Personal Best
Alison Bechdel on love, creativity and exercise addiction
By Emma Brockes
Find clarity in our weekly magazine

In a chaotic world, clarity on global news can be hard to find. The Guardian Weekly magazine can help. Every week you'll enjoy handpicked articles from The Guardian and The Observer. Delivered to you, wherever you live in the world. What's more, you'll only pay £6 for your first six issues, and then enjoy a year-round saving of up to 34%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Retail price per issue</th>
<th>Subscribers pay</th>
<th>Saving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>£4.50</td>
<td>£2.94</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Try 6 issues for £6

Subscribe now, visit theguardian.com/weekly-magazine

Offer is £6 for the first 6 issues (UK), US$6 (rest of world) and €6 (Europe), followed by quarterly (13 weeks) subscription payments of £37.50 (UK), US$75.30 (rest of world) or €61.30 (Europe), saving 34% off the cover price in the UK and 30% in Europe. Currency will vary outside these regions. Offer not available to current subscribers of Guardian Weekly. You must be 18+ to be eligible for this offer. Guardian Weekly reserve the right to end this offer at any time. For full subscription terms and conditions visit theguardian.com/guardian-weekly-subscription-terms-conditions.
‘Travelling makes you feel solitude more keenly. It touches deeper parts of you. It makes you question who you are.’ — Jhumpa Lahiri, page 23

**Contents**

The week in books .................................................................04
The books that made me by Daljit Nagra..................................05

**COVER STORY**

Witness the fitness: Alison Bechdel's new graphic memoir.........06

Book of the week: *Second Place* by Rachel Cusk..............................12

**Nonfiction reviews**

*The Foghorn's Lament: The Disappearing Music of the Coast*
by Jennifer Lucy Allan...............................................................14

*The Accidental Footballer* by Pat Nevin........................................15

*Pedro and Ricky Come Again: Selected Writing 1988-2020*
by Jonathan Meades ....................................................................16

**Fiction reviews**

*China Room* by Sunjeev Sahota..................................................18

*Circus of Wonders* by Elizabeth Macneal ....................................19

*Male Tears* by Benjamin Myers ................................................19

*Civilisations* by Laurent Binet ..................................................20

**INTERVIEW** Jhumpa Lahiri..........................................................21

**BOOKS ESSAY** Childcare issues: the new nanny novel.................24

The best books to understand football and money, plus Tom Gauld.......26
The week in books

1 May

Sonic booms
Some good news: we all bought a lot of books last year. The Publishers Association reported this week that the total income from consumer sales was £2.1bn in 2020 - up 7% on the previous year, despite bookshops shutting during the pandemic. Fiction, nonfiction and children’s books were all up year on year, but the biggest boom by far was in audiobooks, which rose by 37% to £133m, becoming the fastest-growing sector in publishing. Fionnuala Barrett, editorial director of audio at HarperCollins, told the BBC last year: “Nobody is running scared from it, in comparison to the similar moment for ebooks where there was that fear that they were cannibalising other formats in the book world. With audiobooks, there’s a feeling that it’s an additive.”

Sian Cain

Who, when, Wye
From Reverend Richard Coles speaking about grief in the time of Covid-19, to poet Lemn Sissay marking the one-year anniversary of George Floyd’s killing, more than 200 speakers are lined up for this year’s Hay festival. The free digital literary event, which will be broadcast from Richard Booth’s Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye, kicks off on 26 May, and will run for 12 days.

Authors set to appear range from Ali Smith and Colm Tóibín to Michael Rosen, Marian Keyes and Mario Vargas Llosa, while actors including Kate Winslet and Vanessa Redgrave will be performing at a gala event sharing writing by influential women. The former prime minister Gordon Brown will be among those tackling some of the urgent questions of our time in a series of lectures, with Cop26 president Alok Sharma talking on the climate crisis, and Everyday Sexism founder Laura Bates leading discussions around the effect of Covid-19 on motherhood.

“Restrictions may have robbed us of an IRL audience, but there are some gains: this will be our most sustainable and accessible event yet,” said Hay’s Christopher Bone. “Hay festival 2021 is a marker and a promise: stories matter and the conversation cannot be stopped (so long as we remember to unmute).”

Alison Flood

Women’s prize shortlist announced
In a year of widespread inertia, three cheers for a Women’s prize for fiction shortlist that transports readers from Barbados to Alabama to the English countryside, with one protagonist confined to a strange mansion and another travelling the world writing viral social media posts.

The shortlisted novels are The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett; Piranesi by Susanna Clarke; Unsettled Ground by Claire Fuller; Transcendent Kingdom by Yaa Gyasi (above); How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House by Cherie Jones; and No One Is Talking About This by Patricia Lockwood. The winner will be announced on 7 July, and there is a one-in-three chance that it will feature twins.

Katy Guest

Lobbying

Since it emerged that vacuum-cleaner émigré James Dyson was texting Boris Johnson last year to clarify that there would be no change to the tax paid by his workers, in the UK temporarily to build medical ventilators, the issue of political “lobbying” has once again come to the fore. But why is it called that?

A “lobby”, from the Latin lobium, was originally a cloister of the sort found in monasteries, not much frequented by the present prime minister. After its introduction in the 16th century it began also to be used to describe any kind of corridor or anteroom. As Polonius says of Prince Hamlet (left): “You know sometimes he walks four hours together / Here in the lobby.”

The political sense is first given in 1640, describing the public entrance hall of parliament: “The outward Room of the Commons House, called the Lobby.” This was designed to enable interviews between MPs and non-members. So when people ask legislators to change the law in their favour, they are “lobbyists”, first recorded in the mid-19th century (along with “lobbying”) for petitioners of the US Congress. Happily, modern technology means you don't have to stand in an actual lobby to be a lobbyist, but can do it all over WhatsApp.

Steven Poole

WORD OF THE WEEK

Since it emerged that vacuum-cleaner émigré James Dyson was texting Boris Johnson last year to clarify that there would be no change to the tax paid by his workers, in the UK temporarily to build medical ventilators, the issue of political “lobbying” has once again come to the fore. But why is it called that?

A “lobby”, from the Latin lobium, was originally a cloister of the sort found in monasteries, not much frequented by the present prime minister. After its introduction in the 16th century it began also to be used to describe any kind of corridor or anteroom. As Polonius says of Prince Hamlet (left): “You know sometimes he walks four hours together / Here in the lobby.”

The political sense is first given in 1640, describing the public entrance hall of parliament: “The outward Room of the Commons House, called the Lobby.” This was designed to enable interviews between MPs and non-members. So when people ask legislators to change the law in their favour, they are “lobbyists”, first recorded in the mid-19th century (along with “lobbying”) for petitioners of the US Congress. Happily, modern technology means you don't have to stand in an actual lobby to be a lobbyist, but can do it all over WhatsApp.

Steven Poole

WORD OF THE WEEK
The books that made me ¶

The book I am currently reading
Poetry in a Global Age by Jahan Ramazani. His key argument is that poetry is inherently constructed by a network of global engagements, this being the most generous way to appreciate a text.

The book that changed my life
At the age of 19, I found William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and of Experience in a bookshop in Sheffield; it was the first time I’d read poetry and I’ve yet to stop.

The book I wish I’d written
Philippa Perry’s The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read. It is annoyingly insightful about parenting; each time my wife mentions it, I’d like to say: “Oh, that book I wrote!”

The book that influenced my writing
Derek Walcott’s The Star-Apple Kingdom. Discovering an exciting poet of colour and one who employed voices gave me licence to be linguistically licentious (archaic meaning of this word only, please!)

The book that changed my mind
I was freed from the embarrassment of my Indian heritage by Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks: “For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.”

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Sometime in the future, when I retire, the first book I’ll read is The Faerie Queene by Edmund Spenser, having so far only read sections of it. It’s such a forbidding venture that hopefully it’ll keep me from retiring.

The last book that made me cry
The final scene between mother and son in Shuggie Bain by Douglas Stuart has a triple deployment of loo roll; by the final use, I was in bits. Whoever uses the leitmotif of loo roll to excite tears in the reader?

The last book that made me laugh
Vahni Capildeo’s Measures of Expatriation is complicatedly funny, and I love the unexpected moments of wit.

The book I give as a gift
Richard Scott’s Soho is the most gripping portrayal of queer lives I’ve read so far. It always wins me gratitude for my gifting skills.

The book I’d most like to be remembered for
In an attempt at humility, I declare an indifference to the value system of legacy! I’d rather focus on the joys of scribbling my next book.

My comfort read
John Milton’s Paradise Lost is one of those rare moments in poetry when language is inside-outside the central tones of English, and I feel at home in this choppy music. Me, highbrow? I wear a bow tie as I compose these answers.

The book that changed my mind
I was freed from the embarrassment of my Indian heritage by Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks: “For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.”

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Sometime in the future, when I retire, the first book I’ll read is The Faerie Queene by Edmund Spenser, having so far only read sections of it. It’s such a forbidding venture that hopefully it’ll keep me from retiring.

The last book that made me cry
The final scene between mother and son in Shuggie Bain by Douglas Stuart has a triple deployment of loo roll; by the final use, I was in bits. Whoever uses the leitmotif of loo roll to excite tears in the reader?

The last book that made me laugh
Vahni Capildeo’s Measures of Expatriation is complicatedly funny, and I love the unexpected moments of wit.

The book I give as a gift
Richard Scott’s Soho is the most gripping portrayal of queer lives I’ve read so far. It always wins me gratitude for my gifting skills.

The book I’d most like to be remembered for
In an attempt at humility, I declare an indifference to the value system of legacy! I’d rather focus on the joys of scribbling my next book.

My comfort read
John Milton’s Paradise Lost is one of those rare moments in poetry when language is inside-outside the central tones of English, and I feel at home in this choppy music. Me, highbrow? I wear a bow tie as I compose these answers.

The book that changed my mind
I was freed from the embarrassment of my Indian heritage by Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks: “For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.”

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Sometime in the future, when I retire, the first book I’ll read is The Faerie Queene by Edmund Spenser, having so far only read sections of it. It’s such a forbidding venture that hopefully it’ll keep me from retiring.

