New horizons
Ali Smith, Malcolm Gladwell, Maaza Mengiste, Alice Roberts, Kehinde Andrews and more choose books to inspire change
“Thank you, again, for everything you and Vitsoe have done for us over the years. If only each shelf could talk…”

So wrote Marta, a customer since 2004.

Her shelving system started out modest – and has grown over the years. It travelled with her across London (above), to Valencia, and now Amsterdam.

Every time she needs help, she speaks with her personal Vitsoe planner, Robin.

In fact, this is the fifth time she has bought from Vitsoe … and we’re fairly sure it won’t be the last.

Marta has been able to buy an extra shelf or two when needed, while Robin has replanned her shelving to fit her Spanish walls and her Dutch huis.

He’s even sent her more packaging to protect her shelves when moving to each new home.

You could say that over the years their relationship has become one of friendship. Marta knows she is valued as a customer and trusts the advice she is given.

If your shelves could talk, what would they say?

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Contents

The week in books .............................................................................................................. 04
The books that made me by Natalie Haynes .................................................................. 05

COVER STORY Hay festival authors choose books that changed them .................. 06

Book of the week: Languages of Truth: Essays 2003-2020
by Salman Rushdie ........................................................................................................... 10

Nonfiction reviews
Alexandria: The Quest for the Lost City by Edmund Richardson ......................... 12
Paint Your Town Red: How Preston Took Back Control
and Your Town Can Too by Matthew Brown and Rhian E Jones ............................. 13
The Case of the Married Woman: Caroline Norton: A 19th-Century
Heroine Who Wanted Justice for Women by Antonia Fraser ................................. 14
Barbara Hepworth: Art & Life by Eleanor Clayton ...................................................... 15

Fiction reviews
Great Circle by Maggie Shipstead .................................................................................. 16
The Fortune Men by Nadifa Mohamed ........................................................................... 17
Careless by Kirsty Capes ............................................................................................... 17
Children’s and teenagers’ books of the month ............................................................. 18

INTERVIEW Tahmima Anam ....................................................................................... 20

BOOKS ESSAY Can we talk with trees, asks Peter Wohlleben ................................. 22

OPINION The restorative power of fiction, by Valeria Luiselli .................................. 25

The Secret Barrister on books to understand law, plus Tom Gauld ..................... 26
The week in books
29 May

Riddle with error
A small detail in a much bigger story caught the attention of many this week, when the Telegraph reported that the reason Boris Johnson missed crucial Cobra meetings early in the pandemic was because he was working on his much-delayed book Shakespeare: The Riddle of Genius. First scheduled for October 2016, its release was again pushed back when Johnson became prime minister, with publisher Hodder & Stoughton saying it would “not be published for the foreseeable future”. It was later scheduled for April 2020, and now March 2022. On Monday, a Downing Street spokesperson said he was “not aware” that Johnson had worked on the book at all since becoming PM and denied it was the reason he had missed the emergency meetings. So it remains a mystery, as does the question of when we’ll finally get to lay eyes on this work of “genius”. Sian Cain

Sedaris’s farewell
This week, it was revealed that the star of so many David Sedaris stories, Lou Sedaris, has died at the age of 98. The father of the much-loved essayist was a ghoulish presence in Sedaris’s tales, barely tolerating the squabbling of his many children. Sedaris has recently written touchingly about his father’s ageing in his New Yorker essays “Father Time” and “Unbuttoned”. In the latter, the author reconciles their adversarial relationship, after Lou, then in his hospital bed, tells his son: “You won.” “Whichever way he intended those two faint words, I will take them, and, in doing so, throw down this lance I’ve been hoisting for the past 60 years,” Sedaris wrote. “For I am old myself now, and it is so very, very heavy.” SC

Makumbi’s Jhalak
It was with absolute delight that I learned this week that my novel The First Woman has won the 2021 Jhalak prize. Now in its fifth year, this award for authors of colour has shone a light on books that have gone on to become bestsellers, including Reni Eddo-

Prize-winner Makumbi

Inveigle

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

The BBC needed to restore trust in itself, said the British government (in which public trust is immaculate), after an inquiry found that Diana, Princess of Wales had been persuaded to appear on Panorama by lies and forged documents. The princess, claimed a minister, had been “inveigled” into her interview.

That term is a corruption of the French aveugle, meaning “blind”: so if you inveigle someone you restrict their sight, perhaps by pulling the wool over their eyes. Alas, long it has been so with royals: the verb is first attested in Robert Fabyan’s 1516 chronicle, where the future Richard III, at the time the Duke of Gloucester, inveugleyd the archbishop of Canterbury into coming with him to see the Queen and persuade her to let him “protect” her sons. (The princes later died in the Tower of London.)

If one is not metaphorically blinded by inveigling, one might still be ensnared: sometimes literally, as in the web of a certain tropical spider, according to the great naturalist and plunderer Sir Hans Sloane in 1725. Other skilled inveigers, in the history of the word’s usage, include love and Satan himself. Only time will tell if Diana’s infamous interviewer, Martin Bashir, proves to be another.
The books that made me

‘All I could understand in Finnegans Wake were the smutty Latin bits’
Natalie Haynes

The book I am currently reading
For fun, Piranesi by Susanna Clarke. I loved Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell; I’ve been looking forward to this. I’m lost in a strange labyrinth and I’m not sure how to get out, or even if I want to. For work, I have Ovid’s Metamorphoses on the go, because I’m writing a novel about Medusa and I am nicking all of it from him.

The book that changed my life
Euripides’ Medea. I have never recovered: I still think it’s the greatest play ever written. Every time I read it I find something new.

The book I wish I’d written
Ovid’s Heroines. I read these glittering jewel-poems last year during lockdown. They are wonderful.

The book that influenced my writing
Julian Barnes’s Talking It Over. I love a polyphonic novel. Try as I might to write a book from a single point of view, I always end up showing events from multiple characters’ perspectives. Plus I always quote the Russian motto he includes at the beginning: “He lies like an eye-witness.”

The book I couldn’t finish
Cervantes’ Don Quixote. And yet, I wrote the programme essay for a stage version of Don Quixote. Also, I once had to talk about Joyce’s Finnegans Wake at Cheltenham literature festival, and I did try to read it, but all I could understand were the smutty Latin bits. So I marked those pages and auctioned off my copy to the audience to distract from the fact that I was taking their money but hadn’t read the book. I gave the cash to a literacy charity, before you write in.

The last book that made me cry
Everything makes me cry. I’m a massive weeper. I reread The Dark Is Rising by Susan Cooper recently, and cried when the rabbits were afraid of Will, right at the start.

The last book that made me laugh
Calvin and Hobbes, always.

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Time is limited and I don’t think it’s worth wasting on a book you’re not enjoying. (I would add, unless I’m being paid to read it. But as you see above, even that isn’t always true.)

The book I give as a gift
Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn. It’s clever and funny. And short, so it doesn’t feel like you’re giving someone homework. I never ask anyone what they think of books when I give them as gifts: reading should be a pleasure and being given a book shouldn’t come with the expectation that you will read it immediately and have views on it.

My earliest reading memory
Whose Mouse Are You? by Robert Kraus. It’s a story about making yourself belong when you feel isolated. I read it to my niece a couple of weeks ago for the first time. I guess I am her mouse now.

Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths is published by Picador.
Begin again

As thoughts turn to life after the pandemic, whether we can remake society and imagine a different future, authors appearing at this year’s Hay festival choose books that have inspired lasting change in them

Clockwise from left: Ali Smith, Sathnam Sanghera and Malcolm Gladwell

The Guardian Saturday 29 May 2021
Ali Smith, novelist

Books, and all the arts, naturally and endlessly inspire change because they free up the possibilities between reality and the imagination, and the possibilities for change in us. They never stop doing this. It’s one of the reasons the current powers that be are hellbent on controlling the arts, devaluing them, removing easy access to them and controlling history’s narratives. Last week I read a debut novel called Assembly by Natasha Brown. It’s a quiet, measured call to revolution. It’s about everything that has changed and still needs to change, socially, historically, politically, personally. It’s slim in the hand, but its impact is massive; it strikes me as the kind of book that sits on the faultline between a before and an after. I could use words like elegant and brilliantly judged and literary antecedents such as Katherine Mansfield/Toni Morrison/Claudia Rankine. But it’s simpler than that. I’m full of the hope, on reading it, that this is the kind of book that doesn’t just mark the moment things change, but also makes that change possible. Summer by Ali Smith is published by Penguin.

