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All those invisible years raising our children were some of the most formative of my life. I didn’t know it then, but I was becoming the writer I wanted to be.’
— Deborah Levy, page 23

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The week in books
8 May

Six or more from Alan Moore
Two years after announcing that he had retired from comics, Alan Moore, author of Watchmen and V for Vendetta, has signed a six-figure deal with Bloomsbury for a "groundbreaking" five-volume fantasy series and a "momentous" collection of short stories, Illuminations, to be published in autumn 2022. The fantasy quintet Long London, which will launch in 2024, will move from the "shell-shocked" city of 1949 to "a version of London just beyond our knowledge", encompassing murder, magic and madness.

Speaking about the deal, Moore said that he was at a moment in his career when he was "bursting with fiction, bursting with prose". Alison Flood

Popular poetry
A self-published poetry collection by a 92-year-old Scottish grandfather was outselling Amanda Gorman and Rupi Kaur on Amazon last week and topped the poetry charts, after his granddaughter appealed to readers for reviews.

Gordon McCulloch self-published 101 Poems in March. Covering topics such as "love, romance, relationships, religion, prayers, the meaning of life, death and our relationship with God", the book has become a surprise bestseller, after McCulloch's granddaughter Jessica Keachie asked her Twitter followers to read it, writing: "A review would make him so happy."

From cops to Hons
For Line of Duty fans in mourning, some good news. Nancy Mitford's The Pursuit of Love is taking over the same slot on BBC1, with a cast bearing an impressive track record in literary adaptations. The miniseries is written and directed by Emily Mortimer (star of Mary Poppins Returns and The Bookshop), who also plays The Bolter, and stars Lily James (Rebecca, The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society) as Linda Radlett, Emily Beecham (The Musketeers, Tess of the D'Urbervilles) as Fanny Logan and Andrew Scott (Hamlet, Sherlock, His Dark Materials, Ripley) as Lord Merlin.

James recently told the Guardian: "It's faithful to the period, but feels fresh", so one wonders how Mortimer's adaptation will respect all the fox hunting, Oscar Wilde's "sin" and the embarrassing likelihood of peeresses using the lavatory in the House of Lords.

The series starts tomorrow and is limited to three episodes. "Wooing, so tiring," as Davey Warbeck reflects.

Katy Guest

Doomsday
WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

In alarming climate news, scientists recently reported that the "doomsday glacier" in the Antarctic might be melting more quickly than previously thought. Who knew we had such a convenient signal for when the end of the world was nigh? But why is a very bad thing called "doomsday"?

The old Germanic-derived word "doom" does not mean catastrophe but simply "law" or "judgment". That's also where we get the "-dom" suffix in words such as "kingdom", "freedom", or "wisdom". One character noted in literature for issuing laws and judgments is God, and so "doomsday" is the anticipated day on which a divine Last Judgment shall be handed down. William the Conqueror's 1086 survey of his newly acquired lands became known as "The Domesday Book" (left) because it was similarly regarded as the final authority on the taxable value of estates.

In modern times, "doom" mainly indicates disaster, such as doom metal, doom and gloom, and "doom-monger boffins", who, according to one tabloid, thought communal Christmas feasting during a pandemic might be a bad idea. One can still use it in a literary register, though, to mean "judgment" or "fate", as in the eventual doom of Boris Johnson.
‘I found my tribe on the pages of John Wyndham’s Chrysalids’
Cherie Jones

The book that changed my life
The Wine of Astonishment by Earl Lovelace. I never looked at a villain in a book or in real life quite the same after encountering his character Bolo. That book was the beginning of my understanding of the “how” behind the people we see and regard as “bad”. I learned a lot about the complexity of people, and therefore of characterisation, in writing.

The book I wish I’d written
Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry by Leanne Shapton. I discovered it during my MA writing programme at Sheffield Hallam University in 2013 and have been in love with it ever since. I’ve always been fascinated by stories in which you learn as much, or more, from what remains unsaid on the page.

The book that influenced my writing
The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison paved the way for me to address trauma using a structure that is nonlinear. Morrison subordinates structure to story in an incredibly inventive way.

The book that changed my mind
The Chrysalids by John Wyndham. I read it in my first year at secondary school. I was beginning to understand that I was too tall, too round and too outspoken to be cute and my interests were too eclectic to allow me to relate well to some of my more popular peers. Then I found my tribe in the fringe-dwelling community of Waknuk in the pages of that book and was somehow set free. After that I didn’t care what I wasn’t; who I was became much more important.

The last book that made me laugh
I laughed out loud at so many points reading Nora Ephron’s Heartburn. I loved its honesty, humour and chutzpah – and lack of sentimentality.

The book I’d most like to be remembered for
I’d like to think that the best is ahead of me - but I wouldn’t want to choose one anyway. It must be as bad as being asked to choose the favourite of your children.

My comfort read
Stag’s Leap by Sharon Olds. I treasure this collection of poems: so beautiful, so personal, so revolutionary. Every time I return to this book I find a line, a stanza that I understand better, differently, appreciate just a little more.

The book I think is most underrated
The Way to Rainy Mountain by N Scott Momaday. A local writing mentor of mine, Dana Gilkes, lent me this years ago. I love how it examines universal truths via the myths of the Native American Kiowa people. I wrestled with it at first – and I couldn’t get it out of my mind after I’d finished it. Dana said it would change the way I wrote and understood stories and she was right.

How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House by Cherie Jones (Tinder) has been shortlisted for the Women’s prize for fiction.
Forced to abandon tours and retreat from the world, poets have found both ‘artistic claustrophobia’ and fresh perspectives. Here they reveal exclusive new work inspired by loss and boredom, funeral live streams and forced separations - and discuss what it means to write poetry in a pandemic.

The view from here

“The sky stretched thin ...”

The sky stretched thin over the frame of day.

Downdraft and throttle - the air ambulance carving its high yellow arc, the millpond ronked, jittery, wood pigeons rousted out of the wood, an embarrassed fox in its winter coat, flushed from the copse.

Night hunched in the east, ready to fill in the gaps.

I’m watching all this through bullet-proof glass.

Simon Armitage

I was just about the busiest I'd ever been when lockdown arrived, so it was a huge change, and some of that's been quite good for me. I've slowed down, I've caught up with a lot of deadlines. But from a creative point of view, everything has just become a little bit overfamiliar. I've written three poems about my Velux window. And there's probably more to come.

“The sky stretched thin ...” is typical of the kind of poem that I've been writing. It starts with a look out of the window in the morning and a bit of a sigh. “Here we go again.” On that day, there was an air ambulance, which ruffled the feathers of the environment around it and ruffled my feathers a bit, too. I saw it as a token of the emergency that’s going on, but also the fact that it’s slightly anonymised for a lot of people. There’s both a sense of something urgent happening and being somewhat detached from it.

What I’ve really missed are the chance encounters and accidental collisions and earwigging. The unexpected. I miss my friends, going out for a meal, a drink, getting on trains, seeing the world go past through the window. I miss giving readings and travelling; picking up different feelings and ideas and getting that chance to express yourself outwardly. Not being able to do that has become a kind of artistic claustrophobia.

A Vertical Art: Oxford Lectures by poet laureate Simon Armitage will be published on 20 May (Faber).
Jay Bernard
Two of my grandparents died in 2020. That’s life – life is death. My grandfather died first, in the first wave of care home deaths in April. Whether he got Covid and died, or something else, we’ll never know. Then my grandmother died in December, in Jamaica, at the age of 95; she made a good run of it. And this poem came from that. I wrote it around Christmas time and it came to me almost as is.

In the poem, you have these two masculine men – my grandfather and my father – and I light candles for neither of them, but I do send flowers for my grandmother. The question is: why is that? This is the emotional landscape that a lot of the men in my family occupy. You don’t send flowers, you don’t emote. And “I grow more like them” is about my own masculinity, which is never going to be fully recognised or accepted by these people. And yet, it is informed by them.

This year I’ve actually written more than usual. My collection Surge was published in 2019 but the pandemic cut its life in half. Usually there would be about 18 months of readings and taking the book on tour, but 2020 was a dead year. This had its drawbacks but also its benefits. I was able to start thinking about things that hadn’t made it into the book. Also, I wouldn’t show my work to people before, because that was quite scary in my mind. Now I feel more confident and entitled to do that. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is: drop the perfectionism, because it’s not working for you, or for me.