The last book that made me cry
The final scene between mother and son in Shuggie Bain by Douglas Stuart has a triple deployment of loo roll; by the final use, I was in bits. Whoever uses the leitmotif of loo roll to excite tears in the reader?

The last book that made me laugh
Vahni Capildeo’s Measures of Expatriation is complicatedly funny, and I love the unexpected moments of wit.

The book I give as a gift
Richard Scott’s Soho is the most gripping portrayal of queer lives I’ve read so far. It always wins me gratitude for my gifting skills.

The book I’d most like to be remembered for
In an attempt at humility, I declare an indifference to the value system of legacy! I’d rather focus on the joys of scribbling my next book.

My comfort read
John Milton’s Paradise Lost is one of those rare moments in poetry when language is inside-outside the central tones of English, and I feel at home in this choppy music. Me, highbrow? I wear a bow tie as I compose these answers.

The book that changed my mind
I was freed from the embarrassment of my Indian heritage by Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks: “For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.”

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Sometime in the future, when I retire, the first book I’ll read is The Faerie Queene by Edmund Spenser, having so far only read sections of it. It’s such a forbidding venture that hopefully it’ll keep me from retiring.
The first obsession, for Alison Bechdel, was with karate. In her early 20s and fresh out of college, the artist and writer turned up on a whim to an all-women’s karate class (this was the early 1980s in New York), became swiftly addicted, and a year later, after training five nights a week, popped out the other end with a black belt. After that, in swift succession, came fanatical attachments to skiing, cycling, yoga, running, climbing, aerobics and weight training. “Due to space constraints,” she writes in The Secret to Superhuman Strength, her graphic memoir about these obsessions and the quest for enlightenment that drove them, “I have not touched on my passion for in-line skating.”

This is Bechdel’s third graphic memoir, the first of which, the 2006 blockbuster Fun Home, brought her the kind of fame not usually conferred on cartoonists. With mordant humour, Bechdel detailed growing up in rural Pennsylvania in a family that, if it didn’t turn her into a writer exactly, certainly bequeathed her a life-long wealth of material. (In short: Bechdel’s parents, who were teachers, ran a part-time funeral home, and just as Bechdel was starting to come out as a lesbian, her closeted gay father died in a presumed suicide.) A few years later, an obscure reference she’d made in a cartoon strip to misogyny in movies was rediscovered and the Bechdel Test, as it became known – the requirement that a movie should include at least one scene in which two women talk to each other about something other than men - made her a household name.

One side effect of a lifetime spent chasing the endorphin high of hard exercise is that Bechdel, at 60, looks 20 years younger than her age, appearing via Zoom from her home in Vermont. “I have my Zoom filter, my Vaseline lens, on!” she says jokingly, but the fact remains, she must be the world’s fittest cartoonist, an artist with the stamina of an ultra-marathon runner, whose obsession with fitness runs almost as deep as with work. The question of the book is how the two are connected, and what, precisely, Bechdel thinks she’s been doing all these years.

That physical and mental fitness are linked is not a new idea, of course, not least in modern times, when the notion that fitness is next to godliness is heavily promoted by the gym industry. As in previous books in which she marries memoir with literary history, she flips between an account of her own life and that of other writers: William Wordsworth (hung up on walking as a short cut to the writer’s sublime); Jack Kerouac (once climbed a mountain in tennis shoes, provoking a natural high as powerful as any brought on by drugs); and Margaret Fuller, the 19th-century feminist who worked alongside Ralph Emerson on notions of transcendentalism in nature. Between these writers, Bechdel traces a “chain of influence”, one that she follows all the way to recent booms in physical fitness.

As her new memoir comes out, Fun Home author Alison Bechdel talks to Emma Brockes about the power of exercise, being seduced by a fan, and marrying twice: first as a protest and later in love.

‘If you had told me that I would some day become tired of talking about myself, I would not have believed you’
There are a lot of things to unpack in all this, not least the delusion, present in most of us when we exercise, that we are at some level staving off death. (As Don DeLillo put it in Underworld, evoking a scene of people running on treadmills: “They were training to live forever.”) For Bechdel, mortality “is the central anxiety. Every little anxiety we have can be boiled down to fear of death, or of disease and dependence. So why not just try to deal with it head on?”

There is also the question of creative work and the frame of mind best attained to achieve it. “Looking at these other writers in periods when they had great excitement and periods of being really depressed, or addicted, or stuck, wondering is it possible to engineer that creative flow?” The short answer, she says, is no: when an artist is stuck, “the only thing you can do is do the work, which is really hard and you have to get through a lot of bad stuff before it gets good”. On the other hand, she says: “For me, that’s where the exercise comes in. It’s a short cut, a cheat, to get some of that feeling of flow.”

For decades, Bechdel worked in relative obscurity, which, apart from occasional money worries, suited her just fine. Her long-running comic strip, “Dykes to Watch Out For”, ran in scores of alternative newspapers across the US and she had a large, loyal following. The publication of Fun Home, which was later made into a Broadway show, changed all that and made Bechdel startlingly famous in a way that she still hasn’t entirely grown used to. (“If you had told me,” she says, “that I would some day become tired of talking about myself, I would not have believed you, because I had this boundless need to be understood and recognised. And yet I reached a point during the Fun Home hulabaloo when I really started to feel overexposed.”)

The impact of her background surfaces most starkly, as it does for many people in relation to their childhoods, in Bechdel’s intimate relationships. Part of the project of her new book was for Bechdel to look back over her relationship history and see how or why she behaved in certain pivotal ways. There are some wild episodes. In her 30s, while living in Minnesota, she received a fan letter from a woman living in a farm-house in rural Vermont, and decided on a whim to move out there (and, incredibly, to move in with the letter writer, sight unseen). “That was a very strange period of my life,” she says, “and I was seduced. It was a fan letter and I just … I let myself fall for that. That was a very narcissistic thing. And I’m hoping as I’m going through my life I’m less self-absorbed in that way.”

The paradox of this new-found attitude is that it runs entirely counter to the slant of Bechdel’s work, in which self-absorption powers every story. The point, she says, is that the details of her life, when examined in granular enough detail, provide a gateway to deeper and more universal discoveries. In The Secret to Superhuman Strength, she calls her fanatical exercise a form of “metaphysical fitness”, and likens the trance-like state it brings about to writers have been documenting since the beginning of time. (Disliking an author, in Bechdel’s view, is no prohibition.)
NOW EVERYWHERE: THE CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE IS DROWNED.

THE BEST LACK ALL HUMILITY, WHILE THE WORST ARE FULL OF PASSIONATE INTENSITY!

IF MACHINES BORE YOU, TAKE A CLASS! THERE’S SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE!

IT’S A WORLD GONE MAD!

PACIFISTS PAYING FOR BOOT CAMP!

YOGA, ONCE THE PROVINCE OF ASCETICS AND UNSHaven COMnE DwellERS...

FEMINISTS LEARNING TO POLE DANCE!

GEEKS FLIPPING TRACTOR TIRES!

AND THE TRENDS KEEP COMING!

WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?
YOU PROBABLY DON’T EVEN HAVE TO CHANGE YOUR CLOTHES BECAUSE YOU’RE ALREADY SPORTING ATHLEISURE WEAR!

PERHAPS YOU’RE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING MORE LIKE A REVIVAL MEETING, IN A DISCO, ON BIKES.

YOU’RE ON A JOURNEY? YOU’RE NOT THE SAME WRETCH WHO WALKED IN HERE TODAY!

KAVE CYCLE!

$128 FROM LULU LEMUR

YOU’RE A WHOLE NEW WRETCH!

...HAS BECOME AS UBQUITOUS AS TANDOORI CHICKEN.

WE’RE A NATION OF GIANT TODDLERS, DRAGGING OUR BLANKETS AND BOTTLES EVERYWHERE WE GO!

FOR GOD’S SAKE, DON’T FORGET YOUR CORE!

IT’S A WONDER WE EVER EVOLVED TO WALK UPRIGHT BEFORE PILATES CAME ALONG.

WHAT GNAWING VOID PROPELS THIS CARDIO-PULMONARY FRENZY?

THE SPIRITUAL AND MORAL BANKRUPTCY OF LATE CAPITALISM?

THE DESEMBODIMENT OF OUR INCREASINGLY VIRTUAL EXISTENCE?

A BOTTOMLESS CREDULITY THAT ‘6 WEEKS TO A 6-PACK’ IS HUMANLY POSSIBLE?
It’s even worse outside. A new activity requiring a specialized roof rack seems to be invented every day.

And forget triathlons. Now you have to run for days over a mountain range or through an obstacle course designed by counterterrorism experts to get any cred.

But skeptical as I may seem about this rampant expanse of damp spandex, I am damp as the next dupe.

I can’t help myself. The sweat, the endorphins, the gear, the togs, the next new thing!
eventually, Holly gave up polyamory, “that my work is not my life. That I do have a life apart puts it in the book, “jealous and distracted”. Instead of feeling free to work, Bechdel felt, as she other partner. “In fact, it didn’t work out like that. polyamorous with my work, and she could have her relationships. In her 40s, she had a crack at polyamory, dating a woman called Holly, who had another girlfriend. It seemed to Bechdel, briefly, like a good fit. “When I met Holly, and she told me she was polyamorous, it seemed like a perfect solution: I could be polyamorous with my work, and she could have her partner.” In fact, it didn’t work out like that. Instead of feeling free to work, Bechdel felt, as she puts it in the book, “jealous and distracted”. She also realised something during that period: “that my work is not my life. That I do have a life apart from my work.” Eventually, Holly gave up polyamory, and she and Bechdel are now married. “There’s something very appealing politically, and philosophically, about polyamory; there is this great, expansive openness that it promised. I like to think that I’m still a little bit polyamorous theoretically, if not actually.” In fact the act of getting married – which only became legal for gay people across the US in 2015 – struck Bechdel as surprisingly radical. She’d been married once before, as a protest. “In the early 2000s, some American cities did these civil disobedience weddings and I happened to be in San Francisco with my partner, and we got very swept up into this excitement.” Alongside a crowd of other couples, they got married outside City Hall, an act, she says, that was mired in “paradox: that neither of us had ever wanted to get married – we thought of marriage as this backward concept, and we were all about abolishing marriage – but somehow it felt very radical, in the moment, as two women, to go get married.” That marriage, and all the others conducted that day, were eventually annulled by the state. But the feeling of radicalism remained, she says, and in 2015, “when it suddenly became legal, it seemed transgressive in a way. That’s how I rationalised it to myself. I guess I’m able to hold that tension; it feels like a comfortable kind of dissonance for me to think of myself as a married person.”

