‘I wasn’t bold enough’

Ed Miliband on his new vision for politics
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‘Bob Dylan has written more than 500 immortal songs. But as he turns 80, we’re also celebrating the way in which he has continued to make work that is still so alive and expressive, well into his eighth decade.’
— Edward Docx, page 23
The week in books
22 May

Fantasy football
The FA Cup final may seem an unusual inclusion on this page, but last Saturday’s 1-0 victory for Leicester City over Chelsea creates a literary footnote. In the final part of Julian Barnes’s 1989 novel, A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters, the author enters a fantasy afterlife consisting of an eternity filled with everything a person has most enjoyed in life (sex, full English breakfasts) or desired but lacked.

In the latter category, for Barnes, on page 289: “Leicester City had won the FA Cup. No kidding, Leicester City had bloody well won the FA Cup! ... it’s a fact an undeniable fact that in all the time I’ve supported Leicester City (and for all the time before that, too) they’ve never won the FA Cup.”

Future editions may need an afterword on this example of football imitating art. Speaking to me while still celebrating in his replica Foxes shirt, Barnes notes that he “also predicted Brexit” in his 1998 novel, England, England. Mark Lawson

More Mr Men
Mr Bump, Mr Happy and Little Miss Naughty are to be joined by two new family members: Little Miss Brave and Mr Calm. A global vote to mark the Mr Men’s 50th anniversary - Roger Hargreaves’s

Mr Tickle made his debut in 1971 - saw the public choose the next two characters in the series. The winners were Mr Calm, who “appreciates the simple pleasures, including spending time in nature and practising yoga, but also loves rock climbing and parkour”, and Little Miss Brave, below left, who “is fearless when championing things close to her heart, including her friends”. The books will be out in September, joining the cast of over 90 Little Miss and Mr Men already out there. Alison Flood

An Encore to applaud
In Iceland, where one in 10 people is a published author, there is a saying: everyone gives birth to a book. Just one letter away in Ireland, it seems that everyone is popping out novels, and good ones too. In the last few years, we’ve seen knockouts from Lisa McInerney, Sally Rooney, Megan Nolan, Kevin Barry, Eimear McBride and Mike McCormack, all writing with wit and ferocity.

So to find yet another outstanding Irish author, and to name them winner of the Royal Society of Literature’s Encore award for second novels, is a treat, if not a surprise. Having read several books set in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, I found Caolinn Hughes’s The Wild Laughter to be a true original: a grand feat of comic ingenuity, with biblical myth simmering under the surface. I and my fellow judges, novelist Nikita Lalwani and poet Paul Muldoon, are pleased to announce Hughes (above) as our winner of the £10,000 prize. Sian Cain

Orwellian

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

The Welsh rock band Manic Street Preachers (James Dean Bradfield, left) recently released a single called “Orwellian”. “We live in Orwellian times,” it begins. A hung-over literary journalist in his dressing gown, as memorably described in Orwell’s Confessions of a Book-Reviewer (1946), might agree, but should anyone else?

People who ought to know better, including a band who once sang about how “libraries gave us power”, have long used the word Orwellian as shorthand for “a bit like Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four”: i.e. an authoritarian dystopia. (Where, as the Manics have it, “Everywhere you look, everywhere you turn / The future fights the past, the books begin to burn.”) The original sinner, I am sorry to report, seems to be Mary McCarthy, who in 1950 – the very year poor Eric Blair died – called a new magazine “a leap into the Orwellian future”. Norman Mailer adopted the adjective at the end of that decade, and it stuck.

This is very much not the normal function of eponyms: after all, Orwell was not recommending that we adopt his Orwellian vision. It’s as if we were to use Shakespearean to mean “approving of rape, murder, and cannibalism”, simply because such things happen in Titus Andronicus. An Orwellian practice indeed.
'Edgar Allan Poe is so good I feel sick with jealousy'

Denise Mina

The book I am currently reading
A Crack in the Wall by Claudia Piñeiro, a fantastic Argentinian crime writer and my new literary crush. She is a wonderful writer and a great storyteller, two things that don't always go together.

The book that changed my life
The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov. I was raised in a very Catholic environment and the Pontius Pilate section resonated with me deeply because I’d written a musical about him at school and been “spoken to” by the head nun. I read the book when I accidentally went on an Ibiza Uncovered-style holiday in Corfu in 1985. It made me want to be a writer.

The book I wish I’d written
Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” is so spare and modern and well paced that I was almost sick with jealousy the moment I finished it. Envy is the truest compliment any writer can give another, and that short story is one of the best bits of crime writing I’ve ever read. Damn his eyes!

The book that had the greatest influence on me
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. I’m still in thrall to the idea that a writer can address the unspeakable by wrapping it up in an engaging narrative. I think Lee was right not to keep publishing. Each book is a snapshot of a moment in time, an interaction between an editor, a writer and a publisher, and the follow-up Go Set a Watchman makes me think that something magical happened in the original dynamic.

The book I think is most underrated
I cannot understand why everyone hasn’t read Jane Gardam’s Old Filth trilogy: these novels are classics, with glorious writing, stylistic courage and humour.

The book that changed my mind
Not a book but a play: Frank McGuinness’s Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme shook me out of a lifelong prejudice against Ulster loyalists. It made me realise that there was a whole other side of the history of partition that I had been oblivious to.

The last book that made me laugh
This was laughter of recognition rather than cheery joy: Maria Konnikova’s The Confidence Game is a great non-fiction breakdown of the methods of con artists. I was reading it just as Donald Trump was losing the election and it read as a roadmap of what he was going to do.

The book I couldn’t finish
The Devils by Dostoevsky. I’ve started it three times and cannot get the hang of the patronymic system: every scene appears to have 50 different characters floating in and out.

The book I give as a gift
The Leopard by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Its structure shouldn’t work – it’s ill paced and uneven but completely beguiling and one of the most explicitly sensory books I’ve ever read. I found myself sweating while I was reading it. In Glasgow. In November.

Denise Mina’s Costa-shortlisted novel The Less Dead is out in paperback (Vintage).
‘I want to make change happen’

The former Labour leader talks to Rafael Behr about his

Ed Miliband was a cabinet minister before he learned to ride a bike properly. He had mastered staying upright on two wheels as a child, but not much more. At around the same age he also picked up the rudiments of socialism, from the group of intellectuals and left-wing politicians that visited his father Ralph, an eminent Marxist academic. It was not until the summer of 2015, when the British electorate had firmly rejected Miliband’s application to be prime minister, that he discovered the simple pleasure of cycling.

That story is one of many personal vignettes seeded into Go Big, Miliband’s book about policy ideas that can change the world, and how to put them into practice. It is not a memoir, but it does hint at a personal journey. Does the prescription contained in the book’s title imply that, as Labour leader, he went too small?

“I wasn’t bold enough.” Miliband answers my question without hesitation. “I was bold in my analysis, but I felt at the time that I wasn’t bold in my solutions. And since then, I have felt that the prescriptions didn’t meet the analysis.” He recalls giving “a waffly answer” when one interviewer asked if his manifesto matched the ambition of a Margaret Thatcher or a Clement Attlee. “I used to console myself with the thought: well you’re in opposition, there’s only so much you can do.”

Go Big was born of the post-defeat decision not to settle for that kind of consolation. Miliband describes it as a call to “rediscover our agency” when faced with huge, seemingly intractable problems - inequality, insecurity in work, climate emergency, the unravelling of the social contract. “People can often feel powerless. For totally understandable reasons, if you’re on the progressive side of politics: you see a Tory government in power; you think - I hope - I want a Labour government, but what am I going to do in the meantime? There are other points of entry to power.”

Miliband started the book as a backbench MP, not anticipating a return to the frontbench at Keir Starmer’s invitation last year. He likes to quote Barack Obama: “What’s troubling is not the magnitude of our problems but the smallness of our politics.” The book certainly looks across a broad horizon, covering social, economic and political reform. Each theme is extrapolated from a real-world case study, demonstrating that committed individuals and groups can achieve lasting, positive change. Common ingredients are imagination and an absence of caution when it comes to defying a prevailing consensus. The narrative sweeps across the world: a women’s strike for equality in Iceland; American campaigns against poverty wages; Viennese social housing; emergency flood response in Doncaster. The tone is energetic, eager but also quite specific on policy detail. The book does not shy away from what the author tells me is his “nerd-tastic” tendency.

‘Politics has to be about what you are doing with people in their communities, not just about what the leader is saying on telly’

This self-awareness is one of the ways in which defeat in 2015 has given Miliband a clearer voice. Even in the sterile environment of a Zoom call he comes across as more comfortable in his skin than he did as party leader, when political caution sometimes seemed to stuff his mouth with cotton wool. (“That’s a good description of what it was like,” he replies when I offer the
decision to stay in politics and his new book of big ideas

metaphor.) It is a recognised Westminster catch-22: sometimes the natural style that is required for success is only unleashed by failure.

