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‘Ann Quin’s work isn’t just experimentation. It is someone really trying to get at what being alive at that moment feels like and is like.’
— Claire-Louise Bennett, page 24

Contents

The week in books.............................................................................................................04
The books that made me by Anuk Arudpragasam.....................................................05

COVER STORY Donal Ryan’s guide to short story writing.................................06

Book of the week: **Speak, Silence:**
*In Search of WG Sebald* by Carole Angier.................................................................10

Nonfiction reviews
*Ding Dong! Avon Calling! The Women and Men of Avon Products,*
*Incorporated* by Katina Manko..............................................................................12
*Something Out of Place: Women & Disgust* by Eimear McBride..................13
*The Magic Box: Viewing Britain through the Rectangular Window* by Rob Young.................................................................14
*France in the World: A New Global History* edited by Patrick Boucheron & Stéphane Gerson.........................................................15

INTERVIEW YA sensation Femi Fadugba...............................................................16

Fiction reviews
*The Angels of L19* by Jonathan Walker .................................................................20
*Something New Under the Sun* by Alexandra Kleeman.................................21
*The Luminous Novel* by Mario Levrero.................................................................22
*Gold Diggers* by Sanjena Sathian...........................................................................22
Science fiction, fantasy and horror books of the month......................................23

BOOKS ESSAY Claire-Louise Bennett’s revolution by Alex Clark.............24

Books about a post-human world by Cal Flyn, plus Tom Gauld..............26
The week in books
14 August

Booker sales boom
The 13 novels longlisted for this year’s Booker prize have seen a huge increase in sales since the judges’ choices were revealed on 27 July. Two novels, Anuk Arudpragasam’s A Passage North and Nathan Harris’s debut The Sweetness of Water, saw their sales figures rise by more than 900% in the week after the longlist announcement, while sales of Rachel Cusk’s Second Place and Francis Spufford’s Light Perpetual were both up by more than 450% on the week before.

Klara and the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro remains the top pick among readers, accounting for almost 70% of the sales of all longlisted titles. The story of a child’s artificial friend has already become the Nobel laureate’s best-selling hardback since Nielsen’s bestseller records began in 1998, and its sales went up by 50% in the week after it made the longlist.

Holland House, the tiny publisher of this year’s most unexpected longlisted novel, has this week reprinted 5,000 more copies of Karen Jennings’ An Island in anticipation of a further rise in sales.

Lucy Knight

Gordon Burn prize shortlist shines
As reading experiences go, selecting the books for this year’s Gordon Burn prize for writing that shares his spirit has been one of the best of my life. My fellow judges – authors Denise Mina, Derek Owusu and Irenosen Okojie – and I have been blown away by the contenders, and we struggled to choose just six from our excellent 12-book longlist.

Our shortlist features a range of formal approaches, including Sam Byers’ novel Come Join Our Disease, the genre-blurring A Ghost in the Throat by Doireann Ní Ghriofa, and Hanif Abdurraqib’s history of black performance, A Little Devil in America. Jenni Fagan’s interconnected stories, Luckenbooth, the poetic storytelling of Mrs Death Misses Death by Salena Godden, and Tabitha Lasley’s Sea State, an entertaining look at life on oil rigs, complete the lineup.

Now for the impossible task of choosing a winner, announced on 14 October.

Sian Cain

Suez hold-up haunts Ghost in This House
More than four months after the Ever Given container vessel, which got stuck in the Suez Canal, was freed, the blockage continues to wreak havoc. The latest picture book by children’s author and illustrator Oliver Jeffers (above) has now had its publication date pushed back owing to delays caused by the obstruction. "There’s a Ghost in This House, which was scheduled for a September release, will now come out on 5 October. “The fallout from the ship getting stuck in the Suez canal has been long and complicated,” Jeffers explained on Facebook and Instagram. “This world, it’s all connected.”

Antigenic

WORD OF THE WEEK
Steven Poole

Of the many things that might still go wrong with Covid, the government scientific advisory group Sage has warned, is a possible combination of “antigenic drift” and “antigenic sin”. This does not describe a louche jet-setter, but something rather more alarming.

An “antigen” (first recorded in English in 1908) is any foreign substance that, when introduced to the body, stimulates the production of an antibody. Etymologically, it creates (“-gen”) an “anti”. An antigen can be a pathogen (from the Greek “generates suffering”), such as the Sars-CoV-2 virus, or a vaccine. So what is antigenic is good for you, as Nietzsche might have said, unless it kills you first.

But what of drifting and sin? “Antigenic drift” is random genetic variation, which will probably result in a virus strain against which current vaccines are ineffective. And “antigenic sin” is the human body’s regrettable tendency to fall back on its immune memory of previous antigens when presented with a new variant of either virus or vaccine. This phenomenon was first named, jokily, as “antigenic original sin” in 1960, though its heathen humour might be lost on those who prefer to locate the real antigenic sinners in the corridors of government.
‘There’s a lot of laughter in my life, but not when I read’
Anuk Arudpragasam

The book I am currently reading
I just finished Jamaica Kincaid’s Autobiography of My Mother, and am about to read some Elizabeth Bishop. In Tamil I’m reading Vaadivaasal, an elegant late 1940s novella by CS Chellappa about jallikattu, the centuries-old art of bull-taming that still takes place in parts of Tamil Nadu today.

The book that changed my life
I suppose there are many, but the one that comes to mind is Descartes’s Meditations, which I came across by chance at a bookshop near our home in Colombo when I was in high school. I had no context for it when I was 16, but I remember being so impressed and excited by the idea that our knowledge of the world around us could be called into question so thoroughly. This led to a very long immersion in philosophy from which I still haven’t fully surfaced.

The book I wish I’d written
There are definitely texts and passages I wish I was capable of writing. There’s a 20-page section in the middle of Péter Nádas’s novel A Book of Memories where two young boys in a farmhouse outside Budapest are standing in a sty. They watch as a pregnant sow twitches violently on the floor, on the verge of death after struggling for some hours to give birth. The braver boy enters the sty, kneels down and feels around inside until he can finally do what he needs to do to help bring out her litter. It’s the most profound and moving account of communication between two bodies that I’ve read.

The last book that made me laugh
To be honest, I don’t really read to laugh. There’s a lot of laughter in my life, but not when I read.

The book that most influenced my writing
Probably Robert Musil’s The Man Without Qualities, which was the book that made me turn from philosophy to literature. Reading it made me realise that I wanted to write novels, though because it had such a strong influence I also unconsciously inherited a lot of its modernist biases, especially its scepticism about the notion of character. It was a long time before I could move out of its orbit.

The book that is most underrated
One book I love that I haven’t heard discussed very often is Andrei Platonov’s Soul, translated from the Russian by Robert Chandler. It brings suffering and tenderness together in a way I haven’t seen done elsewhere.

The book that changed my mind
I read nonfiction very seldom, though one book I read a couple of years ago that really did change – or at least open – my mind was Angela Davis’s classic text on abolition, Are Prisons Obsolete?

The last book that made me cry
I can’t share the source of my tears so easily, unfortunately.