“Young, Yeah. It’s a paradox. But I do feel like something happens when you have turned yourself over wholly to a project, even though you have a mercenary goal at the end of it. Something else happens. If it’s a genuine process, you somehow – I’m very bad at talking about these intangible ideas – but you do become free of yourself, at least for a short period of time, and it’s such an ecstatic feeling. It’s worth whatever it takes.”

Sometimes, this experimental attitude of Bechdel’s doesn’t pan out quite as planned, particularly in her relationships. In her 40s, she had a crack at polyamory, dating a woman called Holly, who had another girlfriend. It seemed to Bechdel, briefly, like a good fit. “When I met Holly, and she told me she was polyamorous, it seemed like a perfect solution: I could be polyamorous with my work, and she could have her other partner.” In fact, it didn’t work out like that. Instead of feeling free to work, Bechdel felt, as she puts it in the book, “jealous and distracted”.

She also realised something during that period: “that my work is not my life. That I do have a life apart from my work.” Eventually, Holly gave up polyamory, and she and Bechdel are now married. “There’s something very appealing politically, and philosophically, about polyamory; there is this great, expansive openness that it promised. I like to think that I’m still a little bit polyamorous theoretically, if not actually.” In fact the act of getting married – which only became legal for gay people across the US in 2015 – struck Bechdel as surprisingly radical. She’d been married once before, as a protest. “In the early 2000s, some American cities did these civil disobedience weddings and I happened to be in San Francisco with my partner, and we got very swept up into this excitement.” Alongside a crowd of other couples, they got married outside City Hall, an act, she says, that was mired in “paradox: that neither of us had ever wanted to get married – we thought of marriage as this backward concept, and we were all about abolishing marriage – but somehow it felt very radical, in the moment, as two women, to go get married.” That marriage, and all the others conducted that day, were eventually annulled by the state. But the feeling of radicalism remained, she says, and in 2015, “when it suddenly became legal, it seemed transgressive in a way. That’s how I rationalised it to myself. I guess I’m able to hold that tension; it feels like a comfortable kind of dissonance for me to think of myself as a married person.”

“Dykes to Watch Out For” was one of the first representations of lesbians – and in particular butch lesbians – in popular culture and it’s a source of amazement that, since its inception in 1983, not a whole lot has changed. “I used to explain it in terms of just capitalism and commodification,” says Bechdel. “Most products are aimed at selling something to men, and men don’t want to see masculine women. But I don’t think that’s entirely it.” She thinks for a moment. “I feel kind of fine about it. I don’t want to become commodified more than I have been, so it’s a way of being outside of that system in a way that’s really wonderful.”

One thing you notice about Bechdel is how, over the course of her two previous memoirs (six years after Fun Home, she wrote the loose follow-up Are You My Mother?), her depictions of herself as a child are consistent with the way she is now. She grew up in a conservative place at a conservative time, but she was permitted to be herself from the get-go. “I feel like that was a gift from my parents. I was allowed to be an intact self, in a way that probably wasn’t super common at the time.” Her parents may, occasionally, have forced her into a dress, but most of the time she was allowed to run around in boys’ clothes, with short hair and the freedom to pursue her obsessions.

One of these was muscles. As a child, she sent away for a pamphlet on how to pump iron to achieve them. “Part of why that whole muscle-man fantasy was so potent for me as a child, was that it was really about being self-sufficient; about not needing my parents, or anyone. That’s part of my whole intimacy struggle; I can’t just be with someone. It’s a challenge for me to stop doing and just be.” Bechdel still goes running, something she found “salvational” during the pandemic. But, after living with Holly for 13 years, she thinks she’s finally making a little progress on the art of being still; of “learning what it means to be present and truly open to the other person – not trying to turn them into some kind of extension of myself”.

It is the kind of paradox Bechdel has spent a career brilliantly exposing; stillness as an indication of movement. At 60, a fully grown adult by any measure, does she ever feel sheepish still to be searching for the truth about herself? “You’re not fully grown! We keep on growing! There are identifiable developmental stages that proceed into old age, and most of them involve becoming less focused on yourself.” Not everyone does it. But for Bechdel, “that’s the exciting thing about life: the constant opportunity to grow”.

The Secret to Superhuman Strength by Alison Bechdel is published by Vintage.
If you wanted to locate a defining preoccupation in the consistently remarkable, formally daring fiction of Rachel Cusk, you might well alight on the issue of property. Cusk is obsessed with houses. Her revelatory *Outline* trilogy, completed in 2018 with the publication of *Kudos*, faltered on the awkward class politics of its central volume, in which the narrator’s efforts to renovate an ex-council flat are undermined by the inconvenient working classes living below.

Now, in her first novel since the trilogy’s reimagining of novelistic form, Cusk gives us not just a dream home but a dream home with a second home attached – the “Second Place” of the novel’s title. And it’s not just any old place either. It is, says the narrator, “a place of great but subtle beauty, where artists often seem to find the will or the energy or just the opportunity to work”. Indeed, she says, “people often say this is one of the last places”.

The Second Place began as a “parcel of wasteland” adjoining the main property. The narrator and her husband bought it “to prevent it from being misused”, or to put it another way, to prevent any disturbance to the boundaries of their idyll. With the help of a group of men “who all help one another when there’s physical work to be done”, the cottage on the property was renovated. Now the narrator invites artists to use it as a kind of retreat, or, as she puts it, “a home for the things that weren’t already here - the higher things”.

On the surface, then, this is a novel of glaring privilege, steeped in a mode of middle-class existence so rarified that the “lower things” must never be allowed to intrude. This is, however, a Cusk novel, and in Cusk novels the surface, as experienced by reader and characters alike, invariably proves too fragile to be trusted. *Second Place*, it turns out, is a novel less about property, and more about the boundaries and misplaced emotional investment for which property is a proxy.

Where the *Outline* trilogy centred the act of listening – the narrator often receding while the people she met recounted the details of their lives – *Second Place* re-establishes a more singular viewpoint, taking the form of either a letter or a slightly breathless address to someone called Jeffers. The narrator is never named, and Jeffers is neither seen nor contextualised. It’s a telling balance of opposites in a novel devoted to the difficulties of feeling complete. Alone in Paris, the narrator happens across an exhibition of paintings by an artist she refers to as L. The experience is revelatory, transcendent. There is no doubt in her mind that L must be the next artist she invites to inhabit the Second Place. After some delays and distractions, L accepts.

Accessed by invitation only, the Second Place allows for a carefully managed titration of human contact into the narrator’s calm but distanced world. L, though, upends this mechanism of order by bringing someone with him – a young and beautiful companion called Brett. Even before meeting her, the narrator senses in this uninvited addition a profound and destabilising danger. “It wasn’t at all how I’d planned it!” she tells Jeffers. “I feared, suddenly, that my belief in the life I was living wouldn’t hold, and that all I’d built up would collapse underneath me and I’d be unhappy again.” In its apparent excess, her panic is telling. This is a person for whom control and comfort are effectively the same thing.

Her fear is horribly confirmed. When she meets Brett for the first time, Brett first scrutinises, and then, in an act of brazen disregard for personal boundaries, touches the narrator’s hair, finding it “really quite dry”. Painfully, the narrator is made aware of “the feeling of invisibility I very often had, now that I lived a life in which I was very rarely commented on”. She drives home “like an animal in dumb torment”, barely able to stop herself from screaming and lashing out. With just a touch and a word, the smooth and ordered surface of her life has been disturbed. She has been seen, and the experience of being seen is agony.

By the next morning, though, that agony almost seems welcome. Through Brett’s uncurling, youthful scrutiny, and by the unpredictable, at times confrontational presence of L, a kind of charge has been detonated. “My whole life,” she tells Jeffers, “had merely been a process of controlling myself and holding things in.” Now, “strange, violent impulses were coming over me, one after another. I wanted to lie down and hammer my fists on the grass – I wanted to experience a complete loss of control.” Untethered from her own self-protective instincts though she has become, the narrator instinctively grasps what

---

**Cusk slowly reveals the wound implied by the novel’s title: the uneven, deeply gendered experience of freedom**

---

**Second Place**

by Rachel Cusk,

Faber, £14.99

*Fiction* An exploration of art, privilege and our relationship with property unlocks some exquisitely cruel home truths

Sam Byers
she stands to gain. “This loss of control held new possibilities for me, however angry and ugly and out of sorts it had made me feel so far, as though it were itself a kind of freedom.” But a freedom from what? From “my own compartmentalised nature. All these compartments in which I had kept things, from which I would decide what to show to other people who kept themselves in compartments too!”

In this moment, for reader and narrator alike, the true function of property is laid bare. A home is nothing more than a compartment in which we contain ourselves, and by which we keep others out. L, of course, has no time for it. Through his semi-transient life as an artist, he says, he has “watched the people of his acquaintance create homes that were like plaster casts of their own wealth, with humans inside. Those structures sometimes exploded and sometimes merely suffocated their occupants.”

It is through these differing relationships to property that Cusk slowly, agonisingly, reveals the wound implied by the novel’s sly pun of a title: the uneven, contested, deeply gendered experience of freedom. L, the epitome of the arrogant, entitled, unconstrained male artist, experiences property not as a place or possession at all, but “as a set of inalienable rights attached to himself. His property was the radial sphere of his own persona; it was the environs of wherever he happened to be.” For the narrator, it is all so much more fragile, more tenuous, both hard won and easily lost. And the cruellest irony of all is that she knows, in the end, that neither her property nor her fearfully defended way of life will protect her. Encouraging her daughter to move on after a failed relationship, she tells her “she would always be able to find a white man to be obliterated by, if that was what she wanted”. The line is typical of Cusk’s tonal method. The novel’s emotional nuance, its stylistic poise, has been as perfectly and painstakingly constructed as the life it describes, only to be blown apart by a flat and shattering statement, weighted around a central, immovable truth.