In Miliband’s case, the paradox is doubly poignant because he was derided for advancing arguments that have since been absorbed into the political consensus. He warned that Britain’s under-regulated, post-Thatcherite economic model had been captured by a predatory form of capitalism; that the system was rigged in ways that obstructed social mobility, stripped away security and fomented frustration.

Some of that analysis, and the accompanying recognition that the state has to be more robust in fixing the problem, informed Theresa May’s 2017 manifesto, though she lacked the courage and political bandwidth in her party to go through with it. The current government is considering punitive taxes to prevent “land banking” – developers sitting on vacant real estate and watching its value soar without erecting new homes. When Miliband proposed a crackdown on the same thing eight years ago, Boris Johnson denounced it in the Telegraph as “Mugabe-style expropriations”.

That is not a new phenomenon. Johnson is famously uninterested in consistency. Ideological plasticity is why the Conservatives have a record as one of the world’s most formidable election-winning machines. There should be no comfort for Labour in having been right in theory without then gaining the power to put the ideas into practice. My concern with Go Big is that the sections on political effectiveness, which focus on community organising and applying pressure from the outside, risk indulging Labour’s tendency to lean into the role of perpetual opposition. There is a fine line between celebrating the energy of a social movement and retreating from the hard task of winning over voters. The sound of believers chanting Jeremy Corbyn’s name may have lifted the roof in auditoriums, but it did not carry Labour into government.

Miliband counters that activism can persuade people that Labour is on their side; proving the point with deeds, not just words. The party cannot appear on the doorstep as ambassadors from some remote “planet politics”. “If we’re community activists, it re-engages people. Politics has to be about what you are doing with people in their communities, not just about what the leader is saying on telly.” The book, he says, is meant not as a campaign blueprint but as a reservoir of evidence that effective routes to change are available. “I’m not going to pretend that this is the electoral strategy for Labour, but I am raising ideas to change the country; trying to lift eyes from the smallness of politics.”

The missing ingredient, I suggest, is a parable; a story that links the analysis of what has gone wrong in Britain to policy prescriptions with the kind of crisp resonance that has voters nodding along. Miliband’s reply: “I’d have been prime minister if I’d had that in 2015.” When I ask if he offers Starmer advice – or consolation – drawn from his knowledge of how hard the job can be there is, unsurprisingly, no comment. One service Miliband can perform for the current leader is sparing him unhelpful headlines generated by meddling predecessors.

He is sure there will be an chance for Labour when the Tories fail to deliver on their promises. “What you’ll see is a gap opening up between their rhetoric and the reality. They say they don’t want insecure jobs and all that, but they don’t actually do anything about it. They say they want a green revolution but they don’t believe in the role of the state to make that revolution happen.”

It may be true that Johnson’s shape-shifting act lacks intellectual coherence and depth, but if “levelling
Go Big
Ed Miliband

When it comes to tackling the really big challenges of our world, you might not immediately think of cycling and walking as solutions. But it’s time to recognise the potential of the humble bicycle and our own two feet.

First, though, I have a confession. You know how most children learn to ride a bike around five or six? Well, I learned late - about 11 or 12 - and have always been a very, very nervous rider. What’s more, having learned, I left it more than three decades before doing anything more than a few minutes of uncomfortable wobbling. We went through six prime ministers, drainpipe trousers, Duran Duran, the invention of the internet, email, Twitter, Facebook, the bacon sandwich incident - and still I resisted two wheels.

When the first lockdown began and people were discouraged from using public transport, I had to work out how I could get to work in an environmentally friendly way. This led to a brief flirtation with an adult tricycle, but somehow it didn’t seem for me. I was a bit worried about the stigma (and the photos). Then, aged 50 and in Europe’s mountain biking capital - the French resort of Châtel - I had an epiphany. I hired an electric bike. This was the eureka moment, and I now have the zeal of a convert.

In all seriousness, though, policymaking is often out of step with the things we really value in our lives, and yet it shapes them so profoundly that we can lose sight of the fact that even the way we travel every day could be different. Ultimately, if town and city planning reflected the lives we want to live, I think walking and cycling would be taken far more seriously.

For a start, they make us healthier and happier. Of course, we all know that exercise is good for us, but the problem is that building it into our lives is easier said than done. Here we can learn from Sardinia, Okinawa in Japan and Nicoya in Costa Rica, described as “rare longevity hotspots around the world where people are thriving into their 100s”. Their secret? People in these places exercise as they go about their daily lives without really thinking about it.

Inactivity isn’t the only deadly consequence of our current transport habits. Every year around 25,000 people are killed or seriously injured on our roads. Air pollution, meanwhile, is thought to be responsible for approximately 40,000 deaths in the UK each year. Giving people decent alternatives will make our
air cleaner and streets safer. As for the streets themselves, designing our lives purely around the car just isn’t an efficient use of public space. One study found cycle lanes can carry two and a half times as many people as car lanes, despite taking up half the space.

That said, the most urgent case for change is that road transport currently contributes around a fifth of carbon emissions in the UK, and most of that comes from cars. Emissions from public transport are negligible in comparison.

There is one more advantage of walking and cycling over alternatives. The average UK household spends nearly £60 a week on owning and running a car, about 10% of its household budget, and a further £15 on other forms of transport including bus and rail fares. The beauty of walking and cycling is that they cost next to nothing.

Yet in Britain just 2% of journeys are made by bike, compared with 12% in Germany, 16% in Denmark and a staggering 27% in the Netherlands. Just as in the UK, the postwar years in the Netherlands saw a boom in car ownership and urban planning centred around automobiles rather than bikes. Cycling fell rapidly in the 1960s and ’70s and journeys became increasingly hazardous for cyclists.

But then something changed. In October 1971 six-year-old Simone Langenhoff was killed by a speeding car which hit her as she was cycling to school. Simone’s father was a journalist on a national newspaper and used his platform to campaign for road safety. This helped set off Stop de Kindermoord (Stop the Child Murders), which grew into a huge social movement across the country. Over the following decades, the government invested in cycling infrastructure and built the segregated bike lanes that the country is now famous for, which went from 9,000km in the mid-’70s to more than 30,000km today.

Cyclists are now far from an afterthought in the Netherlands. Drivers are restricted to low speeds and reminded to look out for other road users. Wherever possible, cyclists are given separate lanes, protected by barriers and bollards. Cycling lessons are widespread in schools – something that would have really helped me. It works. In cities such as Amsterdam around two thirds of all trips are by bike or on foot, compared with less than a third (28%) in London.

Lots of the most exciting action on urban transport has come from local and regional governments. Nothing demonstrates this better than the Bee Network in Greater Manchester. When Andy Burnham was elected mayor in 2017, he immediately appointed Olympian Chris Boardman as his walking and cycling commissioner. Chris went to each of the area’s 10 local authorities and asked them to think about how their roads could be redesigned. Within a few months, they had a plan for a 1,000-mile network of walking and cycling routes across the city region.

The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, is also convinced there is a better way of doing things. In 2020 she made turning Paris into a ville du quart d’heure (15-minute city) the centrepiece of her re-election campaign. This is the idea that you should be able to meet all of your daily needs within 15 minutes’ walk or cycle of where you live.

A key reason for the rise of the car is that it has been absolutely emancipatory for our lives. Lots of people rely on cars, particularly in more rural areas, and cars will continue to be necessary for many and play a vital role in getting us where we want to go. Lots of people also depend on driving for work and income.

The response to the Covid crisis has reminded us that there is nothing inevitable about how we use our public space. The first few weeks of the lockdown in March 2020 saw road traffic fall by nearly three quarters to its lowest level since the 1950s. On some days, cycling reached double, or even triple, its pre-Covid levels in the UK. More than three quarters of Brits said they supported permanent measures to encourage more walking and cycling.

Ultimately, the big idea here isn’t actually about transport; it’s about building a better life for people: ensuring everyone can live in a clean and attractive neighbourhood and giving them more choice about how to get around. When it comes to our society, we cannot leave it to the market to decide. We need to make those choices ourselves.

Go Big by Ed Miliband will be published by Bodley Head on 3 June.
At the end of February 2020, Cass Sunstein, the academic lawyer and “nudge politics” entrepreneur who was once Barack Obama’s regulatory tsar, wrote an opinion piece about Covid-19 for Bloomberg News. “A lot of people are more scared than they have any reason to be,” he complained; the real peril was “excessive fear”, which might hurt the economy.

Sunstein was not lying, any more than Hannity was: they both believed that the risk of coronavirus was being overstated. But Sunstein was doing one thing that Hannity was not: he was presenting himself as an expert, ascribing the supposedly ungrounded fears about the new virus to cognitive bias. This appeal to the realm of the “cognitive” lent unearned rhetorical authority to Sunstein’s pronouncements about the virus, which were no less dismissive than the Fox News presenter’s.

