Stories to save the world
The new climate fiction

By Claire Armitstead
“Thank you, again, for everything you and Vitsoe have done for us over the years. If only each shelf could talk…”

So wrote Marta, a customer since 2004.

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

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

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

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

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

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

If your shelves could talk, what would they say?

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Review
Saturday 26 June 2021 - Issue № 179

'I would know her written voice anywhere. Composed and dry, articulate and free-striding, drawing on deep learning yet plain in its address, and above all fearless, though she could not possibly have been without fear, since she understands it so well in others.'
— Helen Garner on Janet Malcolm, page 24

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The week in books
26 June

Summer takes the Orwell prize
The winner of this year’s George Orwell prize for political fiction is Ali Smith’s Summer, a novel that brings to a triumphant conclusion a quartet of books named after the seasons. Like its predecessors, Summer captures the spirit of the times with unerring, deadly accuracy. It opens with a howl of protest at recent scandals, such as the Windrush deportations and the prorogation of parliament, then proceeds to delineate the fault lines fracturing the nation with Smith’s characteristic blend of wit and ingenuity. Although never named, the Covid-19 pandemic stalks the country, while the malign manoeuvrings of Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings determine the political agenda. The climate crisis looms not only on the horizon, but in the here and now. Dazzling in its shifts and surprises, Summer is at once fast paced and open ended, up-to-the-minute and intricately plotted. It reveals one of our greatest novelists at her most resourceful and astute. Mark Ford, judge

I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell author Tucker Max, who co-wrote comedian Tiffany Haddish’s memoir The Last Black Unicorn and Paris Review editor Dan Piepenbrinck, who finished Prince’s posthumous memoir, The Beautiful Ones.

Sian Cain

In the footsteps of CP Scott
In 2005, I travelled to the Guardian offices to meet senior members of the Scott Trust, which remains key to the newspaper’s independence. I was thinking about the future for Pluto Books, which I had owned and run since 1987. Founded in 1969, it had gone bust in 1986, along with many other small radical and leftwing publishers. By 2005 I was thinking of retiring and wanted to keep the company out of the hands of mega publishers.

With the guidance of the Scott Trust charity commissioners, I set up the Pluto Educational Trust (PET), a charity that could own Pluto. Since I retired in 2012, PET has become the owner of two publishing houses, Pluto Books and Pluto Journals, publishing 21 open-access social science journals. We’ve set up the Walter Rodney Programme @ PET, a branch of the Walter Rodney Foundation in the US, and the Amenea Gafoor Institute, the first institute to study indentured labour from 1820 to 1920. So PET hasn’t exactly copied the Scott Trust, but we are in the process of producing a dynamic and powerful scholarly charity.

Roger van Zwanenberg

Sausage
WORD OF THE WEEK

Steven Poole

Are you getting hot under the collar about chilled meats? Boris Johnson, who made his mark as a journalist inventing stories about European food regulation, is now outraged that shipping sausages from the UK to Northern Ireland requires paperwork, which is what he agreed six months ago. As you might say if feeling charitable, what a silly sausage.

To call someone a “silly sausage” is a recent invention, attested since a 1934 novel, and dachshunds were christened “sausage dogs” only in the same decade. The word “sausage” itself, however, is satisfyingly old, existing since the 15th century (as sausige). It comes from the French saucisse, which is derived in turn from the Latin salscia, meaning “things prepared with salt”, as in cured meats.

During the first world war, “Sausages” was also one of the less offensive terms employed by the British to describe German soldiers, which augurs well for Global Britain’s next trade war with Europe. In the meantime, let us remember the adage that laws are like sausages, in that it’s best not to inquire too closely into how they are made: advice that the prime minister, who cannot remember what is in his own treaties, surely follows assiduously.
I wish I’d written The Great Gatsby. Doesn’t everyone?  
Ben Macintyre

The book I am currently reading
I am working steadily through the Chips Channon diaries, edited by Simon Heffer. Channon was a superb social and political diarist: bitchy, observant, self-aware, charming and frequently repellent.

The book that changed my life
Friedrich Nietzsche’s Will to Power. A terrible book, cobbled together from the contents of the great philosopher’s rubbish bin by his ghastly sister. But it set me off in search of the antisemitic, vegetarian, German colony Elisabeth Nietzsche had founded in Paraguay, and resulted in my first book.

The book I wish I’d written
I wish I’d written The Great Gatsby. Doesn’t everyone?

The book that most influenced my writing
Undoubtedly In Cold Blood. His honesty is still debated, but Truman Capote showed that a “non-fiction novel”, when it works, can be even more engaging than either “pure” form.

The book I think is most overrated
I can’t manage the later Hilary Mantels, a failure on my part that is made more acute by my admiration for her earlier books.

The book that changed my mind
Wilding by Isabella Tree. The story of an over-cultivated, uneconomic farm rendered wild again, and an ecological vision mercifully free of hand-wringing and finger-wagging.

The last book that made me cry
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee.

The last book that made me laugh
Dear Lupin: Letters to a Wayward Son. Roger Mortimer’s epistles to his infuriating, delightful, feckless son Charlie are filled with gentle frustration, self-mockery and boundless love. Like all great comic writing, he makes it seem effortless.

The book I couldn’t finish
The authorised history of MI6 by Keith Jeffery. Given that I write about espionage, this ought to be my daily reading, yet it manages to make spying seem genuinely dull.

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Stephen Hawking’s A Brief History of Time. I have two copies. One lived on the coffee table for years. But I have never opened it. There is, I believe, a mathematical equation for this: weight + time x celebrity = unpickable.

The book I give as a gift
I am currently distributing, as widely as I can, The Gospel of the Eels by Patrik Svensson.

My earliest reading memory
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak. Still a wild rumpus after all these years.

My comfort read
Scoop by Evelyn Waugh. I know, I know: racially insensitive, viciously snobbish, but still the best satire of journalism ever written.

Agent Sonya by Ben Macintyre is published by Penguin.
How should we write about the climate crisis? From Richard Powers’s The Overstory to Jenny Offill’s Weather and Rumaan Alam’s Leave the World Behind, novelists are facing up to the unthinkable. Claire Armitstead talks to Margaret Atwood, Amitav Ghosh and more about the new cli-fi.

In September 2017, David Simon, creator of The Wire, tweeted a photograph of golfers calmly lining up their putts on a Florida course as wildfires raged in the background. “In the pantheon of visual metaphors for America today, this is the money shot,” he wrote of the picture, which was taken by an amateur photographer who spotted the photo-op as she was about to skydive out of a plane. Everything about this story – the image, the circumstances – seems stranger than fiction.

A year before Simon’s tweet, in a landmark polemic, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable, Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh had questioned why so few writers – himself included – were tackling the world’s most pressing issue in their fiction. But now, as extreme weather swirls around the globe, melting glaciers, burning forests, flooding districts and annihilating species, the climate emergency has brought the unimaginable into our daily lives and literature. A survivor in Jessie Greengrass’s haunting new novel The High House sums it up: “The whole complicated system of modernity which had held us up, away from the earth, was crumbling... and we were becoming again what we had used to be: cold, and frightened of the weather, and frightened of the dark. Somehow while we had all been busy, while we had been doing those small things which added up to living, the future had slipped into the present.”

Don’t tell me...
Greengrass is among a growing number of novelists who are confronting this unfolding catastrophe through the young genre of climate fiction – or “cli-fi”. Among the new arrivals are the Irish writer Niall Bourke, whose novel Line conjures the Boschian image of refugees queuing for generations in an arid land; and Bethany Clift, whose Last One at the Party is the diary of an unnamed thirtysomething who decides to revel her way to the end, as the sole survivor of a pandemic. In August, Alexandra Kleeman’s Something New Under the Sun will take us to a climate-ravaged near-future California. And in September, Anthony Doerr will follow his Pulitzer-winning novel All the Light We Cannot See with Cloud Cuckoo Land, set between 15th-century Constantinople, Idaho in 2020 and space some time in the future. Doerr has said of the book: “The world we’re handing our kids brims with challenges: climate instability, pandemics, disinformation. I wanted this novel to reflect those anxieties, but also offer meaningful hope.”

So what has changed since Ghosh published The Great Derangement? “I think that the world has changed us, and the inflection point was 2018,” he says now. “It was partly because there were so many extreme climate events that year – the California wildfires, flooding in India, a succession of brutal hurricanes – but partly also because of the publication of Richard Powers’s The Overstory.”

This is a big claim to make for a novel. His point, says Ghosh, is not just about the book itself, but the welcome it received (including being shortlisted for the Booker prize). “It wasn’t hived off into the usual silos of climate change or speculative fiction, but was treated as a mainstream novel. I do think that was a very major thing. Since then, there’s been an outpouring of work in this area. In my own personal inbox, I get two or three manuscripts a day.”

Powers’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel reduces human lives to slim growth rings in the bigger history of trees, with characters whose separate stories fleetingly intersect as they circle around a series of confrontations between individuals and institutions, conscience and greed, that will determine the future of humanity. The Canadian writer Michael Christie repeated this structure two years later in a lively eco-parable Greenwood, set between 1908 and 2038, when a virulent new fungus is killing off all trees in what is known as “the great withering”.

