graphic novel and it awakened me to the concept of the mental load, which is basically all the stuff women do for free in their heads.

The last book that made me cry

Brown Baby by Nikeshe Shukla. An exquisitely written memoir about race, fatherhood, courage and food. It's like a clever friend in your ear.

The last book that made me laugh

I was lucky enough to see an early proof of *Other People's Clothes* by Calla Henkel, which will be published this summer. It's about two female American art students in Berlin. They are salty girls and the book is full of delicious layers.

The book I couldn't finish

The one I'm currently writing.

The book I'm ashamed not to have read

Take your pick off my teetering TBR pile! I have two children under five. These are not my reading years. These are my feeding/wiping/dicking about in the garden years. And that's fine.

The book I give as a gift

Postcards from the Edge by Carrie Fisher. It's a tonic of a book - about addicts in rehab, acting, mothers, fame and Hollywood. It has the best description of someone trying to stay off drugs but ending up taking drugs. It will make you wince and howl.

My earliest reading memory

The Hedgehog Feast. It's about some hedgehogs who need to get some apples up a hill to make a pie, so they roll on them and the apples stick on their spines. I do not think it was based on a true story. Everyone knows hedgehogs don't eat apple pie; they eat cat food.

Adults by Emma Jane Unsworth is published in paperback by Borough.

'The new evil is rooted in the old evil'

In Sergei Lebedev's latest novel, a Soviet scientist who created a deadly nerve agent now lives in fear in the west. The Russian author talks to *Luke Harding* about how his thriller draws on family history, his love of Sherlock Holmes and the dark reality of Putin's regime

The Russian novelist Sergei Lebedev is currently based in Berlin. But it is the popular uprising in Moscow that hangs darkly over our conversation. Hours before we speak, protesters calling for the release of the jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny take to the streets in towns and cities right across Russia. The Kremlin's response is a familiar one: thuggish violence.

The TV images make a Mordor-like tableau. Faceless riot police clash their shields together in a rhythmic display of power; demonstrators raise their arms in a plucky counter-clap. There are arrests, many thousands of them. Young men are savagely beaten and dragged through grey slush into waiting police vans. One sets himself alight in an apparent act of rebellion.

After 20 years of repressive rule by Vladimir Putin, and his fellow KGB alumni, discontent is boiling over in Russia. But to what end? Lebedev is optimistic about political change, of a civic thaw after a long winter. "Putin is no Gorbys. We are not in *perestroika*," he admits. "But our grandparents and parents lived with the idea they would die in the USSR. Then all of

a sudden, in two or three years, you are in an absolutely different reality. I think that could happen again."

It is Russia's dialectical past - shot through with collaborators and resisters, martyrs and monsters - that inspired Lebedev's new novel *Untraceable*. That, and the dramatic events in Salisbury. In 2018 Lebedev was watching news reports of the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. Two assassins from Moscow smeared the nerve agent novichok on the front door handle of Skripal's home.

Lebedev spotted an overlooked detail. Scientists invented novichok in the closed town of Shikhany, 600 miles south of Moscow, on the banks of the Volga. It was there, in the 1920s, that Soviet and Weimar republic German scientists secretly tested chemical weapons. The cooperation lasted until 1932. "I was fascinated by the dark romance between people of knowledge and people of power," Lebedev explains.

Lebedev finished *Untraceable* before a group of secret operatives poisoned Navalny last summer in Siberia



What lies beneath
 A geologist by training, Lebedev's fiction excavates the inner lives of earlier generations, buried under layers of official myth and self-deceit



In *Untraceable* Lebedev transforms Shikhany into “the Island”, a forbidden history-haunted place that is “everywhere and nowhere”. The novel’s main character, Professor Kalitin, is a talented Soviet youth. He invents “neophyte” - a neurotoxin that cannot be traced - in a special laboratory built within a former Orthodox church. An angel, half scrubbed out, watches him from above. When the USSR falls, Kalitin defects to the west, taking with him a vial of his own unique poison.

The novel begins with a quote from *Faust* and the Skripal-like murder of another Russian émigré in a Mitteleuropean restaurant. Kalitin’s hiding place in Germany is discovered and two killers are sent by Moscow to poison the professor with his own creation. Meanwhile, a German priest persecuted under communism wrestles with his own inner ghosts.

The Island, you gather, is the USSR. Its citizens are cut off from the outside world, impersonal elements in a giant, malign social experiment. One of the assassins, Shershnev, is a “particle of state power”; Kalitin fails to confront the ethical choices of his scientific work and becomes a kind of human novichok. “His inner essence opens this door so he can work in this lab without any moral issues,” Lebedev says.

Untraceable is Lebedev’s fifth novel, out next month in the UK. He’s had a busy and prolific decade. The New York Review of Books calls him “arguably the best” of Russia’s younger generation of authors - he is 39 - and his work has won praise from Karl Ove Knausgård and Svetlana Alexievich. For my part, I was captured by the velvet lyricism of his prose and his le Carré-ish plot. Lebedev calls his latest book a “political rather than a spy thriller”. There’s no espionage, he stresses, saying: “It’s something in between.”

One major theme in his fiction is the continuity between the old organs of repression during the 20th century and the new. Stalin regularly wiped out “enemies” at home and abroad. There was a justification of sorts: murders were necessary to defend a progressive state from capitalist wolves. Victims died in ingenious ways, with the killings on a spectrum from the secret to the splashy: silent poisons and cyanide spray-guns versus exploding cakes and ice picks.

The Leninist rationale for political murder has disappeared. But Putin has brought back old methods of intimidation and - in certain cases - what the KGB called “physical removal”. Dissidents and ➔

◆◆ troublesome journalists have perished in murky ways. And poison has once again become an exotic instrument of state terror, as evidenced by the Skripal case and the radioactive teapot murder in 2006 of Alexander Litvinenko in London.

Lebedev's attitude towards these crimes is "deeply personal", he says. "Between 1917 and 1991 state security wrote my family's story. We lost about 20 people." His relatives were targets for Bolshevik persecution. They included Orthodox priests from St Petersburg, provincial nobles from Kaluga and Vladimir, and the descendants of Germans who emigrated to Russia in the 19th century.

After the Berlin Wall fell, Lebedev's grandmother took him to visit Moscow's German cemetery. She revealed the family's hidden backstory: they had German ancestors, a connection that spelled doom during the Stalin period. The episode features in Lebedev's novel *The Goose Fritz*, in which a young historian seeks out clues to his roots. A geologist by training, Lebedev's fiction excavates what lies beneath: the inner lives of earlier generations, buried under layers of official myth and self-deceit.

Lebedev's personal history features perpetrators too. His grandmother's second husband was a colonel in the NKVD, Stalin's secret police.

A family friend lived an outwardly non-Soviet life, independent and free-thinking. His job was to devise bioweapons. Lebedev says his books

explore these "contradictory moral shapes", the strange dualism that allows loving fathers to serve tyranny by day and to tuck their children up at night.

One of the Salisbury poisoners, Anatoliy Chepiga, is a father with a young family. In *Untraceable* the fictional hitman Shershnev has a difficult relationship with his son Maxim. Lebedev says the liberal Russian media treated Chepiga and his military intelligence colleague Alexander Mishkin as a comedy duo. "It wasn't funny at all. They did their jobs. I take them seriously," he observes.

The Kremlin, naturally enough, denies it has anything to do with novichok. This, Lebedev thinks, is part of a wider failure by post-Soviet Russians to admit their misdeeds. After a period out in the cold in the early 1990s, Putin and his KGB friends came back. They carried out a counter-revolution against Russian democracy. Once in power they got rich. Habits of secrecy and conspiratorial thinking returned. Foreign policy became stridently anti-western and xenophobic.

The charge sheet against Putin and his cronies goes beyond rampant personal corruption, showcased by Navalny in his recent video of the president's secret palace on the Black Sea coast, now watched more than 100m times. The regime's greatest sins have taken place over the past two decades in Chechnya and in invaded Ukraine, Lebedev suggests.

The Russian opposition has largely ignored these war crimes, he says, in which thousands have died.

"An important person is missing from our historical record. It's the figure of the evil-doer," Lebedev adds. "Russians don't want to talk about responsibility for these murders. In the 30 years since Russia became an independent state our law enforcement agencies have committed lots of crimes that can't be attributed to the Soviet period. Where is the source of this evil? I'm interested in who did this, and why."

As part of his research, Lebedev went through the archives of the Stasi, East Germany's surveillance-fixated spy agency. There was plenty of material in the files that demonstrated what Lebedev calls the "creativity of evil". In *Untraceable*, the authorities persecute the charismatic GDR pastor by sending him goods he hasn't ordered: women's clothes, mannequins, coffins, tins of condensed milk. "Torture through abundance," the priest discovers.

Putin spent the late cold war as a junior KGB officer in the city of Dresden. The Soviet Union and its East German counterpart both carried out clandestine operations in the 1970s and 1980s but also tried to observe legal technicalities, Lebedev says. These days, he argues, the Putin regime behaves with shameless impunity. "The new evil is rooted in the old evil," he suggests, adding that Russia is now part of a modern tyrants' club, with Saudi Arabia and North Korea.

Lebedev hasn't visited Britain but is a fan of English literature: in 1979 his geologist father

**State of fear
Poison has once
again become an
instrument of state
terror, as evidenced
by the Skripal case**



travelled to London as part of a Soviet delegation. Dad came back with a suitcase full of Agatha Christies and other detective novels. Growing up, Lebedev immersed himself in an eight-volume translation of Sherlock Holmes. There's a simplicity about Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, he thinks - and a "philosophical aspect". "For me, Holmes embodies the idea of justice. Morality is based on the fact that every crime has its trace," he says.

