Craig Raine The comedy of Anna Karenina | Michael LaPointe Rachel Kushner goes biking
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Wonderful town
Mary Norris on Craig Taylor’s New Yorkers and other tales of the city
In this issue

Persuaded by the satirist P. J. O’Rourke that there was more to life than a London where the coffee and the beer were both bad (and radiation was freezing) and there was no ice (apart from the radiator), I made a Manhattan transfer many years ago. In the era of Jay McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City, the Margaritas were crushed ice, tinted blue with Curacao, and the living in Soho and the East Village was cheap, easy and exotic (there was the joint where they kept a python behind the bar).

Today the super-rich occupy my old haunts and the grime has gone from the downtown, making it safer but also a duller one. Fran Lebowitz, the local satirist whose politics bear no resemblance to O’Rourke’s, complains that the difference between her old New York and the new is that in earlier days “you didn’t have to think about money every second”. Cultural life thrives on affordable housing.

London, take note.

Still, it is good to hear that reports that the city has become a Covid ghost town are exaggerated. In her TLS cover review of Craig Taylor’s oral history, New Yorkers, Mary Norris writes that “the city is hopping, punching, reeling, dancing, thrumming, honking and thriving”. Many good things haven’t changed. The city is “beautifully beautiful” and the local economic philosophy, exemplified by the pizza parlour business, is as vigorous as ever: “get in, get out, fast on the go”. Please don’t gawk, though. Lebowitz, the star of Martin Scorsese’s Pretend It’s a City Netflix series, also reviewed by Norris, particularly dislikes rubbersneakers: “Pretend it’s a city where there are other people not sightseeing”. One young man attracts her ire for “texting and eating pizza while riding a bicycle (and steering with his elbows!)”. Shouldn’t they pack him off to the circus?

Craig Raine finds serious humour in Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina: “Think of Anna, bleeding to death, after giving birth, suddenly noticing the wallpaper and its badly drawn violins”. According to Raine’s close reading in this week’s paper, Tolstoy’s genius is to make Anna’s suicide a chronicle of a death foretold, thereby avoiding melodrama. Every last detail, from his heroine’s facial tic of screwing up her eyes (suggesting she cannot see the way ahead) to her morphine addiction, prefigures her end.

Rachel Kushner barely survived her close encounter with death on a motorcycle blazing down the highway at 130mph. She tells of a life lived with attitude in her collection of essays, The Hard Crowd. No regrets. The bike, like her writing career, gave her the freedom to steer where she likes.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

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Living Anna’s last hours
How Tolstoy prepares the way for his heroine’s suicide

Craig Raine

Anna Karenina by
Henrich Matveevich
Manzher, c.1900

Anna Karenina is a great novel and
Tolstoy is a great writer. How is he a great
writer? The greatness of his art is, I would
suggest, related to comedy - an alert sensitivity,
an acute awareness of the ironies that confront us, time
and again, in life. Experience is impure. Think of
Anna, pleading to death, after giving birth, suddenly
noticing the wallpaper and its badly drawn violets.
There is always a gap between what ought to be the
case and what actually happens. There is a fissure.
A crack. Which Tolstoy refuses to ignore - where
irony gets in, the serious joke we acknowledge
ruedfully, with a wry smile.

For example, the death of Levin’s brother, Nikolai,
in a drizzly, dirty provincial hotel. Levin wants to
witness the death alone. But his new wife, Kitty,
insists on accompanying him. The first complication.
Nikolai has a companion who has been a prostitute.
She isn’t respectable. It is awkward, a serious social
difficulty and the first indication that this death will
be tinged with potential comedy. Kitty cleans up
Nikolai’s sodden surroundings and persuades him
to agree to the last rites. Levin cannot repress the
knowledge that his brother is not a believer, that his
acquiescence is rooted in fear of death, a last minute
reach for insurance. (Later in the novel, he, Levin,
prays to a God he doesn’t believe in when Kitty is
in childbirth.) In fact, Nikolai goes along with the
charade to oblige Kitty. It is a piece of politesse, an
instance of tactful social hypocrisy.

And then he doesn’t die.

Levin sits at his bedside, his mind wandering,
unable to concentrate completely on Nikolai’s
death. Nikolai persists in hoping. He won’t concede
that he is dying. He is irritable. He demands a better,
Moscow doctor and grumbles when one isn’t
brought. At times, he brightens. Impatience enters
the chamber: “Another three days of torture went
by. The sick man was still in the same condition.
Everyone who saw him now desired his death; and
this is the comedy, the comic exaggeration] the wait-
ers in the hotel, the proprietor, all the other visitors
there, the doctor, Mrya Nikolaevna [the prostitute
companion], Levin, and Kitty*. The perfect, broad,
ironic inversion. From a scenario of sadness to a
callous chorus by the dying man’s bedside.

And when Nikolai actually dies? His hands grow
cold. The priest pronounces him dead. “But
suddenly the clammy moustache of the dying man
moved and from the depth of his chest through the
stillness came his voice, sharp and distinct: ‘Not
quiet ... Soon.’”

And he smiles! As if at a joke. And this, the smile,
is really the moment of death. “A moment later
his face brightened, a smile appeared under the
moustache, and the women who had gathered
round him began zealously to lay out the body”.

After this absurdity, Tolstoy records Levin’s correct,
sombre reflections on death. But the reader cannot
expunge the sensation of being teased. The daring,
unprecedented comic incongruity of this “tragic”
death leaves a pungent residue.

As well as this characteristic instability, this oscil-
lation - think of Karenin arriving at Anna’s bedside,
hoping she will die, only to be overcome by compas-
sion - there is Tolstoy’s quiet skill with authoritative
detail. The night before Nikolai’s Communion and
Extreme Unction, Levin and Kitty retire to bed:
“However, we have hard days before us - let us
go to bed,’ said Kitty with a glance at her tiny
watch”. Tiny. An unnecessary adjective of genius,
a touch that takes us into the actual. The face of a
woman’s watch. Generic and particular. Recogniza-
ble, irresistible.

Tolstoy’s details. They are chosen, of course, but
modest in their authority. In Part Five, Chapter 31,
Anna is handed her baby daughter by the Italian
nurse: “The plump, well-nourished baby, as usual
when she saw her mother, turned her little hands
so fat that they looked as if the wrists had threads
tied tightly round them - palms downward ...”. The
movement of the hands is very well seen and
recorded - and easily missed beside the eclat of the

tight thread of the wrists. (Rosamund Bartlett’s
translation: “As she always did when she saw her
mother, the chubby, well-fed baby twisted her bare
little hands, round with thread, so that their palms
downwards”). This is Kitty and her baby, in Part Eight, Chapter 7, 300 pages later: “she sat softly
rocking herself and tenderly pressing the little plump arm, which looked as if a thread had been
tied round the wrist ...”.

Anna Karenina is a great novel, but it is not a perfect
novel. Even Nabokov, a committed admirer, concedes
the unlikeliness of the mutual declaration of
love between Kitty and Levin - through a word-
guessing game - where the two construct elaborate
sentences from only initial letters. As if love had
conferred clairvoyancy on the couple. “She wrote
these initial letters: T, y, m, f, a, w, h. This meant,
‘that you might forgive and forget what happened’.
The shared, enigmatically ominous dream of Anna
and Vronsky - of a misshapen peasant speaking in
French, “small and dirty with a tangled beard” - is
another strain on the reader’s credulity.

Then there is the matter of Vronsky’s finances. In
Part Three, Chapter 19, just before Anna reveals she
is pregnant by him, Vronsky is ordering his finances,
“doing the washing”. Tolstoy goes into great
detail, telling us brilliantly, unnecessarily, that his handwrit-
ing is “small”. He owes 17,000 rubles, but has only
1,800 rubles. Some are debts of honour that have
to be paid. Other debts - to tradesmen, tailors, hotels -
can be deferred. He needs 6,000 rubles therefore
in ready money and he is generally thought to have
an annual income of 100,000 rubles. However, he
has given up to his married brother - to cover the
brother’s debts - the bulk of this income, reserving
only 25,000 rubles a year to himself. His mother
allowed him an additional 20,000 rubles. But she
has cancelled this allowance because she disappro-
vanced of his liaison with Anna. He finds “it was
impossible to go back” on the arrangement he has
with his brother. Accordingly, Vronsky borrows
10,000 rubles from a money lender. The impression is
that Vronsky is strapped for money.

However, 200 pages later, in Italy with Anna, he
compares himself to Maceenas. In the interval, he
has been promoted to Colonel, and left his regi-
ment. Subsequently, he takes a post in Tashkent and
resigns his commission. In Italy, his money
problems inexplicably vanish: “And it is true that
this Mikhailov [who paints Anna’s portrait] is so
powerful a friend of Vronsky, thinking that he is, as a Rus-
sian Maceenas, ought to help this artist regardless
of whether his picture was good or bad.” Fifteen
pages later, Tolstoy tells us that Vronsky plans to
spend the rest of his life in his own villa, but not
that this means reclaiming the 75,000 rubles originally
made over to the couple. When Anna and Vronsky
return to Russia, Vronsky improves his estate, care-
fully but without financial constraint. Levin’s pitiful-
ly decrepit cafe can be contrasted with the luxuri-
ously appointed properties on Vronsky’s estate.

Tolstoy and love. Nabokov praises Tolstoy for
bringing the business of childbirth into the novel
as a great expansion of subject matter. He is impress-
ively unflinching in the way he records how Levin
forgets that Kitty is in labour and even, momentarily,
wishes she would die just to have a respite from his
proxy suffering. These are daring aberrations to
record. They risk losing the reader’s sympathy for
Levin. But by now we are familiar with Tolstoy’s extension of the franchise to the inadmissible,
the disreputable, the true. And the tellingly trivial:
think of Kitty begging her mother between contractions
to remove her earrings because they are in the way.

In sensual lovemaking Tolstoy. He can’t be as
frank as he wishes. Sometimes this means he is
forced to summarize - on occasion, to brilliant
laconic effect. Here is the honeymoon of Levin and
Kitty in a single suggestive sentence: “...the most
optimum moment. A fervent and moving time of their
 uprising. That’s it. Perfect and poisoned, but evidently
not irreparable. Here the restrictions on candalow
work in Tolstoy’s favour. They serve him.

Milan Kundera’s Encounter (2000), includes this
Craig Raine is Emeritus Fellow in English at
New College, Oxford. His most recent book
is My Grandmother’s Glass Eye: A look at
poetry, 2016.
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BORIS FISHMAN

GEORGE SAUNDERS
In which four Russians give a master class on reading, writing and life
GEORGE SAUNDERS

George Saunders is the Tom Hanks of letters - profoundly gifted and profoundly humane, so much so that we forget to miss the darkness and danger that can substitute for distinction in the art of others. In his 2005 commencement address at Syracuse University, where he teaches, Saunders exhorted students to "err in the direction of kindness". In The Brain-Dead Mega- PHONE (2012) - his previous and, until now, only book of nonfiction - he was generous enough to find the authenticity in Dubai's steroidal glam.

It seems only way to do it, the only way in fact to be: swimming, swimming, the eye held by the sun, no sharks in the mind, nothing in the mind.

The translation of Anna Karenina used in this piece is by Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude, published by Everyman's Library, 1922.

Based on one of Saunders's classes, A SWIM IN A POND IN THE RAIN is a close, marvellous, grateful and profound account of seven short stories included in the book, by Russian masters of the nineteenth century: Anton Chekhov, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy and Nikolai Gogol. (Chekhov and Tolstoy get all the sort-of-much-praise.) Many books that try to teach us how to write commit the first sin of bad writing: their guidance is abstract. There are even more books that try to teach us how to read. None I know do both with Saunders's microscopic attention to the myriad impressions and calculations that occur within us when we compose or absorb even a single word on the page. To quote just one of his observations:

"When a writer subjects us to a non-normative event - a physical implausibility, the use of markedly elevated language (or markedly vernacular language) - he pays a price: our reading energy drops. (We get suspicious and resist.) But if it doesn't drop fatally, and if, later, we see that this was all part of the plan ... then all is forgiven and we might even understand the profitable exploitation of that apparent excess as a form of virtuosity. Such an insight is so obviously valuable for all but the most practised writers and readers that you have to wonder whether Saunders's granular approach has few, if any, predecessors.

The Russian stories compel Saunders because their authors "regard fiction not as something decorative but as a vital moral-ethical tool" that asks questions such as "What is truth, anyway?" The stories offer an antidote to the "degraded era" we live in, "bombarded by facile, shallow, agenda-led, two rapid-fire, 140-character denunciations."

Sometimes, they do so by daring to propose answers to their own impossible questions, as in Tolstoy's magisterial "Master and Man", which ends by locating doubt in the discovery of faith. Imagine the eye-roll that would elicit today. As David Foster Wallace observed about Fyodor Dostoevsky's moralism: "The novelist [who tried this] would be (and this is only my own vision) praised at the expense of his art."

Saunders is the gentilest and most gracious of guides, forever reminding us that these are only his views. But sometimes he does let a little force come through, as during his discussion of a hypothetical story in which a second has been taken morphine. "What am I to do? I could not sleep ..." Discussing her predicament with Dolly, she says, "When I think of it I cannot fall asleep without morphia ...

Eventually, the morphia is less effective than the first person's hatred of his job! Otherwise, what's he doing here? Get rid of him and find someone else who will alter, complicate, or deepen things. It's a story, after all, not a web cam..." Elsewhere, Saunders defends the besiegled notion in fiction that a section, or "structural unit", of a story should "be shaped like a miniaturist version of a story: rising action, building to a climax.

Such notions will drive devotees of autofiction - who regard rising action as artifice - crazy (as if autofiction is not full of its own curation, as if artifice ever prohibited truth). In the end, perhaps nineteenth-century Russian literature endures because it declines not only autofiction's concern with form over content, but also realism's scruple against conflict and resolution. As Chekhov said, in Saunders's rendering, "Art doesn't have to solve problems, it only has to formulate them correctly", and a glimpse of Turgenev's 'The Singers', included here, is a reminder that Russian stories from 1850 to 1900 annually a celebration of plot. Instead, they feel like contemporary fiction's Ancient House, as Yeovyn Tymain wrote it in his dystopian novel HE (1950): the secret place where we can still read things the way we used to. Their authors observe their characters with amusement, tenderness, mercy, charm and, often, a lack of self-consciousness that feels like an endangered resource in today's literature.
Said, Orientalism and facts
In the course of his review of Timo-
thy Brennan’s Pieces of Mind: A Life of Edward Said, Robert Irwin rightly points out that “we all make factual mistakes” (March 12). Here are two of his. He states: “Renan never travelled in the East, his main expertise was in Hebrew studies”. In reality Ernest Renan undertook a long archaeological and epigraphic expedition in the Near East (Tartus, Beirut, Tyre, Jerusalem) between October 1860 and October 1861; see his book Mission de Phénicie, Paris, 1864-1874. As for his expertise, it covered several Semitic languages, but also Greek and Latin. The Corpus des inscriptions sémitiques, which is still being published, was created on his initiative. He remains one of the founders of Phoenician studies. In addition, and unlike Breman, I would certainly not define Renan as a “popularizer”.

Francois Wilson
London NWS

Stevie Smith on stage
James Lever’s Dead Poets Live production (Stevie Smith: Black March (Arts, March 26), about “the man” hereinto the adaptations of Smith’s work for stage and radio: “I have always struggled with this inevitable extra man”. The man in this instance is James Lever, writer and director, who shares the stage with Juliet Stevenson’s excellent Stevie Smith. Masaud feels, for some reason, “awkward” for Lever, “embarrassed for him and his failure to recog-

that he is not new and that too-present present in piece of Masaud herself. Having begun her review with the sentence “A year into my doctorate...”, Masaud waits until the fourth paragraph before mentioning the production she has commissioned to discuss. By the time she draws to her close, six paragraphs later, the reader still has nothing about the main course of Dead Poets Live, or the challenges, aims and ambitions of this particular event. The role of the reviewer of a performance is surely to understand and explain what the writer, director and actors hoped to achieve, rather than expand on her own prejudices and achievements.

Jo Kittenhead
Lasborough, Gloucestershire

Sir Richard Burton
Richard van Leeuwen’s bicen-
tenary tribute to Sir Richard Burton (March 19) limits itself to his influ-
ence as translator of the Thousand and One Nights, but this protein man’s achievements could easily deserve several other articles of similar length.

I value him in particular as one of the greatest guisers of whom we have knowledge. In India in the 1840s, he for a long time passed as Mirza Abdullah, a vendor of linen, calicoes and muslins. “Now and then he rented a shop, and furnished it with clammy dates, viscous molasses, tobacco, ginger, rancid oil, and strong-smelling sweet-

Arabian stories, has an enthralling and informative read. The next year he travelled in disguise in East Africa, and was the first European to set foot in Harar (Arthur Rimbaud would follow a few decades later). His guises were so complete that close friends and colleagues would encounter him without realizing who he was.

Fluent in twenty-nine languages and at home in as many cultures, an expert swordsman whose manu-

Lake City. His final incarnation, in that four-ten tomb at Mortlake (designed by his wife Isabel), with its crucifixes and splendid pictures, may be just another successful guise.