At the heart of both novels is a debate about what constitutes life itself. In The Overstory, a research scientist is cast into the wilderness for daring to suggest that trees have their own forms of consciousness and community, while an entrepreneurial computer geek realises that they hold the secret to...
Don’t tell me how it ends

Everything. In Greenwood, Jake, a tourist guide at a futuristic nature theme park, reflects: “Even when a tree is at its most vital, only ten per cent of its tissue – the outermost rings, its sapwood – can be called alive. Every tree is held up by its own history, the very bones of its ancestors.”

This isn’t so fanciful, given the “rights of nature” movement, which Robert Macfarlane has described as “the new animism.” Two years ago, Macfarlane reported on a move by residents of the US city of Toledo to draw up an emergency “bill of rights” for Lake Eyrie, granting it legal personhood and according it rights in law to “exist, flourish, and naturally evolve”. But it wasn’t quite that simple. “Ecosystems are not human, and they certainly don’t bear human responsibilities,” argued the bill’s organisers. “Rather, nature requires its own unique rights that recognise its needs and characteristics.”

The bill revealed just how difficult it is for our existing legal and intellectual frameworks to accommodate the idea of a reality beyond the human. “The [climate] crisis demands a form of literary expression that lets it out of the realm of intellectual knowing and lodges it deep in readers’ bodies,” wrote a perceptive reviewer, in response to an Amazon collection of standalone cli-fi stories, Warmer, published in 2018.

So what are the stories we need and how do we unlock them? “There are many different kinds of stories one might tell but there are no general answers when it comes to novel writing, only specific ones,” says Margaret Atwood, whose MaddAddam trilogy explores what might happen in the aftermath of environmental collapse. Cli-fi often rests on the familiar trope of a nightmarish new reality unleashed by a catastrophic event. In John Lanchester’s recent novel The Wall, “the change” has eroded beaches and made Britain into a fortress state, patrolled by young defenders under instruction to destroy any boat that approaches. Kate Sawyer’s debut novel, The Strandthing, published this week, opens with the striking image of two strangers who save themselves from a life-obliterating radiation event by sheltering in the mouth of a beached whale.

Both The High House and Rumaan Alam’s 2020 hit, Leave the World Behind, do something a bit different. Alam strands his characters in a Long Island holiday home, cut off from “civilisation” by a cataclysm that presents itself as a mysterious noise, a noise so extreme that it seems to transcend sound. “You didn’t hear such a noise; you experienced it, endured it, survived it, witnessed it. You could fairly say their lives could be divided into two: the period before they’d heard that noise and the period after,” he writes. In The High House, self-sufficiency is made possible by a barn thoughtfully stocked by the scientist mother of one of the characters with the tools of a past civilisation - trainers, and tinned foods.

Greengrass describes her novel as “a sort of prequel” to Russell Hoban’s great dystopian fantasy Riddley Walker, where “in the absence of writing materials - language has degraded and mutated. Her East Anglia, like Alam’s Long Island, is on the way to becoming a dystopia, without actually yet being one. The characters of both novels are trapped between the “before” and the “after”, in precisely the sort of limbo that makes the environmental breakdown so hard to write about.

Apocalyptic fiction has long thrummed with biblical imagery, from the hymn-singing “God’s gardeners” of Margaret Atwood’s The Year of the Flood to the “burning bush” of orange butterflies in Barbara Kingsolver’s Flight Behaviour. Both The High House and The Strandthing invoke the story of Noah’s Ark, creating sealed-off family communities while implicitly asking what such survival could mean in a world without olive trees, or doves.

In the novel Gun Island - his 2019 answer to his own provocation - Ghosh deploys myth and mysticism, and the historic movement of languages, animals and people around the globe. The novel climaxes in a mass migration of whales and dolphins, an implausible freak event that is also an observable physical phenomenon. At its heart is a reclamation of the “uncanny”, defined by Freud as an effect produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality.

Alam also uses the uncanny to slice through the hyper-real surface of Leave the World Behind, most strikingly with a flock of flamingos that land in the backyard swimming pool. “They’re comic and unsettling,” says the novelist. “They’re a color that doesn’t feel like it should exist in nature, but of course it does. And they certainly shouldn’t be in the American northeast. It’s like coming across a zebra in the middle of London. It feels to me a little mythic, a little like the arrival of Zeus as a swan.”

It is also a strangely scary visitation. “I think that we have had all of these moments in the news that are frightening and strange, and we have to think of them as uncanny because they seem to contain something that we can’t comprehend right now,” says Alam. He cites shocking images of drowned children from refugee boats washed up on beaches. “Those were real people, and there is so much heartbreak and shame for us to bear in these moments. But there is also something very hard to figure out about them: an unexplained child washed up on the shore almost feels like something out of folklore.”

There is no inevitable The Future. But there are consequences of actions, not all of them foreseeable

Margaret Atwood

Like Gun Island, Leave the World Behind is a deliberately hybrid novel - part social comedy, part speculative chiller. Hybridity is emerging as one way of addressing the central contradiction between what we are (social beings with lives constructed from familiar rituals) and what confronts us (an elimination so total that, as Greengrass writes, “there won’t be memorials
in church halls. No one is going to make up songs. There will be nothing left”

In The Last Migration, the Australian writer Charlotte McConaghy slips between the magical, the speculative and the domestic in a compelling ocean-going yarn that tracks the world’s last migrating birds across the high seas, in the hope that they may reveal the whereabouts of the last fish. Its narrator, Franny, has a sentimental attachment to one of the three tagged arctic terns she is tracking. “I’ve taken to thinking of her as mine because she has burrowed inside and made a home in my ribcage,” she says, when the reality is that the bird is just a dot on a sonar panel, and finally an absence.

Jeff VanderMeer also embraces hybridity in Hummingbird Salamander, abandoning his usual speculative fiction to spin a pacy thriller plot around a missing eco-terrorist. “Using ‘us’ when thinking about the environment erases all the different versions of ‘us’,” writes the fugitive Silvina. “Many indigenous peoples don’t think this way. Counter-culture doesn’t always think this way. Philosophy, knowledge, policy exist that could solve our problems already.”

Other writers have squared up to the narrative challenge by refusing to join the dots entirely, as Jenny Offill does so brilliantly in her scorching short novel Weather, composed of sometimes random paragraphs. Its narrator, Lizzie, is a librarian whose conscience is besieged by catastrophe aphorisms (“first they came for the coral, but I did not say anything because I was not a coral …”), while her “monkey brain” worries about what will happen to her teeth in a world without dentists, and her socialised one frets that she might have got lipstick on them.

It is not just overtly cli-fi novels that are investigating fragmentation as a way of expressing our state of dismay and disarray. In Sarah Moss’s Summerwater, holiday-makers struggle to enjoy themselves in unseasonably heavy rain, oblivious to a natural world that exists only in the parenthesis of standalone preludes to each chapter: bees dying, ants walling themselves in. In Lucy Ellmann’s Ducks, Newburyport, a lioness tries to keep her cubs safe, a narrative thread related outside the stream-of-consciousness of the central character, who spews out the minutiae of her life over 1,030 pages.

In their different ways, both Moss and Ellmann are addressing the solipsism or self-centredness of consciousness, which got us into this problem in the first place, and is both formed and enacted through the stories we tell about ourselves. Their characters are prisoners of what the Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk, in a visionary Nobel lecture, described as “the polyphonic first-person narrative”, which filters everything through the self of the storyteller.

Tokarczuk, who laid out her environmental agenda in her eco-whodunnit Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead, called for a return to the perspective of parable, and for the development of what she called a “tender narrator”, a quantum version of the omniscient narrator, capable of seeing in many dimensions. Quite how this would work she didn’t know, because it had yet to be invented. In the meantime, we should abandon traditional distinctions between high- and lowbrow fiction and trust to fragments. “In this way,” she said, literature can “set off the reader’s capacity to unite fragments into a single design, and to discover entire constellations in the small particles of events.”

But as long as we continue to think and to tell stories, we are not necessarily doomed. For decades Atwood’s novels have been sounding the alarm about things that may not yet be visible, though they are already coming to pass. “There is no inevitable The Future, just as there is no inevitable Right Side of History. There is no inevitable Road to Perdition, there is no inevitable Road to Oz,” she says. “But there are consequences of actions, not all of them foreseeable. Dark are the ways of wizards. And of novelists as well” ●
An engaging portrait of the woman at the centre of a shameful case in US history
Melissa Benn

The case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the young Jewish American couple executed in June 1953 at the height of the cold war for allegedly passing atomic secrets to the Russians, has weighed heavily on the US political and cultural conscience for 70 years. They were the first civilians to be charged and put to death for conspiracy to commit espionage in peacetime, and the case has long been judged, including by many of those on the political right, as the US's ugliest mistake of the cold war.