As a professional geologist Lebedev roamed around Russia, visiting the far north, with its reindeer herders and frozen tundra, as well as Kazakhstan. He spent 14 years working as a journalist in Moscow on an education newspaper, ending up as its deputy editor in chief. Since 2014 he has written full time; poems and novels. The Kremlin has "mostly ignored" him, he says, despite his growing international reputation.

I ask Lebedev about the state of modern letters in his homeland. He is unimpressed. In the 19th and 20th centuries Russian authors engaged with the great issues of the day. During the Putin era, he says, the intelligentsia has largely shut its eyes to the "reality of what's going on": that the country is rapidly turning into a full-blown autocracy. "Consciously or subconsciously, people are trying to avoid some harsh and important questions," he thinks.

By way of example, he mentions a list of the 100 best Russian books of the 21st century, compiled by the Moscow literary journal Polka. "There was only one book on the war in Chechnya and nothing from the writings of Anna Politkovskaya," Lebedev complains. "For me Russian literature at the moment consists of non-written books. I can clearly see the gaps. Writers have a moral and creative responsibility to reflect reality".

Lebedev finished *Untraceable* before a group of secret operatives poisoned Navalny last summer in Siberia. The undercover hit squad worked for the FSB, the spy agency that Putin ran before he became PM and president-for-life. According to a confession from one of the team, the assassins applied novichok to the inner seams of Navalny's blue underpants. He collapsed on a flight to Moscow. Navalny survived only because a quick-thinking pilot made an emergency landing in Omsk.

Lebedev says there is something "supernatural" in the way Navalny's case coincides with the release of his latest book. Last week a court jailed the opposition leader for two years and eight months. He's now in a penal colony. The fate of Putin's most prominent critic is grimly uncertain; you suspect further vengeance awaits. What will happen? "He will be kept in captivity as a hostage," Lebedev predicts. He adds: "I don't know what is possible. I can only wish him stamina, health and resilience" ●

Untraceable by Sergei Lebedev, translated by Antonina W Bouis, is published on 4 March by Head of Zeus. *Shadow State: Murder, Mayhem and Russia's Remaking of the West* by Luke Harding is published by Guardian Faber.

Books to understand contemporary Russia

Viv Groskop

In Memory of Memory by Maria Stepanova (Fitzcarraldo Editions, translated by Sasha Dugdale)

Stepanova's tour de force blends memoir, literary criticism, essay and fiction. Although this is a personal and intimate work using photographs, postcards and diaries, it succeeds in mining a universal theme in contemporary Russian cultural life: how does a family - or a country - process the events of the past 100 years?

Happiness Is Possible by Oleg Zaionchkovsky (And Other Stories, translated by Andrew Bromfield)

A rare novel about post-perestroika Moscow. Described as "Russia's answer to Murakami", Zaionchkovsky analyses the fate of an introspective writer who can't finish the book he's writing because he feels "newly orphaned" by the collapse of his marriage and tortured by the cramped conditions in his high-rise apartment.

Bride and Groom by Alisa Ganieva

(Deep Vellum, translated by Carol Apollonio) Ganieva is a Russian-Dagestani author famous for winning Russia's Debut prize at the age of 25. *Bride and Groom*, the tale of a young couple torn between the drive for freedom and the respect of their families, is sensitive, compelling and funny: there's an

uncle sent to the camps for boasting that his penis is more powerful than Stalin himself.

Other Russias: Stories and Drawings from the Age of Putin by Victoria Lomasko

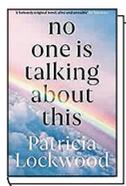
(Penguin, translated by Thomas Campbell) A cross between "guerrilla journalism", post-Soviet Charlie Hebdo and a one-woman Private Eye, this is a collection of drawings and observations by Victoria Lomasko. She aims to show "the unseen Russia" through the eyes of sex workers, juvenile prisoners and the socially isolated. She began the series of drawings in 2008 but many of the slogans she reports were echoed in the recent Navalny protests: "Retire, Putin." "Mother of God, drive Putin away."

The Return of the Russian Leviathan by Sergei Medvedev

(Polity, translated by Stephen Dalziel) A professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Medvedev runs a popular daily blog for an audience of 30,000, writing about "the triangle between history, politics and sociology". Awarded the 2020 Pushkin prize ("to encourage public understanding and intelligent debate about the Russian-speaking world"), this book traces the origins of Russian nationalism and investigates the nostalgia for empire.

Book of the week

{ Fiction } A much-anticipated debut about the absurdity of online life veers between amusement and horror
Mark O'Connell



No One Is Talking About This

by Patricia Lockwood,
Bloomsbury, £14.99

In 2018, the American writer Patricia Lockwood published an essay entitled “How Do We Write Now?”. The piece was an attempt to reckon with the damage done to a creative mind by years of excessive exposure to the internet. Of her efforts to reclaim some mental space from the endless swirling absurdity of online life,

she wrote: “If I look at a phone first thing the phone becomes my brain for the day [...] If I open up Twitter and the first thing I see is the president’s weird bunched ass above a sand dune as he swings a golf club I am doomed. The ass will take up residence in my mind. It will install a gold toilet there.”

Lockwood’s debut novel, *No One Is Talking About This*, is in some ways a more substantial attempt to answer the question posed by the essay. Its nameless protagonist is a sparsely fictionalised embodiment of the same voice, with the same basic problems. Like Lockwood, she is a writer who came to be celebrated for her good tweets; she is invited to cities all over the world to speak about “the new communication”. When we meet her, the tweet in question, “*Can a dog be twins?*”, has “recently reached the stage of penetration where teenagers posted the cry-face emoji at her”. (Though she initially came to prominence on Twitter, Lockwood’s renown is a lot more deserved than her fictional avatar’s: in 2013, her extraordinarily powerful poem “The Rape Joke” went viral, and in 2017 she published an acclaimed comic memoir, *Priestdaddy*.)

The protagonist is living with the effects of irony poisoning. Her mind is a sprawling memory palace of ass, in each of whose chambers has been installed a gold toilet. The internet, which she coyly refers to as “the portal”, is, for her, life itself: a place where she is perpetually suspended between amusement and horror. In the opening pages, we find her absolutely losing it at a video of people being flung from a malfunctioning carnival ride. (“‘Ahahaha!’ she yelled, the new and funnier way to laugh.”)

Lockwood’s observations of the affective reality of the portal, the skittering triviality of its denizens, are both ardent and appalled. Her evocations of this collective consciousness often achieve a nice balance of poetic intensity and analytical force. “Every day their attention must turn,” she writes, “like the shine on a school of fish, all at once, toward a new person to hate. Sometimes the subject was a war criminal, but other times it was someone who made a heinous substitution in guacamole. It was not so much the hatred she was interested in as the swift attenuation, as if their collective blood had made a decision.”

The novel is neatly divided into two parts, each made up of tightly composed fragments. The first half is a study of a peculiarly static existence, a life spent gazing into the roiling abyss of the portal. We are in the company, here, of a person with full-blown *brain worms* - Twitter’s preferred term for the morally and cognitively degenerative condition caused by spending too much time posting, and reading the posts of others (most of whom themselves have brain worms).

After an event in Toronto, she meets a man she knows from the internet, a Weird Twitter personage who has acquired a certain standing for posting photos of his balls online. Their conversation turns to the question of how this “new shared sense of humour” might be written about, and she remarks that everyone who has tried has been getting it all wrong. He agrees, “exhaling gently through his nostrils to be funny, in a tone that meant she was getting it wrong too”.

If Lockwood is invested in anything here, she is invested in not getting it wrong - in accurately representing a consciousness marinated in the shallow irony (and terrible levity) of the portal. The fragmentary form, with its pointillist narrative technique, will be familiar enough to readers of lately canonised 1970s novels such as Elizabeth Hardwick’s *Sleepless Nights* and Renata Adler’s *Speedboat*, and the more recent work of Jenny Offill. In Lockwood’s hands, the approach is intended to be commensurate to the dimensions of Twitter itself - its punchiness imperative, its hunger for the absurd and the awful. “Why were we all writing like this now?” Because, she suggests, “it was the way the portal wrote”. The form, in other words, is an attempt to both reflect and transcend the reshaping of the protagonist’s mind. These fragments she has shored against her brain worms.

Lockwood’s voice is a startling agglomeration of poetic clarity and hectic comedy - but it’s that hectic quality that causes problems

Lockwood is an incontrovertibly gifted writer. Her sentences are routinely surprising, her voice a startling agglomeration of poetic clarity and hectic comedy. But weirdly enough, given the comic gifts on display in *Priestdaddy*, it’s that hectic quality that causes problems. It wouldn’t be quite fair to call *No One Is Talking About This* a comic novel, but it does

ARTEM NAZAROV/THE GUARDIAN



seem too fixated on getting jokes over the line, and too pleased with itself for having done so. There is an airlessness that reminded me of being in the presence of a Known Wit, intent on living up to their reputation by keeping the jests coming at all costs. At such moments, the fragmentary lyricism is overpowered by an anxiously comedic super-ego, as though the *Family Guy* writers' room had done a script punch-up on Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*. The book also has a related problem: far too much of it, to put it bluntly, amounts to lyrical descriptions of memes.