A Passage North by Anuk Arudpragasam has been longlisted for the Booker prize.
Don’t worry, take risks, be truthful ... drawing on writers from Anton Chekhov to Kit de Waal, Donal Ryan explores the art of writing short stories - and finding peace of mind in the process

The short of it

The first story I wrote outside of school was about Irish boxer Barry McGuigan. I was 10 and I loved Barry. He’d just lost his world featherweight title to the American Steve Cruz under the hellish Nevada sun and the only thing that could mend my broken heart was a restoration of my hero’s belt. Months passed and there was no talk of a rematch, so I wrote a story about it.

My imagined fight was in Ireland, and I was ringside. In my story I’d arranged the whole thing. I’d even given Barry some tips on countering Steve’s vicious hook. It went the distance but Barry won easily on points. He hugged Steve. His dad sang “Danny Boy”. I felt as if I’d finished my story an intense relief. The world in that moment was restful and calm. I’d created a new reality for myself, and I was able to occupy it for a while, to feel the joy I’d created by moving a biro across paper. I think of that story every single time I sit down to write. I strive for the feeling of rightness it gave me, that feeling of peace.

It took me a while to regain that feeling. When I left school, where I was lucky enough to be roundly encouraged and told with conviction that I was a writer, I inexplicably embarked on a career of self-sabotage, only allowing my literary ambitions to surface very sporadically, and then burning the results in fits of disgust. Nothing I wrote rang true; nothing felt worthy of being read.

Shortly after I got married my mother-in-law happened upon a file on the hard drive of a PC I’d loaned her (there’s a great and terrifying writing prompt!). It contained a ridiculous story about a young solicitor being corrupted by a gangster client. I’d forgotten about the story, and about one of its peripheral characters, a simple and pure-hearted man named Johnsey Cunliffe. My wife suggested giving Johnsey new life, and I started a rewrite with him as the hero; the story kept growing until I found myself with a draft of my first finished novel, The Thing About December. I didn’t feel embarrassed, nor did I feel an urge to burn it. I felt peace. I knew it wouldn’t last, and so I quickly wrote a handful of new stories, and the peace didn’t dissipate. Not for a while, anyway.

So a forgotten short story, written somewhere in the fog of my early 20s, turned out to be the making of my writing career. Maybe it would have happened anyway, or maybe not, but I think the impulse would always have been present, the urge to put a grammar on the ideas in my head. Mary Costello, author of The China Factory, one of the finest short story collections I’ve ever read, says: “Write only what’s essential, what must be written … an image or a story that keeps gnawing, that won’t leave you alone. And the only way to get peace is to write it.”

I know that in this straitened, rule-bound, virus-ridden present, many people find themselves with that gnawing feeling, that urge to fashion from language a new reality, or to get the idea that’s been clamouring inside them out of their imagination and into the world. So I’ve put together some ideas with the help of some of my favourite writers on how best to go about finding that peace.
Don’t worry
In a short story, the sentences have to do so much! Some of Chekhov’s stories are less than three printed pages; a few comprise a single brief paragraph. In his most famous story, “The Lady with the Dog”, we are given a detailed account of the nature, history and motivations of Gurov within the first page, but there is no feeling of stress or overload. Stephen King’s motivations of Gurov within the first page, but there is no feeling of stress or overload. Stephen King’s 2010 collection Full Dark, No Stars is a masterclass in compression and suspense. The novel form, as I’ve heard Mike McCormack say, offers “a wonderful accommodation to the writer”, but the short story is a barren territory. There’s nowhere to hide, no space for excess or digression.

My wife asked me once why this worried me so much. I’d just published my first two novels and had embarked on a whole collection of short stories, A Slanting of the Sun, and she’d come home from work to find me curled up in a ball of teary-eyed despair. “Every sentence worries me,” I whined. “None of them is doing enough.” “Don’t worry about how much they’re doing until all the work is done,” she said. “Get the story written, and then you can go back and fix all those worrisome sentences. And the chances are, once the story exists, you won’t be as worried about those sentences at all. They’ll just be.”

Get it out
One of the concepts my colleague Sarah illuminates is that of a “draft zero” – a draft that comes before a first draft, where your story is splashed on to your screen or page, containing all or most of its desired elements. Draft zero offers complete freedom from any consideration of craft or finesse.

Kit de Waal, who recently published a wonderful collection, Supporting Cast, featuring characters from her novels, offers this wisdom on getting your story from your head on to the page or screen: “Don’t overthink but do overwrite. Sometimes you see a pair of gloves or a flower on the street or lipstick on a coffee cup and it moves you in a particular way. That’s your prompt right there. Write that feeling or set something around that idea, you don’t know what at this stage. And follow it right to the end – it might be a day, a week, a year. Overwrite the thing and then sit back and ask yourself, ‘Where is the magic? What am I seeing? Who is speaking?’ When you’ve worked that out, you have your story and you can start crafting and editing.”

Your draft zero is Michelangelo’s lump of rough-hacked marble, but with David’s basic shape. It is the reassuring existence of something tangible in the world remarkable study of seven classic Russian short stories, A Swim in a Pond in the Rain, published earlier this year. I don’t buy the overarching argument about fiction generating empathy, but this is a book stuffed with arresting observations and practical tips from a master craftsman. His 30-page close reading of Chekhov’s 12-page “In the Cart” is jaw-droppingly good.

Steering the Craft by Ursula K. Le Guin isn’t specifically about short stories, but she could certainly write them, and her clear, practical advice is invaluable to anyone wanting to learn about two of the form’s prerequisites: rhythm and concision.

My last recommendation isn’t a book at all, but the New Yorker: Fiction podcast. Appearing monthly since 2007, each episode features a writer reading a story from the magazine’s archives and discussing it with fiction editor Deborah Treisman. These conversations are a wonderful education in how stories work. I strongly recommend Ben Marcus on Kazuo Ishiguro (September 2011), Tessa Hadley on Nadine Gordimer (September 2012), and ZZ Packer on Lesley Nneka Arimah (October 2020), a discussion which moves between craft, fairytale and motherhood.

Books for budding short story writers
by Chris Power

If short story collections occupy a minority position on publishers’ lists, books about the short story are an even scarcer commodity. In the 1970s the academic Charles E May published Short Story Theories, which he followed up in 1994 with The New Short Story Theories. These volumes, out of print but easy enough to find secondhand, collect some of the key texts about short fiction, from Edgar Allan Poe’s 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales, to Elizabeth Bowen’s tracing of Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov’s influence, and Julio Cortázar’s brilliant lecture Some Aspects of the Short Story (“the novel always wins on points, while the story must win by a knockout”).

Frank O’Connor’s The Lonely Voice (1962) studies 11 great story writers, from Ivan Turgenev to Katherine Mansfield, and argues that the quintessential short story subjects are outsiders: “There is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel - an intense awareness of human loneliness.” O’Connor’s assertiveness makes disagreeing with him part of the fun.

I have a similar relationship with George Saunders’s Ah. I can still feel the beautiful relief I felt at her wise words. Life is filled with things to worry about. The quality of our sentences should be a challenge and a constant fruitful quest, a gradual aggregation of attainment. But creativity should always bring us at least some whisper of joy. It should be a way out of worry.
outside of your mind, something raw and real, containing within its messy self the potential for greatness. And the best way to make it great is to make it truthful.

Be truthful
I don’t mean by this that you need to speak your own truth at all times or to draw only on your own lived experience, but it’s important to be true to our own impulses and ambitions as writers; to write the story we want to write, not the story we think we should write. That’s like saying things that you think people want to hear: you’ll end up tangling yourself in a knot of half-truths and constructed, co-opted beliefs.

