‘They don’t learn shamelessness at Eton, but this is where they perfect it’

Musa Okwonga on why his old school produces toxic leaders. Plus an exclusive extract from his memoir
“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
Founded 1959
vitsoe.com
Contents
The week in books.............................................................. 04
The books that made me by Emma Cline................................. 05

COVER STORY Eton and me, an interview with Musa Okwonga........... 06

Book of the week: The Adventures of Miss Barbara Pym
by Paula Byrne........................................................................... 10

Nonfiction reviews
On Wanting to Change by Adam Phillips................................ 12
by Richard Thompson............................................................... 13
In Memory of Memory by Maria Stepanova.............................. 14
Lev's Violin: An Italian Adventure by Helena Attlee................. 15

Fiction reviews
The High House by Jessica Greengrass.................................. 16
The Dangers of Smoking in Bed by Mariana Enriquez.............. 17
The Passenger by Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz...................... 18
Science fiction and fantasy books of the month...................... 19

BOOKS ESSAY Sex and savagery in Marian Engel’s Bear............. 20

INTERVIEW Leone Ross............................................................ 22

INSIDE STORY Neurologist Suzanne O’Sullivan on ‘mystery illnesses’... 24

How I wrote Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis
by Wendy Cope, plus Tom Gauld............................................. 26
The week in books
10 April

Essential reading
When the UK tightens lockdown regulations the public demands that exceptions are made for essential services such as pubs and garden centres. In France, they campaign for bookshops to stay open, and so there is much relief among the literary establishment that the latest confinement excludes booksellers.

Lire, c’est vivre, or to read is to live, as they say in France, so last autumn when bookshops were closed under Covid regulations, authors, readers and publishers reacted with horror. Novelist Serge Joncour called closing bookshops “a summons to ignorance” and a group of authors including Didier van Cauwelaert, winner of the 1994 Prix Goncourt, offered to pay the fines of any shops caught selling books illegally.

Bookshops emerged from lockdown at the end of November 2020, just in time for Christmas shopping, but many were concerned that further curbs were on the horizon. Fortunately, a decree passed earlier this year confirmed that an exception will be made for bookshops, along with other essential French services such as florists, music shops and chocolatiers.

Katy Guest

Playing to the gallery
This week, American Psycho author and professional provocateur Bret Easton Ellis (above) has been auctioning off a tweet he mistakenly sent in 2012: “Come over at do bring coke now”. The tweet, which Ellis confessed to accidentally sending while trying to find a drug dealer after taking Xanax, is being sold as a non-fungible token (NFT), a unit of data that can be used as a way of trading digital artworks.

At the time of writing, bidding for Ellis’s NFT has reached $600 (£458). I for one would like to see this artwork hanging in a gallery next to Ed Balls’s 2011 minimalist work: “Ed Balls”. This masterpiece is already celebrated annually on the date it was tweeted, 28 April - could that also become an NFT on the forthcoming 10th anniversary?

Sian Cain

The Tom Bombadil cut
Hardcore JRR Tolkien fans were in for a treat this week, with a Soviet adaptation of The Lord of the Rings that was thought to have been lost to time was found and uploaded to YouTube. The 1991 made-for-TV film aired 10 years before the first instalment of Peter Jackson’s adaptation of Tolkien’s trilogy.

More than 400,000 viewers have delighted in the production’s school play vibes, and many were genuinely pleased to see Tom Bombadil, a beloved character who was controversially cut by Jackson for being too long-winded. Described in the books as a “merry fellow” who loves nature, Bombadil saves Frodo Baggins and his companions from danger in The Fellowship of the Ring, then sings a lot of songs before sending the four hobbits off on their journey. Ring a dong dilllo! SC

Endgame

Word of the week
Steven Poole

Israel, it was recently reported, might be reaching its Covid “endgame”. This refers not to the 1957 absurdist play of that title by Samuel Beckett but to a potential coronavirus-free existence. So why “endgame” rather than simply “end”?

In chess, the endgame follows the middlegame: forces are depleted, and one side is often attempting to promote a pawn. (Though you can also have queen endgames, and middlegames without queens.) It was coined thus in 1884 as “endgame” by the chess writer Bernard Horwitz. Since an endgame can go on for a hundred moves or more, it is very much not a final destination but, as Winston Churchill once had it, only the beginning of the end.

In recent times, though, “endgame” has acquired a metaphorical sense of someone’s final plan or aim, usually disguised. To ask what is a person’s endgame is to wonder how they plan to cash out or triumph from their mysterious activities. Let us hope the Covid virus itself, then, does not have an endgame. And remember that, as Avengers: Endgame (2019, left) teaches us, even the end of an endgame might not be final, as long as someone can invent time travel.
‘I like being dropped into another life entirely’
Emma Cline

The book I am currently reading
I’m halfway through A Way of Life, Like Any Other by Darcy O’Brien, a demented and perfect novel from the late 70s about the mythology of Hollywood intersecting with the mythology of family. It’s insanely good, and the tone is so sparky and bizarre and deadpan. I just finished a Beach Boys biography - a book about fathers as the great villains, which paired in interesting ways with the documentary Crumb [about underground cartoonist Robert Crumb]. In both cases, brothers are psychologically destroyed by their fathers in an era when fathers were held up as the ultimate god/daddy figures. And then the brothers go on, in their art, to pervert these seemingly innocent forms of the culture: comics and pop music.

The book I wish I’d written
Maybe Sweet Days of Discipline by Fleur Jaeggy. Sometimes a heightened world can be hard to keep up for the length of a novel, but this is slim and totally successful at sustaining a surreal atmosphere. Or Sylvia by Leonard Michaels, which has always felt like the perfect book. Oh wait, actually Norman Rush’s Mating.

The books that had the greatest influence on me
Probably the stories of Mary Gaitskill, Joy Williams and Deborah Eisenberg. I’m looking for that slight hallucinatory vibe in my own writing, a sense that the world has been knocked off its axis.

The book I think is most underrated
Problems by Jade Sharma is so great, and I wish it was more widely known and read. I also loved The Sarah Book by Scott McClanahan.

The last book that made me laugh
This psychedelic and totally hilarious nonfiction book by Bett Williams called The Wild Kindness.

There’s a killer scene where the narrator is on mushrooms and having a conversation with their dog and the dog is very calmly recounting that he’s part of MKULtra [the CIA psychological warfare programme involving human experiments].

The book I couldn’t finish
I got a little ways into The Golden Bowl by Henry James. I’ll probably try again, but I’m not too worried about it.

The book I give as a gift
Leonard Koren’s Undesigning the Bath and Bento’s Sketchbook by John Berger.

My earliest reading memory
Probably the Busy Town books, which delighted me with their illustrations of what I assumed adult life would look like: animals wearing vests and running bookstores. I also obsessed over Sherlock Holmes.

My comfort read
When I want to fully peace out of reality, I like being dropped into another life entirely, one that feels as rich and detailed as possible. The Marriage Plot by Jeffrey Eugenides was a comforting reread lately, because the scenes have the quality of life. Anywhere But Here by Mona Simpson is comforting for the same reason, a fictional world that is so tightly woven that it blots out the actual world.

Daddy by Emma Cline is published by Chatto.
Musa Okwonga talks to David Shariatmadari about his days at Eton, and why an institution that prides itself on creating leaders sells Britain short. Plus read an exclusive extract from his memoir One of Them

An education

It's 1996 in a perfectly ordinary suburb just north of Heathrow airport. A teenage boy and his sister are on their way to the optician. Walking under a railway bridge, they pass a man who slows down and gives the boy a stare “as startling as scalding water”. He can't stop thinking about it all through the appointment, and when they emerge - though surely the man won't still be there? - they walk a different way back to the bus stop, just in case. When the bus arrives, they climb to the top deck, and as it turns the corner, the boy peers out. The man is still there, and smiles as he catches sight of them, before opening his coat wide to reveal a colourful patchwork of swastikas sewn into the lining: red, white, black, purple.

The boy is Musa Okwonga, and he goes to school at Eton College, just the other side of the M25. Over there racism may not announce itself with swastikas, but it’s a constant background hum, with something of the same menace as the man in the coat: just when you think you’ve evaded it, surprise! Here’s a moment to chill you to the bone, like when a fellow pupil boasts about the fact that his ancestor was a slave.

Nevertheless, Okwonga thrives at the school, which he set his heart on after being dazzled by a documentary he saw as a child. He wins a scholarship and aged 13 becomes a boarder, putting on the school's distinctive morning suit every day. “The greatest proof of my status is my uniform. It consists of a black tailcoat, a black waistcoat under which I wear a white shirt with a starched collar and thin white cotton tie, a pair of black pinstriped trousers and black shoes.”

He becomes a model student, almost to a fault. But he’s carrying around a double burden of responsibility: first to his father, who was killed amid political violence in Uganda when he was four, and his mother, who works hard as a doctor to pay his fees. Then there’s the second, crushing weight imposed by society’s expectations of young black men and the mostly white environment of the school. “I think it is unlikely that many of my contemporaries, Okwonga writes, “have had a close black friend, and so I don’t want to conform to any of the stereotypes they might have about black people. I resolve never to get drunk around any of them, never to get stoned in their company. I don’t even risk getting a haircut that I might enjoy.”

Much of his time, then, is spent conducting himself with “a military level of self-restraint”, although he admits “it is unclear whether my classmates either notice or care”.

Okwonga tries to make sense of the pressures, absurdities and rewards of his schooldays in his latest book, One of Them: An Eton College Memoir. He talks to me over Zoom from his flat in Berlin, where he has lived for the past six years. As well as being a poet and writer, he presents a successful football podcast, and a big red professional microphone juts into shot. His conversation is more laidback than his prose, which can have the disconcerting quality of feeling both buttoned-up and incredibly raw.
Cover story

I ask why he wanted to write about Eton now, more than two decades after he left.