I see this poem as being enabled by the moment. It’s like when you read war poetry, or any other work that is from a significant time. We know that XYZ was going on historically, but the poem is still that person’s day-to-day preoccupations. It is a shard of the grander historical moment.

Surge by Jay Bernard is published by Chatto & Windus.

Pollen
I order flowers for my mother’s dead mother. I remember my father’s father died too but I do not send him any flowers.

Of what provenance my mother’s crowd of keepers, my father’s single room?

I light neither father candles and grow more like them. I disappear when too remembered.

2020
What scope is there for hope? We wonder with our slogans worn like collars at the throat

Noah stood back from the boat Drowning in the doubt that his own hands could make it float

Kae Tempest
This poem came out of the year we’ve all had. It was longer. I realised these four lines were all the poem needed. Sometimes it takes writing the thing to know what it is you are trying to write.

On Connection by Kae Tempest is published by Faber.
Seaside Staycation

We made it to the beach at 5am and set about our tasks.
Mine to erect the windbreaker using anti-bacterial masks
The kids to build sandcastles in a circle round our plot
While my wife dug out the trench then went to fetch the Rot.

(We call it Ruby, though the dog is a he,
as fearsome as a borrowed rottweiler can be.)

Safe in our bubble, no super-spreaders we,
Anti-social distancing we had down to a T.
Lying low on our lilos, the kids on their phones
Ruby barking at seagulls or gnawing at their bones.

At 8 a.m., music blaring, we were settled and prepared
To scare away the vanguard of the incoming herd.
The union jack fluttering marked our domain
When, at 8.15 precisely came the first drops of rain.

What began as a breeze turned into a gale
The spatter of raindrops, the staccato of hail.
A hurricane in a hurry came within reach
As clouds retched and vomited all over the beach.

The trench filled with water, the sandcastles subsided
When the windbreaker took flight, we took fright and decided
Enough was enough, so we lowered the flag
Wrapped it round our pasties and stuck it in the bag.

The car park, a marina with a single white boat
Our van as it happens, already afloat.
Seaside staycations? Never again.
The day after tomorrow we’re leaving for Spain.

Roger McGough

I was looking forward to 2020. I’d been writing poems about
the end of 2019, referring to things like bushfires, Trump and Brexit, thinking, “Well, let’s hope
for something better in the new year.” I didn’t want
to write poems about the pandemic, but there are
things, inevitably, about that. “Seaside Staycation” is
just about the idea of this Little Englander, claiming
his corner. It’s all from my imagination - I can’t drive,
can’t put tents up, we haven’t got a dog. But when
I was a kid we’d always have “staycations”. We’d go
to New Brighton for the day. My dad worked at the
docks; if you had a week’s holiday, you’d repaint
the bedroom.

I consider myself lucky. I’ve had time to revisit
poems; I do a lot of walks and I jog. I mean, I dawdle,
quickly, I’ve been looking forward to getting back to
the pub and trying out poems on my mates. They’ll
go, “Oh god, yes please Roger. Here we go again.”

Safety in Numbers by Roger McGough
will be published in November (Viking).
chasing ceremony/convincing myself

i'll not get to your funeral.
that's fine.

i know you'll not make mine.
you hate the fussing anyway.
your favourite colour's yellow
not black.

on your street, when next door died
too soon before you did
neighbours clapped the passing hearse
as if the corpse were on a royal tour
you turned towards your daughters

here -
don't you dare do that for me

hair cradled into rollers
each night until the night you left
still lifting life with curls

the laws do not allow me
to stand and watch a lifetime
exit puppet-show-sized curtains
as tears try to console each other
two metres apart;

the only good things
are the sandwich platters
afterwards, anyway,
and we can't even have those

so i'll celebrate you here
three hundred miles from home
wear that butter-coloured jumper
you once said made me pretty
wallow in self-pity
as if your loss is all my loss

let lips tremble all they want
eyes swell to embarrassed red
too obvious a grief to meet with any friends
even with the recommended
coffin space between us

no need for all that, huh?
who cares about it, right?
i already said i love you
so many times in life;

each time i said i love you;
each postcard that i sent;
each nightie that you sent me;
each evening that we wasted
watching prerecords of countdown
at a volume that i'm almost sure
has pierced some of my eardrum;
in refining just that splash of milk
to slightly hint your tea with
till you looked inside the cup again
and smiled, and said that's perfect

Hollie McNish

My maternal grandmother died during the coronavirus pandemic. She was my last surviving grandparent and one of the people I’ve felt closest to on this small, spinning planet. As with many other people grieving loved ones, I watched her funeral on a live stream.

As the allotted time grew closer and a looped video of a calming waterfall assured me that my internet connection was working, I began panicking about what to wear, where in my house to sit, whether to have a glass of prosecco or a cup of tea, as if these decisions were important. I was watching it on my own. I wondered what other people across the world were wearing and eating at funerals now that no one could see them disrespecting traditions.

In the end, I stayed in tracksuit bottoms, put on a jumper I think she liked and sat on the couch eating a Tunnock’s wafer dipped in very sugary tea, listening to the story of her life while staring at a coffin and the backs of my mum’s and auntie’s heads two metres apart above the top of wooden pews.

I also, half by accident, half because I was busy crying, forgot to switch off the live stream once the funeral was over. I assumed it would cut off by itself. So I also watched the cleaners disinfecting the crematorium, the local reverend and organ player taking off their jackets, unwrapping and eating sandwiches and chatting about the care home possibly reopening to visitors, and then I watched half of the next person’s funeral.

The speeches about my grandma were beautiful. Some of the lines from the reverend, such as, We would normally sing now, but because of the virus we are not permitted to sing in public or, Before we run out of streaming time, made it feel a little like a dystopian sci-fi film.

After the funeral ended, I watched my mum walking out of the building and all I wanted was to be there. I didn’t think I’d crave seeing other people’s faces in the flesh so much.

I made another cup of sweet tea and wrote some poems.

There’s a comfort I find in writing that I don’t get from much else: trying to find desirable words to frame thoughts on to a page; playing with metaphors; deciding which silences merit line breaks or
 commas or dashes or just a little more blank page all to themselves. Like moulding and carving clay. Like that scene in Ghost where Patrick Swayze sits behind Demi Moore and kisses her neck while she tries to make some sort of vase on her pottery wheel in the middle of the night because she can't sleep.

I guess in this metaphor, Patrick Swayze's hot, half-naked body behind me represents the comfort and excitement that the writing process gives, and the clay lump spinning in my palms is the scattered ideas, which at some point I can hopefully mould into whatever poetic shape I am able.

I really like the idea of poetry as pottery, but thinking about that particular scene more carefully, it is maybe not the best metaphor.

Demi Moore is actually a very skilled potter and when Patrick Swayze comes and sits behind her, he fuck ups the vase she's already almost completed so that instead of finishing her creation they end up rubbing wet clay into each other. Nonetheless, the thought of that scene is a nice tangent from grief and one which I think my gran would have approved of because she fancied Patrick Swayze as much as I did.

Writing is distraction and focus in one. It also seems a bit sick sometimes: selfish, self-centred, narcissistic. Like, That's a good line about your grandma's funeral, yeah, nice, Hollie, keep that bit in the poem.

Most of the poems I write are primarily for myself: to ease pain; to heal; to reorganise anger; to giggle; to think more clearly; to convince myself of feelings that maybe weren't quite true; to have fun; to play with language; to imagine alternative realities; to laugh; to question; to reconsider; to remember; to give some sort of shape to things that overwhelmed me.

Like death. Like birth. Like how it feels watching a funeral live-streamed into your living room. Like the desperate yearning I now have, to mould a pot out of a chunk of moist clay while being tumbled from behind by a horny lover.

Slug by Hollie McNish will be published on 13 May (Hachette).

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Raymond Antrobus

My wife, Tabitha, and I got married in April 2019. She is from New Orleans, so we moved there for a few months before I came back to London to sort my green card application. That was when the pandemic hit. We were separated for nine and a half months.

This poem came out of the text messages we were sending back and forth. We were really making an effort to schedule dates, to cook together or watch films. Being apart for so long wasn't easy. Just before lockdown, Tabitha and I had made a plan to watch Portrait of a Lady on Fire when I was back in the US. Because I was stuck in the UK, she watched it without me and I caught up afterwards. I wrote this poem the next day.

When we were reunited, there was a nervousness - like, would we meet and realise that this wasn't what we thought it was? It was the ultimate test, but we got to the other end.