Meanwhile, fiction has made rich play with the strange truths and metaphors of the stories swirling around this “stubbornly mundane” couple. Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar famously opens with the line: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs…” But it is EL Doctorow’s The Book of Daniel, published in 1971, told from the perspective of the clever, restive elder son of the slain couple (the Isaacsons in the novel) that still stands as the most inventive evocation of the story’s deeper political meanings and human consequences. Anne Sebba was first introduced to the tragedy by Doctorow’s “highly fictionalised but desperately dramatic version of events”, a “pocket sized paperback” that she devoured when she was a young mother living in New York in the 1970s. She became fascinated by “what can happen when fear, a forceful and blunt weapon in the hands of authority, turns to hysteria and justice is wilfully ignored”.

The case continues to polarise opinion to this day, and reading this book it is only too easy to see why. There are striking similarities between the poisonous atmosphere of the cold war and that of contemporary politics, and particularly Donald Trump’s America: the official lies, the raw misogyny, the hounding of the radical left and racial and ethnic minority people, the disregard for, and twisting of, the legal process, the cowardice of so many moderate, mainstream politicians. (Neither Truman nor Eisenhower found the courage to defy press and public hysteria around the case and commute the death sentences of the Rosenbergs.) The case is littered with reprehensible characters, from J Edgar Hoover to Roy Cohn, who at 23 was the junior lawyer on the prosecution team, rising to prominence as chief counsel on the Army-McCarthy hearings in 1954 and later lawyer to, and general fixer for, the young Donald Trump. Cohn, who died in 1986, is now widely reviled as a corrupt bully, a man who despite being gay and Jewish persecuted both gay people and Jews. During an early crisis in his presidency, Trump is reported to have bellowed: “Where is my Roy Cohn?”

At the time of the case, many believed that both the Rosenbergs were innocent of all the charges against them. Then the 1995 release of decoded transcripts of messages between Soviet handlers and their US recruits – the Venona project – confirmed that Julius, an engineer in a strategic army laboratory, did pass secrets during the war, although arguments still rage about the significance of the material he secured for the Russians. The case against Ethel remains, in Sebba’s words, “ambiguous”. Venona provided no conclusive evidence that she worked for the KGB; she had no code name, for example, although, as Sebba recognises, she may have known about aspects of her husband’s work and approved of his motives. Neither is a capital offence in a democracy. Instead, Ethel was primarily convicted on the false testimony of her younger brother David Greenglass, a spy working at Los Alamos where the atomic bomb was being made, who was spared the death penalty by turning on his sister and brother-in-law. Greenglass, who served nine and a half years, later confessed that he had lied to the trial when he said he witnessed his sister typing up secret information for Julius to transmit. In 2016, the Rosenbergs’ sons – unsuccessfully – petitioned the outgoing President Obama to exonerate their mother.

Those who choose to judge this biography as the product of a writer gone soft on totalitarianism or espionage fail to grasp its true heart. Sebba makes clear her own distaste for communism, and her explicit mission is human rather than political: it is to “extrapolate” Ethel the woman from the whole notorious, sordid story. In doing so, she brings us a woman, rather like Plath’s heroine, suffocated by the “madness that incarcerated so many women in different ways in the early 1950s”.

Ethel Greenglass was born in 1915, the only girl of a poor, Lower East Side Jewish family. Her mother, Tessie, was “a bitter woman whose affection such as it was all went to the boys in the family”, and her father too weak in character to
stand up for his clever and artistic daughter. The determined young Ethel did well at school. Working as a clerk in a shipping company, she took the lead in a 1935 strike against poor wages and working conditions, and became increasingly drawn to the small but growing world of US communism. Her politics deepened after she met the handsome young Julius Rosenberg, three years her junior, with whom there was an immediate and powerful sexual bond.

For its adherents, communism was an entire social as well as ideological world, but Sebba usefully reminds us how official US attitudes to the Soviet Union dramatically oscillated over a relatively short period. Reviled for the 1939-41 Soviet-Nazi pact, Stalin’s Russia was embraced as a heroic, sacrificial partner from 1941 to 1945, only for the US to become paranoid about the possibility of the Soviet Union developing its own atomic weapons a few years later. This was the political context that drove the hysteria of the Rosenberg case.

Ethel’s true preoccupations during the war years were not political but personal. Motherhood triggered within her a parallel and intense psychic life. She longed to be a good mother to her sons. Always short of money, the couple scraped together enough for Ethel to see a child psychotherapist and then a psychiatrist, Saul Miller, who visited her in prison, and for whom she developed a deep and despairing love. Right up to the last weeks of her life, Ethel fought for an inner freedom from the consequences of the corrosive neglect of her birth family, and to confirm a sense of her own intrinsic, human value.

Her backstory makes her apparent strength in the face of intense official and public pressure all the more striking. The Rosenbergs’ trial in 1950 for conspiracy to commit espionage was a travesty of justice. The judge colluded with a malign prosecution to paint her as a “fully fledged partner” in acts of spying and to undermine her legitimate use of the fifth amendment. She refused to inform on her husband or to renounce her political beliefs. It did not help, Sebba observes, that she remained stony faced and shabbily dressed throughout the trial.

After their conviction there was pressure to commute the death sentences, but it did not save them. While Julius retained a naive belief in official clemency, Ethel was convinced that they would die, and worked to protect her children as much as she could. Her final letters to them are heartbreaking. “Showing her sons dignity, confidence and courage in the face of adversity was Ethel’s mantra and the source of what little strength she retained by the end.”

Sebba has dug deep beneath this famous and archetypically male story of spying, weapons and international tensions to give us an intelligent, sensitive and absorbing account of a woman made remarkable by circumstance. For Ethel the most important thing was that she stay faithful to the things she believed and to the people she loved, whatever the consequences. In holding to this fateful path, she emerges as a stubbornly courageous figure, a woman who towers above the parade of morally grubby, self-seeking and misogynistic figures who conspired to destroy her.

To buy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com
A German former soldier recalls his childhood in a 1966 memoir that has a chilling lesson for our own era

Richard J Evans

Horst Krüger (1919-1999), a German journalist and writer, originally wrote this evocative memoir in 1966 after attending the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, where 22 former SS camp guards and lower officials were brought to justice for their part in the deaths of more than a million people.

Looking round the courtroom, Krüger saw only ordinary men who had built a solid and respectable existence for themselves after the war, their appalling crimes forgotten until uncovered by a courageous state prosecutor, Fritz Bauer. Here for example was Wilhelm Boger, “an upright, reliable bookkeeper”, “a man you could depend on, who readjusted to life ... and who certainly had colleagues and friends and a family”. And yet, the court was told, apart from participating in countless selections, gassings, mass shootings and executions, he was responsible for “holding a sixty-year-old cleric in the prisoners’ kitchen under water until he was dead; shooting a Polish couple with three children with a pistol from a distance of about three metres”, and many other acts of sadism and brutality.

Confronted with the spectacle of these men, roughly the same age as himself, Krüger “felt the compulsion to question my own past”. Neither he nor his parents had fallen under Hitler’s spell; there was no guilt to expiate and he had spent the war as an ordinary soldier. And yet, they were guilty, if only indirectly, as members of the “apolitical German lower middle class”, which with its “social insecurity, its instability and its hunger for irrational solutions provided the fertile seedbed for National Socialism’s seizure of power within Germany”. But for a string of lucky chances, he too might have ended up as a guard in Auschwitz. What, he asks himself, would he have done then?

It is precisely the ordinariness of Krüger’s life that makes this not just a book about Nazism and Germany but also a book for our own times. Its subjects are not the SS fanatics in the Frankfurt courtroom and the Nazis who ran the Third Reich, but the millions of apolitical Germans who let this all happen. In an age when democracy is under threat everywhere, and unscrupulous politicians exploit its weaknesses for their own malign and corrupt ends, it’s salutary to learn how one family, one individual among many, could stand by while evil triumphed.

Krüger’s father, a minor civil servant and Protestant, and his mother, a pious Catholic housewife, lived with their son and daughter in the recently built housing estate of Eichkamp in Berlin, its suburban semi and modest terraced houses designed specifically for the lower ranks of the middle classes. Hitler offered the promise of a new, brighter future, and by the mid-1930s “they had slipped so slowly from their petit-bourgeois dreams into this age of greatness, they now felt very much at ease, they were delighted by what this man had made of them. They never understood that it was they, all of them, collectively, who made this man.”

Krüger’s limpid, almost poetic prose, well translated by Shaun Whiteside, conjures vivid, concrete images of the dullness of life in Eichkamp, his adolescent dreams of escape leading him to become friends with “Wanja”, wild, unkempt, mysterious and exciting, a boy who “seemed to have come from another world”. When Wanja joined his school class, stuffed with “elegant and well dressed upper class scions of the Prussian bourgeoisie”, he soon led him into a life of danger, delivering leaflets for the socialist underground, though Krüger never became committed to the ideas they purveyed. Inevitably, the boys were arrested by the Gestapo. Krüger was imprisoned on remand for a few months, “trapped between the milestones of history”, before a judge decided his respectable petit-bourgeois background made it clear that “with good treatment, [he] may perhaps be saved for the volkisch state”, and he was released.