“It felt like it was time. Look at our society — politically and socially, where we are.” (In the book, he writes of the current moment that “It feels like the bad guys have won.”) “I’ve gone to this boarding school which prides itself on creating prime ministers,” he says, “but then I look at the job those prime ministers have done. David Cameron promised stability, but he’s given us — well, he hasn’t given us stability. And Boris Johnson has done terrible damage to the country.”

Okwonga describes the gallery of busts in the 17th-century building known as “Upper School” on the sprawling campus outside Windsor (he writes: “No one here ever tells us out loud that we Etonians are national leaders: that is what the architecture is for”). Prime ministers from Walpole to Earl Grey to Gladstone are immortalised in marble. The prospect of Cameron and Johnson joining them one day makes him queasy. The school smooths the path to power, but seems to evade responsibility for how it is wielded.

The memoir doesn’t contain any blueprint for reform, though Okwonga says the first thing he’d do if he was in charge of the country would be to crack down on tax evasion, and “plough a tonne of money into housing and education”. He thinks there are serious questions to be asked about the charitable status of private schools on the basis of public benefit, given their role in the reproduction of a conservative establishment that tends to strip the public realm of resources. But mostly he wants to start a series of conversations that have largely been avoided. In the book he writes, “I keep reflecting on what Eton doesn’t talk about”, from the part it played in the creation and maintenance of empire, to the function it serves today. He tells me: “The school explicitly prides itself on leadership, right? But if you’re not creating the kind of leaders that are moving the world forward — that’s the most pressing conversation to have, I think.” Of private schooling in general, he asks: “As a structure, as a system, is it serving our society best? I don’t believe it is. And I say that as someone that’s benefited hugely from that world.”

Okwonga sees access to the best education, and therefore to power, narrowing rather than broadening. Yet resilience in the face of global problems such as the pandemic or the climate crisis demands you engage as many people as possible in the search for solutions. “We’re not going to handle the challenges that are facing us right now if we’re only taking expertise from an increasingly small group. It’s not going to work.”

The “why now” question has a personal answer, too. Okwonga started thinking about school again when he was invited to his 20-year reunion. It was the prompt for a fairly unforgiving bout of introspection. He was embarrassed at how his penurious life as a single writer nudging 40 compared with his fellow alumni, by then wealthy executives with houses and families. In his autobiographical novella, *In the End It Was All About Love*, published earlier this year, the protagonist says: “There is not a week when you do not look in the hallway mirror and think, my God, what have I done.” But unlike in the Talking Heads song, there is no beautiful house or large automobile in sight.

When I ask him what psychological marks Eton left, Okwonga says: “You’re taught to compete all the time. And once you leave a world where you can readily compete against others, you kind of turn that competition inward. So you’re pushing yourself constantly, you’re just brutal with yourself. And sometimes things don’t feel satisfying unless they’re difficult.”

Difficult is certainly the word for some of Okwonga’s searing judgments about himself, particularly in *In the End It Was All About Love*, which agonises about the insecurity of freelance life, the alienation of being black in white spaces, romantic rejection and self-loathing. I ask if this confessional phase will continue. He says he’s looking forward to returning to fiction, even sci-fi, having written some unpublished work in the past. The last couple of years, however, called for self-exposure. “We’re in a time of artifice, you know, fake news, and charlatans who aren’t being honest about their intentions. I just thought, what’s the antidote to that? The answer is basically to interrogate yourself and your surroundings. The way through all this stuff, this artifice, is to say, here’s something that I felt that was real, and others may relate to it and feel it as well.”

The exacting standards Okwonga sets himself have roots that go deeper than Eton. He talks of a “survivor’s guilt” over relatives affected by war and Aids at the time his school career was taking off. “Make it count” became something of a mantra. And then there’s his father. “My dad died very young. And he achieved a lot in his life. I think that there was a sense of: I’ve got to do stuff by a certain age.” Forty is always a landmark, but it held particular significance for Okwonga. It was the age his father, having temporarily left the family in order to fight in his country’s civil war, was killed in a helicopter crash. So it’s extraordinary that this was the moment he finally achieved some peace of mind about his professional life. “Yeah, my life changed in the last year and a half, right? Everything changed. I was on the phone to a good friend of mine. We hadn’t spoken for a few years. And during that phone call, I got two notifications in half an hour.” They were both book deals. “I was, like, stay on the phone!” he laughs.

Of a third contract, Okwonga says: “I was slightly pushing — can we sign it, can we sign it. It had all been negotiated, so it was going to be signed anyway. But the reason I didn’t give was that it was a few days before I passed the age my dad was. And I was, like, ‘Dad, I did it! Just before I passed your age, I made work that I felt has honoured you.’ And I went and got a cupcake around the corner. I know it’s not that dramatic or extravagant, but it’s my method of celebration. I did it. I did it just in time.”
Extract ‘What matters is not being good-natured but achieving high office’

There is a way some boys look at me here that I have never seen before. When I annoy someone in my home town, they make eye contact with me, the fury glistens in their gaze. But at Eton, if I confront one of the more arrogant students who dislikes me, there is a very particular stare they give me: a glazed expression, never fully focused, as if they are peering out into the yard at a distant and mildly irritating disturbance, a fox howling somewhere in the dark.

Boys who look at me like this belong to a class that everyone refers to as “the lads”. They are fascinating because they seem to defy all social conventions - I have been told my entire life that it is important to get on with people in order to succeed, but these peers of mine often seem supremely uninterested in that.

The lads have long ago worked out, or been told, that what matters is not being good-natured but achieving high office. In a system where boys are raised to be deferential to those in authority, they know that if they merely gain prestige, then personal popularity will follow.

The school’s power structure is strange to me. The school prefects are not appointed by staff, or elected via secret ballot. Instead they are chosen by the prefects in the year above. The result is that if a boy wishes to be socially prominent at school, there are only twenty people whose approval he truly needs. I watch boys campaign for election as prefects with a vigour that I will later see in the world of politics, and I will realise that this is the kind of place where these politicians learned it, that this is what they mean by networking. It is the least dignified behaviour I can imagine, but I will see boys carry it out with such ease that it appears to be genetic.

I think a great deal about the English concept of fair play: the idea that there are some things that are simply not done. The older I get, the more I wonder how much that concept was created to keep people of a certain social class in their place. I look at the most confident people in my year and I realise that the greatest gift that has been bestowed upon them is shamelessness. While so many other people are hamstrung by the deference and social embarrassment they have been taught since birth, the upper classes calmly parade on through the streets and boardrooms to claim the spoils. They don’t learn shamelessness at Eton, but this is where they perfect it.

There is an incident of racism that occurs at school, which I cannot ascribe to mere ignorance and which I will never truly forgive or forget because I cannot believe that someone so focused in their hatred has actually changed.

I get into an argument with a boy and the exchange is spirited. He has been told I have been disrespecting his family, which I find strange because I do not even know who his family is or what they do. A little later, as a class is just about to begin, he is overheard by a close friend saying that he hates me so much that he wishes he could tell me that his great-grandfather was a slave driver.

My research reveals that the profession of the boy’s great-grandfather very likely did involve the ownership of black people. From that day, my hatred for him will remain unashamed, unrelenting and total. In his final year at school, he ends up in a position of significant authority. It is interesting to me that, despite his stance on this issue, he has always been far from an outcast.

It is grim to witness some of the school’s former students with little apparent compassion for so many of their country’s occupants. I watch interviews where they can barely contain their contempt for people who are poorer and less gifted, where they defend policies that take blowtorches to the budgets of local communities. I wonder how they became that, or whether this is who they always were.

Each time I see a leading Conservative politician from my school in the news, I note that they always seem to have the same brutal outlook, the same ruthlessness towards public-spending cuts. They seem indifferent to the desperation of disabled people claiming benefits; they sweat aside the latest poverty statistics as if they were weak retorts in a sixth-form debating chamber. For them, maybe politics is tennis, and every unhappy fact is thrashed away with a single-handed backhand. The boy who was our head prefect, someone I could not have admired more, crafted the same economic policies that the United Nations’ poverty expert would later describe as punitive, mean-spirited and often callous. Almost every schoolfriend whom I have seen express a political view on social media has been Conservative. And why wouldn’t they be? This world works for them just as it is.

A key problem for too many people from my school is that they’ve never really seen widespread poverty. They have read about it, and maybe even seen it on their gap years, but they don’t really believe in it - that is to say, they largely think it is something you can elevate yourself out of, if you work just a little harder. The reason Eton can hold such grand anniversary celebrations is because we are utterly certain that there will be so much to celebrate. We are absolutely sure that most of us will be affluent, if not wealthy. On the whole, hard times do not happen to us.

One of Them: An Eton College Memoir is published by Unbound on Thursday.
In 1971 the author Barbara Pym was at her day job at the International African Institute when she noticed “Mr C” laboriously attacking his lunchtime sandwich with a knife and fork. Pym made a mental note of the detail before asking herself ruefully, “Oh why can’t I write about things like that any more – why is this kind of thing no longer acceptable?” Ten years earlier, Jonathan Cape had dumped her after her sixth book on the grounds that her brand of anthropological observation of English social manners was old lady-ish, dull and didn’t sell. As an extra humiliation, no other publishing house had been interested in picking up Miss Pym: books built on “the daily round of trivial things” could hardly compete with Frederick Forsyth’s The Day of the Jackal or, if you were feeling fancy, Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude. Jonathan Cape even published John Lennon (Pym liked the Beatles, but still). Clearly there was no place in contemporary literature for Mr C and his oddly formal way with a sandwich.

There is nothing unusual about major minor novelists having a disappointing and disproportionate decline, followed by a posthumous flowering in reputation and sales. What’s unusual about Pym is that her phoenix moment came while she was still alive. In 1977 the Times Literary Supplement asked well-known writers and critics to nominate their most underappreciated novelist of the past 75 years. Only one person was mentioned twice – by Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil – and that was Pym. As a result, Cape said that it would be delighted to publish her future books (too late, she explained: she’d just signed with Macmillan); Roy Plomley wanted her for Desert Island Discs; John Updike couldn’t say enough nice things about her in the New Yorker. Best of all, the Booker prize judges shortlisted her new novel, Quartet in Autumn, her first to appear for 16 years.