Luckily, Sunstein can be merciful. “I am not suggesting that in a system committed to freedom of speech, anything said by Hannity should be regulable in any way,” he writes. However, there are a lot of other things he wants to regulate more heavily, including deliberate falsehoods, libels and conspiracy theories.

Who, though, will decide what is false and whether it should be banned? Why, the government, best understood as a depersonalised version of Sunstein himself, well known as he is for the paternalistic assumptions of “nudge politics”, the point of which is to leverage ordinary people’s cognitive biases to trick them into doing what the nudge believes is best for them. (Examples of such nudging include switching employee retirement plans from opt-in to opt-out, or putting healthy foods at eye level in supermarkets.)

Government in Sunstein’s image will be similarly benevolent once given, as he wants, “the power to regulate certain lies and falsehoods”. If we can outlaw perjury and false advertising, why not more? Sunstein is not persuaded by John Stuart Mill’s argument in *On Liberty* that the desire to suppress falsehoods is based on an erroneous “assumption of infallibility”, perhaps because the assumption of infallibility is a prerequisite for someone designing political nudges.

“It is true and important,” Sunstein allows, “that any effort to regulate speech will create a chilling effect.” People will be dissuaded from saying true things as well as false things, for fear of prosecution. But in Sunstein’s view the right amount of chilling effect is not zero: we should instead aim for a state of “optimal chill”, by which he does not appear to mean Netflix and pizza.

Any “chilling effect” is by contrast anathema to the UK government, or so it claims: the phrase appears three times in the announcement of its new higher education (freedom of speech) bill, the aim of which is allegedly to hold “universities to account on the importance of freedom of speech in higher education”. One example of the “chilling effect” it seeks to prevent is the fact that “over one hundred academics signed a letter expressing public opposition to professor Nigel Biggar’s research project Ethics and Empire, because he had said that British people should have ‘pride as well as shame’ in the empire”. You might suppose that signing a letter opposing an academic project is just the kind of academic freedom of speech that the government claims to want to protect; really, this is about chilling inconvenient criticism.

The underlying philosophy of this sort of performative culture-war meddling, though, is in perfect harmony with the view Sunstein takes in this book: he considers the subject only from the perspective of whether we should “allow” certain falsehoods that he considers noxious, rather than whether we should censor them. It’s a world in which everything is forbidden unless it’s explicitly permitted.

This is necessary, or so the book’s argument goes, because the status quo is leading us to chaos and ruin. “Many people are now being subjected to ‘cancellation’ on the basis of lies, some of which are libellous,” Sunstein claims, with no citation given. Sunstein does give some concrete examples of falsehoods that he thinks should be officially suppressed, though: for instance, the “Pizzagate” conspiracy of 2016 that Hillary Clinton was involved in a paedophile ring, or “negligent falsehoods about actors”.

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If it’s to be the government’s job to regulate lies, what happens when that power rests in the hands of a lying government?
Any refusal to stamp out such falsehoods constitutes, Sunstein does not shrink from saying, a threat to democracy. “Citizens might lose faith in particular leaders and policies,” he worries, “and even in their government itself.” Whenever someone tells you that something must be done for the sake of preserving people’s faith in democracy, you should check your wallet. How much faith, exactly, are people still imagined to have? Surveys show public trust in western governments declining ever since the Pentagon Papers and Watergate proved conclusively to US citizens that their government could and would lie to them if it felt like it.

Today, of course, we live in an age of incontinently lying “democratic” governments. Donald Trump is not named in this book, but Sunstein alludes to him when he writes: “The real fake news is the cry of fake news.” Boris Johnson, meanwhile, is not just a man who has been sacked from two previous jobs for lying, he is, in the philosopher Harry Frankfurt’s definition, someone who simply doesn’t care what is true and what is false.

So if it’s to be the government’s job to regulate lies, what happens when that power rests in the hands of a lying government? Yes, it’s the old *quis custodiet ipsos custodes* question, which applies just as much to the social media giants whom Sunstein praises in this book for their “inventive” approach to the problem, such as tagging dubious statements with “get the facts” and so forth. But who is accountable when Twitter decides to suppress links, as it did last October, to a New York Post story about Hunter Biden? In a recent financial statement, though not in this book, Sunstein discloses having done consulting work for Facebook and Apple, so he is perhaps inclined to take a friendly view.

The formula Sunstein ardously arrives at for his new regulatory scheme is as follows: “False statements are constitutionally protected unless the government can show that they threaten to cause serious harm that cannot be avoided through a more speech-protective route.” But this is precisely what autocrats such as Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin claim they are showing when they shut down dissent.

In Sunstein’s world, though, such powers will never be abused (perhaps because of magic democracy), and instead will regulate speech smoothly for everyone’s increased benefit. “The only question is whether it is possible to administer such a system,” Sunstein writes. “The best answer is that when there is a will, there is a way.”

This isn’t an answer but merely a hand-waving hope, quite apart from the general rule that when you see an American popular nonfiction writer claiming to identify “the best answer” to something, you should check your wallet again. Happily, at least, the best answer to the Covid-19 pandemic wasn’t, in fact, to lecture people about their cognitive failures to understand probability, but more along the lines of what celebrated legal scholar Sunstein told the trusting readers of Bloomberg News less than a month later: that lockdowns actually work.

To buy a copy for £15.65 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Russian tsars and glamorous stars - the story of two revolutionary perfumes and their creators

Stuart Jeffries

“I smell like an old Soviet woman and I love it,” wrote Florence, a satisfied online customer reviewing her purchase of a bottle of Red Moscow perfume. Its fragrance was, she added, “somewhat reminiscent of Chanel No 5 and powerful - and significantly cheaper.”

Florence makes a good point. Not only is Red Moscow roughly five times cheaper than Chanel No 5, but Red Moscow (Krasnaya Moskva) smells similar and shares a common olfactory heritage. Oh come on, you might well counter. Surely Russian scents smell of cabbage and disappointment, while Chanel No 5 has typified sexualised glamour ever since Marilyn Monroe revealed that in bed she wore nothing else.

The truth, as revealed in Karl Schügel’s gripping olfactory history of the 20th century, is that both perfumes have roots in Tsarist Russia, in particular in a fragrance developed by two French perfumers, Ernest Beaux and Auguste Michel, to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty in 1913. Le Bouquet Préféré de l’Impératrice (The Empress’s Favourite Bouquet) was ill fated, appearing only four years before the Bolshevik revolution put an end to the Romanovs and everything they stood for, but it inspired the creation of both Chanel No 5 and Red Moscow.

It would be going too far to say that Chanel No 5 and such Soviet fragrances became proxies in the cold war, but certainly a lot of 20th-century creativity was devoted to perfume industries in both the west and east. My favourite example of this is the bottle for Russia’s most popular cologne, Severny (meaning Northern), designed by Kazimir Malevich. It looked like an ice floe and was surmounted by a little polar bear that also served as the bottle stopper.

But forget about men. It’s the women who make Schügel’s book linger indelibly - like, say, the scent of Laughter by Yardley. Coco Chanel not only had a Nazi lover in occupied Paris but she also holidayed with him at the Wannsee villa where the Final Solution was decided upon. Only an exculpatory letter from Winston Churchill spared her the postwar fate meted out to other Frenchwomen guilty of so-called collaboration horizontale.

Schügel, a specialist on Russian history based in Frankfurt, is sensitive to how, in the hierarchy of the senses, smell is at the bottom. He has done something improbable: written a memorable book about the most ungraspable of historical phenomena. Osip Mandelstam said there was a noise of time; Schügel plausibly argues there is a smell too.

As for the book’s other woman, Polina Zhemchuzhina was a Jewish Stalinist who clearly captivates Schügel. She was chiefly responsible for reviving the Soviet Union's perfume industry and making ordinary Russians unprecedentedly fragrant. A committed fighter for Bolshievism and for women's role in the revolution, in 1921 she married Vyacheslav Molotov. He not only unwittingly gave his name to the cocktail, but rose to become the second most powerful Soviet politician after Stalin. Zhemchuzhina became responsible for Soviet perfume and cosmetics production, heading for a while the superbly named State Fat and Bone Processing Industry.

For a time, she and her husband shared a communal flat with Stalin and his second wife. But Zhemchuzhina fell from grace and fell prey to the anti-Jewish purges of the 1940s. She was forcibly divorced from her husband and sentenced to exile. Her problem was that she had a brother in British mandate Palestine to whom she wrote; worse, she made friends with the American ambassador’s wife.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia has been conquered by western brands and smells like everywhere else. Red Moscow was disdained by young Russians because it smelled like, as one put it, “old ladies”. As if that were a bad thing. But that is not the end of the story. Red Moscow is being made again under a new business model that caters for Soviet nostalgists and for those, like Florence, who want a cheap alternative to Chanel No 5.