Moving skilfully back and forth in time, Krüger tells how he met Wanja some years after the war in East Germany, where his friend had become a Communist apparatchik. Wanja could no longer tell truth from lies, a condition that has been increasingly affecting our own times. Under the Third Reich, ordinary people could still tell the difference. “To me,” Krüger
comments, “the German language had become identical with lies. You can only speak truthfully in private.” His parents told him: “What the papers say isn’t true, but you mustn’t say so. Outside you must always pretend that you believe everything.” He recounts his liberating sense of wonder when, in a prisoner-of-war camp, after he had deserted the army and surrendered to the Americans, he “was holding a newspaper in my hands, which was in German and didn’t lie”. Its front page carried the announcement “Hitler dead”. Yet “Hitler”, Krüger thinks, “he’s going to be staying with us – for our whole lives ... he still exists within us. He still rules us from the darkness, from the underground.”

When The Broken House was first published, the great critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki called it “a book about Germany without lies”. In an afterword written a decade later, Krüger ascribed this honesty to the book’s “ruthless, indeed self-torturing, act of identification with the world of the defendants” at the trials. He found himself guilty of sharing in the “general abnormal attitudes that formed the preconditions for Hitler’s dictatorship in Germany”. And yet there is also a subtle element of self-exculpation in what he writes. For at the centre of the book is the thesis that “apolitical” people can all too easily fall victim to demagogues and their lies. And in the case of the Krügers, this isn’t really true.

They may have thought they were unpolitical, but even in the 1920s they preferred the old Imperial German flag, in the colours of black, white and red representing authoritarianism, militarism, monarchism, to the official colours of the Weimar Republic: black, red and gold, representing democracy and revolution. They voted for the German National People’s party, ultra-conservative, antidemocratic and anti-Semitic, and dismissed the socialists as “the red rabble”. No doubt they joined the vast majority of the party’s millions of voters in switching to the Nazis in the early 1930s. None of this was, in reality, “unpolitical”. The Krügers were not the naive, innocent dupes portrayed in the book.

The path to dictatorship is often smoothed by mainstream political parties that become impatient with the complexities and constraints of formal constitutional democracy. Hitler, after all, came to power in 1933 in a coalition cabinet, in which the German National People’s party held a majority of the seats. It was the substantial overlap between the two parties’ ideas that enabled their supporters to make the transition from the one to the other. Perhaps this is the final lesson to be learned from a book full of warning.

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

Each winter, DH Lawrence descended into a state of critical illness. By Easter, like Christ, he resurrected. Lawrence’s tuberculosis had first manifested when he was a teenager; as if in a fable of ambivalent masculinity, he was nurtured back from the brink of death by his mother, and awoke to find his voice had broken.

Following the Romantic idea that tuberculosis was “an internal flame that consumed the body”, Lawrence believed his illness was caused by an excess of love and rage, pent up inside him, and that his annual cycle of life and death afforded him a special proximity to the divine. Frances Wilson suggests that Lawrence always “saw himself as a figure of allegory”; this is the guiding principle of her book, which rejects two-dimensional interpretations of his life and work and, instead, reads Lawrence brilliantly as a “self-wrestling human document”.

Lawrence, Wilson suggests, built his life - which he called “that piece of supreme art” - around Dante’s Comedy, and her book is structured in three parts: Hell to Purgatory and Paradise. Lawrence was constantly on the run, on a lifelong quest for freedom and rebirth: seeking new worlds to inhabit away from “this world of war and squallor”, and different versions of himself to be. Wilson takes us from Hampstead Heath in London via Italy to New Mexico, with a ragtag cast of larger-than-life characters who were Lawrence’s friends and enemies (the line was always thin).

Lawrence was constantly searching for passionate connection - motherly, romantic, fraternal - and inspired extraordinary reactions in others: his life and work were shaped by encounters with acolytes, kindred spirits and detractors, which he restlessly charted in fictional form. Wilson’s narrative lays bare the fascinating struggle between Lawrence’s two selves: one peaceful and spiritual, another which fantasises about shooting everyone he sees “with invisible arrows of death”. Lawrence, Wilson writes, is a figure “composed of mysteries rather than certainties”: in this astonishing tale, rife with jealousy, messianism and blood, she meets Lawrence on his own terms, offering readers a mythology of his deeply wild and complex spirit.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A brilliant storyteller reads stone, pottery and bones to examine the migrations of our ancestors

PD Smith

In 2002, a mile or so from Stonehenge, archaeologists were investigating the site of a new school when they discovered something remarkable. It was the grave of a man, aged between 35 and 45, who died more than 4,000 years ago. Wessex Archaeology conducted the excavation and they labelled his remains as “skeleton 1291”. But to the public he soon became known as the Amesbury Archer.

Among his bones were 18 beautifully crafted flint arrowheads. Their positioning suggested they had been cast in after the body had been laid in the wood-lined chamber. The grave contained nearly 100 items - copper knives, gold objects, boars’ tusks, a shale ring - making it the most richly furnished from the period ever discovered in Britain. The remains of five distinctive pottery beakers with a characteristic upside-down bell shape revealed it to be a Beaker burial. As Alice Roberts writes, the number of items and the care with which the grave had been created shows “the Archer was a Very, Very Important Person”.

He is preserved in Salisbury Museum and, according to Roberts, “our visits to museums, to gaze on such human remains, are a form of ancestor worship”. In her book, she takes seven different prehistoric burials and explores who they may have been and what they reveal about their communities. It requires imagination, as well as scientific expertise, to read the “stories written in stone, pottery, metal and bone”.

Roberts takes us on an evocative journey through deep history, from the so-called “Red Lady” in Paviland Cave, Wales, believed to date back more than 30,000 years, to Orkney and the tombs of the first farmers, as well as to the extraordinary iron age chariot burials of Yorkshire, where some remains were found to be female. She cautions against imposing our own ideas of gender on the past: “perhaps the Romans were right to be wary of the formidable females of Britain - wise women, prophetesses, priestesses, Ladies, Queens... they appear charismatic, formidable, powerful even in death.”

Analysis of the archer’s teeth reveals that he may have grown up near the Alps. DNA from other Beaker graves in Germany show ancestry from the Eurasian steppe and migration played a major role in establishing Beaker culture. Indeed, in Britain genomes are dramatically different after 2500BC: “Neolithic ancestry is almost completely replaced, in the copper age, by genomes that share ancestry with central Europeans associated with the Beaker complex.”

This forms a central theme in Ancestors. Roberts is fascinated by “the endless movement and migrations - the restlessness - of the past”. Across millennia, generations of people have flowed through continents like water over rock: the landscapes remain, as do the burials - fixed coordinates amid the flux of time.

In spring 2019, Roberts met scientists at the Crick Institute in London who are involved in “the most ambitious archaeological genetic project that has ever been carried out in Britain”. They intend to fully sequence 1,000 ancient genomes, which it is hoped will reveal the connectedness, the shared ancestry, of people across Britain and beyond: “Ancient DNA bears clues to forgotten journeys - memories of migrations long ago, written into genes.”

Although Roberts does draw on genomic evidence to show the migration of peoples in prehistory, what is so fascinating about this book is the way it weaves together scientific and cultural interpretation. Careful archaeology - trowel work - is still essential to understanding the past.

At one point Roberts describes excavating a piece of Beaker pottery. It was, she writes, “a gorgeous object”, one that allowed her to feel a profound connection across time to those involved in the burial: “Human experience is built of moments - and here were two, linked together across millennia. The moment I lifted the bowl out of the grave, my hands earthy from digging; the moment the potter (the mourner, the parent?) held the bowl in their hands, making that corded pattern, their hands covered in clay.”

This is a detailed and richly imagined account of the history of the British landscape, which brings alive those “who have walked here before us”, and speaks powerfully of a sense of connectedness to place that is rooted in common humanity: “we are just the latest human beings to occupy this landscape”.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
History

Was Labour’s ‘red wall’ doomed years ago?
A painstaking story of decline in two coalmining regions
Conrad Landin

When Jeremy Corbyn addressed the 2019 Durham Miners’ Gala, there was a fierce backlash from critics on social media. “So much posh boy fetishising about miners this weekend,” one account opined, followed by a flurry of expletives.

It was under Corbyn that Labour’s loss of coalfields support finally cost the party seats in the “red wall” on a massive scale. But the seeds of defeat were sown decades before, in the aftermath of the 1984-85 strike and the deindustrialisation of Britain. The present-day Miners’ Gala celebrates not the industry of mining, but the solidarity that characterised the sector’s workforce for more than a century.

The Shadow of the Mine reminds us why this spirit has lived on, in spite of people feeling a sense of political betrayal going back decades. Through interviews, archive research and years of work with mining communities and the National Union of Mineworkers, Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson chart the story of two key coal-producing regions.