Graham Chaine
Brighton

Andrew Marvell
It is interesting to read David Whitaker’s comments about Andrew Marvell (March 26) that “for many modern readers, though, the knotty question of Marvell’s political loyalties may be a moot point: it is as a metapsychologi-

currents in defence of civil and religious liberty were much better known to the Victorians than his poetry.” Vita Sackville-West wrote in her essay on Marvell that, following his time in Lord Fairfax’s household as tutor to Fairfax’s child, Marvell, “a flood of political satire poured from his pen, together with panegyrics to Cromwell, songs written in honour of the Duke of York and for Marvell’s marriage and finally a poem on the death of the Lord Protector”. It may be (it is not entirely clear) that Marvell’s political lyrics were not known to us as we were not written while in service to Fairfax, but came later, after his departure from Fair-

Malcolm Doan
St Antony’s College, Oxford

Greek Independence
Mack Mazower gives a bit carried away when he confers to the Greek war of independence as “perhaps the earliest triumph of nationalism - famously defined by Lord Acton as the idea that ‘nations would not be governed by foreigners’” (March 26). He forgets 1776, the impact of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, Haiti, and the emergence of a dozen or so nations in Latin America after 1810. Do these examples somehow not count? If so, why is that? José María Echávarri, a New Granadan (Colombian) general visiting Athens in 1839, was warmly enter-

Robert Peden
Truro, Cornwall

Soul-Sourcing
Christopher Eddy (Letters, March 26) says that speaking competence is necessary to function as a soul.

Clayton
Cheltenham

Outbridge Reach
Seeing the names Robert Stone and Graham Greene in the same sen-
tence (J. Michael Lennon on the Library of America edition of Stone, March 12) certainly got my attention. I’ve only read one of Robert Stone’s books, Outbridge Reach (1992). I have always been a boat person, and was at that time the publisher of two international boating magazines: WoodenBoat and Professional BoatBuilder. I was greatly looking forward to reading Stone’s new book.

Outbridge Reach was a disappointment. The book turned out to be the most dishonest and plagiarizing book I have ever read. Lennon says, “Stone admitted that his novel was based in part on Donald Crowhurst’s fraudulent, fatal, one-man circum-

Paul Treadwell
London SE1 9GF

Jan Morris
I am writing a biography of Jan Morris, and would be grateful if anyone who has correspondence from her, or who is willing to share documents, photographs or mem-

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Captain Blindsight
An excoriating account of the UK government’s mishandling of the pandemic

JONATHAN BAK

FAILURES OF STATE
The inside story of Britain’s battle with coronavirus

JONATHAN CALVERT AND GEORGE ARBUCKNOTT

LAST WEEK, ON March 23, the UK marked the one-year anniversary of its first lockdown. Its Covid-19 death rate per 100,000 people stood at 190, the highest among the G7 economies. The next highest rates were Italy (757) and the US (663). The UK has over 126,000 confirmed total Covid-related deaths, far by the highest in Europe (Italy’s toll is around 105,000; Germany’s around 75,000). The UK also experienced the largest economic contraction of any G7 economy last year.

The prime minister will try to squirm free from the grip of these numbers, and he may yet succeed. The Downing Street narrative is that the virus caught the government off guard. Some commentators and the UK led the planet in developing and delivering a “world-beating” vaccine. Buoyed by that triumph, the nation should simply shunt into a new post-Brexit, post-coronavirus era of forgetful British exceptionalism. “Captain Hindsight” (Johnson’s nickname for the leader of the opposition) and his band of goonsters may want to take over the past, but where is the patriotism in that?

An urgent public inquiry into the government’s handling of the pandemic is needed to establish the facts before they dissolve in this froth. In the meantime, Jonathan Calvert and George Arbucknott’s superb book Fishburne Gate, provides the most rigorous case for the prosecution, or, rather, the people. After a grilling opening about the origins of the virus, which gives credence to the theory that it may have been cultered accidentally by Chinese virologists, the authors — both journalists at the Sunday Times — set out, week by week, how, where and when the UK government was urged to act earlier or differently but did not. Many of the biggest calls it made were simple and obvious wrong. But, despite Johnson’s belated admission last week that “in retrospect, there are probably many things that we wish we had done differently”, no one has mentioned or the government admitted to any specific mistakes.

Indeed, the home secretary Priti Patel declared on the Today programme on December 22, 2020 that it “has consistently throughout the year been ahead of the curve in terms of proactive measures with regard to coronavirus”.

Here, then, is some of the voluminous evidence to the contrary. Between January 20 and March 27, in a single month, approximately 190,000 people flew into the UK from Wuhan and other high-risk Chinese cities, about 1,900 of whom would have been infected with the coronavirus. The government’s first emergency Cobra meeting took place on January 24, but no significant action to secure supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) was taken for a further thirty-eight days, with the government even agreeing to ship 270,000 items of PPE from the UK to China in mid-February as part of Johnson’s post-Brexit, trade-focused “charm offensive” towards the Indo-Pacific. This was in spite of the fact that the government’s last rehearsal for a pandemic, Operation Cygnus in 2016, had identified PPE as a crucial gap. In the intervening years, the national PPE stockpile had decayed and dwindled to the point that it did not even contain gowns, visors, swabs, or body bags. As the crisis developed, doctors and nurses repurposed binbags and gaggles, or simply walked into wards unprotected. The health secretary Matt Hancock has argued repeatedly that there was “never” a national shortage of PPE. Even in Downing Street that claim was greeted with derision, as NHS whistleblowers took to the airwaves.

In the critical six weeks after that first Cobra meeting, the government failed to build a test and trace regime that might have contained the virus. This was due both to the fact, unlike Germany, the UK simply lacked the basic capacity and to a short-lived flirtation with the idea of “herd immunity”, which was shared between the government and some of its scientists. In a televised address on May 10, Johnson claimed that in the early days of Covid-19 “we didn’t understand its effects”. The author’s quote Richard Horton, the editor of The Lancet, in response: “The facts (in January) were utterly opaque to the message from Downing Street. There was international scientific consensus that the government had simply chosen to ignore it.” On February 27 the government’s scientific advisory committee, SAGE, had outlined a “reasonable worst case scenario” in which over half a million people would die. The leaked confidential minutes of that meeting record that “modelling suggests that early and/or combined interventions will have a more significant impact”. The committee’s advice was not implemented in full for another four weeks.

Johnson infamously missed the first five Cobra meetings on Covid-19 (due to a holiday, the finalizing of his divorce, and other priorities), and chaired his first on March 2. He went on to form Sub Cobra meetings of daily coronavirus strategy meetings in the Cabinet room, featuring a smaller cast list and less scrutiny. This excluded the established decision-making structure, with its crucial links to the rest of Whitehall and the devolved administrations, for a new apparatus at the height of the crisis that was then jumbled barely three months later. Many of those meetings involved Johnson trying and failing to get his head around the daily data and scientific advice that directly contradicted his libertarian instincts. He told journalists in March that the virus was “overwhelmingly a disease that is moderate in its effects” and that the country would “get through it in good shape”. SAGE took the opposite view.

When the UK finally locked down on March 23, it had a “higher number of infections than any other European country at the time they had taken the same emergency measures” (an estimated 1.5m infections to Italy’s 1.2m and Germany’s 0.7m). Weeks earlier, SAGE had dismissed the government line that “not locking down too early” could be supported from an epidemiological perspective. By the time of that first lockdown, over 15,000 elderly people had been discharged from hospital into care homes in an effort to free up beds for Covid-19 patients, with no mandatory testing. Neil Ferguson, the government’s chief modeller, told a parliamentary select committee on June 10 that “we had introduced lockdown measures a week earlier, we would have reduced the final [first-wave] death toll by at least a half”. In other words, over 26,000 lives could have been saved by quicker action.

This excoriating litany of errors continued throughout last year: there was the premature reopening of the economy in June; the virus-boostered Eat Out to Help Out scheme; the “will-they, won’t-they” delays in lockdown down a second and third time; the botching of Christmas saved above lives lost; the catastrophic management of school openings and closures, culminating in the decision to send children back for a single day in January before locking down again. The consultant anaesthetist Matt Lucas skewed the prime minister’s dithering in an impersonation in which he urged the nation to “go to work, don’t go to work... go inside, don’t go outside... go out and about”. As always with Johnson, disaster hid in plain sight.

The most crucial question for a public inquiry will not be whether the UK’s response to the pandemic was bad, but why it was so bad. Some of the key actors are keen to get their answers in early. Last fortnight the prime minister’s former adviser Dominic Cummings suggested that the Department of Health had been a “smoking gun” in the crisis in terms of PPE and procurement. He was right to blame structures, to a point. Three key culprits emerge from this important book. Firstly, the NAO’s insufficient capacity in the system: from PPE to ventilators to ICU beds, the UK had fallen significantly behind, due primarily to a lack of investment. Secondly, a “myopic” focus on Brexit had distracted the government’s entire risk management apparatus in one direction. Thirdly, a hollowing out of institutions, and internecine squabbling between them, had reduced their capability. The NHS never worked as well as its public would have liked, the health secretary bickered with the operationally independent NHS, and Number 10 could not extract the data it wanted from either, often because that data did not even exist in certain departments.

But in the UK’s highly centralized system of government, the abilities and character of the prime minister dominate any crisis response. It is impossible to read these pages without bemoaning that, in the nation’s worst crisis since 1945, Britons are governed by someone so obviously unsuited to the job. Over the past year, the man who urged the nation to “take back control” refused to take decisions and sought to discharge responsibility wherever possible (“we are following the science”). In his masterly recent portrait of Johnson in the Guardian, Edward Dobson describes the prime minister as a clown whose rise to power was built on persuading the audience to exult in the secret that all human endeavours is no more than a complicated joke. Johnson, on receiving news in his daily meetings, tends to keep his head bowed. He then looks up quickly, his eyes darting around the room, to find someone to join him in a rueful smirk. The NHS needs more very much, after all, its “Operation Last Night” and “Operation Lockdown”. The temperament behind that has guided the country on its bleakly circular trajectory. Escaping from the vicious cycles of lockdown and release will require not just vaccines but a different, steadier approach: perhaps a different leader. The pretenders to the throne — Sunak, Hancock and Gove — wait behind Johnson, cautiously for now. When the inquiry comes, the knives will be sharpened on all sides.
Time for a culture war truce
A plea for a new politics of collaboration and tolerance

CHARLOTTE HENRY

IDENTITY, IGNORANCE, INNOVATION
Why the old politics is useless

MATT WARD-D’ANCONA

AFTER TWELVE MONTHS of coronavirus restrictions in the UK, and with the country’s vaccine rollout providing some light at the end of a very long tunnel, it is only natural that many are, tentatively, peering into the future. What will the post-lockdown world that we eventually step into, our proper clothes ironed and shoes again polished, actually look like?

In his latest book, Matthew D’Ancona confronts an issue that has long been behind the answer to this question. The author identifies three key factors - identity, ignorance and innovation - and aims to open up a debate that he fears has narrowed, with all roads leading to a discussion about immigration. “Opposition to immigration (in all its forms) was the governing theme of the populist Right surge in the second decade of this century”, he writes. This is hardly an original observation, but that does not diminish its accuracy.

D’Ancona explains that politics “has moved house, shifting from institutions, non-governmental organizations and office-based campaigns to digital networks”. Again, this is something of a cliché. Who hasn’t noticed the galvanizing, organizing power of digital networks - from email mailing lists to Facebook pages, and from Twitter accounts to petitions? Indeed, the subjects in D’Ancona’s sights throughout the book are so commonplace that it seems reasonable to wonder what new insights he can bring to bear on them. These include the potential effect of robotics and artificial intelligence on workers and the workplace; the social and policy implications of an ageing population; and whether or not the education system as it stands is fit for purpose.

However, the very obviousness of its focus emerges as one of the key strengths of Identity, Ignorance, Innovation. This is because of D’Ancona’s range. The author neatly synthesizes material from across the political spectrum, drawing on a range of references, and powerfully backs up his arguments with evidence. This includes, for example, reams of statistics that starkly demonstrate the injustices suffered by minority communities and the hurt behind the Black Lives Matter movement. (“Between 1990 and 2017, one-third of all those stopped by the police in England and Wales under ‘stop and search’ procedures were from ethnic minority backgrounds.” The BAME population as a whole, in 2018, stood at 13 per cent.) A similar look at the catastrophic way in which the criminal justice system handles rape allegations gives background - though the events took place after the book was written - to the recent vigil to remember Sarah Everard. (The number of rapes reported in England and Wales rose by 9 per cent year-on-year in 2018-19; meanwhile, the number of convictions fell dramatically from 2,635 in 2017-18 to 1,925 in 2018-19.)

‘D’Ancona is particularly clear-eyed about identity politics. While contending that it “is not really a new debate at all”, what, is he believes, new and important, is “the urgency this discourse has acquired in the first quarter of the 21st Century, the centrality that it has achieved, and the form the ensuing controversy has taken”. Welcoming this development as a means of giving voice to the marginalized, D’Ancona simultaneously shows us where things have gone awry; in the fraught discussions, for example, around ensuring the rights of transgender women while protecting those of biological women and girls; or in the increasing frequency with which racist and other offensive language, often originally uttered years ago, is compared to real-world violence. D’Ancona does not dismiss the current generation of students and young activists as “snowflakes” - far from it. But his fear is that a partisanship on the part of progressives will prevent them from building a winning coalition and, ultimately, stymie the creation of a more equal and tolerant society. “Any alliance between liberals and those who espouse identity politics must be fiercely contemporary. It must see the world as it is, not just as it could be”.

Look, for instance, at the incident at Conde Nast, too recent to be included in this book, which saw the twenty-seven-year-old Alex McCann removed from her role as editor-in-chief at Tatler Vignette before she had even started. Editorial staff at the publication, which has been at the forefront of discussions about identity politics, raised objections after anti-Semitic and homophobic tweets posted a decade before by a then-teenage McCann resurfaced. (She had already apologised and deleted the tweets back in 2019.) The in-house revolt resulted in major advertisers suspending their campaigns. As defensible and offensive as the original tweets were - a fact acknowledged by McCann - one cannot help but wonder whether a young Black woman being forced out of a high-profile role in this way furthers the causes of equality and diversity.

The section on ignorance in D’Ancona’s book is not a criticism of the current generation of students but of the system through which they are forced. This, the author says, remains anchored in the standardizing reforms brought in by Kenneth Baker during his time as education secretary under Margaret Thatcher in the late 1980s, despite some concerns from the then prime minister. “The standardization of schooling has become a rust on initiative, creativity, and risk-taking”, D’Ancona laments. “Starting with a legitimate attempt to bring rigour to the classroom, we have ended up with a structure that rewards rote learning and crushes imagination.” The author correctly identifies the stress under which such a system puts young people and shows how the results they achieve are rendered less meaningful entries in a database than they head into the real world. The kind of critical knowledge and analytical ability that comes from reading widely and for pleasure is a non-existent concept to many of today’s students, he writes. It is to nobody’s benefit and we should “not settle for it.”

Linked to this is the way students have been drummed into them that studying STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) is the key to a successful and successful future. Clearly, learning to write code, having an understanding of maths and at least a basic knowledge of physics, biology and chemistry is not just beneficial for an individual’s employment prospects but a good thing in and of itself. Yet, as D’Ancona passionately contends, this should not come at the expense of an understanding of the arts and humanities. The two can, and must, complement each other.

Identity, Ignorance, Innovation convincingly argues that we can aim higher, and that collaboration, tolerance and education are the keys to navigating the array of challenges and changes we currently face. However, there is a key part of the story that is touched on all too sporadically, if at all. This is the position of older millennials (such as the author) in a world that has already endured the kind of discrimination and injustice highlighted by the identity politics movement, who have been forced through the education system decimated by D’Ancona, and who are already navigating the changing work environment. They graduated into the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. Just as things might have been turning a corner, they were hit by the pandemic. This book rightly highlights how the baby boomer generation “have benefitted hugely from the housing market boom, paid off their mortgages and now literally inhabit, in their homes, the wealth that pure chance has bestowed upon them”. The additional security of the pensions “triple-lock” is also noted. Yet, while D’Ancona constantly seeks to balance polemic with the exploration of practical policy solutions - for instance, the possible implementation of variations on a Universal Basic Income in response to the growth of robots and automation - he offers too little insight into the “very small but significant cohort that has already been directly affected by not one but two ‘once in a generation’ shocks could or should respond.”

This book is no complete policy guide, then, and it does not claim to be. However, D’Ancona’s regular practical suggestions help to take it beyond mere theory and into the real world - which is more than can be said for many of today’s political commentators. Decision-makers would do well to read it.

Charlotte Henry is a journalist and the author of Not Buying It: The facts behind fake news, 2019
Notes from Neverland to Treasure Island

The correspondence of two great Scottish writers

CLAUDE HARMAN

A FRIENDSHIP IN LETTERS

Robert Louis Stevenson and J. M. Barrie

MICHAEL SHAW, EDITOR


When Robert Louis Stevenson settled in Samoa in 1890, the correspondence that he kept up with his childhood friend and fellow writer, J. M. Barrie, continued almost daily for the next decade. In his letters, Stevenson frequently refers to his relationship with Barrie as a “friendship in letters,” and it is clear from his writing that he held a deep affection for his Scottish friend. Stevenson’s letters are filled with references to his life in Samoa, including his work on the island and his efforts to establish a prison farm. He also writes about his love for his wife, Fanny, and his children, including a poem dedicated to his son, Dodger. Barrie’s letters, on the other hand, are filled with references to his own life, including his work on Peter Pan and his developing relationship with Barrie. Barrie was a much younger writer than Stevenson, and he often sought advice and guidance from his more experienced friend. Despite their age difference, the two men maintained a close relationship, and their letters are filled with mutual respect and admiration.