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator says of L, whom she both admires and loathes, and by whom she knows herself to be loathed in turn: “He drew me with the cruelty of his rightness closer to the truth.” We might say the same of Cusk, our arch chronicler of the nullifying choice between suffocation and explosion. Her genius is that in deliberately blurring a boundary of her own – that between a writer and her subject, between the expectation of autobiography so often attached to writing by women, and the carapace of pure invention so often unthinkably afforded to men – she tricks us into believing that her preoccupations and failings, her privileges and apparent assumptions, are not our own. By the time we realise what has happened, it is too late: our own surface has been disturbed, our own complacent compartment dismantled. It is a shock, but as the narrator of Second Place reminds us, “shock is sometimes necessary, for without it we would drift into entropy”. Cusk is necessary too – deeply so, and Second Place, exquisite in the cruelty of its rightness, reminds us why.

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

**Stylistic poise**
Rachel Cusk

---

**Book of the week**

Saturday 1 May 2021 The Guardian 13
Music From Shetland to San Francisco: in praise of the coast’s most monstrous and melancholy sound machines

Amy Liptrot

The word obsession is overused. People say they are obsessed with something when what they mean is they have a passing interest. But Jennifer Lucy Allan is truly obsessed with foghorns, those near-obscure warning honks around our coasts – not to be confused with ships’ horns. This fascination has taken her from Shetland to San Francisco, to a PhD on foghorns, a radio programme and now this original and absorbing book, which is much more interesting than a study of foghorns has any right to be.

Particularly entertaining are her investigations into modern coastal folklore. Allan explores rumours that a decommissioned foghorn was used by a rave sound system, that lighthouse keepers developed speech patterns to fit around the horns’ blasts, that “sounds of second world war battles are still bouncing around in deep-sea trenches”, and that “fog money” was paid out to keepers who endured their din.

Her interest began in 2013 when she witnessed Foghorn Requiem, an open-air performance by brass bands, ships and foghorns around the cliffs at Souter Point lighthouse in South Shields. The “aural obliteration” of the foghorn and its emotional effect on the audience triggered a quest to understand its power. As well as visiting many archives, Allan spends time in Lizard, Cornwall, and a month staying at Sumburgh Head lighthouse in Shetland.

The foghorn first appeared in the 1850s, although Allan discovers that its history is more complicated than it seems. She links the story with maritime history, industrialisation and post-industry, colonialism, cartography, acoustics, engineering, folklore and psychogeography.

Allan’s background is as a journalist specialising in experimental and avant-garde music. She is less interested in the machinery or the engineering, or indeed the horns themselves, than the monstrous and melancholy sound they create. She has had a long affair with “weird” sounds and lists some favourites: “Buddhist monks chanting for exorcisms”, “field recording of icebergs melting” and “brass stretched out into hour-long multiphonic drones”.

But foghorns have been the biggest revelation to her – each has a different sonority: “There is no other sound tied so deeply to a type of weather, and no machine sounds quite that massive,” she notes with awe.

Allan is particularly concerned with how these sounds are connected to identity and emotion. Listening to the horn at Sumburgh, she realises: “I had thought of the foghorn as a lonely sound, a big melancholic beast echoing into the vastness of the open sea, often to nobody at all. But it isn’t. This heaving machine is the sound of somebody else, the sound of civilisation and safety …”

We are led through the development of foghorns, including alternative alert systems such as underwater bells. Along the way, there are lots of interesting and often beautiful ideas about sound. When writing about sonar, Allan observes: “The topography of the sea comes to us in sound waves and the topography of the land comes through light and sight.” And we learn that, in San Francisco, where the sound of foghorns is so familiar, “the fogs themselves are said to be singing”.

Lighthouse and foghorn at Sumburgh Head, Shetland.

The Foghorn’s Lament: a book to file between memoirs of lighthouse keepers (“foghorn bagging” being a more niche strand of “lighthouse bagging”, where enthusiasts attempt to visit as many as possible) and books about music, expanding the definition by exploring the territory between music and noise.

Foghorns have now been largely superseded by GPS onboard vessels, and a backup system of beeping electronic fog sirens further out to sea. The death of the foghorn is linked to the demise of industry, thus the honks evoke nostalgia. This book is a lament for a disappearing way of life – numbers of former lighthouse keepers diminish each year – but also an appeal to listen deeply. It shows how there can be “a whole world to discover in just one sound”.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The charismatic Glasgow-born winger and music obsessive recalls football before riches arrived

Sukhdev Sandhu

In the 1980s, Pat Nevin was referred to as a “weirdo” by his teammates at Chelsea. Slight, good-looking and fond of wearing a leather jacket and ripped jeans, he was sometimes mistaken for Johnny Marr. His favourite writer was Albert Camus and he read Anton Chekhov on match-day coaches up to Newcastle.

He was a mesmerising winger, but when an NME journalist described him as “the first post-punk footballer”, it was the word “footballer” against which he chafed; he saw the game as an activity rather than an identity. In *In Ma Head, Son!* (1997), a book-length collaboration with psychologist George Sik he published towards the end of his career, he worried about becoming an ex-player: “It’s a bit like people who continually go on about the war. They can’t stop talking about it. It was their finest hour.”

Nevin would go on to be a respected writer and broadcaster, but his career – not least his articalcy and ambivalence about it – still possess a mystique that makes this new memoir a pleasure to read. His childhood was especially formative. He grew up in an eight-person, three-bedroom tenement flat in Easterhouse, Glasgow, a working-class area whose atmosphere are way off the 1980s League era. Money was never an obsession though: he had started out part-time at Clyde so that he could continue his BA at Glasgow Tech, received wages of £180 at Chelsea, and did without an agent for most of his career.

It is hard to imagine Nevin would be comfortable with the marketing and brand management that surrounds today’s players. He is happy, though, that they don’t have to splash around on muddy or waterlogged pitches, can rely on referees to protect them from kneecapping defenders, and don’t, as he once did, play two games in two days - and seven in 15. It should go without saying that he would hate the idea that the 1980s represented his finest hour. Still, *The Accidental Footballer*, so modest and self-effacing, so decently socialist, evokes the national game in a period of transition, to which he himself contributed with style and with soul.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Jonathan Meades is a sceptic. Not in the debased sense of someone who gullibly parrots the claims of shills and the deluded that global warming is a hoax, or that masks don’t mitigate the spread of respiratory viruses. Nor in the idly egotistical sense Meades himself identifies as “the English bents towards spiritual sloth and intellectual incuriosity, what we dignify as scepticism”.

But in the fiery and ancient sense of scepticism: he is not just a man of little faith but an enemy of belief itself: a jeerer at creeds, a sneerer at doctrines of all flavours, metaphysical and otherwise. He has too much sly wit, of course, to identify himself as such: “While it would be beguiling to appoint oneself part of that knowing cadre which lacks conviction,” he admits in the preface to this new collection of journalism and speeches, “I lack the conviction to do so.” He does not, like some celebrity pontificators, award himself a gold star for his ability to identify junk. He is too busy enjoying himself blowing raspberries. Meades sees faith everywhere, and loudly despises it everywhere.

Nationalism, for one thing. “Like all causes, all denominations, all churches, all movements, nationalism shouts about its muscle and potency yet reveals its frailty by demanding statutory protection against alleged libels,” Meades wrote in 2006. The coming of Brexit did not moderate this view. “The nationalist urge to leave was a form of faith,” he observed in 2019. “A faith is autonomous. A faith requires no empirical proof … Taking Back Control was a euphemism for the Balkanisation of Britain, for atomisation, for communitarianism based in ethnicity, class, place, faith. A willing apartheid where the other is to be mistrusted – just like in the Golden Age when we drowned the folk in the next valley because their word for haystack was different from ours.”

Dr Bruce Banner used to warn: “You won’t like me when I’m angry”, but the aficionado of Meades is always hoping for the inevitable transformation, the dandyish Hulk rampage. One of the foremost prose stylists of his age in any register, Meades has an especial ear for the brutal music of invective. He is surely one of the planet’s best haters. The present
prime minister, unsurprisingly, has proved a potent inspiration. “Boris Johnson’s lovable maverick shtick has been to dissemble himself beneath a mantle of suet, to pretend to inarticulacy, to oink about as the People’s Primate, to wear a ten-year-old’s hairdo, to laugh it off – no matter what it is, no matter how grave it may be – and to display charm learned at a charm school with duff tutors,” he writes. “This construct is going on threadbare. If one devotes such energy to a simulacrum of oafishness one becomes an oaf.”

Johnson is, he joyously adds, “a blubbery pink peculator” who is said to have enjoyed “an assisted siesta in Shoreditch”. In that phrase “assisted siesta” we witness the pure poetry of vituperation.

A soft target in more ways than one, Johnson is joined in this volume by other bovines more widely held sacred. George Orwell is a “mediocre novelist” and his mad writing advice has had a chilling effect on prose style. (“Plain speaking, like plain food, is a puritan virtue and thus no virtue at all,” Meades pronounces.) Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain, the urinal sniggeringly exhibited in a gallery, “was a dull jest then and it remains a dull jest, but it has for a century been treated with reverence by morons”. There are certainly enough morons to go round, all spaffing the faddish lingo Meades is so expertly nuking an outmoded logo from the face of a multiplatform contortionists, important synergy distinguishes Monkhouse from virtually everyone else he played as “a fog of armpits and chip fat”), and in his remarkable career of slumming it for success. “What the Nazis “started out as resentful hicks. Cities are mankind’s greatest collective achievement; it is (back to) nature that is unnatural.”

