‘The pandemic has changed us all’

Neuroscientist Karl Deisseroth on the new science of emotions
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 Vitsœ planner, Robin.

In fact, this is the fifth time she has bought from Vitsœ … 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?

“Thank you, again, for everything you and Vitsœ have done for us over the years. If only each shelf could talk…”
‘I still believe One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez is the greatest novel written since William Faulkner died.’
— Bill Clinton, page 5

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The week in books
12 June

Forward for poetry
We know that the year – and more of the pandemic has been a time when we have needed to be exposed to the power of the imagination. The shortlists for the Forward prizes 2021 are a reminder that the poetic imagination isn’t wholly introspective; it is bold, limitless in ambition and it touches every part of our lives. In the shortlist for best collection, Kayo Chingonyi will take you to the Zambezi River and back; Tishani Doshi explores the elastic margins between those who survive in our societies and those who think themselves lost; and Luke Kennard writes a long, elegiac but sharply fashioned riff on Shakespeare’s sonnets (and you thought you knew them!). Stephen Sexton explores a fantastic world that turns out to be not very far from our own and from Selima Hill there’s a seven-part meditation on the never-ending puzzle of women and men and their complicated mutual misunderstandings. The winners will be announced in October.

James Naughtie

Winterson on ‘wimmins fiction’
Jeanette Winterson antagonised a host of women’s fiction writers when she announced on Twitter that she “absolutely hated the cosy little domestic blurbs” on her rejetacked backlist. “Nothing playful or strange or the ahead of time stuff that’s in there,” she wrote, just “wimmins fiction of the worst kind”. So she set them on fire. But as her fellow female writers were quick to argue, fiction written by women contains multitudes. “Women are neither a genre, nor a single experience,” responded Chocolat author Joanne Harris. Yes, publishers can get it wrong – remember the bikini shot of Sylvia Plath on a collection of her letters? – but as many in the industry pointed out, Winterson’s publishers will have followed the usual procedure of gaining her approval for covers and blurbs. As both readers and authors recommended the #wimminsfiction they love, Winterson’s new jackets look set to stay the same, despite her...
‘I always wanted to be a writer, but doubted my ability to do it’

Bill Clinton

The books that made me

The last book that made me laugh
Janet Evanovich’s latest book. Stephanie Plum always makes me laugh.

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Ulysses. I love Irish poetry, prose, and nonfiction. I love Joyce. But I always give out and give up before I get through it. I’ll keep trying.

The book I’d most like to be remembered for
So far My Life, for the reasons Larry McMurtry stated in his review: it’s a story of my life and times; an account of what it’s like to be president when so much is happening at once with fuller explanations of events such as Black Hawk Down that you won’t see anywhere else; and a testament of what I believe and why.

My comfort read
I find comfort in thrillers with interesting characters and good stories. I really liked Stacey Abrams’s While Justice Sleeps, all of Louise Penny’s Gamache books and Sara Paretsky’s VI Warshawski books. And I love my co-author James Patterson’s books. I hope our new book, The President’s Daughter, makes other people’s lists. I like the characters and the story.

The book that I think is most underrated
Probably Ron Chernow’s Grant. With the latest efforts to discredit the 2020 election, pass voter suppression measures and kill the January 6 commission, and the changing composition of the supreme court, we are reminded of what Ulysses S Grant knew: the risks of making our union more perfect includes the possibility that the inevitable reaction can rob us of our democracy altogether.

The last book that made me cry
Sooley by John Grisham. Read it, you’ll want to cry too.

The book I am currently reading
The End of Everything by Katie Mack. The theoretical physicist explains the five most likely endings for our expanding universe, hopefully an unimaginably long time from now. It’s witty, clear and upbeat.

The book that changed my life
Ernest Becker’s The Denial of Death made me rethink the roots of our deepest fears and insecurities.

The book I wish I’d written
One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez. I still believe it’s the greatest novel written since William Faulkner died.

The books that influenced my writing
I always wanted to be a writer, but doubted my ability to do it. From my senior year in college to my first year in law school, I read five books that made me think it was worth a try: North Toward Home by Willie Morris; The Confessions of Nat Turner by William Styron; You Can’t Go Home Again by Thomas Wolfe; The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin; and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou.

The book that changed my mind
That’s a great question. I think Isabel Wilkerson’s Caste and Adam Grant’s Think Again forced me to rethink how deeply embedded our unexamined preconceptions are.

The President’s Daughter by Bill Clinton and James Patterson is published by Century.
"We would all love to be called to action during coronavirus. But there’s not much any individual can do’

The pioneering neuroscientist and psychiatrist Karl Deisseroth tells Richard Godwin how we process social interactions, why we have struggled with Zoom, and why for some, the conditions of the pandemic have induced an ‘altered state’

The coronavirus pandemic has been a disorienting kind of emergency. It is a generation-defining cataclysm, but for many of us the day-to-day reality has been lonely, even dull. It is a call to action, but the most useful thing most of us can do is stay at home. Covid-19 is a disease that attacks the lungs, but it has also worsened mental health while causing a drastic reduction in patients seeking care for depression, self-harm, eating disorders and anxiety. Whatever path the pandemic takes from here, says Karl Deisseroth, the pioneering American neuroscientist, psychiatrist, bioengineer and now author, “coronavirus has affected us all and it has changed us all. There’s no doubt about that.”

Deisseroth, 49, is talking in the lush, squirrel-filled garden of his house in Palo Alto, northern California, where he has spent much of the pandemic looking after his four young children. But he has had much else on his mind. He has been finishing his book Connections: A Story of Human Feeling, an investigation into the nature of human emotions. He has been meeting with psychiatric patients over Zoom as well as putting in night shifts as an emergency hospital psychiatrist. And he has fitted all of this around his day job, which is using tiny fibre-optic cables to fire lasers into the brains of mice that he has infected with cells from light-sensitive algae and then observing what happens, millisecond by millisecond, when he turns individual neurons on or off.

This is the basic methodology of optogenetics, a technique that Deisseroth pioneered in 2005 with his team at what is now the Deisseroth Lab at Stanford University. It has been widely recognised as one of the great scientific breakthroughs of the 21st century. In essence, he found a way to activate or deactivate individual brain cells with incredible precision – which in turn has brought about a revolution in neuroscience. Optogenetics is now its own field, its techniques and principles used in hundreds of laboratories across the world to advance understanding of the circuits of the brain and the consequences of conditions such as schizophrenia, autism and dementia. Mostly this is done by running experiments on animals – literally dialling up or down the circuits that control aggression, for example; however, the possibilities appear almost endless. Last month, the Swiss neurologist Botond Roska published a study that showed how he had used optogenetic principles on a human retina to partially restore the sight of a blind person.

Deisseroth has another great leap forward on his CV, too: see-through brains. In 2013, his team figured out a
way to drain away the opaque fatty matter in a mouse brain and instead suspend all the brain cells in a scaffold of hydrogel, a transparent, jelly-like substance that allows for extraordinarily detailed brain imaging – a significant leap forward from the standard fMRI scan. He came up with the concept while changing a nappy.

Shaggy-haired and unhurried, Deisseroth more resembles a bassist in a west coast rock band than a leading scientist – and the way he tells it, all of his hi-tech questing grew out of his childhood ambition to be a poet. “That was my first love and vocation – I wanted to be a writer,” he says. He once crashed his bicycle as he was attempting to read a volume of Gerard Manley Hopkins while pedalling. “I was always intrigued by how words stir emotions, how they can lift us up and bring us down, how they serve as very potent symbols. If you look at it, one route to understanding how those symbols are transformed into feelings might be looking at how the brain works. So I got very interested in neuroscience.”

But he arrived at neuroscience via psychiatry. The two fields are usually seen as distinct – brain v mind – but the insights gained in consultations with patients have seeded many of Deisseroth’s experiments. “Anybody can read a diagnostic manual and see a list of symptoms, but what really matters to the patient is a different story,” he says. “It’s what allows me to think: what are the correspondences that we can do in the laboratory? How can inspiration flow both ways?”

