Creature comforts
Can our passion for pets help reset our relationship with nature?
“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
Made in England
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‘Undramatic lives can be compelling and actually are full of drama for those people. But just the basic idea that it’s quite important to give somebody a reason to turn the next page, that’s become interesting.’
— Jon McGregor, page 17
**The week in books**
**24 April**

**Shops unlock**
Bookshops are back in business, with Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet*, published as lockdown began in March 2020, proving to be a hot seller, according to the Bookseller. Sales are promising, with the first Monday’s receipts looking like those of a busy Saturday, said Meryl Halls, MD of the Booksellers Association: “There is a long way to go before normal is re-established... But bookshops will benefit from the fondness their customers hold for them.”

“We have been slowly remembering how to do our jobs,” said Leanne from Bookbugs and Dragon Tales in Norwich. “It’s almost like a home-coming,” said Jane from Harbour Bookshop in Kingsbridge, Devon. The highlight so far has been a five-year-old buying her first book, according to Sam from Max Minerva’s in Bristol, who said that many customers, when asked if they need any help, have replied that they “just want to breathe in the books”.

**Katy Guest**

**Literary goals**
Two literary antidotes to a toxic week for football, during which it revealed its contempt for many supporters. Marcus Rashford announced that his free children’s book club will kick off in June with Pooja Pur’s time-travel adventure *A Dinosaur Ate My Sister*. And the Welsh football team launched an under-11 poetry competition ahead of this summer’s Euro finals. Swansea wing-back Connor Roberts recited a poem by the Welsh children’s laureate, Gruffudd Owen, and star player Gareth Bale lauded expression on the page as well as the pitch. Players will help judge poems — without use of VAR — written in Welsh or English on the theme of identity. Closing date is 20 May. Details at literaturewales.org/ euro2020. Nicholas Wroe

**The producers**
Natalie Portman’s announcement that she will executive produce and star in a film adaptation of Elena Ferrante’s *The Days of Abandonment* is the latest example in a trend of all-female book-film box-office smashes led by actors. Portman (pictured) will also co-star in and co-produce, with Lupita Nyong’o, a series based on Laura Lippman’s novel *Lady in the Lake*, while Olivia Colman is expected to star in a film of Ferrante’s *The Lost Daughter*, adapted by Maggie Gyllenhaal in her directorial debut.

Nicole Kidman, meanwhile, is producing adaptations of *The Expatriates* by Janice YK Lee and *Pretty Things* by Janelle Brown (also starring in the latter), while Kaley Cuoco produced and is starring in a TV version of Chris Bohjalian’s *The Flight Attendant*. Reese Witherspoon is the biggest star on the literary adaptation block. She founded her first production company to address a lack of interesting female roles, and snapped up Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild* and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* before they became bestsellers. She’s currently working on a mini series of *Daisy Jones & the Six* by Taylor Jenkins Reid. KG

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**Cronyism**

**WORD OF THE WEEK**
Steve Poole

*British ministers have been accused of “cronyism” simply for awarding lucrative contracts to companies owned by friends or siblings – just as John Major had “sleaze” and David Cameron presided over a “chumocracy”. But where do cronies come from?*

All we know is that it is 17th century in origin, and probably university slang for dear friend. (“No connection with ‘crone’ has been traced,” the OED warns.) The first print citation is from Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras* (1678), where Orsin grieves the loss of his “dear Crony Bear”, which was an actual bear. A couple of years later Samuel Pepys refers in his diary to an old schoolfriens “who was a great crony of mine”.

The political sense of “cronyism” arose in the 1950s, when President Truman was accused of appointing his friends to government posts, but when it was first coined in the mid-19th century, it could be a neutral or even positive word, meaning a love of one’s friends. It might seem startlingly prescient of Walter de la Mare to have written in 1922 of “Johnson’s oddities, his queer habits, his cronyism, his truculence, his wit, his frailties”, but he was speaking of the great Samuel.
‘If I need to forget everything I read Lee Child. Honestly’
Edmund de Waal

The book I am currently reading
It’s never one book. I’m finishing Hermione Lee’s great biography of Tom Stoppard. I’m on the last chapters of Trollope’s The Eustace Diamonds and don’t want it to end. And I’m deeply moved by Durs Grünbein’s Porcelain. I didn’t know his poetry and have become an evangelist.

The book that changed my life
Primo Levi’s The Wrench. It is his novel about why we make things, what it means to slowly create an object.

The book I wish I’d written
I wanted to be a poet. It is Paul Celan’s work that has proved to be a constant. Much of my ceramic work is a conversation with Celan. He wrote in German and so I need his words alongside translation. I’ve loved Michael Hamburger’s versions and more recently Pierre Joris’s, in particular Breathturn into Timestead.

The book that influenced my writing
The Leopard by Lampedusa. It is so delicately done that you don’t notice the changes of register until you find a dynasty has collapsed, certainties are undone, treasures have become dust. He said the dog was the key to the book, and when I reread it I feel this is true: write into the details, keep the energy unsettled.

The last book that made me cry
Last week I reread Denise Riley’s book of poems Say Something Back, which includes “A Part Song”, a long poem about grief, and that was that. It is remarkable.

The book that made me laugh
Joan Aiken’s The Wolves of Willoughby Chase. It is on a shelf of children’s books in a corridor, perfect for middle-of-the-night anxiety reading.

The book I couldn’t finish
Robert Musil’s The Man without Qualities, his epic study of Viennese society. It is of “immeasurable importance”, according to the blurb, which hasn’t helped me get through the last 500 pages.

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
The Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu. Japan has been part of my life since I was 17, and I’ve mumbled through so many conversations about it. I’m sorry.

The book I give as a gift
Three favourites: AS Byatt’s Peacock & Vine, her beautiful essay on William Morris and the designer Fortuny. Nigel Slater’s Toast, as it will make the recipient cry. And Max Porter’s Grief is the Thing with Feathers, because books that collapse genres are exhilarating.

My earliest reading memory
I can remember Rosemary Sutcliff’s The Eagle of the Ninth with painful clarity. I’m sure that the atmosphere of loss and the deep, melancholic descriptions of the damp landscape of the north set me up for life.

My comfort read
If I’m ill it’s back to Nancy Mitford. If I’m on a plane it has to be Carl Hiaasen. And if I need to forget everything it’s Lee Child. Honestly.

Edmund de Waal’s Letters to Camondo is published by Chatto & Windus.
Absolutely wild

While puppy sales soar and the cats of Instagram post to millions, endangered species are vanishing from the planet. Henry Mance on what our passion for pets can teach us about our relationship with other animals
It was the carefree summer of 2019, and I was on a beach in San Francisco - surrounded by a thousand corgis. Sand is not the natural environment for dogs whose legs are only as long as ice lollies. But this was Corgi Con, possibly the world’s largest gathering of corgis. It was weird. It was glorious. There were corgis in baby harnesses and corgis under parasols. There were corgis dressed as a shark, a lifeguard, a snowman, a piñata and Chewbacca from Star Wars (the latter two were overweight). There were stalls selling sunglasses and socks for dogs. If a Martian wanted to understand the depth of humans’ obsession with their pets – the commoditisation of animals and the merging of our social lives with theirs – Corgi Con would have been an ideal first stop.

In California, such pet-wackiness is not unusual. San Francisco’s newest doggy daycare was charging up to $25,500 (£18,500) a year, more than the state minimum wage. Google declared dogs “an integral facet of our corporate culture”. Marc Benioff, founder of software firm Salesforce, had appointed his golden retriever as the company’s “chief love officer”. But pet worship is worldwide; the archbishop of Canterbury says that pets can go to heaven, while Japanese architects have designed a ramp to help dachshunds sunbathe alongside their owners.

Our love for them is easily dismissed as frivolous or private. But in a way, it’s revolutionary. Our pets represent our closest ties to another species. If they can sensitise us, and make us care for other sentient beings, they could change the course of history.

For the last two years, I have investigated how we treat other animals – including working in an abattoir and a pig farm, and visiting fish markets and zoos. Pets are truly the exception. We push slaughterhouses to the back of our minds. We delay turning to the destruction of forests and coral reefs on which wild animals depend. Compare that with domestic dogs and cats, for which we’re always on emotional speed-dial. Pets are animals whose
Absolutely wild

lives we value, whose emotions we appreciate and whose flesh we wouldn’t dream of eating.

Lockdown has seen a pet boom. Deprived of the company of other humans, we looked for the company of animals instead. Britain’s dog population exploded, rising by an estimated 2 million. There were complications. Soaring prices fuelled unscrupulous breeding and thefts. New owners found themselves unable to socialise their puppies in a time of social distancing. They struggled on, hoping that their pets would help their mental health, although therapy sessions might have been cheaper. Over a lifetime, a dog costs a minimum of £4,600 to £13,000, depending on size; care costs can take the total above £30,000, says animal charity PDSA. Americans’ pet spending has surpassed $100bn a year for the first time. Meanwhile, shelters are preparing for a wave of unwanted animals.