My own impatience with this perhaps stems less from alienation, as it might for readers less familiar with Twitter, than from overfamiliarity. I am myself more brain worm than man; if this book has an ideal reader, it might as well be me. As the novel progressed, it struck me that its problem was paradoxical in form: it seemed incapable of being serious, and it was precisely that unseriousness that prevented it from being properly funny. About halfway through, the protagonist's sister becomes pregnant, and the child is born with very severe birth defects. And yet she remains committed, helplessly, to the new sense of humour. "Call me old fashioned," she argues to herself in the shower, "but I happen to believe that a BABY! should get to have an ASS! no matter WHAT!"

But as the dimensions of this human tragedy become clearer, things get more complex, and more sophisticated: the novel becomes seriously concerned with the problem of unseriousness - which is, you could argue, among the more serious problems of our time. The language of the portal is, suddenly, inadequate to the sadness of the protagonist's new reality. "If all she was was funny," she asks, "and none of this was funny, where did that leave her?" That

Anxious comedy Patricia Lockwood

central question hovers over much of the book, but not in the way that seems intended. Maybe it's my own brain worms, my own irony poisoning, but if you're laughing with her as rarely as I was, that premise feels flawed.

Eventually, the anxious comedy gives way to a richer and more complex amalgamation of grief and beauty. Although Lockwood's protagonist never fully transcends her ironic self-enclosure, and therefore only fleetingly allows us a clear view of the baby's parents - the people to whom this awful thing is actually happening - there are nonetheless moments of real poignancy, as she describes her niece's little life, and the heartbreak of her condition. Here, at last, profound connections are made: between a thwarted consciousness and the world, between Lockwood's talent and her subject, and between the novel and its readers - this one, at any rate.

There's a moment near the end when the protagonist's brother, himself a victim of severe irony poisoning, introduces himself to a stranger as "the baby's husband" - it's a bizarre error borne of confusion and grief. "Their laughter approached hysteria," the protagonist tells us, "tears streaked down their faces, they gripped each other's arms and could not stop." This moment, coming after pages of wrenching sadness, feels real, and raw, and authentically absurd. I was with these people, in their pain and hilarity. I was, for the first time, and in the old and funniest way, laughing out loud. Ahahaha.

Mark O'Connell's Notes from an Apocalypse is published by Granta. To buy No One Is Talking About This for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Military } Appalling rituals, champagne-drinking officers, debacles in the field ... An exposé of the British army Jason Burke



The Changing of the Guard: The British Army Since 9/11
by Simon Akam,
Profile, £25

In Britain, the army is one of the few institutions it is almost impossible to subject to serious criticism without provoking outrage. One reason is that anyone who does raise the possibility that it is not world-beating risks accusations of being unpatriotic and disrespectful towards the brave men and women who endanger their lives to keep us safe.

Another reason, which author Simon Akam explores in great detail in his excellent and valuable book, is that the British army has made great and often very effective efforts to close down any criticism, constructive or otherwise. The publication of the book was fraught with difficulty as the military establishment closed ranks (the original publisher was Penguin Random House, which put the book on hold, telling Akam there was a “quite unprecedented level of withdrawal of support and co-operation for the book from multiple sources”). This alone goes a long way to substantiating the author’s powerful accusation that the army, a reflexively defensive, instinctively conservative and opaque institution, has limited ability to adapt to change, whether military, social or political. And this means things go wrong.

Not all of what went so very badly wrong in Iraq and Afghanistan can be conveniently blamed on politicians or penny-pinching Treasury mandarins. As Akam shows, senior officers made grave errors of judgment. Some may have been traumatised or exhausted, but others may simply have not been particularly competent. There is much material here about the personal rivalries between the relatively small number of senior soldiers in Britain’s relatively small army.

The book’s dense, detailed narrative opens in 2002 with a veteran specialist giving a virtuoso display of armoured warfare on a Canadian training ground. He receives fulsome praise from his superior officers even though this type of combat is unsuited to the wars his comrades-in-arms are about to fight - and in

spite of the Nazi officer’s uniform he is found to be wearing underneath his British one.

But this is apparently fine in the British army at the dawn of the new millennium. Akam takes us into the barracks on the eve of the Iraq war. There are push officers who will only drink Pol Roger, beery “drink until you die” sessions for other ranks, appalling rituals to humiliate new recruits, an inflexible hierarchy and almost no one who has actually ever fought. Akam points out that, unlike almost every other profession, soldiers can spend decades training without actually doing what they are trained for: combat.

And so to the debacle of the British army in Iraq, which came after years of senior soldiers telling journalists, politicians and everyone else that they were emphatically not like the Americans, because the UK had seen low-intensity conflicts in Northern Ireland and Yemen and Malaya and understood how to “win hearts and minds”. When I was reporting on the conflict I accompanied patrols in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, given to the British by US planners to look after while they headed north to Baghdad. The soldiers wore berets, not helmets, and were led by sergeants bellowing “Salaam alaikum” in strong regional accents at disconcerted residents. In the end, the US had to come in.

In Afghanistan, from 2006, a host of further deficiencies were laid bare. There were never enough troops, nor helicopters, nor the right equipment.

A policy of six-month rotations for units promoted rivalry and dramatic discontinuities. Command chains were impossibly complex. “War porn” shot on soldiers’ smartphones was not just tolerated but actively disseminated by officers, while dozens of books full of stories of battlefield derring-do were supported by senior officers. In Afghanistan, as in Iraq, the US milit-

Not all of what went so very badly wrong in Iraq and Afghanistan can be conveniently blamed on politicians

ary came in to finish jobs the British had been unable to complete. When the wars ended, there were big public inquiries that received lots of attention but almost no serious scrutiny of or sanction for senior soldiers.

This is a long book. There are chapters of useful and rigorous investigation of alleged abuses by British troops in both theatres, and these may explain the ire of

some interviewees. It would be unfair to expect more analysis of the broader context of intervention in Iraq or Afghanistan in a work that already took five years to write. But without it, the most important factor in success or failure - local and regional politics - is underplayed. In both wars, the self-appointed “best little army in the world” was only a minor actor, with a limited impact. This is another bitter truth that many senior soldiers have trouble accepting. In this at least, the army is representative of the country it fights for.

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

{ Memoir } The ugly truth of how a 14-year-old girl fell for, and was sexually abused by, a renowned writer *Lauren Elkin*



Consent

by Vanessa Springora,
translated by
Natasha Lehrer,
4th Estate, £12.99

Paris, March 1990. A writer called Gabriel Matzneff is a guest on Bernard Pivot's influential literary TV chat show *Apostrophes* to discuss his recently published memoir, about his sexual conquests of very young women. "It seems that women over the age of 20 no longer interest you," comments Pivot. Matzneff agrees; older women have

known "disillusionment", and he prefers to sleep with "those who are not yet hardened, who are still nice".

The only person present to take exception to Matzneff's comments is the Canadian novelist Denise Bombardier, who calls them an "abuse of power": "We all know how some girls can become besotted by men with a certain literary aura." Matzneff says some high-minded things about how Bombardier doesn't have the right to judge a work of *littérature* on those terms. "There are limits even to literature," she replies. For this, *les intellos* mock her left and right in the press. A few days later, on the TV channel France 3, the writer and critic Philippe Sollers calls her a bitch.

Paris, January 2020. The writer and editor Vanessa Springora publishes a book, *Le Consentement*, a memoir of having been sexually abused by Matzneff between the ages of 14 and 16, when he was more than three times her age. It sparks an international furore, and Matzneff, driven from Paris, takes refuge on the Italian Riviera. The Paris prosecutor's office opens an investigation after an "analysis" of the book. Matzneff is set to stand trial in September this year.

This is quite a reversal of fortune for a writer who, for decades, made no secret of his preferences. In 1974, he published a pamphlet called *Les Moins de Seize Ans (The Under-16s)*, which includes such observations as: "To sleep with a child, it's a holy experience, a baptismal event, a sacred adventure" and "When you have held in your arms, and kissed, caressed, possessed a thirteen-year-old boy, a fifteen-year-old girl, everything else seems



Vanessa Springora
Her book has sparked an international furore

dull, heavy, insipid." In the Philippines, the boys were as young as eight.

"How were they afterward, these young girls?" Bombardier asked Matzneff in 1990. Springora's book attests: not at all well. In elegant, focused prose, fluidly translated by Natasha Lehrer, she describes how, aged 13, she met a seductive older man, a writer, at a dinner party. And how, when she turned 14, he started to have sex with her.

Matzneff's preferences were well known, but he was celebrated in spite - or more likely, because - of them. He kept a letter of praise from President Mitterrand in his wallet as a "talisman", Springora writes, believing that if he were ever to be arrested, it would get him out of trouble. Yves Saint Laurent paid for his hotel room stays with the girls. The former mayor of Paris gave him a studio apartment in the 5th arrondissement for €348 a month.

With admirable restraint - another author might have been tempted to veer off into disquisitions on De Sade, Balthus, or Nabokov - Springora describes how Matzneff expertly manipulated her into believing she had as much agency and power as he did: that she was a consenting party in their "affair". Thirty years later, she is able to see this as a mirage.

At the beginning of the abuse, Springora doesn't know how to navigate her own hesitation; "I wasn't prepared for this," she writes, but she also couldn't "bear to be taken for a little kid who knew nothing about life". What Matzneff dismisses as "hardness" and "disillusionment" in adult women is actually the capacity - rooted in experience - for negotiating ambiguity and desire. Springora shows that it is Matzneff himself, not "life", who initiates her into disillusionment and despair. When it is happening, she blames herself. "The guilty party was me. I was the dropout, the slut, the goodtime girl, the pedophile's accomplice." Springora recognises that the contradiction of a "completely depraved teenage girl" is *precisely* what "excites these old men".