Deisseroth follows a lucid line of scientific inquiry

It is a revelatory book. Peppered with quotes from Jorge Luis Borges and Toni Morrison, it leaps from wasp evolution to autism, the origins of mammalian fur to self-harm in borderline personality disorder patients, music to dementia, casually blowing apart any crude arts-science dichotomies as it does so. At times, it recalls the case histories of Oliver Sacks, at times the sweep of Yuval Noah Harari’s Sapiens – though Deisseroth says a closer model is The Periodic Table by the poet-chemist Primo Levi. He writes with an evident love of words – but also, with a lucid line of scientific inquiry. What are feelings? How do they work? Why do we have them? How do new feelings evolve? And why are they so often maladapted to our circumstances?

“Feelings are responses to information in the world – but as we all know, they follow their own trajectory,” Deisseroth says. “They coalesce and disappear with time. Sometimes we’re not even conscious of them.” While we are still far from even a sketchy understanding of the physical nature of feelings, optogenetics is beginning to give us a handle on how and why they arise. “We can not only record from the activity of tens of thousands of neurons while the processes that correspond to feelings are happening – we can directly turn up and turn
Karl Deisseroth

down the representation of these feelings with great precision. We can make an animal more or less anxious or aggressive or maternal or hungry or thirsty. And all of that neurobiology maps on to this fundamental question of what a feeling is.”

There are many moments where Deisseroth’s case histories echo the strange times we are living through. One of the more perplexing stories concerns Alexander, a wealthy, well-adjusted American man with no history of mental illness whose retirement happened to fall around the time of 9/11. Alexander was nowhere near New York when the attack happened and knew no one involved. But two weeks afterwards, while on holiday in Greece, he began to display “classic mania”. He was extraordinarily joyful; afterwards, while on holiday in Greece, he began to feel extremely high libido. When he returned home, he volunteered for the US Navy and started training for war, climbing trees, practising his aim, reading military strategy, insisting to his baffled wife and children that he was better than he had ever been.

For Deisseroth, the case was a sort of parable (Alexander turned out OK, by the way). “Why does this susceptibility to mania exist? Is there a value to it - if not to the person, then to the community, or to the species? Is that something that was more valuable at a different time in the long march of evolution?” He speculates that the manic state - “in some ways the highest expression of what a human can be” - was a circuit in the brain waiting to be tripped; and perhaps such states have helped humans cope with war, famine, climate emergency or pandemics in the past. What we think of as mental illness may be an evolutionary adaptation - or an attempt at an adaptation - that helped past communities survive. “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution,” as the great geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote. This leads Deisseroth to ponder the case of Joan of Arc in medieval France - a female teenage peasant who, like Alexander, appeared to be an inappropriate vessel for such mania, but nevertheless managed to make a national impact. “The altered state has been historically important. Even if it’s maladapted for the individual it can be transformative for the community.”

It’s hard not to think of the thousands of people triggered by conspiracies - imagined emergencies concerning 5G masts, vaccinations, the deep state. “This is the complexity of the world we live in contrasting with the distant and recent past. But the context is all wrong. We would all love to be called to action during coronavirus. But there’s not much that any individual can do.”

In another chapter, Deisseroth contrasts two patients with extreme “social and non-social brain states”. Aynur is an extraordinarily friendly, open and talkative Uyghur woman who started to experience suicidal thoughts when she learned, while living in Europe, that her husband had been interned in a Chinese concentration camp (she had to infer this from phone conversations with her parents, who couldn’t risk telling her directly). As an extreme extrovert, the loss of her deep social bonds had destroyed her.

Meanwhile, Charles, who was on the autistic spectrum, shrank from human contact: he had panic attacks in social situations and could not meet anyone’s eye, associating eye contact with a “negative-valence subjective internal state” (ie feeling bad). Deisseroth was able to treat his anxiety and panic attacks, but the eye contact issue was unchanged. However, through talking to Charles, he was able to get to the “real essence” of the problem. It wasn’t that eye contact made him anxious. It was that too much social information was conveyed through eye contact - and Charles found this overwhelming.

“Hearing him state this was a transformative moment for me. We were able to bring those ideas to the laboratory and study and even quantify in bits per second how certain changes that happen in autism can affect information handling in the mammalian brain. It kind of unified all the threads very powerfully in a way that a paper or a study or a questionnaire would never have been able to do.”

It’s no surprise that the pandemic has been very challenging for those of us who, like Aynur, have deep social bonds with friends, family and colleagues. Computer technology, which reduces our multilayered, multisensory human interactions sometimes to a single bit of information – to like or not to like? - is a poor shadow of our usual social contact. “One reason Zoom meetings may be so exhausting is we have to work much harder to create our model of the other person – and that’s before we get on to multiple people,” Deisseroth says. “Social interaction is one of the hardest things to do in biology. Think of all the information coming in, not just the language and body language but the model you form of the other person’s wants and needs, which you then have to adapt as the conversation progresses - it’s a huge information processing task. Zoom makes that much harder.”

However, for people like Charles, communicating
Deisseroth believes it is wrong to see autism as a limitation of the mind. ‘People with autism do have challenges forming a model of what’s going on in the minds of others. But it’s not a fundamental limitation. They have certain structures and arrangements in their brain that can work it out – but it is hard for them to keep up with the information rate of a social interaction. In a different time scale, there is so much they can do to thrive.’ Digital communication that does not take place in real time, for example email or chat functions, can be of huge benefit – and some people with autism have indeed found the slower pace of lockdown beneficial.

Meanwhile, the reach of mental health treatment is now far greater thanks to the adoption of digital technologies. ‘Unquestionably we’re going to suffer a tsunami of mental health issues as a result of the pandemic, but in the long run I hope that accessibility of mental health care will be greatly enhanced by what we’ve gone through. If there is a silver lining, that this would one day give us the ability to turn on and off cells in the brain and come to a causal understanding of the properties of the system arise from the parts. We won’t get to a Galilean or Newtonian view of the brain. The great leap forward of optogenetics rested on a 19th-century botanist’s notes on the light-sensitive algae he had found in a saline lake in Kenya – “and he was studying them because they were beautiful and for no other reason”, Deisseroth says. “One could never have predicted that this would one day give us the ability to turn on and off cells in the brain and come to a causal understanding of which connections and projections set up our motivational structures. And stories like that turn up again and again in science.”

Situated as he is in the heart of Silicon Valley, I wonder if it’s a source of frustration to him that so many of the finest minds of his generation have decided to train their intellectual capacity on selling online advertising for the tech giants – as opposed to bettering the health of humankind.

‘One reason Zoom meetings may be so exhausting is we have to work much harder to create our model of the other person’

Deisseroth’s partner Michelle Monje is now in medical school. It was an early clinical encounter with a girl who had brain cancer as the inspiration for his work; and it so happens that his wife, Michelle Monje, is now a specialist in brain cancer in children. “All of these experiences are very charged with emotion, because of the things I was experiencing at the time. But I didn’t realise how tightly they were linked to the challenges of single fatherhood and the emotional storms that come with that until I had written the book. I came to see how this was a unifying theme in my life: the child that might be lost, the child that might be found.”

Indeed, optogenetics has helped bring about a deeper understanding of parenthood itself. “It really does change you. That structure is there just waiting. It’s not a new connection that’s formed, it’s there, waiting to be activated.”

Throughout the pandemic, Deisseroth has been attempting to come up with a unified theory of the self by studying dissociative states. What truly excites him are the “big principles” of the brain. “Anything can happen. The real magic is how the properties of the system arise from the parts. We won’t get to a truly deep understanding potentially for decades. But we’ve at least set the stage. And we have to push it as far as we can”.$$Connections: A Story of Human Feeling is published by Viking on Thursday.$$
Not just another Davos bore ... complex issues, morality and vulnerability from the former PM

William Davies

The question of how British prime ministers should and shouldn’t behave after leaving office has recently become a hot one. Property magnate and policy guru Tony Blair has refused to step out of the limelight and Theresa May has cashed in, reportedly charging more than £100,000 for a speech. And now, of course, there is David Cameron, harassing civil servants during the darkest days of April 2020, begging them to throw his failing venture a bone, with reports that he personally stood to make £200m had Greensill Capital made it to flotation.

By contrast, Gordon Brown’s post-Westminster career has been a moral exemplar. He has surfaced to take a position in referendums – on Scottish independence and Brexit – but otherwise been largely invisible, focusing on charitable work, particularly on the expansion of education in the global south. While it addresses political questions of the greatest contemporary urgency, such as the management of the pandemic and the response to nationalism, Seven Ways to Change the World continues in the same spirit, offering a mixture of moral arguments and policy solutions that carefully avoids political controversy. He is silent on the questions of Scottish independence or Brexit, and the current prime minister earns not a single mention. Only Donald Trump, among recent political figures, is explicitly ostracised.