I had a little debate about what to keep private and what to make public. But I had also filled out a form giving the US government permission to check everything in my emails and social media, to verify that we are in a real relationship. As we speak, I am about to go into my rescheduled green card interview and I have about 800 pages of all the text messages we've ever sent each other. When going through the immigration process, you are at the mercy of this machine. For me, this was a way to take some control. It is an antidote to be able to do something creative with a soulless process. Underneath all this stiff legal language is: two people love each other.

All The Names Given by Raymond Antrobus will be published in September (Picador).
Politics} The Big Short author tackles the US handling of Covid and the ‘superhero’ scientists who tried to save the day

Mark O’Connell

It is hard to think of a writer who has had more success than Michael Lewis at turning forbiddingly complex situations into propulsive nonfiction narratives. His first book, the semi-autobiographical Liar’s Poker, drew on his own experience as a bond salesman in the 1980s to tell a vivid story about the predatory culture of Wall Street. He has since repeated the trick, though with fewer autobiographical elements, with an impressive range of subjects, from statistical analysis in baseball (Moneyball) to the credit default swap market and the 2008 financial crisis (The Big Short). His success derives from an ability to take incredibly wonkish-sounding premises and turn them into the kinds of stories that get made into films starring, respectively, Brad Pitt and Christian Bale.

His new book, The Premonition, is the story of a group of medics and scientists who attempt to get the US government to take pandemic response seriously. In a New York Times interview in January 2021, Lewis described the book, which he was then still working on, as “a superhero story where the superheroes seem to lose the war”. It’s a little grandiose, but it’s an accurate enough elevator pitch. Lewis’s main subjects are a group of dedicated, resourceful and conscientious people who understand how drastically underprepared America is for a viral pandemic. They know what needs to be done to redress the situation, but are up against the fragmented dysfunction of the federal government and the malicious indifference of the Trump White House.

Lewis is unashamedly and, at times, cornily earnest about what he refers to at one point as this “rogue group of patriots working behind the scenes to save the country”. One such rogue is Charity Dean, the former assistant director of California’s Department of Public Health, who became, in the days of Covid-19’s first emergence, a kind of underdog heroine in the fight to get the federal authorities to take the threat seriously. Then there are Richard Hatchett and Carter Mecher, who shaped pandemic planning in the George W Bush administration, and later, with Dean and others, worked from outside the nucleus of power to try to mitigate the unfolding catastrophe.

If this is a superhero story, it’s one that lacks a supervillain. Though you might expect this to be a late entry into the Big Trump Book canon, the 45th president is a mercifully peripheral presence in its pages. As with his last book, The Fifth Risk, Lewis’s approach here is to find a small number of unheralded individuals operating within vast systems, and use them to portray the workings (or, in this case, non-workings) of those systems. The malevolent force in The Premonition is institutional malaise. Lewis’s underlying argument here, though, is hardly compatible with the conservative “big government doesn’t work” boilerplate, which posits centralisation as the root of all societal evil. Rather, he portrays a system that is both incredibly vast and insufficiently centralised. “There’s no one driving the bus,” as Joe DeRisi, one of Lewis’s main subjects, puts it. DeRisi, a biochemist who developed a useful technology for rapid viral testing, spends much of the book banging his head against institutional brick walls in an attempt to get his innovation adopted as part of a wider campaign against Covid.

And so although the book’s action takes place within the context of the Trump administration’s drastic mishandling of the crisis, Lewis is more interested in the political conditions that exist before the pandemic. Fiasco though Trump’s leadership was, there is no attempt to lay the entire blame for the crisis at the feet of his administration. To put it in medical terms, Lewis diagnoses Trump as a comorbidity.

It is the US government’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that emerges as the main antagonist. As the country’s public health agency, the CDC is, as its name suggests, technically responsible for preventing the spread of disease. But the book presents a damning portrayal of an organisation in which no one is willing to risk getting fired by making a wrong move, and in which an institutional abundance of caution amounts to a form of recklessness. The fact that the director of the organisation is appointed by, and can be fired by, the president also means it’s a role that tends to go to yes-men.

Although Lewis does justice to the complexity of the scientific and institutional problems he’s examining, he rarely gets bogged down in their density. He is at least as interested in characterisation as he is in, say, explaining the science of stuff like viral genetic sequencing. The wager here is that the investment in the former pays off by getting the reader through a fair
amount of the latter. And so he devotes a large proportion of a relatively short book to establishing his characters’ back stories. We first encounter Dean, for instance, dealing more or less single-handedly with a TB outbreak in her Santa Barbara jurisdiction, trying to get a useless coroner’s office to perform an autopsy on a TB-riddled corpse. (By the time I got to her standing in the parking lot of a morgue, rolling up her sleeves and opening the corpse’s ribs with a pair of garden shears as a bunch of terrified men in Hazmat suits look on, I had narrowed down my casting preference to either Kristen Bell or Reese Witherspoon.)

When Lewis gets to the pandemic itself, surprisingly late in the book, he’s faced with a contradictory problem, with respect to the imperatives of narrative journalism: a major historical crisis is unfolding, but it’s happening mostly in the form of Zoom calls. (This, of course, is also the contradictory problem of our time: the moment itself is dramatic, but the individual’s experience of it is profoundly static.) A representative scene has Dean and DeResi on a Zoom call with Priscilla Chan, philanthropist and wife of Mark Zuckerberg:

“The meeting with the Biohub was meant to start at one thirty in the afternoon on April 29th. Shortly after one thirty, Charity unmuted herself and turned on her video and tried to stall by making small talk with Priscilla Chan about their children. At length Priscilla said, ‘Um, maybe we should get started?’ Joe DeRisi was in his own box. He had one of those faces that would always look younger than it was, Charity thought.”

I was mostly willing to park my epistemological doubts about the position Lewis adopts as a kind of omniscient third-person narrator, but I did find myself questioning whether, in a scene such as this, he’s encountering the formal limits of the kind of pacy, thriller-ish style he favours. At times, in fact, the book can seem less like a work of narrative journalism than an exceptionally vivid script treatment. Of Dean, for instance, he writes: “She’d crash meetings that her boss didn’t want her to attend and announce her arrival by dropping this huge binder on the table: Boom!”

I found this approach strangely unsuited to the story the book tells, largely because it never quite translates into a story at all. And yet, in the end, without his ever having to spell it out, Lewis’s message comes across very powerfully: the US government, in its institutional dysfunction, is in danger of abandoning its citizens to a private sector that is even less equipped to deal with large-scale disasters such as Covid. The Premonition ends on a profoundly depressing note, with Dean abandoning the civil service to found a healthcare startup. “She’d entered the private sector,” writes Lewis, “with the bizarre ambition to use it to create an institution that might be used by the public sector.” When she tells people in the business world that she wants to save the country from another Covid-like catastrophe, she says, she gets blank looks. But when she tells them she wants to do “private government operations”, like a kind of healthcare Blackwater, their eyes light up. “Oh wow,” they say, “you could take over the world.”

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A poet faces his fear of becoming a parent in this freewheeling meditation on the theme of uncertainty

Houman Barekat

About three years ago, the poet Jack Underwood became a father for the first time. The responsibility weighed heavily: he recalls feeling that there should have been more paperwork. We signed a form or two and then they just sort of let us take you away. A human child. A few months later, he started having panic attacks - his love for his daughter had rendered him "utterly fucked with worry". He decided to write about it, which helped: "My breathing regulated, my thoughts took shape, giving direction to my feelings; finding my thinking voice was like opening an enormous valve." The resulting book is a thoughtful essay-memoir on parenthood, in which Underwood recounts how he learned to manage his angst - "to live within the fear" - by embracing uncertainty.

Not Even This takes its title from the ancient philosopher Carneades of Cyrene, who remarked that "Nothing can be known; not even this." It is a hybrid work, alternating between two distinct modes of writing: an epistolary memoir in the second person, addressed to the author's daughter; and a freewheeling meditation on the theme of uncertainty, touching on assorted matters of quantum physics, neuroscience, etymology, history, economics and technology. These include, among other things, the disagreement between Albert Einstein and Henri Bergson as to whether time exists independently of human beings; the biomedical ethics of transhumanism; the prospect of the technological singularity; when digital superintelligence will transcend the human intellect; the way time seems to slow down when we're doing something interesting; the anomalousness of waves; particles; the reality behind the myth of Joan of Arc.