It shouldn’t be thought that this book comprises nothing but screeds. There are, too, filthy jokes in French and fond obituaries of the celebrity cook Jennifer Paterson and writer Lesley Cunliffe. Meades likes the writing of Elizabeth David, the novels of HG Wells and Flann O’Brien; he writes admiringly about Simon Jenkins on churches, Julian Barnes on art, and the satirical cartooning of Steve Bell and Martin Rowson. The latter he dubs “fast art”, though not all fast art is found worthy of his attention: he is not much for rock and pop music, which he refers to with a pair of scare-quote tweezers as “music”, as though it is only pretending to be music. (Though how?) Meades offers intriguing appreciations, in particular, of two men with hidden depths and kindred spirits. Addressing John Major in print, he writes: “You will come to be seen as the last prime minister who had about him the Tommy spirit of the conscript army which won the war: there was something bolshie and obdurate about you and a sense of eccentricity suppressed – beneath your middle manager’s disguise there was a true son of the circus, a daring virtuoso who could and did get to the top of the greasy pole without a safety net.” Do Meades’s celebrated suits furnish similar camouflage?

Reviewing the autobiography of Bob Monkhouse, meanwhile, Meades delights in the comedian’s droll intelligence (Monkhouse refers to one Oldham venue he played as “a fog of armpits and chip fat”), and in his remarkable career of slumming it for success. “What distinguishes Monkhouse from virtually everyone else in illegitimate theatre,” Meades writes (“illegitimate theatre”!), “is the fact that he has a lot to spare. He’s not stretching himself; he doesn’t believe in it.” Ah, our author embraces a fellow sceptic. “Monkhouse is a broadsheet posing as a tabloid. He has made a career out of abasing himself, out of sedulously refusing to realise his potential. And he seems not to possess a pathological need to be loved. When he invented himself, he quite forgot about ‘sincerity.’” Elsewhere, Meades claims he too lacks “the light entertainer’s or politician’s creepy yearning to be liked”. Which, of course, is a clever way of making people like you.

Probably we don’t deserve Meades, a man who apparently has never composed a dull paragraph. What other living writer has a YouTube channel devoted to low-res digitisations of his TV documentaries that the bootlegging uploaders have literally called a place of worship: the Meades Shrine? A consistent sceptic would bristle, but then Meades himself here praises another writer for his “indifference to the paltry virtue of consistency”, so I think we can make an exception.

To buy a copy for £26.10 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A farm in rural Punjab provides the setting for two tales of alienation that link a young man to his great-grandmother

**(Alex Clark)**

It’s a decade since Sunjeev Sahota published his debut novel, *Ours Are The Streets*, a bravura piece of imaginative intensity that took the form of a journal written by a would-be suicide bomber, a British Muslim of Pakistani descent, for his wife, a white British woman, and their child. The reader never discovered whether the planned explosion in a Sheffield shopping centre took place; that was peripheral to Sahota’s primary aim of exploring the cultural alienation and isolation that, in this instance, led his protagonist to radicalisation and violence.

The occasional narrator of Sahota’s third novel, *China Room*, is also alienated and isolated, though his response is to turn his violent unhappiness inward; at 18, he is in the throes of heroin addiction. His account of a summer spent in rural Punjab is interspersed with the more substantial third-person story of a young woman in 1929, whom we later learn was his great-grandmother. The reader never finds herself living in the “china room” – a cramped, derelict, once part of a dowry – that looms largest in the novel. Mehar shares the room with Harbans and Gurleen, whom she has only recently met; the three of them have been married, in a single day, to three brothers. Now, they spend their days doing chores and waiting for the matriarch, Mai, to tap one of them on the shoulder, thereby summoning her to a bedroom to meet her husband and, it is hoped, become pregnant with a son. The narrative’s most important driver is that, while each of the brothers knows which wife is “theirs”, the veiled young women do not. Sex takes place in darkness; the rest of the time, segregation between husbands and wives is near total.

Until it isn’t. There is a hint of the Shakespearean bed trick about the plot that unfolds, although it is only lightly sketched, as with much else in the novel. We know, for example, that Mai’s own marriage, and the subsequent death of her husband, influences her often callous single-mindedness, but details are scant. We know too that the pressure of political events, many centred around independence movements, contribute to the tension on the farm; that questions of caste, religion and sexuality are always present in the background. But these realities are never allowed to stifle what is essentially a novel of interior life and sensation. Sahota refuses to let his historical characters act as though they are in a historical novel.

It is also a dramatically hushed novel, unlike Sahota’s second, the Booker-shortlisted exploration of illegal immigration *The Year of The Runaways*, which teemed with voices and activity. Here, events are glanced at, elaborated in fragments and elliptically, the reader left to draw a line from the earlier story to the life that the narrator has lived in the north of England, complete with its painful incidents of exclusion and racism.

Both storylines converge in themes of escape and incarceration, whether literal or social and psychological. The narrator, living alone on the abandoned farm having been shunned by his aunt and uncle, plays out an almost parodic tale of regeneration and reconnection that echoes Mehar’s less successful attempts at self-determination; their familial link hovers over the entire story, reminding us of the ghost-trauma carried from generation to generation.

Sahota has said that *China Room* has its seed in his own family history, and a photograph at the end of the book, of an elderly woman cradling a baby, confirms an element of documentary about the novel. But rather than feeling confined by whatever real-life elements informed its creation, it exists in a far more indeterminate, diffuse dimension, at times taking on an almost fairytale quality. In his three novels, Sahota has demonstrated an ambitious need to adapt the specific and concrete to something less easy to pin down, complete with all the gaps and ruptures that life provides and art makes, even for a moment, tangible.

*To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
Monsters, leopard girls and a star-dappled aerialist grip the imagination in an atmospheric follow-up to The Doll Factory

Suzu Feay

Elizabeth Macneal’s best-selling 2019 debut of art and obsession, The Doll Factory, was set against the backdrop of the 1851 Great Exhibition; lurking behind it was John Fowles’s terrifying The Collector, also a spider-and-fly battle of the sexes. Several texts underlie her follow-up, again an atmospheric Victorian tale: Frankenstein is a favourite of manipulative circus owner Jasper, while Nell, the protagonist, sees uncanny echoes of her own fate in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale “The Little Mermaid”.

Mottled head to toe by birthmarks, Nell is plucked from her lowly trade of making candied violets to appear in Jasper Jupiter’s Circus of Wonders. To grip the imagination of a freak-sated public, Jasper prides himself on creating irresistible backstories for his collection of “monsters”. “Leopard girls” are old hat, so Jasper retrain her as a star-dappled aerialist, Nellie Moon, swinging above the crowd on ropes hauled by Jasper’s downtrodden brother, Toby. Jasper sees himself as Daedalus as well as Victor Frankenstein, but doesn’t pay enough attention to the fate of Icarus.

In the twists and turns of the narrative, Macneal explores what it means to exert power over another individual. Toby, who took up the nascent profession of war photography in the Crimea, is equally oppressed by his love for Nell and visceral attachment to his more confident sibling. The performers – Stella the bearded woman, Brunette the giantess, Peggy the dwarf and the rest – are exploited by their egotistical ringmaster, but he has also given them opportunities to shine in a world that shuns them as objects of fear and revulsion.

The circus setting is a little more hackneyed than the imaginatively in an atmospheric follow-up to The Doll Factory

Suzu Feay

Elizabeth Macneal’s best-selling 2019 debut of art and obsession, The Doll Factory, was set against the backdrop of the 1851 Great Exhibition; lurking behind it was John Fowles’s terrifying The Collector, also a spider-and-fly battle of the sexes. Several texts underlie her follow-up, again an atmospheric Victorian tale: Frankenstein is a favourite of manipulative circus owner Jasper, while Nell, the protagonist, sees uncanny echoes of her own fate in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale “The Little Mermaid”.

Mottled head to toe by birthmarks, Nell is plucked from her lowly trade of making candied violets to appear in Jasper Jupiter’s Circus of Wonders. To grip the imagination of a freak-sated public, Jasper prides himself on creating irresistible backstories for his collection of “monsters”. “Leopard girls” are old hat, so Jasper retrain her as a star-dappled aerialist, Nellie Moon, swinging above the crowd on ropes hauled by Jasper’s downtrodden brother, Toby. Jasper sees himself as Daedalus as well as Victor Frankenstein, but doesn’t pay enough attention to the fate of Icarus.

In the twists and turns of the narrative, Macneal explores what it means to exert power over another individual. Toby, who took up the nascent profession of war photography in the Crimea, is equally oppressed by his love for Nell and visceral attachment to his more confident sibling. The performers – Stella the bearded woman, Brunette the giantess, Peggy the dwarf and the rest – are exploited by their egotistical ringmaster, but he has also given them opportunities to shine in a world that shuns them as objects of fear and revulsion.

The circus setting is a little more hackneyed than the imaginatively

The circus setting is a little more hackneyed than the imaginatively dark tales of men at the margins of society

Houman Barekat

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

{ Short stories } Outsiders and ne’er-do-wells populate

Houman Barekat

Benjamin Myers’s fiction is concerned with people at the margins of society. His portrayal of Traveller culture in his 2012 novel, Pig Iron, won the inaugural Gordon Burn prize; 2017’s The Gallows Pole, about a band of counterfeiters in 18th-century Yorkshire, won the Walter Scott prize for historical fiction. Male Tears, his first short-story collection, is likewise populated with outsiders and ne’er-do-wells. One story tells of a farmer’s bitter hatred of townies, while another features a sadistic gamekeeper who tortures animals. In “The Whip Hand” a fairground impresario gets mangled to death by his own waltzer; his psychopathic son assembles a posse of forced labourers – “a motley menagerie of men in various states of drunkenness and disrepair”, recruited in “smoky back rooms, parole-board halfway houses, gambling dens” – and has them build a monument in his memory.

Elsewhere a hyper-masculine ex-convict turns out to be a secret cross-dresser, and a man covers himself in paint after a row with his girlfriend – a weird cry for attention that backfires horribly. Other stories are slightly less lurid. Myers, a former music journalist, revisits his younger self in “The Folk Song Singer”, about an encounter between a journalist and a veteran pop star. Sizing up the critic, the singer observes: “They never change … Nervy and earnest … their conversation always undercut with a streak of almost confrontational pedantry.”