At the end, Schügel notes that a luxury perfume boutique is planned for 23 Nikolskaya Street in Moscow, once a key site in Stalin’s Great Purges. History, far from being deodorised, is now doused with high-end perfumes to cover up its stench. The newspaper Novaya Gazeta recommended that the names of the dead be projected on to the façade of this shopping temple. Better was the idea of creating a new fragrance to mark the former court’s new incarnation. What should the perfume be called? Puliya v zatylok, suggests the correspondent, which translates as Bullet in the Back of the Head.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
In praise of an impoverished, independent woman who was ‘the greatest poetess’ Hardy ever knew

Kathryn Hughes

Whenever someone mentions Charlotte Mew, they feel obliged to add context. The fact that Thomas Hardy said she was the “greatest poetess” he knew, or that Siegfried Sassoon maintained she was “the only poet who can give me a lump in my throat”, even Virginia Woolf conceded that Mew, who wrote short stories and essays as well as verse, was “very good and interesting and quite unlike anyone else”.

The reason why any account of Mew, including this fine biography by Julia Copus, feels obliged to begin by digging her up is precisely because she has so often been dug down. Even during her lifetime Mew’s name was familiar only to those who lived and breathed contemporary literature. For these readers Mew’s “The Farmer’s Bride” (1912) was nothing short of a punch to the gut and a slap on the ear, and all in a good way. The poem gives us both the farmer’s bumbling cruelty and the girl’s blind terror as she slips away “shy as a leveret” across the fertile fields. “The Farmer’s Bride” feels as old as the hills yet startlingly new, with its balladry, mixed-up metre and long, wayward lines.

It is this difficulty of placing Mew, who was born in 1869, that critics suggest lies behind her failure to achieve much public profile. She was both a Victorian spinster and an independent New Woman, a Georgian (for which read, really, late-Victorian) and a modernist. This, after all, was a poet who was first “discovered” by Ezra Pound in 1914 when he published “The Fete” in the Egoist magazine while her “Madeleine in Church” was so blasphemous that the printer refused to touch it. Yet in other places Mew comes over as a Georgian pastoralist, as in “May 1915” where she welcomes the “healing breeze” and “heavenly rain” of spring to bind up the war-scorched landscape.

There were other reasons too for Mew’s lack of traction. She published erratically and refused to give her editors even the sketchiest of biographical details. She believed, as she wrote of her lodestar Emily Brontë, that literary genius is “purely spiritual, strangely and exquisitely severed from embodiment”. When scalp hunters such as Ottoline Morrell or Edith Sitwell tried to cosy up to Mew, she told them to go away. Sitwell lashed back by calling her a “grey, tragic woman”, which went a long way towards setting the tone of her shadowy reputation.

Copus has chosen to tell Mew’s life in the most straightforward way, with plenty of archival digging and a narrative structure that marches from cradle to grave. While this might seem a plodding approach to such a vaporous sprite, it actually serves Mew well. Woolf’s pronouncement about the importance of a room of your own and £500 a year starts to look hopelessly out of touch when considered in relation to Mew. Ironically, she too was a denizen of Bloomsbury, at one point living with her parents and siblings in Gordon Street. Yet following the early death of her architect father in 1898 the family became systematically poorer, obliged to let out bits of their house so that eventually Mew and her elderly mother and sister Anne, a talented artist, were crammed into the grubby basement eating suppers off a tray.

There are other reasons for Mew’s insistence on dodging public scrutiny. Two of her sisters were in psychiatric hospitals. The expense of these two sets of fees gobbled up the family’s modest income and built an excoriating sense of shame at a time when eugenics was suggesting that the “taint” of mental illness was carried in the blood. For that reason both Charlotte and her sister Anne were determined that they would never marry and have children.

This is miserable stuff, but Copus is careful to cool some of the more feverish speculation about Mew’s life. In her well-meaning study of 1984, the novelist Penelope Fitzgerald proceeded as if it were a given that Mew was a repressed lesbian and a cross-dresser. There was her penchant for tailoring, her preference for keeping her hair short and her tricky friendship with the novelist May Sinclair, which was broken off abruptly. Copus gently suggests that Fitzgerald’s assumptions may be quite wrong. Tailoring was fashionable for women who wanted to signal their independence and Mew, tiny at 4ft 10in, doubtless knew that a sharp line served her better than an engulfing billow. Bobbing one’s hair was exactly what many modern women were doing and, as for May Sinclair, she was well known for being tricky about pretty much everything.

Copus treats her subject’s sad end in the same matter-of-fact way. Following the death of her mother and then her beloved younger sister Anne in 1927, Mew descended into a depression and took her own life. She was tired and lonely and had reached the point where being “exquisitely severed from embodiment” seemed like the best place to be.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
History} From prehistoric hippopotamuses to high-rises, a 100,000-year survey of an awe-inspiring metropolis

Keiron Pim

If you love London but live elsewhere, it is an emotional experience to read a book that immerses you deep in the city after a year of enforced estrangement. To reacquaint myself with the place via this spirited account of its past and present left me amused, wistful and happily reminded of the sensations a metropolis instills: awe at its flux and complexity, warm detachment on walking unfamiliar nocturnal streets where a thousand lit windows hint at other lives, fascination at the countless historic buildings imbued with centuries of stories ...

Phil Baker contemplates the multitudinous city from diverse perspectives to create a picture of depth and detail. His text has two sections: a spirited description of the capital’s development from prehistory to the present, then a rumination of its condition today. The chronology opens more than 100,000 years ago when, as revealed by fossil finds, hippopotamuses waded through what is now Trafalgar Square, but the story proper begins in Roman times. After Londinium came the Anglo-Saxon Lundenwic, succeeded by Lundenburgh. The suffixes denote the transition from a trading town to a fortified one, but a ghost of the “old wick” survives in Aldwych. By the late 19th century this little web of streets by the Thames had sprawled into a great metropolis, which gained around 40 miles of roads a year and had 5 million inhabitants, including immigrants from Greece, Germany and Spain.

The tour leads us between crammed pubs and hushed gothic cemeteries, through museums from the architect John Soane’s light-filled treasure house to the artist-curator Viktor Wynd’s tenebrous wunderkammer of grotesqueries and delights in Mare Street, via public spaces such as the “psychically squalid” Speakers’ Corner, to the forbidding steel and glass towers of the City. We see the debauchery of William Hogarth’s London and the uneasy blend of squalor and grandeur known to the Victorians. Their gaslit streets became a stage set for furtive characters: the pseudonymous “Walter” who detailed his thousand-plus sexual conquests in My Secret Life, the desperate waifs and crooks interviewed by Henry Mayhew, the stragglers who prompted fearful pedestrians to wear studded collars.

Along the way we glean a cornucopia of facts. We learn why a giant grasshopper hangs over Lombard Street, that life expectancy decreases by a year at every tube stop running east from Westminster to Canning Town, and that the author and occultist E Nesbit burned effigies of suburban houses as they encroached towards her in Eltham. We see the London that was, the one that is, the one that might have been - Trafalgar Square built around a 22-storey pyramid, sewage-eating crocodiles introduced to the 19th-century Thames - and the one it seems determined to become: a hollowed-out, unaffordable city overlooked by a collection of absurd skyscrapers. The high-rises have shot up over the past decade since the then-mayor Boris Johnson applied his laissez-faire approach to architectural regulation, creating a legacy whereby, Baker says, “on top of its three hundred languages, hubristic towers are making London the new Babel”.

Baker opens his second section by surveying London from the tallest of them all, before leaving the Shard to delve into the scene below in a vivid meander through its parks, graveyards, pubs and historic sectors. In a gentrified Whitechapel congested with Ripper tours and overpriced hipster businesses, he runs into the question that overhangs the entire capital’s heritage. When the capitalism that powers a global city relentlessly co-opts it into a commercial sales pitch, what chance is there of retaining authentic character? The old London is gone, he says; it is “as if the song is over, but the melody lingers on”. We’re left listening for echoes, looking for ghosts, poring over books such as this.

Grosbesqueries
The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities

Baker’s acknowledgements feature the usual admission that it may contain errors despite his best efforts. There are, alas, enough here to merit a warning. An estimated 66 people died in the Balham tube disaster during the blitz, not 600. The winged statue commemorating Lord Shaftesbury at Piccadilly Circus is not shooting an arrow into the ground in a “shaft burying” visual pun - the sculptor, Alfred Gilbert, dismissed that myth. There are others besides. Approach the book like one of the solitary walks through the city it describes: enjoy its spirit and energy, be captivated by its curiosities, remember to remain alert.