Malcolm Gladwell, author

After I wrote my second book, Blink, I decided that there was something wrong with my writing. It was too chilly. All theory and no feeling. I had characters in my books, but the reader never got the chance to know them. I would drop a name and then charge on with the story. So I said, which writer can teach me how to engage with my characters? And my answer was: Michael Lewis. In particular Lewis’s brilliant book The Blind Side, about a wealthy white couple in Memphis, Tennessee who adopted, Good Samaritan-style, a poor black teenager they saw walking down the road. I must have read The Blind Side four times, making notes in the margins and underlining huge sections. Lewis has a gift for being patient with his subjects, and letting them speak for themselves, so the picture that emerges is authentically of them, and I wanted to figure out how to do that too. Am I now as good as him at this task? No. Of course not. But I’m better than I was, and it’s safe to say that I could never have written a book like The Bomber Mafia without the benefit of his tutelage. The Bomber Mafia by Malcolm Gladwell is published by Allen Lane.

Imbolo Mbue, novelist

My mind is not easily changed. I can’t be convinced to drink alcohol or try any drug and yet Michael Pollan’s How to Change Your Mind made me wonder if I should open myself to a psychedelic experience. Beyond its superb exploration of everything psychedelic, the book encouraged me to voyage deep into my own mind, understand its intricacies, find new ways to tame it and prevent it from rushing off to places it has no business going to. Not an easy task for any human, but one that I’m now committed to more than ever before. Behold the Dreamers by Imbolo Mbue (4th Estate) won the PEN Faulkner award for fiction.

Sathnam Sanghera, journalist

It is natural to put authors on a pedestal, especially if, like me, you didn’t grow up surrounded with books at home. Even after I’d become a journalist, when it was suggested to me in my late 20s that I write a family memoir, my response was laughter. But it was Andrea Ashworth’s beautiful memoir Once in a House on Fire, the story of a close-knit family forced to battle poverty and abuse, and a conversation with Ashworth, that made me appreciate that it’s not always other people who write books; that the mundane details of my family life might be remarkable in their own way. Empireland by Sathnam Sanghera is published by Viking.

Alice Roberts, anthropologist

The Panda’s Thumb by Stephen Jay Gould draws threads from many different skeins to weave rich tapestries of literature, history, philosophy and evolutionary biology. This was the first book of his essays that I read; I was about 15. Gould described debates in biology, in the 19th and 20th centuries, with such passion that it was impossible not to be completely drawn in. He made evolutionary theory understandable and approachable through metaphor, but also wrote about how scientists are human – flawed and influenced by prejudice like everyone else. He encouraged me to see science as very much part of our culture, not separate from it. Ancestors by Alice Roberts is published by Simon & Schuster.

Guvn B, rapper and author

For me, it was The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry by John Mark Comer. For as long as I can remember, I’ve always relentlessly strived for something more. It goes further than aspiration, I had a burning desire to achieve at a high level. This in and of itself isn’t a bad thing, but it was sometimes to the detriment of my mental and physical health. I’d feel the pressure to reply to emails instantly, or fit in as many meetings as I could in a day, to prove I was some kind of inspirational workaholic. Reading this book made me realise it’s OK to slow down - for the benefit of myself and my family. Unspoken by Guvn B is published by Harper Inspire.

Horatio Clare, writer and broadcaster

I’ve spent two years writing about how we treat distress, from
I now have the honour to teach. The New Age of Empire by Kehinde Andrews is published by Allen Lane.

Jon McGregor, novelist
When I first read Carmen Maria Machado’s In the Dream House (winner of this year’s Rathbones Folio prize, for which I was a judge), I told someone that it had “expanded my feminism”. I’m still working out what I meant. I think it had something to do with this painful but scrupulously interrogative memoir teaching me that patriarchal structures have poisoned all sorts of relationships and not only heteronormative ones; that domestic violence is not only about the violent acts of men but about coercion and manipulation being taught, constantly, as an acceptable price of being in a relationship; that, again, the world is more nuanced and complex and bigger than I knew. Lean Fall Stand by Jon McGregor is published by 4th Estate.

Nina Stibbe, novelist
I hugely admired Patricia Lockwood’s memoir Priestdaddy but my excitement to read her novel No One Is Talking About This was tempered by the worry that I wouldn’t identify sufficiently with its “extremely online” protagonist.

I mean, I tweet a bit, but not enough to be a problem. I’ve had two tiny spots and only once been cyberbullied — by a few Dawn French fans over the correct way to serve scones. Then I read it, and it astounded me. It’s not just the scrolling, reading, checking, liking, not liking, judging, validation-seeking, I realised, but the way the lying politician, the poor whale, global injustice and the pug having his nails clipped and screaming like a human, affect my mood, my creativity, my sleep and the work I’m supposed to do. It’s a beautiful love story, too, a profound and extraordinary novel with lots to say, that has guided me to a healthier relationship with my phone and my time, and changed the way I consume the news.

Reasons to Be Cheerful by Nina Stibbe is published by Viking.

Monique Roffey, novelist
A sacred text in my home is The Myth of the Goddess by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford. I refer to it often. It’s an opus of research which uncovered that the first stories humans ever told were matrifocal and female-centric; they were the stories of the wondrous mystery of birth and rebirth. Of course they were. Our ancestors were wowed by this miracle, that babies were born and that the Earth died and re-birthed itself every year. Stories of the hunt and the quest came later. I love this book and owe Baring and Cashford a debt of gratitude. It changed my attitude to telling my stories and gave me a deep conviction of woman as agent and power image.

The Mermaid of Black Conch by Monique Roffey (Peepal Tree) won the Costa book of the year award.

Hafsa Zayyan, novelist and lawyer
I was raised with a very strong emphasis on education. Both my Pakistani mother and my Nigerian father brought me up in a household that espoused progressive views in the face of traditional and cultural gender norms. I first picked up Eve Was
Framed by Helena Kennedy as a starry-eyed teen, when I knew I wanted to be a lawyer, but not much beyond that. *Eve Was Framed* was my introduction to gender bias in the law and the legal profession. It explores, from a feminist perspective and with elements of intersectionality, institutional and structural misogyny in the criminal justice system and at the bar. Although it was first published in 1992 and in some aspects is now outdated, much of its content remains relevant today. It’s the book that reinforced my determination to contribute to and participate in traditionally male-dominated spaces. I’ve been inspired by Helena’s work and commitment to justice ever since.

*We Are All Birds of Uganda* by Hafsa Zayyan is published by Merky.

Maaza Mengiste, novelist

I first read the three volumes of Victor Klemperer’s *I Shall Bear Witness* soon after the 2016 American presidential election. Back then, I wanted to understand how one person living through the onset, then the collapse, of nazism managed to survive, and how he changed along the way. Klemperer’s journals are a cautionary tale, a terrifying reminder of what is possible when injustices are allowed to flourish and then become law. Over the years, I’ve recognised something else: the power of the written word to force a reckoning with official history. He insisted on keeping a record of those he knew who were murdered by the Nazis—a task that would have sent him to certain death if discovered—and in the process, make them known to future generations. His defiance and dogged belief in the power of language to restore some semblance of justice from the debris of hatred inspire me daily.

*The Shadow King* by Maaza Mengiste (Canongate) was shortlisted for the Booker prize.

Peter Scott-Morgan, scientist

If long ago, in 1979, I’d not devoured *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov on the slow train from Paddington to Torquay, I wouldn’t have gone on to tackle my motor neurone disease by becoming part cyborg... I’d be dead. I needed a credible reason for Imperial College to grant me a year’s sabbatical from my computing science degree so I could live with my Torquay-based boyfriend—today my husband. By the time I reached the English riviera, I had my reason; a few years later, I received the first robotics PhD in the UK. As AI approaches the sophistication of Asimov’s “pistronic brains”, the ethical paradoxes, roboscience, the three laws of robotics in this prescient anthology—first published in 1950—are jaw-droppingly relevant. The concepts don’t just make an impact on my life (and undeath); they’ll soon dominate yours.

*Peter 2.0* by Peter Scott-Morgan is published by Michael Joseph.

Hollie McNish, poet

I read “I Don’t Want to Go Into School” by Colin McNaughton in a children’s poetry anthology when I was about eight years old and it stuck—man-handedly, in two supremely silly, humorous, lighthearted rhyming stanzas, shattered and softened my opinions about adults and adulthood. Before this poem I’d seen adults largely in terms of the roles they played in my life—mum, uncle, teacher, nurse, local shopkeeper, lollipop man—but this poem turned them into actual human beings, full of many of the same fears and boredom and longings as kids. The ending of this poem, the idea that a head teacher could also moan to their mother about attending school, blew my little mind apart. I read it over and over again, giggling in shock.

*Slug* by Hollie McNish is published by Fleet.

Mel Giedroyc, comedian and author

Pan Tadeusz by Adam Mickiewicz. Thought of as the last epic poem in European literature, this Polish-Lithuanian masterpiece takes you into the sumptuous world of its 19th-century gentr. It is gorgeously entertaining, touching, redemptive, bittersweet and escapist. All things I needed when I used to read a chunk of it aloud every night to my mum, who was extremely ill at the age of 54. I felt that she must survive if she could only keep hearing just a bit more Pan Tadeusz from her sickbed each night. She did get to hear the end of it, and is now 84! For this reason I always think of Pan Tadeusz as being close to miraculous.