You’ll be more politician than writer, and, as good and decent as some of them are, the world definitely has enough politicians.

Your own experiences, of course, your own truth, can be parlayed into wonderful fictions, and can by virtue of their foundation in reality contain an almost automatic immediacy and intensity. Melatu Uche Okorie’s debut collection, This Hostel Life, is drawn from her experiences in the Irish direct provision system as an asylum seeker. The title story in particular has about it a feeling of absolute truthfulness, written as it is in the demotic of the author’s Nigerian countrywomen; while another story, “Under the Awning”, feels as if it might be an oblique description of events witnessed or experienced first-hand by the author.

Take risks
You might as well do exactly what you want to do, even (or especially) if it’s never been done before. You have nothing to lose by taking risks, with form, content, style, structure or any other element of your piece of fiction. Rob Doyle, a consummate literary risk-taker, exhorts writers to “try writing a story that doesn’t look how short stories are meant to look – try one in the form of an encyclopaedia entry, or a list, or an essay, or a review of an imaginary restaurant, sex toy, amusement park or film. Have people wondering what it’s even fiction. Mix it all up. Short stories can explore ideas as well as emotions – huge ideas can fit into short stories. For proof, read the work of Jorge Luis Borges. In fact, I second Roberto Bolano’s advice to anyone writing short stories: read Borges.”

Bend the iron bar
“When the curtain falls,” said Frank O’Connor of the short story, “everything must be changed. An iron bar must have been bent and been seen to be bent.” One of the first short stories to break my heart was O’Connor’s “Guests of the Nation”. It has been described as one of the greatest anti-war stories ever written, and one of the finest stories from a master of the form. Its devastating denouement closes with this plaintive statement from the shattered narrator: “And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.” This line contains within it an entreaty to short story writers to reach for that profound moment, that event or epiphany or intense change becomes possible or, at least, imaginable for the character. Cut into the story late, leave it early, and find a moment.” Joseph quotes the closing words of one of his favourite short stories, Raymond Carver’s “Fat”: “It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it.”

Listen to your story
“Beer Trip to Llandudno”, Kevin Barry’s masterpiece of the short form, from his 2012 collection Dark Lies the Island, is another story that has remained pristine in my consciousness since I first read it. Part of the magic of that story, and of all Barry’s work, is its dialogue: the earthy, pithy, perfectly authentic exchanges between his characters. When I asked Kevin about this, he said: “If you feel like you’re coming towards the final draft of a story, print it out and read it aloud, slowly, with red pen in hand. Your ear will catch all the evasions and the false notes in the story much quicker than your eye will catch them on the screen or page. Listen to what’s not being said in the dialogue. Very often the story, and the drama, is to be found just underneath the surface of the talk.”

Such scrupulous attention to the burden carried by each unit of language and to the work done by the notes played and unplayed can make a story truly shine. Alice Kinsella is an accomplished poet who recently turned her hand to the short form in great style with her sublime account of early motherhood, “Window”. “Poetry or prose,” Alice says, “the aim is the same, to make every word earn its place on the page.”

Ignore everything
And as self-defeating as this sounds, here’s a final piece of advice: once you sit down to write your story, forget about this article. Forget all the advice you’ve ever been given. Free your hand, free your mind, cut yourself loose into the infinity of possibility, and create from those 26 little symbols what you will. We came from the hearts of stars. We are the universe, telling itself its own story.

Donal Ryan is a judge for the BBC national short story award with Cambridge University. The shortlist will be announced on 10 September and the winner on 5 October. See www.bbc.co.uk/nssa.

Cover story

Saturday 14 August 2021 The Guardian 9
{ Biography} The first major study of revered author and academic WG Sebald reveals an obsessive, brilliant mind

Caroline Moorehead

WG Sebald’s mother Rosa once said that her son had been born without a skin, so that he was unable to protect himself from being overwhelmed by the suffering of others, and even normal experience was traumatic for him. For Carole Angier, author of this unauthorised biography, something about this acute sensitivity made Sebald “the most exquisite writer”, a man oppressed by experience and the burden of his mind, who believed that the remembering of great injustices was an attempt, however small, at what he called “restitution”.

In Janet Malcolm’s memorable dictum, biographers are burglars, robbing the lives of their subjects. But what Angier realised, as she embarked on her own pattern of theft, was that she was dealing with the most light-footed of all burglars. Sebald’s books, a mixture of history, fiction, memoir and biography, are also heavily stolen from friends, family and acquaintances, leaving many of them furious and aggrieved. As Peter Jonas, former director of the English National Opera and a close friend of Sebald’s, put it: “He wasn’t just a listener. He was a recording machine.”

Angier’s task was not an easy one. The fact that Sebald’s wife and daughter wanted his life to remain private, which meant that she could quote only very little of his letters or even his published work, was clearly a huge drawback. The intimate life is inevitably sketchy. To compensate, she has done a meticulous job of research, both in Germany, where Sebald was born, and in England, where he lived for much of his adult life, interviewing hundreds of friends and colleagues, scrutinising every scrap of his voluminous writings, and unearthing the identity of many of the characters whose stories he used. She visited every place he lived or spent any time in and delved into the backgrounds of his many friends. She quotes another dictum of Malcolm’s: “We do not own the facts of our lives ... this ownership passes out of our hands at birth, at the moment we are first observed.” The result, if somewhat overlong, is fascinating. As she says, biography is a question of joining holes together, and her skills as a joiner are formidable.

Sebald was born on the southern edge of Bavaria in May 1944. He had two sisters, Gertrud and Beate, both of whom talked at length to Angier. His father returned from the war when he was three, and their relationship was never good; as he grew up, Sebald saw in him everything he hated about the generation who had accepted the Nazis. By contrast, he loved and was largely brought up by his grandfather, who taught him to read, to love stories and to look closely at nature.

Until he was 40, Sebald’s work lay in academia, first as a schoolteacher, later as a lecturer at the University of East Anglia, where students found his seminars more like conversations than lessons - challenging, subversive and humorous. He told them that they should steal all they could from the world around them. His papers, most of them on German writers and intellectuals, infuriated the academic establishment with their provocative assertions and cavalier attitude towards orthodox critical methods.

But then, in the early 1990s, came The Emigrants, the first of his books to be translated into English, greeted by Susan Sontag in the TLS as “an astonishing masterpiece”. A collection of stories, based closely on real people, it introduced readers to what would be Sebald’s unique style: characters that are a composite of many people, drawing on conversations, readings, memories and plundered secrets, mixed up, embroidered, illustrated by grainy black and white photographs. He credited no one, because that, he said, would reduce what he was trying to do, which was to write fiction, behind which stood real people.

It was, he told Angier in the one interview she had with him, an act of homage, “tipping his hat to artists with whom he felt affinity”. These included Franz Kafka, Friedrich Hölderlin and Vladimir Nabokov, whose Speak, Memory was one of his favourite books.

In the beautiful but despairing books that followed - The Rings of Saturn, Vertigo and Austerlitz - these gestures of homage continued and with them the themes that define his books: the memory of the genocide of the Jews in a Germany torn between denial of the past and determination to come to terms with it, and the wartime bombing of German cities. It made Sebald’s books unlike any others, in their fascination with coincidences, the way things hang together in forms we don’t expect or understand, their mixture of genres and use of language, and his conviction that literature has to be an ethical activity, inseparable from questions of moral value. They deal with oppression, persecution, war, loss, but never overtly with politics, and his
characters are people who have been cast adrift. Angier further suggests that the books all reflect Sebald’s deep interest in that which lies beyond our grasp, somewhere between the past and the present, between the living and the dead, reality and dream. As the central character in Austerlitz puts it: “I have always felt I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all.” People who read his books never forget them.