The title and format of the book follow a template that is familiar from a glut of self-help books. Brown has identified seven areas where greater international cooperation is required: global health, economic prosperity, climate change, education, humanitarisanism, abolishing tax havens and eliminating nuclear weapons. Each chapter offers a historical and moral diagnosis of the problem at hand, and a set of policies to alleviate it, all of which require states and their leaders to act in common with one another. The research is undeniably impressive in its scope and detail, though occasionally leaves you feeling bludgeoned by its sheer volume and unrelenting force, rather as Brown tended to leave audiences feeling after his speeches.

Brown’s forte as a politician was his combination of clear moral purpose with a mastery of technical minutiae, which sometimes resulted in an air of bookish detachment. But on the page, some sentences – such as: “And we must reduce the differential between the education-poor and the education-rich by ensuring that the supply of highly educated people and thus the opportunities for social mobility rise, that more people move from low-paid jobs to higher-paid jobs and that ...” – simply reminded me of what Blair described as Brown’s “great clunking fist” at the dispatch box.

Given that the policy issues Brown is grappling with are, by their very nature, complex global ones, and that he has clearly engaged deeply with them, I wasn’t entirely sure who his imagined readers were. Many of his interlocutors and sources are those elite-dominated global institutions: McKinsey, the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations. Then there are those campaigners and intellectuals who get a hearing in such institutions: Greta Thunberg, Steven Pinker, Bill Gates. Too often, Seven Ways to Change the World offers something like the view from Davos, not in an ideological sense but in its rarefied global reach, which purports to transcend every national, cultural, political and disciplinary divide. If the bosses of Goldman Sachs or the European Central Bank were to pick up a copy for their next long-haul flight, this would undoubtedly be welcome, but Brown presumably hoped to offer more than elite airport literature.

Where Brown differs from a regular Davos bore is that he clearly holds deep-seated moral views regarding the responsibilities of wealthy countries to less wealthy ones, combined with a sense that true justice (a word that recurs throughout the book) is never adequately achieved, but needs constantly pushing for. It was observed in the past that Brown’s intellectual and political project was to unite Adam Smith’s The Theory of Moral Sentiments (an analysis of our natural tendency to sympathise with others’ suffering) with The Wealth of Nations (the founding work of liberal political economy), books that had been too often read in isolation from one another. Seven Ways to Change the World seems to bear this out, in being a call to match economic globalisation with adequate political coordination, so as to deliver on the moral responsibilities of the rich to the poor. Brown’s ability to move between economic and moral reasoning is a potent one, and more than a match for the kind of smug liberalism of Pinker (whom he engages in a brief tussle) or others proclaiming that contemporary capitalism is as good as it gets.

The subplot of Seven Ways is of a man looking back on his career, wishing he’d had it in him to make of 2008 what the allies made of 1945.
“Most people would rightly regard as morally abhorrent the proposition that a child born into the poorest 20% of a population should face a risk of mortality twice as high as a child born into the richest 20%. Yet that is the reality of the world we now live in.” Such logic blasts its way through everything.

At times the core thesis can seem banal. The belief that global problems need global solutions is scarcely radical, though the book’s historic context – a global pandemic, the threat of nationalism and protectionism, cooling Sino-American relations, the glimmer of hope offered by the Biden presidency – does make it timely. There is perhaps a more nuanced thesis smuggled in concerning historical opportunities, though it’s not clear how much Brown intends it. The institutions that he seeks to build on are largely legacies of 1945, when a global economic and humanitarian architecture was developed to prevent the catastrophic consequences of nationalism. But the other historical crisis he keeps returning to is the one that put him personally in the hot seat, and which briefly turned him into an international hero: the financial crisis of 2008. While he clearly relishes the opportunity to roll out a few insider anecdotes from that time, the more interesting aspect is the sense of regret that he clearly feels for not having exploited the crisis more vigorously to push for international reforms, and for not being more aware of how damaging globalisation had already been. The subplot of Seven Ways is of a man looking back on his career, wishing he’d had it in him to make of 2008 what the allies made of 1945.

Late on in the book, Brown becomes possessed by this esprit de l’escalier. Reflecting on the final year of his premiership, as the political and financial vultures were circling in readiness for austerity, he expresses his regrets:

_I should have gone out of my way to explain what was happening before our eyes: how and why the financial collapse had started, what had gone wrong, who was to blame … I should have shared the poignant letters that had come to me from mothers and fathers, sick with worry about where the next meal for their children would come from, and explained that the most important thing any leader had to do at this time of crisis was not to balance the books – as if I were a corporate chief accountant – but to save livelihoods and lives, as anyone with an ounce of humanity would want to do._

Labour has never really recovered from this moment, and UK politics is now dominated by the nationalisms of England and Scotland. Does Brown feel somehow responsible for Brexit and the rise of Boris Johnson? Does he think the 2009 G20 summit in London or the climate change summit in Copenhagen were missed opportunities to avert President Trump or climate catastrophe? He doesn’t say. The book is a blizzard of heady slogans, plans and statistics. But it also betrays a kind of vulnerability that “world leaders” rarely reveal, of a restless search for answers and reassurances that continues long after one has lost the power to act on them. Brown’s moral keel was always constituted partly by self-doubt, or at least self-questioning. It’s a shame his successor lacks the same quality.

To buy a copy for £21.25 go to guardianbookshop.com.
{ Memoir } A candid account of the joys and agonies of becoming a mother takes aim at patriarchal constraints

Christina Patterson

When Pragya Agarwal started her first period, just after her 11th birthday, her mother handed her a bundle of blue cloth. For Agarwal, as for so many girls around the world, the transition to womanhood was sudden and shocking. “I had to stop playing cricket on street corners at once,” she explains. “And thereafter I was both visible and invisible, not seen or heard except to silence and tease, a provocation and titillation.”

If she was silent then, she has certainly made up for it since. A behavioural and data scientist who has taught at universities in both the US and the UK, Agarwal is now a passionate campaigner for racial justice. She has taught at universities in both the US and the UK, and is right to point out that women of colour generally face bigger challenges and constraints women face and the degree of control they have, or don’t have, over their bodies. She is right to point out that women of colour generally face bigger challenges than white women.

Recollections are interspersed with facts, figures and reflections on fertility, motherhood, the expectations women face and the degree of control they have, or don’t have, over their bodies. She is right to point out that women of colour generally face bigger challenges on many of these fronts than white women. But she talks about “patriarchal and social constraints” with a sense of anger that ranges so widely it’s sometimes hard to pin down.

“As you read this book,” writes Agarwal in the introduction, “you might wonder if it is a memoir, a manifesto, auto-fiction, or a form of political writing.” You might indeed. Her key point seems to be that women are the victims of a system that conspires to make them feel worthless if they are not mothers. “Infertile women,” she notes, “are seen to be unfulfilled, empty, devoid of meaning.” Really? In this country around a fifth of women over 45 don’t have children and most of us had no idea we were meant to feel so bad.

This is a book about motherhood that’s very pro-motherhood by a woman who had a child, and who tried to move the sun, the moon and the stars to have more. In the end, it’s about motherhood as redemption, “my saving grace, allowing me to reconcile all my different selves”. And that’s fine. Agarwal writes beautifully about her own complicated experience. That’s what literature is for. But if she could focus her anger more precisely, she could let the poetry sing.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
London labour, 160 years on – vivid stories from the streets offer a modern take on Mayhew’s revelatory study

Kathryn Hughes

In 1861 the journalist Henry Mayhew completed London Labour and the London Poor, a sprawling, four-volume account of life on the streets and on the skids. Here, for the first time, was first-person testimony from the kind of people who were usually nothing more than a smudge on Victorian England’s field of vision: street-sweepers and shit-collectors; sellers of wilted fruit, rotten fish and children’s bodies; beggars and beadles. Reviewing it, William Makepeace Thackeray called Mayhew’s masterpiece “a terror of tale and wonder”. Charles Dickens, famously, used Mayhew’s database of voices and experiences as a source book for peopling the odd, dark corners of his novels.