Starting with a straightforward history, they examine the turbulent politics of the 1926 general strike, postwar nationalisation and the steady stream of pit closures from the 1950s onwards. After 1947, the NUM worked closely with the National Coal Board to mitigate the damage of closures, with many miners transferred to surviving pits with the promise of life-long employment. This conciliatory approach ended abruptly with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Now market was king, the miners’ victory in the 1973 national strike could not stand. The authors examine the secret report drafted by Nicholas Ridley, a key proto-Thatcherite, calling for the next Tory government to take on “the full force of communist disrupters... on ground chosen by the Tories”.

Arthur Scargill’s prophecy of a run-down of the whole industry - much scorned at the time - came to pass sooner than almost anyone expected. The coalfields were promised “regeneration”, but “inward investment” came in the form of low-paid, low-skilled private-sector jobs. Beynon and Hudson convincingly argue that the “detrimental” focus on “job creation and responding to the needs of large corporations” led to a failure to rebuild communities and address a spiralling health crisis, which continues to blight generations born even after the pit closures.

Moreover, the jobs that came to the north-east and south Wales often disappeared faster than they materialised. When Samsung moved production from Teeside to Slovakia in 2004, it blamed high labour costs in England. Tony Blair - a north-east MP as well as prime minister - said: “It is part of the world economy we live in.” As some remainers continue to blame former mining communities for voting against their own economic interests, Beynon and Hudson remind us of the realities that cemented the perception that globalisation would only benefit a select few.

More than other industrial workers facing a post-industrial job market, miners struggled to adapt to life above ground - a feeling powerfully voiced by many of the authors’ interviewees. If there was a sense of exceptionalism, it had developed with the state’s active encouragement. In 1947, the newly formed NCB employed seven film crews to produce NCB News bulletins for broadcast in cinemas, depicting a heroic and Stakhanovite ideal of the miner. In the same year a report commissioned by Durham’s Labour-run council actively discouraged industrial diversification: coal production was just too important.

These localist insights are enlightening, but the authors’ focus on just two regions ultimately lets them down. Missing from this picture is Nottinghamshire, which suffered the same fate as every other coalfield, in spite of its loyalty during the strike. The post-industrial landscape of Scotland, brilliantly documented in Ewan Gibbs’s Coal Country, pre-figured the north-east’s collapse in support for Labour - and could have helped in understanding its nuances.

The Shadow of the Mine has been billed as a “key explainer for what happened to Labour’s ‘red wall’”, but while it provides plenty of context, the section on the 2019 election is disappointingly sparse. Two years before, Labour had increased its vote share in many post-industrial heartlands, in spite of rapidly rising support for the Tories as the Ukip vote collapsed. So what changed? Beynon and Hudson blame it on there being “no coherent effort by the Corbyn leadership to build on the platform of 2017” as he engaged in firefighting with internal critics.

This glosses over the campaign from centrist MPs in metropolitan constituencies, backed by a small section of the ultra left, to shift the party’s Brexit position from critical support in 2017 to a so-called People’s Vote. Had Labour held its line, the longstanding sense of betrayal would not have disappeared - but we might now be looking at a very different government.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
This time-hopping, form-swapping epic of life, family, love and grief shows an author at the height of his powers
Edward Docx

Everything that makes the novel worthwhile and engaging is here: warmth, wit, intelligence, love, death, high seriousness, low comedy, philosophy, subtle personal relationships and – unique to fiction, of course – the complex interior life of human beings.

For those of you as yet unacquainted with the name, Sandro Veronesi is an Italian writer who has twice won the Premio Strega. This is his ninth novel. He writes across many disciplines and is much celebrated in Italy, where The Hummingbird was voted best book of the year by the Corriere della Sera. All of which is to say: the wonderful (and relieved) feeling I had while reading this novel was that I was in the hands of a seasoned practitioner writing at that peak moment in a career where insight and experience in the form meet insight and experience in life.

The Hummingbird tells the story of Marco Carrera, an ophthalmologist. He marries the right-but-wrong-wrong woman – Marina, who is unfaithful. He loves the right-but-wrong – but right woman – Luisa, and she is unavailable. He is his sister’s sentinell, but she kills herself. He falls out with his brother and is sadly estranged. His parents are emotionally disfigured by their own trials and yet he must deal with their problems (vindictive rages, emotional blocks, marital misery) and then bear witness to them enduring brutal forms of cancer. He betrays his best friend, the man who saved his life. He develops a gambling addiction. His daughter, whom he loves dearly, suffers an inexplicable accident. He is left with his miracle granddaughter, Miralijin, whom he must raise. He never discovers who her father is or why she has been given a Japanese name – meaning “man of the future” – but it is she who gives him reason to go on living.

Veronesi delivers Carrera’s story by moving backwards and forwards in time: the chapter titles tell us we’re in the 1970s, or in 2018, or, at the end, in 2030. Meanwhile, the form itself changes: sometimes we’re reading narrative, sometimes dialogue, sometimes letters, poetry, emails, inventories, postcards. You remain alert. You sift. You piece the life together like a mosaic. Sure, there may be one or two tiles that you don’t love (a couple of chapters felt levered in, as though Veronesi was trying to find a home for something he had written elsewhere), but the overall effect is magnificent – moving, replete, beautiful.

There is plenty for the plot junkie – Carrera is pummelled by events – but what makes the book special is that it is such an intelligent meditation on life, family, the human heart and the “dictatorship of pain” that comes with grief. I was reminded how much I used to enjoy the kinds of writers who have you underlining passages or marking notes in the margin – not just about the book itself, but about your own thoughts on, say, friendship, or lust, or loss. I’m thinking of my early adventures as a reader with Milan Kundera or Umberto Eco, though Veronesi has a very different atmosphere: more tender, more emotionally exasperated, less sure and continually at home to Rudyard Kipling’s “six honest serving men ... What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.”

There’s much sophistication in the comedy and the darkness, too. On his marriage to Marina, Carrera muses: “But they weren’t made for each other. No one is made for anyone else, in all fairness, and people like Marina Molitor weren’t even made for themselves.” Indeed, intelligence is everywhere – in the balance of blame and guilt for the characters, in their psychological narrative and counter narrative, in the novel’s philosophical moments.

I want to mention two last things. First, the translator, Elena Pala, who has done an astonishing job; the language reads so brightly and distinctively, yet does not interrupt the flow or make it self-conscious. And second, to commend The Hummingbird’s last scene, in which Veronesi achieves something transcendent; no plot spoilers, but it’s well worth the read on its own. If you’re in need of modern, intelligent European fiction – and who isn’t? – then this is the precise prescription.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Graphic The New Yorker cartoonist’s witty debut is a fresh account of a young man waking up to the world
James Smart

Will McPhail’s shrewd cartoons often feature animals — amorous crocodiles, sly mice and bickering lizards — and cast a curious eye on human behaviour. This clever debut graphic novel shows that he can produce extended narratives with just as much panache as his single-panel cartoons.

In. by Will McPhail, Sceptre, £18.99

In. follows Nick, a city-dwelling illustrator who strikes poses in coffee shops and craft-beer bars, while feeling as if there must be something more to existence. McPhail laces his middle-class, not-quite-adult life with satire. One coffee shop boasts of “a miscellaneous blend with notes of fermented apricot and polished concrete”; another offers free coffee but charges by the number of pages you write of your screenplay.

But In. offers more than just millennial joshing. There’s a dark undertow beneath the beard oil, spherical ice cubes and milk stouts. The lonely Will gazes out, his eyes swollen with want, wondering how to bridge the gap to the people around him, and what to send across it. He sits on the train, romantic thoughts in his head, sketching the woman opposite, until she pulls him up. “You think it’s cute, because you’re drawing instead of taking a picture?”

Nick’s world is jolted by bad news from his mother and a chance meeting with Wren, a doctor with a low tolerance for nonsense. As the mood darkens, the book’s grip tightens. McPhail brilliantly catches the rhythms of conversation, the beats and platitudes and pauses that punctuate day-to-day routines and our most meaningful moments. Many of his most moving panels are silent, holding the reader in the moment as emotions unravel. Elsewhere, he breaks from black and white to explore Nick’s inner life, rendering vast glaciers, strange beasts and deserted cityscapes in rich, surreal colour sequences that offer a lovely counterpoint to his nuanced sketching.

In. is far from the first book to offer hipster satire or an account of a young creative waking up to the world, and love interest Wren lacks the depth of the rest of the cast. But McPhail’s skill makes it all feel wonderfully fresh. At times, In. fizzes with zeitgeist-skewering wit; at others, it probes the quiet places where doubt lurks and love can flourish. It’s a very fine debut, from a serious talent.

To buy a copy for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.

A finely crafted tale about mothers, daughters and secrets explores the power of storytelling
Ella Risbridger

Esther Freud’s ninth novel is about mothers, daughters and secrets, telling the story of three generations of women. There’s Aoife, in contemporary Cork, who relates to her dying husband Cashel the story of their long marriage; pregnant Rosaleen in 1960s London, in love with bohemian sculptor Felix; Kate, an artist 30 years later, with a difficult partner, a small daughter and a desperate desire to know where she has come from.