And if in the process not everyone was happy to see themselves and their intimate lives and secrets portrayed and transmogrified into composites, well, Angier argues, “every great writer who has ever lived is ruthless.”

As part of her exhaustive research, Angier examined the voluminous working papers that Sebald left. They revealed a man of obsessive, agonising concentration over every detail, a writer who revised, rewrote, revised again. The drafts for The Rings of Saturn ran to 2,000 pages, from which he distilled 400. Going through them allowed her to follow the workings of Sebald’s mind, as he cut, expanded, borrowed and transposed, reimagined scenes and set biographical puzzles. This same minute concern carried over into the translations of his books. He spent 350 hours with the translator of The Rings of Saturn. Not surprisingly, relations with his translators were not always smooth.

Sebald’s nature, as it emerges from Angier’s book, was, even as a boy, anxious, gloomy, passionate and clever, and he was desperate to control the world around him. He was, and remained all his life, very alone. Photographs show his long face brooding. He was much loved by his friends, but could be sharp and cutting. He was a depressive, with spells when he feared that he was crossing “the line from melancholy to madness”. One of the few bright spells in his life seems to have been a late friendship - an affair? - with a woman he had known as a boy and who he met again towards the end of his life. The Sebald glimpsed in their encounters is playful, capable of private jokes and light-hearted pleasure. During her one meeting with him, Angier found him “kind, gloomy and funny”, honest about himself and his parents, but “about his work he ... spun me a tale”.

Though only in his late 50s when he died, Sebald had long been unwell with bad migraines and back pain. He refused to see a doctor. Always easily distracted, over the years he had had many minor car accidents. On 14 December 2001, driving his daughter near Norwich, he turned into the path of a lorry. His daughter was largely unhurt. Sebald died instantly, probably, the coroner concluded, of a heart attack.

In her long and scholarly book, a testament to research and detailed dissection, Angier has presented a remarkable portrait of a writer consumed by work, a man who fashioned, out of his erudition and culture, his imagination and empathy, a kind of writing that was entirely his own. Speak, Silence will turn readers back to the books that made him one of the most famous German writers of modern times. His genius, she writes, was to “see the fiction in facts”.

To buy a copy for £26.10 go to guardianbookshop.com.
How a cosmetics corporation changed the economic landscape for women around the world

Linda Scott

At first glance, some readers may expect *Ding Dong! Avon Calling!* to be a frothy history of cosmetics. Others might assume that the book will belong on the long list of accusatory treatises about capitalism and the power of beauty advertising to enslave women. Fortunately, Katina Manko’s thoroughly researched and deftly written book on Avon products offers a fresh take on the beauty and fashion industry, one that breaks with and demystifies the cliches of the past.

Manko focuses her history on the sales agents who rang the doorbells. Throughout, she takes seriously the idea that at least some “Avon ladies” were striving to do something that, until very recently, was rare in American life: to start and grow a woman-owned business. Rather than dismiss them as foolish housewives or corporate dupes, she treats these agents’ entrepreneurial ambitions with respect, dispassionately analysing their achievements and failures.

Importantly, though Manko repeatedly points to the white, middle-class nature of the Avon distribution system and consumer base, her analysis documents the barriers to economic engagement that Avon reps faced as women. In the early 20th century, for instance, Avon employed an all-female cadre of travelling recruiters. Mostly single—often widowed or divorced—these women continually met with resistance from the husbands of potential recruits, who had the power to refuse permission for their wives to sign a contract, as well as to withhold the $5 fee. In a letter published in 1926 with the headline “The Adamant Husband”, one recruiter wrote: “I had two promising workers today all ready and eager to work when Mr. Husband interrupts. He has the advantage there,

Perfect pitch
An Avon magazine advertisement from the 1960s

as he furnished the $5.00 and likes to show his authority. But finally found one whose husband agrees to help. ‘May his tribe increase.’”

As is still the case in many countries today, in the early 1900s, women in the US lost all economic autonomy under the law, including their own identity, when they married. Even after laws were eased in most of the states, women were held back from economic participation by widespread personnel practices that forced them out of employment as soon as they became wives. These so-called “marriage bars” were rationalised by the belief that a wife’s service to her husband must take priority over all other aspects of her life. In the mid 60s such practices were declared illegal. Yet informal expectations perpetuated women’s dependency.

Even in the 80s, an African American woman given an award by Avon for developing a business that provided 24-hour daycare to minorities and disabled people remarked: “As a woman entrepreneur, I am challenged by the reality of a man’s world and by the task of being the boss at the office and my husband’s wife at home.” It was not until 1982 that the supreme court struck down the final state law holding that a man had the right to total control over household income and assets, including those earned, inherited or purchased by his wife.

In a country where married women often could not take formal employment even when their husbands did approve, the sales agent arrangement offered by Avon gave them an alternative route to economic viability. Gloria Steinem remarked in a recent interview: “One of the most important things I learned about money is that I could support myself and buy...
Manko’s nuanced tale is set to make a lasting contribution to our awareness of how economics and gender typically play out. Freedom, despite all the instruction to my generation of women to marry a good provider.”

Steinem’s own cohort was, in fact, the generation most associated with the famous “Ding Dong! Avon calling!” slogan; that is, the women of the Feminine Mystique era from which the second wave feminism of the 70s emerged.

However, though Manko frequently remarks on the disproportionate place that married women played in Avon operations and culture, she doesn’t interrogate this one crucial motivator – the desire to avoid being forced into marriage merely to survive.

She does however analyse one cultural expectation that is as entrenched in some feminist thought today as it was in the popular mind of the early 1900s. The belief that women should make money only for humanitarian causes and not for their own personal gain was a taboo well recognised by Avon recruiters, so communications sometimes danced around an aim that the company knew was driving the women in their system – making money for themselves.

The even-handed treatment of Avon in this book is laudable. Manko gives the erstwhile California Perfume Company credit for breaking with the prescribed economic role imposed on women in 19th- and 20th-century America, yet also reveals the way that the company’s rhetoric sugar-coated what was really a rather radical economic proposition by wrapping it in ideals of domesticity and respectability.

She takes Avon to task for its failure to include women in the ranks of management; but gives the firm due credit for its generous support of breast cancer research, as well as its commitment to ending domestic violence.

Few historians have been as fair to corporations as Manko is to Avon and even fewer have been as knowledgeable about the strategies available to them or the parameters within which they must work. As a result of Manko’s painstaking research and astute grasp of business operations, readers of Ding Dong! Avon Calling! see the inside of an organisation with blind spots, slow responses, bad decisions and poor management.

Indeed, Manko’s deep and detailed account of Avon’s business history may be a bit overwhelming for some readers. Nevertheless, her nuanced tale of a company, an industry and a group of women evolving over time will make a lasting contribution to our understanding of how economics and gender typically play out. If we are to build a distinctively gendered theory of economics from which to understand women’s disadvantages and to fight for their financial liberty, books like this are essential.