To buy a copy for £13.01 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Care is a feminist issue, but this unusual memoir also speaks of the pleasure that can leaven the heavy burden of care.

By the age of 59, women have a 50/50 chance of being a carer for an elderly or sick relative. Care is a feminist issue, as Mosse rightly points out. Indeed I would suggest it is the feminist issue, and yet it attracts a fraction of the attention of the #MeToo movement. Our economy and culture are stubbornly constructed to ensure care is provided either for free by loving female relatives or cheaply by low-paid care workers who are predominantly women; they have been built on centuries of socialisation of girls to be caring and attentive to the needs of others to the point of self-sacrifice. Without the unpaid labour of the estimated 8.8 million adult carers in the UK, the NHS would collapse and the treasury would have to stump up £132bn to cover the shortfall. Yet the carers’ allowance is the lowest state benefit (€67.25 a week). Meanwhile, the UK’s dysfunctional care system robs families and taxpayers of vast sums to offer often mediocre care - with disastrous consequences during the Covid pandemic.

Against this hideous backdrop of inertia, neglect and crisis, Mosse tells the moving - and very unusual - story of how, over the last two decades, she and her husband have taken in three of their parents to live with them. For Mosse, it has been “a pleasure and a privilege” to share her family life with the older generation, and she pleads for greater appreciation for the elderly. Her account is heartfelt, but it’s not one many of us will recognise. Mosse is the first to admit that she has been exceptionally lucky on several fronts. She wrote a bestseller, which enabled her to buy a big enough house for an annexe. She and her husband were self-employed, so they could juggle the constant rounds of medical appointments and responsibilities. She collaborated with siblings living close by. She had the financial resources to pay for private care when needed. Finally, she says that everything she learned about care was from her own deeply loving parents. Good relationships plus money is the care equivalent of the jackpot.

But even with Mosse’s advantages “it’s hard”, she bluntly admits, and “often it feels as if there are no good options, only less bad ones”. She notes that the origin of the word care is the old German word *chara* for “burden of the mind”. On several occasions, she comments on the “numbing” repetitiveness of daily tasks, but perhaps even more painful is the powerlessness entailed in caring for the elderly as you witness their process of loss – of faculties, of freedom and independence - with only limited ability to relieve or ease it.

Mosse is a model for the option often favoured by politicians (usually male ones) who suggest that families need to step up to meet the demographic challenge of an ageing population, revealing how they simply have no grasp of what care of an elderly person entails. Their ignorance is shared by many: our society has invested huge resources in medical advances and in the NHS care to extend lives, but far less in imagining how our long, increasingly fragile lives are to be supported. As anyone with an elderly parent knows, just keeping track of all the medical needs is a Herculean effort.

As an epigram to the book, Mosse quotes Adrienne Rich: “Freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine remembering.” Throughout the book she weaves in family history; stories of her childhood in West Sussex, the marriage of her parents and the wonderful character of her mother-in-law, who took an entertainment troupe round local care homes to regale residents with music and song. Thus Mosse portrays the riches of reciprocal relations of care between one generation and the next, and is a helpful corrective to the negativity that sometimes burdens the subject.

Mosse finds it hard to shoehorn her thoughts into the impoverished bureaucratic language used in the “care industry” and complains at being designated a “carer”, with its implication of inequality and the passivity of the dependent. Here, she indignantly insists that her surviving mother-in-law may now be dependent, but is also still very much her strong-willed, vibrant self. Mosse refers to herself deprecatingly as an “extra pair of hands” even if she is now “full-time”. The book’s title speaks to the importance of tact in protecting dignity and respect, and Mosse describes admiringly how her mother cared for her father when he had Parkinson’s. “She never spoke for him, never took over unless he wanted her help, never let the things he could no longer do become more important than the things he could do.” She questions how and why we fetishise independence when the reality of human experience is always interdependence. Here is a book that sees, in this, a cause for celebration.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A bookish fantasia about the Israeli prime minister’s father, inspired by an anecdote from Harold Bloom

Leo Robson

The first obligation, when turning to the work of the electrifying American writer Joshua Cohen, is to stress that he clearly is a genius. In his essays (Attention!) and stories (Four New Messages), and in novels such as Witz, Book of Numbers, Moving Kings and now The Netanyahu - a comic historical fantasia – a dizzying range of bookish learning and worldly knowhow is given rich, resourceful expression. Cohen, who turned 40 last September, has prompted all the desirable M-words (master, magus, major) as well as comparisons to Thomas Pynchon (justified) and David Foster Wallace (slightly lazy). While James Wood settles for calling him one of the most prodigious stylists at work in the US today, Nicole Krauss has flatly declared that nobody writing in English is more gifted.

Cohen’s new novel, a sidelong portrait of the Israeli prime minister’s father, has its origins in admiration spurred by his earlier work. In May 2018 he received an email from Harold Bloom, the celebrated critic and longtime Yale professor, summoning him to Connecticut. Bloom later included Book of Numbers in his posthumously published account of 48 novels “to read and re-read”. The Netanyahu is dedicated to Bloom’s memory, and fills out a story that the critic told Cohen about playing chaperone to Ben Zion Netanyahu, a Polish-born, Israel-based academic better known as Benjamin’s father, during a visit to Cornell. Fills out, and wildly fictionalises: Harold Bloom, defender of the western canon, becomes Ruben Blum, a specialist in American economic history at Corbin college in New York state. He is chosen, as the only Jewish faculty member, to host an obscure historian of late-medieval Spain – Netanyahu’s real speciality – who is coming for an interview.

It’s a source of slight disappointment that Cohen didn’t stick closer to the record. It would have been fascinating to see a writer of his erudition explain why a Jew from the Bronx, raised speaking Yiddish, devoted his considerable talent to the promotion of poetry and plays by English Protestants. In the final pages, an author figure with many resemblances to Cohen gives what seems a sincere account of his conversations with Bloom, explaining that he changed the details of the Netanyahu incident to protect the living, though it becomes clear that this passage is itself at least partly fabricated. (Bloom never met WG Sebald and I somewhat doubt that Cormac McCarthy used to phone him from the bathtub.)

The bulk of the novel is given to Blum’s wonderfully pedantic account of his Corbin existence and the visit paid in January 1960 by the Netanyahu family – Ben Zion, his wife, and their three wild, ribald sons (Benjamin plays a minor though not unmemorable role in proceedings). This cold, inauspicious evening provides ample opportunity for Cohen’s descriptive powers. Snow comes “hissing down like static from a world turned-off”. Ben Zion is portrayed as “an uncompromising loner in the snowy wastes”, the soles of his shoes flapping loose “like a horse’s lips”. With its tight time frame, loopy narrator, portrait of Jewish-American life against a semi-rural backdrop, and moments of cruel academic satire, The Netanyahu reads like an attempt, as delightful as it sounds, to cross-breed Roth’s The Ghost Writer and Nabokov’s Pale Fire.

Yet the novel may also help to explain why Cohen doesn’t possess a fame equal to his talent. The ebullience and hyperfertility that accounts for his work’s rare pleasures can produce an engulfing excess. This is a brisk, impudent, utterly immersive novel that also wants to answer questions about Jews and history (the past serving as a distraction from the pain of present realities), Jews and identity politics (and the amnesia of the current incarnation), Zionism and the US (and the conflicting forms of Jewish mutation after the Holocaust), the distinction between Rhenish and Russian immigrants, and the paradoxes of the diaspora. Of its dozen chapters, two are given to letters that Blum receives from academics about Ben Zion’s career (one lasting 18 pages), and another two take the form of lectures that Ben Zion delivers on campus, one a kind of Bible class, the other a disquisition on his chosen field of study. Even with Blum as a mediating force, I didn’t understand every current that the visit stirred up.

There’s a moment near the end that seems to signal an alternative road – a focus that might serve better to conduct Cohen’s awe-inspiring gifts, and yield a calmer kind of wisdom. It comes when Blum is walking with his wife towards the end of what he calls “that Netanyahu-day”. “I’m sick and tired of hearing about Jews,” she tells him. “I’m talking about the two of us.”

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to guardianbookshop.com.
This gripping debut portrays Hong Kong in flux, witnessed by the colourful denizens of a crumbling neighbourhood

Sharlene Teo

“It had been two years since I set foot in Hong Kong, and it already looked a different beast,” remarks Buddha, the laconic narrator of Kit Fan’s gripping and highly accomplished debut novel. With its themes of powerlessness, upheaval, colonialism and displacement, Diamond Hill feels especially timely in light of Hong Kong’s ongoing pro-democracy protests. Yet it is also a nostalgic and evocative portrayal of 1980s Hong Kong, presenting a vivid snapshot of a city steeped in turf struggles, wealth disparities and socio-political tensions.