“ Detach with love,” someone advises Kate, late on, which is a necessary counterweight in this novel about attachments. Kate is adopted, and it is her adoption that drives the narrative. But to what extent are our stories ever our own?

Kate’s search for her birth mother brings her and her young daughter, Freya, to a convent in Ireland. They find, first, a bleak little memorial to the lost babies born there. These are the stories of thousands of real women, and Freud quietly does them justice. I Couldn’t Love You More is apparently inspired, too, by Freud’s own family stories — a what-if at the heart of her history. What if her own “much-missed mother ... pregnant and unmarried”, had “asked for help from the wrong people?”

It is tempting to map Freud’s real-life family (tempestuous sculptor Lucian, for example) on to the novel’s complex interplay of characters, but to pin this book down as autobiographical does it a great disservice. It is a crafted novel, made with great skill and attention, the way Felix makes his sculptures.

“The choices are stark,” Kate tells us, in a moment of crisis: “Kill myself, or glue pasta on to card.” She chooses pasta, and the thing about Kate (and perhaps Freud too) is that she is always going to choose pasta — making something over taking something away. In another book, this line might feel glib, but here it feels like the heart of the novel.

“How do we even know we’re not dead?” little Freya asks Kate. This book is how. We know we’re alive because of the stories we tell each other, and the things we make, and the people we love, and that’s all we ever get. Freud knows that, and it is good in this bleak year to be reminded.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Mermen and pirate mums, things to do and see outside, black British history in songs

Imogen Russell Williams

There’s a watery feel to picture books this month. *Nen and the Lonely Fisherman* (Owlet) by Ian Eagleton and James Mayhew is a gentle story of friendship and love between a merman, Nen, and Ernest, the fisherman of the title, with a conservationist theme rippling through. Mayhew’s light-dappled illustrations are the perfect foil for Eagleton’s quiet, well-chosen words.

The exuberant *Splash* (Farshore) by Paralympian Claire Cashmore, illustrated by Sharon Davey, is full of the joys of swimming, following a little girl from initial aquaphobia to eventual championship. Like Cashmore herself, the heroine has a limb difference, understatedly conveyed in both text and pictures, while the
chief focus of the story is fun, perseverance and supportive family love.

**The Pirate Mums** (Oxford) by Jodie Lancet-Grant, illustrated by Lydia Corry, continues the aquatic theme. When Billy goes to sea on a school trip, he is anxious for his eccentric mums to behave “normally”. But their piratical knowhow is soon needed to save the day when stormy weather traps the captain in the loo in this colourful swashbuckling adventure.

In slightly older picture books for five and up, illustrator Dapo Adeola’s debut as author, **Hey You!** (Puffin), is a lyrical celebration of growing up black. Featuring the work of 18 illustrators, including Diane Ewen, Onyinye Iwu and Selom Sunu – since, as Adeola states: “I’m just one person, I can’t possibly hope to speak for the entire diaspora” – it distils the fierce heartache of racist injustice as well as a passionate sense of joy and hope for the future.

Tim Hopgood’s **My Big Book of Outdoors** (Walker) is a blissful immersion in the natural world, full of poetry, seasonal activities and engaging facts, with illustrations saturated in colour. This handsome hardback invites children to plant sunflowers, go pond-dipping and identify butterflies, birds and plants.

**From far left: The Pirate Mums, Men and the Lonely Fisherman**

From Swapna Haddow and Sheena Dempsey, the dream team behind the Dave Pigeon books, comes **Bad Panda** (Faber), in which cute, furry Lin decides to be so wicked that she’ll be ejected from the zoo and sent home. There’s toilet humour, villainous cobras and silliness aplenty in this uproarious start to a potentially addictive new series.

For eight-pluss, **Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths** (Bonnier) by Maisie Chan, illustrated by Anh Cao, features would-be artist Danny, who is excited about a promised surprise – until it turns out to be his Nai Nai from China, taking up residence in his top bunk. But there’s more to Danny’s grandma than meets the eye. Light-hearted but challenging racist stereotypes, Chan’s debut is a delightful celebration of intergenerational love, individual strengths and bingo.

**The Secret Detectives** (Nosy Crow) by Ella Risbridger follows Isobel Petty, newly orphaned and on her way from India to England, as she tries to solve a murder aboard the ship with the help of new friend Sameer and her chaperone’s daughter, Letitia. This elegant detective tale revisits the backstory to *The Secret Garden*, offering a nuanced modern homage to Golden Age crime fiction and children’s literature.

Finally, **Musical Truth** by Jeffrey Boakye (Faber) is an accomplished journey through black British history from the Windrush to the present day, via 28 songs by musicians including Lord Kitchener, Eddy Grant, Neneh Cherry, Sade and Stormzy. Boakye’s text, enriched by Ngadi Smart’s striking images, is perfectly judged for young readers; his analysis of the songs and moments they represent is celebratory, sad and challenging, bearing out his claim: “Music can carry the stories of history like a message in a bottle.”

**Teenagers**

A wonky love triangle; a problem solver’s troubles; plus an anonymous texter exposes dark secrets

**Felix Ever After** by Rachen Callender, Faber, £7.99
Even in New York, being queer, trans and black isn’t easy – and despite Felix Love’s surname, he has never yet come close to romance. When a mysterious enemy displays pre-transition photos of him at school, though, Felix’s plan to identify the culprit opens up unexpected possibilities: a wonky love triangle between Felix, his rival and his best friend. A poignant exploration of identity, self-acceptance and first love, from an award-winning author.

**Ace of Spades**

*by Faridah Abíké-Íyímídé, Usborne, £7.99*
At the exclusive Niveus Private Academy, the privileged students seem set for greatness – until two of them, gifted musician Devon and head girl Chiamaka, are targeted by an anonymous texter determined to expose their weak points. Soon Devon’s private photos are no longer private – and Chiamaka’s darkest secret is dragged into the spotlight. But why is it only the black students being singled out for ruin and disgrace? Fast-paced and intensely readable, this high-school thriller with a difference investigates the ugliness of systemic racism as it pelts towards a nerve-racking conclusion. IRW

**Not My Problem**

*by Ciara Smyth, Andersen, £7.99*
Aideen is always in trouble, unlike ambitious, overachieving Maebh. When Aideen pushes Maebh down the stairs to help her inveigle her sports commitments, she discovers a gift for solving other people’s problems; with her irresistible new accomplice Kavi, she’s soon sorting issues for the whole school. But with her mother drinking again, Aideen is failing academically; her best friend is avoiding her – and now she’s finding uptight Maebh worryingly attractive. Romantically hilarious and full of crazy capers, Smyth’s second novel also conveys the anxiety of growing up poor without parental support.
‘A heartbreaker and a heart mender’

Twenty-five years after Push was first published, Tayari Jones salutes its groundbreaking heroine, Precious

In the Reagan years, I was a teenager, more reader than writer, when I discovered the work of Sapphire. As a college student, I hung out with a cluster of intense, arty types. My good friend Angela passed me a sheaf of photocopies. It was a book by Sapphire, who called herself Sapphire. What I remember most clearly was a poem from the point of view of a young girl whose mother and stepfather were abusive. The poem was so intense, so vivid, that I couldn’t stop thinking about it. As I turned the pages, I found myself sitting on the floor, tears streaming down my face. I was hooked. This was the first time I had read a book that made me feel this way.

Imagine our shock and delight in 1996 when the publication of Push set the literary world on fire. I called Angela, as we were now living on opposite sides of the country, trying to figure out adult life. “Is that our Sapphire?” This was pre-internet, so I ran to the bookstore. The slick packaging was a far cry from the tattered pages we’d passed back and forth, and the woman in the author photo wore a close crop instead of long, thick dreadlocks, but the fingerprint of an author is her words.

Push is told in the extraordinary voice of Claireece "Precious" Jones, who introduces her story with an agonising declaration: “I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my faither.” From there unspools a novel that is a merciless indictment of a society that abandons its most vulnerable citizens. Without a doubt, Precious has trouble aplenty. In addition to being impregnated by her father twice, she is also sexually abused and beaten by her mother. She is functionally illiterate, obese and destitute. She lives at the intersection of racism, sexism, classism, colourism and more. Yet while her life is certainly shaped by these forces, they do not compromise her vibrant humanity.

Push the novel is much like Precious herself. Some critics were appalled by the very idea of this story, with this heroine, being held up as an important work of literature – just as Precious herself, walking down the streets of Harlem, endures stares and sneers from people who resent the very fact of her existence. The response to Push was similar to that for The Color Purple, with some of the same critics complaining that the novel failed to present black men in a positive light. But this novel, like Precious, finds its people.

Push’s people are those who know first hand the trouble Sapphire has seen. They are the survivors, the first responders, the essential workers and the school teachers. They are also those who have never known the pain of homelessness, Aids or incest, but who desire a world without these scourges.

The miracle of Sapphire’s gift is that she weaves her sharp social commentary and critique into the fabric of this story without shredding its fibres. This is a novel about people and their problems, not problems and their people. The book is like a crown of sonnets, each movement growing in beauty and intensity.