In her three remaining years – she died in 1980 at the age of 66 of returning cancer – Pym enjoyed the recognition that had always slightly eluded her. There was gratifying fuss, good champagne and – always a topic dear to her heart – an excuse to buy some smart new clothes. Today she occupies a space in literary culture that is hard to define. In this deeply affectionate biography, Paula Byrne claims her as a “cult author” but that doesn’t seem quite right. Pym is no one’s idea of a well-kept secret. Although she is frequently described, not least by Byrne, as a modern Jane Austen, in fact her work is far closer to Elizabeth Gaskell in her Cranford days. For one thing Pym’s marriage plots reek of ambivalence. People are often already wed at the start of her books and really don’t like it, although, this being Pym-world, they decide to stick with it. Ageing single women spend years yearning for unsuitable men – gay, married, both – before coming to the realisation that they are better off without them. And then there is Pym’s enchantment with the vernacular of domestic life, which seems closer to the ladies of Cranford than those of Pride and Prejudice – a salad parted to reveal a grey caterpillar leering at a pickle lunch guest, a bowl of gooseberries, an archdeacon with a hole in his sock. Perhaps it is nearer the mark to say that Barbara Pym is a novelist who goes in and out of fashion. Sometimes we can see her and she can see us so deeply and piercingly that it takes our breath away, and then things go cloudy again for a few years.

In this excellent – a word that always carried extra heft in Pym’s universe – biography Byrne explores how her art emerged from three distinct yet porous registers of experience. First was the life lived, then the life elaborately recorded and embroidered in the dense trove of notebooks and letters, which Pym bequeathed to her beloved Bodleian, and finally life as it is transmuted into her deeply autobiographical novels. Reading closely, Byrne shows how often in her rough drafts Pym would start to write herself into her own novels, replacing the name of her heroine, say “Prudence” or “Mildred”, with “I”. Conversely, in her long story-making letters to friends she frequently referred to herself in the third person – “Miss Pym” or “Pymnska” or “Sandra” (despite how it sounds, “Sandra” was the saucy version of her). Some Tame Gazelle, Pym’s first novel, which she began just after she left Oxford in 1934 but didn’t publish until 1950, was originally a jokey imagining of her and her sister’s future lives as spinsters – which is exactly how things turned out. It got to the point where friends wondered out loud whether Barbara had an uncanny knack of casting spells on the future.

In the same way, the many men with whom Pym endured tormented love affairs regularly turned up in her novels only lightly disguised. Horribly self-involved Oxford boyfriend
Henry Harvey was the model for her holey-socked archdeacon, while Julian Amery, another ambivalent man who led her a merry dance, pops up in Jane and Prudence as the permanently gurning MP Edward Lyall. Meanwhile Robert “Jock” Liddell, gay this time, is a ringer for William Caldicote (yet another low-grade narcissist) in Excellent Women. It was only at her friends’ repeated urging that Pym excised any reference to Friedbert Gluck, her SS boyfriend with whom she had a love affair in Germany before the second world war. Frankly, it is extraordinary that the only time Pym came close to being sued was when Marks & Spencer took offence at the suggestion in Jane and Prudence that women who bought their hats from Debenhams thought they were slumming it if they contemplated buying a dress from Marks. The threatening letter quoted the fact that she had been described as the author of books “worthy of Jane Austen” as the reason for taking umbrage.

Although Pym’s archive has already been well picked over by scholars and fans, Byrne’s book is the first to integrate its revelations into a cradle-to-grave biography. She gives a seamless timeline of Pym’s life as a provincial solicitor’s daughter, Oxford undergraduate, wartime Wren and diligent employee of the International African Society. Byrne doesn’t dodge the uncomfortable implication that Pym’s phase as a Nazi sympathiser (she even had a swastika pin that she wore around Oxford) went on longer than that of most middle-class Britons in the 1930s, but she is clear too how completely it was bound up with Pym’s feelings for prewar Germany as a land of music, mountains and philosophy, and, above all, as a crucial bulwark against the terrifying threat of communism from Russia.

Oddly, though, Byrne does not delve very deeply into the less toxic business of why Pym had such a masochistic habit of going after men who were either gay or already committed to prettier or socially smarter women. At times this led to behaviour that today would count as stalking. While she started out like any moonstruck Oxford girl undergraduate, walking past the college of her latest crush several times a day in the hope of bumping into him, by middle age this had developed into something more alarming. In 1956 Barbara and her sister Hilary had actually driven to Devon in a bid to find out more about the family background of one of their neighbours in Barnes, a camp church organist to whom they had hardly ever spoken.

Whenever a man “liked” Pym, and they often did, she decided they were boring and ran in the other direction. Perhaps this was because, as Dulcie Mainwaring, the heroine of No Fond Return of Love puts it, “It seemed [...] so much safer and more comfortable to live in the lives of other people – to observe their joys and sorrows with detachment as if one were watching a film or play.” Or, as Pym herself confided to a friend when in her late 40s, “I love Bob, I love Richard, I love Rice Krispies ... perhaps it is better in the end just to love Rice Krispies.”

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

Psychoanalysis

Conversation rather than conversion is vital in the consulting room - is that the same for politics?

Oliver Eagleton

Those who find writing a chore are better off not knowing about the literary method of Adam Phillips. Every Wednesday he walks to his office in Notting Hill. On this journey some idea begins to take shape, usually related to his day job (Phillips is a Freudian psychoanalyst). So long as this notion sparks his interest it will - by the time he sits down at his computer - have been transmuted into his first sentence. The next hours are spent unfurling that sentence into an essay, which typically forms part of a collection. Over three decades this routine has produced more than 20 books.

The ease of Phillips’s prose is conditioned by his reluctance to “convince” anyone, including himself. The author treats his readers like his patients, aiming to provoke and stimulate rather than persuade. Yet if psychoanalysis - and psychoanalytic literature - is a discourse concerned with change, how is this achieved without arguing, lecturing or coaxing? Is there a paradigm for altering another person from which coercion is entirely absent? That is the question Phillips poses in On Wanting to Change. If there is “something pernicious about the wish to persuade people”, then psychoanalysis offers “a form of honest persuasion. Or that, at least, is what it aspires to be.”

“Conversion” is Phillips’s byword for dishonest persuasion. When converted, we experience something akin to regression. Our primal state of attachment is evoked, which is why the possibility of conversion inspires simultaneous fear and excitement.

Outwardly, the recent convert might appear transformed - donning saffron robes or tattoos of Nigel Farage. But these performative gestures conceal an inner stasis: a powerless subjection to one’s original incestuous desire. For Phillips, it is our reluctance to acknowledge this desire that generates fantasies of radical self-transformation. Conversion seems to offer an escape route. But drastic reinventions are often “in the service of sustaining the very thing that is supposedly being replaced”. They “change everything by keeping everything the same”.

Psychoanalysis provides an antidote to this inertia. Phillips reminds us that Freud saw analytic treatment as a “resisted conversion experience”: the patient brings her inner conflicts and forbidden instincts to the session; but instead of converting them into something more tolerable (a dogmatic belief system, a bodily symptom), she is encouraged to confront them. Desire is no longer displaced but interpreted. As a result, the analyst and analysand forge a dialogue beyond this restrictive framework - one that no longer looks backward to the parental relation, but forward to an open future.

Yet the outcome of this process cannot be predetermined. “The wish to make something specific happen pre-empts the possibility of surprise,” writes Phillips. If the converted have “circumscribed their possibilities for surprise”, the analyst’s job is to expand them by creating a space - where conversation is limitless, improvisational and free-associative.

This is an inspiring vision of the consulting room; but problems arise when Phillips translates it into a political philosophy. He suggests that the “wish to make something specific happen” is equally toxic when striving for social change - so would this logically include the aim of cutting carbon emissions? He rejects firm principles in favour of open conversation - which suggests that the permissibility of child abuse, for example, should be a topic of endless critical exchange.

Despite Phillips’s penchant for surprise, then, his conclusions reiterate liberal bromides – provisionality over fixity, conversation over collective action - that disintegrate on contact with reality. If his thought is less adaptable than it appears, it is also worth questioning his avowed refusal to convince or convert his readers. He is right that an analyst should avoid didacticism; but a writer’s impulse to persuade needn’t imply the same abuse of power. “Honest persuasion” surely means being explicit about that impulse.

Yet when one approaches Phillips’s arguments as arguments, their perspicacity is often undeniable. On Wanting to Change ends with a coda on Covid-19, speculating that “when catastrophic change is inflicted upon us” we may become more able to “create the kind of change we would like”. Phillips warns that this transition must not be tightly planned or “over-organised”, lest it lose the experimental character of the Freudian session - a proviso that expresses his hostility towards radical politics, but one which radicals would nonetheless be well-advised to consider.

To buy a copy for £7.43 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Folk rock, free spirits and tragedy in the early life of a great songwriter and guitarist Richard Williams

The middle-class, middle-aged couple posing awkwardly by the gate of their neat Wimbledon home on the cover of Unhalfbricking, the 1969 album that took the British folk-rock pioneers Fairport Convention into the pop charts for the first time, were the parents of Sandy Denny, the group's singer. But they might just as easily have belonged to Richard Thompson, whose guitar-playing was among the band's earliest and most striking assets.

Born in 1949 and brought up in Highgate, another pleasant district of London, Thompson was the son of a detective with the Metropolitan police. By the time he started at a local grammar school, an interest in his father's collection of jazz records had been diverted by the sounds of Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran issuing from the bedroom of his older sister.

A gift for observation would help turn Thompson into one of Britain's finest songwriters, beloved for such compositions as “Meet on the Ledge”, “1952 Vincent Black Lightning” and the ballad that provides his book with its title. That same shrewd eye informs the recollections of a perennial succès d’estime, whose solo career, nowadays conducted from a home in New Jersey, has brought him a large and loyal following.