Barrie revealed that he had not only treasured Stevenson’s earlier letter, but had fostered a “friendship in letters” with the Scottish writer.

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Samuel names. “I never write to you nowadays without feeling that you are the only family in the world, outside my own relations, with whom I have a close tie,” he said longingly. It seems to fore-shadow the way he insinuated himself into the Llewelyn Davies family (his gang of ‘Lost Boys’): a decade later. Barrie speculated whether he and Stevenson might actually be blood relatives, and sent a joke “family tree” to prove that Gartnor from Kidnapped and Dobbie from The Little Minister certainly were. He also indulged a protracted fantasy that a whole new wing of Stevenson’s house existed in a parallel dimension, “not built for you”, which he inhabited (or haunted), and where their conversations were taking place. He seemed to have spent a lot of time visualising the rooms and furnishings of this virtual apartment, and clearly felt he had every right to have constructed it. After Stevenson’s death, Barrie told Austin Strong (Stevenson’s third grandson, who grew up in the house), “I feel I know Vailima about as well as you”. Stevenson was delighted by Barrie’s fantasy versions of Vailima and repeatedly encouraged the idea that he might come out to visit (“We would have some grand crack! Come it, it will broaden your mind and tell me all about it”), but both men must have known nothing was further from actually taking place. At the time of his marriage to Mary Ansell in 1892, Barrie talked of a honeymoon in Samoa (they went to Switzerland instead) and several times in 1893. But there was a readiness to put the South Seas at a moment’s notice. It would take him no time to pack all his belongings, he said, “which consist, when I come to think of it, of my mother’s phonograph”. “You often ask why I don’t travel, and I never tell them the real reason, but there it is.” In fact, Barrie claimed, if it weren’t for his feelings of duty towards his mother and sister, he would be just as happy to visit Samoa, but settle there and have such times with you as I feel I can never have with any other man and reveal to you (on insist on it) the real JMB who has been so far carefully concealed from his intimate friends”.

As always with Barrie’s emotional life, you can be sure something compelling is going on here, for it is unlikely he had any intention of ever releasing “the real JMB”, and the mother to whom he was so devoted had blighted his childhood with her own exclusive love for her dead older son. But the greatest surprise in this book is how often Barrie strikes this professional, which is so passionate, note. One example is the end of the chapter on Stevenson, “To be blunt I have discovered (have suspected for some time) that I love you, and if you had been a woman –”. The ellipsis is eloquent but peculiar, a meeting – in a blank space – of Barrie’s needy and rather bullying temperament and what Andrew Lang called Stevenson’s “power of making other men fall in love with him”.

Did all this strength of feeling make them very close friends? As Michael Shaw says: “Hardly. Stevenson’s closest friend was his old booj companion Charles Baxter, letters to whom, hundreds of them, couldn’t be further in tone than these polished performances to and from Barrie. Stevenson died – suddenly, in 1894, of a brain haemorrhage – before his delight in Barrie’s letters could wear thin, but both men seemed aware that the pleasure of the relationship lay in its artificiality rather than its intimacy. And it was the imaginative element that kept Stevenson’s interest keen, as well as the flattery, the intriguing sense of Barrie as a curious living ghost, “you convene your walls” from the other side of the world.”

We have been talking in the new study, which I may tell you in is the new part of the house and was not built for you... but we often used to come out to the house and sit down with me. This is the hall (observe the piano). Mind the step. A last look round from the grass. Tula is at the hammock. Tamati in the verandah... Farewell, cousin, but I am coming back. ■
Attitude intact
On the road with Rachel Kushner

Michael Lapointe

The Hard Crowd Essays 2000-2020
Rachel Kushner
272pp, Cape, £16.99.

Discussing the images that inspired The Hard Crowd, her novel of 1973, Kushner notes how many depict men with guns and women with their clothes off. What does this say about the decade? "Many are pure," she writes, "but for others, it means people were getting out of the studio." It is no wonder Kushner is attracted to such active artists. The Hard Crowd, a collection of essays written between 2000 and 2020, confirms her as a writer who, at least until recently, has preferred participation over observation.

"Girl on a Motorcycle" establishes her adventurous spirit. With the velocity of a short story, Kushner recalls her participation in the Capo 1000, an illegal, 1,000-mile motorcycle race in Mexico, in 1992. One of only three women racing, she must navigate winding roads and dangerous cracks, "growing hair and bone pin turnst times" at over 100mph. In her early twenties and not yet a published author, she brings to her Ninja 600 motorcycle the care and attention she will later devote to essays like this, as she takes pleasure in the rugged language of the gear: "steel-stainless steel-after-market valve, a resurfaced cylinder head, a high-performance carburetor jet kit." As it turns out, the Capo 1000 will mark the end of her life as a serious rider. As she blazes down the highway at 100mph, the fastest she's ever gone, someone cuts in front of her and Kushner wipes out: "I see the other bike and feel my bike hit its' seat. I hit my bike and turn in the air and hit the ground." Miraculously, she survives with nothing but cuts and a sprained ankle, but her bike is stolen and she loses all her belongings, including her ID. Even as she reduced to zero, she felt strangely happy... my attitude was intact.

Like all the memoir pieces in this book, "Girl on a Motorcycle" - a title she takes from a film of 1968 starring Marianne Faithful and Alain Delon - is really about Kushner's becoming an artist. Although she takes an ironic view of her mechanic boyfriend and the masculine milieu of the motorcycle world, Kushner wonders whether an authentic female perspective can ever really be achieved on a motorcycle. After all, it was her father who got her into riding, and Faithfull's entire career for being on a bike was to visit Delon. But Kushner concludes that, even if a man inspired the journey, a woman on a motorcycle is nevertheless "kinetic and unfettered and alone." The motorcycle becomes a metaphor for language itself, which, despite any male influence, she has the freedom to render where she likes.

What matters is the attitude.

Soon we see Kushner beginning to sense where that attitude might lead. In "Not with the Band" she ranges over her concert-going youth in 1980s and 90s San Francisco. Many of these experiences were scary, she admits. Waiting in line to see the Who at thirteen years old, she smokes a Joint laced with PCP (in another piece, she says she was fourteen, but that's hardly better), while the parking lot outside a Black Sabbath concert reminds her of "The Kaft of the Medusa." This is, of course, precisely what makes concerts so alluring. "the menace they promised". Drawn even closer to that menace, Kusher starts working as a concert hall bartender. In some cases, the job is disdaining Carlos Santana, if you're reading this, you still owe her tip, but it also provides pivotal inspiration. At a DJ Harvey gig, Kushner hears witness to "an artist who wanted to play all night because she was born to do it." She realizes that "to be truly good at something is the very highest joy," and that "to merely witness greatness is a distant cousin, or even not related at all."

She quits her job and commits herself to art.

What kind of writer does Kushner become? In "Popular Mechanics," she praises Namri Balestri, whose novels of working-class Italian life derive almost unabatedly from their source material. Yet Balestri is "never a voyeur, always a participant," and Kushner admires how the intimacy of his novels undoes a form "traditionally predicated on consciousness as distance, distinction, observation, or inner experience." This is not to suggest that Kusher sees herself in opposition to more interior novels, two of the strongest essays here focus on Marguerite Duras and Clarice Lispector. But she writes most affectionately about artists who ask you, in the manner of Denis Johnson, to "listen closely" to people on the margins. That act of close listening is key to Kushner's broader artistic project. Any social revolutionary process, she writes, citing both Marx and Balestri, must be rooted in actual working-class experience. And in her novels, which frequently ask us to attend to voices on the margins, we can see this revolutionary process at work.

The most far-flung essay in The Hard Crowd is "We Are Orphans," which documents Kushner's visit to a Sinhalese refugee camp in Jerusalem, accommodating Palestinian refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and now basically a city within a city, where she is hosted by Baha Nabata, a twenty-nine-year-old community organizer and "informal mayor" of the camp. The place lacks basic services and is known for something called "Shit Lake," but what Kushner most vividly recalls is the "shimmering white" kids dressed in white, the buildings baked white, a vintage Volkswagen Beetle "in gleaming white, meticu-

lously restored".

Kusher demonstrates an anxiety about inhabiting the role of a journalist - a role that asks you to check your urge to participate - which perhaps explains why "We Are Orphans" is the only piece of reportage in the book. Meeting a badly burned girl, Kushner has the irrational desire to give away her earrings: "and then I realized that (the girl's) ears had been burned off in the fire. I felt obscene. I sat and smiled as if my oversize teeth could beam a protective fiction over this poor child." More distressingly, Kusher catches herself bowing protective fictions over her entire subject, underplaying Nabata's fear, as if he is safe in the camp, as well as his call for more police elements that don't fit into the "hero narrative" she'd prefer to write. Like earrings for a girl without ears, her novelistic gifts are an obscenity in the reality of the camp - a reality brutally stamped on the reader by the essay's tragic conclusion.

"We Are Orphans" is one of two essays originally published in The New York Times Magazine. The other, "Is Prison Necessary?", forms a valuable introduction to the subject of prison abolition. Perhaps because both essays conform to the magazine's very particular house style, they are slightly more restrained than other pieces in the collection (though all have appeared in some form or another), and less exciting than Kushner at her most freewheeling. In "Flying Cars" she swerves from a discussion of Matthew Porter's images of airborne muscle cars reading of the is-novels Gone in 60 Seconds to her own automotive fetishes, how a built-in perfume atomizer "spritzes my spirit with something American that I can actually, for a moment, believe in, the spirit." This associative style is in full force in the collection's title essay. "The Hard Crowd" memorializes the vanished people and places of Kushner's youth in an inner-city district. "We live here for this world for her novel The Mars Room (1988), but the essay pulls together the experiences that "stay stubbornly resistant to knowledge or synthesis," and that "can't yet be transformed into fiction. In this loosest, but also most ambitious essay, she follows the links of memory wherever they lead. One paragraph recalls a house party hosted by a kid who would eventually become a Nazi skinhead. "People started vandalizing the place, for kicks. Someone lit the living room curtains on fire" - and then, like a jump cut of the mind, the next paragraph begins: "When I heard the sound of my father's voice, I think of something else: those red-cased Maybelline black eyeliner pencils we warmed over a flame for smoother application." This technique gives the essay a kind of quality, at times luminously beautiful and abruptly horrifying. One heroin-addicted friend gets clean and becomes a famous tattoo artist; a patron at the bar Kushner tends is murdered, his head discovered in a dumpster.

"The Hard Crowd", which closes the book, allows us to see how Kushner has evolved over the twenty-year span of this collection (though the essays appear only semi-chronologically, this seems to have been necessary to pave out the memoir pieces). One can be forgiven for forgetting that she is actually now in her fifties; everything she writes is infused with a youthful cool. But, as she concedes, she is no longer "busy being born"; she has become more "reflective, interior". In a sense, she has come to understand that she doesn't need to get out of the way but learn to "tell the most brightly alive people". They're with her, she always, as "memories that stay fragile, vulnerable to erasure." No doubt Kushner will continue to be an engaged participant - her political commitments will always compell her outward - but this essay suggests that time is gradually opening up interior perspectives. As a greater distance is achieved, more and more becomes available to art. "Perhaps a person can write about things of which she is no longer the person who experienced them", she says, though in this instance that "transition is not yet complete.

There is still much for this writer to pull into her work, both from the world and from herself.

Michael Lapointe has written for the Atlantic and the New Yorker, and he was a columnist with the Paris Review. His debut novel, The Creep, is due to appear this June.
They happen to like New York
Watching, walking and listening in the Big Apple

MARY NORRIS

NEW YORKERS
A city and its people in our time
CRAG TAYLOR

PRETEND IT’S A CITY
Netflix, seven episodes

THE BARBIZON
The New York hotel that set women free
PAULINA BREN
336pp. Two Roads. £20.

Crag Taylor is one smart, hardworking writer. In the introduction to New Yorkers, his compendium of New York stories - a symphonic choir of voices rising from the five boroughs - he invokes E. B. White, whose classic Here Is New York, published in 1949, runs to only fifty-five pages. If White’s book, with its sage advice (“No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be a lonely, a paean, a ring of bells, Taylor’s is a grand fuzzy, in which all the stops pulled out. It is a gift right now, when New York City is coming back from a pandemic winter that has been the ruin of many a favourite restaurant, bar and sandwich shop, and put the lives of anyone in the performing arts on pause indefinitely. Contrary to popular reports, New York is no ghost town. In New Yorkers the city is hopping, punching, reeling, dancing, thrumming, hollering, thriving. New Yorkers is a documentary, an oral history along the lines of Stud’s Terkel’s Working (1974) - and even more along the lines of Taylor’s own earlier volume, Londoners (2011). His method is to interview people - record them, befriend them, revisit them - and then transcribe and, I assume, shape their words. Either that or every subject is a poet. Taylor was all over the city and talked to a range of people that cannot be summed up in the simplistic A-to-Z formula. His book demands a catalogue. There are landlords and tenants and homeless people (including one bent-over Vietnam veteran whom I recognized as the man who camps out at night in front of the European waxing salon around the corner); there are elevator repairmen and window cleaners (“I’m an old-fashioned guy. I stick with the same squegee”); there are bankers, designers, photographers, lawyers, car thieves; there is a nancy, a spiritual healer who “clears” people’s homes, a tutor to children of the rich, a cop, a doctor, an electrician (“tower trained”), a hospice nurse. The opening section, styled The Overture, employs musicians: a blind singer who navigates Manhattan variously with a cane, a guide dog and a highly developed sense of smell (Port Authority, the bus terminal, is “nasty - sex, groin, and hair and underarm”). A dance producer views foot traffic through the lens of a choreographer. Open any page and you will meet someone who has figured out a way to live in New York. One guy tours houses of pizzarias. He explains the economic structure behind the culture of the slice: “get in, get out, fast on the go.”

The city can be cruel (it “will drain you out of your last dollar”), and people are competitive and aggressive (especially the drivers), and did I mention it’s dirty? Yet a native New Yorker who left and came back now describes it as “tearfully beautiful”. That is how it looks to me whenever I leave and come back.

How did Taylor, who spent six years in New York for this project, find all these talismans, forthcoming denizens? He talked to people who told him to talk to other people, surely that is how he found Jerry Rea, the premier used car dealer of Rockaway, Queens, who has a well-paying job (and perquisites) with the Department of Sanitation on the side. Taylor drives around with a personal injury lawyer named Dan Basco, who gives him a thumbnail history of New York: “So here’s the thing. The five boroughs joined in 1898. Manhattan was bustling and thriving, but so was Brooklyn. Brooklyn was just a step behind... The Bronx was so-so... Staten Island was like a penal colony.” To this day, he says, Brooklyn regrets signing on. “We should never have done it. We would have rocked the universe. Queens, on the other hand, has an inferiority complex.”

Taylor’s presence is felt between the lines; he is as skilled a writer of literary nonfiction as I have ever read. It helps that he is Canadian: a book like Mary Norris is the author of Greek to Me: Adventures of a comma queen, 2019, and Between You and Me: Confessions of a comma queen, 2015

Taylor’s presence is felt between the lines; he is as skilled a writer of literary nonfiction as I have ever read. It helps that he is Canadian: a book like...
elbows. “Pretend it’s a city”, she wants to say. “Pretend it’s a city where there are other people who are not here just sightseeing.”

Fran Lebowitz was born in 1950, and came to New York after getting kicked out of high school. Before her early success as a writer, she worked as a cab driver, a chauffeur, a cleaning lady and a street vendor (she sold belts). Among her favourite subjects are the subway system, the art market and real estate; she has had luck with all three. (She could give Craig Taylor an earful.) She has no use for sports or electronic devices. She doesn’t own a mobile phone or a word processor, or even a typewriter — she writes with a ballpoint pen. What she does have is a knack for the aphorism: “I don’t ever want to die in a way that is amusing to other people”, she says. Scorsese laughs immediately.

One of the incidental pleasures of Pretend It’s a City is that you can study Scorsese’s method, his underlying structure. There are several conversational threads in play, some intimate, some overarching, and he leaps forward, drops back, takes his time, catches up, and leaps forward again. When he returns to a scene, you note the details in Lebowitz’s wardrobe: is that fabric a fine pinstripe? A subtle plaid? Look at those cufflinks? (They turn out to have been made by Alexander Calder.) In some of the archival photographs, Lebowitz appears without her glasses, and her sharp face seems softer. I gradually realized that this was probably the effect not of youth or, God forbid, kindness but of myopia. Her snappy voice is offset by her obvious affection for Scorsese, the way she smiles when he laughs at her jokes. He is funny too. At one point, they’re reminiscing about a screening room in Times Square back in the day, and he says, “Wonderful screening room. So dirty.”

O
to the hotel’s name from a nineteenth-century art movement known as the Barbizon School, after the village of Barbizon, outside Paris, which was home to many starving artists. The Barbizon had a wing for artists (though they were probably not starving) and studios for their use.