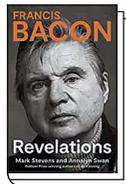
In a February 2020 profile in the New York Times, a photograph shows Matzneff standing alone at the water's edge in Italy, looking dejected, a sad bald man in a trench coat. When Springora's book came out in France, he told the TV station BFM that he did not want to read it, and ruin the memory of what he recalls as having been "a durable and magnificent love story". But can a teenage girl have a "magnificent love story" with someone more than three times her age? This is the question at the heart of *Consent*. Readers will not be in any doubt about the answer.

Why, I find myself wondering, can't Matzneff be bothered to interest himself in Springora's actual thoughts and feelings? It seems to me to signal, *at the very least*, an odd lack of curiosity on the part of someone who claims to be a writer.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to guardianbookshop.com. The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (Napac) offers support for adult survivors on 0808 801 0331.

{ Art } A landmark biography uncovers the origins of some of the 20th century's most iconic artworks

Elizabeth Lowry



Francis Bacon: Revelations

by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, William Collins, £30

Francis Bacon didn't just create some of the most unforgettable images of the human figure in 20th-century painting. He created "Francis Bacon", a legendary persona: big beast of the London art world, wild man and bon vivant, whose raw painterly gift - he is one of only three British artists to be given two retrospectives at the Tate Gallery in their lifetime - was matched by his appetite for champagne, gambling and rough sex with East End crooks. His death in 1992 triggered a run of tell-all biographies, including first-hand accounts by his friends. What further revelations, you wonder, can there be?

Most of the surprises in this landmark new biography of Bacon, the first for 25 years, concern his early life and career, which turn out to have been - at least outwardly - embarrassingly conventional. Born in Dublin in 1909 to Anglo-Irish gentry, Bacon grew up in a series of big country houses, with dashes to England during the Irish revolutionary period. He was severely asthmatic. One of his childhood memories was being shut into a dark cupboard by a housemaid for long periods; he said that the feeling of asphyxiation resembled an asthma attack. He also remembered the entire family hiding in their locked rooms at night, in dread of a visit from the IRA. Suffocation, confinement, a sense of terror - the foundations of Francis Bacon, man and artist, were being laid.

He had a gift for free-form queening in an era when having gay sex was still a criminal offence. The teenage Francis once turned up to a fancy-dress party as a flapper, wearing a beaded dress and an Eton crop; as an adult he was partial to pancake foundation and red lipstick. His fox-hunting father preferred his other two sons, both of whom died young (Bacon later claimed that his father ordered his grooms to whip him). At 17 he escaped to London, where he managed to get by on an allowance from his mother, which he supplemented through petty theft and by picking up wealthy older men. He read Nietzsche, though he liked to say that he'd never opened a book in his youth. In spite of protracted stays in Berlin and Paris he denied that he'd ever had any art classes, either: he would present himself as a fatherless child, a feral rent boy, an untutored

genius with a paintbrush. Wherever he went his nanny went too, remaining his live-in companion until he was in his 40s.

But the embarrassing part is that Bacon was, in his early 20s, an interior designer. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan have uncovered all sorts of excruciating details about Bacon's time in Paris and afterwards. Unlike so many artists of the period - among them his later hero, Picasso - he didn't haunt Montparnasse. "As the painters in Montparnasse remade modern art," we're told, "he began to design Royal Wilton rugs."

But then, in the 1930s, just as Europe was entering the long shadow of fascism, Bacon - untrained would-be painter, rejected son - discovered the Crucifixion. There's a sense, as Stevens and Swan suggest, that "almost all of Bacon's subsequent art could be regarded as part of a broader Crucifixion-like scene in which the central event was rarely presented while all around and to every side - in innumerable smaller scenes, like Stations of the Cross - pictures emerged that were related to the central theme". He wasn't looking for the Christian cross, but for one stripped of religious belief, a wider symbol of a suffering self and a damaged world.

He destroyed almost all his youthful work, but a black-and-white 1933 Bacon *Crucifixion* survives, with a tiny head topping a ghostly splayed figure, like nailed-down ectoplasm. His breakthrough painting, produced in his mid-30s, was *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944), a triptych of grotesque crying creatures, surrounded by scraps of Edwardian furniture, eerily aglow in a burnt orange light. They are clearly influenced by Picasso's biomorphs, but with a quality of darkness and a feverish melancholy all of their own.

Bacon was peculiarly modern in his fascination with X-rays, photographs, film, and other technological ways of testing the human surface. Sometimes, however, he looked forwards by looking backwards. Though he lacked formal training, his vision was shaped by the example of certain old masters: what Stevens and Swan call Rembrandt's "meaty and mysterious" brush, Velázquez's pomp and splendour. He

Famous squalor Bacon in his studio



GRAHAM WOOD/ANL/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

showed his appreciation of these models by butchering them. His filleting of Velázquez's *Portrait of Innocent X*, and contemporary photographs of the bespectacled Pius XII, gave 20th-century art some of its most iconic images. He would paint these Holy Fathers over and over, their mouths levered open in a scream borrowed from Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 movie *Battleship Potemkin*; robed in purple and cut into ribbons, surrounded by carcasses, enclosed by the geometry of vanishing rooms.

There is rage and despair in this work, but there's humour, too. Stephen Spender said that Bacon's painting often has "the quality of an immensely tragic joke". It's theatrical and unapologetically exhibitionist. Bacon takes pleasure in exposing the truths we usually like to ignore: the perishability of the gorgeously dressed body, the emptiness of secular and religious authority, all the bogus certainties of civilised life. His popes, tarted up, tortured and surrounded by heavy gold frames, are, Stevens and Swann note with a twinkle, "the old masters in drag".

The triptych form was both Bacon's homage to an older tradition and his response to the cubist challenge of depicting different spatial and temporal perspectives simultaneously. His paintings didn't fit into the typical dimensions of the English house, but he went on working on a grand scale all the same.

Bacon's emotional and erotic life didn't fit into a conventional domestic space either. Having grown up in the stately homes of Ireland he flitted, in middle age, from room to makeshift room. His last studio-cum-bedsit, around the corner from Harrods, was famous for its squalor. He liked to gamble in Monte Carlo, to have sadomasochistic sex in Soho, and to order magnums of Bollinger in any place. He was terrible at meeting deadlines because he was so often drunk, broke, or in a state of sexual crisis. Two of his long-term lovers died of substance abuse, each on the eve of one of his major exhibitions.

The world finally caught up with Bacon's airless psychic landscape, his flayed bodies and mutilated fathers. In the decades following the second world war, his personal drama and Nietzschean bleakness came to reflect the nihilism afflicting western civilisation. Once Bacon became fashionable (and expensive) it became fashionable, in turn, to dismiss his work as Grand Guignol, but he always insisted that he was simply portraying the reality of the conditions that had shaped him: "the revolutionary Irish movement, Sinn Féin, and the wars, Hiroshima, Hitler, the death camps, and daily violence that I've experienced all my life". The power of this meticulously researched and compelling biography lies not just in the confidence with which it demonstrates the truth of that statement, but in its quieter revelations. Bacon's asthma eventually led to his death by heart attack at 82. Yet this lifelong asthmatic, we learn, had sometimes mixed dust into his paint. It's as if he was making certain that beneath the persona he and his art would remain of a piece.

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

{ Food } Roast duck and 'barbarian pepper' ... a splendid introduction to the cooking and history of China

PD Smith



The Emperor's Feast
by Jonathan Clements,
Hodder & Stoughton,
£20

Jonathan Clements grew up in Southend-on-Sea. In the 1970s, his father played drums in a local Chinese restaurant, the Garden of China, "an odd mixture of industrial chic and orientalist kitsch". As children they ate there regularly ("my brother cut his teeth gnawing spare ribs") and Chinese food has been "a

constant pleasure and addiction" for Clements ever since, propelling him into a career studying east Asian history and culture.

The Emperor's Feast cleverly uses food - the part of Chinese culture with which many western people are most familiar - as a way of charting the complex history of China, a vast country made up of many peoples, cultures and cuisines. Modern Chinese cooking brings together many regional and foreign influences, from the fresh seafood of Fujian province in the south to the love of roast meat in the north ("the Manchus ate little else"). Even the habit of eating rice varies across China: in the wheat-growing north, rice formed only 1% of the diet in the 20th century, whereas in the south it was a quarter of all calories. China's deep suspicion of foreign foods is reflected in their names: tomato was *fan qie* or "barbarian eggplant"; and red chilli was *fan jiao*, "barbarian pepper". But Sichuan adopted the chilli and its food is now renowned for its spiciness.

A surviving 18th-century menu from Yangzhou included 108 courses, although Clements notes they were not intended to be eaten at one sitting. It contained such exotic delicacies as pig's brains, camel hump, steamed civet with sliced pears, dolphin testicles, goose gizzards and minced pigeon. A modern Beijing restaurant offers its diners the chance to experience a banquet such as this, which would have been fit for a Manchu emperor. Fortunately the experience is spread over the course of a year, but it will still set gourmands back some £44,000.

This is a splendid introduction to the cooking and history of China, filled with surprising details on the origins of many famous dishes, including the fact that Peking roast duck originated before the 14th century in Nanjing, whose residents still regard its modern name as "an act of dastardly cultural appropriation".

