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‘Writing is a great way to explore people from a sniper’s range.’
— Stephen Mangan, page 26

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The week in books  
5 June

**International Booker winner**
Over the last nine months I have visited more than 40 countries: Syria followed Italy, Mexico followed Egypt, and yet I did not break lockdown. I was, of course, reading – as a judge for the International Booker prize. And, as borders closed, this became ever more of a privilege.

Our shortlist takes the reader to Argentina and Germany, France, Senegal, Russia, to outer space and through seven centuries, and tackles the biggest questions – what do we live for, how do we care for our world, and for each other? The books are intellectually capacious, morally generous; they expand what we understand fiction to be. And the winner? David Diop’s *At Night All Blood Is Black*, translated from French by Anna Moschovakis, is not long, but contains worlds; it is politically lacerating, but also intimate; a poem of love and grief and friendship. A challenge, and a gift.  

**Beckett’s secret**
Sixty years ago, Samuel Beckett slipped away to Folkestone to marry his long-time partner Suzanne Dèchevaux-Dumesnil at a secret ceremony. Now the wedding has inspired an immersive event at the Folkestone book festival, which runs until 13 June, with Helen Oyeyemi, Rupert Thomson and Eimear McBride writing fictional monologues from the perspectives of those there at the time.

In March 1961, Beckett checked in at a hotel in Folkestone under his middle name. A reporter almost stumbled on the secret, phoning Beckett’s agent, who pretended he was in Africa. The couple married on 25 March.

Those at the festival will be able to follow Beckett’s footsteps around town, with the monologues read by actors Jade Anouka, Russell Tovey and Harriet Walter. It will also be streamed online on 13 June.  

Aida Edemariam

**A debut shortlist to celebrate**
I was thrilled to be invited to judge this year’s Desmond Elliott prize for debut novelists alongside Chitra Ramaswamy and Simon Savidge, because five years ago I had the honour of winning it. We knew what we were looking for – a confident voice, an expansive curiosity – but we did not easily decide on our shortlist. These books were the three most vital, though. AK Blakemore’s fresh exploration of the Essex witch trials, *The Manningtree Witches*, celebrates an unforgettable cast of iconoclasts and zealots. In *The Liar’s Dictionary* by Eley Williams, Peter sneaks personal neologisms into the dictionary in 1899 and present-day intern Mallory tries to weed them out again. And Rebecca Watson didn’t so much write *Little Scratch* as sculpt it, capturing the rushing thoughts of a protagonist equally vulnerable and defiant. Three inventive, wily, joyful debuts, and now it falls to us to find the winner.

Lisa McInerney

The winner will be announced on 1 July.

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**Vigilant**

**WORD OF THE WEEK**

*Steven Poole*

A year ago, UK citizens were told to “stay alert” in case Covid-19 crept up on them from behind. That having been such a success, we are now told that, with the new Indian variant threatening to derail plans to end the lockdown completely, we ought to be “vigilant”. What’s the difference?

In Latin, vigil means awake, and vigilare to stay awake. So a vigil, in English since the 14th century, is a period of watchfulness and concentration, originally religious (devotional rites, or a “wake” for the dead), but then potentially secular too. (As Alexander Pope described a crowd of scholars: “With studies pale, with midnight-vigils blind”.)

One who is “vigilant”, then, is both awake and concentrating, like a writer or a secret policeman, and so we have now been given a more arduous duty than simply staying “alert”. Beware, though, that in being vigilant you do not become a “vigilante”, the words being originally the same. As a Missouri newspaper of 1821 declared: “We hate what are called vigilant men; they are a set of suspicious, mean-spirited mortals, that dislike fun.” Happily at least, no less vigilant collection of people may be imagined than the present government.
’A collapsing ancien régime is like Disneyland to me’
The Rev Richard Coles

The book I am currently reading
Strange Rebels by Christian Caryl, an account of five events in the year 1979: the market reforms of Deng Xiaoping in China; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the election of Margaret Thatcher; the visit of John Paul II to Poland; and the Iranian revolution. I found it in Shaun Bythell’s wonderful bookshop at Wigtown in Scotland and I’m engrossed.

The book that changed my life
St Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, or as I described it in my widely unread thesis, not by St Paul, not an epistle, and nothing to do with Ephesus. That said, it is one of the most enthralling and challenging explorations of what it means to be a Christian.

The book I wish I’d written
The Leopard by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. A collapsing ancien régime is like Disneyland to me.

The book that had the greatest influence on my writing
Elizabeth David’s French Provincial Cooking. If I want to see what a carefully turned sentence looks like, hear how it sounds and resonates, I read this.

The book I think is most underrated
I cannot understand why the novels of the Scottish writer Robin Jenkins are not better known south of the border.

FABIO DE PAOLA/THE GUARDIAN

The book that changed my mind
David Olusoga’s Black and British. I realised that for all my commitment to racial equality, I have never willingly surrendered anything to create fairer shares for black people, and I should do something about it.

The last book that made me cry
I just read Susie Boyt’s Loved and Missed in proof (to be published in August). It is about loving an addict, and the costs involved. I had to put it down twice.

The last book that made me laugh
Raymond Blanc’s Simply Raymond. He writes as he speaks, with unsmotherable enthusiasm.

The book I couldn’t finish
I often flake in book three of a trilogy: Mervyn Peake’s Gormenghast, or Dante’s The Divine Comedy.

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
I have not read Jane Austen’s Emma. No excuses.

The book I give as a gift
I love the nature writing of BB (Denys Watkins-Pitchford), and snap up every copy of Brendon Chase I find in secondhand bookshops.

My earliest reading memory
Ant and Bee by Angela Banner. I think I can remember the words beginning to come together on the page and suddenly I was reading.

My comfort read
Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century East Anglian anchoress. All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

From missing lighthouse keepers to artificial friends and the healing power of trees ... our pick of 50 hot fiction and nonfiction books for the summer. Plus the paperbacks to pack, the best children’s stories, and authors choose their favourite recent reads
Field days

Fiction

The Lamplighters
by Emma Stonex
Based on a real-life mystery, this stylishly written debut interweaves a range of voices to explore the disappearance of three Cornish lighthouse keepers in 1972. Both a slow-growing, atmospheric portrait of claustrophobic relationships and a relentless page-turner, this is a hugely satisfying read and a passionate love letter to the sea.

The Great Mistake
by Jonathan Lee
A deeply enjoyable panoramic novel about gilded age New York, which explores the transformation of the city through the life and sudden death of the man who built Central Park.

Sorrow and Bliss
by Meg Mason
This account of a life derailed by mental illness is both darkly funny and deeply touching. Martha looks back on her failed marriage to Patrick, a family friend, but the real love story in this novel, billed as "Fleabag meets Patrick Melrose", is with her wry sister, Ingrid.

How to Kidnap the Rich
by Rahul Raina
Written with enormous verve and energy, this crime caper satirising aspiration, inequality and corruption in India centres on an "examinations consultant" who fraudulently acquires qualifications for the children of the wealthy. Fast, furious and lots of fun.

Second Place
by Rachel Cusk
A stranger comes to stay in this fascinating, uncomfortable exploration of creativity, the male gaze and the gendered experience of freedom. Cusk’s story of a female writer’s power struggle with a male artist is one of the first novels to take inspiration from lockdown.

Open Water
by Caleb Azumah Nelson
A young author’s tender debut about a contemporary London love affair explores race, sex and masculinity, as well as being a joyful hymn to black art and culture.

A Net for Small Fishes
by Lucy Jago
Described as “the Thelma and Louise of the 17th century” and based on a real-life scandal at the court of James VI and I, this immersive novel follows a friendship between two women that leads to Tyburn and the Tower.

Civilisations
by Laurent Binet, translated by Sam Taylor
In this hugely entertaining counterfactual history of the making of the modern world, it’s the Incas who invade Europe. Binet has riotous, brainy fun in a rollicking story of the urge to power, which delights in turning received ideas upside down.

Girl A
by Abigail Dean
The premise of this thriller debut – that “Girl A” is the sibling who escaped incarceration by abusive parents in a “house of horrors” – may sound overly grim, but this is a carefully judged and propulsive story of survival and redemption, as Lex comes to terms with her past.

The Other Black Girl
by Zakiya Dalila Harris
“Get Out meets The Devil Wears Prada”: in this buzzy, up-to-the-

No One Is Talking About This
by Patricia Lockwood
What is the internet doing to our minds and hearts? The American comic memoirist's first novel, shortlisted for the Women's prize, begins as a savagely witty deep dive into the black hole of social media, then confronts real-life tragedy and transcendence.

Klara and the Sun
by Kazuo Ishiguro
Klara, the “artificial friend” to sickly teenager Josie, is our naive guide through Ishiguro’s uneasy near-future, in which AI and genetic enhancement threaten to create a human underclass. Klara’s quest to understand the people and systems around her, and to protect Josie at all costs, illuminates what it means to love, to care - to be human.

Luster
by Raven Leilani
This Dylan Thomas prize winner introduces a brilliant new voice. Edie is a young black woman in New York who starts a relationship with an older white man, and gets complicatedly close to his wife and adopted black daughter. The sentences crackle in a virtuosic skewering of race, precarious modern living and the generation gap.

That Old Country Music
by Kevin Barry
The third short-story collection from a stylist to savour brings more exhilarating, darkly witty tales of oddballs yearning after love and enchantment in the wild west of Ireland.
Hilary Mantel

Jaap Robben’s *Summer Brother*, longlisted for the International Booker, has a disabled child at its centre and squares up to dangerous subjects. It is a heartening novel, because though it asks the reader to think hard, it puts its faith in simplicity and love. Neurologist Suzanne O’Sullivan offers *The Sleeping Beauties: And Other Stories of Mystery Illness* to put you wise about Havana syndrome and other puzzles: it’s not cheerful, but it is current and it is bracing.