In the 1930s, the Barbizon was the official residence for students at the Katharine Gibbs School, a sort of boot camp for secretaries, and for aspiring models — “long-stemmed American beauties” — with the Powers or Ford agencies. It was also a safe place for Mademoiselle magazine to put up its guest editors, college girls who had won the coveted opportunity to live and work in New York for a month. The most famous of these was Sylvia Plath. The author strains not to let Plath run away with the book, but she does not succeed. The Barbizon had many other illustrious residents, including writers and performers who became superstars: Joan Didion, Lina Minnelli, Ali MacGraw. In the mythology of the Barbizon, Plath upstages them all — even Grace Kelly, whose father financed drama school and a stay at the Barbizon before she became a movie star and a princess. Plath, then a student at Smith College, spent June 1953 working at Mademoiselle and living at the Barbizon, which she later immortalized as the American setting of her novel The Bell Jar. It begins, “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs”. Eisenhower was President, and Malcolm McCourt, who owned a bar in the neighborhood, observed that the Barbizon seemed stuck in the Eisenhower era. It was a time when women wore hats, hose and heels, suppressing themselves from top to bottom. Plath attempted suicide at the end of that summer, and succeeded in killing herself a decade later.

I took a walk up there, straight up Lexington from my apartment — forty blocks — to 63rd Street. Early in the pandemic, it was a pleasure to walk (masked, of course) in Manhattan: there was so little traffic that you could see the city’s topography, the dips and rises in Park Avenue South from Union Square to Grand Central Terminal, the gentle slope of the cross streets falling to the Hudson or the East River. It was like being a little kid in the Panorama at the Queens Museum. And if you stopped to admire a building, you would not encounter anyone on the sidewalk behind you — there was no one on the sidewalk behind you. I darted right past the hotel, on the southeast corner of Lexington and 63rd, because its ground floor was covered in scaffolding. Only when I had gone another block, crossed the street and recognized my old dentist’s office on 64th did I look back and see this splendid Italianate heap of a rose brick building, twenty-three stories high, with arched balconies and leaded windows and roof decks. It was like seeing a Macunzel would live in.

At 64th and Lex is a coffee shop called Eat Here Now, a survivor from the era when people said things like that. I used to stop there for coffee and a bran muffin after a dentist appointment. Now it has a shed out front with a few tables in the street for pandemic dining. I decided to take a break there, for old times’ sake, although that guy was a horrible dentist, full of enthusiasm, the last thing you want in a dentist. I squeezed into a seat in the corner, where I could just glimpse the scaffolding on the former Barbizon. In the 1980s, Professor Bren tells us, the Barbizon was sold and got a makeover, and started letting in men. Now it has gone the way of most Manhattan real estate: it has been converted into luxury apartments. Ricky Gervais owns an apartment there. I ordered a toasted bran muffin and coffee with cream, and as I contemplated biting into this madeleine, I was blinded by memories of sitting at the counter, my jaw numb with Novocain, and of the friend who first recommended Eat Here Now — she was a painter who, to please her husband, had agreed to attend Katie Gibbs, but was secretly treating it as a conceptual art project.

The Barbizon is history, but Bren concludes that women have made enough progress not to need it any more.
Can we be clear?

NICHOLAS MURRAY

THE FREELANCE WRITER, like the hedgehog in the fable, knows one big thing to the fox’s many; and that is survival. As the new century got under way it was clear to me that book advances (that in retrospect seem fabulous) were starting to shrink, followed by the commissions themselves, and that I could no longer live by my pen alone as a literary biographer. Part-time teaching, up to now artfully dodged, looked like the least worst option and, as if in answer to an unvoiced prayer, the Royal Literary Fund launched its Writing Fellow scheme, which aimed to place writers for one or two days a week in universities around the country. They would not be the traditional “writer in residence”, lending the glamour of their presence to the campus, but people with a practical job of work to do, helping students with their essay writing. To those of us reared on the Northern work ethic this looked gratifyingly like a proper job rather than just a handout; and indeed, with as many as six one-to-one sessions with students, each an hour long, it did feel on full days as though I was earning my money.

I was a Fellow at two Russell Group London Universities in the first decade of the new century and a week before finishing at the second of these I was told of a vacancy upstairs running a monthly seminar in the graduate school called “Fundamentals of Good Writing”. Although I had no teaching qualifications couldn’t I, as the author of several plump literary biographies, speak with authority on that subject? I cheerfully weighed in, prepared my PowerPoint slides, and began my classes with the capital’s academic elite-in-the-making. What I hadn’t anticipated was that my idea of what constituted good writing would not turn out to be universally shared.

I had begun my own writing with no tuition, workshops, creative writing courses, just a pencil and paper and eventually a keyboard in front of me. I had never read a writing manual like William Strunk Jr’s classic: The Elements of Style (1918) and its prodigious offspring. I valued, and had benefited from, the skills of sub-editors, copy-editors, and other practical improvisers of over-enthusiastic prose, but I stubbornly held to the view - and my students would have to listen to repeated reminders of this – that the only way to learn to write well was to read well and copiously. How could one be a composer, I proposed rhetorically, if one had never heard a note of music, a painter never having looked on a canvas? This often received a muted response. Many of my students wanted what they called “tips”: shortcuts, wrinkles, magic solutions. They didn’t want to be told to sit down with the TLS and other literary papers where they would find, I assured them, writing that combined scholarly soundness with elegant, readable prose.

My students as I entered the seminar room (where I would be paid for a three-hour session twice as much as for a single freelance newspaper or magazine article) were pleasant but wary. They were considered enough to put their mobile phones on silent mode but not to switch them off. That would be like ripping the saline drip from the arm of a hospital patient; and besides, those devices were needed to look up redefine words tossed out by their tutor (three-quarters were overseas students) and, I would discover, to challenge my authority.

One morning a group of young women, all friends, established themselves at the back corner of the seminar room with, if it became clear, the intention of, in the nicest possible way, catching me out. One of my favourite moments in the morning’s presentation was my ritual fulmination against cliché. Cliché, I thundered, was a sign not of a lively and fresh intelligence, finding new and vivid ways to express itself in delightful and original language, but the mechanical assembly of prefabricated language-blocks (and thus thought-blocks) like a piece of mass-produced IKEA furniture snapped and bolted together. There was a whop of delight from the platoon in the back corner: they had caught me out, apparently, in a notorious cliché: bad language as flat-pack assembly; I was rescued by a charming student of computer science who chipped in with the smiling observation that for him, as a non-native speaker of English, clichés were a boon. They enabled him to snap sentences together from ready-made elements. I returned a wan smile and pressed my clicker for the next slide.

Always urging clarity and precision – these were my “fundamentals” – I gave the class at one point an exercise in which they broke up into groups to identify the fault in four short passages I had chosen from recently published sources. These were not howlers but fugitive imprecisions, careless formulations, mixtures of metaphors. The exercise always turned out to be more challenging than I thought it would be, and seldom did the rapporteur come back with a full set of answers. This made me think of the occult seer Mellyr of Caerleon in the Journey Through Wales of Gildas Cambrensis, who possessed an ability to see demons in corporeal form. He was also able to identify with forensic precision the infelicity or falsehood in any written passage.

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Mellyr of Caerleon could see demons in corporeal form. He was also able to identify with forensic precision the infelicity or falsehood in any written passage.
Found in translation

Family, immigration and an American Dream, rendered with dignity and detail

YOOJIN GRACE WUERTZ

MINARI
Available on demand on Amazon Prime video, Apple TV, et al.

LEE ISAAC CHUNG's richly textured and powerful new film Minari is an American Dream story, but maybe not the one you're thinking of. Jacob and Monica Yi have lived in California for ten years, making good money (for immigrants) selling chicken. They've made friends, joined a church, had two children whose English is as American as Johnnie's from the farm. Their earnings have lifted their family in Korea from poverty (even if - as Monica tearfully points out - their money followed the channels of patriarchy and largely benefited his family, not hers). By all accounts, this is a successful immigration. Shoulnd't they be grateful? Jacob, played by Steven Yeun, is not grateful.

He does not plan to spend his one wild, precious life peering at chicken penitally. Why should he settle for the soulless grind of the American Dream? when he could have fifty acres of the “best dirt in America”, and a success he can finally be proud of? He moves his family to Arkansas where he plans to grow Korean vegetables. This is the 1980s and the immigrants are coming - 30,000 a year from his homeland - and they will need familiar produce.

And so the family pulls up to a single-wide trailer with no stairs and no anchor in the middle of tornado country. “This isn’t what you promised”, says Monica, played with luminous defiance by Yeri Han. Jacob hasn't told her about the trailer or the farm.

A farm? I thought you wanted a garden, now it’s a farm? The incredulity, the exhaustion, the tell you everything you need to know about the state of their marriage. The scene closes with a coy smile of the family sleeping together on the floor - Jacob supports sitting in a position to support her family. Using the children's words as inspiration, he wrote the memories from his life to see if they might trigger a story.

What Chang remembered is the magic of Minari, the details that centre the scene square in the American experience, giving each scene and character astonishing dignity rarely afforded Asian Americans by the Western gaze. But the touch is light, even mischievous, and you might miss it if you don't know what's being subverted. Paul played by Alan S. Kim and Steven Yeun in Minari

Chung's extraordinary vision insists that a Korean immigrant can and will take the same outrageous, passionate risks as a white Arkansas farmer and demand satisfaction

Yoojin Grace Wuertz is the author of the novel Everything Belongs To Us, 2017. She was born in Seoul and lives in northern New Jersey
Hell is money
A cartoonist with a social conscience

ERIC BULSON
ART YOUNG’S INFERNO
Original Art edition
ART YOUNG

By the 1930s, Hell was in need of an update. Humans were as sinful as they had always been, but after the stock market crash of 1929, all of those crooked bankers, financiers, lobbyists and investors managed to convince Satan that his ancient domain was the perfect place to make a buck. As the newly appointed CEO of Hell Corp, Satan was finally in a position to just kick back while these money-hungry Hellions did what they do best: capitalize. Hell is money, so the old saying goes, and every inch of Satan’s Empire was readily transformed into dollars and cents. And the old sinners who were there already didn’t seem to care. Why would they? Hell was being made and would see the construction of an amusement park selling 10-cent breezes, galleries with 4-D art, and big bands that let you dance the night away for all eternity.

This plot is taken from Art Young’s Inferno, a graphic novel avant la lettre that first appeared in 1934 as a subscription-only edition. The book documents the six-week journey of a cartoonist-pilgrim as he wanders around trying to understand how the hellish times are a-changin’. Though favourably received, Young, who died a decade later, never garnered the kind of appreciation he deserves. Thanks to the efforts of Fantagraphics Books, Young’s masterpiece has now appeared as a lavish, inexpensive “Original Art Edition” (yes, the pun is on Art) with previously unpublished material. It is, in fact, the finale to To Laugh That We May Not Weep: The Life and Art of Art Young (2017), which affirmed his presence in the cartoon pantheon.

Born in Illinois in 1896 and raised in Wisconsin, Young was a gifted cartoonist at an early age, with a lifelong love of Dante. The Inferno, in fact, was the first book to give him a “real thrill,” and at fifteen, he recalls being bowled over by the sight of Gustave Doré’s illustrations projected onto a large screen through lantern slides. Young never finished high school but went on to earn a modest living as a cartoonist, selling his work to commercial magazines in Chicago and New York. Hell Up to Date, which was started as a series of sketches for Life, was published in 1929 and was followed up a decade later with stories about a lanky Puritan bumbler, under the title Through Hell with Hiprah Huin.

In between his second and third trips to Hell, Young underwent a serious political conversion. Raised as a Republican in the Midwest, his politics became more progressive, and he developed a disdain for corrupt governments, greedy industrialists and sycophantic journalists regardless of their party affiliation. Capitalism was a recurring target, its excesses, wastefulness and inequality inspiring thousands of Young’s images. Around 1934, in order to maintain his autonomy, Young even stopped publishing his cartoons in the big, ad-driven magazines, and in 1932 he became the art director for The Masses, the legendary little magazine edited by Max Eastman with Upton Sinclair as a contributor. Young was proud to announce that the magazine “has no dividends to pay, and nobody is trying to make Money out of it.”

It was during his tenure at The Masses that Young sharpened his claws against the hypocrisy. One of his early cartoons, which landed him in court, was directed at the Associated Press after it misrepresented a labour strike in West Virginia, siding with the exploitative employers. Titled “Poisoned at the Source”, a man with an Associated Press banner pours a bottle of “lies” into a reservoir filled with “suppressed facts”, “prejudice”, “slander” and the “hated of labor organisations”. The case was dropped, but only a few years later Young was back in court again, this time for sedition after allegedly violating the Espionage Act of 1917 by printing cartoons discouraging enlistment into the armed forces. Two hung juries later, and he was off the hook. When asked by the prosecution to justify his role as a cartoonist, Young responded: “Why, to make people think – to make them laugh – to express my feelings. It isn’t fair to ask an artist to go into the metaphysics of his art.”

To think, to laugh, to express: if there was ever a purpose for Young’s art, that’s it. In the 1930s, he decided to assemble his Inferno after watching the fallout from the Great Depression. “I had seen so much hell on earth,” Young wrote in his autobiography in 1939, “that I was eager to find out what the ancient theological region was like after the passage of four decades.” It turns out that quite a lot had changed. So much, in fact, that even Satan was caught off-guard. “The money insanity,” a nostalgic Satan explains in a final lament: “The destruction of human beings wholesale by fire and poison. Hypocrisy and lying for profit. Jails and more jails for the poor and those who have the courage to revolt.” When Satan is surprised by sinners, you know things are bad.

There’s nothing particularly gory, graphic, or tragic about Young’s images. But don’t be fooled. They provide a series of scathing snapshots of all kinds of human depravity. Viewers are often invited to chuckle, but there is always a lesson: those faceless pigs eating the crumbs tossed by a devil are there for graft, and that manly crew of young kids in front of a chalk board are being taught about “the ideology of profit”. The ones who fall, we are told, are labelled “common working stiffs, failures, bums, and other terms of derision”.

As an artist, Young is economic: never a line wasted. He has a lightness of touch that he uses to great effect, black and white applied with the precision of an engraver, but also smudged on occasion to create a more ominous atmosphere. One of Young’s greatest achievements lies in the faces of the sinners. Dante might have mastered the art of describing bodies in pain, but just try to recall the physiognomy of Francesca or Count Ugolino. If you are relying on the Inferno written six centuries ago, you’re in trouble. Dante names his sinners but he doesn’t describe them. For Young, on the other hand, the careful description of faces, human, beast and hybrid, was an opportunity to foreground what evil looks like. The “Fugled Individual”, a dwarf with long fingers, is one such figure. With his shaggy eyebrows, heavily lidded eyes, and small horns, he is the guy who wants to privatize the parks, the highways, even the air, but he needs to dismantle the unions first. There are also the money monarchs in constant fear of the “political-reform movements of Hell”. An illustration of one of them is framed by the words “Greed, Satiety, Bogomils”; his left hand is stuffed in a bucket of gold coins, while the right one rests on his chin.

None of the sinners in these pages is ever mentioned by name, but you know them well. Even the “Idiot Giant War” seems strangely familiar: that stupid face, enormous belly, and tiny hat on a bloated body, as it grabs handfuls of humans to stuff in its mouth. “War always has been and always will be” is this region of Hell’s slogan, and there is no end in sight so long as more money is to be made. Dante might have created his Inferno to settle some old scores (who can remember Vanni Fucci or Alessio Armentirini?), but Young shows that there’s no need to personalize the sinners: someone is always waiting in line to perform the same glutinous, lustful, heartless, treacherous deeds. Books that are one of the reasons Young’s art remains so timeless: it reminds us how unexceptional today’s class of sinners really is. With his help, we can keep laughing far into the future. It may be our only hope.
**FICTION**

Flâneur, fibber, spy
When does artistic borrowing cross over to become theft?

**LAMORNA ASH**

**A LONELY MAN**

CHRIS POWER


In "Johnny Kingdom", from Chris Power’s collection of short stories, Mothers (TLS, April 20, 2018), a middle-aged comic finds minor success performing gigs as Johnny Kingdom, a deceased (and fictional) American stand-up comedian, famous for his self-deprecating one-liners (think Rodney Dangerfield or Harry Youngman). The comic, Andy, rejects the term “impostor” or “tribute act” to describe his set, which involves him slathering on orange face paint, applying a large fake mole to his right cheek, and executing, word for word, Kingdom’s bawdy jokes at bachelor parties and retirement homes across the US. Other comics are unsettled by him, unsure “why he was doing someone else’s bits”. Meanwhile, Andy promises himself that “the Kingdom thing” is “giving him time to work on his own material”. In truth, “he’s stuck. Blocked”, seemingly flayed to perform someone else’s job for the rest of his days.

Robert, the protagonist of Power’s debut novel, A Lonely Man, is facing a similar bout of creative impotence. An author whose previous collection of stories garnered some acclaim (also like Power, Robert has a Swedish wife and two young daughters), he now sits before his desk in Berlin in a state of perennial misery, unable to write anything worthwhile and eighteen months behind the deadline his publishers set him for his novel. His response is to immerse himself in the life of someone more interesting, and write about that instead. Both "Johnny Kingdom" and A Lonely Man pose significant ethical questions: when does artistic borrowing cross over to become artistic theft, and what, if anything, do you owe to the person from whom you borrow?