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

The Chilean American novelist talks to *Fiona Sturges* about her foundation for women, remarrying in her 70s, and what she has learned from her grandchildren

'When young people question, wonderful things happen: new ideas, new art, new creativity'

The Chilean American author Isabel Allende was a feminist long before she knew what the word meant. At the age of three, she saw her mother, Panchita, abandoned by her father and left to raise their three small children alone. Panchita moved back to her parents' house in Santiago, where her father immediately took control of her finances. Following the annulment of her marriage, she was excommunicated by the church. Observing her mother's disempowerment, the young Isabel railed against male authority. In her new book, *The Soul of a Woman*, she recalls her resentment as "an aberration in my family, which considered itself intellectual and modern but according to today's standards was frankly Paleolithic." Such was her fury, her mother took her to a doctor, suspecting colic or perhaps a tapeworm. ➤➤

Allende has sold 75m books. In 2014, she was awarded the presidential medal of freedom by Barack Obama



◆ Allende, now 78, says she was frustrated on Panchita's behalf but also at her refusal to stand up for herself. "She thought you couldn't change what God had made this way," she tells me. "When she saw me so willing to go out there and fight, she was scared and thought I would be ostracised. She was also worried I would never catch a husband. In my generation in Chile, if you didn't have a formal engagement by age 23, you were a spinster."

Allende ended up marrying three times, and never gave up the fight for equality. In 1967, she co-founded the feminist magazine *Paula*, where she found she "could channel that anger into action", and wrote a series of satirical columns on the patriarchy called "Civilize Your Troglodyte". Later she switched to writing novels examining family, history, displacement and the lives of women. On publishing her first book, the 1982 bestseller *The House of the Spirits*, she was celebrated as a new feminist voice in a male-dominated literary landscape. Dozens more books followed, including *Daughter of Fortune*, *Inés of My Soul* and *City of the Beasts*, which have been translated into more than 40 languages. In 2014, Barack Obama awarded her the presidential medal of freedom, America's highest civilian honour. She has sold 75m books.

Allende is talking from her home in California, where she has been based since 1988 (she became an American citizen in 1993) and where she now lives with her third husband, Roger Cukras. Visible behind her are pristine white shutters with sunshine blazing through the slats. Lockdown, she says, has not made her slovenly - "I get up every morning around six. First I have a cup of coffee, then a shower and then I put on full makeup as if I was going out to the opera. I get dressed and put on high heels, and then I climb the stairs to this attic where I work. I won't see anyone, not even the mailman, yet I dress up for myself."

Allende married Cukras two years ago, and remains sweetly astonished by this fact - "Are you kidding? I didn't anticipate having sex again, let alone getting married! I separated from my [last] husband when I was 72, and everyone said: 'Are you crazy? Why are you divorcing in your 70s?' I've never been scared of being alone, because I am self-sufficient. But then Roger appeared in my life. He is a profoundly decent and kind man, and you don't find them so often."

The seed of *The Soul of a Woman*, a reflection on womanhood that is part-memoir, part-polemic, was planted when she delivered a lecture at a women's conference in Mexico City. "I started thinking about the trajectory of my life as a woman and as a feminist," she says. Along with documenting her early family life, the book contains elegant and illuminating reflections on youth, ageing and objectification ("feminism has not saved us from that servitude"). Elsewhere, she looks at reproductive rights and sexual violence, and lays out her definition of feminism as "not what we have

between our legs but what we have between our ears. It's a philosophical posture and an uprising against male authority."

Particularly touching are her reflections on her relationship with her grandchildren, who identify as non-binary. "When they introduce me to their friends," she writes, "I now ask each one about their preferred pronouns." I tell her that is rare for someone of her generation. "It is," she agrees. "But you know, things change and they change for a reason. You have to adapt. When young people question, it always seems too much, it seems extreme. But in this struggle, wonderful things happen. New ideas, new art, new creativity. We are pushing history."

Looking back at her childhood in Chile, Allende recalls a patriarchal society that was "very successful at depicting feminists as these angry bitches who didn't shave their armpits. And a lot of young women [absorbed] that idea. Though they would not have given up the rights that their mothers and grandmothers obtained with a lot of struggle, they didn't want to be called feminists. What I used to say then, and I still say, is: 'You don't like the word, don't use it. Change it. It doesn't matter. Just do the work.'"

For her, that work involves helping others, acknowledging one's privilege in terms of education, technology and healthcare, and understanding how easily these things can disappear. "In a pandemic the first people to lose their jobs are the women," she says. "They are stuck at home raising the kids because there is no school. Sometimes they are in a situation in which their abuser is in the house, and there are no resources because everything is locked down, and they will be the last ones to recover. Women have to be very alert, vigilant, because we can lose everything."

Allende undoubtedly knows about loss. In 1973 her cousin, the socialist president Salvador Allende, was toppled by Pinochet during a violent coup and killed. She was blacklisted by the government and fled with her husband and two children to Venezuela, where they stayed for 13 years. She endured further trauma in 1991 when her daughter, Paula Frias, fell into a coma from porphyria and died a year later, aged 29. Afterwards, Allende wrote a memoir, *Paula*, though after it was published, she says she was "stuck. I

couldn't write, I couldn't do anything. I felt this emptiness inside."

To distract her from her grief, her husband and a friend decided to take her to India. There, while driving through Rajasthan, they had car trouble. While they waited for it to be fixed, Allende got talking to a group of local women - while they didn't have a common language, they

'I kill the guy around page 112, because I find I can't stand him. If you wouldn't want him in your life, why would you impose him on your protagonist?'



Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons in the film adaptation of Allende's debut, *The House of the Spirits*

TCD/PROD.DB/ALAMY

were able to communicate. When it was time to leave, a young woman handed her a small parcel of rags. “She insisted I open it and inside I saw it was a newborn baby,” she recalls. “It must have been a day old - its umbilical cord was still raw.” The driver intervened, handed the baby back to the woman, and hurried Allende into the car. “When I asked why the woman was trying to give away her infant,” she says, “he told me: ‘It was a girl. Who wants a girl?’ And that clicked something in my heart.”

When she got home she set up the Isabel Allende Foundation. “The mission was to help girls like her, that little baby that I couldn’t help. And women like that mother who felt the only chance for her baby was to give it away.” The foundation focuses on health, education, economic independence and protection from violence. Since 2016, it has expanded to assist refugees, particularly those along the southern border of the US. All the profits from her memoir, *Paula*, went to the foundation, which has continued to take a slice of her book earnings ever since.

Allende says that for years she wanted to write a romance novel, but failed every time because she didn’t believe in the male characters she was writing. “I get started and then I begin laughing, and you can’t write that style tongue-in-cheek,” she says. “You have to believe that there are virgins with green eyes and big breasts that will attract a rich CEO who is disillusioned with love. I have never seen that in my life, so I don’t believe in it.” When she does introduce a male character into her books with romantic intent, she says, “I kill him somewhere around page 112, because I soon find I can’t stand the guy. If you wouldn’t want him in your life, why would you impose him on your protagonist?”

When she wrote *The House of the Spirits*, she had no grand plan. “I didn’t have a role model, and I didn’t know if my book was going to be read

by anyone, let alone published. It was written on impulse with great innocence.” By then, her first marriage was collapsing and she was working as an administrator in a school in Caracas. She wrote at night, at weekends and during the holidays. The book started out as a letter to her dying grandfather and ended up as a fictionalised story of her family.

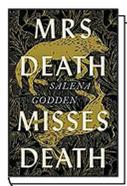
Twenty-five books and nearly 40 years later, Allende has learned to plan, but only a bit. “My plan is that if I’m still alive on 8 January, I start on a new book. Although that doesn’t mean that every year I start a new book, because maybe I haven’t finished the previous one.” Given we are speaking in mid-January, does this mean she’s a week into a new book? “I am,” she nods. Can she tell me anything about it? “Of course not,” she laughs. What she will tell me is that she doesn’t always have an idea before she starts. “Half the job is to show up,” she says. “You show up and you open your mind and heart, and something will happen. I have learned in years of writing that I have to be patient. I can write about anything except politics and football, so I know that if I give myself time, and I relax, it will happen. If I’m tense and calling the muse desperately, the muse won’t come.”

In *The Soul of a Woman*, Allende paints a beatific picture of life in her 70s - “I am in a splendid moment of my destiny,” she writes. She tells me she is a natural optimist and, having seen great change in her lifetime for women, believes that men and women will, in time, have power in equal numbers. Ending the patriarchy, she says, will require “a jump in evolution. It will be a completely different civilisation, and I will not see it. Like all revolutions, we start with great anger and a feeling of injustice that we need to make things right. And we fight like crazy without always knowing where we are going. But you continue to work for that final goal, and it will be achieved. We will do it, I’m sure.” ●

Fiction

Death is personified as an overworked black woman in a modern-day Pilgrim's Progress leavened with caustic wit

Sara Collins



Mrs Death Misses Death
by Salena Godden,
Canongate, £14.99

In poet Salena Godden's debut novel, death is personified as a series of black women: one minute she's an old "homeless black beggar woman with knotty natty hair", the next she's a "kind black lady", then she becomes a young, "shimmering" Nina Simone. This allows her to pass through the world

incognito, because, as she points out, "there is no human more invisible, more easily talked over, ignored, betrayed and easy to walk past" than a black woman.