*The Best Things* by Mel Giedroyc is published by Headline Review.

Maggie Shipstead, novelist

In 1985, when she was 18 and aimless, a New York City club kid, Tania Aebi’s father gave her a choice: she could go to university, or she could sail alone around the world. Although an inexperienced sailor and navigator, Aebi chose the circumnavigation. I stumbled on *Maiden Voyage*, her account of her improbable three-year adventure, in my early teens, and I was gobsmacked that a girl not much older than myself had simply raised a sail and struck off. Yes, she was afraid, but she persevered. This book made me suddenly alive to the possibilities of adventure and courage.

*Great Circle* by Maggie Shipstead is published by Doubleday.

These writers will be appearing at Hay festival 2021, which runs free online until 5 June. Register for events now at hayfestival.org/wales.
Book of the week

{ Essays } Profound insights give way to platitudes - and some superlative nonfiction - in Rushdie's eclectic collection

Abhrayoti Chakraborty

The inspiration for *Midnight's Children* came to Salman Rushdie on a backpacking trip around India. It was 1974, and he had just received an advance of £700 for his debut novel, *Grimus*. But he still saw himself as an apprentice novelist who worked part-time for an ad agency in London. He stretched out his advance over four months of travel, reacquainting himself with the country he had known as a child.

The homecoming made him reconsider a minor character in an old story: a snout-nosed Bombay boy, Saleem Sinai, born at the exact moment of India's independence, whose destiny aggressively mirrored the timeline of major events in the subcontinent. The new novel would tell the story not of a life, but a nation.

Rushdie has previously written here and there about his rookie years, and he writes about them again in his new collection of essays, *Languages of Truth*. He prefaced the story this time with a memory of having lunch with the American writer Eudora Welty in London, one year after *Midnight's Children* won the Booker prize. During the meal, Rushdie ended up asking Welty about William Faulkner. How did she perceive the Nobel laureate, who had lived out his life in Mississippi like Welty? Did she think of him as one of the writers closest to her? Welty's response was caustic: “I'm from Jackson,” she said. “He is from Oxford. It's miles away.”

Welty's distinction was lost on Rushdie, as it would have been on the generation of English-language novelists from south Asia who came of age in the 1980s and 90s. Most of these writers responded to the west's long history of eroticising the subcontinent by effectively eroticising the subcontinent themselves. Tropes broadly associated with entire countries - gods, garish weddings, oral storytelling, crowds, spices, *the Kama Sutra* - were gussied up as markers of an assertive diasporic identity, representative of disparate cultures and societies. The “Indian English” they claimed to be writing in was hardly ever employed to register subliminal shifts, or to probe deeper into a point of view. The priority was to cleanse the language of the colonisers' taint, either through a peppering of untranslated words, or with chaotically stacked clauses that apparently mimicked the clamour of life back home.

Rereading *Midnight's Children* last year, I was struck by how the problem of double consciousness, inevitable in characters growing up just after British rule, is resolved by avoiding inwardsness in the first place.

Many of the old rhythms course through the essays in this new book, at least across the first 200 pages. There is the same impervious sense of wonder about “storytelling”, difficult for the reader to share in the age of fake news and social media algorithms. There is the same uncomplicated nostalgia about growing up in Bombay 70 years ago: how the young Rushdie was obsessed with fairytales and fables, how they all fed into the magic realism of his novels. The rare occasions of vulnerability - the too-late discovery, for instance, that his charming grandfather had actually been a paedophile - are hushed up in parentheticals, snubbed for a more palatable narrative.

In a piece written after Philip Roth's death, Rushdie admires the author of *Portnoy's Complaint* for starting off as a “literary revolutionary” and branching out, with the late novels, into political prescience. Rushdie's own trajectory has been different: the effusive ambition of his early work has run out of steam. The trademark sentences, once full of showy allusions and turns, are now rife with chatty platitudes.

The essay on Roth also reveals a subconscious manifesto: more often than not, when Rushdie uses the first-person plural in this volume, he is talking about those who live in the US like him. The boy from Bombay has travelled far: Cambridge, London, the decade spent in hiding after the *Satanic Verses* fatwa, and then the transatlantic leap. Though he credits his Indian childhood with his literary moorings, it is in England where he learned to write and found the distance necessary to reflect on his early themes: displacement, childhood, nationhood, stories within stories, the prehistory of Islam. Whether it is the time he went to university in the 60s and discovered “civil rights, and flower power, and girls”, or later, palling around with Harold Pinter and Christopher Hitchens on the London literary circuit, his prose still glows while evoking scenes from his interlude in Britain.

Twenty of the essays in this collection have been adapted from public talks and lectures. The number is in line with the figure Rushdie cuts in this century: not so much a novelist who happens to be famous, but a fixture in the culture pages, more in the news for his opinions than his work. There was the time...

Rushdie is as at home holding forth on the morality of children’s tales as with recalling his friendship with Carrie Fisher
he called the writer Mo Yan a “patsy” of the Chinese government. Or the kerfuffle that seems to ensue whenever he admits that he couldn’t finish Middle-march. Rushdie is just as at home holding forth on the morality of children’s stories as recounting his friendship with Carrie Fisher. In an essay on screen adaptations of novels, he can move from Satyajit Ray to Lolita to Slumdog Millionaire, and also reveal that he was invited to appear on Dancing With the Stars.

These days Rushdie lives in Manhattan and teaches at New York University. In 2004, he became the president of PEN America, and one section brings together the speeches he has delivered during their fundraisers and events, impelled by a need to pay forward the support he received during the fatwa years. Here Rushdie passionately rails against the 2011 arrest of Ai Weiwei in China, and speaks out against the rise of Hindu supremacy in Modi’s India. During the heyday of the Trump administration, he calls out the impunity with which “a government of billionaires and bankers ... is able to dismiss its adversaries as elites”.

But Rushdie’s activism has its blind spots. After 2020, it’s easy to forget his regular TV appearances with Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, fellow hardline atheists, their provocations through the George W Bush and Barack Obama years on whether Muslim women can choose to wear the veil, or their insistence that terrorist attacks by groups such as al-Qaida and Islamic State somehow proved “the militancy of modern Islam”. The knowledge that he backed the US-led assault on Afghanistan undercuts the force of his reflections on liberty and truth. Now he cagily concedes that he couldn’t foresee the secularisation of “religious extremism” before Trump.

Happy to record just what he sees and feels ... Salman Rushdie

Did these public convictions impair his literary judgment? How else to account for the thin veneer overlaying these pieces, the jokes and evasions that work well enough in conversation but seldom on the page? A remark on Bob Dylan becomes an occasion to work in words from his most popular lyric. A riff on Roth and comedy triggers the speculation that Dave Chappelle is “Portnoy’s African American child”. With Rushdie, profound insights are invariably followed by something pat, and sometimes the insights themselves are not as revelatory as he would have us think. It is disappointing to find him apprising his readers that the word “novel” also refers to something new.

And yet, just when you think his late style has set in, you run into a different, more private, Rushdie. The final 50 pages or so - comprising pieces on painters, photographers and personal ephemera - contain probably the best nonfiction he has written in years. Rushdie is a perceptive art critic, stirred alike by Mughal-era cloth paintings and Kara Walker’s contemporary silhouettes. Reading the artist Amrita Sher-Gil’s letters, he notices a sensibility moving “naturally towards the melancholy and the tragic”. Midway through a memoir of celebrating Christmas as an atheist, he recalls climbing up the roof of King’s College Chapel in Cambridge. The sentences carefully rise to the intensity of these moments. Rushdie is happy to record just what he sees and feels. You sense that he has arrived somewhere new after a long impasse and hope that it is a sign of good things to come.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The mystery of a trailblazing archeologist who faked his own death is finally unravelled
William Dalrymple

In the summer of 1840, the young orientalist Henry Rawlinson arrived in Karachi and began anxiously searching for his mentor, the pioneering archaeologist of Afghanistan, Charles Masson. The rumours he had heard profoundly alarmed him. Rawlinson had made his name by helping decipher ancient Persian cuneiform script; but he looked up to Masson as a far greater scholar. For more than a decade, Masson had wandered, alone and on foot, collecting coins and inscriptions, studying ruins and making sketches. The bilingual Hellenistic coins Masson had sent to Calcutta had been like miniature Rosetta stones. They had provided the key for scholars to understand the hybrid Greco-Buddhist ancient history of the region.

Masson had also been the first western archaeologist to visit the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. It was he who first made known the lost Hellenistic Buddhist golden age of Gandhara by digging up what are still the earliest extant images of the Buddha. His most spectacular find was the solid gold, garnet-encrusted Bimaran casket that is now one of the British Museum’s greatest treasures. Above all, Masson had done more than anyone else to uncover the traces left by Alexander the Great in Afghanistan and to identify, outside Kabul, the site of the legendary lost city of Alexandria Beneath the Mountains.