Richard Osman

*Small Pleasures* by Clare Chambers is a very big pleasure. It follows a journalist in the 1950s, her last roll of the dice, and how the people she meets change her life. It feels like the type of book Barbara Pym would be writing now. I also enjoyed *Mrs England* by Stacey Halls – a gothic mystery set in a grand house in Edwardian Yorkshire where a nanny realises the family holds a dark secret. It’s highly atmospheric.

Sara Collins

*Sorrow and Bliss* by Meg Mason is one of the most joyous novels I’ve read this year, yet I’d never be able to persuade you of that simply by telling you its premise. This is a book where things start out bleak and get bleaker, yet it achieves such a fine balance between hilarity and despair that it ultimately recalibrates the reader towards hopefulness.

Yuval Noah Harari

I recently enjoyed Bart Ehrman’s provocative and amusing *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife*. Ehrman reminds us that the Bible says almost nothing about these mysterious places, and that popular conceptions owe much to the fertile imagination of ancient fantasy writers. These literary inventions have infiltrated the collective consciousness, and reshaped the beliefs and politics of billions of humans to this day.

Bernardine Evaristo

The incredible life of Bessie Smith has been captured beautifully in Jackie Kay’s imaginative biography. Kay has been fascinated with the singer ever since she was a young girl and her passion shines through in a book that is unputdownable and unforgettable.

Light Perpetual

by Francis Spufford

Spufford follows his 18th-century romp *Golden Hill* with a brilliantly achieved interweaving of working-class lives in postwar south London. The book’s metaphysical conceit – that the children whose stories he spins, from the blitz into the 21st century, died when a German bomb dropped on Woolworths – infuses this tale of the miracle of everyday existence with an elegiac profundity.

The Absolute Book

by Elizabeth Knox

A magical book; doors between worlds; talking birds, vicious fairies and a trip to Purgatory … Stuffed with literary allusion and mythic echoes from the Norse legends to Alan Garner, straddling dimensions and hopping genres with ease, this is a one-of-a-kind fantasy novel that’s worth getting lost in.

My Phantoms

by Gwendoline Riley

A short, sharp shock of a novel that anatomises a toxic relationship between mother and daughter. Riley’s icy style and uncanny ear for dialogue create unflinching prose that is funny and devastating by turns.

Daughters of Night

by Laura Shepherd-Robinson

This intricately written and absorbing historical crime thriller spans all levels of Georgian London, as a woman with her own secrets investigates a murder in Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens.

Transcendent Kingdom

by Yaa Gyasi

Shortlisted for the Women’s prize, this follow-up to *Homegoing* confirms Gyasi’s blazing talent. Focus-
ing on a family who emigrate from Ghana to the deep south of the US, it examines science and faith, addiction, ambition, and the way trauma is passed down the generations.

**In.**
*by Will McPhail*
The debut graphic novel from the New Yorker cartoonist is a beautiful, bittersweet portrait of modern life, with black and white panels bursting into sublime colour when isolated hipster Nick makes a genuine connection with others.

**Luckenbooth**
*by Jenni Fagan*
An Edinburgh tenement building is haunted by tall stories and unnerving strangers, from William Burroughs to the devil's daughter, in this weird and wonderful gothic confection.

**The Manningtree Witches**
*by AK Blakemore*
Based on documents from the time, a striking debut about the women victimised in the 17th-century Essex witch trials that is both an amazingly fresh historical novel and a timeless meditation on the male abuse of power.

**A River Called Time**
*by Courttia Newland*
A speculative epic of parallel Londons, set in a world where colonialism and slavery never
happened, enables a superhero story that’s thought-provoking as well as action-packed.

**The Rules of Revelation**  
*by Lisa McInerney*  
The rollercoaster conclusion to the Women’s prize-winning “unholy trinity” of big-hearted, sharp-mouthed novels set amid Cork’s seamy underbelly. A sideways look at modern Ireland, and a comic treat.

**The Passenger**  
*by Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz, translated by Philip Boehm*  
This year’s essential literary rediscovery was written as darkness descended in Nazi Germany.

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**Michael Rosen**  
*The Language of Thieves: The Story of Rotwelsch and One Family’s Secret History* by Martin Puchner is a book about history, language and culture wrapped up in a detective story about the writer’s hunt to find out what his close relatives did during the Nazi era. At times it’s painful, but full of moments of discovery and revelation. It feels as if the writer is peeling back the skin to reveal Germany. I found it fascinating.

**Diana Evans**  
Poetry is always transporting, a country in itself, and a writer I trust to take me there safely is Kayo Chingonyi, whose collection *A Blood Condition* is a thing of beauty. It’s a pleasure to read such a sure and strident second outing from one of our most celebrated young poets. Also on my reading pile is journalist Arifa Akbar’s beguiling memoir *Consumed: A Sister’s Story*, about her sister’s death from TB and a childhood straddling London and Pakistan.

**Douglas Stuart**  
I loved *Mayflies* by Andrew O’Hagan, about the bond between two Glaswegian friends. It’s full of the invincibility of youth and the grief of losing a dear friend much too soon.

**Torrey Peters**  
*Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar, a work of autofiction about a Muslim-American playwright who constantly argues with his dad, doesn’t sound like a beach read, but hear me out: this book has the drama and fury and fizz of *Real Housewives* crossed with the timeless lament of *The Great Gatsby*. I read it in a fever, swept up in the kind of rapture you fall into when your most audacious friend kicks off on a hilarious, outrageous, but deeply sincere rant.

**Sarah Waters**  
Alison Bechdel’s new graphic memoir *The Secret to Superhuman Strength* feels perfectly pitched to meet the nervy uncertainties of our almost-post-lockdown moment. It’s a wise, wry, generous look at selfhood, ageing and mortality, a sort of hymn to transformation, to the importance of forging connections and the necessity of letting things go.
Germany. With the nightmarish absurdism of Kafka and the pace of a thriller, it follows a German-Jewish businessman’s attempts to flee the country: tense, terrifying and still horribly relevant today.

**This One Sky Day**  
*by Leone Ross*

Gloriously inventive magic realism set over a single day on a fictional Caribbean archipelago, where every inhabitant has a touch of supernatural power. Whimsy, romance, erotica and adventure collide in a literary feast for the senses.

**Great Circle**  
*by Maggie Shipstead*

A soaring epic of female adventure and wanderlust that ranges across decades and continents, from the early 20th century to the 21st, as a Hollywood star investigates the mysterious disappearance of an early aviator.

**Slough House**  
*by Mick Herron*

Spymaster Jackson Lamb may be getting a little cartoonish in this latest outing for the screwups and rejects of MI5, but Herron’s bone-dry farce of corruption and intrigue remains as delicious as ever.

**Animal**  
*by Lisa Taddeo*

Taddeo follows a nonfiction investigation of female desire, *Three Women*, with an excoriating debut novel that puts female rage in the spotlight. Her transgressive antiheroine, making a US road trip of revenge and self-discovery, is a wisecracking voice to relish (out on 24 June).

**The Startup Wife**  
*by Tahmima Anam*

In this sparky satire of startup culture and the modern search for meaning, a computer scientist who launches a social media app with her husband has to find her own voice, both in the boardroom and her marriage. Smart and funny on culture clashes, male-female dynamics and the cult of wellness.

**A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life**  
*by George Saunders*

Why is fiction important and what makes a great story? The Booker winner teaches Russian literature at Syracuse University in the US and this enjoyable collection of essays channels that expertise, diving into classic short stories by Chekhov, Tolstoy and Gogol. A masterclass from a warm and engagingly enthusiastic companion.

**Real Estate**  
*by Deborah Levy*

The concluding book in Levy’s “living autobiography” trilogy sees her travelling between London, New York, Mumbai and Paris reflecting on creativity, security and what makes a home as she approaches her 60th birthday. Witty, honest and hypnotically allusive, this brilliantly crafted memoir interrogates women’s quest for artistic and emotional freedom.

**Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain**  
*by Sathnam Sanghera*

A concise, well researched and accessible primer to a history too often whitewashed or overlooked, *Empireland* shows how the legacy of our colonial past saturates so much of the “Britishness” that we take for granted today.

**Fall: The Mystery of Robert Maxwell**  
*by John Preston*

In an entertaining account of Maxwell’s life and extraordinary death, the author of *A Very English Scandal* charts the press baron’s vast appetites, ambition and feud with Rupert Murdoch. It ends with the man Private Eye
nicknamed “the bouncing Czech” emptying the Mirror pension fund before disappearing from his yacht, the Lady Ghislaine - named after the now equally infamous youngest of his nine children.

The Secret to Superhuman Strength
by Alison Bechdel
If you’ve never read a deeply personal, stomach-shakingly funny, existential graphic memoir about exercise, mortality and self-improvement, start with this one by the talented artist behind Fun Home.

In the Thick of It: The Private Diaries of a Minister
by Alan Duncan
Some politicians’ diaries disappoint by pulling their punches and offering little in the way of political gossip. This isn’t one of them. Duncan describes Gavin Williamson as a “venomous self-seeking little shit”, Priti Patel a “brassy monster”, and Michael Gove an “unctuous freak”. And that’s to say nothing of Boris Johnson and Brexit ...

The Heartbeat of Trees: Embracing Our Ancient Bond with Forests and Nature
by Peter Wohlleben
A simultaneously stimulating and soothing blend of nature writing and science, this detailed examination of the consciousness of trees may disappoint readers who want to commune with the forest, but strongly encourages tree hugging for our own, human sake.