Thompson recognises that his public will be most interested in the events of his early career. His account begins gently but blossoms into gripping reflections on early tragedy, his conversion to Sufism, and a first marriage whose dramas were played out on stage. He is not the first to describe the progression from skiffle and folk music to rudimentary beat groups made up of schoolfriends and onwards to rock’n’roll – and, in his case, to a significant variant of the basic form. But he does so with a fond and precise recall of such details as witnessing “the arrival of a new culture” at the 14 Hour Technicolour Dream at Alexandra Palace, where he sees John Lennon “wandering around, looking every inch an impersonation of himself, with his moustache, NHS spectacles and Afghan jacket”.

He had already begun what would become regular visits to an occult bookshop in the West End of London, where his first purchase was Paul Reps’s Zen Flesh, Zen Bones, whose riddles made more sense to him than the teachings of his parents’ Presbyterianism. “This started me on a quest for meaning in my life,” he writes, without irony.

His telling of Fairport Convention’s swift rise to prominence and their momentous decision to bring the techniques of rock music to bear on traditional English folksong includes the late-night crash of their van on the M1 while returning home from a gig in Birmingham in 1969. Martin Lamble, their 19-year-old drummer, and Jeannie Franklyn, Thompson’s young American girlfriend of barely two weeks’ standing, were killed after a roadie fell asleep at the wheel, with Thompson making a vain attempt to keep the vehicle on the road.

There is a brief but touching description of his glancing acquaintance with the troubled singer-songwriter Nick Drake, and rather more about the equally ill-fated Denny, who left the group a year or so before Thompson to pursue a solo career, but died after what seems to have been the last of many drunken falls, perhaps accidental, in 1978.

It was through Denny that he had met her best friend, the singer Linda Peters, whom he married in 1972 and with whom he formed a duo. Their album I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight started a joint performing career that ended when they separated after 10 years, during which they lived in Sufi communities in London and Suffolk and produced three children.

Perhaps the most affecting chapter of all deals with the writing of the song “Beeswing”, its words inspired by the lives of two free spirits: Anne Briggs, the gifted folk singer who, like Drake, shied away from the spotlight at a time when it might have embraced her; and a former stable boy turned tramp named Ted who helped out in the Thompsons’ Suffolk garden. “I think we write songs for pleasure,” Thompson notes, “but also to understand ourselves and to decode life.” The same impulse seems to have guided this quiet joy of a memoir, in which honesty and humour are burnished rather than dulled by a certain restraint.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Russian poet Maria Stepanova, born in 1972, came of age amid all the upheaval of the post-Soviet 90s, and the accompanying new challenges for writing. She has won important Russian and international literary awards, is editor-in-chief of online arts journal Colta.ru, and is now being published in English for the first time (she was in a Zephyr anthology in 2013). Bloodaxe has brought out a selection of poems, War of the Beasts and the Animals, translated by Sasha Dugdale. It will take a while for readers in the UK to learn how to take in these poems, crowded as they are with different voices and types, dense with allusions to Russian life and culture past and present, as well as to wider European literature and history. At first encounter they seem sensuous, haunted, significant, ambitious. Meanwhile Fitzcarraldo has published her prose memoir In Memory of Memory, which has been longlisted for the International Booker prize, and which probably gives us as good a guide as any to the shapes and motifs of Stepanova’s thought.

She tells us that she’s been trying to write this book of her family history for years, in some sense ever since she was an only child, growing up with parents and grandparents and, for a while, a great-grandmother, too, in an apartment in Moscow crowded with the leftover possessions of past generations: books, teacups, newspapers, clothes, postcards, toys, photographs, as well as fragments of family anecdote. It’s also the place where she begins typing the memoir we are reading. That child was smitten with a sense of responsibility in relation to all this memorabilia, and when she grows up it’s as if, until she’s written about it, she can’t get beyond it into her adult present. There may be something particularly Russian in this anxiety: as though its 20th-century dead demand their reckoning with a special urgency, because the question of their lives had to be postponed, in all the surreal chaos of revolution and state violence and war.

Not that the Stepanova family story encompasses the worst horrors. That’s the surprise of it, and in a way the knot she needs to unpick: that these Jewish bourgeois doctors, engineers and intellectuals – perfectly positioned, you might think, for disaster – got away with a few near escapes, they were survivors. “Earlier in my life this gave me cause for some embarrassment, although the reason for this is hard to put into words and shameful to admit … I felt bound to notice that my ancestors had made hardly any attempt to make themselves interesting … None of them had fought or been repressed or executed.” There’s just one son of a great-great-aunt, who died in the siege of Leningrad and leaves behind his letters to his mother, poignant in their resolute cheerfulness. How are you though, Mother? How have you been? I beg you not to worry about me, there’s nothing I need and I am doing well. I feel completely healthy. Partly, what Stepanova wants to do is rescue the story of the lives of her family from a catastrophist narrative of Russian 20th-century history, and convey the ordinary daily continuity of their experience, their tangled, opaque whole lives.

Her method is like a scrapbook, building family portraits tentatively from what fragments she has, filling in around them everything else that feels like part of their world and history – or absorbs her omnivorous interest, or crops up in her reading, or prompts her meditation. Although the book moves more or less chronologically through the family’s story, punctuated by extracts from their letters, it isn’t meant to offer conventional detective-satisfactions, uncovering hidden secrets and clarifying what had been obscure. Stepanova is more drawn to how the past resists being uncovered. Travelling to Saratov where her great-grandfather once lived, she works up a deep imaginative affinity with the “crooked walls” of his house, the strong smells of “plants and greenery”, the “high windows”, only to find out afterwards that it was the wrong house. In Pochinsky, where her great-grandmother Sarra grew up – a “shrunken husk” of a 19th-century town, three hours’ drive from the nearest station – she can’t find any trace of the family, nor even a Jewish cemetery.

Sarra is the most colourful figure in her story, imprisoned in tsarist times, trained as a doctor in Paris, then treating Soviet children; yet Stepanova doesn’t work at conjuring her actual presence, or bringing her to life like a character in a novel. Rescuing her family from the totalising narrative of history, she doesn’t mean to reassure us of the past’s solidity, or its continuity with ourselves. History pretends to make sense
of the past in the present. What she wants to recover is rather the strangeness of what’s past, and its lostness – to recover ordinary anguish at ordinary death, and at time’s ordinary disappearing act. “The memory of what is lost, inconsolable, melancholy, keeping tally of those losses while knowing that nothing can be returned.”

Of course she can’t ignore catastrophe, and it broods over the book, in meditations on the Leningrad siege, or passing references to famine, or to the purges (which came so close to her grandfather Nikolai, who had earned pitchfork scars in his youth, collecting taxes from the peasants to pay for the revolution). Or in fascinating pages on the quarrel between poets Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva – or on Walter Benjamin, or outsider artist Charlotte Salomon, all destroyed in the murderous convulsions of the mid-century. And the past is smeared, too, with its casual omnipresent antisemitism (shockingly, poet Aleksandr Blok on Mandelstam: “You gradually get used to him, the Jewboy hides from view and you can see the artist”). And the present. When in 1995 Stepanova says farewell in a Moscow station to her parents emigrating to Germany, a man shouts at her: “Kill the yids and save Russia.” “It’s all too neat,” she says, “but that’s how it happened.” Her book is not a protest exactly. Mere righteous indignation feels inadequate to the sheer scale of the wrong assembled here.

Intentionally the memoir is meandering, digressive, cumulative, compendious – a mind moving around its wide world. Dugdale’s translation appears heroic, to this reader with no Russian, in its careful attentiveness. One section, for instance, is composed of descriptions of a succession of photographs, where only some subjects are identified; in another Stepanova discusses the self-portraits of Rembrandt, and in another, Alexei Tolstoy’s interest in the language of 17th-century confessions extracted under torture. I was becalmed sometimes in the sheer surplus of rumination and piling up of detail, and among so many different family members who remain foggily just out of imaginative reach.

To my taste, at 500 pages the book is quite a lot too long. Prose has its hidden inward logic of limitation, just as poetry does; she says too much, too many times. On Rembrandt for instance: “The portrait with its fist of meanings, an embodied demand for attention, a place in the sun, tries to break open your head like a door, to enter in and make itself at home. It has the intensity of a message in a bottle, a voicemail – a letter which will sooner or later become the very last letter.” Half as much would have had twice the energy. She can’t let the smallest perception go: like her aunt Galya hoarding notebooks and diaries, thermal vests and leggings, brooches, a complete set of Chekhov. But in the end the excess is less important than the fact that so much of what Stepanova has saved for us is remarkable and rich with meaning.

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

Music

The search for the origins of a violin leads to Italy and Cremona, home of the great Antonio Stradivari

Jamie Mackay

Lev’s Violin: An Italian Adventure by Helena Attlee, Particular, £20

One summer’s night, at a concert in a small Welsh town, Helena Attlee is blown away by the sound of an exotic stringed instrument. The timbre is sweet and rotund, like nothing she’s heard before. After the encore she hunts down the performer, a man named Greg, who plays with one of Britain’s major symphony orchestras, to find out more about his instrument. Greg tells her that his violin was once owned by a Russian named Lev, and that he thinks it may have been made in the Italian town of Cremona, birthplace of the famous luthier Antonio Stradivari. Attlee inspects the body, expecting to find a resplendent antique. Instead she discovers something worn, matted with the sweat of many generations of musicians. The two agree this violin’s “voice” is unique in the world. And yet, Greg reveals, the auctioneers have declared it “worthless”, little more than junk.

For Attlee this proves the catalyst for a literary adventure. Her goal may be to authenticate Lev’s might-be-Stradivarius, but she finds plenty of time to reflect on the meaning of the violin as a technology, on how it redefined the relationship between sacred and secular music and opened up a new world of baroque sonatas and concertos. It’s a testament to her skill as a storyteller that she uses her Cremona trip to construct a more elegant and ambitious narrative. Descriptions of Asian ebony fingerboards, rosewood tuning pegs and Balkan maple soundboards, which could have been rather dry, serve instead as a proxy history of early modern globalisation.