The gist? Knowledge is inherently "tenuous, mutable ... renegotiable, political and socialised", and the craving for certainty is at the root of many societal ills. The financial system, for example, is wedded to certain rigid orthodoxies that are periodically disproved, with disastrous consequences: "When we mistake the power of finance for certainty in its workings, then we only hand it more power, more confidence, and so permit it to act less and less reasonably." Fallibility is integral to human progress, so it's best to go with the flow: "a parent has little choice but to learn to trust a child to become themselves, and ... such trust is a kind of love."

The idea of trust also informs his approach to creative writing. Underwood, whose first poetry collection, Happiness, was published by Faber in 2015, sees poetry as a form of "dissonant, unruly, uncertain knowledge", in which language is "provisional, equivocal, interpretable". The process of composition is built on two-way trust: trusting the reader to get it, and trusting yourself, as a writer, to make yourself understood.

Underwood rejects the platitudinous notion that having kids turns you into a better person - "If anything parenthood has made us more selfish, more insular, always directing our heart's resources inwards." But he is, by his own account, a sentimental sort, and this is what gives this book its charm. He reminisces fondly about his daughter's first unaided steps, and recalls how, during the first months of her life, she would become unsettled whenever he had guests round: "A roomful of strangers bursting out laughing must have been a grotesque, hyperreal tableau of teeth and gums."

This is Underwood's first book of nonfiction prose and, like most debuts, it has its flaws. The central argument is somewhat woolly - almost any subject might be obliquely tethered to "uncertainty" - and his rhapsodic lyricism sails dangerously close to froufrou at times. But he is an engaging companion and the book's format, flitting back and forth between disquisition and memoir, serves the reader well: essayistic meanderings are kept in check, and the autobiographical candour doesn't cloy.

For all his fretfulness, this is an upbeat book. Underwood's dread gave way to a sanguine sense of purpose and self-sacrifice.

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

A study of horrible afflictions, from famines to pandemics, reveals our failure to learn from the past

Rafael Behr

The bad news is that plagues are a constant companion to civilisation. The good news is that we are getting better at explaining their causes and treating them without recourse to superstition. When the Black Death ravaged Europe in the 14th century, troupes of flagellants proceeded from town to town, surrounding local churches, beating themselves with iron-tipped leather scourges. They saw the disease as divine punishment and prayed for release from its clutches, all the while aiding its dispersal across the land. The medical treatments they needed were nearly 600 years away.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought its share of irrational fanaticism. There is something medieval about paranoid mobs felling mobile phone masts in the belief that 5G signals are responsible for the disease. But that minor skirmish is far from the frontline in a battle that science is winning, at least until the next disaster strikes. The march of progress gives cause for optimism; the certain recurrence of disaster less so. That tension is the subject of Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe, Niall Ferguson’s excursion into the history of horrible afflictions.

It is not a gloomy book, although it dwells often on our collective failure to learn from past mistakes. Ferguson’s interest is the patterns and systems that emerge from the repetition, to which end he skips quite breezily through a rich catalogue of gruesome, miserable experiences: floods, earthquakes that swallow whole cities, volcanic eruptions that bring humans to the brink of extinction, wars, famines and an array of lower-division horrors. The sinking of the Titanic and nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl exhibit at microcosmic level much the same “fractal geometry of disaster” discernible in the macro calamities.

Ferguson’s rundown of disasters combines the human-made and natural kinds, exploring the boundary between the two. Sometimes it is distinct. The Romans did not provoke Vesuvius, whereas the Germans did invade Belgium in 1914. But in many cases, humility is the accomplice to mass suffering from what looks ostensibly like natural causes, as when the Spanish flu ripped through barracks and trenches towards the end of the first world war. Likewise, terrible politics can manufacture calamity out of nature, as when Stalin’s collectivisation policy led to famine in Ukraine and sustained it with repression.

The origin of most catastrophes is elusive. But Ferguson does identify recurrent traits from the vast back catalogue of misfortune. When it comes to finding fault, he is particularly exercised by bureaucratic failure, which he finds in cases of industrial accident and, most recently, in British and American responses to Covid-19.

There is no disputing the harm that can be done by institutional inertia, group-think and mediocrity making managers pursuing perverse incentives (or just trying to shirk difficult choices). The Challenger space shuttle disaster makes a good case study. Pressure to meet a launch target overrode known concerns about a design flaw that proved fatal. But when it comes to the pandemic, Ferguson starts to reveal his conservative avarice to big states. He is not exactly forgiving of Donald Trump, but the former president is treated more as a pathetic accessory to the disaster than a motor of it. In the UK context, Boris Johnson’s equivocations and delays are leaptfrogged in eagerness to find fault with scientists and officials advising the prime minister.

Notably absent, too, is recognition of the fiscal background to Britain’s pandemic – the possibility that Covid wreaked more harm because the public realm had been depleted by decades of budget cuts. There are other flashes of political partisanship that feel out of place in a historical account. The death toll in care homes is cast, gnomically, as “a paradoxical result of fetishising the National Health Service at the expense of institutions beyond its aegis”.

By the author’s admission, the pandemic section of the book is unfinished and vulnerable to refutation by post-publication events. But by that stage there is already a sense the narrative has drifted from its original purpose. What began as a taxonomy of doom evolves into a hawkish foreign policy treatise on the coming cold war with China. Perhaps a more satisfying conclusion was simply unavailable. Ferguson is wise, in the end, not to posit a grand theory of catastrophe, when his exploration of the subject proves the absence of any such thing.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A meticulous portrait of the Bloomsbury outsider and influential critic who championed modern art

Kathryn Hughes

One day when he was looking along his bookshelves, Mark Hussey realised that they contained no biography of Clive Bell. You can see why it would strike the distinguished Bloomsbury scholar as odd. Over the last 50 years a veritable industry of gossip life-writing has grown up around even the most minor denizens of mid-20th-century WC1, to the point where someone who danced with a man who danced with a woman who danced with Leonard Woolf (assuming Woolf ever kicked up his heels) can boast at least two fat biographies bristling with footnotes.

So why is Bell so Lifeless? After all, he belongs to the innermost circle of Bloomsbury, being both married to Vanessa Stephen and, unusual in a culture that made a point of not worrying what others thought, addicted to public utterance. Indeed, for many years Bell was a fixture in the press, at opening nights and, later, on the Third Programme radio service at the newly minted BBC. While his family and friends wrote, painted, danced and bedded their way into the 20th century, it was Bell’s job to explain to the world just what they were doing and why it mattered.

He performed his project of, to use Hussey’s subtext, “making modernism” chiefly through the championing of “modern art”. By this he meant painting that eschewed anecdote, nostalgia or moral messaging in favour of lines and colours combined to stir the aesthetic sense. For ease of reference, he called the thing he was after “significant form”. While sensible Britain saw cubism, together with post-impressionism, as incoherent and formless to the point of lunacy, Bell followed the example of the older and more expert critic Roger Fry in reframing these movements as heroic attempts to purge the plastic arts of any lingering attachment to representational fidelity. His great touchstones were French (he called Paul Cézanne “the great Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form”) but admitted that occasionally you found an English painter who was making the right shapes – Vanessa Bell, say, or Duncan Grant. The fact that Vanessa was his wife and Duncan her lover detracted only slightly from his pronouncements.

Still, what Hussey wants us to see in this revelatory book is just how different, how much of an outsider in Bloomsbury Clive Bell really was. Unlike the Stephens, Lytton Strachey, EM Forster or John Maynard Keynes, he was not a member of London’s liberal intelligentsia by birth. Rather, his family lived in rural Wiltshire, exactly the kind of hearty, philistine people at whom Bloomsbury curled its collective lip. Even better (or worse), the Bells weren’t really squares, but actually rich industrialists who had made their money from south Welsh coal. Then again, although Bell was bright, he was not super smart. At Cambridge, where he met Vanessa and Virginia Stephen’s brother Thoby, he was never asked to join the Apostles, the elite chattering set to which Strachey, Keynes and the rest belonged.

And above all, Bell was straight. Not just exclusively heterosexual, but doggedly, ponderously and, in time, embarrassingly so. While the rest of Bloomsbury’s men and women moved ambiguously between genders, performing dizzying dances of desire both illegal and scandalous, he ploughed on like a bulldozer, looking for a series of substitute wives, now that Vanessa was committed to life with her lover Grant.