Robert meets Patrick Unsworth at a bookshop in Berlin. Patrick, a well-regarded ghostwriter, is adrift and friendless in the city, so Robert agrees to take him for a drink. During the evening, Patrick discloses to Robert the bizarre sequence of events that has led him to Berlin. A few years ago, he was hired by a Russian oligarch named Sergei Vanyashin to write his autobiography. But the project came to an end when Vanyashin died unexpectantly – a suicide, allegedly, though Patrick believes it was an assassination. Patrick has been on the run ever since, chased from city to city by the same man. Robert is both fascinated by Patrick’s tale and liable of its veracity. He decides to meet Patrick again.

Despite his wife’s misgivings, Robert tells Patrick he is writing about his life. Their friendship becomes increasingly parasitic as the novel progresses, with Robert squeezing Patrick for more information, while secretly recording their conversations. After each encounter with Patrick, Robert rewrites his story, “adjusting emphases, adding inventions and making deletions”. With every change he makes, Robert convinces himself he is closer to assuming ownership of the story. This process of rewriting Patrick’s life is cleverly incorporated into the fabric of the novel. Each time Robert orchestrates another meeting with Patrick, he urges him to share more about the time he spent with Vanyashin. In the midst of the first of these conversations, the close third-person perspective seems to shift from that of Robert to that of Patrick, allowing for a detour into Patrick’s own memory of visiting Vanyashin’s lavish Holland Park mansion. The descriptions in this section are wonderfully exaggerated. Vanyashin’s basement is adorned with red fabric running from “the edge of the room to the ceiling” in imitation of a Roman tent (Vanyashin, we learn, has a particular fondness for Julius Caesar). Only later does the reader discover that this was not Patrick’s memory at all but an elaboration written by Robert himself (which he hopes will form part of his novel). Robert then wonders “if the tent was too much”.

Power holds in a state of suspension two distinct narratives. There is the Medusa-esque, Russian spy plot centred on Patrick, involving shady figures stealing computer hard drives and stalking street corners; and there is a looser, elegant literary narrative, reminiscent of Ben Lerner et al., with Robert slouching from city to city, between England, Germany and Sweden – where he and his wife have a summerhouse – getting drunk in bars and getting out at breaking dawn. This bimodal act is expertly handled; both styles are refreshed and made strange by their contact with the other. In perhaps the strongest section of the book, the Patrick narrative is temporarily shelved. Robert returns to London, where he previously lived, for the funeral viewing of an old friend who has committed suicide itself a theme that hangs heavy over the entire novel. He remembers the last time he saw his friend. They were at a play: “In Robert’s memory, he carried on watching Liam for a long time, until he completely lost sight of him in the crowds. But he was still the memory of Liam, that since he heard that Liam was dead”. Here, with Robert poised to return to Berlin and Patrick, Power unnecessarily resurfaces the theme of false memories, and the narratives we construct for ourselves from the truth.

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**FICTION**

Poison pals
A tale of hunter and hunted, both with uneasy consciences

**LESLEY CHAMBERLAIN**

**UNTRACEABLE**

SERGEI LEBEDOV

Translated by Antonina W. Bouis


One man invents the perfect, untraceable poison. A handful of others are trained to administer it. The result is a new, seemingly foolproof way for Russia to deal with its individual enemies, at home or, as described in this dazzling novel, abroad. The poison in the neck feels like a wisp sting and, as the toxin rapidly enters the bloodstream, there is little time to contemplate about it. Vyin, an enigmatic who was once in the Soviet espionage business, chooses his excursions carefully in his new country, but tradecraft has entered a different dimension when killing can be as discreet as this. It is the work of a mastermind, an artist who works with chemicals.

The roots of the diabolic enterprise in Sergei Lebedev’s Untraceable (translated by Antonina W. Bouis) go back to 1945, when redundant Nazi expertise found a new Soviet home. But Kalitin, a distinguished scientist who over forty years perfected the nearest way to exterminate his country’s enemies, has also now defected, following the USSR’s collapse. In case the West moves to control him about the death of Vyin, Kalitin in turn must be dispatched. And so a third character, Shershnev, enters the scene.

Driving in a hired car through the former Czechoslovakia and East Germany, Shershnev must reach this most wanted man, living somewhere in the remote countryside (the facts are deliberately kept vague), before Western intelligence does. Both hunter and hunted have uneasy consciences, as well as self-justifying stories they tell themselves, and it is the professional-psychological mess in both their heads that puts the pair on course to meet, evade, or kill each other. Each has the poison.

The first half of Untraceable is almost unsayably cold: there is no social interaction, only a brain in an ideologu setting somewhere beyond the Urals, and a soldier who once tortured a man to death while fighting the war in Chechyna, and has now been recruited to the security service. The reader may long, at this point, for the relative comforts of John le Carré, for whom the issue was always treachery in a tangled weave of loyalties – something very human, as opposed to the evil contained here in a test tube. In the second half, we are given just enough human interaction to warm things up.

A perfect poison, administered without accountability, is an apt metaphor for the once and future Soviet. Kalitin’s laboratory is situated in a closed city, where experiments are done on horses, monkeys and finally human “dummies”, with the inevitable death of malign substances: nature itself becomes toxic. For all that Lebedev’s novel is given an exclusively twentieth-century context, we might recall Pushkin’s poem “Ancher” (1832), about the upas tree with its lethal sap: “And in that poison brew the Tsar / Dipped arrows under his command”. Khrushchev is a kind of Faustian figure, imagining that the capacity to destroy can be made aesthetically perfect. His poison ripples across nature’s own inherited offerings. The poetry he makes out of his situation is like one long hallucination, and he only wakes up when human disaster strikes close to home.

Shershnev likewise almost wakes up to the kind of man he is when he plays a game of paintball in a former Young Pioneer camp with his son and is unable to suppress his killer instinct. There is no redemption for either, something we understand from the role a dissident Czech priest plays in their story. Someone, somewhere, has to uphold a standard of decency.

The topics of this fierce novel risks overshadowing its deliberately and literary historical qualities. To my mind it invites comparisons with both sea: Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon and the terrifyingly aestheticized war diaries of Erich Janos. **—**
What the butler saw
A comedy of a prissy retainer, superfan, aesthete and creep

MOLLY GUINNESS
KITCHENLY 434
ALAN WARNER
347pp. White Rabbit. £18.99

I t IS A Mazing Who Alan Warner can have you rooting for. His latest hero is Crofton Clark, a man who really ought not to be left in charge of anything. Crofton occupies “the annoyingly vague position of The Help at Kitchenly Mill Race”, an architectural oddity on the Sussix Downs owned by a largely absent rock star called Marko Morrell. It is the late 1970s and Marko’s band – the perfectly named Fear Taker – have made millions from new wave and punk are now taking over. An oddball butler, his duties ill-defined, Crofton has a knack for concocting all sorts of jobs for himself. There is a great deal of discussion about the opening and closing of curtains: “does one draw [them] on such a habituation night? Or do you leave the cool back glass exposed to the blink eye of night?” He spends much time checking on gates; unbidden, he constructs a traffic barrier in an indoor corridor to keep two house guests apart. Early on, it looks as though Crofton might largely be a stately home bore, and he is a bit: “Within those perimeter walls, I knew the tristeess of every weeping willow along those crawling waters’ edges”. His pompous tour guide persona can certainly drag a little, but the acid seeps through pretty quickly. As he carefully positions an extensive cable for the gardeners to trip over, he remarks: “I was always unable to look at our gardener without thinking about tied cottages and bestiality”.

Warner is an indulgent chronicler of our weaknesses and foibles, and he specializes in taking on ambitious voices. Kitchenly 434 is his ninth novel. In The Sopranos (1998) and its sequel The Stars in the Bright Sky (2010), his protagonists are a gang of hard-drinking convent girls on the rampage. The Worms Can Carry Me To Heaven (2006) is told from the point of view of a man speaking in Spanish whose narrative has later been translated into English. His latest venture is similarly quirky, ambitious – and well-realised.

Crofton Clark is many things – a prissy retainer, a roaddie and superfan, a lover of the natural beauty. He is also really quite creepy. When he starts reminiscing about his London days, his language gets a bit more rock ’n’ roll: “Nice looking garg, nine-foot wall, long back garden. I checked it out for him, the recessed stairs agent giving me the dirty looks”. The switch in tone and register, away from all that willow-tristessee, is notably unerring.

As Crofton moves through his various moods and memories, Warner deftly, and credibly, keeps pace. A delightfully astutely reliable narrator, Crofton recounts his infrequent human interactions with an acute eye for comedy. Warner’s ear for dialogue and nuance is acutely attuned. He describes the various characters that might be finding the dialogue, the slapstick and Crofton’s self-justifications are all present. When, for example, two teenage girls turn up hoping the great rock guitar

Yoga, the juices, the desperate detoxification and deforestation of our bodies” (or, for that matter, personal narratives and attempts to purge the internet of obscene content) when “right outside the window the sickness was total” and “the world homicidally impure”? Maya bites down on the soiled bread in protest against the “humatic endeavor” of imposing wellness and order on an irredeemably sick and chaotic world via work, clean living and social media.

At the office, she wishes “I wasn’t shitting in the toilet all the time, but on the office, on my desk, on my keyboard, on the pavement outside Pict’s door”, and her benefactors’ hopes for Maya’s journey back when she uploads an image of her face to Instagram. The post triggers a viral trend as the internet bombards Pict and Green with increasingly extreme content. Maya, flush with new followers, begins squatting in an industrial unit in Leyton, where she is joined by several like-minded lost girls who contact her over the internet. Here she can cultivate decay without the distraction of wine-to-five.

The industrial unit is where Maya’s journey really takes off: its concrete floor becomes a pungent stew of shit, piss and rotting food teeming with vermin. “We ate from it, then shot, pissed, and pulsed back into it”. The girls slip and slide around in the soup: they inspect and admire each other’s excrement and daub each other with menstrual blood. They pop spots with filthy fingernails, “fuck work. Fuck progress. Fuck hygiene.” They extract maggots from open sores on one another’s bodies; Maya wears a necklace of decaying dead rats. Now we see what it really means to know the body”. It is a remarkable spectacle. It is also relentless. Sam Byers could probably have made his point without creating quite so much mess, but Come Join Our Disease is – for better or for worse – an unforgettable novel.

Molly Guinness is a producer at Times Radio

keshasepaer?
My Shakespeare.
The Authorship Controversy
edited William Leahy
www.eerpublishing.com
The avid biter bit
How Sade was outraged by Italian debauchery

DAVID COWARD
JOURNEY TO ITALY
MARQUIS DE SADE
Translated, introduced and annotated by James A. Steintrager

Travel books were Europe’s introduction to relativism. “Abroad” was a real world where things were done differently but not always less well. Set-in-stone assumptions were questioned by the first generation of explorers who returned with tales of impossibly strange lands. Then came the confraternity of voyages, fuller descriptions of flora, fauna, peoples and places and, by the late seventeenth century, a utilitarian guide to the routes of the Grand Tour. The Enlightenment produced the more personal “familiar letters”, which ploughed less didactic furrows. By then the traveller was an established literary figure and a source of inspiration for artists, historians and intellectuals who fed on the aesthetic, scientific and philosophical ideas provided by the practices, past and present, of other cultures.

The Marquis de Sade was no homo viator of this enquiring sort and his Voyage to Italy, unpublished until 1867 and now studiously translated and exhaustively edited by James A. Steintrager, is a voyage into the known. He was an accidental traveller who ascended at intervals to avoid the consequences of his actions, which, over a dozen years, had led to four imprisonments, two for crimes of “horrible impiety”, sodomy and murder by poison. Other aristocratic rakles behaved outrageously and committed crimes too but were never hounded as he was. Louis XV, who ran a “chevalerie” of delicate lovers, set to the lines of the Prince de Conti who amassed a collection of 2,000 rings, each a remembrance of a woman forced or bought. Sade shared his castle’s consumerist view of the infantile brats, indulgent royals or dismembered anybody. Yet he was chased by a form of inverse charisme. Even before he published a word, journalists pounced on his depravities, the authorities were permanently on his case and eventually every regime under which he lived - monarchical, revolutionary, imperial - would lock him up.

His first strategic retreat - to Holland in 1769 - was followed by two brief visits to Italy before, for forestall enqueries into orgies held at his château in south-east France, he fled, again to Italy, on July 17, 1775. As Steintrager shows, he took great pains with his Voyage to Italy, a series of ruminosus letters to a fictitious countess (here addressed simply as “madam countess”), though he followed no plan. “I point things out as I see them”, he says. He keeps complaints about crimes of nature, indifferent lodgings, dull cuisine and thieving functionaries to a grumblign minimum but salutes the picturesque and pays his own pretomantic tribute to Rome. And though he described himself as “a second-class art-lover”, he provides solid descriptions and opinions of art, works, architecture and public places.

Passing briefly at Turin only to comment on its mood of austerity, he hastened to Florence where he found the air hot and the women haughty, dirty and ugly; thirty servants would buy the grandest of them. Interrupting his intermittent accounts of churches and museums he reported that its many theatres and opera houses fell short of his idea of art and taste, he was particularly offended by the castrati who, incomprehensibly, were drooled over by the same women who swarmed around any English milord who visited the city. Nor did he care for the moral laxity he detected in Florentine marriages, which gave husbands complete power over wives.

On October 21, 1775 he travelled at twenty-five miles a day to Rome, where he found much less to say about its inhabitants but earnestly described his wanderings in careful, exact, imageless style. Until excavation of Herculanenum and Pompeii began in the 1740s, Rome had marked the southernmost limit of the traveller’s circuit. But following the new fashion for Naples, Sade duly proceeded there in January 1776. The sights caught his fancy (he catalogued them soberly) and he explored the streets and salons which, though elegant and entertaining, he judged harshly. The city was dirty, slovenly and violent; popular festivals like the Easter Cocktails quickly turned into murderous brawls. The climate, diet and general corruption, he thought, encouraged the debauchery which filled the streets with punks and harlots and every type of perversion. He was shocked to find that “honest gallantry” was unknown there.

It was equally saluting the scant progress made in the sciences and arts in modern times which made Italy’s present much less remarkable than its past. Neglect of education perpetuated ignorance and begangers to be courted and flattered, set to the tune for the court and, as to Naples Sade preferred the courteous, thoughtful bourgeoisie of France and even the populace who, though rude, coarse and superstitious, lived together praiseworthy enough to need no super-vision by police.

Italy was “a nation to be formed”, but only a “re-volution” would raise it to the level of civility known in the rest of Europe. It was a task that called for a philosopher king, a role which Ferdinando IV of Naples was not qualified to play. Sade indicated some lines of approach though he found it impossible to make sense out of the writings and economics of his age, and the Italian degree of libertarianism was incompatible with civilization.

For Steintrager, Sade’s performance as a “Philosophical Informer” (one title he considered for his unpublished Voyage) is less significant than Italy’s impact on his imagination. Recollections of gruesome martyrdoms in paint and marble, the shocking evocations of Roman barbarity, of Messaline and Tiberius, the “sublime horror” of the Neapolitan Carnival and not least the memory of clambering Vesuvius - which provided the organic climax to Henriette (1795) - would resurface, expanded and exaggerated, in the imaginings of the Château.

Within a year of his return to France, Sade was under lock and key. And there, except for a bout of freedom in the decade of Revolution, he remained until his death in 1814. In the narrow confines of his cell, memories of Italian stimulations helped fill his days as he travelled to outposts of the psyche, to an unexplored country where they did things very differently.

Pessimism of the will
Schopenhauer gave Houellebecq unexpected joy and sorrow

HENRI ASTIER
IN THE PRESENCE OF SCHOPENHAUER
MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ
Translated by Andrew Brown

Michel Houellebecq projects himself as a man of profound ideas. His novel was written with views on modern society, philosophy, religion and much more besides. Few, however, take him very seriously as a thinker - mainly because Houellebecq doesn’t appear to do so himself.

His characters’ musings about life, the universe and everything have a playful quality that defies reasoned analysis. The references to Arthur Schopenhauer are a case in point. The German philosopher pops up in Woody Allen’s Let’s Call It Love when the mundane and the mock-solene are juxtaposed for effect. The narrator of the novel Platform (2000), for instance, connects his readiness to ditch all his belongings and move in with his girlfriend to Schopenhauer’s thoughts on the indeterminacy of the self and irrelevance of the past.

The author has paid homage to Schopenhauer in interviews, but speaking to journalists is not something he is known to take particularly to heart. Readers could be forgiven for wondering whether these nods are any more substantial than his fictional paens to Agatha Christie, Snoopy Dogg or Leclerc superstores.

But it turns out that Houellebecq was serious about Schopenhauer after all. In the Presence of Schopenhauer is a profound tribute that illuminates the French novelist’s own work. Houellebecq discovered Schopenhauer by picking up a copy of The World as Will and Representation, which he read in his mid-twenties and assumed he had read everything that could shape his literary tastes. “And then, in a few minutes, everything dramatically changed”, he recalls. Houellebecq went on to devour Schopenhauer’s masterpiece, The World as Will and Representation, which he could only find in a used copy. “We were in Paris, one of the main European capitals, and the most important book in the world had not been released” he rues. “No novelist, no moralist, no poet has influenced me as much as Schopenhauer has.”