I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain
by Anita Sethi
After she was subjected to a racist attack on a train, Mancunian writer Sethi was left anxious, claustrophobic and longing for open spaces. This account of her pilgrimage across the Pennines explores ideas of estrangement, home and belonging, and shows

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Ian Rankin
Reading Annalena McAfee’s Nightshade, All About Eve comes to mind: a successful artist takes on a young male assistant who estranges her from those around her. It’s beautifully written, engrossing and provides insights into both the contemporary art scene and the individual artistic process. I loved each and every brushstroke.

Elif Shafak
Intimacies by Katie Kitamura (to be published in the UK next month) is beautifully written, deep and soulful, and imbued with a calm, wise energy. You can read it as a psychological thriller or a philosophical meditation but for me, primarily, it is the quest of a woman, a stranger in a strange city, as she comes to The Hague to escape New York, and struggles with power, inequality, justice, memory and love – or the absence of it. In the quietest way, it is a deeply transformative story.

David Nicholls
Something new: I very much enjoyed Meg Mason’s witty, affecting Sorrow and Bliss. Something old: I love John Cheever’s stories and am curious to know which have made it into Julian Barnes’s new selection, A Vision of the World.

Sarah Perry
I’m a serial monogamist where crime writers are concerned, and I’m currently passionately attached to Lisa Jewell, whose novels somehow manage to be good-natured, creepy and tense all at once. When her latest, Invisible Girl, finally lands on the doormat, I’ll lie about all day reading and forget all my woes.

Polly Samson
There are two recent satirical books that I couldn’t have loved more, partly for the jokes but also the glimpses of self-recognition. In Second Place, Rachel Cusk’s narrator struggles to be seen, especially by the sadistic artist she invites to stay who refuses to paint her portrait. Her strong, silent husband deals with her clamour for attention by declaring that he speaks to her with his heart. In Katherine Heiny’s brilliant Early Morning Riser, good-hearted Jane has to cope with a husband so generous that he has slept with every woman in town. It’s funny and warm and just what the doctor ordered.
the value of carrying on putting one foot in front of another.

**Many Different Kinds of Love**

*by Michael Rosen*

In the darkest days of the pandemic last year came news that the former children’s laureate was seriously ill with Covid. This affecting anthology is his attempt to piece together the 47 days he spent in intensive care. Darkly funny poems sit alongside messages from his wife, Emma, and extracts from his “patient’s diary” recorded by the nurses and care workers who saved his life.

**Ancestors: A Prehistory of Britain in Seven Burials**

*by Alice Roberts*

A winning combination of groundbreaking genetic science and real, human empathy, this exploration of seven burial sites explains who we are and how we came to be here.

**One of Them:**

*An Eton College Memoir*  

*by Musa Okwonga*

An elegantly crafted memoir that weaves together the two strands of Okwonga’s early life: takes in the rise of the far right in his mostly white, working-class hometown and his time at Eton. The result is a unique insight into race and class in Britain today.

**Helgoland**

*by Carlo Rovelli, translated by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell*

Travelogue meets biography meets a masterful explanation of quantum theory in this warm and fascinating account of what happened when young Werner Heisenberg went to Helgoland in 1925.

**The Sleeping Beauties:**

*And Other Stories of the Social Life of Illness*  

*by Suzanne O’Sullivan*

Some people call it mass hysteria; some grisi siknis (crazy sickness) or “mass psychogenic illness”. What neurologist O’Sullivan makes clear, in this fascinating and compassionate account, is that these illnesses are real, that they sometimes allow voiceless people to make themselves heard and that, with the right support, those people can be helped.

**From Spare Oom to War Drobe:**

*Travels in Narnia with My Nine-Year-Old Self*  

*by Katherine Langrish*

A wonderful companion to CS Lewis’s Narnia novels, which captures the magic of books as a doorway into other worlds while also thoughtfully exploring Lewis’s religious didacticism.

**How to Make the World Add Up:**

*Ten Rules for Thinking Differently About Numbers*  

*by Tim Harford*

As presenter of Radio 4’s *More or Less*, Harford is a calm voice in the often confusing and clamorous world of statistics. With its 10 simple rules for understanding numbers, this book demystifies maths and gives its power back to the people, taking away the advantage from those who would use statistics to bamboozle us.

**Stronger:**

*Changing Everything I Knew About Women’s Strength*  

*by Poorna Bell*

Bell took up powerlifting after the death of her husband and can now lift more than twice her own body weight. In this defiant and reflective memoir she examines ideas around women and strength, resulting in a challenging, positive and powerful call to arms. Muscled arms.

**All the Young Men:**

*A Memoir of Love, Aids and Chosen Family in the American South*  

*by Ruth Coker Burks*

Soaked in love, agony and booze, the Booker-winning tale of a young boy and his alcoholic mother in 1980s Glasgow.

**The Thursday Murder Club**

*by Richard Osman*

The Pointless host’s all-conquering crime debut is a cosm caper in an upmarket retirement village.
The Dangers of Smoking in Bed
by Mariana Enriquez, translated by Megan McDowell
Shortlisted for the International Booker, unsettling ghost stories from the Argentinian author.

Explaining Humans: What Science Can Teach Us about Life, Love and Relationships
by Camilla Pang
A writer with autism spectrum disorder uses scientific concepts to help her understand human behaviour - and other humans have a lot to learn from her about both.

Small Pleasures
by Clare Chambers
A virgin birth in postwar south London? This wry, witty tale of a stifled journalist finding new horizons as she investigates an unlikely claim is a bittersweet treat.

Bessie Smith
by Jackie Kay
A richly inventive biography details the Scottish poet’s lifelong love affair with a “libidinous, raunchy, fearless blueswoman”.

The Gospel of the Eels: A Father, a Son and the World’s Most Enigmatic Fish
by Patrik Svensson
A gorgeously evocative blend of science, nature writing and family memoir that explores a father-son relationship - and eels.

Ace of Spades
by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé
Only two black students attend an exclusive US high school - and now an anonymous texter is trying to destroy their reputations in this tense, compelling YA thriller that will appeal to fans of Karen McManus.

House of Hollow
by Krystal Sutherland
Three sisters vanished as children and came back strangely changed. Now Grey, the eldest, has vanished again. Can she be saved once more? A gorgeous, grisly modern fairytale for 14-plus.

Starboard
by Nicola Skinner, Illustrated by Flavia Sorrentino
An escaped steamship, estranged best friends, a talking map and a fabulous voyage add up to a thrillingly original story for 10-plus.

Bad Habits
by Flynn Meaney
When rebel girl Alex sets out to stage The Vagina Monologues at her Catholic boarding school, she’s hoping to be expelled - but things don’t go according to plan. A frank, feminist and outrageously funny YA novel.

Wild Child: A Journey Through Nature
by Dara McAnulty, illustrated by Barry Falls
From the prize-winning young naturalist, Wild Child (pictured below) is a dreamy dive into the natural world to thrill wildlife fans of six-plus ⬤

Children & teens

Good News: Why the World Is Not as Bad as You Think
by Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illustrated by Adam Hayes
Learn to spot fake news and celebrate the best of humanity in this mood-lifting global overview for readers of seven and up.

Noah’s Gold
by Frank Cottrell-Boyce, illustrated by Steven Lenton
What happens when a school trip leaves six kids stranded on an island - and the entire internet is turned off? A gently funny story for eight-plus, with a warm, classic feel.

The House of Serendipity
by Lucy Ivison, illustrated by Catharine Collingridge
Scandalous secrets meet riotous hilarity in this glorious 1920s-set romp starring a young dressmaking duo, perfect for readers of nine to 12.

Something I Said
by Ben Bailey Smith
Smart young comedian Carmichael Taylor is on a journey of self-discovery - from trouble at school to American TV star (maybe). Witty and touching, this book is ideal for 10-plus readers who love wordplay and wild, looping tangents.

You’re the One That I Want
by Simon James Green
Shy, ordinary Freddie is terrified of auditioning for Grease, but gorgeous newcomer Zach seems determined to seduce him in the props cupboard. A hilariously rude, sweetly addictive YA romance.
{Mental health} A forensic psychotherapist looks beyond the lurid headlines to give insight into patients’ stories

Joanna Cannon

“I’m blind because I see too much, so I study by a dark lamp.” This exceptionally insightful patient quote appears in the introduction to Dr Gwen Adshead’s collection of 11 patient stories, and it sets the scene for a captivating journey through the corridors of Broadmoor hospital and beyond, into the prison system, the community and the consultation room. Drawing on Adshead’s vast experience as a forensic psychotherapist, each chapter focuses on a different person. Their crimes can make uncomfortable reading, and rightly so. We meet Tony, a serial killer who decapitated his first victim; Gabriel, who stabbed a complete stranger in a north London cafe; Zahra, who enjoyed setting fire to herself and took chunks out of his office door with a sharp object. Adshead, a witness to this fury and “with a speed fuelled by cowardice”, leapt into a hall cupboard and locked herself inside. She questioned, afterwards, whether she would have been more likely to intervene if the patient had been male. Having gone through an identical experience with a laundry cupboard on a high dependency unit, Adshead’s story is far from coincidental, and towards the end of our journey we meet a patient who challenges our definition of what a good mother should – or should not be. Perhaps, though, the most moving account of maternal loss is found in Gabriel’s story. Originally from Eritrea, Gabriel arrived in the UK as a young asylum-seeker, fleeing the violence and conflict of his homeland, but becoming separated from his family in the process. With his narrative, and with other chapters, Adshead is keen to convey that while people of colour make up 13% of the UK’s general population, they represent around 25% of the populations within prisons and secure hospitals, a ratio reflected within the book itself. Statistics such as these, along with the work of theorists and historians, are peppered throughout the pages.