To buy a copy for £23.48 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Nonfiction ¶

A prize-winning novelist examines how disgust is still used as a form of social control

Susie Orbach

For feminists of the postwar Freudian era, it wasn’t so much disgust we were taking on. We were fighting ideas of lacking (penises, capabilities). We were being deprived of power, recognition and opportunity. We looked at the consequences of women’s roles as child bearers and emotional nurturers and how our profound dependency on mothers generated fear. We looked at the terrors, disappointments and desire to control that dependency.

Eimear McBride uses disgust in a visceral sense. The disgust coming at us; the shame and repulsion we feel towards our own bodies. Her framing adds another particularly useful layer to the discussion about dependency and the fear of it. Dirt, as her title reminds us, is “matter out of place”. A woman is an object who has dared to become a subject and is now out of place, wrong. And surely she is right. The backlash against women – from the vicious marketing of “beauty” to the use of rape as a weapon of war and the control of women’s bodies in certain US states that prioritise a foetus over a mother in need of medical treatment – tells us that disgust is a form of social control.

This control is bred into girls early on. They see their siblings, aunts and mothers taming and transforming the body as though there were something wrong with it. We drench women in shame. We still divide them into the sanctified and the sinner. Where once “sexual ignorance was a sign of a woman’s market value, now any admission of reticence or sexual naivety causes her stock to plummet”. However, McBride writes, women and girls are not only crossing the lines that have been drawn for us, but changing “the very lie of the line”, unleashing danger for those – Harvey Weinstein et al – who cannot, or will not, accept that change.

Her final point, in this satisfying polemic, is that women’s ability to manage conflicting demands could bring complexity and nuance to solving world problems and help us all navigate territories of contradiction. Yes, and well, sort of yes, for the fear that lurks behind the internal patriarch that lives inside us needs to be engaged with, too. Without that, we are destined to fix the pain and vulnerability of individual others rather than society as a whole.

To buy a copy for £9.29 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Saturday 14 August 2021 The Guardian 13
Television

In praise of a vanished age in British TV, when the brilliant and the bizarre were aired to the nation

Sukhdev Sandhu

I grew up in the West Country but spent much of my adolescence peering at the Sheffield Crucible theatre. Like millions of other Britons, I was glued to championship snooker. Back in the 1960s, BBC Two’s controller David Attenborough had promoted the sport as a showcase for the wonders of colour TV; two decades later, I was still watching it on my parents’ black-and-white set. This should have been absurd, an inferior experience. In fact, my imagination transformed the grey balls into pinks and reds and blues. Were all programmes envisaged as much as seen?

Rob Young’s The Magic Box, an exploration of British television from the late 1950s to the late 80s, seems to think so. It portrays its subject as an alternative national curriculum. Television in those days harboured deviants. It was spectral, a dreamscape. This may have been inevitable: a key figure in the development of the cathode-ray tube was William Crookes (1832-1919), who was interested in spiritualism and also served as president of the Society for Psychical Research.

Young writes of television as a spirit medium, its programmes transmitted through “the dreamcatcher aerial bolted to chimney pots”. He is brilliant at evoking the sheer oddness of these “ghosts of movement”, of otherworldly images emerging from “a hissing void, a blizzard of whirring white dots” to flood the living room. At the same time, he points out, television then was also “terrestrial”, broadcast on “channels”, and often made at rural-sounding production centres such as Maida Vale and Pebble Mill. It was “bonded to the earth”. Its ability to challenge, even deconstruct received narratives about landscape, nation and history lies at the heart of this book.

Not a few of the landmarks of this era (even if they weren’t immediately hailed as such) stray from a social realism template. The Stone Tape (1972), written by Nigel Kneale, who had authored the equally remarkable Quatermass and the Pit (1967) and The Year of the Sex Olympics (1968), deals with scientists who land at a new research facility only to discover the building is a recording device, its walls archiving horrors that had been committed there centuries before. John Prowse’s The Changes (1975) is a 10-part children’s series featuring deranged adults who smash up 20th-century technology, a young girl wandering across southern England before being taken in by a band of Sikhs, and witch trials and sentient lodestones. Many programmes Young discusses were broadcast only once; they couldn’t be paused or rewound, far less circulated. Some no longer exist. It still beggars belief that HTV Wales even commissioned Michael Bakewell’s Fat Man on a Beach (1974), in which avant-garde novelist BS Johnson tramps across the bay of Porth Ceiriad in North Wales while discussing about bananas, happenstance and female deities. Then there’s the time-travelling science fiction series Sapphire & Steel (1979-1982), which Young calls “one of British television’s most tantalising enigmas”, though it had “none of the elements that a modern viewership would call ‘entertaining’”.

Almost everything in his book would be dismissed by today’s streaming behemoths as “too quirky, too local, too slow, too dry, too difficult, too weird”. “Spells woven against forgetting” is a beautiful phrase Young uses to describe the train travelogues of poet laureate John Betjeman. It’s true of so many of the dramas and documentaries here: in their tang and texture as much as in their subject matter, they were spells against forgetting — reanimating pre-Christian Britain in Alan Clarke and David Rudkin’s Penda’s Fen (1974), British imperialism in Colin Luke’s citric The Black Safari (1972) and Molly Dineen’s Home from the Hill (1987), the Highland Clearances in John McGrath’s extraordinary The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1974), directed by John Mackenzie. If, as the cultural theorist Mark Fisher has claimed, postwar public broadcasting represented a form of “popular modernism”, this was often a modernism against modernity.

The Magic Box isn’t solely about television. Young writes eloquently about cinema directors such as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Lindsay Anderson, Derek Jarman — heretics all, lifelong members of the awkward squad — who cocked a snook at the nation’s shibboleths and fantasies. Young is no nostalgist, but there’s an unmistakable plangency to his observation that, these days, “the medium has had to focus on story and forward drive over ambience and atmosphere”. Television is hi-definition, louder, branded, portable, privatised. It’s everywhere but often nowhere. What it increasingly lacks is filigree and shadow, ambiguity and ache, ghosts and spectres.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
An enticing and quixotic history of France that’s defiantly liberal-leftist in its vision of the past

John Kampfner

At the end of December 1989, France ended commemorations of its revolution two centuries before. Jack Lang, the culture minister, declared: “Let us pause and take it all in and remember how fortunate we are to experience this amazing moment. This evening does not mark the end of the bicentenary, but rather a prelude: a kind of overture to the third century of our freedoms in the making.”

This moment of naive optimism is all the more remarkable because the French are rarely prone to excesses of ebullience in modern politics. Each president seems to secure record lows in opinion polls. The fury of the street is never far away.

An enticing and quixotic history of France reaches these shores outre-Manche at a time when both countries have seldom felt so ill at ease. France in the World, a 1,392-page volume of essays, was published at home at the start of 2017. Since then France has had to contend with terrorist attacks, gilets jaunes, the calamitous fire at Notre Dame, resurgence of the far right, Trump, Brexit and other populist oddities and, in Emmanuel Macron, the foe of just about everyone.

Beginning with pre-history and ending with the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan in 2015, this is a chronicle of the French, wedded not to territory or blood lines, but to certain ideals and ways of thinking. It is defiantly liberal-leftist in its vision of the past, seeing in colonialism and global finance the roots of most contemporary ills.