After an eternity spent shape-shifting among the ranks of the unseen and unheard, she desperately wants to share her stories, and she selects as her amanuensis Wolf Willeford, an east London poet described in gender neutral terms. Wolf was traumatised as a child after their mother died in a fire with echoes of the recent Grenfell disaster: "My mother died, friends and neighbours died, they were jumping from the windows, trapped in the stairwell, bodies cooked in the lifts. We still don't even know how many lives were lost and how many lives were affected because of that one fire, that one night."

It's the kind of shock that deforms a childhood, and it has left Wolf with "a temptation, a desire, a compulsion" to die. Wolf buys a desk through which Mrs Death transmits her poems, songs and "private thoughts". She has been traumatised too, by her work harvesting human souls: "the other day, there I am, sweeping through a town in Syria and I find I am in floods of tears". Now she's driven to speak about it, as if by the same kind of "woeful agony" that drove Coleridge's ancient mariner. She tells Wolf



Miraculously light-hearted
Salena Godden

that death "lives in silence", yet in this incarnation she seems to exist in a state of constant, garrulous neurosis, musing on human nature and her relationships with Life and Time, often in the tone of an exasperated sibling.

She extemporises about the infinite number of deaths she has facilitated, and offers fractured reminiscences of various female serial killers, some true (most female serial killers work in a "deadly couple"), some invented (Jack the Ripper was a woman). Mrs Death's emphasis on women who kill is deliberate, as is the fact that she has chosen to appear in female form: "For surely only she who bears it, she who gave you life, can be she who has the power to take it?" Wolf transcribes her utterances as bits of biographies, poems, transcripts, and even medical records. But there are also gaps in the narration represented by ellipses and line breaks, mimetic evocations of the silence induced by trauma. The effect is to produce a collage of speech and speechlessness, a story that sometimes slips away from you even while you are reading it, becoming a memento mori in form as well as content. In other words, it's exactly the sort of thing you expect when a poet writes a novel, and exactly the sort of thing you'll devour if you like huge helpings of experimentation with your fiction.

This is not light-hearted stuff, yet Godden has produced a miraculously light-hearted novel, leavened in the right places with a caustic, perceptive wit. It opens with a disclaimer: "Spoiler alert: We will all die in the end," and thereafter what could have been a dirge becomes an elegant, occasionally uproarious, *danse macabre*. Wolf's London is exemplified by the image of "a one-legged pigeon picking at a discarded chicken burger by a frozen dog shit in a pissy bus stop", and there's also a transcript of Mrs Death's session with a psychiatrist (picture Charon on a therapist's couch).

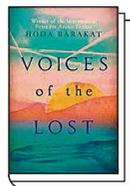
Be warned: this novel is highly allegorical, and more interested in message than plot - it is a kind of latter-day *Pilgrim's Progress*, which, in spite of the humour, intends to make you squirm. I'm not sure how much of it was written before last year took its surreal turn, but by the beginning of February the total number of deaths attributed to Covid-19 in the UK had exceeded 100,000. Whereas the 14th-century Black Death brought forth the Grim Reaper as a menacing, skeletal figure with hood and scythe, perhaps only a modern poet living through a modern plague could personify death as an overworked black woman who suffers from PTSD and tells us off for always looking in the wrong direction when deciding who to lionise and who to overlook. "Your heroes are working overtime in the crumbling NHS A&E departments," she says, "your heroes are your doctors and nurses, your teachers and volunteers, people taking phone calls at the Samaritans and talking people down from the edge." Godden's novel is full of lines like this: wry illuminations of the anxieties of our age.

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

ROBERTO RICCIUTI/GETTY

A chain of letters links five migrants and asylum seekers in the Lebanese writer's prize-winning 10th book

Madeleine Thien



Voices of the Lost
by Hoda Barakat,
translated by
Marilyn Booth,
Oneworld, £12.99

country for a lover she has not seen in decades. As the hours tick by, hope of reunion fades.

In the hotel directory, the woman finds a love letter written in Arabic. Its male author reveals himself to be manipulative and abusive, but our nameless narrator feels a bond with him: “It was as if, as soon as my fingers even touched the page, I sensed that the man ... [was] familiar, a person I already knew.” She begins a letter of her own.

Voices of the Lost, awarded the 2019 International prize for Arabic fiction, is the celebrated Lebanese writer Hoda Barakat’s 10th book. Translated by Marilyn Booth, the novel is constructed primarily of letters written by five migrants or asylum seekers from the Arab world, all of whom have departed or fled their unnamed countries. The five letters form a chain as each letter falls, by chance, into the hands of another migrant; one letter is salvaged from a trash can, another from the seat of an airplane. The finder is then moved to write their own letter, and thereby make sense of their present isolation.

A man, tortured for months by the secret police of an unnamed Middle Eastern state, recounts to his mother how he became a torturer himself. In his chilling missive, he asks: “So why should I punish myself with thoughts of remorse? ... the circumstances we’re put in have their own laws of necessity.”

The Arab spring, the horrors of Isis, desperate people “pulled out of sea water” – our present world pulses within all five letters; allusions are made to lost homes that might be Lebanon, Syria, Libya, Egypt or Iraq, among others. Against this background of unnamed places and abstracted histories, Barakat attempts to create specificity – real human voices. The voices are often piercing; but at times, they are thin, as if imagined only up to the limit of what the narrative thematically requires.

The five letters are followed by a short section of

“That country is now gone,” observes an unnamed woman in *Voices of the Lost*. “It is finished, toppled over and shattered like a huge glass vase. To attempt to bring any of this back ... could produce only a pure, unadulterated grief, an unbearable bitterness.” The woman is waiting in a hotel in an unnamed European

counterpoints: brief glimpses into the lives of four intended recipients or acquaintances. Rather than letters, these snapshots take the form of internal monologues. A woman, seemingly European, describes an Arab lover whose problems “were all products of a miserable childhood in an ailing country”. A Canadian asserts that if anyone tried to understand “that obscure world ‘close up’, they would return to their family as a few random body parts in a little wooden chest – if they come back at all, that is.” When his daughter accuses him of a “white man’s indifference”, he wonders: “How well can we ever know people who lived through civil wars? How much can we ever really know about the violence and destruction, the losses, the devastation?”

The recitations in *Voices of the Lost* are searing. Yet the construction of the novel – the device of found letters, the late addition of a heroic postman keeping a register of what cannot be delivered – creates an uneasy space where contrivance is an insistent part of the fabric. Barakat’s desire to channel certain experiences is vivid; as one character puts it: “It was a desire to insert myself into the logic of a man I do not know ... a logic that doesn’t ask for the consent of others ...” Occasionally, thematic investigations threaten to replace depth of character. The fourth

Their host countries view them as undesirables from volatile regions in which they pretend to have no interests

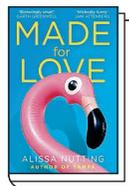
letter, discovered in a storage locker, prompts the finder to comment: “This letter, which didn’t arrive where it was supposed to arrive, was like a voice that no one has ever heard – never, not since the beginning. From the day this woman was born her voice was lost.” This is a powerful sentiment whose strength somewhat ebbs as it is repeated across a slender novel. “There are so many

of them out there,” says a man who has escaped his father’s tyranny, “people whom life has cast mercifully out to the margins where no one can see them ...”

The tragedies of *Voices of the Lost* are agonising. Collapsed states and familial betrayals have ruptured the people within this novel, all of whom have sought and failed to find safety elsewhere. Meanwhile, their countries of refuge view them as undesirables from volatile regions in which they pretend to have no geopolitical or strategic interests: a mass of interchangeable migrants who can only be pitied or feared. This feigned innocence of host countries is, for me, what is subversive in Barakat’s writing. The reader of literature who takes pleasure in vague, generalised pity, who enjoys their own capacity for sympathy, becomes complicit in a continued evasion. The desperation of refugee flight results, necessarily, in an uneasy paper trail, which reads just as uneasily in fictional guise.

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

Packed full of gags, this comedy about sex dolls and the big tech surveillance bonanza is a wild ride *Carrie O'Grady*



Made for Love
by Alissa Nutting,
Windmill, £8.99

“The stench of crisis on you now is at an all-time high,” Hazel’s father tells her. He’s not wrong; Hazel is a perpetual Cinderella, still in rags despite having been swept off her feet by a (not so charming) prince. She has packed up and run away, back to her dad’s, but how do you evade a husband

who has planted a microchip in your brain?

American author Alissa Nutting’s first novel, *Tampa*, courted controversy by featuring a 26-year-old teacher who seduced her teenage male students. Here Nutting is on safer ground, taking on big tech and its deceptive promises of a streamlined, pain-free life.

Byron, Hazel’s husband, is a billionaire internet mogul pursuing global domination through gadgetry – a sort of unholy hybrid of Elon Musk and Tony “Iron Man” Stark. His tech is sufficiently advanced to bear out Arthur C Clarke’s maxim that it’s indistinguishable from magic, and Nutting has fun describing his combination head-massager/web-browser and the like. But mainly he serves as a persecutor of Hazel, who had only managed to ensnare him originally through flattery, lies and the total suppression of her true self.

Nutting touches on the feminist issues raised by this scenario, but only intermittently. She is a funny writer, and her goal here seems to be to make every line a gag. Ludicrous situations proliferate, many involving the dad’s two sex dolls, who are good springboards for comedy set pieces, such as when Hazel gets her arm stuck in one’s mouth, or rather “Throatgina™”. An extended subplot about a conman whose sex life is derailed by a brush with a dolphin hits new heights of absurdity, and inspires some startlingly lush descriptions of marine nookie.