At the end of 2018 Jennifer Kavanagh set out to do a Mayhew for our own broken times. With notebook and recorder in hand, she has tramped her native city, talking to the men and women who live and work on its streets. What is at once striking is how little has changed in the intervening 160 years. There are still street sweepers, fruit sellers and even beadles (private security guards by another name). Many people are dependent on an economy of salvaging and repurposing. At night, as lucky Londoners head for their beds, thousands of others make do with the pavement. Food is still the kind that you can hold in your fingers and eat with minimal cutlery, but instead of trotters and hot potatoes it’s more likely to be a late-in-the-day sandwich. There are as many soup kitchens and shelters as ever.

What made Mayhew’s work so viscerally thrilling was the way he let his subjects tell their stories in their own words. Rather than cutting and pasting a few choice phrases to give colour and punch to his research and statistics, he simply let them say their piece, complete with pauses, stumbles, repetitions and non sequiturs. The effect was vivid and immediate and has since become the standard way that oral historians present their work.

Given the way that Kavanagh emphasises how her text is in constant conversation with Mayhew’s, you might imagine that she models her methodology on his, sidling up to street cleaners and sex workers and handing them the metaphorical microphone. But, of course, Mayhew’s methodology – if you can call it something so fancy – would be deemed deeply unethical today. Before Kavanagh can interview Robert, the homeless painter and decorator from Hungary, or Aisha, who sells mattresses in Whitechapel, she has to get them to sign a consent form, a cumbersome document that requires them to give their name and address. No wonder so many of the people she approaches seize up at this point, or just scarper, such as the Albanian peanut seller in front of the British Library who, she finds out later, hasn’t got the requisite licence. Even if they have an address, people are unlikely to divulge it to the chatty middle-class woman with the bright smile who might easily be an undercover spy from Immigration or Benefits. The £10 payment she offers for their time smells like bait.

Notwithstanding the fact that Kavanagh is bound to work within a modern ethical framework, she manages to access some compelling stories. There is Caval, who works as a living statue during the day and for Amazon by night. He is trying to make enough money so that he can go back to Romania and take up his architectural studies. What is even more troubling is the number of people with steady office jobs who are nonetheless obliged to wait tables or busk in order to pay their basic living costs. There are homeless people who run market stalls, professional drivers who do car boot sales, graphic artists who draw caricatures for the tourist market. No one in this obsessively productive landscape is allowed to be anything other than on the go, all the time.

Kavanagh’s own writing is no match either for Mayhew or for the scores of interviewees who furnish her with their vivid self-portraits. At times her prose is leaden, and you find yourself longing for the next hotel doorman or drug-rehabilitation worker to start telling their story. Even so, there’s no doubting the skill that Kavanagh has deployed in getting people to talk candidly to her. What shines through this wonderfully engaging book is the author’s genuine assumption that every life matters and, if we care to listen, has important things to tell us about our own.

To buy a copy for £7.82 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A Belgian Antarctic expedition offers mutiny, danger and a young Roald Amundsen’s verdict on raw seal

Geoff Dyer

While the launch of certain books was postponed because of lockdown, Julian Sancton and his publishers might have been tempted to go in the opposite direction: bringing forward the release of *Madhouse at the End of the Earth* on the grounds that it was the ultimate lockdown read. Or maybe now is the perfect time to publish it as, venturing gingerly out again, we find ourselves succumbing to lockdown nostalgia.

For an account of a Belgian expedition to Antarctica it opens, unexpectedly, in Leavenworth, Kansas, where an unnamed doctor is serving a prison sentence for fraud. In 1926 he receives a visitor, “one of the greatest explorers the world had ever known”, and they recall events from the deep polar night, almost three decades earlier, when they had formed a lifelong friendship.

The expedition had been led by Adrien de Gerlache de Gomery with the intention of finding the magnetic south pole. Belgium was then fully engaged in what Conrad would call the “vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” in the tropics of the Congo. The country’s lack of any tradition of polar exploration lent an allure to De Gerlache’s undertaking, however it also made it difficult for him to raise funds or find personnel. He ended up recruiting a ramshackle, multinational team of scientists and sailors: essentially anyone who was ambitious, up for adventure or lacked more tempting offers.

The team, defined by a lack of national unity or shared purpose, sets off in the doughty *Belgica* and it’s not long before things start going wrong. A booze-fuelled mutiny is narrowly averted and the ship runs aground before they have even put the tip of South America behind them. Displaying the calm decision-making of a leader under pressure, De Gerlache bursts into tears. Not for the last time, the *Belgica* proves resilient beyond expectations and they get clear, moving on to greater, undefined dangers. A crew member is swept overboard in a storm. They head into a world of alien and constantly changing beauty.

As the journey gets stranger the leader’s log for this period becomes “a chronicle of slow but inexorable constriction”. The days shorten and soon turn into endless night. And then they are stuck, with no choice but to wait for the sun to return and the ice to free the *Belgica* from its grip. Or to tighten it, and shatter their fragile refuge. Meanwhile the grim ordeal of surviving in a place utterly hostile to human life takes its toll. They have plenty of canned food and alcohol and at first everyone keeps busy, especially the pair to whom we were introduced at Leavenworth, the American doctor Frederick Cook and the Norwegian Roald Amundsen. Cook had spent time among the Inuit in the Arctic and realised the importance of learning from them. He noticed they did not suffer from the scurvy that afflicted his team here, at the other end of the world, and his solution is a diet of raw penguin and seal meat. Those who adapt to this unpalatable necessity rally; those who don’t sink towards death. At one point Cook and Amundsen are seen “sucking warm blood” from a slaughtered seal. “Delicious,” is the verdict of Amundsen, who takes note of every detail, amassing the skills and knowledge that will enable him to beat Captain Robert Scott to the south pole in 1911.

De Gerlache, a leader of flickering competence, is prone to lyricism. The splendour of the icescape is such that even the austerely pragmatic Amundsen yields occasionally to a sense of the sublime; more typically, having managed a near-death escape, he writes: “I will not allow my plan to spend the winter on an iceberg to be influenced by this.”

Sancton’s own prose serves the reader well as he negotiates a path through what must have been a submerged mass of documents.

**Before the frost**

*The Belgica in 1898*

Except for odd moments – when the explorers pass a night in an igloo “shooting the breeze” we are suddenly wrenched into a linguistically inappropriate future – he coaxes his material into a watertight narrative. One member of the crew goes mad, the rest are exhausted, enervated, listless, forced to reassert themselves against their captivity when the sun reappears and the slow thaw brings hope and a new set of dangers. We’ll leave them there, two-thirds of the way through this utterly enthralling book. Some of them, we know, will survive – and we also know that by 1926 Cook will be locked up in Kansas. How on earth, we wonder, does he wind up there?

*To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
From a pillow fight with Prince to ripping up a picture of the pope, the singer has always done things her way

**Fiona Sturges**

As a young woman starting out in music, Sinéad O’Connor rarely did what she was told. When Nigel Grainge, an executive at her label, asked her to stop wearing her hair short and dress more like a girl, she went straight out and got her head shaved. While recording her first album, she discovered she was pregnant, prompting Grainge to phone her doctor and tell him to warn her against having a baby. The doctor duly told her that women shouldn’t take babies on tour but neither should they go on tour without them. O’Connor ignored them both and had her son anyway.

Then, in 1992, during a performance on Saturday Night Live, she ripped up a picture of Pope John Paul II, and blew up her career. She knew exactly what she was doing. “Everyone wants a pop star, see?” she writes. “But I am a protest singer. I just had stuff to get off my chest. I had no desire for fame.”

**Rememberings**, then, is a tremendous catalogue of female misbehaviour. Music memoirs tend to follow similar trajectories of ambition, success and depravity, followed by regret and redemption. But O’Connor doesn’t do regret, and redemption isn’t required – at least not by her. “I define success by whether I keep the contract I made with the Holy Spirit before I made one with the music business,” she explains. “I never signed anything that said I would be a good girl.”

The writing is spare and conversational, and reveals O’Connor as self-deprecating, pragmatic and a sharp observer. She is funny, too. During a tour of America in 1990, there was an outcry after it was reported she had demanded “The Star-Spangled Banner” not be played before her gigs. MC Hammer made a big show of buying her a first-class plane ticket back to Ireland, while Frank Sinatra said she should have her arse kicked. People began steamrolling her albums outside her record company HQ in New York. “Intensely angry old people (with pointy noses) operating the steamrollers,” she hoots.