Male Tears has been marketed by its publisher as an exploration of the male psyche – the title nods to a popular feminist meme – but this is somewhat misleading. While many of these stories do indeed involve men in upsetting circumstances, they contain little in the way of subtle emotional or psychological insight. In keeping with the conventions of rural noir and folk horror, the emphasis here is on atmospherics: for the most part, Myers is less interested in depicting his characters’ inner lives than in evoking the eerie menace of moorlands and forests, be that “the gloaming of an October evening” or a whistling wind, “hypnotic and forest, be that “the gloaming of an October evening” or a whistling wind, “hypnotic and

{ Short stories } Outsiders and ne’er-do-wells populate

Houman Barekat

Benjamin Myers’s fiction is concerned with people at the margins of society. His portrayal of Traveller culture in his 2012 novel, Pig Iron, won the inaugural Gordon Burn prize; 2017’s The Gallows Pole, about a band of counterfeiters in 18th-century Yorkshire, won the Walter Scott prize for historical fiction. Male Tears, his first short-story collection, is likewise populated with outsiders and ne’er-do-wells. One story tells of a farmer’s bitter hatred of townies, while another features a sadistic gamekeeper who tortures animals. In “The Whip Hand” a fairground impresario gets mangled to death by his own waltzer; his psychopathic son assembles a posse of forced labourers – “a motley menagerie of men in various states of drunkenness and disrepair”, recruited in “smoky back rooms, parole-board halfway houses, gambling dens” – and has them build a monument in his memory.

Elsewhere a hyper-masculine ex-convict turns out to be a secret cross-dresser, and a man covers himself in paint after a row with his girlfriend – a weird cry for attention that backfires horribly. Other stories are slightly less lurid. Myers, a former music journalist, revisits his younger self in “The Folk Song Singer”, about an encounter between a journalist and a veteran pop star. Sizing up the critic, the singer observes: “They never change … Nervy and earnest … their conversation always undercut with a streak of almost confrontational pedantry.”

Male Tears has been marketed by its publisher as an exploration of the male psyche – the title nods to a popular feminist meme – but this is somewhat misleading. While many of these stories do indeed involve men in upsetting circumstances, they contain little in the way of subtle emotional or psychological insight. In keeping with the conventions of rural noir and folk horror, the emphasis here is on atmospherics: for the most part, Myers is less interested in depicting his characters’ inner lives than in evoking the eerie menace of moorlands and forests, be that “the gloaming of an October evening” or a whistling wind, “hypnotic and

{ Short stories } Outsiders and ne’er-do-wells populate

Houman Barekat

Benjamin Myers’s fiction is concerned with people at the margins of society. His portrayal of Traveller culture in his 2012 novel, Pig Iron, won the inaugural Gordon Burn prize; 2017’s The Gallows Pole, about a band of counterfeiters in 18th-century Yorkshire, won the Walter Scott prize for historical fiction. Male Tears, his first short-story collection, is likewise populated with outsiders and ne’er-do-wells. One story tells of a farmer’s bitter hatred of townies, while another features a sadistic gamekeeper who tortures animals. In “The Whip Hand” a fairground impresario gets mangled to death by his own waltzer; his psychopathic son assembles a posse of forced labourers – “a motley menagerie of men in various states of drunkenness and disrepair”, recruited in “smoky back rooms, parole-board halfway houses, gambling dens” – and has them build a monument in his memory.

Elsewhere a hyper-masculine ex-convict turns out to be a secret cross-dresser, and a man covers himself in paint after a row with his girlfriend – a weird cry for attention that backfires horribly. Other stories are slightly less lurid. Myers, a former music journalist, revisits his younger self in “The Folk Song Singer”, about an encounter between a journalist and a veteran pop star. Sizing up the critic, the singer observes: “They never change … Nervy and earnest … their conversation always undercut with a streak of almost confrontational pedantry.”

Male Tears has been marketed by its publisher as an exploration of the male psyche – the title nods to a popular feminist meme – but this is somewhat misleading. While many of these stories do indeed involve men in upsetting circumstances, they contain little in the way of subtle emotional or psychological insight. In keeping with the conventions of rural noir and folk horror, the emphasis here is on atmospherics: for the most part, Myers is less interested in depicting his characters’ inner lives than in evoking the eerie menace of moorlands and forests, be that “the gloaming of an October evening” or a whistling wind, “hypnotic and
Flights of counterfactual speculation reimagine the stories of the Vikings, the Incas, Columbus and Cervantes

Sam Leith

French author Laurent Binet is preoccupied with real-life events, AKA history, and how we tell it. There was the fretful meticulousness of his debut HHhH, a “nonfiction novel” about the assassination of Nazi chief Reinhard Heydrich; then The 7th Function of Language, a metafictional thriller about Roland Barthes and his fatal encounter with a laundry van. Now, still not content just to make up some imaginary characters and have them interact, he presents something that reads more like a collection of primary sources than a conventional novel. What to call it? A historical systems novel, preoccupied with the roots of great power conflict and the forces that underpin it? Or just a *jeu d’esprit*? It’s a bit of both, and it’s tremendous fun.

Each of Civilisations’ four parts poses as a historical document, and the main story runs for most of a 16th century that never happened – from when a ragtag Inca expeditionary force, fleeing civil war in South America, makes landfall in Lisbon, to the years after the Battle of Lepanto (which is, spoiler alert, fought at Lepanto, as usual, but, in what I’m fairly sure is a departure from the historical course of events, ends up being Michel de Montaigne’s lodger). That detail is the groundwork for this flight of counterfactual speculation is laid in the first two sections. First up is a spoof Norse saga, describing how Vikings not only made it to Vinlandia, the coast of North America, but as far south as what is now Panama. Erik the Red’s daughter Freydis befriended the local *skraelings* – as the Vikings called Native Americans – and, crucially, introduced them to two technologies: horses and iron.

Accordingly, things go the worse for Christopher Columbus when he shows up. The second section consists of fragments from his comically pious journals. He annoys the locals by abducting their people and in due course gets his European posterior kicked. He ends his abject days as a captive court jester in what’s now Cuba. After Columbus fails to return, the Spanish court loses its appetite for exploratory expeditions westwards.

But it’s on Columbus’s old ships that, half a generation later, Atahualpa, known to us as the last Inca emperor, sets off for Europe. On arrival, he is no less perplexed by the shaven-headed locals, with their weird cult of the “nailed god”, than Columbus was by the feathered head-dresses on the other side of the pond. Though the Incas are no strangers to human sacrifice, Atahualpa takes one look at the Inquisition burning heretics and wonders if these “Levantines” don’t go a bit far. He has his doubts, too, about the “little white llamas” – sheep – that the locals let run around everywhere.

Through low cunning, high diplomacy and the occasional application of brute force, Atahualpa not only survives but prospers, playing squabbling European factions off against each other and in due course usurping the Holy Roman Emperor. Among the many nice touches here is that Atahualpa immediately sees the point of Machiavelli and takes much of his advice to heart. Various counterfactual shenanigans play out. Inca/European dynastic alliances are forged. Atahualpa wins hearts and minds by promulgating religious tolerance and a series of quasi-socialist land reforms that sound a great deal more appealing than what was actually on offer in Europe in the real 16th century.

Binet has a lot of fun with existing history. We get Thomas More corresponding with Erasmus about Inca theology rather than Luther’s articles, and the narrator drops little references to “*the entirely misnamed Antoine the Good*” or remarks, after introducing a second “*The Magnanimous*, that magnanimity was “a quality apparently very common among these princes”.

Everything seems rosy, for a while. But then the supplies of gold dry up and a rival gang of South American people and in due course gets his European posterior kicked. He ends his abject days as a captive court jester in what’s now Cuba. After Columbus fails to return, the Spanish court loses its appetite for exploratory expeditions westwards.

Through low cunning, high diplomacy and the occasional application of brute force, Atahualpa not only survives but prospers, playing squabbling European factions off against each other and in due course usurping the Holy Roman Emperor. Among the many nice touches here is that Atahualpa immediately sees the point of Machiavelli and takes much of his advice to heart. Various counterfactual shenanigans play out. Inca/European dynastic alliances are forged. Atahualpa wins hearts and minds by promulgating religious tolerance and a series of quasi-socialist land reforms that sound a great deal more appealing than what was actually on offer in Europe in the real 16th century.

Binet has a lot of fun with existing history. We get Thomas More corresponding with Erasmus about Inca theology rather than Luther’s articles, and the narrator drops little references to “*the entirely misnamed Antoine the Good*” or remarks, after introducing a second “*The Magnanimous*, that magnanimity was “a quality apparently very common among these princes”.

Everything seems rosy, for a while. But then the supplies of gold dry up and a rival gang of South American people and in due course gets his European posterior kicked. He ends his abject days as a captive court jester in what’s now Cuba. After Columbus fails to return, the Spanish court loses its appetite for exploratory expeditions westwards.

Through low cunning, high diplomacy and the occasional application of brute force, Atahualpa not only survives but prospers, playing squabbling European factions off against each other and in due course usurping the Holy Roman Emperor. Among the many nice touches here is that Atahualpa immediately sees the point of Machiavelli and takes much of his advice to heart. Various counterfactual shenanigans play out. Inca/European dynastic alliances are forged. Atahualpa wins hearts and minds by promulgating religious tolerance and a series of quasi-socialist land reforms that sound a great deal more appealing than what was actually on offer in Europe in the real 16th century.

Binet has a lot of fun with existing history. We get Thomas More corresponding with Erasmus about Inca theology rather than Luther’s articles, and the narrator drops little references to “*the entirely misnamed Antoine the Good*” or remarks, after introducing a second “*The Magnanimous*, that magnanimity was “a quality apparently very common among these princes”.

Everything seems rosy, for a while. But then the supplies of gold dry up and a rival gang of South American people and in due course gets his European posterior kicked. He ends his abject days as a captive court jester in what’s now Cuba. After Columbus fails to return, the Spanish court loses its appetite for exploratory expeditions westwards.

Through low cunning, high diplomacy and the occasional application of brute force, Atahualpa not only survives but prospers, playing squabbling European factions off against each other and in due course usurping the Holy Roman Emperor. Among the many nice touches here is that Atahualpa immediately sees the point of Machiavelli and takes much of his advice to heart. Various counterfactual shenanigans play out. Inca/European dynastic alliances are forged. Atahualpa wins hearts and minds by promulgating religious tolerance and a series of quasi-socialist land reforms that sound a great deal more appealing than what was actually on offer in Europe in the real 16th century.