In her previous books Attlee has tended to stick to the comfortable environs of high-walled Tuscan gardens. This time, she has to consider a broader reality. In Florence, a city she loves, Attlee discovers that Lev’s violin may have once belonged to members of Italy’s Roma community. As she follows this lead, she discovers an “underbelly” of racism against these people, and worries that she “had never really known” Florence at all. By the final scenes, in southern Russia, she is musing on pogroms, border checks and the practicalities of smuggling antiques out of the Soviet Union. It’s a far cry from the first spritz-soaked pages on Monteverdi’s contrapuntal innovations.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The joy of raising a child, even on the other side of disaster, is intercut with our current slide towards climate chaos

Melissa Harrison

From Barbara Kingsolver’s Flight Behaviour to Jenny Offill’s Weather and Doggerland by Ben Smith, the “cli-fi” genre is growing exponentially – no surprise, given the evolving crisis. In fact, as an artist in any medium it can feel self-indulgent, in 2021, to be making work about anything else. Jessie Greengrass’s Women’s prize-shortlisted debut novel, Sight, used motherhood as a starting point to explore wider ideas of psychoanalysis and medical history; her second tackles the subject of global heating head-on, conjuring a near-future vision of a flooded East Anglia. Where it excels is in its characters’ recollection of the slow, incremental progress towards disaster, and the effort ordinary people made, every day, to block their knowledge of it out: “Crisis slid from distant threat to imminent probability and we tuned it out like static,” Caro, one of the survivors, recalls.

As the novel opens, Caro is a teenager. Her father’s partner, Francesca, is a high-profile climate scientist and campaigner; it’s a mission on which Caro’s father will join her. Francesca may be principled and tireless, but she’s also unlikeable, her constant insistence on the coming apocalypse cutting her off from most forms of simple joy. She’s an astute creation, providing readers with a channel for their discomfort; Caro’s weariness with Francesca’s warnings mirrors our own.

Unbeknown to Caro, her father and stepmother are preparing a refuge for her and her half-brother, Pauly: the High House in Suffolk, built on a bluff with an orchard, vegetable garden, tide pool and water-driven generator – even a boat. They employ a young woman, Sally, to act as caretaker, and install her there with her grandfather. Caro’s father and stepmother are on the campaign trail when a series of devastating storms hit; there’s just enough time to phone Caro and tell her to take Pauly to the High House, where they meet Sal and Grandy for the first time. There they remain in a landscape left almost completely uninhabitable: growing potatoes, tending hens, planting a little wheat and guarding against accidents and infections. The question is to what end: “What option is there... for those few of us who have survived, but to be the unforgivable, and the unforgiven?” Caro asks.

Despite its bleak subject matter, this is a book suffused with the joy and fulfilment of raising a child. Left almost entirely in loco parentis even before the crisis comes, Caro adores little Pauly, and Greengrass brilliantly dramatises the ways in which the simple rhythms of life with a toddler can bring comfort: “Things had a form and, carried along by it, the future ceased to seem important, although I knew that it would still happen to us, coming on while I was cutting carrots for snacks, while we fed oats to the ducks, played tag, stuck plasters to grazed knees. I fitted my life to Pauly’s, because he needed me – or because I needed him.”

Greengrass is excellent on the complex currents that can develop between people who live in close proximity: the way Pauly’s birth subtly reconfigures Caro’s relationship with her father and stepmother; Sal’s dislike of Caro, with her physical fragility and obvious grief. The fact that both women are orphans is not a source of common feeling but a trigger for judgment, or even jealousy.

But as the novel jumps back and forth in time, the gradual filling-in of information about the High House and Sally creates a slow start, while some misapprehensions about how birds are likely to respond to changing weather patterns – not to mention the fact that badgers don’t hibernate, so wouldn’t be “awake too early” – mar the picture of growing natural turmoil. And although Caro and Sally’s backstories and personalities are different, their voices aren’t.

Kindly Grandy, the keeper of practical wisdom about sailing and self-sufficiency, is a bit of a standard-issue wise elder. Short, numbered sections and fragmented speech presentation also get in the way of a truly immersive reading experience, so the book is ultimately not as emotionally affecting as it deserves to be.

The question with all cli-fi is what the reader should do with the warnings it aims to deliver. And this is where The High House stands out, for Greengrass understands that perhaps the best writers can hope for now is to help us admit, accept and process our collective failure to act. From the far side of disaster, Caro recalls people persisting with “the commutes and holidays, the Friday big shops, day trips to the countryside, afternoons in the park. We did these things not out of ignorance, nor through thoughtlessness, but only because there seemed nothing else to do.”

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Recent interview, “I try to make it Latin American. To reimagine the subjects in accordance with our realities, to include indigenous mythologies, local urban legends, pagan saints, local murderers, the violence we live with, the social problems we suffer.” Many of these elements are present here: an isolated shrine to the Afro-Brazilian spirit Pomba-Gira; the sex workers of Constitución, one of Buenos Aires’s most dangerous neighbourhoods; the heavily polluted waters of the Riachuelo river.

But the culturally specific event that has the most pull here is the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983, and the abduction and murder of political enemies that took place. In “Back When We Talked to the Dead”, a story about teenage girls messin’ around with a Ouija board, Enríquez shows how those events, like any trauma, led to repression and silence: “The thing was that everyone knew Julieta’s parents hadn’t died in any accident: Julieta’s folks had disappeared. They were disappeared. They’d been disappeared. We didn’t really know the right way to say it.”

In less explicit ways, this repression seems to lie at the root of several other stories. In “Kids Who Come Back”, the longest story, missing children start reappearing in the capital’s parks, never a day older than when they vanished. Some have bruises that have stayed fresh for years. As parents reject them, convinced they’re impostors, the city’s inhabitants become indolent and depressed, giving a flavour of the sort of society-wide maladies found in José Saramago’s fiction. Enríquez has a talent for short, pessimistic stories that deliver satisfyingly nasty shocks, but one like this – a little structurally ungoverned – lodges itself far deeper in the mind.

The other part of the book that will stay with me is its depiction of male violence against women. Most of the missing children in “Kids Who Come Back” are girls who “fled from a drunken father, from a stepfather who raped them in the early morning, from a brother who masturbated on to their backs at night”. In “The Lookout”, Elina has never told anyone about being raped: “She had just showered, and she’d cried.” In “No Birthdays or Baptisms” the parents of a young woman called Marcela (readers of Enríquez’s previous book will remember her from the story “End of Term”), who is self-harming in extreme ways in her sleep, hire a cameraman to film her. The cameraman spends two nights with her and never sees her mysterious, apparently phantasmal assailant, but films Marcela’s naked, “slender and destroyed” body as she sleeps. When she asks to see the tape, he decides not to give it to her and swears he will never return to her house. Following his voyeurism, this act of withholding is the final cruel detail in a story that powerfully captures the isolation and abandonment abused women often suffer. Trick us into waiting for a ghost to “put out its head”, Enríquez surprises us with real horror.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Eighty years on, this prescient tale of a Jewish businessman in Nazi Germany is part John Buchan, part Franz Kafka

Jonathan Freedland

There was a risk that the story of this book might overwhelm the story in the book – its origin tale is quite something. It was written in a four-week fever immediately after Kristallnacht, the pogrom in November 1938 that signalled the lethal nature of the Nazi intent towards Jews. The author was a 23-year-old German Jew who had got out three years earlier, making his way to England via Sweden, France, Luxembourg and Belgium.

His name was Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz, and though he published an early version of his novel in England and France, few noticed it. Once war broke out, he was deemed an “enemy alien”, interned along with thousands of other Jewish refugees on the Isle of Man. From there he was deported to Australia, interned again in a prison camp in New South Wales before finally being redesignated a “friendly alien” and allowed to return to England in 1942. He was on a troopship heading back when it was torpedoed by a German submarine, killing him and 361 others. More than 70 years later, the original German manuscript for The Passenger turned up in a Frankfurt archive, allowing an editor to revise the novel in line with instructions Boschwitz had conveyed in letters to his mother. It’s the translation of that new text that has been lovingly published by Pushkin Press.

Compelling though the real-life tale is, it’s surpassed by the story between the covers. The central character is Otto Silbermann, a successful, slightly self-satisfied businessman in Berlin who finds his world collapsing in the hours that follow the night of broken glass. He is Jewish, but until now that had been an incidental fact. There’s nothing visibly Jewish about him, he tells us often; his wife is not a Jew. Rather, this is a label the new rulers of the country are insistently imposing on him and which he cannot escape: it is the J stamped in his passport.

From the start, the pressure on him is intense. It comes in the form of violence, as brownshirt thugs pound on the door of his home forcing him to flee into the night, and in the chillier shape of former business associates who, spotting an opportunity, push him to sell the building he lives in for a knockdown price or else rob him of his rightful share of the company he built. In this new climate, even those who once professed friendship or loyalty shun the person marked with the scarlet letter J.

Silbermann becomes a man on the run, hopping on and off trains criss-crossing Germany. At first, each journey is part of some vague strategy for survival - at one point he tries to make an illegal break across the border into Belgium - but soon there is no real destination, only desperation and eventually disintegration: he is forever travelling but going nowhere. There is tension, as Silbermann seeks to dodge those who might check his papers, relying on his Aryan looks to blend in as fellow passengers greet him with a “Heil Hitler!” , but there is also the surreal, thickly claustrophobic atmosphere of an actual nightmare - a man repeating the same move over and over again, his goal permanently out of reach. The result is a story that is part John Buchan, part Franz Kafka and wholly riveting.

It is also uncannily prescient. “Perhaps they’ll carefully undress us first and then kill us, so our clothes won’t get bloody and our banknotes won’t get damaged,” he writes. “These days murder is performed economically.” That reads like a premonition, not only of the process that would come nearly four years later, as Jews were stripped naked before entering the gas chambers, but also of the Nazi determination to extract every last pfennig from their victims, even pulling gold teeth from the mouths of the dead.