In the end, O’Connor put on a wig and sunglasses and joined the throng. When a news crew turned up, she gave an interview pretending to be from Saratoga. “They ran it later on the news, with the caption Is that her? Running and re-running the footage of my ‘interview’. Aha–ha–ha–ha–ha!”

As a child, O’Connor endured fierce beatings from her mother. She once won a prize at nursery school for being able to roll up into the smallest ball – “but my teacher never knew why I could do it so well”. She rarely went to school and would steal compulsively: “If a thing ain’t nailed down, I’m stealing it.” She picked up the habit from her mother, who would take money from the collection plate at mass rather than putting it in. Later, she and her mum would steal from charity tins. Full of guilt, O’Connor went to see her local priest who made her promise to give the money back when she got a job, and that way she’d be square with God (she was true to her word, giving her LA home to the Red Cross). She eventually left home to live with her father after her mother locked her and her siblings out in the garden all night. She later recalls being sent to a convent boarding school, where a nun bought her a guitar and a book of Bob Dylan songs, and encouraged her to sing.

There are stories from the height of her success, too, most of them underlining the hollowness of the experience. She is summoned to visit Prince, whom she brilliantly calls “Ol’ Fluffy Cuffs”, and who treats her atrociously. He tells her off for swearing, demands that she eat soup even though she has declined it and insists on a pillow fight. It turns out his pillow has something solid in it: “He ain’t playing at all.”

In the book’s foreword, O’Connor says that before she ripped up the picture of the pope, she never had the chance to find herself. “But I think you’ll see in this book a girl who does find herself,” she writes, “not by success in the music industry but by taking the opportunity to sensibly and truly lose her marbles. The thing being that after losing them, one finds them and plays the game better.” While her childhood and rise to fame provide rich material, O’Connor, who is 54, says she can’t remember much of the past 20 years, “because I wasn’t really present until six months ago”.

As such, the final chapters, which sprint through her marriages, children, a traumatic hysterectomy and spells in mental institutions, are episodic. But they remain, like the rest of her book, full of heart, humour and remarkable generosity. The postscript comes in the form of a letter to her father. “Please know that your daughter would have been as nutty as a fuckin’ fruitcake and as crazy as a loon even if she’d had Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary for parents and grown up in the Little House on the Prairie,” she tells him. “So don’t be kicking the walls unless it’s just for fun.”

*To buy a copy for £17 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
Three linked novellas offer an unearthly, magical view of a city in all its beauty and its shadows

**Nicholas Wroe**

At first sight *Barcelona Dreaming*, three linked novellas billed as Rupert Thomson’s love letter to the city, appears a somewhat conventional excursion for the author. His last few novels have featured a maker of waxwork depictions of plague victims in renaissance Florence (*Secrecy*), the voice of a frozen embryo (*Katherine Carlyle*), lesbian artists in the golden age of surrealism (*Never Anyone But You*) and vampires (*NVK*, written under the unimprovable pen name of Temple Drake). But although he plainly adores the place, it should come as no surprise that a Thomson love letter is not so much a starry-eyed document as something sharper, stranger, more unsettling and, ultimately, more revelatory.

For Thomson’s inhabitants of the city – and in a way for the city itself – much hinges on the lingering implications of old emotions, relationships and actions. Wounds stubbornly refuse to close, whether from love affairs gone wrong or love affairs that never were. Crises present themselves or are engineered. In the opening story, “The Giant of Sarrià”, we meet divorced British expat Amy, who one evening hears someone crying in the car park beneath her apartment. There she finds a young Moroccan sex worker, Abdel, whom we later learn has been raped. Amy comforts him with sugary mint tea, gives him money for a taxi and realises she is hopelessly infatuated. He was half her age and she’d “never seen anyone more beautiful”.

In “The King of Castelldefels” former jazz musician Nacho wakes up in a garden he doesn’t recognise, with a hangover. “Everything’s floating, flowing. Brain, skin, lawn – it’s all the same.” Via a series of weirdly plausible events, he is asked to give English lessons to Barcelona’s Brazilian soccer star Ronaldinho. While their unlikely arrangement intriguingly colours the surface of the story, the reader is increasingly caught up in a dark undertow evinced by glimpses of Nacho’s first marriage, his relationship with his much younger girlfriend and her son, and his recollections of shared addictions with an old flame from his touring days.

It is a rare prosaic clunk of exposition when the reader is informed that Ronnie, as Nacho is soon calling him, had scored “26 goals in all competitions, including two against our bitter rivals, Real Madrid”. But his presence as a ubiquitous celebrity is artfully deployed, as Thomson lays down intricate layers of connection between stories, characters and locations. We first spot him smiling down from a huge billboard advertising gum in Amy’s story, and then her daughter notices him out jogging. Amy’s friend Montse also turns out to be Nacho’s first wife. And Montse and her new husband are close to Jordi, a translator of literary fiction in the final story, “The Carpenter of Montjuïc”, whose entanglement with a shady British businessman unhelpfully impinges on his long, and unrequited, love for a woman he had known since schooldays.

Thomson has always been good at assembling discrete worlds invested with a touch of the unearthly. Here there is a hint of fable, with a slightly skewed reality reflecting the dreams, delusions and often fraught emotions on display. The giant in the title of Amy’s story actually materialises; a chest of drawers made of Russian birch “cut by the light of a full moon” exerts a strange pull; Nacho’s perception of the world moves woozily in and out of focus.

Yet there is also a hard clarity in the way light and shade, rough and smooth coexist. Yes, there is tenderness, and much sex, whether hurriedly in a house under construction or on a carpet of warm pine needles in a forest clearing. But violent relationships, mostly off stage, also cast their shadows.

Thomson’s Barcelona is similarly defiant in its insistence on complexity. He lived in the city in the mid 00s, around the time the stories are set, and one assumes he is of a mind with Amy when she explains why she decided to stay on after her divorce: the beaches and the mountains and the bars; “the quality of light first thing in the morning” and so on. But there is more to it. Thomson is also entranced by dusty forecourts, the cement factory just out of town, the view at night from the Ronda bridge of the six lane coastal highway, the smell of “exhaust fumes mingled with frangipani”.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A virtuosoic debut about a black woman preparing for a party examines the disorienting experience of assimilation

Sara Collins

Here is a short sharp shock of a novel about the kind of person the government’s recent commission on race would have wanted to profile in their report. Natasha Brown’s virtuosoic debut follows a British woman who is preparing to attend a party, and who is musing about her life and her place in the world as she does. Comparisons with Mrs Dalloway would be neither unwarranted nor, I suspect, unwelcome. Assembly fulfils, with exquisite precision, Virginia Woolf’s exhortation to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall”, even though Brown has restricted herself to an astonishingly small quota of words in doing so. To say that Assembly is slight would be an understatement: not only is it barely even novella-sized, it is also organised into vignettes, so that its already meagre portion of language is threaded through what seems comparatively like acres of space. The effect is to require readers to supply the connective tissue necessary to turn it into narrative — text that is sparse on the page expands on consumption; it swells like a sponge in turn it into narrative — text that is sparse on the page

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There seems to be a growing appetite for books like this, as if literature is mutating to fit attention spans stunted by social media, producing prose we can tatively like acres of space. The eff ect is to require language is threaded through what seems compara-

The narrator’s educational achievements and lucrative career embody the kind of success story about — as she deadpans — “hard work, pulling up laces, rolling up shirtsleeves, and forcing yourself” that slakes modern Britain’s craving to see itself as colour-blind, but leaves her steeped in numbness, an observer rather than a participant. “I have everything,” she declares, even as her narration slices surgically through the notion that there’s any value in what she has. Her experiences at her high-flying City job waver between outright assaults and insidious microaggressions. A colleague grabs her shoulders and presses “his open mouth on her face”. She feels “the spray of [her] co-worker’s indignation as he speak-shouts his thoughts re affirmative action. Fucking quotas.”

There is no escape. Not in the world and nor by going inward, where “the ugly machinery that grinds beneath all achievement” is laid bare. In the aftermath of a cancer diagnosis, she undergoes “an untethering of self from experience”. By the time she arrives at her white boyfriend’s family estate for the party in ques-

The narrator’s educational achievements and lucrative career embody the kind of success story about — as she deadpans — “hard work, pulling up laces, rolling up shirtsleeves, and forcing yourself”
Reimagining the extraordinary life and death of a visionary dreamer who determined the shape of modern-day New York

**Beejay Silcox**

In a quiet corner of New York’s Central Park, there is a stone bench streaked with bird droppings. It’s an unassuming memorial for the “Father of Greater New York” – Andrew Haswell Green (1820-1903), a man the clamous, roiling city has largely forgotten. It was AH Green, a lawyer and civic powerhouse, who championed the creation of Central Park, and the five-borough infrastructure that gave New York its modern shape. No legacy is immune from pigeon poo.