Through comments on some of his favourite passages, he explains why that is so. The affinity rests in part on Schopenhauer’s famed pessimism. Life, as he sees it, is a blind process of aimless striving: “The plant raises its manifest root from the seed to the stem, to the leaf, to the flower, to the fruit, and this is only the beginning of a new seed, a new individual that will, however, pursue the same old course, and so on for eternity. The same applies to the life of animals, only in its culmination point, after which the life of the first individual fades away more or less quickly, while a new individual ensures the perpetuation of the species.”

This accords well with Houellebecq’s own dark outlook. His first novel was a tale of relentless sexual competition, told from the losers’ perspective. The English translator highlighted the world-weariness that pervades it by rendering the cryptic French

“Before he published a word, journalists pounced on his depravities, the authorities were permanently on his case and every regime under which he lived would lock him up.”

David Coward is writing a biography of philosopher de la Brevanne.
Civilize your trogloidyte
An old-fashioned defence of women

MIRANDA FRANCE
THE SOUL OF A WOMAN
ISABEL ALLENDE

In preparation for this book on womanhood, Allende asked several friends and Elena, her undocumented Honduran cleaner, if they liked being a woman. The friends said they did, “because we have more empathy and solidarity than men and we are more resilient. As we give birth, we bet on life, not on extermination. We are the only possible salvation for the other half of humanity. Our mission is to nurture, destruction is masculine”. Elena, puzzled by the enquiry, said “God made me this way, so what’s the point of complaining?” - then presumably got on with the cooking. It’s the friends’ ideas rather than Elena’s that set the tone for The Soul of a Woman, a kind of survey of the ways women around the world suffer at the hands of men but prevail through superior character. The examples, though sobering and indisputable, are somewhat undermined by sexist generalizations about women’s kindness and the iniquity of men.

Allende was born in Peru and raised in Chile, where machismo has thrived at least since the conquistadors rode in. She was in kindergarten, she says, when her feminism first stirred, she hated the way her mother (and the housemaids) had to submit to male authority. In some houses, girls were expected to make their brothers’ beds and serve them at table. Allende’s grandfather - a cousin of the deposed president - was infuriatingly machista, but supported her career ambitions. She worked as a secretary at the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization in Santiago and later co-founded Paula, which she describes as a feminist magazine, although it also organized beauty pageants. There she wrote a column called “Civilize your Trogloidyte”, her warmth and humour winning a readership that has grown through such bestselling novels as The House of the Spirits (1982) and A Long Petal of the Sea (2019). Now seventy-eight and living in California, Allende is one of Latin America’s most famous authors and runs a foundation dedicated to furthering the opportunities of disadvantaged women and girls. Her ideas on feminism command attention. What a shame, then, that they are so unfocused.

The global picture presented here is devastating. Allende cites violence as the leading cause of death worldwide for females between the ages of fourteen and forty-four, “more than the sum of deaths due to cancer, malaria, and accidents”. She also describes the trauma caused by rape, unwanted pregnancy and genital mutilation. For centuries, she says, women know how to control their fertility: “the knowledge of the menstrual cycle, and of herbs and abortive methods, but that knowledge was brutally rooted out”. None of her observations is accompanied by sources. Statistics quoted by the World Health Organization, however, suggest that 87,000 girls and women were intentionally killed in 2017 alone - a horrifying figure, but much lower than the 250,000 who died in childbirth in the same year. This isn’t to dispute Allende’s research, just to say that it would be useful to know more.

The author chides neglectful husbands but, of her own life, admits regretfully that it was she who brought his work and their children - "sometimes my passionate heart clouds my understanding". She despair’s of women’s anxiety over their looks but gets up "an hour before anyone else" to put on make-up. She deplores the patriarchy, but when creating heroes for her novels, favours men who are "handsome, strong, rich or powerful". She rightly argues that caring responsibilities too often fall to women, but also thinks it would be good for the United States to admit more female immigrants because they make such good carers.

Contradictions exist in all our lives, of course. By the same token, patriarchy is a phenomenon for which men cannot be held solely responsible. Women, too, may insist on feminism or subservience in the home. Both sexes may fear making changes that go against their families and communities. Instead of repeating clichés about randy old men, Allende might have considered why patriarchy perpetuates itself, trapping both sexes, and how it might eventually be replaced by more equitable arrangements.

To write so breezily about what it is to be a woman - the assumption that there is one soul, the soul - at a time when so much of our language has been disputed seems strangely out of touch. The disputing truth is that wherever they are, women’s bodies are still a battleground. At one point Allende mentions her passing that her two Californian granddaughters style themselves non-binary and have decided not to have children, for environmental reasons. I wish she had asked them more about these choices. Theirs are the voices we need to hear now.
Bride to a Blackshirt
A party hack who put loyalty to Mussolini before marriage

GIGLIOLA SULIS

THE PERFECT FASCIST
A story of love, power, and morality in Mussolini’s Italy

VICTORIA DE GRAZIA


ATTILIO TERUZZI, born in Milan in 1882, was a military officer in the Italo-Turkish war and the First World War. He was a Fascist from the first hour, leading the Blackshirts from Emilia-Romagna in the March on Rome, and came to play a part in many major Fascist deeds. For the historian Victoria De Grazia, long preoccupied with the intersection of Fascism and gender, the life of this “perfect Fascist” is an opportunity to explore toxic masculinity and the contradictory relationship between the public roles and private lives of Fascist elites.

Teruzzi’s cursus honorum, achieved through violence, abuse of power, moral double standards and unquestioning loyalty to Mussolini, comprises positions as vice-secretary of the Fascist National Party, Member of Parliament, Governor of Cremona, National Commander of the Blackshirts (including during the Spanish Civil War), Undersecretary to the Ministry of Colonies, and Minister of “Italian Africa.” After Mussolini fell in 1945, Teruzzi joined the Repubblica Sociale. At the end of the war, he was sentenced to thirty years and incarcerated on the island of Procida, off the coast of Naples; amnestied and freed in 1950, he died soon afterward. To provide a backdrop for the events of his life, De Grazia presents ample sections covering the history of Fascism, accompanied by useful maps that also detail Teruzzi’s movements around the Mediterranean, central Europe and Eastern Africa.

De Grazia’s investigation does not, however, turn on the career of this “mediocre but very loyal” Fascist, as Mussolini’s son-in-law, Gallocate Giano, described Teruzzi. Rather, by examining the intertwining of love, power and morality, the “social history of a man” emerges, seen through the lens of family life. As the feminist slogan goes, the personal is political. Four women shaped the narrative: his mother Celestina, after whom he named the Tuscan villa in Castiglioncello, rebuilt in Fascist rationalist style, where sumptuous parties were held; two outsiders of his family, his first cousin, the American Lillian Weiman (Teruzzi’s wife) and the Levantine Yvette Blank; and his only offspring, Celestina Maria (Marielle), Yvette’s daughter, born in 1926.

The story of Teruzzi’s relationship with Lillian is the book’s driving force. An aspiring opera singer from a wealthy New York family, she met Teruzzi in Milan, married him in 1926, and moved with him to Benghazi, only to be repatriated after three years under accusations ranging from adultery and non-virginity when entering marriage to the fact that an American, “she could not believe in the sacramental nature of the marriage bond.” Since divorce was not allowed in Italian law, tied to Catholicism by the Lateran Accords of 1929, Teruzzi launched a two-decades-long case for annulment, which followed geopolitical twists and turns. If, in the mid-1950s, Lillian and Marielle represented Teruzzi’s follicles, he sought to replicate, by the end of that decade, ideals of atherary that had settled in and this foreign, cosmopolitan, non-Catholic was looked at with disfavour. The escalation of anti-Semitism through the 1930s and the introduction of the race laws in 1938 made her an enemy of the state. Then, the US entered the war. She was, in the words of a court document from August 1941, “an enemy twice over.” The legal decision was reached only in the late 1940s, at “the peak of the Cold War romance of the Vatican with the United States”: the Sacra Roma court ruled definitively against annulment. To this case are linked the destinies of Yvette — not only denied marriage, but also confined to the Sicilian island of Lipari — and of Marielle, whom Teruzzi, by manipulating the laws, recognized as his daughter.

Since Yvette and Marielle were relegated to public invisibility after Teruzzi’s death, De Grazia traces their later lives in Naples through oral interviews with people who knew them. As for Lillian, her collection of letters, documents and photographs constitutes a rich source. Images of her linger after closing the book: looking like a Klimt portrait, she ended her days in Elna in Leoben, Austria in 1952: dressed in white, leaning against a monument to Verdi in Bursero; relaxing by the sea in Benghazi. The final image of her in the book, a portrait from 1933, was one of the most sought-after artist of divas, shows us Lillian approaching forty, newly separated from her husband and full of self-assurance — a “heroine manicou” whose beauty was a homage to the stage career Liliana renounced that the structure of The Perfect Fascist echoes that of a liberta, divided into the four acts of the male protagonist’s life: Strife, Grasp, Overreach and Fall.

No heroes here
A shared hatred of democracy bound most aristocrats to Hitler

JANE CAPLAN

NAZIS AND NOBLES
The history of a misalliance

STEPHAN MALINOWSKI

Translated by Jonathan Andrews.


T he aristocracy has barely featured in the extensive literature on the social bases of support for National Socialism in Germany. Until recently, the impenetrable family networks that protected it from Nazi infiltration after 1933 also seem to have shielded it from the scrutiny of historians. This has left the aristocracy’s postwar reputation polarized between a media image of murdering reactionary leaders purging delinquents from restoration and a rose-tinted ideal of noble army officers sacrificing their lives to redeem German honour — the latter a common postwar perspective.

Although the nobility subsided into political irrelevance after 1945, it is still an object of public fascination; and it has revealed a string in its tail, with an ongoing controversial and hard-nosed legal campaign by the ex-Yugoslav Hohenzollerns family to gain compensation for estates and property sequestered by the German Democratic Republic. These claims will be dismissed in law if the family can be proven to have given “substantial encouragement” (erheblicher Vorschub) to the Nazi or East German regimes. Stephan Malinowski’s cultural-political study of nobles and Nazis, revised and stylistically translated from the German original (2003), invites us to reach our own judgement. Malinowski not only adds indispensable complexity to the bifurcated model of attraction and repulsion, but also offers a riveting and subtle portrait of an elite in decline and in denial after 1938. If the republican revolution did not launch the aristocracy into a new nobility, the aristocratic collapse of 1918, and 1917, it still threw Germany’s aristocracy into crisis. Shorn of Kaiser, titles and political dominance, an elite that thrived on continuity was sailed by unwelcomed shifts, new republics and a new social order and a new right that quickly coalesced into a profound challenge to aristocrats’ own aspirations to leadership.

Malinowski’s sparkling initial chapter, profiling the nobility and its values, conveys the wistful pleasures of “studying up” (Lauré Nader’s term for the anthropology of social elites). Vignettes of aristocratic superciliousness read like curious eccentricities, until later chapters expose them to have been, in their cumbrous, sprawling. Numbering more no than 80,000, in total (about 0.2 per cent of Germany’s population), the nobility was split by wealth, region, religion and the generation gap, but exerted disproportionate influence.

The connective tissue between nobility and Nazism was provided by a shared hatred of democracy and the Jews, a disdain for bourgeois campy, and overlapping beliefs in a removed romanticised Burg. These adaptable anti-values enabled the major of the Protestant nobility (more reactionary than their Catholic and Bavarian leftist counterparts) to find some common ground with the majority of aristocrats despised. Some families yielded striking numbers of party members — the princely line of Hessen is the most famous example — yet only a minority of aristocrats actively took part in the persecution of Jews, possibly also the noblemen schooled in habits of patrician nonconformity, they were still over-represented. Malinowski suggests that the full scale of aristocratic support reached far beyond party member-
A secular gospel

The difficulties of taking Jesus out of context

LISA SOWLE CAHILL

THE GODLESS GOSPEL
Was Jesus a great moral teacher?
JULIAN BAGGINI

Three-quarters of the world’s people belong to faith traditions. Christianity is burgeoning (and diversifying) in the global South; secularism, agnosticism and atheism, meanwhile, are growing rapidly in western Europe and North America. The logic remains: if we separate political life from their intellectual and cultural content (despite recent inroads by identity-group belief systems, “fake” news and denial of climate and coronavirus science), yet modern western cultures have deep religious roots; Christian moral ideals, such as basic human equality, individual responsibility, altruism and solidarity — surely in need of reinforcement in the present century – evoke broad cultural respect.

Can the Christian scriptures and Jesus provide a moral beacon for a secular society? To answer that question, Julian Baggini has attempted “to extract a moral philosophy” from Jesus’ teachings. Accordingly, he provides a redacted, synchronized and homogenized version of the four Christian gospels — “one, hybrid, godless Gospel”. Unfortunately for Baggini, all such “hybrid” gospel harmonies have two problems in common: firstly, they work on the premise that the gospels are exact and detailed historical accounts and that if we want a full historical picture, we should collate all the texts they collectively offer; secondly, the harmony approach misses the fact (uncovered by modern “historical criticism” and research on the gospels) that each gospel was transmitted and collected into a stable whole over time by different communities in different settings, each interpreting Jesus and his teaching in the light of their own questions and problems. The “godless” aspect of Baggini’s text, meanwhile, sees “all the supernatural elements, such as miracles, healings and claims to have fulfilled prophecies” stripped away. God is any hint of God as “the great cosmic guarantor, there to assure a happy ending”. The second half of the book offers the gospel text, while the first lays out Baggini’s findings.

In what does the “secular philosophy” of the stripped-down Jesus consist? Baggini recognizes Jesus as “an iconoclastic revolutionary so threatening that he was crucified”. Jesus teaches non-violence and pacifism; forgiveness and renunciation of relationships; distance from, if not hostility towards, marriage and family; world-denying ascetism; humility and kenosis (self-emptying); compassion, especially towards the poor, religious institutions, and political change. Baggini characterizes this moral vision as “becoming your best, most moral self”. Numerous Christians are not interested in early Jewish (or Christian!) matters of his picture. But there are caveats. Jesus was a Jew and a prophet of Israel’s renewal (so he was not against all religious institutions, nor was he a moral individualist); it is hard to accept non-violent yet threatening revolutions as politically disengaged.

Baggini does have historical evidence on his side when he maintains that the specific gospels are not a single moral philosophy. “Jesus himself seemed to have a number of different and non-exclusive values.” This raises the question of what it is that Jesus distinctively brings. The several theologians Baggini consults (including Karen Kilby, Keith Ward and John Cottingham) all argue that Jesus is important primarily for forming community. They have support from thinkers (including Philipp Gold, Tim Crane and Rupert Shortt who have written on the subject for the TLS) who regard reductionist portrayals of religion. God might be understood, in Gold’s words, as “an ineffable spiritual reality”; religious belief is “deeply communal”, as per Crane, and for Shortt, the “really important” question is whether faith communities nurture “human flourishing”. Along similar lines, The Godless Gospel’s first three chapters concern conversion (metanoia), virtue and the salience of deeds over words. These chapters already go beyond Baggini’s stated plan to “extract from Jesus a moral philosophy, because they are concerned with dimensions of moral life that are relational, dynamic, holistically interconnected and communally supported. But the moral and the transcendent cannot be easily separated in gospel narratives about a community of disciples embodying “God’s reign”: dedication to a transcendent source of good is what gives Jesus’ message power and unity. Believers experience God not as extrinsic authority (deus ex machina), nor even as a judge, primarily, but as an entity that empowers the virtues Baggini extols, while redeeming human failure. The parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 and that of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 elevate Jesus’ moral identity as a sacred duty: compassion for the suffering in terms of the power in direct opposition to the kingdom of God for themselves, or for the kingdom of God. Furthermore, much is lost by reducing the four gospels with their internal tensions; these spawned multiple interpretations of Jesus’s philosophy and theology inside the church and, indeed, continue to fuel provocations and catalysts for communities today, Divergences among the gospels on wealth and poverty, women’s roles, and the extent to which the church endorses authority in its structures and can illuminate ongoing debates, self-criticism and reform.

The morality of Jesus, as Baggini redisCOVERs, it reveals more than theistic or cultural assumptions. It involves membership in an adaptable church, whose full significance is lost in this flattened “secular” gospel. Jesus’s moral teaching is embedded in a community of identity, accountability and hope — the very community the canonical gospels were created to sustain.

What is it to be alive?

Radical questions in John’s Gospel

THEO HOBSON
RESOURCES OF CHRISTIANITY
FRANCOIS JULIEN
Translated by Pedro Rodriguez
107pp. Polity. £35.

About a century ago, a new sort of philosophy emerged. Martin Heidegger suggested that the New Testament idea of having new life in Christ was a crucial resource in the philosophical quest to understand authentic human existence and to get beyond a tired rationalism. At first, this looked like a strange cul-de-sac, and Heidegger’s dalliance with Nazism didn’t help. But towards the end of the century things changed. Critical critiques of rational modernity became mainstream (with Nietzsche’s star in the ascendant), and Marxist atheism yielded to a revolutionary mysticism. Here Jewish thinkers played a central part (Berrada, Lewsin). What’s the point of this branch of philosophy? To enlighten us; to help us to see the errors of our unreflective assumptions about morality, perhaps. But crucially it also proclaims a message of radical possibility.