Like many parents, I hoped that having a pet would help to teach my children about nature. I grew up with a terrier, which I fondly remember as the source of my internet passwords. We now have a cat, which generally lies on my laptop whenever I try to work. Yet I wonder if pet ownership is not a missed opportunity. We needed a new relationship with nature, instead we ended up with feline Instagram accounts. We love pets, yet accept factory farms and extinctions. Shouldn’t pets spur us to treat all animals better?

The first stumbling block is that our love for pets is not as pure as we would like to think. Pet ownership is so ingrained that we rarely question its implications. The relationship can bring great joy, and not just to us: when was the last time you saw a person happier than a dog chasing a Frisbee? But that’s not the whole story.

By owning animals, we take control of their lives. We decide who they live with, when they socialise with others of the same species, and whether they can have offspring. Often we feed them into obesity. Often we decide when they die.

In Chile, many dogs roam the streets in packs. They have more freedom, and perhaps more fun, than their pampered cousins. In Europe and North America, many pets arguably live their whole lives in a form of lockdown: they are well fed and safely homed, but lack social interaction and autonomy. We love our pets deeply, we want them to be happy, but we expect them to fit in with our schedules and needs. In reality, many rabbits don’t want to be cuddled. Pet fish and tortoises probably don’t value our company at all. Wild parrots often live in huge flocks, but as pets they are mostly kept alone; one study found that American owners spent only 15 minutes a day interacting with their parrots. What are these highly intelligent birds meant to do the rest of the time?

Similarly, when devoted dog owners return to offices after lockdown, how are the dogs meant to react? Modern human societies may not be easy places to live: nearly three-quarters of dogs show at least one anxiety-related behaviour, such as sensitivity to loud noises. “We have a perception that being owned is an inherently positive experience. I am not convinced that it is,” says Heather Bacon, an animal welfare expert at the University of Edinburgh.

What we love about dogs, in particular, is that they offer us unconditional love. Yet this has “almost made us lazy about meeting their needs”, Bacon says. Nowhere is this more evident than in breeding. Dogs were probably domesticated more than 20,000 years ago. Breeds as we understand them today have existed for under 200 years. They were standardised, often on arbitrary, aesthetic criteria, based on dogs from small gene pools. This was the Victorian age of empire and of social hierarchy. Dog breeders’ ability to manipulate a single species into very different shapes and sizes helped to inspire proponents of eugenics.

Breeding has had indefensible results. Some of our most popular pets are brachycephalic dogs, such as pugs and French bulldogs, whose flat faces affect their airways and much else. Yet people find flat faces cute and loving. Some owners also believe that brachy dogs are low maintenance because they don’t require much exercise (in fact, the dogs just cannot breathe properly). So one-fifth of dogs in the UK are flat-faced. In March Lady Gaga offered a $500,000 reward after her French bulldogs were stolen. It’s weird to value your dogs’ company so much, but value breeding for health so little.

Our unethical breeding also affects cats too: Scottish fold cats, which Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran have helped to popularise, suffer a cartilage defect. Most Persian cats have at least one health disorder. Put a cat in a wheelie bin and you become a national hate figure; create a cat vulnerable to eye disease and you become a wealthy breeder. As Dan O’Neill, a companion animal epidemiologist at the Royal Veterinary College, puts it, pets’ health problems are “actually human problems”.

We could start to solve these human problems. Right now, pet-buyers often seem to be acting on a whim - like the hapless narrator in Taffy Brodesser-Akner’s novel *Fleishman Is in Trouble*, who panic-buys a miniature dachshund to turn his life around, but wakes up to find the dog peeing on his head. We could do our research, and stop trying to make fashion statements through animals. We could also try to offer our dogs choice (when Bacon walks her dogs, she lets them help to choose the route: “It’s their walk, not my walk”). Advertisers could stop using French bulldogs and other flat-faced dogs. Another option is to push breeders to cross-breed. Why not be radical, and drop our obsession with pets’ appearance altogether? We regard eugenics as beyond the pale; why should we celebrate the canine and feline equivalents? The problem isn’t
that we think of pets as almost human-like; it’s that we don’t think of them as human-like enough.

Even if pet owning is done well, it only brings us close to a small slice of the animal kingdom. At least 1,300 species of mammals, including both species of African elephant and 1,400 species of bird, such as snowy owls, are endangered. To save other animals, humans must shrink their footprint on the natural world – by eating less meat, creating more protected areas, and so on.

The difficulty is that our love for our pets increases our footprint. We need more chickens, cows and fish to feed our pets: US dogs and cats eat as many calories in a year as 62 million American people, according to the UCLA geography professor Gregory Okin. Pets no longer just eat our offcuts, because we want them to have the best. As a result, feeding an average-size dog can emit more than a tonne of greenhouse gases a year.

There’s more: in the US, cats have been estimated to kill between 1.3 and 4 billion birds, and between 6.2 and 22.3 billion mammals each year. It’s not clear how big a chunk of the bird population this represents, or whether the cats are taking mainly weaker birds that wouldn’t have survived anyway. I find this tricky: I love cats and birds. Having shared more nights on the sofa watching Netflix with cats, I value their individual existence over that of most birds. I also recognise that cat and dog populations are doing well, while those of birds are not, and that this puts our ecosystems off balance. Our cat has rarely brought anything back into the house, but I have to admit that our garden is not full of birds. Owners can try training their cats or attaching bells to their collars, yet the failsafe way to protect birds is to keep your cat indoors: something that affects the quality of a cat’s life.

Dogs, too, impinge on wildlife – as shown by the sad recent incident on the River Thames where a pet dog savaged a seal known as Freddie Mercury. Farmers complain about dogs disturbing nesting lapwings and other birds. Other pets can be even more disruptive: Florida’s Everglades have been overrun by Burmese pythons and green iguanas, which have escaped or been released by bored pet-owners.

This is not an argument against pets. It’s a call for balance. There are roughly as many parrots in captivity as in the wild. The world has close to a billion dogs and several hundred million cats. Meanwhile, some of their closest wild relatives – such as dholes, a species of Asian wild dog, and African lions – are losing their habitats. If we truly love animals, we should make sacrifices for them, whether or not they curl up on our sofa. If pets represent our deeper love for the natural world, perhaps we could match every pound we spend on them with a pound given to conserve wild animals.

Maybe we could use our love for pets to reconsider where our food comes from, too. Farm animals exhibit many of the same emotional and social behaviours as pets. Right now, we exaggerate pets’ abilities – Barbra Streisand thought her dog Samantha could speak English – and ignore farm animals’ instincts, such as dairy cows’ desire not to be separated from their calves after birth. Before lockdown, half of UK adults had a pet, but only one in 20 was vegetarian. We are outraged when dogs are killed in China or South Korea, but not when 11 million pigs are killed every year in the UK. We should think about why we wouldn’t be happy for our pets to live on farms, or be killed in slaughterhouses.

Our pets can sensitise us. Jane Goodall said that her dog had taught her about animal emotions, long before she carried out her groundbreaking observations of chimpanzees. The American activist Henry Spira said that taking care of a friend’s cat pushed him to become interested in animal rights: “I began to wonder about the appropriateness of cuddling one animal while sticking a knife and fork into another.”

For the Victorians, who laid the groundwork for our modern pet-keeping, the natural world was a vast treasure chest to be explored and tamed. Things have changed. Our challenge now is to live on a finite planet, without jeopardising our own existence or the animals that we love. It requires a shift from a mentality of hierarchy to one of humility.

In San Francisco and beyond, conscientious humans often refer to their pets as “companion animals”, and themselves as “guardians”, rather than pet owners. This phrasing doesn’t quite work for me. It implies that animals are only our companions if we keep them in our homes. Yet the birds in our cities, the beavers in our rivers, the pine martens in our forests – these are our companions, too, and our wellbeing depends on their survival. I take more joy from the ring-necked parakeets in the park (presumably descendants of someone’s escaped pets) than I would do from a parrot living mate-less in my home. Our cities and countryside should have space for wildlife, not just dogs and cats.

Corgi Con hasn’t decided whether to go ahead this year. I hope it does, but I also hope we pet owners look beyond it. There is more to loving animals than owning them: our pets should be the beginning of our love for other animals, not the end.