Yet for all his extraordinary achievements, Masson remained an enigma. Despite clear traces of a cockney accent, he claimed to be “an American gentleman from Kentucky”. This was a cover story that few believed, and Masson had been imprisoned by the East India Company on suspicion of spying when he was picked up wandering, without papers, on the borders of Afghanistan. The company kept him in solitary confinement for six months, on an occasional diet of stale bread and sheep entrails, something that seems to have come close to unhinging him.

Certainly, when Rawlinson finally ran Masson to ground in the back streets of Karachi, he was horrified by what had happened to the man he had long revered: “I rode into the town to see Masson of whom I have heard and read so much,” Rawlinson wrote in his diary. “I found him in a wretched hovel talking with some Beloches nearly naked and half drunk. I remained with him several hours and was extremely pained with all I witnessed. His language was at first so insolent that I thought he had become quite foolish. I think that his mind is really giving way.”

Masson’s story has fascinated generations, and he weaves his shadowy way through many books about Central Asia, from Peter Hopkirk’s The Great Game to Rory Stewart’s The Places in Between. When I was researching my own Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan 1839-42, I came across a stash of Masson’s letters in the Indian National Archives and I remember thinking what a wonderful book his story would make. Only now, with this superb biography, is Masson’s tale told in full for the first time. The result, evocatively written, impeccably researched and minutely footnoted, but with the pace and deftly woven plot complexity of a John le Carré novel, is a small masterpiece.

The story Richardson has painstakingly reconstructed from archives in three continents tells a very different tale from that put about by Masson himself. Masson’s real name, it turns out, was James Lewis of the Bengal artillery. He was a self-taught working-class Londoner who had enlisted in the army of the East India Company. In 1827 he faked his own death at the siege of Bharatpur and disappeared into the night. He wandered as a fakir through Hindustan, skirting Mughal Delhi to avoid attention. Somehow he made his way northwards from Bikaner through the emptiness of the Thar desert, before reappearing,...
starving, blistered and peeling, at the court of Bahawalpur, in what is now Pakistan.

There Masson was recruited into a mercenary force formed by the American adventurer Josiah Harlan, the self-styled Prince of Ghor and one of Rudyard Kipling’s models for The Man Who Would Be King. Harlan aimed to reconquer Afghanistan for the ousted king, Shah Shuja ul-Mulk, but the expedition quickly fell apart and Masson was left alone and friendless in the middle of war-ravaged Afghanistan. He was unable to return to India - the company had condemned him to death for desertion - so he had no choice but to beg his way to Kabul, where he began his historical researches.

Under the protection of the highly intelligent and curious Crown Prince of Kabul, Akbar Khan, Masson became the first westerner to explore Afghanistan’s ancient archaeology. Following in Alexander’s footsteps, he methodically excavated Buddhist stupas and Kushan palaces and before long had located the remains of the lost Alexandria.

It was here that Masson’s diggings really began to bear fruit: “Before the commencement of winter, I had accumulated one thousand eight hundred and sixty-five copper coins,” he wrote, “beside a few silver ones, and many rings, signets and other relics.” Coin after coin had the same words stamped on it in ancient Greek: “Basileus Basilaeon”, “King of Kings”; yet these were clearly Buddhist coins and many were turning up in buildings that appeared to be Buddhist monasteries. Dutifully, Masson began sending his finds down to the new Asiatic Society in Calcutta. Slowly the story of the Buddhist Bactrian Greeks began to come together.

It was his former mercenary commander, Josiah Harlan, who tipped off the authorities about Masson’s past. When the East India Company spymaster, Claude Wade, learned of Masson’s real identity as an EIC deserter, he blackmailed him into becoming an “intelligencer”, dangling both the threat of capital punishment and the lure of a pardon. It did not end well. Masson was finally forced to leave Kabul in 1839, just before the company blundered into the catastrophe of the first Anglo-Afghan war.

Masson’s political advice and intimate knowledge of Afghanistan were ignored. The result was a conflict that its first historian described as having “not one benefit, political or military”. Masson made it back to England, only to die in poverty near Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, in 1853 “of an uncertain disease of the brain”. He was buried in an unmarked grave. Both his priceless finds and his scholarly discoveries were appropriated by the company, and it is only now that his full achievement has finally become clear. Richardson writes at the end of his heartbreaking book: “No statues were ever set up to Masson. No marble mausoleums were erected. Not even a portrait survives.” But with the publication of this utterly brilliant biography he now has, at last, a fitting memorial.

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

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Society A gripping account of the community wealth-building scheme that turned a hard-up city’s fortunes around Lynsey Hanley

The Lancashire city of Preston, originator of artisans’ guilds, has long been overshadowed by its resurgent neighbours Liverpool and Manchester - but no longer. It’s now better known as the home of “the Preston model” of sustainable economic development, which has boosted local jobs and wages and shown a way to reinvent local government.

In 2011 Preston was in a bad way. The 2008 financial crash and its fallout left the Labour council with a choice: to live with Westminster-managed decline, or to consider - in spite of everything we’ve been told for the last 40 years - that there is an alternative.

With this book Preston city council leader Matthew Brown and writer Rhian E Jones make a compelling case for that alternative, blending a concise and unexpectedly gripping account of Preston’s experiment in “community wealth building” with a guide to the grassroots activism that underpins it.

Community wealth building was first developed in Cleveland, Ohio. The city authority replaced multinationals with “purposely created worker co-ops” to supply laundry, catering and other services. The reduced costs of “in-housing” these services enabled the creation of 5,000 jobs and a 15% pay rise for employees.

The council started small by procuring its services from local companies, then it invited the city’s other public employers to do the same. As more revenue stayed in the city, Preston incubated small businesses and became the north of England’s first living-wage employer. Now the council plans to establish a mutual bank, aiming to put loan sharks out of business.

It’s not just the right thing to do: it works. By 2020, Preston had achieved its highest employment rate and lowest levels of economic inactivity for more than 15 years, and in 2018 it was voted the UK’s most improved city to live and work in. It also shows how local authorities can make choices that benefit citizens rather than companies. As Brown and Jones state convincingly, that is what democratic government is for. Carry this book around with you and be reminded of what’s possible.

To buy a copy for £9.56 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Biography

Shrouded in scandal: the 19th-century poet and women’s rights activist who became a symbol of justice
Lara Feigel

High up in the House of Lords there is a fresco depicting The Spirit of Justice, painted by Daniel Maclise in 1850. It’s a huge portrait of the 19th-century poet, novelist and campaigner Caroline Norton, her eyes cast upwards, the scales of justice held in one hand. As a celebrated beauty of the era, Norton was an obvious choice. But there was an irony to the portrait, because this was a woman who had been denied justice as a mother.

It was a classic story at the time. Married women had no rights – over their property, possessions or children. If husbands tired of their wives, they were entitled to throw them out and deprive them of access to their children. Caroline’s husband, George Norton, was an abusive man who had beaten her for years (allegedly causing a miscarriage); in 1836 (when their sons were two, four and six), he locked her out of the house, sued for adultery and shipped the children off to his relatives.

The man with whom she was supposedly having an affair was Lord Melbourne, the prime minister; his close friendship with Caroline had largely been encouraged by her husband (Melbourne had got the cash-strapped George a job as a magistrate). Journalists including Charles Dickens flocked to report on this celebrity scandal in which much was made of her “mannish” wit and unwomanly, writerly ways – the Satirical newspaper styled her as “the unblushing one”. Caroline was declared innocent but was still prevented from seeing her children. She used her skill as a writer and connections in parliament to initiate the Custody of Infants Act which was passed in 1839 and granted married women the right to petition for custody of children under seven.

Sadly, this didn’t change her own situation. George simply moved the children to Scotland so they came under Scottish jurisdiction instead. What’s most painful about this story is that he was clearly using the children to punish and control Caroline. He kept proffering meetings with them and then changing his mind. And he doesn’t seem to have especially wanted to spend time with them himself. He was absent when their youngest son, Willie, went riding alone aged eight and fell off his pony. The servants weren’t able to care for the boy in the absence of proper medical help and he got blood poisoning. Caroline was summoned only to be told that her son was dead.

Fraser gives insightful judgment on the questions that remain questions despite Caroline’s extensive archive. We still can’t be sure if she committed adultery with Melbourne, for example, and Fraser thinks she didn’t, given the tone of the letters between them even when closest. Melbourne comes out of the relationship fairly well. He was protective of Caroline and left her an annuity at a point when she desperately needed it (George continued to own all proceeds of her writing, even after they separated). Melbourne was not much of a solace during the trial itself, though. “A woman should never part from her husband whilst she can remain with him,” he wrote at a time when it was clearly impossible for her to do so.

Fraser’s is a spirited book, particularly moving on Norton’s old age. It is impressive to see one of our most important intellectual figures turning her mind to this remarkable woman from an earlier, different and not so different era. I would recommend Diane Atkinson’s longer, 2012 biography for anyone who wants to get to know Norton and her campaigns in detail. Both writers are sensitive readers of her writing, and are judicious in the face of her frequent assertions of male superiority. “There can be no equality, any more than there can be a sea without a shore?” she wrote – but didn’t the campaigners for abolishing slavery say something similar? I agree with Fraser that despite her depth of feeling for her children, Norton was a pragmatist: “The practical details of women’s lives and how to better them were her concern.”