Adshade questions her own prejudice at points during the stories, challenging her readers to do the same.

templates from which we often work – the dutiful compliance of an Asian daughter, the moral standing of a blustering, golf-playing GP, what a child sex offender looks like – all provide a rich and dangerous harvest. Even more worryingly, these prejudices can travel beyond our subconscious and into misdiagnoses, sentencing and resources. Several of Adshead’s stories, for example, illustrate society’s preference to explain away female violence as a result of trauma (despite the majority of the very many female victims of trauma never becoming violent) and that assumption might lead to different care plans or the absence of certain therapies being offered. The book also recalls an occasion when a female patient became so enraged at her male therapist that she began shouting and growling, and taking chunks out of his office door with a sharp object. Adshead, a witness to this fury and “with a speed fuelled by cowardice”, leapt into a hall cupboard and locked herself inside. She questioned, afterwards, whether she would have been more likely to intervene if the patient had been male. Having gone through an identical experience with a laundry cupboard on a high dependency unit, I now question myself too. Perhaps the idea of female violence is so distasteful to us as a society that it is easier just to look away.

In contrast, images of motherhood, from the Virgin Mary to the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, are threaded throughout our consciousness, and they also appear through the book as the respective mothers of Adshead’s subjects are lost to them in different, equally painful, circumstances. The order in which these stories are told is far from coincidental, and towards the end of our journey we meet a patient who challenges our definition of what a good mother should or should not be. Perhaps, though, the most moving account of maternal loss is found in Gabriel’s story. Originally from Eritrea, Gabriel arrived in the UK as a young asylum-seeker, fleeing the violence and conflict of his homeland, but becoming separated from his family in the process. With his narrative, and with other chapters, Adshead is keen to convey that while people of colour make up 13% of the UK’s general population, they represent around 25% of the populations within prisons and secure hospitals, a ratio reflected within the book itself. Statistics such as these, along with the work of theorists and historians, are peppered throughout the pages.

But this is not an academic text, and though there is a gentle invitation in the notes to explore these issues further, at no point did I feel I had returned to a lecture theatre. The background and context we are provided with in the stories only add to their breadth and texture, and huge credit must be given to Adshead’s co-author, the writer and dramatist Eileen Horne, who...
RICHARD MILDENHALL/ALAMY

has collaborated with Adshead in this “joint exercise in empathy”. She retains the voice and experience of the clinician, without any danger of losing the emotional investment a reader has made in the patient.

Horne also manages to weave in a selection of quotations chosen by Adshead, from The Merchant of Venice (“prick us, do we not bleed?”) to Marvel Comics (“You won’t like me when I’m angry”), which lightly punctuates the grief and pain within a patient’s story, and illustrates the many bridges between psychiatry and the arts. Given the importance of language within the speciality, it is no surprise that so many psychiatrists are also writers. Adshead discusses language many times, highlighting a patient’s selection or absence of words, the use of present tense when describing a traumatic event, and the difficulties faced when the doctor and patient are not fluent in the same language. Even if they are, the results can still be frustrating. When asked to elaborate on something, David (the blustering, golf-playing GP) repeatedly dismisses Adshead’s questions, not with “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure”, but with “I couldn’t say”. An interesting choice of phrase, which prompts a further exploration of what it is that might be silencing him.

This collection joins Nathan Filer’s excellent exploration of schizophrenia (This Book Will Change Your Mind About Mental Health) and forensic psychologist Kerry Daynes’s wonderful The Dark Side of the Mind in using patient vignettes to illustrate both mental illnesses and our perception of those illnesses. The Devil You Know has a richly deserved place on that bookshelf. Adshead’s words are effortlessly readable and deeply moving. This is not just down to the patients’ stories themselves, but to Adshead’s honest and compassionate response to those stories, and her ability to write with such clarity and elegance around even the most distressing of narratives. How a therapist responds to their patient is an important part of the therapeutic process and Adshead experiences transient fear, sadness, irritation and even drowsiness during the course of her consultations, and each for a different reason.

With that therapeutic process in mind, when I had finished reading I reflected on how those stories made me feel. I have never worked in forensic psychiatry, but the patients I met through this book made me nostalgic for the wards. Places where we are taught always to sit in the chair closest to the door; where, to an observer, the only thing that distinguishes the doctor from the patient is a lanyard; where a spoon going missing from the dining room is a grave occurrence. As in life, the stories here do not always have the happy ending we might crave. We may feel discomfort during a shift in our perspective. We may, temporarily, absorb the pain felt by the patients, and other victims, about whom we have just read. However, the most overwhelming feeling I had after reading the book was of hope, not only for the patients but for the readers. Over the last 12 months we have all seen too much and therefore, perhaps, become blinded. This insightful, compassionate and fascinating book will help us to move away from our blindness and misconceptions and shine a light on the stories beyond the headlines - stories that desperately need to be heard.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Imagine you have committed a crime. If you are up on your behavioural economics you will be hoping to have your case heard early in the day or just after lunch: a 2011 study of more than 1,000 rulings by eight judges found that those times coincided with the greatest tenacity in judges’ rulings. How hungry or tired a judge is should have no impact on her ruling, and yet, the data says it does. But what about the judge assigned your case in the first place? That shouldn’t matter either and yet, again, the data says it does. A 1974 study of 50 judges setting sentences for identical (hypothetical) cases found that “absence of consensus was the norm”. Depending on the luck of the judge lottery, the same heroin dealer assigned your case in the 1970s and 80s highlighted unacceptable noise. These changes were successful in reducing noise but were wildly unpopular with judges who resented the removal of their discretion, and in 2005 the guidelines were downgraded to advisory. Noise went back up - but judges were happier. Whether or not justice was better served is another question.

Another example comes from a school that scrapped its admissions system because it was causing conflict. One of Noise’s most repeated recommendations (and there is a lot of repetition in this book) is that school should, where possible, make use of the “wisdom of the crowd”. That, if you ask enough people a question you will almost invariably get a better answer than if you only ask one person – but there is a caveat: the opinions must be independent from each other in order to avoid “grouptinking”. And this is how the school ran its application process: two people independently read and rated a application before making a joint decision. This made admissions less noisy but also led to arguments. The school chose to have a noisy process.

As for algorithms, Daniel Kahneman et al lament, we are unwilling to tolerate mistakes in computers in the way we tolerate them in humans. This may well be unreasonable of us, but on the other hand, when they make mistakes they can be huge: gig workers in the US have been locked out of earning a living by trigger-happy algorithms erroneously detecting fraud; one designed by Amazon systematically downgraded female job applicants. Meanwhile, algorithms remain unreasonably opaque, their inner workings protected under proprietary software laws, meaning recourse is often impossible. “We’re not discriminating, it’s just the algorithm,” said Apple’s hapless customer service reps in response to a man whose wife was given a 20th birthday credit card late despite having a higher credit score. Multiply this problem by a thousand or more, the world is in a bad way.

There were even allegations of pseudoscience. But according to Michael Gordin, this is how science works. The label of pseudoscience has been applied to everything from ufology and eugenics to the pursuit of Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. What do we mean by pseudoscience and why in our technological age are such fringe ideas so prevalent? These are the questions Gordin seeks to answer in this brief (some 128 pages) yet fascinating book. Karl Popper attempted to distinguish science from non-science by the principle of falsifiability: if a theory could be proved wrong by an experiment, then it was science. But for Gordin, pseudoscience is more closely intertwined with scientific endeavour. For instance, in the cold war fears of a “psi gap” with the Soviets prompted the CIA to pay physicists $50,000 to investigate Ufology’s spook-bending skills and the potential for “ESPionage”. Gordin’s book is not just an explanation of fringe ideas: it is also about how our knowledge of the world evolves. Gordin divides what he terms fringe doctrines into four main areas. These are those based on out-of-date science (“vestigial sciences”), including astrology and alchemy; those, such as Lysenkoism in Stalin’s Soviet Union, which are anti-science by the principle of falsifiability; and counterestablishment sciences, including creationism, “the exemplary pseudoscience in the west”. Finally, there are sciences that posit extraordinary skills and the potential for “ESPionage”. Gordin’s book is not just an explanation of fringe ideas: it is also about how our knowledge of the world evolves. Gordin divides what he terms fringe doctrines into four main areas. These are those based on out-of-date science (“vestigial sciences”), including astrology and alchemy; those, such as Lysenkoism in Stalin’s Soviet Union, which are anti-science by the principle of falsifiability; and counterestablishment sciences, including creationism, “the exemplary pseudoscience in the west”. Finally, there are sciences that posit extraordinary skills and the potential for “ESPionage”. Gordin’s book is not just an explanation of fringe ideas: it is also about how our knowledge of the world evolves. Gordin divides what he terms fringe doctrines into four main areas. These are those based on out-of-date science (“vestigial sciences”), including astrology and alchemy; those, such as Lysenkoism in Stalin’s Soviet Union, which are anti-science by the principle of falsifiability; and counterestablishment sciences, including creationism, “the exemplary pseudoscience in the west”. Finally, there are sciences that posit extraordinary skills and the potential for “ESPionage”.

Rough justice
In one study, the same heroin dealer was sentenced to anything between one and ten years. Similar studies were repeated in 1977 and 1981, all with the same sobering findings - and they are likely to underestimate the scale of the problem, because, according to the authors of Noise: “Real-life judges are exposed to far more information than the study participants received in the carefully specified vignettes of these experiments.” This scattering of dirt and noise to detect bias, you have to know what the right answer is, or to use the book’s metaphor, you have to stand in front of the target so you can see the bullseye. Noise is detectable no matter which side of the target you’re standing on, since all judgments should, where possible, make use of the “wisdom of the crowd”. That, if you ask enough people a question you will almost invariably get a better answer than if you only ask one person – but there is a caveat: the opinions must be independent from each other in order to avoid “grouptinking”. And this is how the school ran its application process: two people independently read and rated an application before making a joint decision. This made admissions less noisy but also led to arguments. The school chose to have a noisy process.