The author deserves credit for envisioning the dangers of our surveillance-state tech economy, and milking them for all their ridiculousness. Generally, though, the humour is glib and depthless. Hazel is the classic hapless protagonist, forced into situations of maximum vulnerability, such as choosing a wedding dress, for laughs. Her eventual rescue is something of a *deus ex machina* – which could be excused, since the whole book is about gods in machines. The novel is a wild ride, with Nutting’s foot firmly on the pedal the whole way; and like most joyrides, it doesn’t take you far.

To buy a copy for £8.36 go to guardianbookshop.com.

{ Short stories } From rumours of an invisible family to lessons in flatshare etiquette ... cleverly fragmentary and fabular tales *Jude Cook*



The Earth, Thy Great Exchequer, Ready Lies
by Jo Lloyd,
Swift, £12.99

In George Saunders’s luminously perceptive meditation on lessons learned from the Russian masters, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, he suggests a short story should “always be escalating”; that it must ideally adhere to a “ruthless efficiency principle”. Jo Lloyd’s debut collection demonstrates that stories can be compelling in other

ways. They can be gestational, digressive, subtly allusive: more a patchwork quilt than a grid-iron system.

These qualities are on show in “The Invisible”, winner of the 2019 BBC National short story award, a fabular, fragmentary tale set in 18th-century Wales, in which new wealth destroys a community. Inspired by an entry in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, it tells of a Caernarvonshire woman who claims that she knows of an invisible family in an invisible mansion. The story is narrated in the first-person plural, and eventually represents the voice of the proletariat, delivering an allegory of envy and inequality.

Elsewhere, contemporary quotidian tales are juxtaposed with myth. In “The Ground the Deck”, provincial Megan moves into a London flatshare with worldly Licia and Xander, only to be given an education in how small inconsiderate gestures can be devastating to those “below us” – literally in Megan’s case, with her treatment of the couple downstairs.

In “The Butterflies of the Balkans”, ageing Dottie and Prue travel the Dalmatian coast in 1905, passing themselves off as “scientists ... researching the Lepidoptera”. Deaf, with “some mischievous artist ... taking an eraser to her vision”, Dottie knows the trip is a last, life-affirming apprehension of existence: “One day the whole glittering world would fade.” Lyrical, weightless, elusive as the butterflies in Dottie’s net, this story is one of the best in the collection.

The theme of class divisions returns in the daringly structured title story about a 17th-century mercantile adventurer. Episodic, with many ellipses, it is neither efficient nor escalating, but gains its power from its undocumented stretches of time: “Years pass, then centuries. Wars are fought, empires spread and contract ... The world is changed utterly.” Readers are allowed to put together the jigsaw for themselves.

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Books of the month

{ SF and fantasy } A fugitive from fascism; a bioform bear named Honey; 'techie' overlords; and a dreamworld traveller
Lisa Tuttle



Beginning in 2013 with *The Bone Season*, Samantha Shannon's fantasy series has attracted a large readership and much-deserved praise. In a field thick with medieval despots and fairytale atmosphere, it stands out for its uniquely different and complex setting. **The Mask Falling** (Bloomsbury, £16.99) is the fourth instalment, returning us to the near-future alternative reality that split from our own in 1859, after the veil between worlds was breached. This led to human contact with the immortal inhabitants of the Netherworld, and subsequently the overthrow of the British monarchy and the establishment of the brutal Scion regime, dedicated to the persecution of "unnaturals" (anyone with a psychic gift or interest in spiritual matters - even fantasy fiction is outlawed). The characters are believable, as are the compromises they make to stay alive under a fascist government. This new book takes the much-abused heroine Paige Mahoney out of Britain in search of potential new allies in Paris, where the narrative exerts the same vice-like grip as before, with danger, deception, hair's-breadth escapes and new revelations coming thick and fast.

Adrian Tchaikovsky's **Bear Head** (Head of Zeus, £18.99) is a sequel to his *Dogs of War*, but perfectly comprehensible - and very exciting - without knowledge of the earlier book. Although it is set in a near future when Mars is being converted into a holiday destination for billionaires, and "bioforms" are engineered from animal stock as intelligent instruments of war, some things are familiar: the chief villain is an American politician even more malevolent than a certain recent ex-president. Narrator Jimmy is something of a bioform himself, having undergone physical modifications to survive his construction job on Mars. To pay for the drugs that relieve the tedium of his working life he has been renting out space in his brain for temporary data

storage, until one day he is horrified to realise that the "data" includes another personality - the ghost of a bioform bear named Honey who tells him she needs his help. Jimmy is desperate to get rid of this uninvited guest, but Honey is considerably cleverer and tougher than her host, and there's far more at stake than he knows. Smartly choreographed as it moves between opposing forces on two planets, this is a rousing good read.

Adam Roberts is one of the most intellectually daring British science fiction writers, trying something different in every book. **Purgatory Mount** (Gollancz, £16.99) starts off like classic space opera, on board a spaceship crewed by five quasi-immortal superhumans. On an empty planet they discover an enormous tower-like structure, possibly the remains of a space elevator, in which they perceive a resemblance to Dante's mountain of Purgatory. However, this is not the real story. That takes place in part two, "The United States of Amnesia", in which the US of perhaps a decade from now is descending into chaos: as 16-year-old Otty runs for her life, she remarks that her attackers "could have been anybody - US military, state troopers, local militia, three gun-nuts out on walkabout. It hardly mattered." Other citizens include an increasing population of "buckleheads", who have had their memories wiped and can only function when plugged into their phones. It's a miserable, grimly compelling dystopia. When that narrative ends, we return to the demi-gods in their spaceship. From the title onwards there are hints that *Purgatory Mount* is a response to *The Divine Comedy*; in case readers miss it, Roberts spells out his meaning in an afterword. But what an author says he meant is not always borne out by the text, and I was left unconvinced.

The Swimmers by Marian Womack (Titan, £8.99) is a richly imagined eco-gothic tale set centuries from now after the sea has turned to a dead brown sludge of plastic waste, and the land remaining in the tropical zone has been overwhelmed by forests filled with carnivorous plants and gigantic animals that mutate and evolve with unholy speed. The poor must cope as best they can, while wealthy "techies" live suspended above the world in the sanitised safety of the Ring. Pearl loves her childhood forest home and dreams of becoming a storyteller, but agrees to an arranged marriage with techie Arlo. Perhaps, if they piece together their knowledge, and art and science come together, the seas may yet be saved.

After so many dystopian visions, Tim Pratt's **Doors of Sleep** (Angry Robot, £9.99) offers some light relief. Zax Delatree is transported to a different world every time he falls asleep, and although they are not all benign - some are deadly, and there are people out to do him harm - on the whole this is a gentle, slightly old-fashioned picaresque that made me think of *Doctor Who*, or characters created by Douglas Adams. It's welcome escapist fare in these stressful times.

Lisa Tuttle's The Dead Hours of Night is published by Valancourt.

Breathless

Fiona Sampson

After being diagnosed with a severe respiratory illness, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was forced to live in isolation. Her biographer describes how the poet's nomadic, campaigning career offers an inspiring model for lockdown life

The expression of frustration could have been sent from any tier in travel-restricted Britain: "Where do you go in July? For *me*, I cant answer. I am *longing* to go to London, & hoping to the last. That is all. For the present, ... certainly the window has been opened twice - an inch - but my physician shakes his head or changes the conversation (which is worse) whenever London is mentioned. But if it becomes possible, I shall go - will go! Putting it off to another summer is like a never."

In fact, it was mailed from Torquay in June 1840, by someone who had already spent two years in virtual lockdown there. Its recipient was Richard Hengist Horne, a literary man about town. Horne has since fallen into obscurity, but the letter writer would go on to become world famous as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, author of many pioneering works, including one of the best-known poems ever written, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways".

For now, though, she was an emerging talent struggling to keep any sense of herself as a writer alive. The success of her *The Seraphim and Other Poems* two years earlier had been eclipsed by the onset of severe illness that prompted her medical evacuation from the polluted capital. As a result she was feeling isolated, and left behind. As she confided to another friend: "What claim had I in my solitude & sadness & helpless hopeless sickness upon a literary man overwhelmed with occupation & surrounded by friends & fitnesses of all sorts in London?"

In fact, she wasn't alone in her isolation. Bad

health was good business for 19th-century Torquay. Wealthy invalids flocked to the south Devon town for its sunshine and sea air. The 34-year-old was among many incomers settling round its picturesque harbour. Here she shared a family "bubble" with an aunt, sister and favourite brother, all "quenching the energies of their lives" in this frustratingly limited existence; her wider social and professional life would remain entirely virtual for years. In 1845 she would still be writing to fellow poet Robert Browning, "As for me, I have done most of my talking by the post of late years - as people shut up in dungeons, take up with scrawling mottos on the walls."

Elizabeth had lived with chronic illness, self-isolating on and off, for much of her adult life. The emergency that precipitated her flight to Torquay was coughing up blood. Unlike John Keats, however, she seems to have had not tuberculosis, but bronchitis and asthma that, without modern clinical treatments, eventually merged into pneumonia, to kill her at 55. For this brilliant woman, who was writing poems at six and French dramas at 10, and whose first book was published at 14, "the straitness of my prison" was becoming intolerable.

As a robust, outdoorsy child she had planned (in no particular order) to become the greatest female poet ever, to help liberate Greece from Ottoman rule, and to become Lord Byron's girlfriend. But when she was 15, she and her sisters caught an undiagnosed illness, quickly followed by measles, which in Elizabeth turned to months of headaches and whole-body muscular spasms. Today, her diagnosis would probably be viral illness and post-viral syndrome.