It is often shrouded in erudite jargon, as if to ward off more intellectual day-trippers, but it has its merits. François Julien, who has previously written princi- pally on Chinese philosophy, joins his voice to a distinguished tradition in this little book (neatly translated by Pedro Rodriguez) based on a lecture given in 2016. He first explains that he is not interested in defending the coherence of Christian orthodoxy (and of course his own). The first chapter is about asking what potential resources it has for us today. This approach might freshen up a “willed” tradition and help it “to take on some risk once more”. He focuses on the Gospel of John, on the grounds that it is more radical than the other gospels in asking “a single question: what is it to be effectively alive”, paying particular attention to a few key words. First he approaches the theme of “event”: the Gospel presents us with an occurrence — God’s appearance in human form — that redefines existence, drawing the concept away from Greek metaphysics. In this basting of conventional thought, “the impossible becomes possible” and we are in the presence of the “unheard-of”. He then turns to John’s notion of “life”, which is an intensified form of one, the Greek for animal vitality, as opposed to life in a more carefully determined sense psyche. He returns to his notion of resources: here “we have a resource: not to content ourselves with being alive, but to seek a connection, within our lives, ever more diligently, with what ‘quickens’ the active self-interest, participating in ‘life insofar as it is alive, and so none die: life as vocation’. He emphasizes that this is nothing in common with pseudo-spiritual ‘personal development’, yet he does not flush it out in practical positive terms.

Then he coins a curious phrase: the Gospel is a call to “de-coincide with the world. We must live in defiance of all stifling habits of thought and culture, which means truly affirming subjective existence (to “exist” is to be at odds with “the world”, in the sense of any orthodoxy or theory about the world). In the ideas of the Christian love (agape) we are called to live beyond ourselves, through our relation to “the Other”.

On one hand, none of this feels very new. For a long time, liberal theology in the early 20th century has been saying that in Christ there is a radical openness to new possibilities that escapes all worldly structures and categories, including religious orthodoxy. And plenty of post-Christian thinkers and poets have also drawn on this “resource”: the call to reckon with what quickens, for instance, reminded me of D. H. Lawrence, whose neo-pagan vision is at least half-Christian. On the other hand, everything feels very new. There is a large quantity of every intelligent reiteration of it. And it looks sharply dressed in the register of French philosophy.

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The poetry in the poem

The power of imagination in Christian belief

BERNICE MARTIN

ALIVE IN GOD
A Christian imagination
TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

A SECRET HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY
Jesus, the last Inking, and the evolution of consciousness
MARK VERNON

Forensic examination of the arguments of the New Atheists is not the only way of challenging galloping secularism. The authors of these books explore aspects of human experience that elude capture in abstractions: in particular, “a Christian imagination” (Timothy Radcliffe) and “mysticism” (Mark Vernon). They focus on what makes emotional sense, approaching human psychology through naturalistic, narrative and therapeutic perspectives. Neither offers a conventional exposition of theology, although both are serious Christian thinkers.

Timothy Radcliffe, formerly Master of the worldwide Dominican Order, is notably open-minded. He has an engaging style and a wide cultural hinterland. He introduces Alive in God with the modest hope of opening the door into the Christian imagination for secularists and atheists and perhaps being “of some help” to believers. Mark Vernon left the Anglican priesthood to be a writer and psychotherapist. His book expands on the theory of Owen Barfield, the “last of the Inklings”, about the stages of evolution of human consciousness and the importance of the life of Jesus in that development.

Timothy Radcliffe knows religion has become meaningless for many young people and shows how a Christian imagination can light up the world, especially in the face of suffering. The cover of Alive in God shows Matias’s energetic “La Danse” from the Hermitage. Radcliffe insists that “fullness” can only be sought among “the messy stuff of people’s lives, what they suffer and enjoy”. He never belittles non-Christians but believes secularism cannot bring full human flourishing. He chides Christians who have an “odd and restrictive” idea about what Jesus meant by “choose life”.

Rather than defining “being alive in God”, Radcliffe exemplifies it by following the New Testament narrative from the point when Jesus summons the disciples to go with him to Jerusalem, through his teaching, death and resurrection. Radcliffe then probes how the disciples persistently misunderstood the point of the journey to Jerusalem, did not always comprehend what Jesus meant in his teaching, so much of it in ambiguous parables about abundant life and the Kingdom of God, or understand the non-violent response that led to Jesus’s ignominious death. Yet by teaching and example Jesus invited his disciples “to grow up”. Using the framework of John’s Gospel narrative, Radcliffe draws parallels between its events and core human dilemmas and experiences represented in particular lives and in visual art, poetry, film, literature and popular culture. Much of the book’s persuasiveness comes from these accessible and vivid examples. The range is immense and shows how steeped in life this celibate friar is.

In A Secret History of Christianity Mark Vernon covers allied terrain and with a matching intensity, but uses Owen Barfield’s theory of human consciousness as his framework. Vernon believes the Churches have neglected the ancient mystical message of Christianity, its “secret”, and this is largely responsible for emptying the pews, although the rise of science, the impact of the Reformation, and the separation of psychology from spirituality have contributed to the decline. What has been lost is the classical recognition that God is not another being like us, but the very ground of being, “the poetry in the poem ... the pulse of the cosmos”. This mystical truth “must be inhabited to be understood” through reorientation of life.

Vernon uses Barfield’s model to set out both the problem and its solution. Barfield proposed a three-stage evolution of human consciousness. The first is “original participation”. Life is a continuous flow of vitality between humans and other animals or natural objects, between humans and gods, past and present, the cosmos and human consciousness. The sense of individual distinctiveness and self-consciousness is barely present, as existence is essentially collective and connected. Anthropologists often call this “dividuality”, where the self is
Beyond the Law

Theology has its place in Jewish tradition

LEOBA BATNITZKY

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO JEWISH THEOLOGY

STEVEN KEPNES, EDITOR

514pp. Cambridge University Press. $34.99.

According to Thomas Aquinas, theology includes what we know of God, what God teaches, and a path towards God. Given the expansiveness of this definition, it may be surprising to see Steven Kepnes state, in his introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology, that “any book on Jewish theology must, unfortunately, include some discussion of the validity of the enterprise”: Appreciating why this is the case offers an important lens through which to understand the diverse, learned, and often stimulating essays that encompass this new collection.

The resistance to Jewish theology is shared by Christians and Jews alike. For Christian theologians as formative and different as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Judaism is at best a relic of the past that has been superseded by Christianity. To speak of Jewish theology would be at most to speak of Judaism’s, or the Old Testament’s, anticipation of the coming of Christ, or the New Testament. Sticking stubbornly to the letter rather than the spirit of the law, Judaism after Christ lacks faith and by implication has no theology of which to speak.

While Christian resistance to Jewish theology may be understandable (if, of course, disturbing to many Jews), it is perhaps more puzzling that so many Jews also reject its relevance. This is the case for Orthodox Jews, who argue that theology is for Christians while law (or halakha) is for Jews. Many different kinds of liberal Jews similarly reject the Germaneness of Jewish theology by contending that Judaism is mainly concerned with ethical and social action. Indeed, it may not be an exegagration to suggest that despite the wide variety, and in some cases irreconcilability, of different Jewish worldviews today, the one thing that many if not most Jews do seem to agree on is that Judaism has no theory of religious, and by extension, human, life. Reservations come not from asceticism but from recognizing that “outside knowledge of God, all things are seen for that which they are.” Divine will and human agency are not in conflict in this conception of freedom, which can only be grasped if one has eyes to see. Vernon’s treatment of it means that the meaning, and as well as his interpretation of the resurrection, rest on his understanding of how the Christian imagination operates in the psychological consciousness into which Jesus conducted his followers. It is poetic, paradoxeal and its truth comes in metaphors.

Vernon believes that the past 500 years have prepared the way for Christianity’s secular decline. In Barfield’s model, consciousness reverts from the participatory consciousness exemplified in Jesus, back to “withdrawal of participation” through the intensified individualism and anxiety initiated by the Reformation and accelerated by the rise of science. (There is striking congruence with the philosopher Charles Taylor’s account of the development of the modern identity.) Vernon recognizes the many beneﬁts of these developments but sees the cost as the loss of “Christ-consciousness.” The rediscovery of a consciousness fully interrelated with God and the created world can only come if “we all become mystics.” That will involve an imagination that can visualize participation in God and in his creation. Vernon uses poets such as Blake, Donne and Trabant to exemplify this imagination. The religious experience that such a vision yields is poetic and self-forgetful: “The imagination is a sixth sense. It can tell that the Kingdom of God is within you.”

Timothy Radcliffe and Mark Vernon have the psychological and spiritual myopia of contemporary culture in their sights. Today’s secular young have acquired the disastrous legacy of a culture dominated by utilitarian calculation and modern selves “liberated” to pursue self-interest that has priority over connection and obligation to others and to the natural world. These books respond to this disquiet and to the hunger for more satisfying meaning.

This brings us back to why many, if not most, Jews today resist the relevance of this subject when there is so much clear evidence for diverse and sometimes contradictory Jewish theologies. And here is what we do need to return to Christianity. As stressed throughout the volume, it is undeniable that law historically was and is still in many circles central to normative Jewish life. But in the introduction, in some places here, the importance of Jewish law in the formation of Judaism and the Christian Testament is theological signiﬁcant, with the former adhering to a cyclical view of history in which Israel repeatedly suffers in the electorate of itself and the latter offering a progressive view of history in which the experience of Jewish people in history and the collective’s consent to God’s covenant with the people. The essays in part two (“lawful”) offer helpfully introduces to the theological contributions made by Maimonides, Saadiah Gaon, and Kabbalist traditions.

The volume’s third part, entitled “Modern”, is less successful. Each of its three essays misses the “goldilocks” standard of providing just enough but not too much information for an argument for its readers. While Tamar Ross’s essay on Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief Ashkenazi rabbi of mandate Palestine, is brilliant, novices will find it diﬃcult to follow. The essays on Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas, respectively, offer creative readings of these ﬁgures, but they would need either far more philosophical argument or far fewer sweeping claims to make the stakes of their readings clear to advanced and new and neophyte readers alike. Parts four and five treat contemporary issues and analytic philosophy and theology respectively, contain some very interesting essays but no hints as to why particular topical methods were chosen. It is unfortunate that there is only one essay that deals with gender and theology (written by one of two female contributors), given that so much recent scholarship on ancient, medieval and modern Jewish texts has creatively and rigorously brought questions about gender to the forefront.

Quarr Abbey book bindery is a traditional craft bindery, where as far as possible, everything is done by hand according to traditional methods, and every attempt is made to find the most appropriate and highest quality materials for each commission. Originally its main purpose was to look after the extensive library at Quarr Abbey but now it has commissions to undertake.

Leora Batnitzky is Perlman Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Religion at Princeton University.

Bernice Martin is Emeritus Reader in Sociology in the University of London.
ERRANCY
ERROR IN SHAKESPEARE
ALICE LEONARD

"We have scarce any book in the English tongue more fertile of errors than the plays of Shakespeare." So said the eighteenth-century Shakespeare editor Lewis Theobald, and so says Alice Leonard in *Error in Shakespeare*. Leonard argues that error is at its most fertile in Shakespeare's early comedies and histories; her study is accordingly limited to these plays, in which error is "casual" rather than "cassually destructive", as it is in the tragedies (think of the handkerchief in *Othello*). A defining characteristic of the error is that it "is not in the text: it is in the reader's mind".

Leonard's best readings are found in the chapters on the mother tongue and the nation. She illuminates the notion of "mother's tongue" to "father's mouth" in *Henry V*; the misunderstandings of Juliet's Nurse; the exchange of French words and the exchange of money in *Henry V*; and Falstaff's memorable lines "I have a whole school of tongues in this belly..."

Leonard's picture of the rhetorical age against which Shakespeare's early plays seem particularly errant. Her comparisons do sometimes fall into repeating "old arguments for Shakespeare's exceptionalism", especially in the chapter on figurative language, which includes an essay on *Hamlet's Ophelia*.

Scribbles
LEARNING THROUGH IMAGES IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE
Illustrating manuscripts and education in quattrocento Florence
FEDERICO BOTANA

In a fifteenth-century manuscript held in Florence's Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS II.83, there is a distinctive trace of early reception. Between the hind leg of a doodled donkey, added in a brazen scribble, are sizeable pines and testicles. The manuscript is an illustrated copy of the *Esopo* volgarizzato, a Tuscan version of Aesop's fables. Owned by the Benci family of Florentine traders, the book was probably enjoyed in the education of several generations of Benci sons. As Federico Botana comments, the "inmate tendency of male children to draw genitalia is apparently nothing new". Surely, though, we expect better from the humanist students of Renaissance Florence, at the height of the quattrocento. Aren't they meant to be busy translating Cicero? Not so, according to Botana, whose thorough research uncovered a scholarly diet that was diverse, popular and above all practical, arising from the snuff and noise of the urban street and the pragmatic requirements of business and civic life.

In *Navigating Esopo*, Botana focuses on the *Fior di Vinr*, a treatise on the virtues and vices; early mathematics manuals or *Libri d'abaco*; a long poem on cosmology; and geography; the poem as the *Sfida*, and two messiahs claimed by Florentine adolescents. It is through the miscellaneities that we get the clearest sense of individual tastes and lives. One of the compiler's clear a appetite for "vividly gruesome" poetry; the other is apparently a gentler soul, preferring "sonnets by Dante and Petrarch". Both draw on their urban surroundings in wayward, wondrous illustrations, in which Botana hunts down visual allusions to specific frescoes and architectural features near their respective homes.

Throughout, Botana emphasizes the importance of images in quattrocento models of thought and learning. In these texts, bustling illustrations suggest the Aristotelian maxim that "when the mind is actively aware of anything, it is aware of it along with its image". True, too, that "Aristotelian and modern cognitive theories present some common ground" in the cognitive neuroscience, however, Botana's appeal to "neuroscientific experimentation" to corroborate or bolster lines of argument that stand up perfectly well on their own. "Scientific experiments have proved that depictions of wounded people trigger bodily reactions in viewwe", we are told about an illustration featuring wounded birds. So? Banish all that, and use the space for even more images of emancipating themselves, which are endlessly enjoyable. The MS II.83 *Esopo* is a particular pleasure, and not only because of the engagingly endowed donkeys, Hogs, mice and lions squabble and clamour in a jazzy landscape of rocky castle towers, all in scratchink washes redolent of Quentin Blake. Florence and its books, Botana shows, brimmed with character and life.

James Waddell

BERLIN
KÄSEBIER TAKES BERLIN
GABRIELLE TERTG
Translated by Sophie Duverney

Gabriele Tertg was the nom de plume of Elfie Hirschmann (1894-1982), a prominent journalist in early 1930s Berlin. Already admired for her work as a court reporter and features writer at the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*, her first novel, *Käsebier Takes Berlin* (*Käsebier erhöht den Kässervorrat*), was a hit. Published in 1932 - the same year as Erich Kästner's *Fahrbahn: A morality tale*, a year after Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* - and a year before Tertg herself was forced to flee Berlin on account of her Jewish heritage and following her criticisms of the Nazis - it provided an invaluable portrait of a Germany on the brink.

In Berlin in 1930, Käsebier is a decent cabaret singer, recognizable perhaps only for his sincereness and lack of artifice. But when he is described on a slow news day by a journalist at the Berliner Rundschau as the "Montmartre in Berlin", he is rocketed to stardom: "Käsebier's songs droned from the gramophone speakers. Käsebier lights up against the darkening sky, scowling ase. Käsebier shoes are the best... balloons shaped like Käsebier. A blow-up Käsebier. A wind-up Käsebier." However little his head is turned by the adulation, Käsebier is a high pedestal from which to fall; when it comes, there is a quiet novetly to his return to the shadows.

At a time when newspapers were in fevered competition for stories (forty titles existed in the German capital at the time), and were themselves a forum for the culture wars of the volatile young democtrician, Käsebier's appeal was not really a newsroom novel, depicting the struggle for substance over splash, honour and decency over green, and ephemeral celebrity. The extensive cast of characters includes journalists and editors, patrons of the arts, louche foreign correspondents and typesetting artisans.

Tertg's prose is energetically rendered by Sophie Duverney. Berlin is depicted as a city of infinite possibilities, but also as a place of shabby booths where beauty is forged from steam, a fatted [sic] hand... and the trees, which have swelled up from a wisteria of longings... for March"; the air is "scented with freedom, brashness and benzene". Tertg's gift for engaging dialogue...was conveyed in a novel. But beneath the witty comedy and acute observation lies a sober reminder of the dangers brevity: referring to money and widespread bankruptcy; and as the election results go up, auctions are held and Zustanders of the vulnerable stand ready... at the checkout, there are ...[redacted].