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Imagine you have committed a crime. If you are up on your behavioural economics you will be hoping to have your case heard early in the day or just after lunch: a 2011 study of more than 1,000 rulings by eight judges found that those times coincided with the greatest leniency in judges’ rulings. How hungry or tired a judge is should have no impact on her ruling, and yet, the data says it does. But what about the judge assigned your case in the first place? That shouldn’t matter either and yet, again, the data says it does. A 1974 study of 50 judges setting sentences for identical (hypothetical) cases found that “absence of consensus was the norm”. Depending on the luck of the judge lottery, the same heroin dealer and a bank robber received sentences ranging between the luck of the judge lottery, the same heroin dealer and a bank robber received sentences ranging between $50 and $5 million.

This scatter gun variability in judgments of all kinds, from court sentencing to insurance underwriting to how AI judges sentences convicts on drug-related crimes, is what the authors call, well, noise. As its more famous cousin, bias, noise is an error in judgment. They distinguish between the two using a shooting-range metaphor. If all the shots land off target in the same direction, that’s bias; by contrast, noise is all over the place.

Which brings us to the other significant distinction between bias and noise: to detect bias, you have to know what the right answer is, or to use the book’s metaphor, you have to stand in front of the target so you can see the bullseye. Noise is detectable no matter which side of the target you’re standing on, since all judgments should, where possible, make use of the “wisdom of the crowd”. That is, if you ask enough people a question you will almost invariably get a better answer than if you only ask one person – but there a caveat: the opinions must be independent from each other in order to avoid “groping”. And this is how the book runs its application process: two people independently read and rated an application before making a joint decision. This made admissions less noisy but also led to arguments. The school chose to live with the noise.

As for algorithms, Daniel Kahneman et al lament, we are unwilling to tolerate mistakes in computers in the way that we tolerate them in humans. This may well be unreasonable of us, but on the other hand, when they make mistakes they can be huge: gig workers in the US have been locked out of earning a living by trigger-happy algorithms erroneously detecting fraud; one designed by Amazon systematically downgraded female job applicants. Meanwhile, algorithms remain unreasonably opaque, their inner workings protected under proprietary software laws, meaning recourse is often impossible. “We’re not discriminating, it’s just the algorithm,” said Apple’s hapless customer service reps in response to a man whose wife was given a 20th century credit limit despite having a higher credit score. Multiply this problem by a thousand for older people and anyone without good internet access.

To be strictly fair, the authors do acknowledge the existence of algorithmic bias. Although they perhaps underestimate its magnitude. A crucial point they do not acknowledge, however, is that algorithms don’t merely replicate human biases, they amplify them – and by a significant amount. One that was trained on a dataset in which pictures of cooking were 33% more likely to involve women than men ended up associating kitchens with women 68% of the time. Until these issues are ironed out we should beware of social scientists bearing algorithm-driven gifts.

Rough justice
In one study, the same heroin dealer was sentenced to anything between one and ten years. Implications of AI are all of it is a piece with a book that while it undeniably has a point, and an important one, feels half-baked. If ever there were a book in search of an editor, it is this one. Noise could have been half the length and it would have been far better for it. Instead, weighed down by flabby scenarios (and terrible) dialogue, it is a slog. This is disappointing given the authors’ previous output and it’s tempting to wonder whether the book was a product less of an idea whose time had come than of a publisher’s desire for the next bestseller. Towards the end comes the line: “Noise is the unquantified variability of judgments, and there is too much of it.” Rather like the book itself, I found myself thinking.

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Nonfiction

{ Psychology } From criminal sentences to medical diagnoses, human judgment varies wildly. Are algorithms the answer? Caroline Criado Perez

{ Science } An exploration of how scientific theories evolve takes in ultrafragility, anti-vaxxers and spine-breaking physicists PD Smith

During the Covid-19 pandemic we have watched science evolve almost daily with each news report. We have listened to explanations of competing ideas about how the virus emerged, how it spreads and the risks of new vaccines. As scientists debated, gaps in knowledge were revealed and theories contested. There were even allegations of pseudoscience. But according to Michael Gordin, this is how science works.

The label of pseudoscience has been applied to everything from UFOlogy and eugenics to the pursuit of Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. What do we mean by pseudoscience and why in our technologically age are such fraudulent ideas so prevalent? These are the questions Gordin seeks to answer in this brief (some 128 pages) yet fascinating book.

Karl Popper attempted to distinguish science from non-science by the principle of falsifiability: if a theory could be proved wrong by an experiment, then it was science. But for Gordin, pseudoscience is more closely intertwined with scientific endeavour. For instance, in the cold war fears of a “psi gap” with the Soviets prompted the CIA to pay physicists $50,000 to investigate Uri Geller’s spoon-bending skills and the potential for “ESPionage”. Gordin’s book is not just an explanation of fringe ideas: it is also about how our knowledge of the world evolves.

Gordin divides what he terms fringe doctrines into four main areas. Those are those based on out-of-date science (“vestigial sciences”), including astrology and alchemy; those, such as Lysenkoism in Stalin’s Soviet Union, which are discredited sciences; and counterestablishment sciences, including creationism, “the exemplary pseudoscience in the west”. Finally, there are sciences that are taken too seriously, powers of mind, from telepathy to clairvoyance.

Gordin argues that fringe ideas are generated by the adversarial scientific process itself, “sloughed off from the consensus as it changes”. Science and pseudoscience are the yin and yang of our attempts to comprehend the universe and there is no way to eliminate pseudosciences entirely. Indeed if we did so, Gordin argues, we might destroy science too.

To buy a copy for £14.99 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A vivid and insightful portrait of sisterhood, art - and a troubled life cut short

Fiona Sturges

Arifa Akbar’s memoir begins with the death of her sister from a mysterious illness. Fauzia had already been rushed to hospital twice, the cause of her symptoms unknown. She had complained of chest pains, shortness of breath and night sweats, but still doctors were clueless. Later, as her speech started to slur and her behaviour became erratic, she was put in an induced coma and subsequently had a brain haemorrhage. Eventually there was a diagnosis: she had died of tuberculosis.

Akbar was left with questions, among them: why hadn’t Fauzia been diagnosed earlier? How, in 2016, does a person contract TB? Her sister’s death also prompted a broader reflection on her life and the ways she had been failed by others. Along with telling the story of a sibling, *Consumed* is also a candid dissection of family with its complex bonds and rifts, and an acute portrait of grief and mental illness. “Life brought Fauzia pain,” Akbar writes.

The eldest sibling, Fauzia was born in Pakistan shortly after her father had left for the UK to find work and start a new life. She didn’t meet him until she was one, when she and her mother first joined him in London. The child instinctively shrank from this man, which he took as a personal slight. Throughout her childhood, he subjected her to sustained abuse, reprimanding and taunting her. He made no secret of the fact that her younger sister, Arifa, was the preferred daughter; his emotional cruelties towards Fauzia were, notes Akbar, “so insistent, every day and unrelenting, that they became normalised in our home”.

In her teens, Fauzia began to experience depression – she was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder – and developed an eating disorder. Fauzia and Arifa’s sibling relationship ebbed and flowed: there was closeness and camaraderie as children but, in adulthood, they would be estranged for long periods before cautiously making up.

In telling Fauzia’s story, Akbar moves between tenderness and frustration, compassion and helplessness. She grapples with her own part in her sister’s misery – could she have done more to defend her? Why did she escape her father’s ire? - as well as that of her parents. Akbar’s father now lives in a care home, dementia having long ago rendered him unreachable, so instead there are conversations with her mother which tell a wider story of a marriage built on secrets and false promises, and a family who came to London from Lahore for a better life and instead lived their early years in extreme poverty.

Akbar occasionally paints herself as an unreliable witness, and in doing so, highlights how memory is shaped by the stories we tell ourselves. She recalls the family shuttling back and forth between Britain and Pakistan when she was small, and observes her view of 1970s Lahore as comparable to the fantasy of the Bollywood movie *Mughal-e-Azam*, with its exaggerated palette and airbrushing of background political strife. The permanent move to London, leaving behind cherished cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents, wrenched Arifa from an idyllic life and turned her world grey. But, for Fauzia, the world had been grey all along.

In fact, it is through an artistic lens that Akbar seeks to understand herself and her sister, locating similarities in their relationship to Amy and Jo in Little Women and, as adults, in the two warring sisters in the film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* She is transfixed by the film version of Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette*, by Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Puccini’s *La Bohème*, and the ways they throw light on the world and her family’s place in it.

Elsewhere, she tries to reconnect posthumously with her sister through her artworks, Akbar’s analysis providing some of the book’s most profoundly moving moments. In her 40s, Fauzia found respite and focus via a return to art college. Her work, which was deemed remarkable by her tutors, brought together embroidery and painting, the latter inspired by Renaissance paintings and frescos. Amid Fauzia’s vast portfolio, Akbar unearths portraits of herself, some more flattering than others, which document, through her sister’s eyes, “my fall, from angel to devil. These … pictures remind me that, just as she was my demon sister for a time … I was hers.”

Despite the themes of grief, trauma and illness, *Consumed* is far from a misery memoir. It is, rather, an insightful and often lyrical study of siblings and the story of a troubled life cut short. Akbar is wise enough to understand that much of her sister’s inner life will remain unknowable. Nonetheless, as Fauzia immortalised her sister in art, Akbar has done the same, vividly and wonderfully, in prose.