Binet has a lot of fun with existing history. We get Thomas More corresponding with Erasmus about Inca theology rather than Luther’s articles, and the narrator drops little references to “*the entirely misnamed Antoine the Good*” or remarks, after introducing a second “*The Magnanimous*, that magnanimity was “a quality apparently very common among these princes”.

Everything seems rosy, for a while. But then the supplies of gold dry up and a rival gang of South American people and in due course gets his European posterior kicked. He ends his abject days as a captive court jester in what’s now Cuba. After Columbus fails to return, the Spanish court loses its appetite for exploratory expeditions westwards.

Through low cunning, high diplomacy and the occasional application of brute force, Atahualpa not only survives but prospers, playing squabbling European factions off against each other and in due course usurping the Holy Roman Emperor. Among the many nice touches here is that Atahualpa immediately sees the point of Machiavelli and takes much of his advice to heart. Various counterfactual shenanigans play out. Inca/European dynastic alliances are forged. Atahualpa wins hearts and minds by promulgating religious tolerance and a series of quasi-socialist land reforms that sound a great deal more appealing than what was actually on offer in Europe in the real 16th century.

Binet has a lot of fun with existing history. We get Thomas More corresponding with Erasmus about Inca theology rather than Luther’s articles, and the narrator drops little references to “*the entirely misnamed Antoine the Good*” or remarks, after introducing a second “*The Magnanimous*, that magnanimity was “a quality apparently very common among these princes”.

Everything seems rosy, for a while. But then the supplies of gold dry up and a rival gang of South American people and in due course gets his European posterior kicked. He ends his abject days as a captive court jester in what’s now Cuba. After Columbus fails to return, the Spanish court loses its appetite for exploratory expeditions westwards.
The Pulitzer-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri tells Lisa Allardice about her ‘nomadic’ existence, her passion for Rome and conquering Italian for her latest novel

‘I have always existed in a kind of linguistic exile’
Jhumpa Lahiri’s third novel is the triumphant culmination of her 20-year love affair with Italian, an obsession that led her to move to Rome with her family almost 10 years ago. She renounced all reading in English and began to write only Italian.

Published in Italy in 2018 as Dove mi trovo – “Where I find myself” or “Where am I?” – it is her first novel written in Italian. Now she has translated it into English under the title Whereabouts.

The story follows an unnamed woman around an unnamed city over the course of a year, each chapter an espresso shot of regret and loneliness. In the second chapter, “On the Street”, the narrator bumps into a man, the husband of a friend, whom she “might have been involved with, maybe shared a life with”: they go into a lingerie shop because she “might have been involved with, maybe shared a life with” – “how does a city become a relationship in and of itself for the female protagonist?” she says now. This is a book about belonging and not belonging, place and displacement – questions of identity that Lahiri has explored throughout her fiction, whether set in New England, Calcutta or Rome. Following a year of enforced isolation for so many, not least in Italy, this “portrait of a woman in a sort of urban solitude”, as she describes the novel, has assumed an unexpectedly timely resonance.

Today Lahiri is at home in New Jersey: “Mi trovo”, she says. She returned to teach at the university in 2015, while maintaining a long-distance relationship with Rome. “I had two sets of keys. I had this other life, in this other place,” she explains, until coronavirus struck last year; her son was still in school in Rome at the time. On the shelves behind her, the only visible title is a book facing outwards with “ITALIAN” in large print. Her previous book, The Namesake, which follows the fortunes of “Gogol”, the son of Bengali immigrants, as he makes his way in New York, was made into a film by acclaimed director Mira Nair; and her second The Lowland, a family saga stretching from 1950s Calcutta to New England decades later, was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2013. Although Whereabouts is a novel, it could be described almost as a collection of connected short stories, and so, in form at least, Lahiri is very much on home ground. She may be a traditionalist, but surely there is no bigger experiment for a writer than adopting an entirely new language? Like a 21st-century Henry James heroine, she shunned the US (the Brooklyn brownstone literary set, of which she was one of the most feted) for the old world charms of Rome, in what she describes as nothing less than an act of “literary survival”.

“It is really hard to explain the forces in life that drive you to people, to places, to languages,” she says. “For me, to a language and then to a place and then to a new life, a new way of thinking, a new way of being. Those are very big things.”

She has always felt she existed in “a kind of linguistic exile” long before she left for Rome. She was born in London, the daughter of Indian immigrants, and the family moved to the US when she was two. Growing up in Rhode Island (her father, like many of her characters, worked at the university), with frequent trips to Calcutta, she felt her place and then to a new life, a new way of thinking, a new way of being. Those are very big things.”

“Bengali, which she spoke until she was four, is both her mother tongue and “a foreign language”, she says. “For me, to a language and then to a new place and then to a new life, a new way of thinking, a new way of being”. Bengali, which she spoke until she was four, is both her mother tongue and “a foreign language”, because she can’t read or write it: it is her parents’ language, “the language of their world”. Lahiri and her sister were educated in English, which she came to regard as a bullying “stepmother”.

“I’m the least experimental writer,” Lahiri told New York Times magazine in 2008 when her second collection of short stories, Unaccustomed Earth, went straight to No 1 on the US bestseller lists, prompting Time magazine to declare a changing of the guard in US fiction. “The idea of trying things just for the sake of pushing the envelope, that’s never really interested me.” And it is true that her elegantly melancholy short stories – her first collection, Interpreter of Maladies, won the Pulitzer in 2000 when she was 33 – belong to the realist tradition. Eschewing the showy irony of many of her American peers, or the lush prose and epic sweep typical of Anglo-Indian fiction, she depicted the everyday lives of (often middle-class) Asian-American immigrants with the same compassionate scrutiny and moral complexity that distinguishes the work of her literary heroes William Trevor and Alice Munro.

Her first novel, The Namesake, which follows the fortunes of “Gogol”, the son of Bengali immigrants, as he makes his way in New York, was made into a film by acclaimed director Mira Nair; and her second The Lowland, a family saga stretching from 1950s Calcutta to New England decades later, was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2013. Although Whereabouts is a novel, it could be described almost as a collection of connected short stories, and so, in form at least, Lahiri is very much on home ground. She may be a traditionalist, but surely there is no bigger experiment for a writer than adopting an entirely new language? Like a 21st-century Henry James heroine, she shunned the US (the Brooklyn brownstone literary set, of which she was one of the most feted) for the old world charms of Rome, in what she describes as nothing less than an act of “literary survival”.

“It is really hard to explain the forces in life that drive you to a language and then to a place and then to a new life, a new way of thinking, a new way of being.”

‘It is hard to explain the forces in life that drive you to a language and then to a place and then to a new life, a new way of thinking, a new way of being’
“But at the same time, emotionally it represented this sort of impossible challenge. My relationship to English was always very much part of the desire as a child to be fully part of that world.” Paradoxically, the fact there was “not even a question of really belonging” in Italy finally freed her from being caught between two languages, “that is to say, having to choose between two ways of being, two ways of thinking”, she explains. “In poche parole, in few words, it has given me a true sense of belonging, fully recognising that it is ‘a sense’.”

Written in bursts each time she returned to Rome, Wherabouts grew out of her “day-to-day inhabiting of that city, mostly walking through it”. It is fitting that both the novel’s inspiration and the English title suggested themselves to her in transit: the idea was “born” on a train in Italy when the author became intrigued by a middle-aged woman she saw sitting alone, “and one looks in the window and maybe one sees oneself”. The title came to her suddenly, after months of deliberation, on a flight to Rome – “one sees oneself”.

The novel’s underlying sense of urgency or agitation comes from the fact that it was written in the knowledge that they would one day be leaving. “I always had the return ticket,” she recalls sadly.

The past year has been “an incredibly intense time”, as she has watched the pandemic unfold in two homes – Italy and the US. But it has also been one of the most productive: she has just finished her first book of poetry – in Italian – will be published in June. She has never written a poem in English before and “maybe never will”, she says. Just as she would never have written Wherabouts in English, she thinks writing in Italian made poetry possible.

“When I first started writing in English I felt like an interloper. When I first started writing in Italian I felt like an interloper. When I was writing the poems I felt like an interloper. But maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

Lahiri hopes to return to Rome this summer, as her daughter is due to start high school there in September. Each time they visit she can’t wait to get out into the piazza, “to have that first coffee and see all those people, who are so happy that we are back”, she says with passion. “There’s this life that is happening right on your doorstep that is always changing and always kind of the same. I miss that.” She keeps in touch with friends she made among the many immigrants from Bangladesh living in Rome. “It’s the one place in the world where I speak English, Italian and Bengali on a daily basis.” This “little triangle” of language is part of the magic of the city for her, she says, “and it is waiting for me in the piazza”.

When in Rome ...
‘There is this life happening right on your doorstep’

The narrator is a contradiction in other ways, too: a professor in her late 40s, she is alone, yet with many friends and lovers; sometimes she is lonely, sometimes she is content; she envies others their intimacy and is envied for her freedom. “She’s at this crossroads. She is a woman who recognises she probably won’t become a mother; she may have other relationships but that is not going to be part of her life. How is she going to come to terms with that?” she asks. So much of writing comes out of imagining alternative lives, different paths, she believes. “So what if I didn’t have this life? What if I hadn’t met the person I did, the day I did and this happened and that happened and a child happened and then another child?” Although she is keen to stress that she is not her narrator, and her Italian adventure was very much “a family experience”, the act of travelling makes “you feel solitude more keenly”, she says. “It touches deeper parts of you. It makes you question who you are.”

...and “maybe never will”
Questions of class and race, politics and power are at the heart of a new kind of novel that explores the complicated relationship between working mothers and the women they pay to look after their children.