This is a book to dip into and enjoy. It is inconsistent, perhaps necessarily so. The thematic and geographic range is vast – from farming to philosophy to social mores, from Algiers to Siam, the Suez Canal to England’s south coast. It contains gaping holes and bewildering choices. The first world war is assessed elsewhere. Perhaps more than anything else, it is language that defines Frenchness. Villers-Cotterêts is a commune to the north-east of the capital, one that apparently has not too much to show for itself. Today it has a population of 10,000 and an extreme right-wing party apparently has not too much to show for itself.

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Femi Fadugba

The physicist-turned-YA novelist talks to Kadish Morris about setting his debut in south London, and how it was snapped up by Daniel Kaluuya for Netflix. Plus read an extract

‘There is no good reason why Peckham couldn’t be the theoretical physics capital of the world’

had it not been for his secondary school caretaker, physicist-turned-novelist Femi Fadugba might never have gone on to study material sciences and quantum computing at Oxford University. “I don’t usually tell people this story because it sounds like something out of a movie,” he says, laughing, on a video call from Peckham, south London. “He gave me a Quantum Physics for Dummies book when I was 11. It was only a couple of years ago that I found his phone number and called him up. He told me that he had a PhD and was really into physics, but just wasn’t able to pursue it.”

Similarly, had it not been for his career in quantum physics, Fadugba might never have written his debut sci-fi novel, The Upper World – a book about time travel set in Peckham and deeply informed by the study of atoms, matter, energy and relativity. “I decided I wanted to write this book because I’d have conversations with people who would ask me to explain quantum physics. They’d always be super fascinated and wanted me to recommend a book, but I couldn’t find one that I could put my hand on my heart and say: ‘You’ll dig this.’”

So he set out to do exactly what Toni Morrison had asked of anyone frustrated by the lack of diverse stories in the landscape of literature: “If there’s a
Interview

Femi Fadugba

The book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

*The Upper World* is a uniquely thrilling, heart-wrenching young adult novel that follows two teenage protagonists. Esso and Rhia exist in different time periods, 2020 and 2035 respectively, but are connected by a life-changing event - a bullet heading for an alleyway and set to cause irreversible harm. When Esso is hit by a car, he is transported to a mysterious place where he discovers that he can see into the past and the future. He then seeks to change the course of this tragic event, which somehow involves Rhia - a girl living in foster care who is desperate to learn the truth about her parents.

“Peckham is full of people who look like me. People from somewhere else, but also from here,” says Fadugba. His eyes light up whenever he talks about the neighbourhood. “I’ve seen two decades of change in Peckham, so I felt comfortable trying to project another couple of decades. I also just really like this place.”

Now aged 34, Fadugba, who was born in Togo, moved to England from the US in 1997, when he was nine years old. He spent much of his childhood moving between a boarding school in Somerset and various African countries with his parents, where his father was working as an interpreter for the UN. But the summers and half terms at his aunt’s house in a Peckham estate had the biggest impact on him.

“As a Nigerian, there aren’t many places in the world, including Nigeria and including most of England, where I feel so at home.”

The idea of feeling at home is something Fadugba struggled with when it came to his career in science, however. In addition to Oxford, he studied at the University of Pennsylvania and taught science.

“I published in PRL [a peer-reviewed scientific journal], which is where Einstein published. I was at the peak of my career. But at the same time, something about writing equations for my whole life seemed too abstract and removed from real life problems.”

He eventually left academia and went into the energy sector, working full time at a solar finance company. He didn’t start reading fiction until his late 20s (naming Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Stephen King and Orson Scott Card as particular favourites) but something clicked, and he decided to teach himself how to write. “I had a couple of chats that convinced me that writing was something you could learn and didn’t have to be born with. That was the switch for me.” He still had the urge to communicate scientific ideas and theories, but wanted to do that through fiction rather than academia.

Perhaps that’s why *The Upper World*, despite its humour, is also enjoyably educational. Theories relating to time and space are woven into the narrative. The appendix is full of equations relevant to the plot, such as the speed of light and the Pythagorean theorem. But deep down, the novel is about grief, loss and hope. “I was dealing with a similar situation to what Esso goes through, in terms of losing someone before their time, because of some madness. The part in the book where someone gets shot: there are kids and adults who are dealing with this in real life. I felt a responsibility to explore what that meant.”

An important part of the novel is its investigation into the concept of free will. As the two teenagers fight to change the future, the psychological and sociological influences on a person’s destiny are a central part of the narrative. “For the black community in the UK, so much of the tension is fundamentally about free will. Are our people in the position that they’re in because they made bad decisions or was it actually [out of their control]? It’s tough. I do think we are a product of our environment, but at the same time, if I’m standing in front of a kid who is in a shit
situation, that’s not a helpful thing to say. We have an obligation to explore both sides, instead of making the false choice that only one of them is true.”

What makes *The Upper World* so groundbreaking is how it straddles multiple realities and truths. It’s geeky but cool, otherworldly but also very south London, a genre-defying book for which Penguin Random House Children’s won the rights after a “crazy” 15-way auction. It also grabbed the heart of Daniel Kaluuya: the Oscar-winning actor will not only star in the Netflix film adaptation, he will also co-produce it.

“My book leaked to Hollywood,” says Fadugba in disbelief, speaking of the whirlwind that ensued in June 2020, straight after he sent his manuscript to publishers. “I still don’t know how that happened, but apparently, it happens. A bunch of studios got hold of it - the big ones. Jordan Peele’s Monkeypaw Productions and Brad Pitt’s Plan B Entertainment. You can circle a month around the period where I got my book deal and I got the Netflix deal. It was exciting and also very hard to process. Even now, I still talk about it as if it happened to someone else.”

A big reason why the mammoth successes have yet to sink in is because they came at a personally difficult time. In early 2020, Fadugba had been living with his wife in Kenya when the country’s president tweeted that they would be shutting the borders due to the pandemic. “I packed up my life in two days and went to my aunt’s house [in Peckham]. My wife is American and had to go back to her family. I spent a whole year in my aunt’s spare bedroom, separated from my wife, while the world went down.” The couple finally reunited in June 2021.

It has all been incredibly stressful, Fadugba tells me. “The gradient of change was insane.” But he’s grateful, of course. I can see how visibly excited he is speaking about his new life. He humbly smiles while talking about the fact that he will be executive producer on the Netflix film. “It’s a strong team,” he says. “Eric Newman [the producer of *Narcos, Children of Men* and *Bright*] has the experience of making sick films and shows. Daniel knows how to navigate both worlds. He’s from ends, but he’s also an Oscar-winning actor.”

I ask him if he’s nervous about whether the adaptation will be as good as the book. “My agent put me in touch with Nick Hornby, who has had the experience of having his books adapted into films, and he gave me a metaphor. If you design an ankara suit and then someone buys it and turns it into a bikini, that bikini could go on to sell more than your suit. Even though the Netflix team has been really faithful to the vision, you have to let it breathe in whatever direction it needs to.”

So what does Fadugba see when he looks into his own future? “I’m currently writing a film with a couple of mates, and a well-known rapper called CS.” He’s also working on the sequel to *The Upper World*, which will focus on “quantum mechanics and the multiverse”. But, he says, “my biggest purpose has always been about education. I don’t mean that necessarily in terms of getting all kids into Stem [science, technology, engineering and mathematics]. I think it’s more about getting kids to explore all the different parts of their mind. There’s no reason why Peckham couldn’t be the theoretical physics capital of the world - I mean, there are reasons, but there are no good reasons.”