Buddha is a recovering heroin addict who returns from Bangkok to stay with the nuns in a small Buddhist monastery in the crumbling neighbourhood of Diamond Hill. As the last-standing shantytown amid a glitzy financial hub, this is a liminal zone in which drug gangs, real estate developers, the local government and foreign emissaries jostle for dominance. Once regarded as the “Hollywood of the Orient”, the neighbourhood, which boasted a film studio, is now grim and decrepit. Here Buddha encounters a motley cast of characters: there’s the Iron Nun, former travel agent turned canny despot; Quartz, her disturbed novice; a sad-eyed love interest, nicknamed Audrey Hepburn, who looks “like a faded film actor who had settled on being an extra”; and finally the teenage Boss, an iconoclastic gang leader who peddles heroin and plans on escaping what she terms “the death of Hong Kong”.

Set in 1987, three years after Britain signed the joint declaration agreeing to hand over Hong Kong to China, the novel depicts “a city in a state of violent change, moving from one regime we are used to loathing, to another one we are loath to get used to”. Even though the handover is a decade away, it serves as a catalysing force for acts of personal and political depravity. Fan uses the seamy deterioration of Diamond Hill to dramatise the destabilising effects of redevelopment and the transfer of supposed autonomy from one power to another. “The alley, once a popular and charming hotspot for housewives’ mahjong marathons full of laughter, food and improvised profanity, had become an outdoor drug den.”

While the women are well-rendered characters prone to cussing and ranting, Buddha remains something of a cipher. As the book unfolds, his opacity reveals itself to be germane to the plot rather than a byproduct of thin characterisation, although his passiveness and enigmatic nature occasionally frustrate. Though Diamond Hill is populated by drug addicts and lost souls, it is not a depressing novel. The language veers from the sacred to the profane, and it is a dizzyingly kinetic, occasionally humorous read, with a zippy plot that balances satirical and schmaltzy undertones. Fan’s background as an award-winning poet comes through in acute observations such as: “Don’t you think that’s what memory is like? A series of broken images connected by unfulfilled desires.” His fresh, lyrical language evokes a fantastically noirish sense of place: “the sky was a heavy mackerel. The curve of the roof and gable, the construction cranes and the shanty town were all blurred in the wash. The vertical rain soon turned into a flood, the nursery steps into a waterfall.” Such descriptions, at times, recall the ultra-modern and radiantly original imagery of May-Lan Tan’s short stories or the grittiness and darkly comic menace of Prabda Yoon’s urban fictions. The novel’s use of Chinese written characters and Cantonese slang makes for a lively and dynamic read, paying homage to the distinctive, bilingual culture of Hong Kong.

The legacy of colonialism is explored through Boss’s fixation with an idealised England to which she can escape; her bedroom is decorated with “complete leather-bound sets of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot”, which turn out to be film props. Boss is a truly inspired creation, responsible for bon mots such as: “We can’t unfuck our past, but let’s try and not fuck up our future.”

A shanty town in Kowloon, Hong Kong, in 1994

The descriptions of a half-bulldozed landscape frequently obscured in rain or smoke, and the often lengthy chunks of expositional dialogue delivered by cartoonish baddies, nod stylistically towards the wuxia genre of Chinese fiction and hardboiled detective novels. There are nods, too, to the Odyssey, with its arc of exile and return, and the figure of a beggar who may or may not be all that he seems. As an enjoyable and profound exploration of powerlessness, identity and the evolution of a city, Diamond Hill does indeed prove that, as one character puts it, “sometimes, nowhere is more foreign than home.”

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com
This merciless satirical debut set in the small world of English poetry recalls the comic rage of Thomas Bernhard  
Toby Litt

“...all writers go through a Thomas Bernhard phase, sooner or later,” said Geoff Dyer. His authority was offhand but absolute, like the pope telling you where to get the best cannoli. This was years back. We were on the train to Manchester, heading for a reading event in a huge nightclub - attended mainly by the bar staff, it turned out. I started to panic because I hadn’t gone through a Thomas Bernhard phase - in fact, fairly shamefully, I’d never heard of Thomas Bernhard. (Austria-despising novelist, playwright, poet and essayist. Died 1989, aged 58. Not a happy chap.)

But almost immediately after the train journey, to make up for my ignorance, I read Thomas Bernhard (one of the shorter ones), and then - just as Pope Dyer had predicted - I went through my own Thomas Bernhard phase. A Thomas Bernhard phase is not hard to spot. First, no paragraphs (or very long paragraphs). Second, repetition. Last, rage played for comedy. Dead Souls is Sam Riviere’s Thomas Bernhard phase. It is a single-paragraph novel, written in raging, recursive prose, about the small world of English poetry.

Within a couple of pages this subject matter became clear and I thought, “Oh God, why bother?” But 100 pages later, I was thinking, “Why bother with anything else? Why bother with lunch?” This is a brilliant and brilliantly entertaining novel. The writing is merciless; the rage is genuine. I’d say it was satire, and it is that, but it’s also a meticulous analysis coming from a place of despairing intimacy. (Riviere is an established poet who has published poetry collections with Faber.)

The setup is simple. In a slightly futuristic version of the UK, where drones dot the sky and thumbprints have replaced credit cards but not much else has changed, a poet called Solomon Wiese is found guilty of plagiarism, disappears for a bit, then is found guilty of plagiarism a second time. Over the course of a single very long evening and night, the unnamed narrator is informed of Wiese’s latest disgrace, gives a poetry reading, attends a festival after-party in a Travelodge near Waterloo Bridge, meets Wiese and then spends the next seven or so hours listening to his hilarious raging monologue about the destiny of the poet.

No one escaped the deadly words of praise that everyone arrived at the poetry recital armed to the teeth with, and in a certain sense all perished at the hands of those who wielded deadly words of praise. After the recital, the words of praise were guaranteed to come thick and fast from every direction at once, turning every poet into a virtual pin cushion of words of praise, ridling every poet with words of praise - and eventually every poet at the poetry recital fell under this unending hail of words of praise, when they realised at last the monstrous insincerity that powered these words of praise, targeted as they were at every poet regardless of their so-called talent, whereupon the words of praise detonated, destroying the poet instantly.

The cumulative effect is exhilarating: Riviere has turned paranoid pub talk and midnight doubts into a prose poem of laceration. But the novel goes deeper than flesh wounds. Time after time, the reader is brought to a point of soul horror - the horror of doubleness, nothingness, meaninglessness. The obvious comparisons (apart from Nikolai Gogol’s original Dead Souls) would be with Martin Amis’s aria of literary jealousy The Information or Rachel Cusk’s Outline, but the book has more in common with the Contes Nocturnes of ETA Hoffmann - that is, a tightly constructed anthology of horror stories in which we encounter creepy puppets, noodlay ghosts, rural vampires and a half dozen dopplegangers. They just happen to be poets.

But is the poetry scene worth all this energy, this rage? The final image is of the 40 or 50 people who comprise this coterie together in a Travelodge bar serving humid breakfasts. Surely it’s not so much shooting fish in a barrel as nuking the London Aquarium? Wiese’s answer is quite explicit: “When you’ve looked at the situation for long enough, one monstrosity becomes much the same as another, and it is of no consequence if one monstrosity comes to stand in for another monstrosity.” By the novel’s end, Riviere has extended his satiric range far beyond the monstrous poetry scene. It’s become a guilt verdict on his countryfolk worthy of Thomas Bernhard. Not just a phase.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Chowdhury’s debut novel. Winner of the inaugural Harvill Secker/Bloody Scotland crime fiction prize, *The Waiter* (Harvill Secker, £12.99) is the tale of disgraced Bengali detective Kamil Rahman, who, having left the Kolkata police force under a cloud, is now waiting tables in his uncle Sabal’s Brick Lane restaurant (“Tandoori Knights – Keep Calm and Curry On”). Kamil helps out when Sabal caters for his friend Rakesh Sharma’s lavish 60th birthday party, but at the end of the night Sharma’s body is discovered in the swimming pool of his opulent “Anglo-Greco-Bollyweirdo” house in north London. Sharma’s trophy wife, Neha, a friend of Kamil’s feisty cousin Anjoli since school, comes under suspicion, and, with tensions running high in the family, Kamil starts to investigate. Alternating between past events in Kolkata and the present, Kamil makes an appealing narrator, haunted but genuinely humours and always humane as he negotiates a minefield of conflicting loyalties, warnings from the Met and UK Immigration, and attempts on his life.