*To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
{Music} Bowie beats Tolstoy, Morrissey is like Larkin, and Yes rock: a rich survey of writers’ musical passions

Nicholas Wroe

The public airing of musical tastes doesn’t always bring out the best in human nature. The scope for being snobbish, competitive, judgmental, braggish (humble or otherwise) and a long list of other petty vices is hard to overestimate. Which is partly why politicians, for example, fret so much about calibrating their Desert Island Discs selections. And also why the exercise is often such fun.

The ground rules set by Tom Gatti in this anthology of 50 writers on 49 albums (Ali Smith, slightly thrillingly, declined to stick to the rules), asks the writers not for a best album, but for a “cherished” one that is, or was, important to them. As Ian Rankin, adapting Jean Brodie, explains in relation to his love for John Martyn’s Solid Air: “Give me an album at a certain age and it is mine for life.”

There is a decent enough sample size for the reader to engage in some crude number crunching. The oldest recordings are from 1956 – Duke Ellington at the Newport jazz festival, chosen by the late Clive James, and Clara Haskil’s Mozart Piano Concertos, picked by Neel Mukherjee – the most recent is Daisy Johnson’s choice of Lizzo’s 2019 Cuz I Love You. Between them the bulk of the albums come either from the 1970s or the 90s. Depending how you categorise these things there are three jazz albums, two classical and two folk. But most of the choices are in a loosely defined mainstream tradition of modern pop, with Joni Mitchell and David Bowie the only artists to get selected twice.

Perhaps unsurprisingly it turns out that writers tend to value literary effects and skills, and to draw literary comparisons. Deborah Levy, who chose Ziggy Stardust, calls Bowie a “great writer” who has influenced her “more than Tolstoy ever will do”. Sarah Hall compares Radiohead’s OK Computer to “a great short-story collection” and Musa Okwonga links Morrissey – “grudgingly” via the Smiths’ Meat Is Murder and the 80s jobs who smashed his parents’ shop windows and painted the shutters with racist slurs - to Philip Larkin. “Like Larkin, I’d have Morrissey leave the limelight, so I can love the best work before he smashes the shopfront of his own great tenderness.”

The entries can be just a few hundred words long - some of them began life as columns in the New Statesman where Gatti is deputy editor – but throw up some vivid autobiographical vignettes. In the mid 80s the teenage David Mitchell, who’d “never been in love, much less fallen out of it”, first heard Joni Mitchell’s “raw autobiography” of California heartbreak, Blue, on his Walkman while wandering around his hometown of Malvern. His encounter with the great and dark Christmas breakup song “River” came on a June day “halfway across the golf course”.

Some albums are aids to self-actualisation. As a girl in New York, now adopted Brit Erica Wagner just knew the English folk of Steeleye Span’s All Around My Hat “runs through my blood”. And some are resources for self-help, such as with Marlon James, aged 25 and running out “of capital A answers to life’s big questions”. Björk’s Post didn’t straightforwardly reply: “Instead it gave answers to shit I didn’t even ask.” The funniest piece features the 12-year-old Joe Dunthorne discovering Black Sunday by Cypress Hill and its production that allowed “even the straightest listener – the prepubescent boy playing Warhammer – to feel stoned.” The prize for it’s so-uncool-it’s-cool goes to George Saunders for the transcendent sincerity of his response to the album Fragile by Yes. “Grudgingly” via the Smiths’ Meat Is Murder and the 80s jobs who smashed his parents’ shop windows and painted the shutters with racist slurs - to Philip Larkin. “Like Larkin, I’d have Morrissey leave the limelight, so I can love the best work before he smashes the shopfront of his own great tenderness.”

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Taken as a whole, the collection’s many observations and angles amount to a richly textured snapshot survey of artists on art. And at their best the pieces reveal something useful about the writer, the music, the world at that moment and the world at large. For Linda Grant, Joni Mitchell’s Hejira clearly laid out “the great paradox of 70s feminism”, the desire for independence from men and also for a “love that sticks around”. It also crystallised something about the strange and powerful relationship between the listener and the artist: “I never saw her perform live. I don’t want to. I’ve no interest in sharing her with total strangers because none of this is about her, it’s about me.”

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Fiction

A gloriously tender novel about mental illness and sisterly love finds hilarity in anguish, without diminishing pain

Clare Clark

In her poem “Tango”, 2020’s Nobel laureate Louise Glück concludes that “Of two sisters, one is always the watcher, one the dancer”. It is a pattern familiar from life and from literature. In fiction it is usually the watching sister who takes on the role of the storyteller.

In Sorrow and Bliss, New Zealander Meg Mason’s first novel to be published in the UK, it falls to the dancer to tell her story as she sees it, even as she dances closer and closer towards the abyss. Martha Friel is 40, the writer of a “funny food column” that, once her editor has cut out all the jokes, is – as she sardonically acknowledges – just a food column. She has few friends, but is intensely close to her sister Ingrid. Her husband Patrick adores her. It is clear from the start, though, that Martha does not make things easy. Recalling a party not long after their wedding, she remembers Patrick suggesting that, instead of staring at a woman standing by herself and feeling sad on her behalf, she should go over and compliment her on her hat. “Even if I don’t like it?” she asks him. “Obviously, Martha,” Patrick replies. “You don’t like anything.”

Like so much in this gloriously tender and absorbing novel, Patrick’s remark manages to be both technically true and hopelessly wide of the mark. Patrick has loved Martha most of his life. Eight years and several pages later, he leaves her. Martha is clever, compassionate, hilarious, fierce and devastatingly sharp-eyed. She is also sharp-tongued, cruel, careless and prone to bursts of white-hot rage that range over the people closest to her like searchlights, mercilessly picking out their failings. That she hurts the people who love her best is something that causes her great anguish. It is also something she cannot seem to stop.

Despite all this, people forgive Martha – until, like Patrick, they can’t do it any more. Her family sticks by her, Ingrid most of all. They understand she is not well, that ever since “a little bomb went off in my brain” at the age of 17, she has been crushed by a recurring depression that leaves her, for days, weeks or months at a time, exhausted, terrified and unable to function. During these episodes, it is not, she says, that she wants to die. “It is that you know that you are not supposed to be alive … The unnatural fact of living is something you must eventually fix.” She sees doctor after doctor, accumulating diagnoses and pills, but none of it makes any difference. In the end, defeated by the process, she reaches her own diagnosis: “I seem to find it more difficult to be alive than other people.”

If this makes the novel sound grim or self-absorbed, nothing could be further from the truth. Sorrow and Bliss has been justly compared to Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s Fleabag: both perform that peculiar miracle of making us care deeply, desperately even, for a character who does unforgivable things. It is also very funny. Like Miriam Toews’s All My Puny Sorrows, another masterclass in the fierce, exasperating, overwhelming force of sisterly love, it finds humour in the darkest of situations. It is impossible to read this novel and not be moved. It is also impossible not to laugh out loud.

Mason is brilliant on family, its eye-rolling absurdities and its deep hurts. Martha’s drunken, bohemian mother is a sculptor who ignores her husband and her two daughters; when the girls were young, she would throw parties where she could be extraordinary in front of extraordinary strangers, because it was “not enough to be extraordinary to the three of us”. Her kind, self-effacing father is a failed poet “whose desire to help me had always exceeded his ability”.

At its heart, though, this is a love story, or rather two love stories: the story of Martha’s marriage to the quietly steadfast Patrick, a man who is broken in his own way, and the older, deeper story of Martha and Ingrid, whose illimitable love for one another turns out to have limits after all. Mason is careful not to pigeonhole Martha by naming her particular condition (when it is finally diagnosed, it is referred to only as “--”), but she makes us see how mental illness carves its shapes not just into the people who live with it but into their families. It scars them all.

Mason pulls off something extraordinary in this huge-hearted novel, alchemising an unbearable anguish into something tender and hilarious and redemptive and wise, without ever undermining its gravity or diminishing its pain. In the end, Sorrow and Bliss is a coming-of-age story, if you can come of age at 40. It is by telling her story that Martha begins to understand the truths that can save her, and to work her way back towards herself. Sometimes, it seems, the dancer is the watcher too.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A mysterious death casts its shadow over this brilliantly polyphonic conclusion to the Tokyo trilogy

Tanjil Rashid

Tokyo is that most modern of cities, the microchipped metropolis where vending machines and lavatory seats seem to have enough artificial intelligence to beat a grandmaster at chess. What’s interesting about this hypermodernity is that it has arrived alongside an extraordinary renunciation of violence by a society for so long considered synonymous with it. The samurai class, once hailed as the paragon of martial virtue, has given way to slick, suited salarymen, whose expertise is in global merchandising, not sword fighting. In place of the shoguns who pretty much invented military dictatorship, Japan now has the longest serving democratic regime in Asia, with a constitution that prohibits war. The army has no offensive weapons – not a single ballistic or nuclear missile – while Tokyo is the safest city in the world.

David Peace’s Tokyo trilogy can be read as an allegory of this transformation. For the detectives, the past is a zone of violence bordering perilously on the present. Theirs is a struggle to cast off a legacy of atom bombs, genocide and sexual slavery. The crimes each novel is researched, down to the emperor’s Mickey Mouse wristwatch. The effect is one of transfixing veracity. Repetition and rhyme, trusted Peace techniques (some might say tics), give the prose an incantatory rhythm and an epic feel. This often drifts into bathos (the recipe-book ring of “douse” and “souse” some people might say), but Peace’s now complete Tokyo trilogy truly is, to which Peace is indebted. Details are meticulously researched, down to the emperor’s Mickey Mouse wristwatch. The effect is one of transfixing veracity.