His plan is to find a way to use music, virtual reality and gaming to facilitate maths and physics education. Looking at what he has achieved so far, with his physics career and his first ever attempt at writing fiction, very little seems impossible. “I was born in a civil war. There have been too many times that things could have gone left,” he says, referring to everything from his family’s immigration struggles to his time spent in Rwanda, to living in a council flat and “seeing all kinds of shit go on”. “When I think about the stuff that has happened to me, I think to myself: ‘I was given this [gift]. Enjoy yourself, take care of your mental health. But use it’”

‘Inside the darkness are echoes’

After the collision, I expect to turn and see a pumpkin-coloured bench stuffed with people waiting for the 78, 381, 63 or 363. And, on the other side of the road, I expect a barbershop, followed by a Western Union, then a pub, then a corner shop selling fufu and Oyster-card top-ups - the same rota of shops that repeats itself across Narm, interrupted only by the odd pound shop or chain cafe.

I expect to see a Range Rover with a dent in its front end and I’m ready to go ballistic on the driver, threaten to sue him, punch him, both. I expect - no, I hope - to see a little boy, sitting safely on the pavement, in the scorching heat.

A bead of sweat tumbles down my forehead. Above the echoes, I can hear my heart pounding and my breaths getting shorter. In all the Sunday school lessons I remember, not one mentioned heaven looking like a barren wasteland filled with screams. Not to mention the scorching heat. Please let this be scenario A.

This is an extract from *The Upper World* by Femi Fadugba, published by Penguin.
An ambitious coming-of-age novel set in 1980s Liverpool explores repressed trauma and religious belief

**Nina Allan**

Robert Fisher is a troubled young man who spends time in local authority care before coming to stay with his Auntie Rose and Uncle Edward. Next door live Robert’s classmate and cousin, Tracey, and her father, Bill. Tracey feels drawn to Robert because of their shared sense of loss, protective of him because of his strangeness, an enigmatic, interior quality that seems to set him apart from the other kids on the estate.

Both families are Brethren, evangelical Christians who worship at Garston chapel. When Robert begins to hear voices, he intuits them as a manifestation of the divine presence. Mark Thorn, a church elder and Falklands veteran, is convinced that Robert has the divine presence. Mark is moved to action. The events that follow will scar the lives of the whole community.

The bulk of the novel takes place in 1984, a year whose literary significance is briefly alluded to, though Walker’s cultural and political references throughout are more in keeping with the time in which the book is set: Derek Hatton, the Smiths and New Order. There are any number of subtler shadings that anyone who grew up in the 1970s and 80s in a low-income household will recognise instantly: homes without central heating, once-a-week bath nights, the TV turned off at the wall to save electricity.

The author has characterised his narrative as a coming-of-age novel in which politics and popular culture rub shoulders with a grander, more universal inquiry into repressed trauma and the nature of religious belief. Where many fictional accounts of the 80s have tended to skew towards hectic excess, Walker has chosen to show us a different kind of post-punk reality, that of a working-class Christian community in which material deprivation is not so much a matter for protest as a test of spiritual strength, and the tragedy of an ordinary family is drawn into parallel with a grander narrative.

The book is beautifully written, making use of a low-key colloquial language that is always apposite and never intrusive or forced. But I am uncertain as to how well it works, not least in the treatment of the subject matter that is clearly of greatest importance to Walker himself. The subject of Christian faith seems to be enjoying something of a literary renaissance. Recent novels such as Yaa Gyasi’s *Transcendent Kingdom* and Neil Griffiths’s *As a God Might Be* stand as modern counterpoints to 20th-century classics such as William Golding’s *The Spire* and Iris Murdoch’s *The Time of the Angels*, novels that examine the nature and power of belief and more specifically the relevance and persistence of religion in a secular age.

Such narratives thrive on conflict, from the tension that inevitably arises in the battle lines between the community and the individual, tradition and progress, faith and reason. *The Angels of L19*, by contrast, feels curiously free of such conflict, as if a vital piece of narrative thread is missing.

There are some extremely niche arguments over which edition of the Bible is the truest representation of its message, but the fact of religion – its centrality to every aspect of the characters’ lives – is never questioned. The most we see in the way of rebellion from these teenagers is some mild sarcasm. The most compelling narrative threads – Tracey’s passion for music, the reasons behind Robert’s mother’s suicide – are left largely unexplored. The real-life impact of Thatcher’s policies is disappointingly underutilised, with the cultural markers of the time ultimately more stage dressing than catalyst.

It is in the novel’s final chapter that Walker comes closest to achieving a kind of transcendence. The adult Robert is an addict and a ruin, so uncertain of his own identity it seems impossible that he can survive another year. And yet redemption is possible, together with a new kind of clarity that comes from being properly seen and understood.

*The Angels of L19* is a flawed experiment, but its ambition is admirable. I will be mulling over this story long after smoother, more conventional dramas have faded from my memory.
A self-obsessed writer chases his dreams to Hollywood in this sun-drenched, eerie tale of climate apocalypse

*Daisy Hildyard*

Patrick is a middle-aged American writer who travels to Hollywood to watch his dreams come true: his latest book is being made into a movie and he has a job on set. When he arrives in LA, though, he discovers that his autobiographical novel has been adapted into a farcical horror and that he’s expected to act as errand boy for the movie’s suave producers, Brenda and Jay, and as driver to the lead actor, Cassidy Carter. Cassidy is notorious - Patrick has seen the viral video in which she’s caught shoplifting a single tampon. A paparazzo, unseen behind his camera, taunts her (“Baby, you’re so moody right now”) until she flips out, pulling a used tampon from her shorts, throwing it at the camera and shouting “Namaste”.

This is the hyperperceptive, painfully funny opening image of Alexandra Kleeman’s second novel, a speculative climate apocalypse fiction. From the outset, there’s a weird pathos to its disturbed and disturbing world. Still, at least Cassidy has her tampon-slinging chutzpah. Patrick’s mind, by contrast, is saturated with borrowed dreams of contemporary America – advice from men’s exercise magazines, gory movies, advertising taglines, chat forums, property listings and news stories about polygynous cults. More than anything, Patrick’s perception of reality is obscured by his longing for self-advancement. Even his wife Alison suspects that their relationship is founded on the fact that Patrick’s “inner struggle filled much of his field of vision”: Alison can “hide in plain sight”.

If Patrick is obsessed with himself, Alison has become obsessed with the planetary emergency, to the point that she can no longer function. “I don’t see the park or the trees. I see all of it dying.” She and nine-year-old daughter Nora flee the couple’s suburban home for Earthbridge, a nature retreat in the Adirondack mountains: a place of handicrafts and homilies about climate grief. Alison doesn’t mention Patrick’s current situation to the other residents. She’s unwilling to risk a sermon on how Hollywood celebrates the human “at the expense of all else that lives and suffers”.

*Something New Under the Sun* is interested in this accusation, which could also be levelled at the tradition of the novel. Kleeman creates tensions between the intimate human stories that are the mainstay of literary fiction and the non-human worlds in which these stories happen. She is a playful rather than a lecturing writer, mining the different ways in which the personal is snarled up in the environmental, and vice versa. Alison frets about Patrick’s whereabouts and Nora’s bad dreams while straining to think about the decline of Israel’s Hula frog. Earthbridge pieties about ice sheets and river mussels get in the way of caring for loved ones. On the other side of America, daily life in LA appears even more absurd. The human-centred economy leaves most humans suffering, or at best stuck in traffic. When Patrick and Cassidy glimpse vacant-looking people being loaded into green vans, they become convinced that their movie is a front for some sinister operation. Brenda and Jay have connections with WAT-R, a synthetic blue liquid that has replaced tap water across California. Its commercial monopoly works with quiet efficiency so that lower-income households are left without water and in debt. “When people are dying of thirst, they’ll drink gasoline,” observes Jay. “And it’s their right to do that.”