This is no easy read. It is accessible, but no, never easy. The experience of reading this novel is best captured in the scene from which the novel takes its name, when Precious gives birth on the kitchen floor. As she is wracked with labour pains, the paramedic coaches: “When that shit hit you again, go with it and push, Preshecita. Push.” Sapphire wants us not to push past the pain, injustice and trauma. Instead, we must push through it. We must feel it to be changed by it. By the last page, we don’t have the type of happy ending that Precious would call a “Color Purple”. Yet we have the gift of a new day and a mandate to act. When I finished Push in 1996, I immediately called my college friend, breathless and clutching the slim book to my breast. “It’s the same Sapphire. I can tell,” “Yeah,” Angela sighed. “It’s her. Always a hero”.

Push by Sapphire is reissued by Vintage.
#BookTok
Young readers with thousands of followers are sharing their passion for books — bringing titles they love to life online and reshaping the world of publishing, writes Alison Flood

TikTok bookworms Each short post can attract huge numbers of viewers

When you get to the plot twist in the book but you already read the last page of the book
In August 2020, Kate Wilson, a 16-year-old from Shrewsbury, posted on the social media video platform TikTok a series of quotes from books she had read, “that say I love you, without actually saying I love you”. Set to a melancholy soundtrack, the short video plays out as Wilson, an A-level student, holds up copies of the books with the quotes superimposed over them. “You have been the last dream of my soul,” from A Tale of Two Cities. “Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same,” from Wuthering Heights. “Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own,” from Jane Eyre. It has been viewed more than 1.2m times.

Wilson’s TikTok handle, @kateslibrary, is among the increasingly popular accounts posting on #BookTok, a corner of TikTok devoted to reading, which has clocked up 9.6bn views and counting, and has been described as the last wholesome place on the internet. Here, users – predominantly young women – post short videos inspired by the books they love. Those that do best are fun, snappy takes on literature and the experience of reading. “Books where the main character was sent to kill someone but they end up falling in love,” from @kateslibrary. “Things that bookworms do,” from @abbybooks. “When you were 12 and your parents caught you crying over a book,” from @emilymiahreads.

These posts can attract millions of views, and rekindle an appreciation of books in young readers. “I started reading again after six years when I came across BookTok for the first time last October,” says Mireille Lee, 15, who, with her 13-year-old sister Elodie, now runs the high-profile @alifeofliterature account on TikTok.

The idea started after Mireille convinced her sister to try the young adult novel The Selection by Kiera Cass; “I didn’t want to read. I was into gaming,” Elodie says. But once she started, she couldn’t put the book down, and set up her own TikTok account, through which she shared videos inspired by the mood, or “aesthetic”, of The Selection. When one of Elodie’s videos received 1,000 likes in a day, Mireille decided to join her, and the sisters now have some 284,000 followers and 6m likes; one of their biggest hits was about E Lockhart’s We Were Liars, which flashes photos of dramatic and glamorous scenes on a beautiful coastline, summing up the book’s contents to thrilling music. As the sisters put it, it’s about “convincing you to read books based on their aesthetics”.

While this might sound like a reductive way to talk about books, the sisters know that these memes are an effective ruse to entice readers, “I think it all comes down to the fact that when you see a book, you’re like: ‘no more homework thank you very much,” Mireille says. “I tried influencing my friends to pick up The Selection, or Red Queen [by Victoria Aveyard], and they were just not having it.” Instead, “we showed them loads of images with some really popular music, and that was a huge success. People loved it, and we’ve continued doing it.”

Adam Silvera’s 2017 novel They Both Die at the End is one of the books to have benefited from the BookTok effect. Users recently started filming themselves before and after reading the book, sobbing as they reached the final pages. In March, it shot to the top of the teen fiction charts, selling more than 4,000 copies a week. The book has sold more than 200,000 copies in the UK, with well over half of those coming belatedly in 2021, after thousands of posts about it (#adamsilvera has been viewed 10.8m times).

Publishers are watching with interest. “The pool of people who are guaranteed to buy young adult books is limited to a few thousand dedicated lovers of the genre, but BookTok is exciting, with its short, entertaining videos bringing a new, powerful opportunity to reach and engage non-readers, to create more book lovers,” says Kat McKenna, a marketing and brand consultant specialising in children’s and young adult books.

“These ‘snapshot’ visual trailers are making books cinematic in a way that publishers have been trying to do with marketing book trailers for a really long time. But the way TikTok users are creating imagery inspired by what they are reading is so simple, and so clever. It’s that thing of bringing the pages to life, showing what you get from a book beyond words.”

At Simon & Schuster, marketing and publicity manager Olivia Horrox, who worked on Silvera’s novel, is now watching another of her titles, Tracy Deonn’s Legendborn, taking on a new life on BookTok. “It has become a trend that other users want to jump on and...
start creating their own content,” she says. “Like the ice-bucket challenge that used to be around on Facebook, these TikTok trends become a challenge in the same way, and you don’t want to miss out on the zeitgeist, so you get the book that everyone’s talking about.”

BookTokers capture the “visceral reaction” to a book, which doesn’t come across in a written review, Horrox says. “There’s something about the fact that it is under a minute. People who are consuming this content want stuff that’s quicker and snappier all the time – you watch a 32-second video and someone’s like: ‘This book has LGBTQ romance, it’s really heartbreaking, it’s speculative fiction.’ And then the viewers think: ‘Oh, OK, those are all things that I’m interested in. I’ll go buy it’.”

A teenager’s emotional life can be rocky, soaring from intense highs to crashing lows, and books that offer a cathartic cry prove most popular. “Romantic books and sad books seem to be really big,” McKenna says. “If it tugs at a heartstring, it’s likely to retain the user’s attention.”

Ayman Chaudhary, who is 20 and at university in Chicago, found her life soothed when she posted a video of her reaction – loud (and hilarious) wailing – to finishing Madeline Miller’s The Song of Achilles. “There’s this trend going around… you talk about a book and maybe you even add a clip of you crying while reading the book,” Chaudhary says. “It makes people curious – like, what could make this book so good, or so sad that it can make you show your emotions and be so vulnerable to the public? Books that can make me cry instantly have my money.”

It’s not all romance and tears, however. American teenager “cocolinnnn” has 21.7m likes for his humorous posts, which are often teasers for live streams in which he reads children’s bedtime stories. Emily Russell, who has 1.2m likes for her @emilymiahreads account, found it took off in earnest after a post about a bookshop that she loves going to. And some of the funniest videos mock literary tropes – “How white people write east asian women”, or “which dress are you wearing to run romantically through a castle to your lover?”, or “what I think I look like when I’m reading, versus what I actually look like.”

Chaudhary says it was during lockdown that she started posting BookTok videos, spurred on by “quarantine boredom”. “I never planned to make content. I didn’t think I had anything special or new to say.” Today, she has 258,000 followers and 16.2m likes for her @aymansbooks account.

Wilson, too, got into BookTok during lockdown. “I just love finding even more people who I can talk with about my favourite books,” she says. “I’ve actually had a few people at my school who I’d never spoken to before come up to me just to talk about books and my TikTok account because they’d found it.” By December 2020, she was being contacted regularly by publishers, who had realised that TikTok “really does sell books”.

Russell, a 21-year-old science student, first started to get sent books by publishers and authors at the end of September. “I still can’t believe that I get to work with these publishing houses. It’s always been a dream of mine,” she says.

BookTok content tends to focus around the five or so “hot” books, which currently include the fantasy novels Caraval by Stephanie Garber, Heartless by Marissa Mayer and Sarah J Maas’s A Court of Thorns and Roses series. “What people really love on BookTok is fantasy romance. If you tell someone that there’s a romance when they try to kill each other, that’s it, sold,” says Faith Young, who posts as @hellyeahbooks.

“At the beginning, when you first join, there are definitely six to 10 books that everyone talks about,” she says. “The more popular books tend to be quite straight and quite white. And so I think the biggest movement within the community is being like: ‘Hey, have you never seen yourself represented? Here are books that are going to represent you.’ I’m bisexual, and when I first joined, I only ever read books about straight couples. So finding these books that I saw myself reflected in was life-changing.” She cites in particular Claire Legrand’s Empirium trilogy, some of the first books she read with a bisexual protagonist.

Young is 22, and says: “I thought TikTok was ridiculous, last year before the first lockdown. I really did think it was just for 14-year-olds, but BookTok is such a lovely community. These are people who like the same books as me, and I can talk about the books that I like. It just seems a little bit magical.”
‘Her writing turns us into better readers’
Helen Garner

Whether in her deft reports and profiles for the New Yorker or her studies of Sylvia Plath and psychoanalysis, Janet Malcolm wrote with breathtaking eloquence and insight.

I can’t remember which of Janet Malcolm’s books I read first. She seems to have been making things blossom in my head since the day I started thinking purposefully about anything.