At the time, the borough plan - a consolidation of a dozen satellite towns into a single megacity - was reviled as much it was celebrated, publicly denounced in 1898 as “The Great Mistake”. Jonathan Lee’s novelisation of Green’s life, written in the south-east borough of Brooklyn, steals its title from AH Green, a lawyer and civic powerhouse, who championed the creation of Central Park, and the five-borough infrastructure that gave New York its modern shape. No legacy is immune from pigeon poo.

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“Now do we picture the past?” the British writer asks, when the present brings much-needed context but the past is ever-receding. Fiction can collapse the space between the two - conjure the past with the tools of the present. This is what Lee does, with a great deal of care and wit, in his fourth book. The Great Mistake is not a novel of grand deeds, but of grand imagination, a novel that wonders how a mind like Green’s came into being.

When the intensely private Mr Green is gunned down in the street outside his home at the age of 83, rumours swirl: “Was it a crime of passion, or a political assassination, or some kind of great mistake?” Inspector McClusky is assigned to the case: a barrel-chested, heavy-footed fellow who’s worn himself out of him. “His family feared he might one day succumb to the catastrophe of being a poet,” Lee jests. That’s not all they’re afraid of, and Green will carry the weight of their unvoiced shame for the rest of his life. (Potted biographies still refer to Green as a “confirmed bachelor” – that tired old code.)

Green arrives in New York nursing a tenacious case of ambition. “He had begun to feel the first stirrings of it,” Lee writes, “the longing to transform himself into someone new, that special American itch for the future which, even now, so often afflicts the young.”

In the next decade Green will unmake and remake himself, including a burnishing year in the sugarcane plantations of Trinidad, which will fill his pockets but shake loose his certainties. “He loses his understanding of the word free, for the newly freed still seem enslaved in all but name.”

Green will also meet the effusive Samuel Tilden, unabashed dreamer and future presidential candidate. Tilden and Green will spend the rest of their lives working to shape New York into the city they believe it can be. Theirs is a love story wrought in steel, stone and silence; chaste and ever-yearning.

The Great Mistake is pure literary comfort food: yet another tale of gilded age New York, pitiless and gorgeous; yet another scrappy, self-made man thrusting his way up through the brothels and seedy backrooms; yet another heart-hardened cop teetering on the edge; yet another contemplation of the fickleness of history, and the grand precarity of reputation. Paradoxically, it makes for quite the risk; it’s difficult to distinguish yourself in the hustle. The lure of the New York novel seems much like the lure of New York. “It was a cathedral of possibilities,” Green thinks of his city, “it might remember him or it might forget him.”

Much like its visionary hero, The Great Mistake feels quietly but intently ambitious, and similarly driven by the quest for a kind of tidy beauty. Lee’s prose is so carefully wrought it often wanders into aphorism. Green’s soul-shaking year in Trinidad is described with gauzy, vague beauty, but the fate of Green’s black assailant, Cornelius Williams, unfolds in the margins – it’s all too ugly.

“You are always at last two histories happening.” Lee writes, “the inner and the outer, the private in the public.” It is in imagining the bruises and longings of Green’s private history that The Great Mistake feels entirely its own. It is not an antidote, but a humane correction to the impenetrable, stone-chiselled histories of impenetrable stone-chiselled men.

Central Park, Lee explains, is a “careful fraudulence”. The waterways, the rocky outcrops, the wooded glens: all manmade. Landscaping the park required more gunpowder than the battle of Gettysburg. But none of that artifice matters once you’re walking there; you’re too grateful for the sheer glorious fact of it. The Great Mistake is the literary equivalent of that too-cultivated wilderness. Go wander awhile.

*To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
Britain under Nazi rule is a staple of alternate history, but CJ Carey’s *Widowland* (Quercus, £14.99) makes it fresh again. The story is seen through the eyes of Rose, who, being young, healthy and attractive to men, has the highest status permitted to women under the caste system designed by Alfred Rosenberg, Britain’s Protector. It’s 1953, and the war continues, but Britain is one of Germany’s allies. Rose, who is having an affair with her boss in the ministry of culture, is assigned to rewrite classic works of literature to ensure they align with Nazi ideals. Another task brings her into contact with inhabitants of “widowland” – a ghetto for childless women over 50 who are treated with official contempt and kept on short rations. They have not forgotten the truth about the past and have something to teach Rose about books and resistance. CJ Carey is a pseudonym for Jane Thynne, author of a series of spy novels set in 1930s Germany, and she clearly knows her Nazis. Rosenberg was a real Nazi ideologue who thought society would benefit if women were forced to live under a caste system, with older, childless widows seen as a drain. This is an absorbing, Orwellian dystopia that makes a good case for the subversive power of literature.

For good old-fashioned science fiction and a veritable feast for the maths and science nerd, turn to Ed O’Loughlin’s *The Martian* author Andy Weir’s *Project Hail Mary* (Del Rey, £20). My own deficiencies had me skimming over the calculations, but this is still the most enjoyable hard SF I have read in years: funny, well plotted and full of surprises. In addition to enjoying the cracking story, it was a pleasure to read about people relying on logic and science as the best way to solve problems.

Susannah Wise’s *This Fragile Earth* (Gollancz, £14.99) is a powerful near-future tale of apocalypse and survival. It begins quietly in London with the ordinary daily routines of Signy, a stalled musical composer, and her six-year-old son Jed. One day, there’s no electricity or gas in the flat – or anywhere. Soon the water is off. Jed’s father is sure everything will be back to normal in a few days, but as it becomes harder to get supplies, Signy decides they must leave for her childhood home in the countryside, where survival might be possible. What she finds there is not what she expected. This is an intense, engaging and beautifully written first novel.

*Rabbits* by Terry Miles (Del Rey, £16.99) is the story of K, a self-proclaimed expert on a dangerous underground game referred to only as “Rabbits”. He has never been a player, yet one night a reclusive tech billionaire – who is rumoured to owe his success to winning an earlier round of the game – approaches him for help. Something has gone wrong, and only K can fix it. After promising to explain everything, the man disappears. As K struggles to identify the potential problem, and a friend’s interest in the game takes a deadly turn, he wonders if he is going mad, seeing patterns where none exist. Or is the game itself changing the fabric of reality? Quirky, mind-bending fun.

Ed O’Loughlin’s fifth novel, *This Eden* (Riverrun, £16.99), also plays with coincidence and features a mysterious tech billionaire and an existential global threat that can only be stopped with the aid of a particular young man. It could hardly be more different, though, in style and tone. A sophisticated literary thriller, it is written with super-cool elegance and a keen eye for detail reminiscent of the best of William Gibson. Manipulated by the mysterious, philosophising Towsie, Aoife and Michael must keep moving, warned to stay off-grid or be captured by the sinister agents pursuing them for reasons Towse is not ready to disclose. They manage to get from California through Africa to Israel, and then to Europe for the final showdown in Dublin. This is a breathtaking, memorable adventure with a serious heart.

**The Colours of Death**

( Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99), the debut novel from Patricia Marques, is a police procedural set in Lisbon, in an alternate reality in which a small number of people – the “Gifted” – have telepathic or telekinetic powers. One of them, Isabel Reis, is a police inspector confronted with the most disturbing case of her career: a man is dead, probably forced by someone powerfully Gifted to kill himself in a most painful way. Marques plays fair with the reader, and this is a good detective story which can only work if the reality of extrasensory powers are accepted from the start. But the discrimination faced by the Gifted doesn’t work as a metaphor, and there’s no explanation of why the regulatory system was developed, or hints of any other major differences between this Portugal and our world, which seems a missed opportunity in an otherwise intriguing story.
A hit in Australia, where she lives, Meg Mason’s Sorrow and Bliss tackles marriage and mental health with humour and heart. She tells Alex Clark why she wrote it in secret.