Henry Mance’s How to Love Animals in a Human-Shaped World is published by Cape.
A virtuoso global study of how modern nations were formed upends the familiar narrative at every turn

Miles Taylor

Few documents are venerated as much as the American constitution. Until recently, 1 million people a year filed past the original copy on display in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom in Washington DC. Yet, as Linda Colley’s brilliant new book shows, viewing constitutions as national tablets of stone tells us more about their contemporary charisma than the complex histories from which they were wrought. In this compelling study of constitutions produced around the world between the mid-18th century and the outbreak of the first world war, she upends the familiar version of history at every turn. Out goes the myth that constitutions were the product of democratic aspirations or revolution – rather they arose from the ashes of war or the threat of invasion. Nations may have been girded by constitutional documents, but these were borderless texts, available for adaptation across time and space. Above all, constitutions were “protean and volatile pieces of technology” that travelled far and wide, assisted by the expansion of print media and the speeding-up of long-distance travel and communication.

The Gun, the Ship and the Pen begins its journey, not where one might expect – in the America of the founding fathers or in revolutionary France – but in Corsica in 1755 where a former soldier, Pasquale Paoli, drew up a 10-page constitution for the island. Such military men crop up throughout the book as unlikely draftsmen of political order. In a series of vivid portraits we come across Toussaint Louverture in Haiti, Napoleon Bonaparte in France and Simón Bolívar in South America. This preponderance of the soldier-legislator provides Colley with one of her main themes: the combination of sword and pen might and right – in the making of constitutions.

An array of statistical and descriptive evidence demonstrates how so many constitutions that built the modern world were forged during two eras of intense warfare at sea and on land. These were the Seven Years’ War of 1756-63 and its aftermath, and the wars of the great powers in the long 1860s (the American civil war, the wars of unification in Italy and Germany, and the European and American incursions into China and Japan).

Countries needed constitutions not to free the people, but to defend them from aggression from without, and disunion from within. The book’s terminal point is unorthodox. Colley closes out not in the company of the lawyers and politicians who founded the League of Nations in 1920 to relight the flame of constitutional freedom. Instead she ends with the 1889 imperial constitution of Meiji Japan, which itself was a beacon of political modernisation as far afield as India and north Africa, not least after Japan defeated Russia in the 1905 war. Seeking legitimacy and popular acclaim, monarchs and emperors proved adept authors of constitutions. Colley makes a case for including not just the Meijis, but Catherine the Great of Russia and Gustav III of Sweden, as well as less powerful monarchs such as Pömare II of Tahiti and King Kalākaua of Hawai’i.

There is much more going on here than a level-headed reassessment of the realpolitik that sits behind the evolution of liberalism and democracy. By weaving together warfare and “lawfare”, The Gun, the Ship and the Pen draws attention to a perennial problem in the study of citizenship: who is in, and who is left out. Colley reveals the extent to which constitutions of the 18th and 19th centuries were preoccupied with military preparedness. Granting political rights went alongside conscription. Armed forces were almost exclusively a male preserve, so in most countries women were not formally part of the constitution until they became a cog in the fighting machine. This did not happen until the first world war, when they were dragooned into munitions factories and land armies working the farms to feed the nation. The vote soon followed.

Focusing on warfare also explains why so many political systems of the new world – for example, California, Australia and eventually New Zealand – made exclusions on the basis of race. Settler constitutions followed in the wake of land-grabs and wars with indigenous peoples, creating white politics and practices that would take decades to undo. At the same time, as Colley points out, the ripple effects of the constitutional amendments that emancipated the slaves after the American civil war led to a flourishing of colour-blind constitutions across south America and beyond. Her sword and pen...
argument enables Colley to explain one of the most famous constitutions, albeit unwritten, in the world: that of the British. Britain escaped the turbulence evident elsewhere not because it possessed a better constitution, as many liked to believe, but simply because it was an older settlement, the outcome of the civil war of the 1640s and the “glorious” revolution of 1688-9. In the 19th century, a powerful and peaceful Britain proved a handmaiden to constitution-making overseas. As both a financial and publishing hub, London became the centre for the projection of paper constitutions. The philosopher Jeremy Bentham stepped in as a bespoke constitutional tailor to a variety of political exiles and hereditary rulers who sought his advice, and many more who did not. Starting in the 1820s, British historians also pioneered the scholarly study of constitutions, their own included, starting with Magna Carta, an ancient document that enjoyed a new lease of life as a template, or at least a catchy title, to be emulated far and wide.

As with all great history books, the big picture is here, but so is the telling detail, the astute comparison, the arresting and memorable turn of phrase, the suggestive moral for our own times. There are some amazing discoveries: for instance, Pitcairn Island in the south Pacific with its 1838 constitution that enfranchised women as well as men, and also made provision for looking after animals and the environment; and the Norwegian constitution of 1814, which people were encouraged to paste on to the inside walls of their homes.

There are new twists on old turns. Napoleon, with his manic invention of new constitutions for every conquest, is offered as a credible model for Mary Shelley’s Dr Frankenstein. Fresh insights are suggested for pivotal moments, such as the Philadelphia convention that agreed the first American constitution in 1787 in great secrecy, only to find it emblazoned across the newspapers as soon as it was ready. Religion is given its due. The role of Catholic priests in the hugely influential Cádiz constitution of 1812, the first Islamic political code in the shape of the 1861 laws of Tunis and the influence of Protestant missionaries as agents of change are all worked into the narrative.

Colley ends her account in 1914, although a thoughtful epilogue points up how paper constitutions still matter in an age of cyber-warfare and digital democracy. Wisely, she avoids Brexit and the vexed question of whether the UK now needs a new constitution to shore up the union. But the portents are there. Major traumas reset the political landscape. A superb retelling of the past, The Gun, the Ship and the Pen will surely make us rethink our present and future.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
In 2019, Anita Sethi was on the TransPennine Express train from Liverpool on her way to Newcastle when a man sitting near her began playing loud music. Sethi asked if he could turn it down, and he stood up and unleashed a torrent of vicious racist abuse that attacked her right to exist in the country of her birth.

“Do you have a British passport?” he shouted.

“Get back on the banana boat. Paki cunt. Fuck off!”

In a busy carriage, only one other passenger tried to intervene, telling the man to shut up. But Sethi decided not to let it pass. Having recorded some of his rant on her phone, she calmly walked past her abuser, through the train and to the door marked “Staff”. A guard appeared, accompanied her back to her seat and then quietly took down statements from other passengers about what they had witnessed. When the train arrived at Darlington, the police were waiting. Sethi’s abuser was removed and arrested. Later she learned he had pleaded guilty, though the knowledge that he had admitted his crimes in the face of overwhelming evidence did little to lift the depression that had descended.

This was not the first time Sethi, a journalist and author, had experienced racist abuse. Jibes about her skin colour had been a feature of her life since childhood. In 2018, she had a fleeting encounter with Prince Charles at the Commonwealth People’s Forum where she was a speaker. When the prince asked her where she came from, she replied: “Manchester, UK.” “Well, you don’t look like it!” he exclaimed.

Afterwards, Sethi wrote a powerful piece in the Guardian in which she revealed how she had travelled to Georgetown in Guyana to search for her ancestral history, only to find British colonists had mostly destroyed the records of the indentured labourers they had shipped in from India. She also noted how white people, the prince included, needed a history lesson about immigration, colonialism and the Commonwealth.

But it was the incident on the train that propelled Sethi to pause and reflect in more detail on who she is and how she is perceived. Her memoir *I Belong Here*, the first in a trilogy, is a heartfelt examination of identity, place and belonging, and her discovery of greater peace of mind by drawing on the healing powers of nature. Determined not to allow a hate crime to stop her from moving freely, Sethi embarked on a journey on foot across the Pennines, the northern range of hills and mountains known as the “backbone of England”. In doing so, she hoped to turn ugliness and insult into adventure.

Sethi makes no secret of her novice status as a walker and naturalist, which makes her account of her expedition that much more relatable. City-dwellers are frequently viewed as interlopers in rural areas, diletantes of the outdoor world. But, despite aching bones and sporadically waterlogged boots, Sethi is undeterred, finding pleasure in everything from picture-postcard waterfalls and ancient gorges to woodland expanses and tiny pockets of moss, all the while intent on completing her walk and reclaiming her right to roam.

But it is the way Sethi’s connection to nature is refracted through her experience as a woman of colour that gives the book its rare power. Her analysis of language is particularly acute: “My journey of reclamation is one of prose as well as place, of both routes and roots,” she writes. She explores how the colour of a person’s skin invites judgment and cruelty, even though its function is as a protective layer, and how wounds can leave scars on skin and also on land. She examines the question “Where are you from?”, which she notes is “the question wrapped around the question ‘Why are you here?’” and provides a brief history of the words “paki” and “cunt”, deployed by her racist attacker. His reference to “the banana boat” prompts a further meditation on the history of banana plantations, the slave labour used to build railways to access them and the resultant devastation of the land.

As Sethi makes her way across mountains, rivers and rugged limestone hills, her stamina grows, her resolve hardens and her confidence builds. Nature does not cure her anxiety, but she learns how it can bring relief and a sense of perspective that can be lost amid life’s day-to-day clamour. “Walking through such wild, ancient landscape brings a strong awareness of how we are all temporary guests on this earth,” she observes. “We will take nothing of it with us.”