Fraser seems on the whole to think that the feminists have now succeeded, but I’m inclined to agree with Atkinson’s suggestion that it’s a story that reveals that not enough has changed. It is true that there are still plenty of men physically abusing their wives, plenty of men still using their children to punish their wives long after their marriages have ended. Reading about the Nortons has also been for me an exercise in seeing the long prehistory of our continuing inequality of power. Helena Kennedy in Eve Was Framed cites precedents and evidence to show that “a web of prejudice, privilege and misinformation affects women” in all their dealings with the law. “The symbol of justice may be a woman, but why should we settle for symbols?” Kennedy asks. It’s a question that Caroline Norton continues to pose from her lofty perch, rolling her eyes skyward in the House of Lords.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A new life of the sculptor reveals a passionate correspondent, loving mother and dedicated artist

Oliver Soden

If the pram in the hall really is the sombre enemy of good art, then pity the sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975). Few halls can house three prams - or, at least, one wide enough to carry triplets. The subtitle of this biography by Eleanor Clayton is Art & Life, but that ampersand could easily have been replaced by “or”, even “versus”. Torn between sculpture and motherhood, Hepworth sent her triplets first to a nursery training college and then to boarding school. Domesticity was a distraction. “One can easily expire,” she wrote, “bothering about moths & cleanliness & cabbages.”

It comes as a disappointment that the main text runs to just over 250 densely illustrated pages. Clayton is a curator at the Hepworth Wakefield museum and her biography, published to coincide with a forthcoming retrospective, has the feel of a book-length exhibition text panel. There are no new interviews with friends or family, no psychological delving, no real conjuring of atmosphere. A sense of place should be vital to any account of Hepworth’s life, whether it be the leafy streets of Hampstead (where she set up home with her first husband, the sculptor John Skeaping, and their son Paul), or the light-saturated town of St Ives in Cornwall. Having left Skeaping for the painter Ben Nicholson, father of the triplets, Hepworth moved to St Ives at the outbreak of the second world war, and lived among its golden sand and granite cliffs for the rest of her life.

This biography’s value and novelty are level-headedness and fine-grained research. Clayton sets Hepworth talking through the pages, quoting generously from letters that correct, or complicate, previous accounts of her humourless self-absorption. A passionate and stylish correspondent, Hepworth makes strings of her words: “one’s mind is so turned towards France & the weather & winds & sea!” Clayton uses letters to show again and again how Hepworth doted on her children. On parting with the triplets: “it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to think about. I am so deeply happy about the babies & want them with me all the time”. This confirms what Hepworth’s work had already made clear: motherhood and family nourished and inspired her. Many of her sculptures of babies are exquisitely tender.

The book’s illustrations (nearly 200 of them, mostly colour) bring together a lifetime’s vision. The pages glow and throb with stringed bronze, humped wood and bored stone, with cool white plaster scooped and painted. Best of all, to my mind, are Hepworth’s drawings of surgical procedures, made following the hospitalisation of her daughter Sarah: “layers of gesso and chalk”, in Clayton’s description, “on which coloured oil glaze was then painted ... before the surface [was scraped] with razors to reveal the white ground and brushstrokes below”. Clayton’s writing is at its best when dealing with the physical business of making and creating, the rhythm and intent of hands and tools.

Clayton’s aim may have been to pull her subject out from the shadows of others. Critics referred to her variously as Mrs Skeaping, Mrs Nicholson, “the huge-browed Miss Hepworth” and as a “sculpstress” (which she loathed). Eventually she was Dame Barbara, increasingly ill, ceaselessly productive, finally venerated. Her eldest child was killed in a plane crash; she and Nicholson divorced. Her commissions became prestigious and international, adorning John Lewis on Oxford Street and the United Nations Secretariat Building in New York. She wanted death to find her at work. It found her in bed in her St Ives studio, smoking a cigarette and drinking whisky to ease the pain of throat cancer. The cigarette set the building ablaze and the firemen carried out her body, her death simultaneously tragic conflagration and mundane domestic accident. Her sculptures stand in the studio garden still, breathing more freely than in any gallery, speckled with blossom and gull droppings. Amid the indifferent roar of fire and ocean they must have been a crowd of silent mourners, offering their creator immortality as she finally escaped a world of moths, and cleanliness, and cabbages.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The tales of an early aviator and a 21st-century Hollywood star are deftly woven into an enthralling narrative

_Erica Wagner_

Yet _Great Circle_ is more than a historical novel, and has more than one heroine. Running in parallel to Marian's story is a 21st-century narrative: that of Hadley Baxter, a Hollywood ingénue attempting to rescue her reputation by making a film about Marian. She finds herself powerfully, unexpectedly drawn to digging out the truth of Marian's fate. The book's early sections, set in 2014, are wincingly hilarious. A former child star, Hadley shoots to fame in a series of fantasy films called _Archangel_ (think _Twilight_). When she starts dating her co-star, Oliver, fans swoon: when she cheats on him in public she's unceremoniously booted off the franchise. It is Marian's story that will allow Hadley to spread her own wings.

Shipstead deftly interweaves Marian and Hadley's lives and draws striking parallels between their experiences, despite the time and circumstances separating them. She begins Marian's story before she is even born in 1914, introducing us not to a little girl but to a ship, the _Josephina Eterna_. Marian's ill-fated father Addison is the captain; he is as unsettled a wanderer as his daughter and her twin brother, Jamie, will be. He finds himself a wife, Annabel, whose postnatal depression is recognisable to the reader but to no one around her.

The plot of _Great Circle_ is intricate and rich, humming like the Merlin engine of the Spitfire Marian will eventually fly. It is rare to read a novel that is as beautifully built as it is elegantly written. Sarah Waters is another writer who combines those gifts, but not many spring to mind; let's say Barbara Kingsolver, too.

After the deaths of their parents the twins end up in Montana with their uncle Wallace, a man unfitted, really, to raise children, though he does his best. Hadley is also an orphan, her parents killed when their small plane crashes, and she is raised by her uncle Mitch, who - like Wallace - is a victim of addiction. In less deft hands, all these links might come across as strained, but that is never the case here.

If we know the conclusion of Marian's story, however, why should we bother to read this nearly 600 page novel? Because the destination isn't the point: rather, it's the path one takes to get there. Marian's obsession with flight lifts the reader into the air - and perhaps, when we've all been grounded for so long, the freedom we share with her is even more delicious.

Shipstead conveys the swift pleasure of flying a nimble aircraft perfectly, as Marian loops through the Montana mountains the first time she takes to the sky, "flying around the valley like a marble riding the inner surface of a bowl".

_Great Circle_ is peopled by memorable characters whose fates intersect in ways both inevitable and shocking: whose deaths have the blunt, heartbreaking force of truth. The book takes its epigraph from Rilke: "I live my life in widening circles / that reach out across the world." This is a novel that expands the reader's horizons, and is moving and surprising at every turn.

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To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbooksop.com.
This real-life story of a Somali seaman wrongfully executed for murder in Wales is powerfully reimagined

Michael Donkor

Discussions of racial inequity often focus on the US as opposed to scrutinising the entrenched racism on our own shores. With The Fortune Men, her third novel, Nadifa Mohamed takes her place among the growing crop of British artists and writers of colour — including Reni Eddo-Lodge, Steve McQueen and Jay Bernard - committed to correctly shining a light on recent British history.

Set in 1952 among the “tumbledown” docks, milk bars and lodging houses of Cardiff’s multiracial Tiger Bay, the book novelises the real events surrounding the wrongful imprisonment and execution of Mahmood Mattan, a Somali seaman and father of three young boys, who was the last man to be hanged in Cardiff prison. False evidence and witness testimonies and institutionally racist policing led to him being found guilty of the murder of a shopkeeper, Lily Volpert, here renamed Violet Volacki.

The story takes time to develop momentum, largely because of an understandable attempt at even-handedness: several early chapters focus on Violet and her family, and capture their grief after her murder. The novel becomes most compelling when it turns to spiky, maverick Mattan and the fight to clear his name. He is a shape-shifting character, rakish antihero, plucky picaro, petty thief, charismatic dreamer, gambler, doting father, anti-colonial firebrand and speaker of truth to power. Mohamed animates Mattan’s incarceration with evocative flashbacks to his wandering childhood in fractious British Somaliland and recollections of his risky life in the merchant navy.

While awaiting trial, Mattan’s belief in the “famous British justice [system]” wavers and he finds renewed religious faith that encourages him to assess his life afresh. This new understanding is expressed in delicate and perspicacious prose: “God reminds you through [...] night skis of how small and insignificant you are, and he speaks to you clearly, his anger and solace tangible in the rain he sends or withholds, the births or deaths he orders, the long, waxy grass he gives or the dead, broken earth he carves.”