Connections are suggested with the 1948 Teigin poisonings central to Occupied City, and there are hints of a web of complicity, but we don’t actually learn what really happened with Shimoyama. Peace writes crime fiction in name only; “whodunit?” is a question entertained, then relinquished, and for all his paranoid speculations, he stays faithful to the mystery of each of his cases. His prose is braided with real headlines, like the “newsreel” sections in John Dos Passos’s USA trilogy, and he stays faithful to the mystery of each of his cases. His prose is braided with real headlines, like the “newsreel” sections in John Dos Passos’s USA trilogy, giving the novel an incantatory rhythm and an epic feel. This often drifts into bathos (the recipe-book ring of “douse” and “souse” some people might say), but Peace’s now complete Tokyo trilogy truly is, to which Peace is indebted. Details are meticulously researched, down to the emperor’s Mickey Mouse wristwatch. The effect is one of transfixing veracity.

Tokyo Redux concerns what the Japanese call the “Shimoyama incident”: the death of Sadanori Shimoyama, the first head of Japanese National Railways, whose body was found dismembered by a locomotive in 1949. It’s the perfect mystery for Peace. Shimoyama’s sacking of 30,000 workers made him a target for the unions, allowing Peace to pursue his fascination with the conspiratorial world of industrial politics, as he did in 2004’s GB84, a fictionalised account of the miners’ strike. That JNR, with its iconic bullet trains, would become the most admired rail network in the world means that the alleged murder of its founding chief is freighted with symbolism, a junction at which old Japan halts the shiny new one in its tracks.

Portraying the long shadow cast by the incident, the narrative unfolds in three periods: 1949, during the occupation; 1964, as Tokyo hosts the Olympics; and 1989, as Emperor Showa, who led Japan through the second world war, enters his death throes. Each has its own protagonists: first, Harry Sweeney, a jaded cop from Montana; next, Murota Hideki, a deadpan PI fired from the police for “fucking a pan-pan gal on my beat”. Both are from central casting, maintaining a smoky, masculine aura in the best (or worst?) noir traditions. Our final sleuth, though, an ageing, émigré translator, fits a more unusual profile: the kind of brilliant literary mind that washed up in postwar Tokyo, a generation that never quite had a Hemingway mythologise it. He is the most vivid character, no doubt due to a degree of self-identification on the part of Peace, who himself spent more than a decade in Japan.

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A new Japan

Mount Fuji and Shinjuku, Tokyo

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The follow-up to Leonard and Hungry Paul finds moments of grace and comedy amid the everyday grind

John Self

Rónán Hession’s first novel, 2019’s Leonard and Hungry Paul, won the word-of-mouth success that small publishers dream of, and it hasn’t stopped rolling yet: shortlisted for half a dozen prizes, it recently made the One Dublin One Book choice for people across Hession’s home city to read.

A hard act to follow. Hession’s new novel, Panenka, adopts an amiable, sincere approach that’s similar to his debut, but with a touch of steel at the core. The hero – that word seems apt – is Joseph, a former footballer for Seneca FC living in a rundown part of an unnamed town, “a sort of spare room where all the problems were dumped”. He is 50 but seems older (grandchild, comb-over) and is nicknamed Panenka, after a risky penalty-taking move (straight down the middle) he tried 25 years earlier.

He blames his failure to score in that game not only for his team’s relegation, but for the decline of the whole town: “There are lots of unhappy people here, and it’s a huge relief for them to agree on a single cause.”


But a novel is not its subject matter, and it’s the narrator, in a moment of desperation, has left her baby in the care of a total stranger, and is suddenly hit by the implications.

If you want to yank the heartstrings, writing about a stolen baby is a surefire winner. But Caldwell is doing something more interesting: taking the possibility of trauma and rotating it, re-examining it from unusual angles, showing us a fresh, sharp edge of horror. She has an amazing ability to zoom from small-scale to large in an instant, one moment mired in stifling domestic immediacy, the next contemplating the vast shadow of tragedy across the generations. As one woman, awaiting her biopsy results, puts it, families are like an Escher staircase: “The potential grandchildren that I might never even see, joined in a vertiginous rush with the grandmother who only barely met me, the centuries collapsing.”

Four of the stories use a second-person narrator. True to the title, it draws the reader in, makes them complicit – that uneasy intimacy again. But it also awakens one’s inner contrarian, prompting the thought: “You might do that, but it’s not what I would do.” It has the negative effect of making four of her narrators feel like the same person. That aside, this is an outstanding collection. Caldwell’s skill is evident on every page; she maintains effortless control even as she ventures ever deeper into those dark areas on the other side of parenthood.

{ Short stories } An outstanding collection explores the intimacy and vulnerability of motherhood

Carrie O’Grady

Intimacies is the perfect title for a collection in which 10 of the 11 stories are about mothers and babies or children. It is a relationship too close for comfort – sometimes literally, as on the red-eye flight Belfast author Lucy Caldwell depicts so expertly, a mother enduring seven hours of toddler on lap, “heavy and warm and limp and sprawling”. Like all the women here, she is caught at a vulnerable moment, when exhaustion, love and grief combine to offer a flash of enlightenment. Caldwell specialises in this exposure of vulnerability: not the gradual peeling away of a character’s emotional onion-skin layers, but the heart-stopping second when a whole potential future gapes before them. It’s particularly powerful in the first story, “Like This”, whose narrator, in a moment of desperation, has left her baby in the care of a total stranger, and is suddenly hit by the implications.

If you want to yank the heartstrings, writing about a stolen baby is a surefire winner. But Caldwell is doing something more interesting: taking the possibility of trauma and rotating it, re-examining it from unusual angles, showing us a fresh, sharp edge of horror. She has an amazing ability to zoom from small-scale to large in an instant, one moment mired in stifling domestic immediacy, the next contemplating the vast shadow of tragedy across the generations. As one woman, awaiting her biopsy results, puts it, families are like an Escher staircase: “The potential grandchildren that I might never even see, joined in a vertiginous rush with the grandmother who only barely met me, the centuries collapsing.”

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The past may be a foreign country, but things aren’t always so different there. In his debut collection *The Resurrectionists* (Bloodaxe, £10.99), John Challis reminds us how both personal and collective histories remain a part of our present. Whether describing “used / and wasted love” stored in surreal depots, or a coal power station which is “always there, the church no one visits”, this is poetry as archaeology. Challis commemorates the lives of working London people in poems that reflect on class politics while avoiding nostalgia. *The Resurrectionists* is alive to both the individual moment and the long perspective.

Lorna Goodison is a major voice in Caribbean poetry, distinctive for her blend of the demotic and lyric in poems that seek to realise Jamaica’s complex past. Her writing is often a celebration of the spirit and tenacity of women; *Mother Muse* (Carcanet, £10.99) extends this feature of her work. “O mothers of Jamaica from henceforth we will be Queens”, proclaims “Psalm of the Sistren”. Sister Mary Ignatius Davies, an inspirational teacher, is a recurring presence, fondly referred to as “Sister Iggy”. She comes to embody resilience, inspiring musical greatness among those “rambunctious, rowdy rompers” she takes under her wing.

“This will end with those lines Keats wrote about his hand expiring” begins “Admin”, from Caleb Klaces’s capacious and uneasily self-aware second collection, *Away from Me* (Prototype, £12). After the speaker boots up the computer and faces the tedium of the digital working day, things take a self-reflexive turn. “I’m thinking the same thing: how am I going to get back to Keats?” But while Klaces’s poems are sometimes wrapped up in conversation with themselves – “I started writing what would become this collection in 2013” begins “explanatory notes with no fingers” – they often capture the distracted nature of our digital age, where information overload swamps our search for meaning.

The title of Ralf Webb’s *Rotten Days in Late Summer* (Penguin, £9.99) seems to warn of a debut in thrall to teenage angst. But Webb proves to be an impressive narrator of the complex experiences that shape the whole of a life. Set in the West Country of the poet’s formative years, the book is a bildungsroman of sorts. In the end, it is the perceptive observations that ring truest. “The memories of him are cordoned off”, reflects a tender, unflinching sequence on the loss of a father to cancer: “they become an exclusion zone”. This is a direct and emotionally intelligent volume, that knows “how easy it is to take advantage / of the ones who love you”.

If poetry and Covid-19 have anything in common, it’s their capacity to change the way we see the world. In *Poetry & Covid-19* (Shearsman, £12.95), an anthology of international and collaborative poetry, editors Anthony Caleshu and Rory Waterman have helped pair poets from the UK with those from around the world: Vahni Capildeo and Vivek Narayanan, Vidyan Ravinthiran and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Luke Kennard and Hwang Yu-won, to name only a few. The result is brilliantly eclectic, a testament to poetry’s power to reimagine and remake. As Selima Hill writes, “it’s good to be reminded how to hope”.

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**Poem of the month**

An Evening Walk When Spring is Already Old  
by Jason Allen-Paisant

On the third of June  
I re-enter the woods

The trees’ souls  
have bloomed into canopies

There is volume  
not just skeletons

Breeze passes into the placenta  
of this womb

There is hiding place  
in the trees

and the birds sing differently  
the leaves

have become a sea  
in my body

*From Thinking With Trees* by Jason Allen-Paisant (Carcanet, £10.99).
Stephen Mangan talks to Hadley Freeman about bedtime storytelling, bereavement and making the leap from comedy acting to writing a children’s book about grief.

‘Whenever I considered writing, I thought: “What right do you have?”’

‘It’s hard to say this without sounding like a dick,’ begins the actor Stephen Mangan taking a sip of his black coffee, steeling himself. “But if you’re sensitive – OK, already I sound like a dick, but go with me – and you have trouble revealing that day to day, acting is a great way to deal with it. And if you find people interesting but don’t always know how to deal with them, writing is a great way to explore them from a sniper’s range.”