There is similar foresight in Otto’s lament: “No one resists. They all cringe and say: we have no choice, but the truth is they’re happy to go along because there’s something in it for them.” It’s as if Boschwitz foresaw the complicity of the millions who were bystanders to the wickedness that took place right in front of them.

Boschwitz was a shrewd observer of his time, but his story still resonates nearly a century later when antisemitism is on the rise once more and the exclusion of those who are different remains a pernicious constant across the globe. Besides, some of his insights are timeless. In a remark that will surely chime with members of any minority, Otto notes that any flaws he may have, any misdeeds he may have committed, are taken as evidence of the supposedly inherent defects of his group. “I don’t have the right to be an ordinary human being,” he says. “More is demanded of me.”

The Passenger is a gripping novel that plunges the reader into the gloom of Nazi Germany as the darkness was descending. It deserved to be read when it was written. It certainly deserves to be read now.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
On the trail of an eco-terrorist; a pandemic road trip; a society without men; and supernatural creatures

Lisa Tuttle

“If you received this, I am already gone. You’re on your own. But not alone.” These words are scrawled on an envelope containing a key, a number and an address, left at a coffee shop for the narrator of Jeff VanderMeer’s compelling *Hummingbird Salamander* (4th Estate, £16.99). The trail takes Jane to a storage unit where she finds a stuffed, extinct hummingbird with a cryptic note signed “Silvina”. Bored by her job, chafing at the predictable routines of home life, Jane seizes the challenge to investigate.

Silvina, she learns, was an eco-terrorist, at odds with her wealthy Argentinian family, and is reported to have died in a recent traffic accident. Could it have been murder? Clues from the hummingbird lead her to a suspicious taxidermist, and then to an odd, failed utopian commune, but nothing to suggest why a woman she did not know should have chosen her to solve this puzzle. By the time she realises she’s being followed, her interest has become an obsession that won’t let her go, even with her family in danger.

Set in the very near future in the US Pacific Northwest, this unusual detective story could be classed as an eco-thriller, as Jane’s investigations touch on the international criminal trade in wildlife as well as forcing her to confront secrets buried in her own past. Jane, who once trained as a wrestler, is a wonderful creation: strong, stubborn, damaged and perpetually angry, frequently unsympathetic, always believable. This quirky, compelling book is likely to gain an even wider audience for its author, without disappointing his many SF fans. The engine that drives it is speculation about the future not only of civilisation, but of all life on this planet.

*Under the Blue* (Serpent’s Tail, £14.99) by Oana Aristide unfurls a what-if apocrypha – which could be happening now, if Covid-19 had been a more universally lethal threat. In the midst of a pandemic, Harry, a solitary, middle-aged artist, abandons his London flat for an isolated cottage in Devon, and is joined there by Ash, a young woman for whom he has romantic feelings, and her less agreeable sister. For reasons the two are at first reluctant to reveal, they have decided they must get to Africa, and rather than be left behind, he agrees to join them. Interwoven with the story of this oddly matched trio on a road trip across an abruptly depopulated Europe during a long, hot summer is another, very different narrative set in a research station in the Arctic Circle. Through transcripts of sessions between scientists and an artificial intelligence known as Talos XI, we observe the creation of an AI made to predict disasters in the making, and offer the best solutions, or means of prevention. The discussions between human and AI are fascinating, revealing different ways of perceiving reality. The two stories come together to provide a surprising, satisfying conclusion to a beautifully written, emotionally gripping book.

Izumi Suzuki was a Japanese actor, model and writer. Her turbulent marriage to saxophonist Kaoru Abe, who died of a drug overdose in 1978, followed by her own suicide in 1986, enshrined her as a sort of punk icon for disaffected Japanese youth. But her most lasting and important legacy is found in her science-fiction stories, now appearing for the first time in English in *Terminal Boredom* (Verso, various translators, £10.99). The seven stories here are not only still relevant but remarkably fresh, even if some tropes are familiar. “Women and Women” is Suzuki’s take on a female-only society in which men, having caused so much trouble and used up most of the world’s natural resources, are kept imprisoned underground, for reproductive use only. It stands out from the many English-language variations due to Suzuki’s jaundiced view of both genders. “Night Picnic”, about aliens trying to imitate humans, is even weirder and funnier than similar riffs by Ray Bradbury and Philip K Dick.

All these stories are brilliant, but with few exceptions they are bleak. Despite levennings of the fantastic, and absurdist touches, the cumulative effect is one of alienation and despair.

*All the Murmuring Bones* by AG Slatter (Titan, £8.99) returns to the gothic fairytale settings of her short stories (her 2014 collection *The Bitterwood Bible and other Recountings* won the World Fantasy award). It is a rich and satisfying novel about a young woman, born to be the last hope of a once powerful family, who resists an arranged marriage and won’t stop at murder or magic to survive in a world of abusive men and dangerous, supernatural creatures. Shifting between scenes of wonder and horror, a complex plot is gradually revealed, as well paced and gripping as a thriller.
Animal attraction
Katherine Angel

Marian Engel’s story of a lonely librarian’s sexual awakening with a bear was first published in the 1970s. What can the cult classic teach us now about desire and savagery?

What do you think of when you think of a bear? A large, lumbering and unpredictably violent creature? Perhaps you think of Grizzly Man, Werner Herzog’s jaw-dropping film about a man killed by one of the creatures he so adored? Do you think of the bearded, heavy-set man contrasted, in the informal typology among gay men, with the skinnier, more feminine twink? Or perhaps you think of a cuddly toy?

When Lou, the narrator of Marian Engel’s 1976 novel, Bear, meets a real bear, she finds that “its nose was more pointed than she expected – years of corruption by teddy bears, she supposed”. He is no cuddly toy, but she becomes surprisingly intimate with him. Lou is an archivist in a dusty Canadian Historical Institute. Her life has become narrow and joyless, punctuated by perfunctory sex with the institute’s director. New horizons beckon, however; the institute has been granted the estate of Colonel Jocelyn Cary: an island, with a house containing a large library. The colonel’s English ancestor had served in the Napoleonic wars, and nursed fantasies of living on an island. Cary’s Island is no longer a romantic outpost for colonial adventuring, but a tourist destination – and the estate remains intact, complete with a resident bear.

When Lou arrives in this landscape “hectic with new green”, she has a lurching realisation about the smallness of her life, feeling “as old as the yellowed papers she spent her days unfolding”. She journeys upriver to the house, along “this silent, creeping shore”. There are intimations of fairytale, and of horror too, and Engel’s prose is both clipped and lush, pitching between Lou’s dual yearnings: for order and for disarray. Once settled, she is wildly happy with her new solitary kingdom: “an octagonal house, a roomful of books and a bear”. A bear that is “not a toy bear, not a Pooh bear, not an airlines Koala bear. A real bear.”

As she archives the library’s contents, slips of paper fall out of hefty tomes, with the colonel’s handwritten notes on the theme of bears: in myth, history, legend. She is ostensibly there to excavate histories of settlement in the region, but she keeps finding bear-related musings.

She becomes exasperated with many of the books – all “morbid geniuses”, these Victorians. But she discovers other joys. She shits next to the bear in the mornings (that will make the bear like her, she’s told), and delights in her verdant surroundings. The bear fascinates her: “His bigness, or rather his ability to change the impression he gave of his size, excited her.” This creature is both an animal and a metonym for masculinity, intimidating and comical by turns. He spends time in the house with her, by the fire, as she works. Reading a 19th-century biography of a famous Regency dandy, while “rubbing her foot in the thick black pelt of a bear”, she feels elated. Yet she has moments of terror: “the horrifying slither of his claws on the linoleum; his change of stature at the top of the stairs”.

The image shows a bear standing on its hind legs, facing the camera with a fierce expression.
Things take a turn. When Lou swims naked in the river, he begins to “run his long, ridged tongue up and down her wet back”. The bear is “like a dog, like a groundhog, like a man: big”. One night, by the fire, he begins to lick her with a tongue “capable of lengthening itself like an eel”, and “like no human being she had ever known it persevered in her pleasure. When she came, she whimpered and the bear licked away her tears.”

Lou becomes lyrical and hazy with love for the bear; a sort of delirium descends on her. She wants him to devour her, but he is good, and gentle, “once laid a soft paw on her naked shoulder, almost lovingly”. Can Lou get what she wants – from a man, or a bear? Eventually, the bear, by sheer dint of being a bear, injures her.

When Bear was first published, to great acclaim and some controversy, the feminist and women’s liberation movements had been burgeoning for some years in North America and Europe. Arguments for equality and freedom were unfolding alongside internal divisions as to what this freedom would look like. In the late 70s, the emphasis on the right to have a sexuality would be critiqued as the preserve of a largely white cohort, by feminists of colour for whom their own depiction as inherently sexual was a greater source of violence. A focus on sexual liberation would become itself controversial. Just how linked to sex should feminism be? And what kind of sex?

The “sex wars” of the 80s were on the horizon, and heterosexual feminists were grappling with men as objects of desire, who can nonetheless always pose a threat. Engel is playful, slyly winking at these questions; riffing, for example, on age-old misogynistic associations of women’s genitals with fish, as when Lou buys fish for the bear, which repels her.

At the time Engel was writing, sex research conducted by Alfred Kinsey and colleagues, as well as by William Masters and Virginia Johnson, had put paid to any notion that women were less sexual than men. Their work undid much of the hand-wringing about frigidity that had dominated in previous decades. It also bolstered the importance of the clitoris in women’s sexual satisfaction. Within a certain strand of second-wave feminism, sexual pleasure and political emancipation were tightly linked, with sex and orgasm and the clitoris itself functioning as metaphors for women’s liberation: from men and from patriarchy. Lou plays out these issues, on the rug, by the fire, with the bear.