*To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
war ravaging Europe. As a journalist, she covered the end of empire in Africa, the cold war, the 1968 upheavals in Paris, Kennedy’s assassination and the collapse of the Soviet bloc. At the UN, or at the Royal Institute for International Affairs in London she cut a distinctive figure, always elegantly dressed, her dark hair swept back from her strong features. Her deep voice with its cut-glass accent was instantly recognis- able when she was interviewed on BBC radio. Those of us who followed her as female foreign correspondents in what was then a male-dominated profession could only envy her poise - and her legendary contacts book. She knew everyone, from diplomats to prime ministers and presidents. More importantly, they knew her.

One of Pick’s notable friendships was with then German chancellor Willy Brandt, whom she was sent to interview about some passing trade dispute with the US. “We sat on a window seat in his sitting room and talked into the early hours of the morning - not about the political situation and transatlantic problems, but about Hitler, the Holocaust, German history, anti- "Willy Brandt the charismatic human being”. He might equally have noted that this was not Hella Pick the famous foreign correspondent, but Hella Pick the woman who was unlucky in love, the British citizen trying to figure out the difference between being an outsider and a foreigner.

Despite her professional achievements, Pick suffered from multiple insecurities, the eponymous “invisible walls” that curtailed the psychological freedom she craved. This was partly the result of an overbearing mother, Hanna, who managed to escape Austria and joined her in the UK. She could not let go, insisting on moving with Pick when she went to university, and again when she got her first job, and she later persistently called her editor. Yet how can we blame a woman who lost her own mother in the Holocaust? When Hanna came to the UK as a refugee and a single parent, the only child she had followed was all she had. No wonder they both struggled to cut the cord.

Over time, Pick learned to cherish her British, Jewish and Austrian identities. She reported Britain’s accession to the European Economic Community in the 1970s. “Memories can be so short,” she observes. “Even I, who covered them, had forgotten just how eager Britain’s politicians were to belong to the club.” A European “by instinct, as well as in heart and mind”, she describes the EU as the “framework to my uprooted life”. Nowadays, Pick feels “out of place” in Brexit Britain, let down by the land that took her in as a little girl, and whose politicians’ antics seem ever more distant from the serious, careful diplomacy on which she reported throughout her rich and successful career.

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A scrupulous and poignant account of how love and loss inspired the Just So Stories  
Kathryn Hughes

Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Stories are often described, O Best Beloved, as creation myths. In 13 tales, more varied in tone and shape than most grownups ever quite remember, Kipling explains how the elephant got his trunk, the leopard his spots and the rhinoceros his saggy, baggy skin. The stories appeared in their final form in 1902 when Kipling was 36 and already a literary star, thanks to the success of Kim and The Jungle Book, both of which drew on his Indian childhood to tell fables of social and emotional maturation. Now here he was, circling back to the shorter forms with which he had started his career, most obviously in his breakthrough collection Plain Tales from the Hills, assembled when he was working as a cub journalist in Lahore in the 1880s.

In this origin story of origins stories, John Batchelor sets out to explain the genesis of Just So. The first three tales – concerning the whale, the camel and the rhinoceros – were conceived as bedtime performances for Kipling’s eldest child, Josephine, and published initially in an American children’s magazine in the 1890s. It is “Effie” who wanted things “just so” in the way that small listeners often do. If her father changed the rhythm, or swapped a word, let alone altered the ending, she would insist that he correct his course until everything was as it was before. From here the phrase “just-so story” came to be used by evolutionary biologists in the 1960s to describe a fictional or fantastical origin yarn that politely yet stubbornly resisted rational challenge. It is so because I say so, O Best Beloved.

Of course Kipling – and doubtless Effie too – didn’t really think that these accounts of djinns and shipwrecked mariners explained how the world and its creatures came to be. Part of the fun came from their shared suspension of disbelief, a kind of bedtime egging on of mutual nonsense. Above all, Batchelor is keen that we understand the stories as part of a larger turn in children’s literature towards the animal fantastic. The year 1902 was when Beatrix Potter unleashed Peter Rabbit on the long-suffering Mr McGregor, and E Nesbit created the Psammead, the sand fairy in Five Children and It. Within just four years Mole and Toad would be sculling down Kenneth Graham’s riverbank in The Wind in the Willows.

What’s more, none of this was remotely pastoral. On the evidence of its children’s literature, Edwardian England was a dog-eat-dog, or at least crocodile-eat-elephant, world. Peter Rabbit’s dad is in a pie, the toad-like Psammead lives in a gravel quarry, and Mole and Toad will soon be fighting against the marauders of the Wild Wood. In the same Darwinian way, the creatures of the Just So universe are engaged in a constant battle to avoid being maimed, eaten, or reduced to dust. Far from providing a moment of ontological security, Kipling’s stories offer children a reminder of intense physical vulnerability. The whale is sick, the camel is doomed to walk for days over sand, the kangaroo’s exaggerated back legs come from having to hop incessantly to escape the arch-enemy, Yellow-Dog Dingo.

And human children, even the Best Beloveds, can also turn out to be heartbreakingly fragile. It is a shock to learn that Effie died at the age of seven, three years before the Just So Stories were published in book form. So while she is the child reader addressed directly in the first three stories, thereafter she is a ghostly presence.

It is always tricky writing about Kipling. By the time of his death in 1936 his jingoism, with its babble about the “white man’s burden” in Africa, made many moderate souls feel queasy. Batchelor is too scrupulous a scholar to ignore what came after the Just So Stories – indeed he points out that within two years of the book’s publication the satirist Max Beerbohm was drawing Kipling as an imperial stooge, the diminutive bugle-blowing cockney lover of a blousy-looking Britannia.

Nonetheless, Batchelor urges us to see the stories as evidence that as a young man Kipling was an imaginative artist of the first rank. Full of bustling linguistic ingenuity, conjured by a man whose first language was actually Hindi rather than English, the stories themselves are hopeful, expansive, joyfully attentive to a world where difference and separation can be mended by imaginative acts.

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The incident prompted Chappelle’s famous decision to quit and fly to South Africa. Abdurraqib – with help from the plot of Christopher Nolan’s 2006 film The Prestige – encourages the reader to think of Chappelle’s disappearance and reappearance in Africa as a kind of magic trick, an escape from the impossible bind that America had forced him into.

One of Abdurraqib’s tasks is to rescue marginalised performers from the condescension of posterity. He does this lovingly in a tribute to Merry Clayton, the singer who provided the famous backing vocals to the Rolling Stones’s 1969 hit “Gimme Shelter”. He also does this for William Henry Lane, in an essay on the history and legacy of blackface. Lane, who was born a free black man in the early 19th century, went by the stage name Master Juba and made his skin darker to perform. He may look like a victim of his time, but this account confers on him independence of thought and action. Abdurraqib delights in recounting how Lane defeated an arrogant white minstrel performer, John Diamond, in a series of dance competitions.

Like the rest of the book, the essay on blackface makes use of confessional autobiography: Abdurraqib recounts a dream in which he tries to drown Al Jolson, that most famous blackface performer, in a bathtub. Elsewhere, he writes of his own mother’s death, his relationships with friends, his different jobs.

This is an affirmative project, then, but also a melancholic one. Aretha Franklin’s funeral and Michael Jackson’s death furnish important scenes. One of the opening images is of a dancer looking “lifeless” in another’s arms during a Depression-era dance marathon. “I tell my friend that I’m done writing poems about Black people being killed,” Abdurraqib writes, “and he asks if I think that will stop them from dying.” Abdurraqib believes in transformative politics, in “reimagining ways to build a country on something other than violence and power” but chooses not to develop this vision.

There are clues, though. He loves the punk band Fuck U Pay Us, whose gigs are a frenzy of reparative politics. He is seduced by the partisan commitments of Josephine Baker, who spied for the French during the second world war.

**Rolling Stones backing singer Merry Clayton**

Payling attention to culture also highlights the social shape of the world; it allows Abdurraqib to clarify the many “miracles” that have been performed by artists who shone in a universe not made to their measure.

But he is most invested in what might be called ordinary miracles, the “mundane fight for individuality” against the depersonalising effects of racism. Abdurraqib ends by describing a profoundly moving moment when his brother drove many miles to find him and lift him out of the depths of a depressive episode. They held each other tightly and Hanif cried in his arms. Through this performative embrace, this motionless dance, he found his footing for another day.

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Expeditionary force

Reservoir 13 was a quiet portrait of rural life - now Jon McGregor has taken on the peril of the Antarctic. He talks to Alex Clark about discovering the thrill of page-turning tension

In 2004, the novelist and short-story writer Jon McGregor went to Antarctica. As is so often the way when fiction writers find themselves in unexpected places, the trip was part of an initiative - in this case, the writers and artists programme run by the British Antarctic Survey and supported by the Arts Council. There was no specific expectation or obligation to write about the experience; then again, why wouldn’t you?