While none of this may sound very edifying, it provides a fascinating starting point for Hussey’s meticulously researched and well-informed account of how modern art entered the British bloodstream in the first decades of the 20th century. The peak of Bell’s influence came in 1914 with the publication of Art, in which he introduced the concept of significant form to a general readership. Predictably, the book brought him as much opprobrium as praise, especially when it emerged that its author was a noisy pacifist and conscientious objector. (Bell’s father, with a pleasing symmetry beloved by biographers, had just been made the military-sounding Lord High Sheriff of Wiltshire.)

You certainly don’t end Hussey’s biography liking Bell. At times he seems to combine bad bits of claquish, snobbish Bloomsbury with the even worst parts of anti-Bloomsbury – hearty, noisy and frequently brandishing a brace of dead partridge. Still, Hussey’s patient recuperative work is important in reminding us that the significant players in last century’s art history often refuse to fit our sentimental requirements. Bell was no one’s idea of mad, bad or dangerous to know, yet his very ploddingness and clumsy bonhomie proved to be a brilliant camouflage. He is best thought of as a sort of Trojan horse, a plausible cover for a radical programme of aesthetic reform designed to weaken middle Britain off its nostalgic attachment to Constable’s clouds and Turner’s sunsets.
This root-and-branch study of the network that sustains our forests shows how all life is interconnected

Tiffany Francis-Baker

Our relationship with the natural world is balanced on a knife-edge, which means our own lives, too, are facing an uncertain future. For the first time in history, we can draw from a compendium of scientific research that not only warns us to take better care of the Earth, but shows us how to do so. Yet still we place obstacles in the way, and the eco-apocalyptic countdown continues.

What is it that stops us from taking action? Einstein once suggested that imagination is more important than knowledge, claiming that knowledge is limited while “imagination encircles the world”, and perhaps this is where the answer lies. In order to bridge the emotional chasm between the science and our ability to act, we must take what we know and reshape it into something more palatable. We must tell ourselves a story.

In *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard demonstrates how storytelling can ignite something science alone cannot. Her research in underground tree communication through a “wood wide web” of mycorrhizal fungi will be familiar to readers of Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* and Robert Macfarlane’s *Underland*, while one of the characters in Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* was heavily inspired by Simard’s life and work in forest ecology. The author takes us through her career in the forests of North America, working on plantations to identify links between crop yields, herbicide use and species diversity. In carrying out these initial studies, she goes on to discover that trees communicate underground through a complex web of fungi, and at the centre of this web, an individual known as the “mother tree” helps to coordinate a powerful network that heals, feeds and sustains the other members of the forest.

The strength of this story isn’t only in the discoveries she makes, although they are so fascinating it would be easy to dismiss them as fantasy. In fact, she recalls how some members of her profession almost laughed her out of the room on first hearing her findings, not helped by the fact that she was a woman in a male-dominated field, trying to convince a room full of foresters that their age-old methods were flawed.

Throw in a theory about interconnected roots and spores in the soil, and you can’t help but be impressed by her courage – but therein lies the magic of this book. This is science in action, from beginning to end, and so much more than a study published in a journal.

We learn not only how her ideas first formed, but how they were shaped by her own life events. In the same way Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Brading Sweetgrass* weaves together ecology and the human spirit, Simard shows us that scientific study is not just statistics and conferences, but a journey of passion and introspection that relies on the organic nature of the human mind just as much as the meticulousness of experimentation. Her ancestry is rooted in the outdoors, yet she recognises that the old ways of working with the land must evolve and change, responding to what the forest tells her.

Alongside her forestry work, we gain insights into Simard’s friendships, relationships, marriage, motherhood and her recent breast cancer as seemingly disconnected experiences become woven seamlessly into her working life. In studying the relationships between the trees, air, earth and everything in between, she reflects on her own relationships, not only with other people but with the trees themselves. This interconnectivity is at the core of her writing.

*Finding the Mother Tree* is the kind of story we need to be telling, a new way of communicating that the world desperately needs to hear. The idea of spirituality in science may seem paradoxical to some, but as we have learned from ecologists such as Simard and Kimmerer, there is something missing in our study of nature. We rely on nature’s rhythms and cycles far more than we rely on profit and technology. Simard’s book invites us to embrace this connection with the Earth when she writes: “I can’t tell if my blood is in the trees or if the trees are in my blood.” This book has, at its centre, a simple tale of a woman who follows her intuition, views compassion as a strength, and dares to see the world differently. It is also a reminder to listen to our wilder selves, and to remember, with humility, how little we know of the complexities of the natural world.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Lahiri’s first novel to be written originally in Italian focuses on a narrator adrift, free from the anxieties of geography

Tanjil Rashid

Linguists tell us that language isn’t learned, it grows naturally, like our bodies. Intrinsic and instinctive, language is an organ – the heart, as it were, of our consciousness. To swap one’s native language for a new one seems therefore, if not inconceivable, certainly as difficult and risky an ordeal as a heart transplant.

Incredibly, some writers do just that, and we are fascinated by those who work in an acquired tongue. But it’s always the same clique of grands hommes who spring to mind: Conrad, Nabokov, Beckett. Never Chinua Achebe, never RK Narayan – the black or Asian writer is simply expected to adopt English.

It’s against this background that the Bengali-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri has renounced the language in which her silky-smooth sentences once won a Pulitzer prize. Her new novel, Whereabouts, was composed in Italian, like the essays comprising her last book, In Other Words. It has been translated into English by the author herself; indeed, the only English sentences Lahiri now writes are translated from Italian.

This intriguing novel portrays the lonely existence, in an unnamed place, of an unnamed narrator. We know she’s a woman and, in a rare concession to biographical detail, a university teacher, in her mid-40s. She has virtually no family, no relationship, just friends, who are also nameless and thinly characterised. Whereabouts is formed of vignettes, each chapter a postcard from an everyday landmark - “In the Bookstore”, “At the Beaucitician”, etc - typically experienced alone, although sometimes highlighting the consolation of strangers. These mental dispatches are tantamount to a primer in the art of solitude, which, Lahiri rightly observes, “requires a certain discipline”.

Though plotless, the novel remains compelling, as a peep hole into a mind sequestered from others. What lies behind the narrator’s unyielding solitude remains obscure. Portraying such a character, adrift in an urban landscape, Whereabouts feels like a film

by Michelangelo Antonioni, and there’s something cinematic about the way the novel progresses spatially, each chapter exhibiting a new place, plotted out as a map rather than a timeline.

The sense of place here departs radically from Lahiri’s writings in English, where the settings (sweating Calcutta, bookish Boston, a bored housewife’s Rhode Island) retain their distinctive character. Whereabouts, true to the equivocation about place buried in its title, could be unfolding anywhere. The narrator, we presume, lives in Italy - there are pizzas and piazzas - but beyond those the environment is rather generic. Lahiri references only “the city”, “the neighbourhood”, “the country” (anywhere abroad is simply “another country”).

Even Italian, which the narrator probably teaches, is known as “our language”.

This is the quality in Lahiri’s Italian that the novelist Tim Parks hit upon in his essay “Why Write in English?”. “At no point does it draw energy from Italian culture, or even transmit a feeling that her life is now firmly based in the world of Italian.” This misses the point, though, that Lahiri is straining to evade the clutches of geography, or as she has said, “to arrive at a more abstract sense of place”. Lahiri herself admits her Italian is like “unsalted bread”, but this very lack of the seasoning of local insinuation is what allows her language to achieve such a degree of abstraction.

Where her English thrives on the particular, Lahiri’s Italian reaches for the universal. Astonishingly, Whereabouts contains not a single proper noun: nothing to identify individuals or places. Yet with a burst of adjectives, it manages to nail the experience of all of us wading through liquid modernity: “disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, severed”. When Lahiri likens a hotel to “a parking garage designed for human beings” - applicable to the business district of any contemporary city worldwide - the image is emblematic of the universalist vision now shaping her writing.

In English, such a vision seems, intrinsically, a form of white privilege. Writers of colour know that publishers, academics, even lay readers, bring trite, postcolonial presumptions to their work and load them with the burden of minority representation. Perhaps, in Italian, Lahiri saw the possibility of writing the everywoman English denied her - English, at once too close and too far, in fact her second language (after Bengali) which, according to interviews, always “represented feelings of guilt”. From such anxieties of biography and geography, and for the reader no less than the writer, Whereabouts offers a stylish and therapeutic release.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A celebration of artistic trickery confirms this French prize winner as one of our most gifted stylists
Beejay Silcox

As she wanders the immense backlot of Rome’s Cinecittà film studio – “Hollywood on the Tiber” – the heroine of Maylis de Kerangal’s Painting Time is struck by how unreal the sets seem up close, how patently conffected. “A set doesn’t have to be real,” her guide explains, “it has to be true.”