‘I was utterly convinced no one would ever see it. It was the last hurrah’

‘I was utterly convinced no one would ever see it. It was the last hurrah’

When Meg Mason took herself off to her shed to write her third book, a certain pragmatic confidence accompanied her. After all, she knew she could do it: there on her shelves were her memoir of having children in her 20s, Say It Again in a Nice Voice, and her 2017 novel You Be Mother. The New Zealander, now 43, had built up a career in journalism in the UK and Australia, where she lives, writing for outlets such as the Times, Vogue and the New Yorker, and felt comfortable with discipline and deadlines. If she sat there for a year, she figured, something “at least as good” as her previous work would emerge.

It did not, not even when there were 85,000 words of it. And it wasn’t just that the “untitled Christmas novel” wasn’t coming together as she’d hoped, it was that “it was dreadful, it was awful, and I knew it, and I didn’t stop”. It probably still exists somewhere in Gmail, she says now, but “I couldn’t open it with a gun to my head”. Her feeling at the end of that year was overwhelmingly one of failure, of not “being equal” to the thing that she most wanted to do.

And yet here she is, ready to tell me about Sorrow and Bliss, the novel that emerged from the wreckage; the novel that has amassed “must read” pre-publication quotes from Gillian Anderson and Ann Patchett, whose protagonist, Martha, has been compared to Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s Fleabag, and which looks set to be filmed by the company behind the Oscar winners Birdman and 12 Years a Slave. To adapt the well-worn anecdote of the waiter delivering champagne to George Best, where did it all go wrong?

It was the going wrong, Mason explains to me via Zoom from Christchurch, New Zealand, where she’s visiting family for the first time since the start of the pandemic, that started her on the road to things going right. Chiefly, it allowed her to feel her way into the character of Martha who, we learn at the beginning of Sorrow and Bliss, has just turned 40 and just split up with Patrick, her husband of eight years. But from those opening paragraphs, we are aware that there is more going on than the end of a relationship: “An observer to my marriage would think I have made no effort to be a good or better wife. Or, seeing me that night, that I must have set out to be this way and achieved it after years of concentrated effort. They could not tell that for most of my adult life and all of my marriage I have been trying to become the opposite of myself.”

The story that follows includes depictions of intense and frequently painful family dynamics, most notably between Martha, her sister and their mother; the long tail of parental loss and trans-generational trauma; the innumerable false starts of a stalled career; and the emotional demands of both having and not having children. But at the centre of it all stands the reality of Martha’s mental

Meg Mason

Sorrow and Bliss was a ‘post-hope project’
Meg Mason

 illness, a condition that catapults her into periods of intolerable sadness, epic self-destruction and terrifying isolation. And, for much of the novel, it is an illness that is kept hidden not only from the reader, but from Martha herself. Even when she is finally diagnosed, the narrative refers only to her condition with two dashes (“I wonder,”) a new psychiatrist asks her, “has anyone ever mentioned — to you, Martha?” I moved my hand and said no, thank goodness.”

Mason’s refusal to put a name to what ails Martha becomes a defining feature of the novel. Why did she do it? In the aftermath of her disastrous first start, she explains, she had started writing again with no expectations: “It was a post-hope project. It wasn’t for my publisher, I didn’t tell her I was doing it. And I was truly and utterly convinced that no one would ever see it.” She describes feeling “a bit drunk with it, because I didn’t care. It was like making this enormous meal from everything you have in the fridge, with no recipe, just throwing it all in. It just doesn’t matter. And it was the last hurrah.” She didn’t even conceive of it as a novel about mental health; that material, and the striking and turbulent relationship between Martha and her sister Ingrid entered, she says, almost “without conscious thought”.

But when she did send it to her publisher, who reassured her that it would definitely see the light of day, she started to feel “anxious about the fact that I’d essentially written a mental health novel by accident”. She worried about the interpolation of extremely harrowing material with high comedy, and about the way that she’d amalgamated bits and pieces of real conditions to make a sort of composite portrait of mental disintegration; she was concerned about readers, especially vulnerable ones, following too closely some of Martha’s decisions and behaviours. “I felt such a burden of responsibility to any reader for whom that’s a real and daily battle. To them I’m just a novelist in a shed having, in inverted commas, fun with it.” Around this time, she even suggested to her publisher that she might put it out anonymously, or at the very least without her own biography, photograph or acknowledgements. “I wanted it to be allowed to exist on its own without that author just dancing in at the end.”

A compromise was reached in the form of those dashes, that redacted condition, a creative decision that, as she wanted, worked to serve a broader purpose: “It’s not the schizophrenia book, the bipolar book, the borderline personality book, it’s a book about what it feels like to have X or to look after someone with X and what it does to the extended family and the marriage.” It also allowed her to reflect on situations that commonly exist beyond mental illness as well as within it, including the way that women are treated by the health system, and that families create intractable roles and scripts for one another. Sorrow and Bliss is Martha’s story, but also an ensemble piece, creating wonderful characters in her mother, Celia, an alcohol-dependent sculptor who has dealt with the demands of motherhood largely by ignoring them, and Celia’s sister, Winsome, who has married into extreme wealth and cannot now bear any wrinkles in everyday life.

Mason says she has a complicated relationship with Say It Again in a Nice Voice, the memoir she published in 2012. “They say, never drive angry. I think never write angry is probably a good life lesson as well.” She had moved from New Zealand to Australia at 16, and on to London at 22, where she stayed until the birth of her first child. She and her husband now live in Sydney with their two teenage daughters. For years after her memoir came out, she had to parry questions about her family life, and particularly whether or not she regretted having children young. I ask whether she feels prepared for people to ask how much her own life is reflected in Sorrow and Bliss?

It is, she says, a work of imagination; she has not experienced the same issues as Martha. But she is adamant that she wanted to explore the territory, arguing that the estimates of the proportion of people impacted by mental illness – she mentions one in four – seem “ridiculously” low: “When I look around my group of friends and my family, I can’t see a person who hasn’t been touched by it in some way.”

She’s thrilled with the idea of the film adaptation, she says, but she’s staying well out of it, feeling that her presence wouldn’t be useful. Sorrow and Bliss is set in London and Oxford – an interesting choice for someone who hasn’t lived in the UK for a long time. “I’m hugely sentimental about London,” she says. “In my mind, it looks like a Working Title film at this point, even though I remember it being, particularly where I was, a little bit rough. But I think there are things about the novel intrinsic to it, that can’t work anywhere else.” She asked British friends to read the manuscript closely for inaccuracies.

There is another novel in the works: “But what I’m doing is I’m sort of checking every day that I should still be going on with it. And I’m not doing the same thing I did before, which is just to press on. So what I’ve learned out of Sorrow and Bliss, even if it’s difficult, it shouldn’t be that difficult. And if you’re not finding it interesting, no one else is going to find it interesting.” Assuming that she doesn’t have to junk it all, how does she think things will pan out? She laughs. “It’s so tricky to work out how to simulate that sense of privacy that I had before, which is what made the novel basically successful in the end. It’s much harder this time to convince myself no one’s going to see it, because I think they might.”

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A couple of years ago I found myself gazing at the cover of a book I’d loved as a child: the 1942 Carnegie medal-winning *The Little Grey Men*, by the naturalist, illustrator and sportsman Denys Watkins-Pitchford, who wrote under the name BB. The charge it carried felt electric, and even opening the cover felt risky; I braced myself in case its magic had faded in the 40 years since it had been read to me at bedtime.

*The Little Grey Men* was published during the misery of the second world war, with destruction all around and a sense – familiar to us today – of a world in terminal decline. I remembered it as an utterly luminous evocation of spring, summer and autumn in the countryside, seen through the eyes of the very last gnomes in Britain: “honest-to-goodness gnomes, none of your baby, fairy-book tinsel stuff, and they live by hunting and fishing like the animals and birds, which is only proper and right,” as BB wrote. As a child I loved that businesslike tone, with its flattering dismissal of other, “babyish” stories; I loved BB’s illustrations, the precise and detailed rendering of the natural history in the book, and most of all the feeling it gave me of a secret world...