But it was easier said than done. Over the intervening years, McGregor - who in 2004 was the author of a single novel, the impressive debut *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* - has built up a striking body of work, including the novels *Even the Dogs* and *Reservoir 13*. The latter was an intricate, cyclical portrait of rural life that spawned a series of pieces for radio, *The Reservoir Tapes*, which themselves became a collection of short stories. Yet still the Antarctic box, an assortment of notes, ideas, photographs and sketches, sat there, resisting the translation to fiction.

*Lean Fall Stand*, McGregor’s fifth novel, marks the end of that process; and its tripartite narrative – which moves from the south pole to a group of people living with aphasia and struggling to find a new kind of language and communication - demonstrates how complete the metamorphosis has been. What’s been going on?

On a straightforward level, McGregor tells me over Zoom from his home in Nottingham, Antarctica was simply really hard to write about. “A lot of the physical description is kind of inadequate, and often quite boring. Especially the classics of Antarctic exploration literature, it’s just pages trying to explain what an iceberg looks like, or what a moraine is.” That experience made him realise how much writing works by triggering associations in the minds of readers; trickier when the place being described is so fundamentally alien to us. And, for a writer whose work is so rooted in the recognisable everyday, it foregrounded the limits of making things up: “Going to Antarctica, having this real life experience, talking to people who were working there about their experiences; the prospect of turning that into a piece of fiction seemed very artificial, and very unnecessary, really.”

But an image persisted. It was of three men in a shed, and it seemed “like it would stick”. And so McGregor kept doggedly returning to his material. “I was interested in the idea of an older man working in Antarctica, who was hankering after a previous version of working there, the kind of romanticism about when they were more heroic and more self-sufficient, which was always an illusion anyway,” he says. And he came up with Robert, “the kind of warrior figure of the Antarctic explorer”, who at the beginning of *Lean Fall Stand* is acting as a guide to two younger expeditionary scientists. “I always knew that, for me, this was tied up in bigger ideas about male self-image; ideas of heroism and responsibility, and parenthood and sacrifice.”

Robert and his party quickly fall into desperate trouble, during which they are effectively cut off from one another by blizzards and malfunctioning radios. The sense of peril is overwhelming - and also quite different from what McGregor has written before. “One of the things in this book that was quite new to me was the idea of drama and suspense and narrative and anticipation. You know,” he adds, semi-comically, “the things that most writers try to do from the beginning.”

He credits *The Reservoir Tapes* with this pivot into tension; he recalls having a clear picture of someone listening to the broadcasts on BBC Radio 4 on Sunday evenings with their hand hovering over the controls as they move between chores. “OK,” he thought, “what does it take to make someone’s hand pull back from the off switch, and stay with this for 15 minutes?”

But his joke that he’s never going to write Jack Reacher books startles me, because the terse, repetitive sentences and rapidly mounting jeopardy of *Lean Fall Stand’s* opening had indeed put me in mind of a propulsive Lee Child novel. Then, however, everything changes, and we enter the aftermath; a world of severe illness and gradual rehabilitation, in which we follow not only Robert, recovering from a near-fatal stroke, but his wife, Anna, who becomes the novel’s central character.

McGregor describes it as “a crashing change of gears”, and says cheerfully that he enjoyed the idea of “hijacking my own concept”. It felt a little different, though, during the writing of the book. “There was quite a
long period of time when people would say: ‘What are you working on?’ And I’d say: ‘I’m writing a novel about the complete failure and absence of language.’ Hahaha. And then come to my desk and just kind of panic. Part of me relished the stupidity of that as an idea.”

Writing the second and third acts of the book involved McGregor researching aphasia, the impairment in the ability to communicate that follows a brain injury. As well as speaking directly to speech and language therapists, he began to go to a monthly self-help group for people living with aphasia, an experience that evidently had a profound impact on him.

Seeking to represent such a wide range of issues - and a condition that is still not properly understood - was inevitably challenging. “There were definitely moments,” he recalls, “when I went into quite a radical breakdown of syntax territory, working on ideas that were formally consistent with the theme that would have been borderline unreadable. I pulled right back from that, because it ended up feeling a bit indulgent. And actually, I think by setting the last third of the book in that group, it gave me an opportunity to externalise the experience.”

Alongside aphasia, the novel is also concerned with ideas of parental and familial responsibility, a subject that has always interested McGregor. When his trip to Antarctica was halted by ice, he was offered the chance to extend it by another couple of months. But his wife was pregnant with their first child, and he came home; he is still struck by the surprise with which his decision was greeted by other members of the party. Now, he says, he rarely takes up offers to go on trips or residencies; the idea of a lengthy absence, he says, “seems nonsensical to me”. He and his wife are no longer together, but share the upbringing of their three children equally.

McGregor attended a self-help group to learn about aphasia for Lean Fall Stand

McGregor’s father was a vicar and worked at home a lot when his family were growing up; he would walk the kids to school and be “semi-available” even when he was busy. McGregor has adopted the same kind of role in his family, and is suspicious of the idea of writers - usually male - who demand eight hours of unbroken quiet in order to create. They “somehow make out that they’re the ones sacrificing things. And actually, there’s a whole lot of other people running around in the background sacrificing stuff to enable that to happen.”

Reservoir 13, he remembers, was written when things were particularly busy at home, and much of it happened in half-hour bursts, often in coffee shops, its collage structure meaning that McGregor always knew where he was: “I could just launch into it and think, ‘OK. In the next couple of weeks, I’ve got to write 13 paragraphs about blackbirds. That’s it, that’s all I have to do. This week, I’m going to write 13 paragraphs about the Jackson family.’ It was really focused. And I knew that when I got to the end, I was going to almost literally cut them up and stick them together and rearrange them.”

Lean Fall Stand and Reservoir 13 are two very different kinds of novel, with very different origins. Yet in their attentiveness to tiny detail and their interest in the rhythms and recurrences of human life, they are recognisably McGregor. What’s next? He is, he says, “tinkering” with a few things; he also teaches and recently judged the Folio prize. He still believes “undramatic lives can be compelling,” he says, “and actually are full of drama for those people. But just the basic idea that it’s quite important to give somebody a reason to turn the next page, that’s become interesting.”
Suspend your scepticism for a thrilling magical realist ride around an enchanted Caribbean archipelago

Michael Donkor

Although the fictional archipelago of Popisho in Leone Ross's third novel is imbued with a Caribbean sensibility, it is an entirely original place. Here, clouds rain down torrents of physalis. Houses morph, stretch, bend over backwards to accommodate their inhabitants' whims.

The citizens of Popisho are just as remarkable: each possesses a special power, or "cors". Some islanders can converse with cats. Others walk through walls. Some have prehensile tails that fluff up in response to injustice. While the despotic Governor Intiasar ostensibly presides over the state, it is the Fatidique, an esoteric council of female visionaries, who really hold the reins of power.

Ross undertakes the task of world-building this trippy realm with gusto, wit and style. Lushly chromatic landscapes reminiscent of Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* teem with bougainvillea, “polymorphic butterflies” and trees whose blue fruit is covered with lines of poetry. When asked about the influences on his magic realism, Gabriel García Márquez cited his grandmother’s propensity for telling outlandish tales “with a brick face”. Ross similarly recounts the extravagantly bizarre - descriptions of “three buttocked” youngsters and “butchers who taught their goats to meditate” - in a breezily unfazed voice.

Into this bustling world, Ross incorporates a populous cast, ranging from graffitiing revolutionaries to dancing ghosts to sagacious sex workers and a wise-cracking shock jock. She homes in on three disparate individuals whose trajectories connect over the course of one “strange day, full of surprises and moments with sharp teeth”. This focus brings solidity to an expansive plot as it meanders towards a dramatic climax. Anise has healing hands; Romanza can tell lies from truth; and Xavier has an extraordinary intuition for flavour, and must prepare an elaborate meal for each of the islands’ residents. As is so often the case with writing in the magical realist mode, glittering strangeness rubs up against trauma. Carefully positioned flashbacks reveal that Anise is wrestling with the emotional strain of several miscarriages. Romanza is marginalised because of his queerness. Recovering addict Xavier struggles with guilt and grief; his wife has killed herself. Anise and Xavier’s vexed romantic past is also affectingly laid bare.

There are moments when lengthy description, a digressive tendency, overemphasis or repetition cause the narrative propulsion to snag. One truly bonkers episode is a case in point: seemingly apropos of nothing, the islands’ women are sent into chaos as their vulvas, or “pum-pums”, become loose and fall to the ground. The absurd conceit is at first striking and provocative; it loses its comic charge because it is returned to over and again without development or expansion.