She was the author of 12 books, including *The Journalist and the Murderer*, a dissection of the ethics of her own industry that famously opened with a hair-raising fanfare: “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible”; *In the Freud Archives*, a study of the ego’s jostling to redefine Sigmund Freud’s legacy that saw Malcolm sued for libel by one of her interviewees (she won the decade-long legal fight); and *Forty-One False Starts*, her collection of pieces about artists and writers from Vanessa Bell to JD Salinger written chiefly for the New Yorker, her journalistic home for six decades.

To open any one of her books at random is to find myself drawn back into that unmistakable sensibility, that unique tissue of mind, and to grasp how deeply I am indebted to her. The inside jacket of *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* is black with my scrawled notes: I see now that this is where I got my first tentative handle on Freud. My white paperback of *The Journalist and the Murderer*, that audacious and gallling challenge to all nonfiction writers, is held together by two thick rubber bands. Its binding splintered years ago but I wouldn’t dream of replacing my copy, because every time I go back to it to strengthen my nerve, I make more tiny notes inside the back cover, or slide between its bulging pages a fresh spray of yellow Post-its. On every page I have underlined a sentence, a phrase, a word. It’s a private archive of enlightenment and I treasure it.

In *The Silent Woman*, her study of Sylvia Plath’s biographers and of the whole enterprise of biography, I saw manifest what I was at the time painfully trying to learn: the fact that beneath the thick layers of a writer’s self-censorship, of her fear of being boring or wrong, lies a whole humming, seething world waiting to be released. I learned from watching Malcolm in full flight that I could go much further than timidly nibbling at the edges of people’s peculiar behaviour. I saw that I could get a grip on it and dare to interpret it, to coax meaning from it. The tools were already in my possession. It dawned on me with a dizzy sense of power that in journalism, as well as in fiction, I could call upon the imagery, the spontaneous associations and the emblematic objects that I had learned to trust when I myself was groaning on the therapist’s couch.

I never met Malcolm, or heard her speak, and now I never will; but I would know her written voice anywhere. It’s a literary voice, composed and dry, articulate and free-striding, drawing on deep learning yet plain in its address, and above all fearless, though she could not possibly have been without fear, since she understands it so well in others.
The whole drive of her work is expressed, I think, in a phrase she uses in an essay: “the rapture of a first-hand encounter with another’s lived experience”. Rapture is not too strong a word for the experience of reading Malcolm. You can feast on her writing. Nothing she does is slick or shallow. Her work is always provocative, intellectually and morally complex, but it never hangs heavy. It is airy, racy, mercilessly cut back, so that it surges along with what one critic has called “breathtaking rhetorical velocity”. It sparkles with deft character sketches. It bounds back and forth between straight-ahead reportage and subtle readings of documents and diaries, photographs and paintings.

Malcolm’s whole way of perceiving the world is deeply dyed by the psychoanalytic view of reality. She never theorises or uses jargon. She simply proceeds on the assumption that (as she puts it in her essay collection The Partly-Dressed Clinic) “life is lived on two levels of thought and act: one in our awareness and the other only inferable, from dreams, slips of the tongue, and inexplicable behaviour”. This approach, coupled with her natural flair for metaphor and imagery, allows her almost poetic access to meaning in the way people dress and move, speak or decline to speak - and in her most famously (and legally) disputed concern, the question of trust and betrayal in the relations between writers and the people they choose to write about.

You feel the intense pleasure she gets from looking and thinking. She loves the mystery of writing, of why we do it and what we imagine our prerogatives to be. She keeps coming at things from the most unexpected angles, undercuts the certainty she has just reasoned you into accepting, and dropping you through the floor into a realm of fruitful astonishment, and sometimes laughter.

She skates past the traditional teachings on split infinitives or the undesirability of adjectives: she will plait adjectives and adverbs together in sinewy strands, half a dozen of them, each one working hard. An art magazine, she says, has “an impudent, aggressively unbuttoned, improvised, yet oddly poised air”. Her brisk shorthand often has a sting in its tail: “Wilson, who had an unhappy childhood in a mansion…” “The look of a place inhabited by a man who no longer lives with a woman.”

She relishes the juicy signals of people’s self-presentation. An art critic speaks “with the accent of that non-existent aristocratic European country from which so many bookish New York boys have emigrated”. An old man, once Plath’s peevish downstairs neighbour, “was dressed in a kind of jumpsuit made of black and white seersucker; a bit of turquoise shirt showed at the throat, and a medal hung down his chest. He carried his handsome head proudly, and his rosy lips were set in a pout.” A young pianist about to tackle a monster sonata “looked like a dominatrix, or a lion tamer’s assistant. She had come to tame the beast of a piece, this half-naked woman in sadistic high heels. Take that, and that, Beethoven!”

Rapture is not too strong a word for the experience of reading Malcolm. You can feast on her work - nothing she does is slick or shallow.

As an interviewer Malcolm pulls no punches. She will observe a person and the decor of his apartment, his shoes, his clothes, his way of cooking; she will switch on her reel-to-reel, start him talking, then stand back. Her ear is so finely sensitive to speech, and her nerves to the unspoken, that later, when she sits at her desk, she will recreate her subject’s utterances with a lethal accuracy, unfolding his character and worldview like a fan.

She maintains a perfectly judged distance between her eye and its target. She does not suck up to the people she interviews. She gives her subjects rope. She allows herself to be charmed, at least until the subject reveals vacuity or phoniness, and then she snaps shut in a burst of impatience, and veers away. Although at times she draws back in distaste, or contempt, or even pity, she is not someone who deplores the way of the world or sets out, in her writing, to change it. She merely pays it the respect of her matchless eye. In her work there is a complete absence of hot air. There are no boring bits. Reading her is an austerely enchanting kind of fun. Everything she finds interesting she makes even more interesting by the quality of what she brings to it.

But she will not be read lazily. The packed quality of her work and its bracing sophistication make demands on our attention that we respond to with joy. When she drops into cruising gear she has no equal. She assumes intelligence and expects us to work, to pace along with her. Her writing turns us into better readers. There is no temptation to skim: its texture is too rich, too worldly, too surprising. She is brilliant at revealing things in stages, so we gasp, and gasp, and gasp again. She yokes the familiar to the strange in the way that dreams do - suddenly a wall cracks open and a flood of light pours in, or perhaps a perfectly aimed, needle-like beam.

Her presence in the text is lighter, her touch firmer and more delicate, and her alertness to the psychic tangles of the human more accurately attuned than those of any other nonfiction writer I know. All her life she was perfecting this superb narrating and analytical voice, and if for one, even now she’s gone, will follow it anywhere.

This is an adapted extract from Helen Garner’s foreword to Forty-One False Starts, published by Text.
I set out to write another King Lear
Anne Enright

In 2012 we took a long rent on a cottage in County Clare with a sea view that went all the way to the Aran Islands. It was a fancy version of the cottage my father grew up in, 30 miles south along the coast, and when I told him we were going there my father started to whisper a poem of his youth: “Oh little Corca Baiscinn, the wild, the bleak, the fair, / Oh little stony pastures, whose flowers are sweet, if rare!”

Truth be told I was running away to County Clare, in the turbulence and ardent of middle age. I walked out like a madwoman every evening up the grass-covered green road that began near the house and which went many miles over the uplands of the Burren. During the day I wrote about an Irish aid worker in Africa. I had been writing this for some time. The little house belonged to a builder who was working in Nigeria, and I thought this a nice synchronicity. Every time the aid worker sent a letter home he thought about the stone walls of the west of Ireland with the fuchsia and orange montbretia (as we call crocosmia) growing alongside it.

I really did not want him to be thinking about stone walls; it tapped into something “too Irish” for my purposes. I moved him to Meath, to Dublin, I moved him to a small town nowhere, but Emmet, as he was now called, kept thinking of home the way the drinker in the “Sally O’Brien” Harpad thought of home, and I could not shake him, or the book, out of it. It took ages to reclaim the moment of my father’s little recitation and to own the nostalgia that it contained. It is a poem of exile: “The whole night long we dream of you, and waking think we’re there — /Vain dream, and foolish waking, we never shall see Clare.”

In January 2013 I wrote a scene set around a family dinner table, where the mother cries foolish tears, which the children both dread and ignore. I had the mother, or her foolishness. And I knew the children went everywhere, because that is what Irish children of my generation did. As I worked out their lives (when I saw them at the dinner table, I knew them already, it was as though I had walked into a pre-existing room) I found that the girls, who really wanted to move, could not. Constance stayed at home. Hannah got as far as Dublin and more or less fell apart. The boys were protected by their own coldness, though that was their problem, too. Emmet saves the world but does not love it, Dan can not care for the man he desires.

Each of them walked off into their own world, with its own way of telling a story. When they come back to their mother, the reader knows more about them than they know about each other. I set out to write another King Lear (it always helps to have a plan) but the children had other needs. I followed them, let them grow up and, given the circumstances — the mother’s vanity, the father’s silence — there was a limit to how far and whether they could get away.

Actress by Anne Enright is published in paperback by Vintage.

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Tom Gauld

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