There is something magnificently true about de Kerangal’s fiction, which braids technical fluency with winged prose. A meticulous researcher, she draws immensely humane stories out of niche vocational knowledge: the world-bending muscle of mechanical engineering (Birth of a Bridge); the hermetic brutalities of transplant surgery (Mend the Living, which won the Wellcome science book prize in 2017); the explorations of haute cuisine (The Cook). In her new novel, Painting Time, translated by Jessica Moore, the French author turns her granular attentions to trompe-l’œil and its artisans: those “bamboozlers of the real” who can conjure marble, wood and ethereal skyscapes from pigment and lacquer.

The students at the Institut Supérieur de Peinture in Brussels are a dissonant bunch, ranging from penniless house painters to the rebellious daughters of aristocrats. The school’s trompe-l’œil course – immersive and uncompromising – will remake them all. For one trio, a lifelong friendship will form in the hectic months between October 2007 and March 2008, born of all-nighters and the unshakable stink of turpentine. There’s Kate, a 6ft Glaswegian nightclub bouncer; cryptic, talented Jonas; and Paula, the painter we will follow once lessons end, with her untapped fervour and David Bowie eyes.

To become trompe-l’œil artists, Paula, Kate and Jonas must learn to see anew. “To see, under the glass roof of the studio on the rue du Métal, high on the fumes from paint and solvents, muscles sore and forehead burning, doesn’t just mean keeping your eyes open to the world,” De Kerangal writes; “to see is to engage in a pure action, to create an image. To see, here, is something else.”

At the institute, Paula will learn the “patient work of appropriation”, with all its bruising rigours. From her friends, she will learn to be a storyteller. For what is a polished slab of marble, but “a slice of time”? A tale of prehistoric coral, tectonic melodrama and human avidity: “Everything that has happened since the beginning of time has left its mark, a palimpsest.” To render the natural world in paint is to retell – or perhaps continue – this ancient narrative.

Paula’s work as a trompe-l’œil painter will take her from Italian villas to Moscow film sets, and in the book’s sublime final act, to the very birthplace of art. As she tells the story of each surface she paints, Paula will tell her own. Every job rouses a memory, drags something quietly formative up from the cortical deep. It is here, De Kerangal argues, in this intimate collision of history, memory and creative yearning, that art happens.

Painting Time is a celebration of mastery, which is nothing more, she writes, “than an aptitude for failure, a consent to the fall, and a desire to start over”. But how exhilarating that fall can be, how heady that desire. The book finds the sensuality in proficiency: the way a new skill feels as it settles into your body, the way a new language feels on your tongue. As she has so often done, De Kerangal shows there is poetry to be found in our jargon, and stories embedded in our tools. A tin of sky blue paint tells a saga from Renaissance times of pulverised gemstones and ostentatious wealth. A pigment chart becomes an incantation of friendship: “Paula, unfolding her fingers one by one, lists the litany of colour names they all know by heart, enunciating the syllables as though she were bursting capsules of pure sensation one by one…”

Among the sets at Cinecittà film studio, Rome

Capsules of pure sensation – it’s a description worth stealing to describe this novel, which is strange together image by beautiful image. This is writing that defies haste, that slows the eye. It is also a mighty feat of translation. Like Paula with her paintbox, De Kerangal builds her story into every layer. That her new novel’s painterly resonances feel elemental, rather than effortful, cements her reputation as one of contemporary fiction’s most gifted sentence builders.

For trompe-l’œil to truly enchant, it must first deceive and then reveal itself – only then can we marvel in the trickery. So it is with Painting Time; revelling in the artistry of this book makes the grand illusion complete.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
This long-awaited opus from a comics legend mixes military experiment with dark family drama

**James Smart**

There are epic waits, and there's the wait for Barry Windsor-Smith's new epic. This great, grim 366-page slab of postwar angst began its life as a Hulk story that Windsor-Smith planned for Marvel in 1984. Now, it finally emerges, its striking cover bearing the ruined face of a man, a Stars and Stripes thrust in one ear, his torn lip exposing a cavernous jaw. This is Bobby Bailey, the young man at the centre of this forcefully told and thoroughly affecting drama.

Windsor-Smith's return is big news. The Londoner got his break after sending sketches to Marvel in the late 60s. He drew staples such as the Avengers and Daredevil, and brought romanticism and style to the award-winning Conan series. But Windsor-Smith has always had his own vision, and his relationship with an industry that keeps creatives on a tight leash has rarely been easy. "The business," he declared in a 2013 interview, "stinks." In the 70s and beyond, he spent spells within the industry - working on the Wolverine origin story *Weapon X* for Marvel, as well as for Valiant and Dark Horse - and long stretches out of it. He has published virtually no new work for 15 years.

Fittingly, the ambitious *Monsters* uses time lapses to great effect. It opens in 1949 with brutal violence, as Bobby's mother, Janet, defends her young son against his raging father, Tom. Fifteen years later, Bobby follows in his veteran father's footsteps, and walks into an army recruitment office. His claim that he has no family or qualifications sees him chosen for an ominous trial. A few months later, he is dotted with wires and suspended in a stinking pool, his skin swollen with muscles and gouged with scars. His chemically enhanced body is now an army investment, but Bailey has an unexpected ally with an escape plan.

It feels a well-trodden set-up, part Captain America, part Frankenstein's monster. The secret project begins with a Nazi scientist who adjusts his glasses with a claw-hand. A lesser writer might crank up the cliches another notch, and focus on the drama of a supersoldier on the loose in 60s America. Windsor-Smith does give us shootouts, stakeouts and chases, but *Monsters* is more interested in turning back the clock. It’s a book about how we got here; it’s about a lost boy, his put-upon mother and brutal, traumatised father, about fraught dinners and PTSD, and how it takes a monster to make one. And its telling is often brilliant.

Windsor-Smith's brooding, dramatic panels later show a young Tom and Janet, happy before the war. The new father sends tender notes back from the front, his eye for a scene such as he "could describe the French countryside and the sounds of war in the same sentence". But after a shock discovery in the chaos of the German retreat, he returns a changed man. The hands that once penned love letters instead reach for the whiskey bottle, and lash out at his wife and son.

*Monsters* hums with suppressed violence and regret, and Windsor-Smith renders both with real power. His command of pose and gesture - Tom's thick arms bunching with tension, Janet's shoulders slumping in resignation - brings his cast to life. Some images stay with you: a bike with buckled wheels in long grass, cross-hatched shadow stretching across a face like a cowl. Alongside the naturalism sits stranger stuff; sausages turn into severed fingers and memories swirl into the present, their echoes turning simple conversations into a deafening hubbub. At the heart of the book, the adult Barry relives his childhood traumas, his great freakish frame balled up on the stairs as arguments burst out around him.

Perhaps inevitably, given its long gestation and ambitious scope, *Monsters* can feel disjointed. Its mix of sci-fi, body horror, fateful coincidences, psychic powers and family drama isn’t always coherent; at times the dialogue falls flat. Windsor-Smith's grotesque visions of butchered cadavers and dark experiments seem distant and almost comedic when set against the real menace of domestic violence.

Yet that dissonance helps illuminate the book. Pulp fiction has asked again and again what might happen if you could create someone who was more than human. Windsor-Smith’s answer is that such a birth would be a trauma, not the spark for quips and pyrotechnics. Fittingly for a writer who's never felt comfortable in the mainstream, he has created a tale in which wild moments of excess and scenes of superhuman strength form an unsettling backdrop rather than the main event. Instead, a family drama of kindness, cruelty and redemption takes centre stage, offering the chance for a broken man to shed his skin, and begin again.

*To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
Would you get a brain implant to help you multi-task? What about one for your child, to help them do better at school? In Sarah Pinzer’s *We Are Satellites* (Head of Zeus, £18.99), these questions are explored through the experiences of one loving yet conflicted American family. After teenage David gets the “Pilot” implant he desperately wants, his grades improve, but he finds it hard to cope with the increased influx of sensory impressions – although doctors insist nothing is wrong. His sister Sophie has epilepsy, which rules the implant out, but having a Pilot quickly becomes near-mandatory for most jobs and she joins an anti-Pilot movement demanding accountability from the manufacturer. This is science fiction as domestic slice of life; a gripping, believable immersion in the day after tomorrow.