Rebecca K. Morrison


When war ended in 1992, US administrations expelled jailed gangsters back to El Salvador where, sporting erotic tattoos, they reconstituted the two main groups, the MS-13 and the 18th Street gang, bringing extortion and homicide to the war-weary nation. Many later made their way back to Los Angeles and other cities, where US officials, oblivious to their own role in creating the problem, declared them a threat to national security. That circular dynamic lies at the heart of Steven Dudley's informative and well-researched study of the members of MS-13. In Dudley's description, the gang is a shape-shifting organization that adapts its criminal activities according to circumstances. In Los Angeles, some leaders tried to ally the MS-13 with...
adventures in the nightspots of London and Berlin, diplomatic intrigue and heroic stands against the prevailing foreign policy of the Conservative-dominated National Government of the 1930s makes for an irresistible cocktail in Mark Bryant's retelling and the story of the British government's appeasement of Nazi Germany.

Other recent studies of appeasement have brought new perspectives and fresh air to what had become a repetitive, entrenched debate between the critics of Neville Chamberlain and his coterie, revisionists who defended Chamberlain, and the post-revisionists. These new approaches have included culture, the role of women, psychology and psychoanalysis, emotion and generational identity and conflict. Now, The Glamour Boys offers sexuality as another lens, telling the gripping story of a group of rebel MPs whose common experience of bisexual and homosexual existence - constantly in fear of exposure and abrupt and shameful ends to promising political careers - informed their anti-Nazi and indeed emboldened their dissent in Parliament. While not all in the group were gay, including their putative leader the former Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, they were nonetheless dubbed the "glamour boys" by Chamberlain. Chamberlain trusted Sengvuli's figure Sir Joseph Ball, an unambiguous smear on their sexuality.

The public lives of the leading figures - Jack McNamara, Ronnie Cartland (brother of Barbara), Victor Cazalet (brother of Thelma), Ffoulkes, Harold Nicolson, Bob Boothby and Philip Sassoon - have already been quite well examined. However, Bryant brings us into their lives with thoroughness and detail, revealing their private lives, their friendships and romances, the influence of the men who loved them, their personal and collective struggles, and the homosocial spaces and places where their politics were honed. Not only was the world of parliamentary politics overwhelmingly male, but it was dominated by bachelors; 47 of the 480 MPs making up the National Government in 1931 were unmarried.

Their story is another striking reminder of the limits of knowledge in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War, only a few ready to call out the appeasing policies of the British government. With meticulous research, reading between the lines of diaries and correspondence, as well as interviews with surviving contemporaries, Bryant tells their stories with pathos, reverence, humour and much admiration: "without them we would never have gone to war with Hitler, Churchill would not have become prime minister and Nazism would never have been defeated."

Julie V. Gottlieb

The combination of parliamentary politics, illicit homosexuality (there could be no other kind in Britain at the time), sexual

the big leagues of Mexican drug cartels, but, with their inexperienciated elaborate internal codes, the Salvadorans were "simply not good criminals," he writes. Occupying themselves with petty extortion and senseless turf murders, they were haggled and prosecuted by law enforcement. Though the gang, to some degree, has been continually replenished by new arrivals from Central America, Dudley's account suggests that it was a clumsy, if merciless outfit that created "spiderwebs of violence spinning from the paranoid egghell egos of men."

Co-founder of the research organization Inhlead Crime, Dudley has an anthropologist's eye for detail. He aims to shine a light on the roots of violence and, in especially evocative chapters, uncovers pathologies of family disintegration and abuse. In one upsetting passage, a future gang member recalls her rape at the age of seven by her step-grandfather. Dudley also examines the malignant history of US intervention in El Salvador, though nothing seems quite as explainable to the levels of violence in comparison to the tripling amount of money the MS-13 handles. A lookout earns $20 a week; gang bank accounts have "thousands, not millions" of dollars, an FBI agent tells him. In 2012, the two syndicates negotiated a truce with the quiet encouragement of Salvadoran authorities, yet, Dudley writes, homicides spiked again when it collapsed, and the long-term effect was probably to fortify them both. Stronger on the than what on the why, Dudley offers no pat solutions to a complicated problem.

Roger Atwood

APPEASEMENT

THE GLAMOUR BOYS

The secret story of the rebels who fought for Britain to defeat Hitler

CHRIS BRYANT


The combination of parliamentary politics, illicit homosexuality (there could be no other kind in Britain at the time), sexual

THE ARCTIC

NO EARTHY POLE

The search for the truth about the Franklin expedition 1845

ERNST C. COLEMAN

380pp. Amberley. £25.

Every field has its contrarians, and among writers on the history of Arctic exploration no one occupies that role with more self-evident relish than Ernest Coleman. He is a former Royal Navy officer, and if a man could be said to channel an institution, this book is surely what that would look like.

From 1990 to 1995 he organized four expeditions to King William Island in the Canadian Arctic, where the tragic demise of Sir John Franklin's last expedition unfolded between the autumn of 1846, and the death of the last survivors sometime in 1849 or 1850. Initially focused on finding Franklin's grave, Coleman reconstituted many sites on the island's north-west coast. The group expedition of 1995 judged the possibility of面条 and not to be a natural feature, however, and only the remains of a boat seemed definitely to belong to Franklin's era.

Coleman's breezy and often humorous account of his remarkable burst of Arctic activity take up "glamour boys" by Chamberlain. Chamberlain trusted Sengvuli's figure Sir Joseph Ball, an unambiguous smear on their sexuality.

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at stake. That is not an approach in which anyone should feel obliged to join, or a game that anyone else has to play.

Jonathan Dore

CHEESE

A CHEESEMONGER'S HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ISLES

NED PALMER


Cheese is part of our national title, which explains the intriguing inversion of Ned Palmer's title: he is not a story of British cheeses, but a history of Britain through cheese. He begins in the kitchen in the home of Stonehenge where the Vikings introduced a version of their whiffy but filling gamalost, which for centuries had been a staple of the Nordic pen- cill. The monasteries, with their separate granges, became important centres for cheese production, and, for centuries after, the work depended on female deyes, from which we get "dairy". Curiously, while it's clear that cheese was accepted across Europe as a legitimate article of feudal tribute, Palmer finds almost no reference to cheese in Domesday, not even in Cheshire, the acknowl-
edge's excellent cheese for British cheese. The Normans brought their own cheesemaking technology and sense of terroir to England. Charles de Gaulle famously asserted that it was impossible to run a country that made 246 cheeses, but the Normans proved him wrong and to provide us with the cheese of our time. Now Britain boasts some of the finest cheeses in the world: Caerphilly, Cheddar, Stilton, Dun- dow, and Stilton the thing to look for is a pinkish "baboon's bum" ring: "when finally you cut the cheese open, its paste should be the colour of old ivory piano keys, with a hint of blue veins going out in marked patterns". The exact blue is required, though. Too light and your cheese will be bland; too dark, and it will be over. "Indigo is perfect", and you'll get notes of maltasty digestive biscuit, Marmite and Hubba-Bubba. Even if you don't like the stuff, Palmer is riveting. And if you do, a directory of "some favourite cheeses" invites further, hands-on research.

a Brian Morton
No more sucking up to Zuckerberg

Behavioural science plus profit-driven analytics equals disaster

PAUL DUGUID

IF THEN
How one data company invented the future
JILL LEPORE

T

hen

marks a significant point in a long narrative by Jill Lepore to raise awareness of, as she puts it here, the “unmaking of American politics” or, more broadly, “the death of truth”, a theme highlighted in her podcast series, The Last American Century. Published between Congressional investigation of big tech CEOs in July 2020 and the US election in November of that year, If Then’s exploration of technology and democracy was timely. It remains so, as it is clear that the rise of tech companies and the collection of data through digital platforms and the possibilities of digital interference and ineptitude endure and related concerns about the 2022 elections start to rise.

The pre-election Congressional grilling of Mark Zuckerberg and co marked a significant transition from earlier encounters, where politicians mostly fawned, and anticipated today’s growing concerns and accusations about technology’s political influence, the theme of this book. If Then provides background for such a shift, showing how, since the Cold War, digital technology has come both to underpin and to undermine “expert” predictions of technology’s influence. The theme of technology’s part in truth’s decay stretches back across several Lepore books. The Story of America (1988) examines the role of print in forming that story. The Secret History of Wonder Woman (2014) interrogates the lie detector; and The Whites of Their Eyes (2010) explores mechanisms for spreading fake news.

If Then’s subtitle, “How one data company invented the future”, fits the book into this theme of technology shaping the public sphere. But this account highlights a less discussed but no less important concern: the scholars behind many of technology’s innovative moves. The book explores the rise of behavioural social science, and in Lepore’s view, the profound and damaging effects of its alliance with profit-driven, computer-supported “predictive analytics”.

Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard University and a columnist for the New Yorker, seeks to revive truth by reviving history. “Politics”, she asserts, “is accountable to history. It is accountable to evidence.” Popularization of technology has primarily been deployed to shape public opinion for developers’ unaccountable and unprincipled purposes. The humanities must fight back. If Then, in its own words, “begs a question of the bitterest kind: who is in charge?”

In Lepore’s eyes, such a view of what “matters”, an “article of faith” in Silicon Valley, has helped underwrite firms such as Cambridge Analytica, which used Facebook data to manipulate both US and UK voters. The last US presidential election, the “2016 election, accusations of digital interference and ineptitude endure and related concerns about the 2022 elections start to rise.”

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In next week’s

ALEXANDRA HARRIS

The darkness of Joseph Wright of Derby

TLS CROSSWORD 1370 BY MYRTILUS

ACROSS
1 Henry Handel Richardson’s name for Maurice’s visitor (5)
2 Mystery over Miss J. Hunter’s last name, resolved with brackets (9)
9 How printed words may be heavily influenced (6)
10 Beloved ex-slave assigned this man (5)
11 East Scots detective’s hellish place (8)
12 A crime writer twisted everything in part of a book (8)
14 Special agent lives as John, say (10)
16 Crazy about posh girl in a poem (4)
19 Part of speech only she must repeat (4)
20 English female in July wed a poor, obscure type (4,6)
22 From hard seat with special line, who captured a shark? (8)
23 Does the writing for another play (6)
26 Arcadian king in uniform tucking into drinks (5)
27 Finely put a philosopher’s collection in the bottom drawer? (5)
28 Borrow book and lots of whiskey, having run out earlier (6,3)
29 Clever Harry, Roddy Doyle’s star (5)

DOWN
1 Queen a state almost always blocks (9)
2 One reared by a misrecording food (5)
3 Rebecca West’s work that ones tried before? (3,5)
4 See 7
5 Anger about Quiet American in reference book by a king (7,3)
6 Hero’s attendant nurse put play out of bounds (6)
7/40 He wrote Miss Lonelyhearts anew, then a last novel (9,4)
8 Trim filling edges of the motif (5)
13 Duke blinded by Cornwall cheese (10)
15 Old journal articles name unruly university dons (9)
17 Doctor Jonas’s end in a study about Scott’s dull antiquary (9)
18 Fate of one trapped by the French revolutionary’s son (8)
21 Outspoken star’s title used by Meyer and Nesbo (3,3)
22 Orwell book lover’s top character (5)
24 Novel but originally a biblical land (6)
25 In my view War and Peace is one (4)

DARKISHERE DALE E BRONIE HYPHER A Z E N
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SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1366

The winner of Crossword 1366 is S. Bolger, of Peebles.

The sender of the first correct solution opened on April 23, 2023, will receive a cash prize of £40.
Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1370, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF.
Sweet sins

The wise Agatha, in T. S. Eliot’s play The Family Reunion, sums up the play’s situation thus: “What we have written is not a story of detection, / Of crime and punishment, / nor of sin and expiation”. You couldn’t ask for a more Eliotic distinction, suggesting as it does both the Anglican aspirations of his thought and those depths where a taste for “pure detective interest” might be indulged. The strength of the latter, for Eliot, should not be underestimated. In a review-essay published in the Criterion in January 1932, this enthusiast for the genre, a reader of Sherlock Holmes in his boyhood and a critical champion of The Moonstone, laid out five rules for “detective conduct”, discounting “occult phenomena” and fictional detectives with “superhuman” capabilities. “In the ideal detective story we should feel that we have a sporting chance to solve the mystery ourselves; if the criminal is highly abnormal and irrational element is introduced which offends us.” Save the esoteric stuff for the other kind of mystery.

This is a long way round of saying that we recently received word of a pleasingly minor puzzle discovered in the TLS archives. It concerns Eliot’s quotation of some lines by Ben Jonson in the middle of his tercentenary essay about Andrew Marvell (published in the issue of March 31, 1921):

“But no sweet love’s fruits to steal, / But that sweet sin to reveal, / To be taken, to be seen. / These have sins accounted been.”

Those who know Jonson (who does not know the third act of his comedy Volpone?) will recognize this quotation as a misquotation. Deceive should read-delude. A couple of lines have gone missing, after “household spies”: “Or his easier ears beguile, / So removed by my wife?” And if you’re really going to nitpick, the punctuation’s out, “that sweet sin” should be the “sweet theft”; and there are no “sins” in that last line but (you guessed it) merely “crimes”.

Homer’s nodding would hardly trouble readers if they did not hold more exalted expectations of him; and as with Homer, so, we fear, with Eliot. The passage was silently corrected in his Selected Essays of 1932, albeit still left incomplete; it has sometimes reappeared in its original form. Could Eliot have been quoting from memory? These would be pertinent lines for a fellow of his way of thinking to think with - converting thefts and crimes into sins in the process. Did he crib the lines from some intermediate source; or, as our informants suggest, actually improve, consciously or not, on Jonson’s original? We ask out of pure detective interest.

Sooner or later - more likely one than the other - the first History of Lockdown Literature is bound to appear. And maybe, beyond the governmental gaffes and the squabbling over toilet rolls in supermarket aisles (two phenomena that are, tonally, all too similar for comfort), its authors will bother to take in the imaginative literature of these dolorous times.

They could reproduce, for example, fourteen lines from Jacqueline Saphra’s One Hundred Lockdown Sonnets, or a canto from Jonathan Gibb’s Spring Journal (“after Louis MacNeice”); reviewed in the TLS, March 12); only last month appeared Poetry and Covid-19; edited by Anthony Caleshu and Kory Waterman (Shearsman, £12.95). From the pages of an autumn issue of Poetry magazine, meanwhile, would fall Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s “Lockdown Garden”, with its talk of “socially undistanced” mulberry leaves, and “Nineteen Spikes” by David Baker: “Wash your doorknob. Your hands. Pray in your hair.”

Pictured here is one of Sandra Goldmark’s illustrations to accompany Haiku for New York City by her father Peter C. Goldmark, Jr (Tuttle, $14.99; “a portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to support New Yorkers affected by COVID-19”). Published next week, this short book is meant as a “timely celebration of a unique and wonderful city and its people” - which is not to say that it ignores the realities of living there. Central Park may be noisy at the weekends, but that row can only “nearly” drown out the police sirens. The “old city is ill”, so it is understandable that Mr Goldmark, Jr - the former chairman of the International Herald Tribune, among other things - should get a little sentimental about it. He happens to like New York, and who can blame him? Just look out for life getting back to normal, yes: “There is a train directly / behind this one. / New York City bullshit.”

Under Lockdown, we had hoped, when it came to the buying of old books in the modern way - online, that is, via one website or another - to show moderation. We had hoped, you know, but, inevitably - despite the threat to the piggy bank that such activities pose, despite the humiliation that the purchasing of a dad may entail, and despite our conviction that messing about in bookshops is a nobler activity than filling up a virtual shopping basket - we have failed. Despite our best efforts, therefore, what should make its way to our door the other day but, somewhat belatedly, the London Mercury for December 1932? Sought out for one particular essay or another, this tattered volume (“which is Incorporated the Book” immediately offered an alternative array of distractions: W. B. Yeats, a few years before his death, looking back to the turn of the century (“I have been looking through the letters I wrote to Lady Gregory during those first years of our friendship”); another Irishman, Séan Ó Faoláin born around the time to which Yeats alludes, holding forth on “Pigeon-Holding the Modern Novel” (“One has to be extremely cautious about the Traditionalists”); the Mercury’s editor, R. A. Scott-James, attempting to describe the achievement of Dorothy Richardson (“her technique” matters less than her “femininity”, apparently); and, also, in the Ó Faoláin generation, Jan Struther, the creator of Mrs Miniver, retelling and reshaping the story of Cinderella.

This last item reminds us how smart Struther could be. (One indication of her versatility: she wrote hymns that have stuck, such as “Lord of All Hopes”。) When a Knight Won His Spurs, despite being an agnostic.) Her contribution to this issue of the London Mercury is called “Ugly Sister”. “My sister and I are old women now,” it begins. “Everyone admits that there are two sides to every story, but unfortunately the side that is heard first is the one that sticks in people’s heads, especially if it is told by a pretty mouth.” The good and intellectually engaged Augusta (the narrator) and Sophonisba see that the world does not deem them to be marriageable types. Cinderella, meanwhile, boasts a “swift radiant smile” but is also, “as I believe the modern usage has it”, “dead from the neck up.” The tale has been told, in essence, many times over since Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, in many different ways, of course, just as it was told before them, in many different ways, from ancient Greece to almost-as-old China. All the same, Struther’s feminist version makes wonder if we haven’t been oversold the originality of Angela Carter et al; and it is perhaps a shame that her own writer, Mrs Miniver aside, is largely out of print. Such are the idle thoughts to which a tattered Mercury may give rise, making it well worth its £10 plus postage and packing.

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one particular identity

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