In her determined, nuanced and compassionate exposure of injustice, Mohamed gives the terrible story of Mattan’s life and death meaning and dignity.

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

A teenager negotiates her way through the care system in an accessible yet profound debut from a rare new talent

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett

Teenage heroines are ten a penny, but every now and again one will saunter up, offer you a fag, and hit you with her story right between the eyes. Careless, a debut novel by Kirsty Capes, is the story of Bess, a 15-year-old who has just found out that she is pregnant by Boy, a 19-year-old rebel without a cause/shelf-stacker at Tesco. Getting pregnant at 15 is complicated enough, but Bess has been in the care of a foster family since the age of four and her relationship with foster mum Lisa is fraught. Should she keep the baby, or have an abortion and pursue her dreams?

Care narratives are rare in fiction - Tracy Beaker inevitably comes to mind, and certainly Capes shares with Jacqueline Wilson a tenderness for her vulnerable characters and an understanding of the deep, knotty friendships between girls. There are shades of Georgia Nicolson, the hilarious heroine of Louise Remmison’s YA books, as well as Caitlin Moran’s Johanna Morrigan. But although Careless is a coming of age story written in a very accessible style, it is suffused with an adult understanding of relationship dynamics and, perhaps most viscerally, the struggles young women can face to take ownership of their own bodies (a botched home abortion scene is one of the book’s most shocking moments).

Capes is a care leaver herself and Bess’s voice fizzes from the pages: “My two life choices are either to do really, really well at school so I can get out of Shepperton as quickly as possible … or become one of the locals in the Crossroads who drink so much that all their teeth have fallen out. I could go either way right now.” She can floor you with unexpected revelations about the limits that are placed on foster families: “In this family we don’t talk about love,” she writes. “We just don’t. It’s a care thing; against the rules, for starters, the ones that say foster carers can’t hug you or take you for a haircut without permission.”

I’m unashamed to say that this novel made me weep and, despite not containing an ounce of didacticism, it offers profound insight into the impact of conditional love on a “looked-after” child. Capes is a rare new talent, and has written something very special here: a novel that transforms, with the lightest of touches.

To buy a copy for £11.30 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Children} A lost puppy, a judo-practising guinea pig and victory for a girls’ football team

Imogen Russell Williams

This month’s picture books range from the comic to the meditative. Swapna Haddow and Dapo Adeola’s My Dad Is a Grizzly Bear (Macmillan) is a feast of sly visual jokes and loving fun poked at a hulking, hairy, silhouetted father, with bouncy interwoven repetition that makes it huge fun to read aloud.

Grandad’s Camper (Andersen) by Harry Woodgate, meanwhile, is a colour-flooded riot of memory. Grandad used to go everywhere with his husband in their beloved vintage camper van. But now that he’s a widower, he doesn’t feel like travelling – until his granddaughter suggests he get the van out again. A poignant sense of intergenerational love and grief made manageable makes this beautiful debut stand out.

There are more intricate images in Penny and the Little Lost Puppy (Walker), Emily Sutton’s debut as author-illustrator. A sweet-shop array of rainbow hues and fascinating details lend the story of a little girl, a lost puppy, a new home and a new friend a child-pleasing, involving freshness.

Kids of four or five plus will enjoy the more sophisticated picture book Weirdo (Penguin) by Zadie Smith and Nick Laird, illustrated by newcomer Magenta Fox. When a judo-practising guinea pig arrives in a pet-filled household, she is ostracised at first – but when she meets Emily Brookstein, another eccentric, she embraces her weirdness and finds her feet. Dryly hilarious dialogue and warmly detailed pictures invite readers in.

An enchanting anthology of poems for very young children, Take Off Your Brave (Walker) features words by four-year-old Nadim and gorgeous illustrations by Yasmeen Ismail, with a foreword from Kate Clanchy. Nadim’s poems distil the intense bubbly feelings and unexpected sideways leaps of a young child’s imagination, while Ismail’s illustrations draw the reader effortlessly into his colourful, expressive world.

For seven-and-up, the irrepressibly hilarious Maz Evans kicks off a new series with The Exploding Life of Scarlett Fife (Hachette), in which Scarlett’s Big Feelings all too often get her into Big Trouble – even before they start making things explode ... Packed with laughs, and with just enough realism to give heft and balance, it’s enlivened by Chris Jevons’s energetic illustrations.

Football-crazed readers of eight-plus will relish Jaz Santos vs the World (Puffin) by Priscilla Mante, following a young football player determined to do her
warring parents proud by taking a winning team to the Brighton girls’ under-11s tournament. A deliciously dramatic and funny debut, its brave underdogs and sporting triumphs are intertwined with the sadness of family conflict, as well as a strong sense of hope.

Slightly older fantasy fans will be dazzled by The Life and Time of Lonny

Quicke (Nosy Crow), from the hugely inventive Kirsty Applebaum. Lonny is a Lifeling – he can save the lives of other creatures, but at the cost of some of his own lifespan. His father has always kept Lonny and his brother hidden in the forest, but what will happen when they befriend two girls from the nearby town? This is a book to keep the reader thinking long after it’s finished.

Finally, Hilary McKay returns to the world of her Costa-winning The Skylarks’ War with a sequel, The Swallows’ Flight (Macmillan), set this time in the build-up to the second world war. Hans and Erik are growing up in Berlin, Ruby and Kate in Plymouth and Oxford; the coming conflict will change all their lives, as well as intertwining their destinies. It’s not necessary to have read The Skylarks’ War (though many beloved characters make reappearances) to be instantly and joyfully lost in this evocative, moving novel, showing McKay at the very top of her game.

{ Teenagers } A boy alone in a caravan in the woods; some mysterious tarot cards; plus a way to turn the tables on a bully

We Were Wolves
by Jason Cockcroft,
Andersen, £12.99
A boy lives in a caravan in the woods, waiting for his father to get out of prison. It’s cold and cheerless, but he has a stray dog, Mol, for company – and his dad has taught him about elemental forces, the wild and ancient creatures of the woods that lie hidden beneath the soil. But a frightening man in a black Range Rover is circling, waiting to strike. Beautifully illustrated, starkly poetic, Cockcroft’s debut as author-illustrator marries the shadowy power of his monochrome images with a tense, knife-edge, unforgettable story.

All Our Hidden Gifts
by Caroline O’Donoghue,
Walker, £7.99
Maeve is the odd one out both at home and at school, especially after alienating her best friend, Lily. But when she finds a mysterious tarot deck, her gift for reading the cards wins her a throng of followers - until a rogue card appears and Maeve gives Lily a disturbing reading, only for her to disappear two days later. Can Maeve, Lily’s brother Roe, and Maeve’s new friend Fiona find a way to bring the lost girl home? From the author of Scenes of a Graphic Nature, this genuinely creepy novel is veined with mordant comedy and dreamy romance.

The Yearbook
by Holly Bourne,
Usborne, £7.99
By the end of year 11, Paige Vickers has made herself invisible, except for her byline in the school paper. Years of navigating her father’s terrifying moods have conditioned her never to make herself a target. When Paige meets the mysterious Elijah, though, she realises she wants to change her story – and the leavers’ yearbook might present the perfect chance. This absorbing novel from the queen of British YA conveys the pain of being bullied with visceral clarity, as well as the fearful, wonderful power of turning the tables on an abuser. IRW
‘As a woman, I’m aware of the limitations of tech’

The prize-winning author Tahmima Anam talks to Liesl Schillinger about drawing on her experience of the tech world for her darkly funny satire, The Startup Wife

Readers may know Tahmima Anam as the author of a trilogy of sombre, lyrical novels centred on the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence and its fallout: A Golden Age (2007), which won the Commonwealth writers’ prize for best first book and was shortlisted for the Guardian first book award; The Good Muslim (2011); and The Bones of Grace (2016). She constructed that fictional world largely around the memories of her relatives in Bangladesh, who endured those times - it doesn’t mirror her own experience.

Born in Dhaka in 1975, four years after the war, Anam grew up in Paris, New York and Bangkok, went to college in New England and now lives in London. When she travelled to Bangladesh she used to feel “like I didn’t belong”, she says. “Those books were my way of putting myself back into that identity. I would wake up, sit down at my desk, cry all day and write, and then I would turn my computer off and go to sleep. If you feel, as I did, a very complex relationship to a place, writing a book about it is a great way to stake your claim: that is my country, that is my history.”

But in her new book, she stakes her claim in the present. The Startup Wife is no elegiac history novel: it’s a jauntily apocalyptic, stealthily philosophical and darkly funny romcom about a young Bangladeshi-American scientist, Asha Ray, who founds a tech startup with her “encyclopedically brilliant” Wasp husband, Cyrus Jones. “There was something extremely liberating about writing this book,” Anam says now. “It came from me as an immigrant, a woman, becoming aware of the limitations of this new world of tech that promises everything; and how hard it is for a woman to make her way in the world.” And this time it’s a world that she knows first hand, because Anam, like her heroine, is a startup wife herself.