Impressively, however, Ross almost always handles the vast range of material and the multi-tonal quality of the text with an adroitness that keeps the reader involved. There is a particularly mesmerising episode in the middle of the novel when Romanza and Xavier take a boat to the mysterious Dead Islands. Much to Xavier’s confusion, the anchor is dropped miles from shore. Romanza disembarks and seemingly begins to walk on water, heading for dry land. He teaches a nervous Xavier to do the same, showing him how to make use of a sprawling platform of coral close to the surface, how to gently rest his soles on fish that will propel him on. Similarly, because of the easy confidence of the narrative voice throughout the novel - by turns raconteurish and gnomic - we too willingly follow as it wends its capricious way.

As Xavier becomes more at ease with the water, he remarks that “to be alive [is] a gamble, a bizarre miracle”. Ross invites us to also take a risk and immerse ourselves in the wildness and weirdness of Popisho. This is a novel that will reward those who are able to surrender to its capaciousness and eccentricities. But *This One Sky Day* provides us not merely with a welcome opportunity to enjoy a madcap, freewheeling ride through surreal and supernatural territory. It also asserts the importance of interacting with our own unpredictable world with openness, unfettered awe and wide-eyed wonder.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
**{ Short stories }** An Irish debut exploring marriage, children, mortality and memory to vivid, heartbreaking effect

**Jude Cook**

In recent times, the critical focus in new Irish fiction has been on writers who explore millennial dilemmas, such as Sally Rooney and Naoise Dolan. But alongside these novelists have emerged superbly accomplished short-story writers such as Wendy Erskine and Danielle McLaughlin, whose first published works draw on many years of rich lived experience. Louise Kennedy can confidently join their ranks with her dazzling, heartbreaking debut collection, *The End of the World Is a Cul de Sac.*

Marriage, children, mortality and memory are Kennedy’s principal concerns, and she finds truth in the tiniest details and connections, though the weight of Irish history is always palpably present. In “Hunter-Gatherers”, Siobhan and Sid live in the lodge of a grand house in which England’s colonial influence still lingers. When Siobhan blots condensation from the windows with an old towel, the symbolism is clear: it’s the Irish who are left to mop up the mess. In “Silhouette”, a sister is haunted for decades by a murder committed by her brother during the Troubles, his shoes caked with mud as well as the victim’s blood and hair. “It’s grass, you tell yourself. Just grass.”

In many stories the natural world, with its animal appetites and feral, sexual energy, impinges on the urban. A pregnant woman accidentally witnesses her husband commit adultery in the lambed shed, shattering her sense of self-worth; while in another story a man shoots a hare that he knows his partner adores: “There was a trectly hole at the front of his head, his eyes were hazel and still.”

Elsewhere, words unspoken impose unbearable tensions. In “Brittle Things”, a mother tries tenderly to encourage her nonverbal autistic son to speak, while her husband lives in denial: “She fretted now that Ferda’s first words, if they ever came, would be words against his father.” It’s an intensely moving story, simultaneously poignant and defiant; a diamond amid the collection’s many jewels.

With their sensitivity to people’s vulnerabilities and failings, and their sharpness of imagery, these 15 taut tales recall Annie Proulx at her best: salty, wise, droll and keen to share the lessons of a lifetime.

To buy a copy for £12.74 go to guardianbookshop.com.

**Twins forced out of seclusion by tragedy uncover a lifetime of secrets in this Women’s prize-longlisted tale**

**Christobel Kent**

Claire Fuller’s impressive new novel opens by documenting, in fine and gravely moving detail, the last moments of an elderly woman, Dot, early one snowy morning in the isolated, run-down cottage she has shared with her children, the middle-aged twins Jeannie and Julius, since the violent death of their father in an accident almost 40 years earlier.

As after every death, the world to which the twins awake looks colder, emptier and stranger, but theirs is a situation complicated by a lifetime spent in seclusion. Dot has kept her children from the world, living a hand-to-mouth existence. Without internet access, television or bank accounts, their pleasures have been simple: a dog for company; the garden for food and beauty; the music they make themselves. And now their home – rent-free, on a mysterious understanding with the local landowner – their livelihoods, their family history and habits, are all under threat without Dot. Within days, Jeannie and Julius find themselves facing eviction, and a fabric of secrets constructed over a lifetime begins to unravel.

Like Fuller’s prize-winning first novel, *Our Endless Numbered Days*, *Unsettled Ground*, which has been longlisted for the Women’s prize, takes marginal lives as its theme. With sensitivity and intelligence, Fuller unpicks the relentless complexity of the modern world, in which mobile phones are connected to bank accounts are connected to central heating systems, and the hopeless poignancy of our longing for simplicity.

Wayward Julius and stubborn Jeannie resist our love as they resist the pity of the outside world: when she is taken in by her mother’s friend Bridget, Jeannie’s bitter, proud revulsion at every detail of her rescuer’s “civilised” life – such as the enormous television screen and the ready meals – is so convincing that the lesson seems to be that there’s no longer any place for her anywhere.

But it is exactly this note of astringency, combined with Fuller’s skill at evoking sensations from the animal pleasures of sex to the misery of sleeping rough that gives the narrative its fierce energy. Jeannie’s refusal to relinquish her hold on the things she loves carries the reader with her on a frightening and uncomfortable journey to the truth, and the possibility of starting again.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Books of the month

Children} Secret agents, ships’ captains, terrific tantrums and much more

Imogen Russell Williams

Books for nine-plus are far-ranging and imaginative this month, especially the spectacular, synopsis-defying Starboard (HarperCollins) by Nicola Skinner, intricately illustrated by Flavia Sorrentino. On a school trip aboard the SS Great Britain, 11-year-old YouTube star Kirsten does not expect to be declared the old ship’s captain – or to be kidnapped alongside her former best friend as the vessel breaks loose and heads for the open sea ... A wild, hilarious, surreal adventure of self-discovery, by the brilliantly original author of Bloom.

For espionage enthusiasts, there is some delicious escapism in Amber Undercover (Oxford) by Em Norry. When Amber distinguishes herself in a locked-room challenge, she’s amazed to be recruited by a spy organisation. Can she really make it as a secret agent? This swift-paced, lively debut balances down-to-earth believability with wish-fulfilment fun.

Geraldine McCaughrean’s The Supreme Lie (Usborne) is a more complex and challenging book, with the odd upsetting element, so it’s best suited to tougher readers of 10-plus. It follows Gloria, a teenage maid who finds herself impersonating a vanished head of state in Afalia, a country overwhelmed by floods. When Gloria’s desperate efforts to help the suffering population come up against the machinations of Afalian propagandists (elegantly evoked by Keith Robinson’s newspaper-style illustrations), discovery looms perilously close in this thought-provoking, poignant, blackly funny novel.

For readers of seven-plus, Jen Carney’s The Accidental Diary of BUG (Puffin) introduces sparky eponymous heroine Billie Upton Green, who has been told to look after the new girl at school, Janey McVey. But Janey has some funny ideas about Billie’s adoptive mums, and Billie isn’t sure she’s guilt-free in the matter of Mrs Robinson’s disappearing purse. This cheery illustrated diary story, more rooted in contemporary reality than Liz Pichon’s Tom Gates books, is the first in a series that’s sure to find devoted fans.

The Rock from the Sky (Walker) by Jon “I Want My Hat Back” Klassen is a longer-form picture book, divided into short “chapters”. Saturated with Klassen’s wry humour, and ideal for children of four or five and up, it’s full of side-eyeing reptiles, shared imaginings, suspense and narrowly avoided catastrophe.
{ Teenagers } Outlaws team up in post-apocalyptic Britain; a runaway finds friends on a plane; plus a tale of dreamworld deities

The Outlaws Scarlett and Browne by Jonathan Stroud, Walker, £7.99
In a dystopian, divided, waterlogged Britain, terrorised by “The Tainted”, teenage Scarlett McCain, crack shot and bank robber, is used to working alone. That’s until she meets sweet Albert Browne, with his dark past and terrible secret skill; but teaming up with Albert puts Scarlett in the firing line too. Will they outpace the pursuit at their heels, and can Scarlett come to terms with her own twisted history? Gun-slinging action and black humour meet post-apocalyptic thrill ride in this brilliant new departure from the author of the Lockwood & Co series.

Dream Country by Ashaye Brown, Onewe, £12.99
Theo, Tores and Fanta are three sibling deities: the triplet gods of Sleep, Dreams and Nightmares. Kept apart since they were children, they are trapped in their own territories behind impassable gates of Horn and Ivory, each of them under suspicion for the murder of their mother, the Night. But when a mortal with impossible abilities enters the world, the uneasy peace between their realms is fractured. A rich intertwining of Kenyan, Grecian and Brazilian mythology and cultural reference makes for a highly original fantasy, keeping the reader guessing throughout. IRW

Also from Walker, Nano – The Spectacular Science of the Very (Very) Small by Dr Jess Wade, illustrated by Melissa Castrillon, is another beautiful picture book for five-plus, plunging deep into the world of atoms, materials and the applications of nanoscience, with accessible text and richly shaded pictures.