How will Bear land today – a novel about a repressed woman living on colonised land, mating with an animal? What has changed for women? The answer, I think, is so much, and yet so little. Engel, in the 70s, was writing into and against the expectation that (white) women be virginal and innocent (“What Lou disliked in men was not their eroticism, but their assumption that women had none. Which left women with nothing to be but housemaids”).

Women now are increasingly depicted as active and autonomous sexual beings – a depiction that can become a form of duty, as well as a denial of painful realities: for such a depiction does nothing to change the depressingly static rates of sexual violence against women, while evidence of confident sexual desire is used against women in rape trials.

Bear, though, is not just about sex; it’s about sex with a bear – an exploration of mixing between human and animal. Lou experiences her sexual awakening while delving into the mind of Victorian gentlemen scholars, in a library of European scientific endeavour and natural history. Like Darwin, Lou is asking herself: how related are humans and animals?

Rethinking the boundaries between animals and humans is promising territory, as Rebecca Tamás recently argued in Strangers: Essays on the Human and Nonhuman – “what is good for human equality is good, overall, for nonhuman equality”. Ecological concerns require us to take seriously a “love for things which are nothing like us, and which may not love us back”, writes Tamás, in a utopian exploration of “sharing with, becoming with, the world of which we are a part”. In Bear, there is an erotic thrill not only in being pleased by the bear, but in the way Lou merges with the swampy, watery terrain. There is a confusion of boundaries, and an unselfconsciousness that could not be further from the self-monitoring sexuality so encouraged by today’s social media and platform capitalism.

Lou, however, is a white woman, on land settled by white colonisers, and the erotic merging in Bear comes with ambivalence on Engel’s part. Lou’s archive is thick with the musings of white men. American poet Henry Wadsorth Longfellow is thought to have written “that Indian poem” nearby – his “Song of Hiawatha” of 1855, featuring First Nations people and the bears of their legends. Lou gradually begins to inhabit the colonialist’s land. While gardening in the heat, “a piece of cheesecloth tied around her head”, she feels “like a colonial civil servant’s wife in India”.

Lou returns to the city, enlivened, transformed; is she too a white settler energised by the encounter with nature? Or is Engel doing something different, more ironic and oblique? Bear is delightfully ambiguous, and Engel’s prose too slippery and wry for any pat formulations. But in its mingling of the erotic quandaries for heterosexual women – does one need a man? Does one want an animal? – with the dynamics of human-animal domination, and in its evocation of the lure of landscape, Bear is an acute evocation of human projections on to land and nature.

At the time Engel was writing feminists were grappling with men as objects of desire, who can nonetheless always pose a threat.

A new edition of Bear by Marian Engel is published by Daunt.
‘I’m 51, I can say what I want’

On the launch of her third novel, a magical comedy more than 15 years in the writing, Leone Ross talks to Alex Clark about overcoming her creative fears

There is the difficult second novel, but for some writers there is also the far more difficult third novel. And so it was for Leone Ross, who in the 1990s published two well-received works of fiction, All the Blood Is Red and Orange Laughter. The first, a visceral group portrait of four women that moved between London and Jamaica, was longlisted for what is now the Women’s prize for fiction; the second, which tells the story of a man descending into madness in the tunnels of the New York subway as he reckons with the legacy of the civil rights movement and his upbringing, appeared on Wasafiri magazine’s list of its 25 most influential novels.

Then, although their author worked steadily and productively as an editor and as a teacher of creative writing, and although she continued to produce pieces of short fiction, the novels ceased to come. As Leone Ross prepares to publish This One Sky Day, a novel at least 15 years in the writing, I ask her what happened to keep her quiet for so long?

She answers me over Zoom, as she wrangles a cat that she says is determined to attend every interview she gives about the book. (“If I fight her off,” she adds, “it just becomes a visual of me fighting a cat.”) She was, she remembers, around 26, and “very frightened to write a book. I’d always wanted to, but I was terrified that I wouldn’t do it well. And so I thought: ‘I’ll try 60% with All the Blood Is Red, because, you know, if I don’t try as hard as I can, then if everybody thinks it’s shit, well, I have an excuse, right?’” The novel, which Ross describes as her response to the case of Desiree Washington, the woman raped by boxer Mike Tyson, did extremely well, emboldening her to embark on what she felt was an even more difficult project; this time, she decided, she’d go all out. Orange Laughter got 100% of her effort.

That novel also did well. But then, says Ross, “I got really frightened. In my 20s I thought that what you do is you write a novel, and then you can be a novelist. And it didn’t quite work out that way. You know, at one point, Oprah had it in her hand, and then... she didn’t have it. And there were a variety of disappointments for this inexperienced, relatively young woman. And I decided that I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be a novelist.” She stops herself. “No, that’s not true; I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be published, or that I could handle being published.”

It was, she says now, a mixture of ignorance of the mechanics of publishing, a less than perfect agent, and her own feelings of shame and “vague humiliation”; a worrying sense that, while she might be an “all right” writer, she wasn’t destined to be a great one. Orange Laughter, written in a style close to stream of consciousness, had taken it out of her; and yet the world kept turning. “I figured what I should do is take my little wagging tail over here and just tuck it between my legs and, you know, not write for a while.”

This One Sky Day is a glorious shout of a novel, a sensual, saturated combination of romance, magical realism and erotic comedy set on the imagined Caribbean archipelago of Popisho, where slavery has never existed and the only attempt at colonisation has been successfully resisted by the inhabitants. It’s hard to imagine its creator feeling daunted or tentative. Bravura pieces of whimsy - Popisho’s citizens are each born with a gift from the gods, which is as likely to be never farting as it is the ability to time travel - blend with intimate explorations of grief, childlessness and crises of sexuality in an intricate narrative set on a single day. Of the supernatural talents that she bestows on her characters, Ross says, “I rather like the idea of the whole world reading this book and going: ‘What’s my magic?’ All right, so what’s yours?”

It was the short story, Ross notes, that helped her to find her way back to the novel; that, and the encouragement of a friend who told her: “There must be another book by you in the world. Who cares if you make money? Who cares if anybody notices?” Stories freed her from the feeling that there were “certain things I had to do about race, about gender, about society”; those subjects are still vital, she says, but experimenting allowed her to explore her love of...
surrealism, horror and erotica. She wrote *This One Sky Day* by imagining herself as a story-loving child, writing longhand in parks, “a pen and paper on my tummy, waving my legs in the air”. “And then what happened is this mountain of words over a period of years in which I was essentially free writing, without trying to decide what it was. I would say that that got me 450,000 words easily. And then I started the process of pulling it apart.”

For all the exuberance and bigheartedness of *This One Sky Day*, it is also a novel of subtle seriousness, asking how we can make peace with profound loss and sadness. The two lovers at its centre, the widowed chef Xavier and the unhappily childless Anise, demonstrate the importance of allowing renewal and possibility into one’s life; and the islanders the value of holding on to traditions rooted in the natural world.

Ross was born in Coventry, and then lived in London until she was six, when her Jamaican mother decided that they would return to the Caribbean. “People change countries for all kinds of reasons,” Ross tells me. “But at least one of them was that she had this light-skinned, mixed-race child who had already been called a zebra at school. And she’s like: ‘You know what? I can’t, I just can’t. I’m taking her back to where the majority of the space is black, and let’s just see what she negotiates.’” Ross’s white Scottish father remained in the UK; she would visit him, when funds allowed, during the summer, and he would make trips to Jamaica.

In Jamaica, Ross learned to navigate anomalies. Her mother, she says, ran “a very British household”, courtesy of the years that she’d spent in the UK. At the same time, her daughter was immediately aware of colourism, and of the privilege that her lighter skin bestowed on her. Not wanting to benefit from that was part of the reason that she returned to Britain when she was 21; she describes a process of becoming accustomed to the hybridity of her biracial background and of her sexual identity as a bisexual woman. “I’ve often felt like I’m sitting in the middle,” she says. And yet she also feels deeply Jamaican, telling me by way of illustration about attending a ceremony to mark the death—and passing into the spirit world—of the renowned dancer, choreographer and scholar Rex Nettleford. With her was a friend who became increasingly alarmed at the trance-like reactions of the crowd, which bordered on the hallucinatory. But Ross, an atheist, an intellectual, a pragmatist, remembers: “I’ve never felt so Jamaican. I knew every piece of drum, I knew every motion.”

For much of our conversation, Ross and I trade the experiences of middle-aged women; and there is an unsurpassable joy at the sight of someone who felt held back from what they wanted to do for so long finally doing it. “How are you feeling,” I ask her, “as the book goes out into the world?” “OK,” she says, taking a breath. “I’m 51, I can say what I want. This: I have spent a long time facilitating the process of other creatives. I spent a long time teaching, a long time being an editor, and a long time listening and supporting other people. My time now. Mine”
Mystery illness syndrome

A healthy child who can’t wake up, dizzy diplomats, twitching schoolgirls ... psychosomatic conditions are not as strange as they seem, writes neurologist Suzanne O’Sullivan

I cannot resist a news headline that refers to a mystery illness and there is no shortage to keep me interested. “Mystery of 18 twitching teenagers in New York”; “Mysterious sleeping sickness spreads in Kazakhstani village”; “200 Colombian girls fall ill with a mysterious illness”; “The Mystery of the Havana Syndrome”. One medical disorder seems to attract this description more than any other: psychosomatic illness. That the body is the mouthpiece of the mind is evident in our posture, in the smiles on our faces, in the tremor of our nervous hands. But, still, when the body speaks too explicitly, when the power of the mind leads to physical disability, it can be hard to understand why. This perplexity is most apparent when psychosomatic disorders affect groups, spreading from person to person like a social virus, in a phenomenon often referred to as mass hysteria.

We are currently caught in a pandemic. We have been ordered to hide and to search our bodies for symptoms. If there was ever a time for a psychosomatic disorder to spread through anxiety and suggestion, this is it. The threat of a virus can affect health in more ways than one. Since 2018 I have been visiting communities affected by suspected contagions of psychosomatic illness. I have seen what fear can do to our physical health. I have also seen the curative effect of hope.