For more than a decade, Anam and her husband Roland Lamb, the CEO of the music tech company ROLI (she is on the board), lived in Hackney, east London, a five-minute walk from his office. They married in 2010, shortly after ROLI launched. “Our marriage and the startup are exactly the same age,” she observes. “The life we have, that startup world, our physical home, it’s been framed by the business. It’s like one of our children.” As we talk she extols her husband’s inventions. But, unlike Asha in The Startup Wife, Anam did not co-found her husband’s startup, or have anything to do with the tech. And they have recently moved, with their two real children, to north London. “We decided during the pandemic that we needed to start having a life that was not right next to the office,” she explains.

In The Startup Wife Asha is obsessed with science, and besotted with her husband. While she toils in an AI lab at MIT, seeking to endow machines with human empathy, Cyrus devises meaningful secular ceremonies for people who want to mark life’s milestones without “the baggage of religion”. When Asha discovers she can harness his thought processes for an algorithm that generates customised ceremonies - yoga funerals, atheist prayers, cat baptisms - they attach her algorithm to a social networking platform they name WAI (“We Are Infinite”).

WAI catches the attention of a secretive, well-funded tech startup incubator in Manhattan called Utopia. Its state-of-the-art headquarters houses a stable of companies that share Utopia’s brightly doomy “post-world world” ethos. Among them are the app Consentify, which aims to “make every sexual encounter safe, traceable, and consensual” by having its enrollees “sign a contract every time you want to touch someone”; another, Obity, invites members to curate their posthumous social media presence. One startup, LoneStar, intends to protect the animal population by injecting humans with a vaccine derived from the saliva of the lone star tick, which causes lifelong intolerance of meat and dairy. (That tick, by the way, exists.) At the more permissive end of the Utopia spectrum, another company sells a tiny clip-on vibrator, Filter, furnishing women with discreet sexual release at any time - “a handbag essential”. When Utopia admits WAI to the collective, the startup goes viral. Will Asha’s marriage survive, if tech worshippers hail Cyrus as a new messiah - “the Jesus, Abraham and Mohammed of the age”?

'I have always envied people who have a strong attachment to a religion. It gives you a schedule, it gives you a structure'
Unlike those earlier books, “writing Asha’s story was a really joyful experience”, Anam says. First of all, it’s full of expletives. “I feel like; ‘Hey, that’s Asha, saying the F-word whenever she wants!’ It was great to inhabit the voice of a person who is a lot more free to be herself.” Adding to the fun, last year she created a fake website for the Utopia collective, just to see what would happen. Duped venture capitalists emailed the site asking how they could invest. Their mistake was natural: the startups she invented are plausible enough to have real-life counterparts.

Nevertheless, once it was finished, Anam had misgivings. She asked her publisher to let her use a pseudonym; they dissuaded her. “It was very hard for me to square those books I had written before with this one, because it was such a departure,” she says. Roland reassured her: “This is much more you,” he said. “And it’s true,” Anam says. “Asha’s voice sounds more like the way I speak.”

Despite the difference in voice, strong threads connect all four books, carrying through the author’s abiding preoccupations. One of these is ritual: the social and religious acts that strengthen a community. In *The Golden Age*, they arise organically, tied to religion and family, as when the young widow Rehana Haque (her story inspired by Anam’s maternal grandmother) holds an annual garden party for her children, to mark the date when she regained custody of them. She buys them clothes, makes lemonade and special biryani. In *The Startup Wife*, the rituals are curated showpieces, highlighting the effort that goes into conferring meaning on landmark events unattached to established tradition. One of these is the wedding: Cyrus dreams up for two classicists. The bride wears a gown and veil made entirely of strips cut from pages of the *Iliad*. During the ceremony, bride and groom tear off the paper strips until the bride is revealed wearing only shorts and an “I heart Homer” T-shirt.

It was the idea of ritual that prompted Anam to write *The Startup Wife*, she says. She was not raised with religion; both her parents were revolutionaries in the 1971 war, which was “the defining moment of their lives”. Today, her parents live in Dhaka, where her father is a “very outspoken” newspaper editor, and her mother is a human rights activist. “There should be a way to get secular, non-religious rituals for people who still want those things,” she says. “I would quite like to have a baptism for my kid - something to acknowledge the start of life - but I’m not Christian. And I can’t, as an atheist Muslim, have a bar mitzvah for my son. If you don’t belong to those faith traditions, you just don’t have a way to access those.” She pauses. “I’ve always envied people who have a strong attachment to a religion. It gives you a schedule, it gives you a structure.”

Yet the other thread that connects the Bangladesh trilogy with *The Startup Wife* is Anam’s sharp exposure of the menacing draw of ideological fervour. In the wake of the 2016 Brexit vote and US election, she has recognised the increasingly harmful role that social media can play in society, sowing division in families and fomenting unrest. “The all-encompassing power that was represented by religion in *The Good Muslim* is represented by tech in this book,” she says. “I think the message in both cases is the danger of blind belief.”

The only ideology she will stand up for at the moment is belief in science. When the pandemic arrived, she observes, “we were putting all our hopes and dreams into these scientists who were going to give us a vaccine. And then they *did*... The day I got it, I just felt so moved.”

*The Startup Wife* is published by Canongate.
The root of the matter
Peter Wohlleben

Trees have the ability to taste and feel - they communicate with each other, store memories and respond to attacks. They can have a profoundly positive effect on our emotions ... but can we know how they feel about us?

Why can’t we communicate with trees the same way we communicate with, say, elephants? Both live in social groups and look after not only their young but also their elders. That famous elephant memory is also found in trees, and both communicate in languages that we didn’t even recognise at first. Trees communicate through their interconnected root systems, and elephants communicate using low-frequency rumbling below the range at which we can hear. We get a feeling of wellbeing when we run our fingers over the rough skin of both creatures, and what we would love above all is to get a reaction from them.

Is such communication possible between people and trees? First we have to take a closer look at what we mean by “communicate”. It is not enough that we consciously or subconsciously eavesdrop, so to speak, on the scents trees use to communicate among themselves. We have a physical reaction when we breathe them in, but for communication to happen, the trees also need to react to our signals.

Trees transpire chemical compounds. We are subconsciously aware of these compounds and we respond with changes in blood pressure. The tree, for its part, is unaware of our response – after all, we are not in contact with the tree in any way. And even if we hug the tree and talk of electric fields,
which is one way we could mutually affect each other (because plants, like us, function partially by transmitting electric signals), there is still one huge obstacle: time. Trees, as we all know, are awfully slow. You can multiply the time it takes you to make contact with the tree by 10,000 to find out when you can expect a response.

Trees store memories, respond to attacks and transfer sugar solution, and perhaps even memories, to their offspring. All these abilities suggest that they must also have a brain. But no one has yet found any such thing. Professor František Baluška at the University of Bonn has recently been looking into this. For some time now, he has been of the opinion that plants are intelligent — after all, they can process information and make decisions — but consciousness takes the discussion to a different level.

Baluška and his colleagues sedated plants that feature moving parts, such as Venus flytraps. The anaesthetics the scientists used deactivated electric activity so that the traps no longer reacted when they were touched. Sedated peas showed similar changes in behaviour. Their tendrils, which usually move in all directions, stopped searching and started to spiral on the spot. After the plants broke the narcotics down, they resumed their normal behaviour.

Did the plants wake up as we do when we come to after a general anaesthetic? This is the critical question, because in order to wake up, you need one thing above all others: consciousness. And it was exactly this question that a reporter posed to Baluška. I really liked his answer: “No one can answer this because you cannot ask [the plants].”

When you hug a tree, nothing electric happens, because your voltages are the same. But might the tree be aware of your touch in some other way? All you have to do, for example, is stroke your tomato plants for a few minutes each day and they slow their upward growth and put their energy into growing thicker stems instead. This, however, is not the plant saying it loves you too, but rather the plant reacting to what it likely experiences as a breeze blowing by, because the wind elicits a similar response. If you were hoping to hug a tree and get a hug back, this information must be disappointing.

We do, however, find a great deal of sensitivity in a completely different part of the tree: its roots. At this level, the tree works its way through the ground with its root tips, which contain brain-like structures. The root tips feel, taste, test and decide where and how far the roots will travel. If there is a stone in the way, the sensitive tips notice and choose a different route. The sensitivity to touch that tree lovers are seeking is therefore to be found not in the trunk but underground. If it is possible to make contact, the roots would be the first place to try. However, they like neither pressure nor fresh air — and so there’s no point exposing these tender structures, because even 10 minutes in the sun spells death for their tissue.