For pre-schoolers, the sensational Nadia Shireen returns with Barbara Throws a Wobbler (Jonathan Cape), the hilarious story of a kitten, a sock problem, a strange pea – and a stupendous tantrum. Its guide to bad moods, from the huff to the seethe, is worth the cover price by itself; this is the sort of book that will make both children and adults laugh, and provide the perfect vocabulary to defuse (some) tense toddler situations.

What Happened to You? (Faber) by James Catchpole and Karen George is a picture book with a difference, engaging directly with how a child with disabilities might want to be talked to, rather than simply reiterating a generic “difference is great” message. Catchpole’s beautifully judged, child-friendly words ably evoke the fatigue and wariness of repeatedly being asked the same question rather than being accepted and allowed to play, while George’s warm images amplify the delight of shared imagination.

Finally, The Boys (Little Tiger) by Lauren Ace and Jenny Lovlie is the standalone counterpart to the award-winning The Girls. Tam, Rey, Nattie and Bobby have been friends from babyhood; as they grow, they remain close, though their friendship is sometimes put to the test. Gentle, tender and joyful, the book challenges rigid ideas of masculinity, emphasising the value of supportive talk and listening: “They came to realise that no boy is an island.”
Predictive text

Completed in 2019, Christina Sweeney-Baird’s The End of Men offers uncanny premonitions of the pandemic. She reflects on the role of fiction in a time of crisis.

A plague that starts with a pangolin, doctors sounding the alarm but not being listened to, countries slow to close their borders, a virus spreading until it’s too late to contain it, a cruise ship of passengers stranded with nowhere to dock. Sound familiar? I’m describing 2020, of course, but all of those things are also present in my novel, The End of Men, which I wrote between September 2018 and December 2019. I’m now answering to Cassandra.

The End of Men is set between 2025 and 2031 and shows a world in which a virus to which women are immune kills 90% of the world’s men. I didn’t actually set out to write a “pandemic” novel. I wanted to explore what the world would look like without men - what would parliament and hospitals and dating and childcare look like? What would change? What would stay the same? What would it feel like to live in a world so affected by loss and which needed to be rebuilt around, and by, women? A pandemic was the most realistic way of writing that world; a reverse-engineered thought experiment.

Speculative fiction has always offered an opportunity to explore big ideas through an alternative reality in which a “What if?” question is introduced into the world as we know it. The physical dominance of women exposes gender inequality in Naomi Alderman’s 2016 novel, The Power; the inhumanity that follows global infertility in PD James’s The Children of Men, from 1992, shows society’s vulnerability; the clones created in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go (2005) explore what it means to be human.

But as a writer of speculative fiction, I never expected to gauge the distance between my novel and the world I was living in. Some things I wrote about, for instance how characters would feel after years of a pandemic, now feel unnerving. I imagined Dawn - a character who rises quickly up the higher ranks of the civil service partly by dint of remaining alive - being excited to travel again. For her, a late flight and cramped plane seat seem both exotic and nostalgic after years of closed borders.

My editor and I removed the pangolin (at that time prime suspect as the source of coronavirus) from the final draft of the book because, as she told me: “People will think you’ve stolen it from the real world.” Other elements of the story that I worried would seem far-fetched have been mirrored by reality. The drive for a vaccine throughout 2020 and 2021 has been, arguably, one of humanity’s greatest scientific achievements. As I wrote about fictional scientists trying to find a cure in my fictional 2020s, I wondered if a vaccine being discovered quickly would be dismissed as silly. Would it take months, years, decades? Would it, maybe, not happen at all?

Pandemic stories have always been popular but, as real life became dystopian in the terrifying, uncertain months of spring 2020, many found comfort in stories of viruses even worse than Covid-19. Steven Soderbergh’s 2011 film Contagion became one of the most watched movies online. Station Eleven, Emily St John Mandel’s novel from 2014, in which a virus kills almost the entire population and society breaks down, rose back up the book charts. Plague Inc., a video game first released in 2012, has had a resurgence. Fictional plagues even cropped up in discussions about public policy: health secretary Matt Hancock referenced the panic in Contagion about the order of priority for vaccination with regard to his own vaccine policy (although I should note he was clear he was separately advised on policy). At first glance this seems strange, ghoulish almost. Is it so unexpected, though? People have always used fiction as a way of processing the world in times of crisis.

While those stories were published long before 2019, the recent spate of pandemic novels will be the last pre-pandemic pandemic novels ever to be written. Severance by Ling Ma (2018) tells the haunting story of “Shen fever”, a fungus that originates in Shenzhen and leaves sufferers technically alive but unaware of their existence. “The state media in China controls the optics of this, so we don’t know the real statistics,” Ma writes, with a prescience that made me mark the page and keep returning to it. Later, the protagonist, Candace, recalls the doctors claiming the US needed to quarantine “whole regions, especially during Thanksgiving”, which cast my mind back to the “I’m not travelling this Thanksgiving and neither should you” posts that swept American social media in November 2020.

We removed the pangolin from the final draft of the book because, as my editor told me: ‘People will think you’ve stolen it from the real world’
by Bethany Clift (published in February this year), a pandemic is a source of intermingled humour and horror. Its unnamed main character has the time of her life (raiding Harrods, getting drunk on champagne) before falling apart as a virus, 6DM, kills almost everyone else on Earth within six days of their contracting it. Under the Blue by Oana Aristide, published in March, follows a reclusive artist and two enigmatic sisters on a road trip across a deserted, post-pandemic Europe. Meanwhile, The End of October by Lawrence Wright is almost painfully prescient - a specialist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention investigates a potential coronavirus originating in Indonesia.

More than a year into a pandemic, at times it still hits me in waves that we are living through the unthinkable and yet, these times are not entirely unprecedented. A globalised world with electricity and internet and flights has never experienced a medical crisis of this magnitude but pandemics are not new, nor confined to the 21st century. The Pull of the Stars by Emma Donoghue, set during the 1918 influenza pandemic, arrived with uncanny timing in summer 2020. One of the most successful books of the last year has been Hamnet by Maggie O’Farrell, in which a child is killed by the plague. Set in the 1500s, with Shakespeare’s family at its core, it would not, at first glance, seem relatable to a childless 27-year-old living in London in 2020. And yet, as I read Hamnet, more than the horror, it was the normality of the disease that I connected with: the way it was woven into the characters’ lives; accepted and dreaded and dealt with. “It is also plague season again in London,” O’Farrell writes, a sentence that felt plucked out of my own life as we faced yet another lockdown in December.

One question authors now have to reckon with is whether or not to include Covid-19 in their books. The End of Men was bought by my publishers in early February 2020. By late March I was unwell with Covid and approaching edits with a lingering cough. My editor and I had the bizarre job of reviewing my manuscript in which a pandemic spreads across the world, as a pandemic spread across the world. We changed the cause of the virus from a pangolin to a type of monkey but preserved every other part of my imaginary characters’ response to the pandemic. And, even though the book begins in 2025, we chose not to mention Covid.

Steven Soderbergh’s 2011 film Contagion became one of the most watched films online after the coronavirus pandemic hit the news. It felt too jarring then, and now, to introduce into fiction the real-life pandemic we’re experiencing, even if that fiction is close to the truth. I wonder if we’ll reach a point when Covid can be referenced - briefly, casually - in a novel without it feeling painful. Will romance novels and thrillers mention, in passing, people wearing masks and social distancing in the strange days of the early 2020s?

Now there is light at the end of the tunnel, I wonder how many of us will keep reading pandemic stories, or pick them up having avoided them. There is something primally comforting about reading the resolution of a story when that resolution isn’t yet, in real life, in our grasp. Hope and resilience are, after all, the parts of The End of Men I’m happiest to have predicted. Nurses and doctors continuing to do extraordinary work, with care and compassion, in unbearable circumstances. Scientists doing the previously impossible and finding a vaccine in years when it “should” have taken decades. People coping, adapting, enduring.

The End of Men by Christina Sweeney-Baird is published by Borough.
‘I’m fine with being called an activist’

Angie Thomas tells Coco Khan about exploring violence and black fatherhood in her latest young adult novel, a prequel to The Hate U Give

A ngie Thomas does not hesitate when I ask whether her new novel will be banned somewhere. “Absolutely, I’m expecting it,” she replies. “Adults don’t like talking about teenage sex, they don’t want to get uncomfortable.” She has good reason to think so: The Hate U Give, her bestselling debut, was pulled from schools in the city of Katy, Texas. The initial objection focused on swearing and the discussion of sexual acts and drugs. In her new young adult novel, Concrete Rose, drugs and violence are more than discussed: the book follows 17-year-old Maverick Carter, a self-described “drug-dealing, gangbanging, high school flunkout ... who got two kids by two different girls”.