There’s a line at the opening of Kiley Reid’s hit debut, Such a Fun Age, that encapsulates the drama at the heart of the recent spate of nanny novels. Emira, a young black woman dressed for a night out, is stopped by a security guard in an upscale supermarket with Briar, the white child she looks after. It’s late, the guard wants to know where Briar’s parents are. He won’t let Emira leave with her. “But she’s my child right now,” she tells the guard. “I’m her sitter. I’m technically her nanny…”

Emira isn’t strictly a nanny. She doesn’t get the perks of a full-time job – health insurance, holidays. Later, she reflects that, “more than the racial bias, the night at Market Depot came back to her with a nauseating surge and a resounding declaration that hissed, You don’t have a real job.” But in many ways, Briar is her child. Emira is the one who spends time with Briar, who understands her. Alix, a blogger and influencer, relies on her daughter’s nanny completely, but she is also desperate to befriend “the quiet, thoughtful person she paid to love [Briar]”. In pursuing a friendship with Emira at the expense of her own children, Alix only succeeds in putting further distance between them. As Emira observes, Briar is “this awesome, serious child who loves information and answers, and how could her own mother not appreciate the shit out of this?”

It’s the kind of judgment every working parent dreads, and it is this unique perspective on family dynamics that makes the nanny such a compelling character. From Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre to her sister Anne’s Agnes Grey and Becky Sharp in Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, novelists have long understood the disruptive potential of the nanny, nurse or governess in a household – often put to romantic purposes, upsetting a rigid class system. But with the rise of the working mother has come a new kind of nanny novel. One that explores questions of class and race, politics and power, and has at its heart the complicated relationship between the women of the house.

“My nanny is a miracle worker,” Myriam tells her friends in Leïla Slimani’s Prix Goncourt-winning Lullaby. But at the same time, returning to work as a lawyer after a period as a stay-at-home mother, “she is terrified by the idea of leaving her children with someone else”. While working late, “she tries not to think about her children, not to let the guilt eat away at her. Sometimes she starts imagining that they are all in league against her.” It is this sense of alienation from your own family, as well as the worst nightmare lurking at the back of every parent’s mind, that Slimani so skilfully evokes. We learn at the beginning of her taboo-busting novel that Louise, the “perfect nanny”, has murdered the children in her charge. It is left up to the horrified reader to piece together the reasons why.

“The nanny takes care of children who are not her own. She shares a daily life and intimacy with people who are not her friends or family. She sees everything, she knows everything, but at the same time she is an outsider,” says Slimani, of her fascination with the
role. “She has a huge responsibility - looking after the children - and yet very little social recognition.” For the parents who bring a nanny into their home, the temptation is to see her (it is usually her) as a superwoman, infallible, perfect (it is no coincidence that the US title for Slimani’s novel is The Perfect Nanny).

The archetypal fictional nanny first appeared in the children's novels by PL Travers - sensible, strict, yet magical - though it's the sweetened screen version of Mary Poppins that is lodged in the hearts and minds of so many. In Slimani’s novel, Paul, the father of the house, tells Louise “that she is like Mary Poppins. He isn’t sure she understands the compliment.” Myriam admires how Louise can lose herself in play. She is “vibrant, joyful, teasing”. As Slimani’s narrator wryly observes: “Louise arouses and fulfills the fantasies of an idyllic family life that Myriam guiltily nurses.”

In Reid’s novel, Alix becomes similarly obsessed with her childcare, eventually realising that she has “developed feelings toward Emira that weren’t completely unlike a crush”. The 25-year-old seems effortlessly cool in comparison with Alix’s mum-friends, but there’s more to it than that: like Myriam, Alix idealises her nanny to assuage her own guilt, convincing herself that Emira is far better at looking after Briar than she would ever be. Alix also lives vicariously through the younger woman - she reads Emira’s phone messages, listens to the music she likes, buys her gifts and invites her to join the family for Thanksgiving dinner. Yet although Emira is present as a guest, she slips quickly back into a service role during the meal, coming to Briar’s rescue when she is sick.

In my debut novel, The House Guest, 25-year-old Kate is invited to France for the summer by Della, a charismatic life coach, ostensibly to look after Della’s children. But Kate is also encouraged to see herself as a guest, and the boundaries continue to blur as she becomes enmeshed within the family, eventually crossing a line from which there's no return. In one scene, Kate is expected to serve drinks to the family’s guests before joining them for a casual dinner. In another, she’s left to rescue Della’s son from the swimming pool, while Della sits by preoccupied, on her laptop. Kate judges Della for her lack of interest in her own children, just as Emira judges Alix. Though at least Emira is allowed to wear her own clothes to the Thanksgiving dinner - usually, as her boyfriend points out, Alix makes her wear “a uniform”. In Alix’s eyes, the embroidered polo shirts she leaves lying around are a handy way for Emira to keep her clothes clean, but he accuses Alix of “hiring black people to raise your children and putting your family crest on them”.

In Raven Leilani’s debut, Luster, Edie, a drifting 23-year-old, is invited into the home of her older, white lover Eric and his wife, Rebecca, partly in the hope that she will be able to connect with their adopted daughter Akila. As Leilani points out: “This transaction is predicated on the assumption that Edie, as a black woman, is available to fill the role of caretaker, even as she is desperately needing care herself.” Here, the arrangement is informal, but in both Reid’s and Slimani’s novels, the procurement of a nanny is described in purely transactional terms: “Alix had a knack for acquiring merchandise back in New York, and searching for a babysitter in Philadelphia was no different.”

In another of this year’s debuts, Ellery Lloyd’s People Like Her, Instamum Emmy considers finding a nanny via a competition on Instagram, or through a promotional partnership with an agency, until her husband Dan insists on doing it “in the conventional manner”: finding a woman who is “no-nonsense. Nannyish, if you will. Someone reliable, trustworthy, unfappable.” Or so he hopes.

But for those parents who can afford to leave their children in the sole care of a nanny, the choice is always a gamble - and one that Slimani explores so viscerally in Lullaby. “Not too old, no veils and no smokers,” Myriam and Paul agree during their initial search. Myriam, who is of north African descent, is herself mistaken for a nanny when she arrives at an agency. Yet the issues at play here are as much about class as race. Myriam “does not want to hire a north African to look after the children … She fears that a tacit complicity and familiarity would grow between her and the nanny.” In the end, Myriam and Paul invite their white nanny to Greece on holiday, eating dinner together for the first time, and drinking, so that “a new light-heartedness blows over them”.

Away together, the familiarity Myriam sought to avoid grows regardless, and there is a sense on their return that Louise has seen a new way of living from which there is no going back. She becomes “haunted by the feeling that she has seen too much, heard too much of other people’s privacy, a privacy she has never enjoyed herself”.

In order for Myriam to be free, Slimani points out, another woman must be enslaved. It’s what she calls a “Russian doll” system: “There is a woman inside a woman inside a woman.” None of the nannies or the mothers comes out well from these new novels about childcare, domestic life and motherhood - all of which explore the impossible burden placed on women in the modern family. Torn between trying to be the perfect mother and the successful employee, the domestic goddess and the fulfilled woman, Myriam strives to find another way for her family to be. Ultimately, she concludes, they will only be happy “when we don’t need one another any more. When we can live a life of our own . . . When we are free”.

The archetypal fictional nanny first appeared in the children’s novels by PL Travers - sensible, strict, yet magical.
Further reading

The best books to understand football and money
Nicholas Wroe

While we wait for the inevitable slew of books about the fiasco of the European Super League, we can familiarise ourselves with the luridly complex relationship between football and finance. The most assiduous follower of the money is David Conn. He was one of the first writers to analyse, in his 1997 The Football Business, how a new financial model was changing the culture of the game both on and off the pitch. Later, as a lifelong Manchester City fan, he was well placed to chart, in Richer Than God, how the scruffy poor relations to swanky United were elevated into the global elite via the almost unlimited resources of the Abu Dhabi royal family. Most recently The Fall of the House of Fifa charted an organisation that when formed looked askance at the official FA Women’s Premier League in 1994 she actually had to “hand over a fee, for referees, pitches and so on. It may have had ‘Premier League’ in its title but it certainly didn’t feel Premier League to me.”

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that football memoirs tend to feature money more than most sporting lives. The standard anecdote remains the young player’s First Big Contract, but there are also less orthodox financial dealings. Jonathan Wilson’s biography of Brian Clough, Nobody Ever Says Thank You, covers not only triumphs on the pitch but also the less heroic subject of bungs, the brown envelopes stuffed with cash received by managers for facilitating a transfer. By contrast, in David Peace’s novel The Damned United, the Clough character is disgusted by fellow manager Don Revie’s fondness for stuffed envelopes to bribe officials.

So was it all more wholesome back in the day? Well, in 1888 the Football League itself emerged after a split over money, in this case professionalism v amateurs, a tale engagingly told by Richard Sanders in Beastly Fury: The Strange Birth of British Football. And, although those Premier League clubs not invited into the ESL were vocal in their disapproval, the Premier League was likewise born after the bigger teams broke away from the Football League, to the detriment of smaller clubs. That early-90s schism is catalogued in Joshua Robinson and Jonathan Clegg’s The Club, in which a confluence of events – economic boom, the arrival of satellite TV and a sclerotic run sport mired in violence and squalor – prepared the ground for the unimaginied wealth of the football world we have today. The venal and ham-fisted antics of the ESL billionaires and bankers might have been the latest instalment in a long story, but no one believes it is the final chapter.

Tom Gauld

YOU’RE ALL SET: I’VE REPLACED THE PUMP, PRESSURISED THE SYSTEM, MOVED CHAPTER TWO TO THE BEGINNING AND DELETED MOST OF THE ADVERBS.

ANY MORE PROBLEMS, JUST GIVE ME A CALL.

DAVE’S 24 HOUR BOILER AND NOVEL SERVICE, NO CALL-OUT CHARGE.

26 The Guardian Saturday 1 May 2021
From Deborah Levy to Rachel Cusk...

Explore a curated collection of May's best new books, handpicked by our team at the Guardian Bookshop

Deborah Levy
Real Estate
£9.34
RRP £10.99

Rachel Cusk
Second Place
£12.74
RRP £14.99

Nadifa Mohamed
The Fortune Men
£12.74
RRP £14.99

Meriel Schindler
The Lost Café Schindler
£17.40
RRP £20

Daniel Kahneman
A Flaw in Human Judgment
£21.25
RRP £25

Jhumpa Lahiri
Whereabouts
£13.04
RRP £14.99

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

*Get free UK P&P on online book orders over £20. Promotional prices valid for a limited time only (all orders placed by phone will incur a minimum £1.99 delivery charge)