The *Kingdoms* by The Watchmaker of Filigree Street author Natasha Pulley (Bloomsbury, £14.99) begins 90-odd years after the British were defeated at Trafalgar; London is an outpost of the French empire. As the novel opens, Joe Tournier steps off a train in the “Gare du Roi”, with no idea of who he is. Attacks of amnesia are well known in this world, and usually brief; but, although he is quickly returned to his home and family, Joe never regains his memory, and remains haunted by a sense of loss, which is only assuaged by love for a new baby daughter. Then he’s transported abruptly back to 1807 as the prisoner of a ragtag remnant of the British navy, who hope his knowledge of future technology will allow them to defeat the French. But Joe fears that if he changes history, his beloved daughter may never exist. Meanwhile, he is attracted to his captor’s, Missouri Kite, an unlikely character who combines a sensitive nature with casual brutality. Bromance simmers, always thwarted by a lack of honest conversation, and multiple flashbacks to earlier years can make it hard to follow the complicated story. Pulley is an inventive writer, and there is much to enjoy, but eventually my suspension of disbelief collapsed.

The *Cottingley Cuckoo* by AJ Elwood (Titan, £8.99) references the famous Cottingley fairies hoax of a century ago, but instead of pretty little people with gauzy wings, these fairies are the dangerous, spiteful creatures of folklore. In the present day, Rose works in a care home, where one of the residents, Charlotte Fowell, shows her letters written in 1921 by a man who claimed to have found a dead fairy. Rose is too intimidated to ask questions, but Charlotte seems able to read her mind, and tells Rose she is pregnant before she knows herself. Rose becomes obsessed with this mysterious old woman, and with fairy lore, increasingly worried that her baby has been replaced by a changeling. Unease escalates into dread in an accomplished blend of dark fantasy and psychological thriller.
Dream homes and empty nests
Deborah Levy

For years, the novelist yearned for a house of her own, with honeysuckle and balconies. Then her children grew up, and she found herself in a flat in Paris with a writing desk and one chair. Was it bleak, or just light and uncluttered?

NEW YORK

I walked to Central Park. It had suddenly become warm and I was so jet lagged I thought I might faint. I found a place near the entrance to the park under a tree and collapsed onto the grass. Lying on my back, looking up at the big American sky between the leaves, I saw something hanging from the branches. It was a key. A key on a red ribbon that someone had hung on a branch and forgotten to take with them. I wondered if they had deliberately left it behind because they were never going to return to wherever the key belonged. Or perhaps they wanted to close a door on a chapter of their life and leaving the key behind was a gesture of this desire. There is always something secret and mysterious about keys. They are the instrument to enter and exit, open and close, lock and unlock various desirable and undesirable domains.

I had spent so much of my life peering into estate agents, searching for my very own domain, my face pressed against the window, along with the ghosts of other dreamers looking for homes we could not afford. Nevertheless, I believed that one day, when I grew up, I would earn myself the keys to a house of my own with honeysuckle and balconies. At the same time a mean little voice in my head was always saying: “This is not real, it will never be yours.”

Yes, I had spent a long time trying to have a more bourgeois life. Somehow it seemed hard to get one. My colleagues were always trying to be less bourgeois, but I wanted to move into the neighbourhood.

Bonjour, isn’t the air a delight here! Look at our country cottages with their tangle of pink climbing roses. Look at our dining table and its constellation of chairs, look at the art on our walls, our pergola, our salad bowls and oriental poppies, our Victorian porcelain and wildflower meadows. Look at this slice of buttered toast next to the modernist lamp. Look! Look at you looking on Instagram! Here we are, setting off on our country walk with Molly, our sweet-natured Burmese python!

If real estate is a self-portrait and a class portrait, it is also a body arranging its limbs to seduce. Actually, I couldn’t work out why real estate wasn’t flirting with me more intensely, its swooning eyes making me all kinds of offers I couldn’t refuse. After all, I was at last able to live from my writing. As I lay beneath the abandoned or forgotten key in Central Park and started to think about all this, it was too depressing to linger on the real and pragmatic reasons for still living in the wreck of the London apartment block.

I had started writing in my early 20s and was first published at 27, though my plays were performed throughout my early 20s. It has been immensely powerful putting words into the mouths of actors, but it was hard to pay the bills. I thought about the writer Rebecca West, whose books had brought her enough wealth at 40 to buy herself a Rolls-Royce and a grand country house, or estate, in the Chiltern Hills. At the age of 40 my second daughter was three months old and I was experimenting with how to make dhal (very cheap) from a variety of pulses and lentils. While Rebecca West put her foot down in her new swanky car, I was figuring how to combine spices and whether it would be better to serve dhal with rice or learn how to make roti and other Indian flatbreads. Yes, it gave me such pleasure to see how the dough bubbled and puffed up in the frying pan and to simmer butter and strain it. Later I went on to make paratha, much trickier: it required pleating the dough. I couldn’t believe it. I was making delicious dhal and rotis and parathas to feed my family and I was writing through the night, familiar with every car alarm that went off at four in the morning. At the same age, Rebecca West was parking her new Rolls-Royce in the grounds of her real estate and Camus was receiving the Nobel prize.

Deborah Levy, below. Opposite, Cape Cod Morning by Edward Hopper, 1950

Only part of us is sane; only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our nineties and die in peace, in a house that we built, that
shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations.
Rebecca West, Black Lamb and Grey Falcon (1941)

I was with Rebecca West some of the way, but not with the blackened foundations. If you are not wealthy, you do not want a catastrophe in which your house burns down. My wok! My little lamp fringed with white pom-poms! All the same, those invisible years raising our children and getting to grips with all those parathas were some of the most formative years of my life. I didn’t know it then, but I was becoming the writer I wanted to be.

To walk towards danger, to strike on something that might just open its mouth and roar and tip the writer over the edge was part of the adventure of language. Anyone who thinks deeply, freely and seriously will move nearer to life and death and everything else we pass on the way. Any cleaner getting up at dawn to sweep offices, railway stations, schools, hospitals, will be familiar with this sort of thinking.
She knows she has to be stronger than her most fearful thoughts, stronger than her exhaustion. It is likely there are many people who hear and see her, though she might not be visible on Instagram, but that doesn’t stop her from thinking big thoughts. Thought is language. Avoiding thought is language. I once taught a writing class just looking at the words Yes and No. We agreed that a sign on a gate that reads No Blacks, No Jews, No Gypsies is the most impoverished language of all. The signs on public swimming pools in the 1970s were interesting texts, too. No Diving, No Petting, No Eating, No Splashing. Why not put up a sign that just says No. No. No. And what would happen if we were to flip the sign? Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes. I wanted a house. And a garden. I wanted land.

LONDON
Rain fell quietly and gently on the trees in the car park of the crumbling block on the hill. As I helped my daughter pack her suitcases that autumn, I knew epic motherhood was now moving into a new phase. I wondered if it was possible to be a matriarchal character who does not hold everyone hostage to her needs, ego, anxieties and moods. A powerful woman who is at the centre of a constellation of family and friends, yet does not conceal her own vulnerability, or mess with everyone else to get attention and empathy? I am not sure I have ever met her. I am certainly not her. How do we encourage, protect and nurture those in our care and let them be free? Parents do not give children their freedom. They don’t have to ask us for it. They will take it. 
anyway, because they must. They are not our hostages, though I remember feeling there was some sort of mysterious ransom I was obliged to offer my mother in exchange for my freedom. Her children, if she loves them, are inside her, where they started life. It is a mystery to me to even write this sentence, never mind feel it to be true.

Yet in my unreal estate daydreams, my nest was not empty.

If anything the walls had expanded. My real estate had become bigger. There were many rooms, a breeze blew through every window, all the doors were open, the gate was unlatched. Outside in the unreal grounds, butterflies landed on bushes of purple lavender, my rowing boat was full of things people had left behind: a sandal, a hat, a book, a fishing net. I had recently added light green wooden shutters to the windows of the house. My best male friend suggested I add a septic tank, but saying goodbye to my youngest child was real enough for the time being.