The most recent scientific discoveries, however,
offer something completely different: the heartbeat of trees. What blood is to people, water is to trees. I have written a lot about how water is transported up into the crown of the tree; exactly how that happens has not yet been adequately explained. But Dr András Zlinszky at the Balaton Limnological Institute in Tihany, Hungary, is shedding some light on the matter. Some years ago, he and colleagues from Finland and Austria noticed that birch trees appear to rest at night. The scientists used lasers to measure trees on calm nights. They noticed the branches hung up to 4in (10cm) lower, returning to their normal position when the sun rose. The researchers started talking about sleep behaviour in trees.

Zlinszky could not get this discovery out of his head, and he decided he needed to investigate further. He and a colleague, Professor Anders Barford, measured another 22 trees of different species. Once again, they documented the rise and fall of the branches, but this time some of the cycles were different. The branches changed position not only morning and night, but also every three to four hours. Was it conceivable that the trees were making pumping movements at these regular intervals? After all, other researchers had already determined that the diameter of a tree’s trunk sometimes shrinks by about 0.002in (0.05mm) before expanding again. Were the scientists on the trail of a heartbeat that used contractions to pump water gradually upward? A heartbeat so slow that no one had noticed it before? Zlinszky and Barford suggested this as a plausible explanation for their observations, nudging trees one step further toward the animal kingdom.

A heartbeat every three to four hours is, unfortunately, too slow for even the most sensitive person to feel when they hug a tree. But there is one last possible way to connect with trees: our voices. Can plants hear? I can answer without hesitation in the affirmative. I encourage you to experience this for yourself. Make a plan to go outside and immerse yourself in nature. If there is a forest near you, make that your destination. If you live in a city, find a park or even just a tree-lined street where you can take a walk. Stand and feel the air on your skin. What can you smell? The gentle, earthy aromas of old leaves gently decomposing on the ground or the tangy, brisk scents of new growth? What can you hear? The scratching of squirrels scuttling up trunks or the rustle of leaves as birds turn them over to find insects underneath? Shut your eyes and feel that this is a place where you belong.

Take a moment to just sit - on a stump or a log or a carpet of leaves. Does that bring you even closer to feeling part of the forest? Run your fingers through the crispness of leaves or over the softness of moss. What do you know about the trees and plants around you? Do you know their names? Do you know if they are safe to eat and, if they are, how they taste? What more would you like to learn about their lives, what would you hope to find in guide books and what do you hope scientists will explore in the future so we can really get to know the amazing creatures that are trees in all their biological complexity? We share a world and if they thrive, so do we.

One possible way to connect with trees is by using our voices. Can plants hear? I can answer without hesitation in the affirmative.

This is an edited extract from The Heartbeat of Trees: Embracing Our Ancient Bond with Forests and Nature by Peter Wohlleben, translated by Jane Billinghurst, published by Greystone on 5 June.
‘Without books, we would not have made it’

Valeria Luiselli won the Dublin literary award last week for Lost Children Archive. Here she reflects on how reading, and writing, have helped her through the pandemic.

I read an article the other day about a computer program that writes fiction. You feed it a few lines, tell it the genre - science fiction, horror - and it produces the rest. And it’s not bad at all. It writes in full grammatical sentences; comes up with metaphors and analogies; emulates a writer’s particular style and so on. The author of the article says that this “tool” is going to be the “salvation” for writers who dislike writing, which, according to him, is nearly all writers. I want to say to this writer: you are wrong. And to this robot that writes fiction I want to say... well, I don’t want to say anything to it because, you know, robots are robots.

Fiction is one of the most pleasurable of human activities. It’s one of the most difficult, yes; but when it is driven by a deep desire, it is one of the most pleasurable. Fiction is also something quite like a bodily intuition, or an embodied knowledge, something we feel when our minds are able to pierce through the mesh of the present, and imagine someplace/something other. At times, when we try to peer into that other place what we see is too painful, shocking or simply abysmal. But we have to look at it anyway, and make something of it, make something with it. The word fiction, in fact, comes from the Latin fingere, which means “to shape, to form”, and originally, “to mould something out of clay”. Fingere implies the action of making, or rather, giving form. It is not inventing something that is not true, but giving shape to something that was already there. Fiction requires a combination of insight, hindsight and foresight. In other words, it requires experience. Lost Children Archive is a novel about childhood solitude and children’s boundless imagination, the fragile intensity of familial ties, about tensions between history and fiction, and the complex intersections of political circumstances and personal lives.

But more than anything, it is a novel about the process of making stories, of threading voices and ideas together in an attempt to better understand the world around us. It is a novel about fiction. It begins with two parents telling stories - their children physically but also metaphorically riding in the backseat of the family car - but then shifts to the children’s narrative, to them becoming the voices that tell us the story of the fucked-up but blindingly stunning world that we are always fictioning, as in, always shaping and reshaping.

In this past year of isolation and doubt, and so much fear, my daughter, my niece and I have been reading out loud to each other, for company, for a better sense of togetherness, maybe, beyond cooking and eating meals and cleaning the house. We read to each other the way one seeks company around a fireplace - to be alone, together. Often, we play a game: we sit in front of the bookshelves, and one of us chooses a book with our eyes closed, and then we read out loud from it, sometimes just a few lines, sometimes entire chapters.

We’ve been reading Audre Lorde, Marguerite Duras, James Joyce, and even a vampire series the title of which I will never confess. In any case, I can say, without a hint of doubt, that without books - without sharing in the company of other writers’ human experiences - we would not have made it through these months. If our spirits have found renewal, if we have found strength to carry on, if we have maintained a sense of enthusiasm for life, it is thanks to the worlds that books have given us. Each time, we found solace in the companions that live in our bookshelves.

Recently, for a project I’m working on, I interviewed some women in my family about what they feared most. What are you afraid of? I asked. My mother said: “Perder claridad” - to lose clarity. My daughter said: “I’m afraid of being alone.” My younger niece said: “Expectations.” My older niece said: “I’m afraid of my relationship failing, losing love.” And what are you afraid of, Mamma?” my daughter then asked me.

What am I afraid of? I am afraid of many things. Of loss, of not being able to provide for those who depend on me, of political violence, of the climate crisis and Silicon Valley. But I am particularly afraid of our spirits becoming stagnant, of not having a narrative to believe in, of not having a space in which to listen to each other and understand each other deeply. I am afraid, in other words, of a world without fiction. A world in which we do not share a collective space of imagination. And so I am committed to that, to devoting my life to the improbable art of fiction.

This is an edited version of Valeria Luiselli’s speech for the Dublin literary award. Lost Children Archive is published by 4th Estate.
Books to help you stay the right side of the law

The Secret Barrister

No lawyer has a comprehensive knowledge of the labyrinthine law of our land, so quite how a member of the public is expected to understand all of the rules that bind us has long been a mystery to me. Nevertheless, even if the precise letter of the law is held captive by the legal profession, there are a number of fantastic books to help the general reader discern the law’s spirit.

One book that has earned the right to sit atop any list of legal books is The Rule of Law by Tom Bingham, the former lord chief justice. It explores a principle that underpins not merely the legal system, but the edifice of our democracy. Offering as a definition that “all persons and authorities within the state, whether public or private, should be bound by and entitled to the benefit of laws publicly made, taking effect (generally) in the future and publicly administered in the courts”, Bingham charts with clarity the historical development of the rule of law and why it matters.

When the rule of law collapses, cases such as that of Josef K in Franz Kafka’s The Trial escape the realm of dystopian fiction and materialise as living, breathing miscarriages of justice. The notion that a private citizen can be prosecuted on undisclosed charges and tried in secret courts by government officials is not the preserve of early 20th-century authoritarianism, but represents explicit 21st-century policy in a number of states in which governments are eroding the rule of law to bolster executive power.

The importance of an independent judiciary in upholding the rule of law is spelled out superbly by Joshua Rozenberg in Enemies of the People? Taking the famous newspaper headline of 2016, when judges who ruled against the UK government were subjected to a political and media attack, this book examines whether the popular criticism of “activist” or “politicised” judges stands up to scrutiny.

For a window on to the everyday reality of our justice system, you will struggle to find better written or more insightful accounts than In Your Defence by Sarah Langford and In Black and White by Alexandra Wilson. Langford paints honest and often heartbreaking portraits of the people she has represented in the criminal and family courts. Wilson is a junior criminal and family law barrister, who also shares stories of those pulled into the justice system, but from the perspective of a young mixed-race woman who felt a calling to the law after a friend was murdered as a teenager. The truths that she exposes about race and class are as powerful as they are uncomfortable for the legal profession.

Finally, to understand why so often we see law and justice veering away from each other, Why We Get the Wrong Politicians by Isabel Hardman is indispensable. As one of Westminster’s most insightful political journalists, Hardman reveals the depressing reality about those we elect to write our laws. In particular, how rarely our MPs even read the legislation they vote on, let alone understand the consequences, explains much about the state of our political and legal culture - a culture in which a politician promising a “tough new law” is the panacea to every social ill, while rarely, it seems, making anything any better.

Fake Law by The Secret Barrister is published in paperback by Picador.

Tom Gauld

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