In 2018, when I started writing the first biography of Barrett Browning in three decades, a mysterious respiratory illness that clinicians were helpless to understand or alleviate appeared remote, colourfully old-fashioned. And she seemed a most unlikely role model. I'd absorbed the cultural cliché of the neurasthenic poetess in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, Rudolf Besier's Broadway hit that spawned three films and seven TV dramas. Now I found myself wading through theoretical and fictional speculation about psychosomatic symptoms, a feminist retreat to the couch, or all-round privileged weediness. Just like the pandemic conspiracy theories that were beginning to crop up on my social media,

Elizabeth shared a 'bubble' with an aunt, a sister and brother, all 'quenching the energies of their lives' in a frustratingly limited existence

these speculations seemed obsessed with avoiding the brutal truth of human vulnerability: denying the fact of illness which, though today clinically manageable in the west, still kills millions in the absence of, for example, antibiotics or steroid inhalers.

By 2020, as I continued to track her lifelong search for the clean, warm air that would let her breathe,



Barrett Browning's struggle for life took on an ugly new meaning. It became increasingly hard to spend days thinking about someone racked with coughing, fighting for breath and profoundly frustrated in all she wanted to do, when every time I stood up from my work table it was to hear more of the same.

Yet the same material was also offering me a fascinating insight into how to cope with what was going on in my own world. Elizabeth was one of the first cultural influencers to understand how a virtual existence offers escape from daily life, "The escape from pangs of heart & bodily weakness ... when you throw off *yourself* ... what you feel to be *yourself* ... into another atmosphere & into other relations, where your life may spread its wings out new," as she explained it to Browning. She escaped via paper rather than a screen, of course; but her grasp of self-invention through a kind of "second life" reminded me of all the friendships we were suddenly reconfiguring on Zoom. I also realised how closely her practice prefigured today's digital communicators: not just the teenagers and geeks, bloggers and TikTok stars, but citizen journalists, activists and those policed by authoritarian regimes too.

Key to her new way of writing was its use of influence. Barrett Browning might be confined to her room but, like Charles Dickens, she deployed her fame, and rapidly widening readership, to advocate against key injustices of her day. Her still-shocking "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" was published in an abolitionist fundraiser in 1848; she also wrote fundraiser poetry for the Ragged Schools movement giving poor kids an education, and had published an impassioned

condemnation of child labour, "The Cry of the Children", in the mass-circulation Blackwood's Magazine. In "The Runaway Slave" and in *Aurora Leigh* she condemned rape and forced prostitution - rather than their victims. Finally, "Casa Guidi Windows" and other late poems forced the Italian anti-imperial struggle on the attention of British readers, and it's for this that she would receive a hero's funeral in Florence.

Elizabeth's life story isn't just a useful guide to working around isolation, though. There was, eventually, an end to lockdown. *Poems* (1844) had also inspired the young Robert Browning to contact her. When the pair eventually married, it was to Italy that they ran away together. The next 15 years, though latterly marred by the recurrence of Elizabeth's ill health, were a period of glorious nomadism. Working from abroad and searching about to create their ideal lifestyle, first in Pisa and then in Florence - with stays in Rome, Paris, London and Le Havre - the Brownings lived the life of perpetual adventure that today's digital nomads have rediscovered.

From the first moment, "it was all glorious, & past speaking of". A southern climate, fresh air and fresh food allowed Elizabeth to get really well for the first time in her adult life. British visitors have embraced



**Home from home
Elizabeth and Robert
Browning found
freedom together
in Florence, top**

the Med since the days of the grand tour. What differentiated the Brownings was that they continued to send work back to publishers in London and the US; and to keep up with fellow writers and artists via letters and visits. Elizabeth proved as determined to sustain her writing life as she had been to carve it out. In the model she created in Florence - of a home from home, in which to *work* from home - I think she found the perfect response to her lockdown

life. Necessary as that had been, it taught her actively to embrace the freedom to travel when it came: something I recognise in the travel plans friends are sharing now for "when this is all over".

Besides, the shadow cast by those years of isolation was surely what made her pay such passionate attention when she found herself in Italy, and campaign so hard for the country's future: rather as we debate organising society differently from now on. When our lockdown ends, I've realised, we could do worse than throw ourselves into campaigning for change, whether for social justice or the planet we find ourselves on. Just like that remarkable pioneer Elizabeth Barrett Browning ●

Two-Way Mirror: The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning by Fiona Sampson is published by Profile on Thursday.

'I wanted to write an epic love story'

David Nicholls



Sometime in the mid-80s I was studying *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for A-level. Seventeen was the optimum age for doomed romance, and I still recall reading the passage in which Tess "noted dates as they came past in the revolution of the year" and realised that, as well as a birthday, there was "a day which lay sly and unseen ... that of her own death ... giving no sign or sound when she annually passed over it". Hidden anniversaries! Days we pass through without knowing their significance! Perhaps I said "wow". Certainly the notion seemed profound enough for me to talk about it at parties. I did well in the exam, less well at parties.

Twenty-two years later, I found myself struggling to find an idea for my third novel. A new parent approaching

40, I was predictably preoccupied with the question, how do we become our adult selves? I wanted to write an epic love story on the theme, but 20 years of biography seemed unwieldy. Besides, I was distracted by adapting *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for the BBC. There, once again, was that passage. Twenty single-day set-piece scenes seemed far more manageable and by leaving out the obvious events - the first encounter, first kiss, the wedding days - perhaps the reader might be pulled forward, filling in the other 364 days as they went along.

What date? It couldn't be a birthday, Valentine's Day or New Year's Eve - too repetitive - but it would be helpful if the characters could register its significance. St Swithin's Day corresponded to graduation season, the

starting line of the journey, and its mythology tied in with the themes of unpredictability.

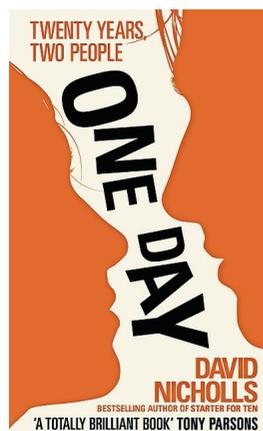
That was the structure. I'd need characters and a series of obstacles, to keep them dancing around each other into their 40s. Dexter - "Tom" initially - would be one of those privileged, self-confident boys who barrels into adult life with every expectation of success. Emma would take longer to find her way. I tried to avoid autobiography but I'd had my fair share of false starts and anxieties. Emma's terrible Tex-Mex restaur-

ant was my Fulham bistro chain, her avocado bathroom came from my bedsit.

I planned the book in detail, pinning down the off-page events. Emma and Dexter wouldn't have to be together all the time but they'd need to remember each other, so that a chance remark in Edinburgh in 1988 might finally land in Paris in 2001.

I finished the first draft of "Twenty Years", my daughter was born and after some time off, I printed out the manuscript and wrote it out again from scratch rather than editing it on screen - I wanted to make sure every word was right.

Of course every word was not right and 14 years later, there are still things that I'd love to fix. But the book changed my life in ways the teenage Hardy-freak could never have imagined. The intention was to write something funny, sad and emotional, something like a great old song that would make you want to call old friends. I hope that's what it achieves.

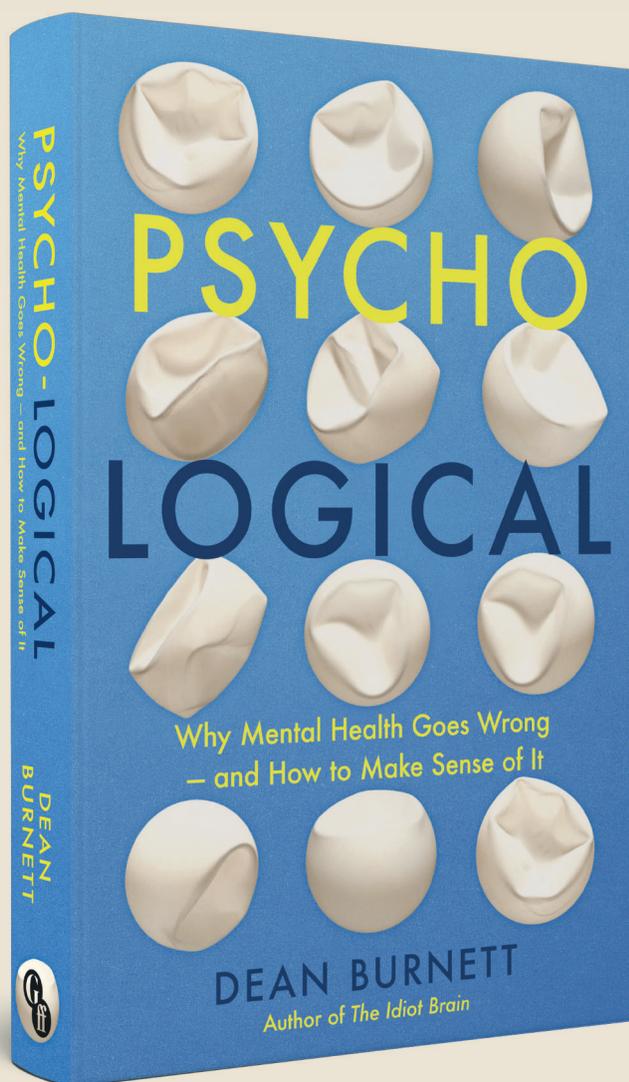


Tom Gauld

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