**True to nature**

*Melissa Harrison*

From Watership Down to *The Animals of Farthing Wood* ... leading authors discuss the children’s books that inspired them to write about the natural world...
to which I was being granted privileged access. I needn’t have worried. As I turned the pages I found myself enchanted all over again, and I began to think about the other nature novels I’d loved: Fiver, Hazel and Bigwig’s flight from ecological destruction in Richard Adams’s *Watership Down*; the glorious Devon riverscapes of Henry Williamson’s *Tarka the Otter*; Wullgar gnawing off Teg’s paw to free her from a snare in Brian Carter’s *A Black Fox Running*. I could clearly see how those early animal stories had shaped my adult interests and sympathies, but when I tried to find modern books that might awaken children’s interest in nature – perhaps written by a more diverse range of voices than those I had grown up with – I was surprised by how few there were. Working in secret in case I couldn’t pull it off, I began to write *By Ash, Oak and Thorn*, an updated story inspired by, and in homage to, the magical world created by BB.

“I believe that the most powerful books a person reads are when they’re making decisions about the kind of human they want to be,” says MG Leonard, author of the bestselling *Beetle Boy*, *Beetle Queen* and *Battle of the Beetles* – all-too-rare examples of nature-based fiction for today’s children. “I write in the hope that my readers, once they’ve finished my books, won’t subscribe to the assumption that bugs are disgusting or terrifying, and will marvel at the amazing little creatures that run this planet.” Leonard’s books offer children a way of seeing the world and relating to other creatures – one that may prove vital in overcoming the ecological challenges we face.

Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* was the nature novel that changed Leonard’s life. “I read it several times as a girl and loved it, but it wasn’t until I was in my 20s and struggling with depression that the message hit home,” she recalls. “It was one of the reasons I began gardening; at first planting a window box of lavender, then, slowly, gathering containers of plants on the steps up to my flat, which brought the bugs, and they attracted the birds. It made me happy.” Books are tool kits: the things we learn from them can change our own lives, as well as the world.

The extraordinary success of Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris’s *The Lost Words: A Spell Book* is also proof of a growing hunger for writing that connects children to nature. It was created as a response to the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*’s decision to delete dozens of nature words from its pages, and a way of celebrating those that had been culled. “Keeping everyday nature alive in the words and stories of children in particular – who are the ones who will grow up and decide what to save and what to lose – seems to me vital,” Macfarlane wrote at the time.

So what were the books he read as a boy? “Colin Dann’s *The Animals of Farthing Wood* series activated an early sense of the problems of human-animal conflict,” he says. “I got deep into Brian Jacques’s *Redwall* series, and like many people my age I still shudder at the memory of General Woundwort from *Watership Down*. I also pored over BB’s *Brendon Chase*, and details from it – including that honey
Buzzards scrim their nests with fresh beech leaves, as the young leaves contain a natural insecticide – are with me still.

I fell in love with Tarka the Otter when I was too young to know anything about its author’s postwar PTSD, or his later fascism – as did the farmer and bestselling author of The Shepherd’s Life and English Pastoral, James Rebanks. “I was deeply affected by the beauty of the pictures Henry Williamson painted with words,” he says now, “and there was a radical aspect to its effect on me, because I was beginning to realise that if nature was beautiful and literary, then who saw it more directly than me, a kid who worked in fields all day long?” Portals, as well as tool kits: nature stories can leave marks that change lives.

Macfarlane makes the point that the books that first open the door to nature need not be fiction at all: “What we might call ‘field guides’ can be a form of imaginative literature, especially to a child’s mind. I still have, and still turn to, the Reader’s Digest Guides, which I bought with hoarded money and book tokens, about one a year: their combination of artwork, identifying ‘facts’ and a compressed poetry of description sharpened my eyes and fired my mind.” Helen Macdonald, author of H Is for Hawk, was also a fan of guide books: “They were full of characters that I could learn to recognise and name, and then, if I were lucky, strike out and see them living in the real world around me,” she recalls. Like me, she loved BB’s books, too: “I obsessed over Wild Lone, his biography of a fox; and Manka, the Sky Gypsy, about an albino pink-footed goose. I identified with the animals in their pages, and rooted for them as they went through all manner of perils.”

Not quite field guides, Ladybird’s classic and recently updated What to Look for ... series, originally illustrated by the great Charles Tunnicliffe, left an indelible impression on generations of children. Mary Colwell, the author of Beak, Tooth and Claw: Living with Predators in Britain, is a conservationist and the campaigner behind the growing call for a natural history GCSE. “I felt grown up,” she says. “I had a different demeanour reading them than I did with books that were obviously for children. They awakened my serious mind. It was as though everywhere there were little eyes, sharp teeth and fluttery wings – and they were in the same place as I lived! I just had to look, and a cast of incredible characters would be revealed.”

David Lindo, an author, broadcaster and wildlife tour leader, was behind the poll to find Britain’s first national bird. Writing as the Urban Birder, he aims via his books, campaigns and events to connect a diverse range of people, from beginners to experts, to nature in towns and cities all over the world. In his case, it was conservationist Gerald Durrell’s memoirs that proved an early inspiration: “As a child I wasn’t read to at night nor encouraged to read fiction – but I did indulge in factual literature,” he says. “Reading My Family and Other Animals really fuelled my future lust for travel and discovery.”

There has never been a shortage of books featuring animals, of course – they are a staple of children’s publishing from board books on, and stretch all the way back from Aesop to Babar the Elephant and Peter Rabbit. But these are often not the kind of nature books that inspire children. They are simply “ourselves in fur”, as the critic Margaret Blount put it.

One of the things we do to animals “is tame them”, writes Clare Pollard in the brilliantly illuminating cultural history Fierce Bad Rabbits: The Tales Behind Children’s Picture Books. “We also tame children. The similarity between these two processes does much to explain how common animals have become in picture books, especially farm animals or pets. We make these creatures walk upright, like circus ponies. We put Anubis in mittens and use him to teach three-year-olds how to behave.”

She is right, of course: I may have enjoyed the Babar books as a child, but it was stories about real animals in their own habitats, such as the vividly observed A Black Fox Running, that made me the writer and nature lover I am today – and made me want to inspire other children in turn.●

Melissa Harrison’s By Ash, Oak and Thorn is published by Chicken House.
I published *The Sense of an Ending* in 2011, when I was 65. Various things change you as a person and a writer as you age. You think more about time and memory; about what time does to memory, and memory does to time. You also mistrust memory more than when you were younger: you realise that it resembles an act of the imagination rather than a matter of simple mental recuperation.

And when it comes to writing, two things may happen, and with luck do. The first is you have a greater confidence in your ability to move through time. The great exemplar here is Alice Munro - you can read a story of hers, 30 pages or so, and realise that, almost without your noticing, a character’s whole lifetime seems to have passed. How did she do that, you wonder? So in my novel, there is an opening section of about 50 pages, then a gap of 40 years, and then a hundred pages more. I wouldn’t have risked that in younger years.

The second thing is a realisation - shared with other artists - that you don’t have to put everything in. There are painters who in old age allow the canvas or the wood to show through their markings. Verdi, in his later years, scored more sparingly; as he put it, “I learned when not to write notes.” And I think I learned when not to put in those unnecessary sentences. It’s not a loss of physical energy (though that is also unignorable), more a recognition that you can often do more by saying less. While at the same time inviting the reader to fill in the gaps.

When I finish a novel, I usually forget its origins, processes and pains: they are no use to me now. I know that early on, I wrote down the name of a friend I’d been close to at school and then lost touch with; only to discover, when I was around 50, that he had killed himself a quarter of a century previously. It was not the death itself but that long, eerie unknowingness that played into a central strand of the novel. I also knew that I wanted the novel to be at the same time meditative and a psychological drama. Two modes, just as it would have two speeds: in the first section, the pace, or anti-pace, of memory, while the longer second section would move in “real” time.

What I do remember well was the problem with the title. I came up with *The Sense of an Ending* and tried it out on friends. Most liked it, but one pointed out that there was a work of literary criticism by Frank Kermode with the same title. I hadn’t heard of it, let alone read it (and still haven’t). I thought, a little cavalierly: “Well, there’s no copyright in titles, he’s had it for nearly 50 years, it’s mine now.” When the reviews came out, several pointed out that my book was “in conversation” with Kermode’s, either working out his ideas, or perhaps providing a riposte. Intertextuality, you see. Aaaarrgggh. Well, that’s one lesson the book taught me, at least.

*The Man in the Red Coat* by Julian Barnes is out in paperback from Vintage.

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**Tom Gauld**

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**Julian Barnes**

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**I learned to do more by saying less**

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**The Guardian Saturday 12 June 2021**
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Mrs England

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