Readers of The Hate U Give will recognise Maverick as Starr Carter’s father, and Concrete Rose – Thomas’s third novel – is effectively its prequel. Once again, the reader is transported to the fictional US city of Garden Heights and the pacy, highly readable story of “Mav”, whose world is turned upside down when he becomes a father. How can he escape the gang he’s affiliated with, when the only routes out are prison or death?

Zooming from her home office in Jackson, Mississippi, Thomas tells me it was her readers who made her think about returning to Maverick Carter. “When I toured for The Hate U Give, he was asked most about, and he had such a wide range of fans.” But it was speaking with the actor Russell Hornsby, who played Maverick in the film adaptation, that sparked the new storyline: “He asked me about Maverick’s parents. He knew his father was incarcerated but he said that for Maverick to be the type of father he is, somebody had to lay the foundations parenting-wise. It made me think deeper.”

In Concrete Rose, we meet those who raised Maverick – from his mother and cousin to Mr Wyatt, the local shop owner and harsh taskmaster who gives Mav a job. Fans of The Hate U Give will relish the echoes and nods to Starr’s story: both books contain a killing, both have narrators who live in the shadow of their fathers’ reputations, both are packed with pop culture references, and both feature Thomas’s signature attention to verbal habits and slang to create a vibrant cast of distinct characters (“I can be a bit temperish,” says one of the characters, P-Nut, to which Mav thinks: “Temper-what? I sweat P-Nut be making up words to sound smart”). Both novels draw their titles from the rapper Tupac Shakur’s work (The Rose That Grew from Concrete is a collection of poetry written by him). And both deal with the grim reality of black children exposed to the horrors of life too young.

It is fitting that a book written in the isolation of lockdown explores the value of community, but for Thomas it made research trickier. Unable to meet...
anyone in real life, she turned to music and television from the time. The story is set around 1999, “so it’s considered historical fiction, which hurts,” she laughs (“I have kids messaging me like: ‘What’s a beeper?’”). “It was fun to go back in time, especially in 2020, a year that we all wanted to escape.”

Despite the connections between her works, Concrete Rose is a departure for Thomas. It is her first novel to have a male narrator and could be described as a portrayal of the journey from black working-class boyhood to manhood. Thomas is unflinching about the numerous hurdles young black men face. Maverick is struggling with his education at a school named after a slave owner in a neighborhood where poverty is rife, and burdened by an expectation to “be a man”. In a touching scene, Maverick is advised by Mr Wyatt: “Son, one of the biggest lies ever told is that black men don’t feel emotions... We got a right to show them feelings as much as anybody else.”

“When I wrote [this], I thought about the real-life Mavericks who are going to pick up this book, and how they’ll feel when they read it,” says Thomas. “I want to make sure that they walk away feeling hopeful and inspired and with more love for themselves. Whether the adults are comfortable with that or not I don’t care.”

I tell Thomas that my favourite moments in Concrete Rose were the sometimes comic but always tender scenes between Maverick and his newborn sleepless nights, fumbling nappy changes, getting teased at high school for looking “like a bum”. “I ended up following some Instagram pages that specifically show young black fathers,” says Thomas. “The tenderness you see, you feel it in your ovaries.”

All Thomas’s work extends beyond the page: The Hate U Give became a movie; the film adaptation of her second novel, On the Come Up, is currently in production and Concrete Rose is being considered for television. I’m curious about whether the extension of her work on to the screen influences what she writes. “The Maverick in [Concrete Rose] isn’t influenced by the one on screen, but his father, Adonis, is definitely influenced by Russell Hornsby,” she says.

Thomas is a producer on On the Come Up and is “learning more about budgets, music, and sets... So it’s easy to think: ‘Do you really want to write this like that, what would that scene cost?’ I try not to let it get in the way. Putting a big chunk of time between writing and talking about film helps.”

Still, dealing with million-dollar budgets in relation to your own work must add a certain pressure. Does she feel that everything must be a smash hit? “With the second book I put a lot of pressure on myself. It’s easy to worry about everything in this industry. It helps having a therapist who reminds me that the only thing I can truly control is what goes on the page.”

Thomas’s position is all too common to young women and creatives of colour who make politicised work. Success pushes the artist on to a pedestal, where they become a de facto political leader. For Thomas, this must be especially true. She has consistently used her platform to highlight the lack of diversity in children’s literature, and the success of The Hate U Give — which spent more than 200 weeks on top of the New York Times bestseller list — demonstrated the scale of the opportunity, and how readers of all ethnicities wanted to read diverse books.

Would she describe herself as an activist? Or does suggesting an “agenda” diminish the artistry? “I’ve chosen my lane and it’s children’s books,” she says. “It’s recognising the power literature has for shaping leaders, and making sure all kids have books that reflect themselves. So, I’m fine with being called an activist. Though I wonder if I’m doing enough.”

Has she started to see the result of her activism in galvanising American youth? “I hope so. They say young people - the recently registered voters - came out in huge numbers to vote for Biden. Maybe the kids who were 14 when they read The Hate U Give are 18-year-olds voting in their first presidential election. And maybe I had some kind of impact. That would be nice to know.”

What about publishing? In the US there’s been a boom in books featuring diverse characters. A study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that more than 12% of children’s books starred African American characters in 2019, compared with 5% in 2012 (in the UK, 5% of children’s books have black, Asian or minority ethnic protagonists, up from 1% in 2017). “Things have improved but we have a ways to go,” says Thomas. She refers to a 2018 US study that showed there were “still more books featuring animals and trucks as the main characters than black kids” and questions the types of stories being told. “Authors of colour shouldn’t be expected to only write stories of struggle,” she says. “It’s nice to see more marginalised authors getting published. I’m hopeful.”

Hopeful is a word that describes her work well. Would she call herself an optimist? “I am! I try and write hope into my books. But I also want to be real. I know shit sucks. But... there are some things that are stronger than the dark forces. Love and empathy are some of our strongest weapons.”


“I want to see black kids on road trips and black girls bringing home a vampire like Edward from Twilight. It would be great to see black kids in these hero roles.”

“And hopefully,” she smiles. “It won’t get banned”
‘When I started Kevin the heavens didn’t part’
Lionel Shriver

I began We Need to Talk About Kevin without ceremony on an ordinary morning. I’d yet to read the hundreds of articles about school shootings that I’d photocopied in American libraries over the summer; still more research would amount to procrastination. I tapped out the initial paragraph — which appeared word-for-word in the published version — with zero anticipation that this novel would finally turn the tide of my flagging career.

If anything, I felt pessimistic. None of my previous novels, however well reviewed, had erased my mark of Cain in publishing as a money loser. Nevertheless, I liked this new premise. And giving up altogether after my previous manuscript was roundly rejected would have stuck me as babyish.

“Yes,” my partner remarked after reading over my shoulder. “That’s just right.” He wouldn’t read another word until the book was finished.

We had just moved from Belfast to London, where we were living precariously in a short-term furnished let in Bow. I was intimidated and unnerved by the financial burden of living in the capital. The flat was small. My computer rested on a desk painted in poster paint intended for a six-year-old.

Needling the money and intrigued by a different kind of challenge, I soon shifted to Brussels to work for the Wall Street Journal Europe’s editorial page. Weekends and evenings, I worked on the book. When I returned to London, we shifted to nicer digs in Borough, where I soon grew exasperated; I had hundreds of pages, and my nefarious kid was still only four years old! (That’s why the narrative jumps from the age of four to 14: I didn’t want to write War and Peace.) Nine months after I’d begun in Bow, I wrote the last line, and I surprised myself: I cried.

At no point during this novel’s composition did I feel any confidence that I was writing a life-changing manuscript. On the contrary, I’d no idea if it would ever see print. On its own terms the book seemed to be working, but all my other novels had seemed to be working, too. I hadn’t lost faith in myself, but I had lost faith in the outside world greeting my efforts with anything better than indifference. I didn’t even feel proper self-pity, because plenty of more dreadful things happen to people than failure to publish a book. To wit, I completed my final edit in New York in concert with 9/11, after which surely no one would care to read about something as paltry as a difficult boy and his ambiguous relationship with his mother.

The point being: when I started “Kevin”, the heavens didn’t part. No archangel appeared by my desk proclaiming that this child of my hand would be blessed by God. It was one more book. Though once stuck in I had a good time, I was often dismal about my project’s prospects. To colleagues and aspirants I would only advise, then: you’ve no idea when you’re writing a bestseller.

The Motion of the Body Through Space by Lionel Shriver is out in paperback (Borough).

Tom Gauld

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