PARIS

My new apartment was a five-minute walk from Sacré-Coeur. In a way it was a version of my apartment in London because it was located on a hill in a building that was once grand but unrestored. The bells of Sacré-Coeur were ringing while I unpacked my suitcases. A fir tree planted in the grounds cast a shadow over the front room. It was eating up the light. I wasn’t sure that evergreen was a good idea. It would forever eat up the light. Perhaps on sunny days I could write under its boughs in the evenshade, which meant I would have to buy a portable table that could fold up (like a flower) so I could carry it down the circular staircase. It had been hard to get my giant suitcases up this same staircase but the concierge had helped me.

The concierge went through the inventory of the things in the apartment for which I had paid a deposit: two cups, two knives, two forks, one cooking pot and a breadboard. There was a writing desk and one chair, two single beds in a bedroom that was smaller than the vast bathroom next to it. This bathroom did not have a bath, it had a tiny shower and big windows that opened up to panoramic views of Paris. The inventory took a long time, considering there was not much to go over. The concierge sat on the one chair at the writing desk while I sat on the wooden floor because there was nowhere else to sit. He gazed at the empty walls, the biro poised in his hand, as if something momentous had been forgotten – perhaps a sofa, or a table and more than one chair? Downstairs, in the apartment below mine, I could hear the sound of an electric saw whirring. Ah, he said, yes, he had forgotten to include the plastic rack to dry laundry. At last we were done. When he left, I pushed the two single beds together and began to make my nocturnal throne. I looked around the bare flat. So this is what an empty nest looked like.

Bleak. Or was it just uncluttered, light and spacious? Even in 1949, when she was writing If real estate is a self-portrait and a class portrait, it is also a body arranging its limbs to seduce The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir thought it essential that women emancipate themselves from a life tethered to home and children. The domestic labours that fell to her lot because they were reconcilable with the cares of maternity imprisoned her in repetition and immanence; they were repeated from day to day in an identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century; they produced nothing new.

All the same, I decided to disobey Beauvoir and find a local Monoprix to stock up on plates and cutlery. I was superstitious about a home that lacked the most basic implements to gather new friends around the table.

A month later, I made my first ever bœuf bourguignon and invited the sculptor with the electric saw who lived downstairs to join me. She made little human figures from bread, rolling the dough in her hands and then pinching and tweaking it. When these miniature sculptures were perfectly formed, she ate them.

Never again did I want to sit at a table with heterosexual couples and feel that women were borrowing the space. When that happens, it makes landlords of their male partners and the women are their tenants.

This is an edited extract from Real Estate by Deborah Levy, published by Penguin (£10.99). To order a copy for £9.56 go to guardianbookshop.com.
‘People speak of the apocalypse’
Jeet Thayil

As India is devastated by a crippling second wave of coronavirus, its leaders’ response is causing anguish and disbelief

When the second wave began, we woke each day with a premonition of dread and as the days passed, and the toll climbed, taking our family members, our friends, our acquaintances and colleagues, the dread became ever present, like the dead, who took up residence in our hearts. Then came the fear, which crippled us even when the fever did not. We thought ourselves lucky if we did not fall ill, knowing it was only a matter of time before it would be us on the pavement outside a crowded, underfunded hospital, begging for a bed from the overwhelmed orderlies and nurses.

People spoke in metaphors. They spoke of apocalypse and its bearded saffron-clad horsemen, of inferno and the pyres of hell that burned in parking lots, in open fields, in the streets adjoining graveyards and crematoria. They spoke of life during wartime. But instead of air raid sirens we heard ambulances, day and night. There were curfews and lockdowns and shortages. There were hoarders and black marketers. Oxygen and medicine became the new currency. The cries of the stricken appeared on our social feeds, asking for a cylinder of oxygen, a vial of remdesivir, a hospital bed, home remedies, any kind of advice or solace. And it was on social media that we found help, and if not help then sympathy. We found others who shared the nightmare to which we woke. Strangers stepped forward to set up their own networks of rescue, beyond bureaucracy, religion and politics, complete strangers who cooked for the sick and checked up on them, who spent entire days arranging a bed or medication, who found care for the small children orphaned overnight. This miracle began in a matter of days, just as soon as we understood that those we had elected to protect us had failed us at the time of our greatest need.

Since the pandemic began, some of us have looked to our prime minister for comfort. He was our guru, in his immaculate wardrobe and shaped beard, whose shining image looked down on us from billboards and newspaper advertisements. We waited, hoping for a word of understanding, some acknowledgment of our grief. In thrall to his magnetism, to the aura of wisdom and invulnerability that surrounded him like a halo, we believed in him most when he spoke, with his arms opened wide as if to embrace the entire nation, as if he would take upon himself our suffering. But when an announcement did arrive it was to tell the people of West Bengal that they would receive the vaccine for free if they voted for him. (An election he went on to lose.) Otherwise he rarely addressed the nation. If he did, it was to tell us that religious gatherings would continue because we had defeated the virus, an achievement only we had accomplished, because we were Indians, exceptional, the pharmacists and inventors of the world, not heroes but superheroes. His voice was his charisma; when he spoke we believed.

But many among us had lost their faith. If this was a war then the crimes of our leaders were war crimes and they should be tried accordingly, they said. These voices were branded anti-national, even as they called out the robed chief minister of our most populous state, whose response to those begging for oxygen was to threaten to take away their property; and the home minister who campaigned while the disease raged; the health minister who said the nation’s vaccine rollout was the fastest in the world when it was among the slowest, and assured us there was no reason to be afraid because the virus was not so virulent among Indians and, besides, we had one of the lowest fatality rates in the world; the solicitor general who called us crybabies when our capital city asked for oxygen. These men took their cue from the prime minister, whose bloated ego, monumental vanity and lack of empathy, they said, was unforgivable negligence. We let them talk. The faithless do not know that our true power is not the belief that we hold a special place in history; it is our talent for forgetfulness. In three years, when the next elections take place, we will have forgotten our anguish and our dead. Our memory is shallow, contingent, buyable. We will return our leaders to power.

Jeet Thayil’s Names of the Women is published by Jonathan Cape.
‘I’m drawn to unbearably intense situations’

Emma Donoghue

I got the notion to write *Room* in 2008 when I was driving to a book event and mulling over a news story from a few days before about a five-year-old called Felix Fritzl, rescued from the Austrian dungeon where his mother had raised him and his siblings. By the time I parked, and grabbed a napkin to scribble down my thoughts, I knew my novel had to be from the child’s point of view, would begin on his fifth birthday and be split into two halves by the escape, and would be called (in an echo of womb) *Room*.

To tone down some of the horror, and distance Jack’s story from Felix’s, I made him a well-nourished only child, the captor a stranger rather than his ma’s father, their home a locked shed with a skylight and ventilation somewhere in the US.

But the novel really started years earlier, when I gave birth to the first of our two kids. From day one – or middle-of-the-night one, rather – I found child-rearing fascinating. I was a youngest-of-eight who had never had a job that required set hours or responsibility, and motherhood broke and remade me.

Only when I got the idea for *Room* did I realise that I had three and a half years’ worth of things to say. About what a huge gap separates an adult and a small child, with only curiosity, humour and love to bridge it. About how a mother is her baby’s captor and prisoner, sometimes both at the same time. About how you long to give your growing kid freedom while somehow, impossibly, keeping them perfectly safe. Jack’s story was an intensification of every childhood, so I wasn’t writing a crime novel so much as a coming-of-age story in which the growing up had to happen overnight when that door opened. It was also sci-fi, because he’d be an alien among us; and a fairytale that would have to find its way into realism.

I’m often asked how *Room* changed my life, and really it didn’t, because I wrote it when I was 40 and had already spent two decades in the luxurious position of getting to write what I liked, full time. Reaching millions more readers has been a thrill, and writing the screen adaptation certainly has opened doors to me in the world of film and TV.

Also, *Room* has altered something about my fiction. I don’t expect every novel of mine to be a bestseller, but there’s a new emphasis on gripping plots. I’m drawn to situations of unbearable intensity, such as the maternity quarantine ward in a 1918 Dublin hospital in *The Pull of the Stars*. The settings often have, if not a locked door, then a claustrophobic quality and a ticking clock. All our lives are limited, after all, so I like to see what happens when I set extreme limits – how my characters come to care so rapidly and intensely about each other, and even find moments of transcendence within their prisons.

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*Emma Donoghue’s latest novel, The Pull of the Stars, is out now in paperback (Picador).*

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