My journey started with a 10-year-old girl called Nola. She was lying in bed when we met, her eyes closed and her thick black hair spread out on her pillow like a halo. She looked very much as if she was asleep, except that she was unrousable. When her father tried to sit her up she was limp like a rag doll. In fact, Nola had not moved, she had not even opened her eyes, for 18 months. She was being kept alive by her parents who fed her a liquid diet through a tube. They kept her joints mobile with passive exercises and massaged her skin to keep her in physical contact with the world.

Belying Nola’s deeply unresponsive state, scans and tests suggested her brain was awake.

Nola is one of hundreds of children who have fallen into a prolonged coma due to a newly coined medical condition called resignation syndrome. This is a disorder that causes an impenetrable comatose state, but where there is no disease to explain it. Medical test results are always normal. It appears in specific geographical locations: until very recently, people with this syndrome came exclusively from families seeking asylum in Sweden.

When I visited Nola I was hoping to get some insight into what was prolonging her coma, but I left her bedside feeling frustrated about the opaque way in which resignation syndrome was being discussed. The doctor who facilitated my visit was desperate for me to propose a brain mechanism to explain why children like Nola can’t wake up. Swedish scientists had invested considerable time in scans and blood tests to find an answer. The media, meanwhile, marvelled at the seeming impossibility of this “mystery illness”.

Half a mind
MRI scan of a brain

The Guardian Saturday 10 April 2021
Resignation syndrome is certainly a highly unusual disorder – comas that are as deep and long-lasting as Nola’s, where testing implies the brain is healthy, are very rare. But does this illness really deserve all the headlines? After all, we know what causes it – and how to treat it. In the face of being deported from Sweden, children such as Nola withdrew from society, becoming increasingly apathetic, until they cease to interact with the world. The cure for resignation syndrome is to offer the child asylum.

It seemed to me that resignation syndrome was a social disorder masquerading as a medical one. When the children display their need through physical symptoms, and others conceptualise it through neurotransmitters and brain connections, their suffering is given some substance. Physical disability attracts more help than psychological or social distress; resignation syndrome is a language of distress. It made me wonder about all the other mystery illness outbreaks and what they might be trying to say.

When, in 2011, a group of American schoolgirls began twitching uncontrollably, their neurologists diagnosed them with a psychosomatic disorder, but a celebrity-driven media frenzy cast doubt over that diagnosis and sent their community on a fruitless hunt for an environmental toxin. In 2016 two dozen American diplomats in Cuba were struck down by a constellation of neurological symptoms, including headaches, dizziness and unsteadiness. A diagnosis of mass hysteria was widely mooted but, likening psychosomatic illness to malingering, the diplomats’ doctors insisted their patients were not “pretending” to be ill. Despite the lack of evidence for it, the doctors attributed the outbreak to an attack by a sonic weapon.

“Mass hysteria” is an ambiguous term. It is used to describe any number of behaviours: excitement; rioting; stampedes; panic buying; mass shootings. As a medical disorder, under the name mass psychogenic illness (MPI), it refers to contagious symptoms that spread through a close-knit group of people, propagated by fear and anxiety.

The medical condition hysteria had many incarnations. The name comes from the Greek word for womb. It was once thought to be found only in women, linked to childbirth and sexuality. In Freudian theory, hysteria became a psychological disorder caused by repressed trauma converted into physical symptoms. More recently, it has been presented as a biological problem, arising through the interplay between psychological mechanisms and physiological brain processes. With this latest formulation, people are starting to accept the reality of psychosomatic suffering. However, many are still uncomfortable about talking openly about it.

The group phenomenon of mass hysteria is one of the most misrepresented disorders in medicine. It is inextricably linked to clichés, ogled at by the media and caricatured by art. All too often it is presented as a disorder found in emotionally overwrought girls. Books and films reduce it to a product of female sexual frustration. Allusions to witch-hunts, and references to Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, are never very far away. News reports liken modern outbreaks to centuries-old laughing and dancing epidemics. One newspaper headline referred to the twitching US schoolgirls as “The Witches of Le Roy”. I know of no other medical disorder that still carries the burden of 17th-century beliefs.

Many doctors still mistake hysteria for malingering, just as the diplomats’ doctors did. They assume that it is a condition of the fragile and the female, and as such reject the diagnosis for men. Many still use Freudian theories, often linked to sexual abuse, to explain it. Is it any wonder that groups affected by this disorder will go to great lengths to distance themselves from it?

By presenting MPI as faked illness, the doctors left the diplomats no choice but to look elsewhere for answers. The history of the US embassy in Cuba was fraught enough to make an attack believable. Politicians told embassy staff they were in danger and advised them to hide. In New York, where doctors made a diagnosis of a psychosomatic illness, the media took that to mean the girls were troubled and began picking over their social problems. As honours students and cheerleaders, the teenagers simply did not experience their lives as bleak. If mass hysteria was caused by unhappiness and stress, then the diagnosis couldn’t be right.

Once the psychosomatic explanation had been belittled and dismissed, both these communities were pushed into endless cycles of medical testing that led to repeated dead ends. The schoolgirls recovered, while five years on in Cuba, some are still looking for a sonic weapon. It makes you wonder what suffering could have been prevented had the tropes associated with mass hysteria been cast aside.

Mass psychogenic illness is also called mass sociogenic illness. It seems a more fitting name because it suggests it is a social disorder, more than a psychological or biological one. Sometimes doctors can be afraid to look too closely at their patients’ social worlds for fear that they will be accused of blaming the person, their family or their community for the illness. So, they avoid the frank conversation. Which is how resignation syndrome ceased to be the product of a worldwide immigration crisis and became a “mystery”.

It is two years since I met Nola and I’m happy to report that she’s awake now. Her feeding tube has been removed. She can eat and even goes to school sometimes. But she can’t talk yet, so there’s progress to be made. Her family has been granted permission to stay in Sweden. Her cure did not come from medical doctors or psychologists, it came by offering her hope of a safe future.

The Sleeping Beauties: And Other Stories of Mystery Illness by Suzanne O’Sullivan is published by Picador.
How I wrote

‘I wanted someone to tell Kingsley Amis about me’
Wendy Cope

Kingsley Amis described writing poems as “a limited risk enterprise”. He thought, perhaps unfairly, that this was why Philip Larkin, after producing a couple of novels early in his career, stuck to poetry thereafter. You can waste a day or two producing a hopeless poem. A hopeless novel takes months or years of your life.

The Amis quotation has stayed with me because I only write short things: bits of journalism and poems. My books are accumulations.

When people ask how I began writing, I sometimes say that it was because I was too tired in the evenings to do anything except read and write. That’s not entirely serious or the whole truth. The stimulus of doing creative work with children had something to do with it, as did being in psychoanalysis, and living alone for the first time. Those are the reasons I became obsessed with poetry in the early 70s. I was in my late 20s.

For some years I was producing stuff that would never make its way into a book. The earliest poem that would end up in my first collection was a villanelle called “Lonely Hearts”, inspired by the lonely hearts column in Time Out. The second was another villanelle, “Reading Scheme”, a poem that arose directly from my work as a primary school teacher. Around 1983 I went part-time, so as to have more freedom to write.

A few of the poems in Making Cocoa were commissioned for BBC radio programmes, one or two were entries for competitions, and there are six or seven about my mostly unhappy love life. The book also includes the work of the invented poet Jason Strugnell.

His poems are poor imitations of a number of his contemporaries, including Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Craig Raine. He also wrote some Shakespearian sonnets bemoaning his fate as an unpublished bard.

And then there’s the title poem, the result of seeing Amis at a reception and wishing that someone would introduce us. He had written an article asking: “Why are there no young poets today who can use rhyme and metre?” “Why?” I thought, “doesn’t somebody tell him about me?” Hence “Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis”, a poem about a dream.

When the book was published in 1986, I saw to my surprise that the miscellany did have a theme. The Strugnell parodies of male poets, the love poems about an affair with an older man, and one poem about my late father. Without realising it, I had written a book that was largely about father figures.

Tom Gauld

THE BOOKSHOP CAT AND THE PANDEMIC

THE CAREFREE DAYS BEFORE.

THE TERRIFYING EARLY WEEKS.

THE LONG MONTHS OF LOCKDOWN.

THE TRIUMPHANT REOPENING!

Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis
by Wendy Cope

It was a dream I had last week
And some kind of record seemed vital.
I knew it wouldn’t be much of a poem
But I love the title.
Brighten up your bookshelves

From Murakami's mind-bending new story collection to a landmark book on 200 years of the Guardian, explore our pick of April's new releases and save up to 15% on RRP.

**MURAKAMI**
*First Person Singular*
£14.44 RRP £16.99

**Capitalism’s Conscience**
200 Years of the Guardian
Edited by Des Freedman
With essays by Gary Young, Victoria Brittain, Ghada Karmi, Hannah Hamad, Tom Mills, Natalie Fenton, Mike Berry, Matt Kenward, Mark Curtis, Justin Schlosberg and others
£14.78 RRP £16.99

**Everybody**
A Book About Freedom
Olivia Laing
£17.40 RRP £20

**Hilary Mantel**
The Mirror & the Light
£8.49 RRP £9.99

**Serhii Plokhy**
Nuclear Folly
A New History of the Cuban Missile Crisis
£21.25 RRP £25

**Shuggie Bain**
Douglas Stuart
£7.82 RRP £8.99

Support the Guardian with every book you buy
Visit guardianbookshop.com or call 020 3176 3837

*Get free UK P&P on book orders over £20. Promotional prices valid for a limited time*
David Salisbury

- AWARD WINNING ORANGERIES & GARDEN ROOMS -

ORANGERIES | GARDEN ROOMS | CONSERVATORIES | OAK BUILDINGS

Call for our inspirational brochure or book an expert design consultation

01278 764444
davidsalisbury.com