*Love and Theft* by Stan Parish (Faber, £12.99) is a slick, snappily written thriller. After a daring raid on a Las Vegas jeweller – an absolute showstopper of a prologue – career criminal Alex Cassidy decides to retire. He has a share of $22m and wants to spend some time with fellow single parent Diane. There’s an instant attraction when they meet at a party, but he later realises he has met her before – her son, Tom, is the child of Alex’s teenage partner-in-crime, Clay, who was killed before the boy was born. A romantic weekend in Mexico turns into an impromptu family gathering, during which Tom gets together with Alex’s daughter Paola – and Alex finds himself forced into one last job when Tom and Paola are kidnapped and used as collateral. What puts *Love and Theft* head and shoulders above the average thriller is that characterisation is never sacrificed to the cause of momentum: even the bit-part players are fleshed out, often in a matter of sentences, and by the time jeopardy looms for Alex and Diane we are entirely invested in them both.

The darker side of family loyalty is on display in Icelandic writer Sólveig Pálsdóttir’s *Silenced* (Corylus, £8.99, translated by Quentin Bates), with the return of police detective Guðgeir Fransson, first seen in *The Fox*. He’s in the process of moving into a new home in Reykjavik when he’s called to the prison to investigate the apparent suicide of a female inmate a few days before she was due to be released. Artist Kristín Kjarr, who smashed her car into a house while under the influence of drugs and almost killed a child, has left not a suicide note, but dozens of drawings of the same man. Meanwhile, Fransson’s new neighbour, social media influencer Andrea, complains drunkenly that the police have failed to find her brother Johannes, missing for almost 20 years … After this coincidental plot-starter, tension ferments slowly but powerfully as Fransson doggedly discovers what can happen when people choose inaction and concealment over responsibility and truth.
‘Had to ask myself, who do I want my writing to resonate with?’

Based on his experiences in corporate America, Mateo Askaripour’s debut novel, Black Buck, is a New York Times bestseller. He talks to Sirin Kale about satire, empathy and microaggressions.

Mateo Askaripour’s bookshelves are a mess of plants and cameras with dangling straps and books crammed in tightly. Prominently placed, parallel to the 29-year-old author's left ear, is his debut novel, Black Buck. “At first I didn't have it so prominently,” Askaripour says via Zoom call from his Brooklyn apartment, “and my publicist in the US messaged me and said: ‘Can you start displaying your book?’”

His publicist needn't have worried: Askaripour is everywhere at the moment. Having been plucked from the slush pile, Black Buck is a New York Times bestseller that has received rave reviews in the US. A crackling satire of corporate America, it has been compared to other classics of the genre Sorry to Bother You by Boots Riley and Jordan Belfort’s The Wolf of Wall Street. The rights were optioned last year - Askaripour will write a TV adaptation - and a UK launch this week will be followed by France and Spain in 2022. “The journey has just been incredible,” he says; he is a sincere, ebullient presence. “I’m grateful every day. I don’t take any of it for granted. Because I still remember being by myself, in my childhood bedroom, writing this book.”

Black Buck tells the story of Darren Vender, a smart but unmotivated high-school valedictorian who works as a barista in midtown Manhattan. (Hence the nickname Black Buck – because Darren is black, and works at Starbucks.) One day, bored at work, Darren challenges himself to persuade a high-flying corporate executive type to change his drink order, just for kicks. The executive takes a shine to him, offers him an internship at a startup called Sumwun - and just like that, Darren is thrust into the world of corporate America. The novel hits all the satirical tropes - Darren becomes an obnoxious, pompous, cocaine-snorting fool, before a third act redemption and an unlikely plot twist - but what makes Black Buck fresh is Askaripour’s sharp observation of what it is like to be a black person in a predominantly white space.

The book documents the experiences of people of colour in white-dominated companies, and the daily microaggressions and small humiliations that minorities have to endure in order to fit in at work. One recurring gag is Darren’s white colleagues’ habit of comparing him to other black men he looks nothing like. This detail is autobiographical. “Oh man,” he laughs. “I’ve gotten Malcolm X. Kid Cudi. Bruno Mars.”

The novel is written principally with a black audience in mind, meaning that Askaripour does not have to explain why it is so crass and offensive to be continually compared to people you in no way resemble. His readers will already know, from lived experience. “I had black people in mind when I was writing,” he says, “but I’m happy when anyone reads it. And for me, what’s been one of the biggest joys is having people who aren’t like Darren. They aren’t this young black guy from Brooklyn, they’re a 65-year-old white woman, and the book resonates with them because they’ve been the only woman on an executive team.”

For Black Buck, Askaripour drew on his own experience of working in sales for a startup in his early 20s. By the age of 24, he was managing a team of 30 people and earning a six-figure salary. Inevitably, he became a bit unbearable. “I was in the sunken place [the trance-like state black victims are trapped in in the film Get Out]. I’d cringe,” he says candidly. Friends would tell Askaripour that he was changing. “I would say,” he recalls with a wince, “you don’t understand. You don’t get it! We’re pioneers. We’re doing all these things... Fortunately, when I left, my friends and family were still there for me.”

I ask him what his former colleagues make of the book. For a moment, he is at a loss for words. “There are people who are very proud and very supportive... and anyone else who probably isn’t feeling it, or doesn’t like it, I haven’t really interacted with them,” he finally volunteers, a glint in his eye. Askaripour left his
corporate job in August 2016, and wrote and shelved two novels before eventually starting Black Buck in January 2018. “When I was writing the first manuscript I was still working at that startup, and I had that typical sales male bravado... Oh, I can write this novel. Back then, I was oblivious to the fact that writing a novel is hard, and that many people try and fail.” The first two novels didn’t work out because, Askaripour says, “I don’t think I had a clear idea of my audience... I had to ask myself, who am I as a writer, who do I want to be as a writer, and who do I want my writing to resonate with?”

Born to a Jamaican mother and an Iranian father, Askaripour grew up in Long Island, before moving to New York City for college, and subsequently settling down in his early 20s in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighbourhood where Black Buck is set. He is more closely connected to his Jamaican heritage, having grown up with his maternal grandmother in the house, and spent holidays in Jamaica with his family. (Askaripour has four brothers, all older than he is.) “Growing up,” he says, “my dad didn’t really tell us anything about Iran. So we were raised as five black men in America with Caribbean heritage... [but] I always knew there was another part, and I longed to learn more about it.” In college, Askaripour studied Farsi, and he hopes one day to visit Iran, to better connect with his Iranian roots.

Darren is a natural salesman, and the novel frames this ability as a sort of superpower. Black Buck is part-sales manual, giving readers advice such as ending a pitch with “Sounds fair?” “Most people don’t want to be seen as unfair or unreasonable,” Askaripour writes, “so they’re more likely to give in.” He believes in the ability of sales to change lives: “Everything is sales, whether we call it that or not, [it] doesn’t take away from the fact that feeling empowered, and knowing how to articulate yourself in a compelling way will help you advocate for yourself better, help you advocate for those that you love, right? All civil rights movements, these people were selling a vision.”

As a manual for how minorities can survive and thrive in corporate America, the novel could be seen to reinforce the idea that the best way for people of colour to achieve equality is to pursue individual riches, rather than collective empowerment or the redistribution of wealth. Askaripour robustly rejects the notion that he simply wants to see more people of colour earning six figure salaries in executive suites.

“The goal isn’t just to have a load of black and brown people and people who are marginalised work for white dudes and make them more money,” he says, “that’s not the goal. That could be one way though, right? Where you go in and learn and create your own [business], or you stay and get some money and help your own community, or you just live a good life. Like, I can’t judge people in terms of what they want to do.” Instead he sees Black Buck as a cautionary tale. “We see Darren all of a sudden chasing this western, white, patriarchal form of success and capitalism,” he says, “and we see how it destroyed the thing that made him different, and which made him special.”

Mateo Askaripour

‘I had that typical sales male bravado... I was oblivious to the fact that writing a novel is hard, and that many people try and fail’

After the whirlwind success of Black Buck, Askaripour now has the world at his feet. “The way I define success today,” he insists, “it’s not about being a New York Times bestseller, even though I wanted to hit that milestone, and it’s not about having the book potentially adapted for the screen, although of course I definitely wanted that when I was, you know, dreaming... the way I define success today is when someone reads my book and says, ‘You don’t know me, but it feels as though you wrote my life into the pages of this book. And I feel more empowered. I feel less alone. I don’t feel crazy, paranoid, or overly sensitive when I perceive something to be amiss in these spaces.’”