Mangan, 52, and I are sitting outside a cafe, and the endearing wide-eyed goofiness for which he’s known on screen and stage is replaced, in person, by much gentler self-deprecation. We are just around the corner from his house in Primrose Hill, north London, where he lives with his wife, the actor Louise Delamere, and their three young sons. He has lived in the area for more than 30 years and seems to know pretty much everyone – the waiter, passing pedestrians – but despite being surrounded by all that is familiar, there is a palpable nervousness. As an

PHOTOGRAPHY Chris McAndrew/Camera Press
actor, he has given hundreds of interviews, promoting, among many other things, the peerless sitcom Green Wing, the megahit Episodes, co-starring Tamsin Greig and Matt LeBlanc, and - my personal favourite - Hang Ups, the short-lived sitcom he wrote and starred in about a therapist who talks to everyone over Skype (“I did think [during lockdown] that we were really ahead of the game with that one,” he says). But this is one of his first interviews as an author, because Mangan has written a book for primary-age children called Escape the Rooms, illustrated by his sister, Anita Mangan.

“Did you really like it? Did you? Oh that’s so great. I’m so hungry for feedback it’s pathetic. With comedy, you can have an idea and then try it out to see if it works. But with book writing ... I read the audiobook last week and immediately wanted to rewrite the whole thing,” he says.

Happily, he cannot. I admit, before reading Mangan’s book I was feeling a little jaded about all the actors and comedians knocking out children’s books, which Mangan understands: “It’s like when models and athletes go: ‘I want to be an actor!’ And you think: ‘It’s not that easy, honey. ‘ So whenever I thought about writing, I thought: ‘What right do you have?’ ”

Escape the Rooms tells the story of a boy called Jack, whose mother has recently died. He reluctantly goes to a fairground with his dad, but when he does a bungee jump he finds himself, instead of bouncing up, falling through the ground “with a small, muffled plop. Like dropping a bowling ball into a vat of jelly. The ground folded up around him and swallowed him up.” There, alongside a frequently angry girl called Cally, the adventure begins, as the two of them make their way through various mysterious rooms, involving even more mysterious creatures, to get back to Earth. It is richly imagined and deeply heartfelt, and Anita Mangan’s cartoonish and poignant illustrations capture the tone perfectly.

The episodic structure of the book, with the children moving from room to room, was born out of necessity: “I never had a clear six months to crack my knuckles and go, ‘Right! I’m writing my magnum opus now.’ So I wrote it in hour-long bursts in dressing rooms and on trains,” he says.

I tell him that it reminded me a little of The Wizard of Oz, with the children on a quest through different lands to get home. “Right, and I realised later that my opening scene is basically Alice in Wonderland. It’s annoying that people have thought of these things before,” he says with a self-mocking smile.

While the book’s structure bears echoes of classic children’s novels, thematically it does something very

‘a burst of springtime joy...’

Daily Telegraph

‘lavishly illustrated’

Guardian

‘a springboard for ideas about art, space, time and light’

The Times

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Thames & Hudson
died so young. His grandmother once told him that "you're supposed to be doing this. 'You want someone to say: 'Look, there isn't a way through it. It's heartbreaking. And Helen, I saw her in a room on your own. But … I really love it. Maybe that's why I'm working harder than ever now because this is where we are now.'"

Mangan grew up in the suburbs of north London, the eldest child. His parents came from County Mayo and met in an Irish pub in Camden, just down the road from where we are having our coffee. Unlike his sisters, Mangan got a scholarship to an independent secondary school and decided to go to boarding school, thinking it would be like something out of Enid Blyton. It wasn't. "I was miserable as sin there, because I was home-sick, but I didn't admit it to my parents because I felt like I'd failed by making the wrong choice."

He went on to Cambridge where he studied law - another wrong choice. "I thought I should study something practical, but there was no sense of vocation and then when Mum got sick I thought: 'You know what?'" he says. "It makes sense, because you have to give the kids the death of at least one parent is as common a trope in children's literature as fairy godmothers. "It makes sense, because you have to give the kids agency, and it's part of the fantasy," Mangan says. But in Escape the Rooms, the death of Jack's mother doesn't free him: it traps him in emotional stasis, and the rooms, it quickly becomes clear, represent moving through the grieving process.

Grief is very much the theme of the book, but that was not Mangan's intention. He loves reading to his sons - "Roald Dahl, AA Milne, pretty Route 1 stuff. And Varjak Paw, that's a cracking book" - even if they don't always appreciate it.

"As an actor, you think your kids will look back on their childhood and go: ‘One of the best things was Dad was so great at reading books.' But all they say is: 'Stop doing the voices, Dad.' 'Just read, Dad,'” he laughs. So he envisaged writing something that was, well, fun: "I just wanted to write something that I would want to read at that age – at this age now, to be honest - with as much adventure and ridiculous characters as I could cram in. But Mariella Frostrup told me that all first novels are autobiographical so ... " He shrugs.

Mangan's father, Mary, died from colon cancer shortly after he graduated from university. She was 45. “We were having dinner together, she stood up, doubled over and six months later she was dead,” he says. Fourteen years later, his father died from a brain tumour.

“I've got to stop myself from banging on so much about my parents,” he says, although it was me who told him that. "They're supposed to be doing this.”"

The death of Mangan's parents, and in particular his mother, are, I suspect, the most seminal moments in his life. When talking he repeatedly refers back to them: he decided to become an actor right after his mother died. Now he wonders whether he should have had his children younger, given that his parents died so young. His grandmother once told him that you're one age your whole life. So what age is he? "I'd love to say 27, but probably nine,” he says. And every nine-year-old needs their parents.

With bitter irony, Mangan's book about grieving is coming out while he's going through some more grieving of his own. He was close friends with actors Helen McCrory and especially Paul Ritter, both of whom died from cancer in April. Did he know how ill they were? "I knew how ill Paul was. We were at university together and a gang of us would zoom every Friday lunchtime. He had a brain tumour, like my dad, so I could see what was happening. It was very familiar. He came to my mum's funeral with me, I went to his mum's with him. His boys are the same age I was when my mum died, so I know what they're going through. It's heartbreaking.

Tamsin Greig with Stephen Mangan in the TV sitcom Episodes

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He went on to Cambridge where he studied law - another wrong choice. “I thought I should study something practical, but there was no sense of vocation and then when Mum got sick I thought: ‘You know what?’” he says in a life’s-too-short tone. He decided to be an actor, inspired by friends from university: Ritter especially, but also Jez Butterworth, Rachel Weisz and Tom Hollander. He auditioned for Rada 10 days after his mother died, “so I couldn’t have cared less, and that’s a great way to audition”.

I tell him that a line of his from Hang Ups has haunted me for years. Richard (Mangan) is arguing with his sister (Jessica Hynes), who is a precious writer and is using her work as an excuse not to help him look after their mother. “Anyway, I had a breakthrough today!” she chirrups. “Oh good, did you find your pencil?” he snaps back at her. Does he now understand how hard it is, actually, to be a writer? “It’s a form of masochism, isn’t it?” he says. “Acting is such a team sport but with books you’re just stuck in a room on your own. But … I really love it. Maybe I’m shrinking from the world and this is the first sign.” He already has an idea for his next children’s book, he says. Has he started writing it? “Any day now. Yup, any day … ” he trails off self-mockingly. Ahh, indefinite procrastination. Oh dear, Mangan is definitely an author now.
How I wrote

Tom Gauld

I was 24 when I signed up for an Arvon creative writing course and set off with 40 pages of what I hoped might be a novel. It was based on my early childhood on the hippy trail in Morocco and was structurally complicated, full of flashbacks, anecdotes and jumps in location. I’d begun it on another course at the City Lit, where I was encouraged to present a longer piece, breaking the habit of short poems, songs and sketches that had made up a show I performed with a friend from drama school.

Tell the story, was the advice at Arvon, start at the beginning, and keep going to the end. So I went to an old summer house and wrote what became the first chapter of Hideous Kinky. The rest might have flowed from there, but I hadn’t found that other vital ingredient—discipline. In order to write a book, apparently, you had to sit down and actually do it, and I still hoped that wasn’t true.

Two years later I was out of work, again, single, again, and in a surprisingly despairing mood for 26. I made a decision that the following Monday I’d write for three hours, and I’d keep on writing until my agent called and told me I was needed immediately for a round-the-world Shakespeare tour.

That didn’t happen, and so I applied myself. Memories came back to me, some humorous, others chilling, whole conversations, word for word. When I was stuck I’d tramp across London to interview my mother, and as she spoke I’d re-imagine her stories from the perspective of my five-year-old self. By chance I was living in an area with a large North African community, a Moroccan advice bureau on the corner, where sometimes I queued up, to their surprise, with questions about places I’d visited, the spellings of half-remembered names. I did wonder if I should go back to Marrakech, to remind myself of the 18 months we spent there, but I was worried that the memories I’d stored for 20 years, along with my kaftan, a bead choker and my sister’s Arabic school book, would evaporate.

By then I had an excited feeling about the book, and indulged in fantasies of being interviewed, who might play the part of “Mum” when it was made into a film. But at the same time I wasn’t surprised when it was turned down by the first agents I sent it out to—acting had prepared me for disappointment. Then all of a sudden an agent liked it, gave it to an editor (the same editor I still have, 30 years later) who bought it on the spot. I was exultant. I remember sailing down Portobello Road, walking on air, amazed that my life was about to change, that I’d changed it through sheer force of will. Within days I’d started on a second book, and that’s when I bumped into a friend of my mother’s, a woman who’d visited us in Morocco, bringing along her baby, Mob. She congratulated me and asked what I was doing now. I’m writing another book, I told her. Another one! She looked amazed, but no one could have been more amazed than me.

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