In addition to developing Black Buck for TV, a second novel is in the works. It’s a lot, but the energetic Askaripour won’t have any issues juggling the competing demands of literary follow-up, international book tours and screenwriting. He’s practically bouncing out of his seat. “This is the preamble,” Askaripour promises. “This is the appetiser.” I don’t doubt him for a second.
Mighty and unbowed

Prolific, resilient and endlessly creative... as Bob Dylan celebrates his 80th birthday, Edward Docx assesses the singer-songwriter’s artistic contribution to the human story

Astonishingly, Bob Dylan turns 80 on Monday. For millions of people like me, this is a moment to celebrate. We’re insane, of course. We listen to him every day like other people pray. We’ve been to hundreds of the live shows - witnessed the transcendent moments and stood there loyally through entire set lists of dirge and backed-up drains. We know all 39 studio albums inside out; and the bootlegs; and the basement tapes; and the bootlegs of basements. We can tell you what year a recording was made simply by hearing which of Dylan’s dozen or so voices he is using. Bad Dylan for us is interesting Dylan. We were there for the desert wastelands of the mid-late 1980s, the soporific crooning-swamps of the middle 2010s; we even bought the 2009 Christmas album - a record so bad that an hour of pocket-dialled voicemail would make for less painful listening.

So what exactly are we celebrating? What have we been listening to all these years? And is there any way we can share the experience with the unconverted - or at least illuminate it a little?
In a straightforward way, we are celebrating the immensity of Bob Dylan’s 60-year artistic contribution to the human story. The man has written more than 500 immortal songs. But we’re also celebrating the way in which he has continued to make work that is still so alive and expressive, well into his eighth decade. His last album, Rough and Rowdy Ways (2020), will come to be considered one of his finest. Where once he was the most interesting Hamlet of his generation, he is now the most interesting Prospero. As with Goethe or Beethoven or Picasso, the late works stand as measured and resonant equal to the raw, intense virtuosity of his unsurpassable early output – those first eight albums, written and recorded between the ages of 21 and 26.

We are celebrating Dylan’s inspiring commitment in another way, too. From 1990 until 2019, he played an average of more than 100 shows a year – every year – all around the planet. Can you imagine that? Forget the artistic requirements, could you even face the travel? It takes most people a fortnight of sweat to psych themselves up for a wedding speech or an instantly forgotten work presentation. But consider what it’s like holding an audience of thousands for two hours with nothing but your voice, your songs, your words.

And it’s in the live performances that we’re celebrating another thing about Dylan’s extraordinary creative dynamism.

**Intense virtue**

Dylan in 1965

Because every night he plays his songs in a slightly different way. Works from decades ago will be reimagined and reshaped so as to acquire new resonances – not just for the audience, but also for Dylan himself. Unlike, say, Mick Jagger, whose work is some kind of frozen-in-time museum re-enactment, or Paul Simon, whose fastidiousness speaks somehow of anxiety and limitation, or Paul McCartney with his nursery rhymes, Dylan writes songs that are textured and capacious enough to withstand endless reinterpretation. A common experience when seeing him live is to discover that a song that you thought was about rage is suddenly transformed into something tender. Ten years on, at another concert, that same song you now think of as tender turns out to be a wry throwaway burlesque. The burlesque later becomes an elegy. And on it goes.

We’re also celebrating Dylan’s epic resilience. We live in times where everyone jostles for attention, for approval, for applause. Conversely, Dylan’s attitude of supreme indifference to the press, or to public opinion, or even towards the Nobel prize committee, seems somehow stirring, comforting even. It’s not so much that he annoys his critics every few years, it’s more that he simply doesn’t think about them. He follows his muse. Down the decades he has been Little Richard electric, Woodie Guthrie folk, his own folk, his own electric, imperious, stoned, quasi-biblical, country, crooning, pastoral, comeback, Gypsy, despairing, Christian, biblical-biblical, Jewish, nowhere, drunk, back again, lost, finger-picking, back again, mighty and unbowed, Santa, Sinatra, and at the last... transcendent. And you feel when you listen to his work as though you are partaking in some part of his mighty endurance. Like he’s sharing some form of heroic tenacity or stoicism. Quite literally, you are given strength.

What are we listening to? And to put the question that all Dylan’s work asks at its heart, how does it feel? At its simplest: we’re listening to a highly intelligent artist with a rare sensibility address the subjects that most define and preoccupy human beings throughout this inexplicable celebration/catastrophe we call life.

We’re also listening to one of the great poetical anatomists of love. Wherever you are on the relationship curve, from first glance to dying breath, there’s no feeling of love that Dylan hasn’t rendered in song.
Dylan writes songs that stand for decades, movements, moments in history, yet also say something acute about how you feel today. Meaningful to his listener. (This double operation is at the heart of his genius.) Dylan writes songs that feel iconic and yet intimate. Songs that seem to stand for decades, movements, issues, moments in history, yet also say something acute about how you feel today.

And yet the songs also feel just out of reach, self-sealed in such a way that you can’t reduce or define or explain them. I have heard Dylan play “All Along the Watchtower” live dozens of times; it’s the song he has performed most in his career – at more than 2,200 concerts – ahead even of “Like a Rolling Stone”. But what it is “about”, I don’t know. There’s a joke and there’s a thief and there’s so much confusion that they are in danger of talking falsely. All I can tell you is that somehow their plight is my plight is your plight is our plight is the end of the world. Because, yes, the hour is getting late and the wind has begun to howl.

The core of what we are celebrating is the way Dylan uses words, hauling up fresh water from the deep and stony wells of language in a voice that neither quite sings, nor declaims, nor prays, nor hollers, nor
And this is perhaps the best way to think about it. The experience of listening to Dylan feels a close cousin to the experience of hearing the soliloquies of Shakespeare: the way Shakespeare manages to get Hamlet to say what only Hamlet needs to say and yet somehow to speak for all of us in a certain mood. Another day it's Iago, of course. Or Rosalind. Shylock. Richard II. Portia or Puck. And each soliloquy open to as many different interpretations as there are actors to speak them.

Which brings me to what I think we're celebrating most of all: Dylan's generosity. Because Dylan, like Shakespeare and Homer, is an artist who disappears as only the greatest can. An artist who somehow creates work far beyond himself. We have no idea what Shakespeare feels. You look for him in the plays - all the way from Juliet to King Lear via Bottom and Cleopatra - and you can't find him: he has mysteriously vanished from the work altogether. Same with Dylan. Sure, the songs come through him and by him but they are not for him. They are there for the benefit of anyone and everyone who wishes to fathom human nature in their company. They exist for all the world today and they will exist for all the world tomorrow. They will always be there for me. They will always be there for you.

In his Nobel address, Dylan said: “The words in Shakespeare's plays were meant to be acted on the stage. Just as lyrics in songs are meant to be sung, not read on a page. And I hope some of you get the chance to listen to these lyrics the way they were intended to be heard: in concert, or on record, or however people are listening to songs these days. I return once again to Homer, who says, 'Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story.'”

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**Nature takes care of us.**

**It's only right we take care of it in return.**
I was wildly ambitious— and I had a chip on my shoulder’
Jane Rogers

When I started work on *Mr Wroe’s Virgins* I was 35. I was wildly ambitious, and had a chip on my shoulder. Faber had published my first three novels and all had found critical favour. But I was broke and my sales were poor, and I was spiky about the literary world, which seemed to me to consist mainly of men, mainly in London.

Two conversations from that time linger in my memory. The first was with my father, who helped to forge my taste in literature. He gave me James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* when I was too young to understand either, but old enough to fall in love with their language and their rule-breaking. He encouraged me to become a writer but never dished out praise. After the publication of *The Ice Is Singing* he told me it was time to tackle “a bigger topic”; it was no good just writing books about women and feminism. This rankled.

The second was with Pat Barker. We met as judges for the Constable Trophy, a first novel prize for northern writers, which we judged in 1986 and 87. Both of us were chafing against the way the literary world seemed stacked against women. Pat told me she was getting out of “the women’s ghetto”; she was planning a book about men and war, she was going to beat the boys at their own game. “There are already far too many novels about the first world war,” I said. Which just goes to show how much I knew: Pat was, of course, working on *Regeneration*.

I knew what I wanted to write about next; that perennial question that has never been better put than by Chaucer: “What thing is it that women most desyn?”

My children were five and two, and I had anointed motherhood in *The Ice Is Singing*. Now I wanted to explore other areas where women might find value and meaning: work, religion, love, the physical world. My own instincts, reinforced by these two conversations, told me that if set in the present, such a book would be all too easily placed in the “women’s ghetto”.

So I considered a historical setting. And then lots of ideas ran together, as they do when a novel is conceived. I was living in an old mill town, surrounded by relics of the industrial revolution and the evangelical, social and educational movements that sprang up in response to it; a crucible for new heavens and earths. Prophet Wroe’s Christian Israelite church was four miles down the road, in Ashton-Under-Lyne (which he had identified as the New Jerusalem). And his congregation had given him seven virgins “for comfort and succour”. No one had ever told their story.

In the end I had to narrow it down to four stories, with each of my four women pursuing a different desire. And in the years it took to write the book, life intruded to alter and colour it – most significantly in the sudden death of my father. My loss became Hannah’s and her grief gave me the key to her character.

Body Tourists by Jane Rogers is published by Sceptre.

Tom Gauld

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