Kleeman’s first novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, was distinctive in its attention to minute detail. Oranges were described in segments; human skin seen pore by pore, as though the prose looked more closely than the human eye. *Something New Under the Sun* develops this intense focus in brief passages that digress into largely unseen worlds: sewage pipes, the heart of a wildfire, a prehistoric seascape. When a fictional setting is given a great deal of attention, it’s become a cliche to describe it as a character in the story. That cliche requires an assumption that forests or weather fronts don’t habitually make anything happen. In Kleeman’s novel, as in real life, this assumption looks wishful: scenery and infrastructure threaten to murder the protagonists.

*Something New Under the Sun* is sun-drenched, sharply observed and swift-moving; the sentences are beautiful. What makes it strange and new is the way the narrative disrupts itself. With concentrated attention on each flame in a wildfire, prehistoric marine life forms, or the plastic taste of soft furnishings in a carpet beetle’s mouth, it takes notice of much that is outside the brief of the story of Patrick and Cassidy, Alison and Nora. The book encompasses extra reality, but the experience of reading it is oddly surreal - it exposes unsettling truths about this “world as a whole, trembling with life and violence”, hiding in plain sight.

To buy a copy for £13.04 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Mingling fact and fancy, this epic of digression and procrastination is wonderfully poignant

Sam Jordison

In 2000, the Uruguayan author Mario Levrero won a Guggenheim grant to write the final chapters of a novel he had been unable to complete for the past 16 years. He then set about assiduously not writing them. Instead, he recorded his lack of progress in an autofictional diary covering the 12 months before August 2001.

A few completed chapters of the original novel are included towards the end of this wonderful book, but it’s the diary and its strange blend of fancy, fiction and daily reality that forms the bulk of its 500-plus pages. The entries show the sixtysomething Levrero variously indulging and regretting his computer addiction (“I was playing FreeCell and now it’s six in the morning”); trying and failing to install an effective air-conditioning system (“it certainly pains me to spend Mr Guggenheim’s money on home comforts”).

There is a decaying pigeon corpse outside his window around which he weaves absurdly engrossing narratives. His battles with Microsoft software take on titanic urgency. “I fixed word 2000!!!!” he declares, in one of the most unusual punch-the-air moments in literature. His gradual alienation from romantic involvement is as moving and engrossing as any story of a more fervent, younger lover.

“Writing every day about events that have just taken place is a mistake,” he informs us, a mere 300 pages in. By this point, it’s impossible to agree. You may not think you’re interested in the purchase of a new armchair, but it’s described here with such surprising humour and drama that its significance begins to feel cosmic.

There are a certain number of recollections of dreams to endure. There are also plenty of absurd theories and questionable opinions. But it’s hard to see such longeurs as faults, when they also help to complete this portrait of flawed and failing humanity. The Luminous Novel was originally published in Spanish in 2005, a year after the author’s death. This knowledge of mortality makes his continual terror that time is slipping through his fingers yet more poignant. Every wasted moment in this book feels precious.

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

A magical debut about anxiety and ambition asks what it means to be both Indian and American

Sana Goyal

In a fictional Atlanta suburb that’s a “bubble of brownness”, Neil Narayan wonders if, in post-9/11 America, “there were other ways of being brown on offer”. Sanjena Sathian’s satirical and magical debut, Gold Diggers, is full of searches for answers: for alternative histories and futures.

Pressured by Indian immigrant parents, Neil, like his peers, is desperate to excel. He is even more desperate, however, for the attention of his high school crush Anita Dayal. And then he discovers that she and her mother are gold thieves; they have been stealing jewellery, and by extension “ambition”, from folk within their community and melting it into an ancient alchemical potion in their basement. This “lemonade” is a shortcut to success, transferring the ambition of the owner of the gold to the drinker. But there are consequences to stealing a part of someone, and the lemonade soon begins to leave a bitter aftertaste.

Fast forward a decade and, in the second half of the novel, there’s a shift from adolescent Bildungsroman to adult shenanigans in Silicon Valley and a Bollywood-esque heist. Neil, now a PhD candidate in history at Berkeley, and Anita, a Stanford drop-out, are reunited. They could still use a dose of the good old lemonade, but Anita’s mother – the original creator of the drink – needs it more. Will they steal to secure her future, as she once did for them?

With a pacy plot and a protagonist you feel for, Gold Diggers blends magic, mythology, alchemy and melodrama into a story about anxiety, assimilation and ambition (“the substance to settle the nerves of immigrant parents”). “What does it mean to be both Indian and American?” The question troubles Neil and Anita, who identify as “conceptual orphans”.

In some ways, Gold Diggers is a delightful concoction of the best of South Asia’s literary offerings, reminiscent of Hanif Kureishi’s irreverent humour in The Buddha of Suburbia and the magic realism of Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West. But Sathian has forged a narrative path entirely her own. She is not interested in social realism or satire; she tackles issues of mental health, the “model minority” trap and the generation gap with a fresh literary toolkit and voice.

To buy a copy for £14.99 go to guardianbookshop.com.
**Books of the month**

**{ SF, fantasy and horror } The war between the living and the dead; final girls fight back; an alternative Cairo; British chills**

Lisa Tuttle

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**Hollow** (Coronet, £17.99), the latest novel from the author of the Vorrh trilogy, is set in an alternative-history version of Egypt. In 1912, half a century after the mystic al-Jahiz made an opening into the realm of spirits, Cairo is a modern, multicultural city running on a combination of magical, alchemical and steam-powered technology. Muslims and Copts co-exist with devo tees of Hathor; djinn and humans work together; even women have won the right to vote and are employed in jobs formerly given only to men.

Fatma el-Sha’arawi of the Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments and Supernatural Entities has saved the universe from destruction once and is sure she can handle the problem of an imposter in a gold mask, claiming to be al-Jahiz and stirring unrest in the rougher neighbourhoods. This fantasy is refreshingly different; a well-plotted mystery filled with engaging characters, presented with a lightly humorous touch.

In Helen Grant’s **Too Near the Dead** (Fledgling, £9.99), Fen Munro is happy to be engaged to James and living in their beautiful new house in the Perthshire countryside – so why is she having nightmares about being dead? And why is the owner of the local bridal shop so disturbed by her request for a lavender dress? Can a new house be haunted?

Mingling past and present, ghosts and gothic, this is a very British blend (Fen’s response to any upset is a cup of strong, sweet tea). It’s an excellent example of what MR James, the master of the form, called “a pleasing terror”.

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As one might expect from the author of the Vorrh trilogy, this is far from standard fantasy

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The book opens in 2010, the 10th anniversary of the group. Then the shooting starts – and it becomes clear that someone wants all of the final girls dead, and there is no one they can rely on apart from themselves. Hendrix’s cinematic knowledge is deployed with skill, and it is not necessary to be a fan of slasher movies to enjoy this very clever, gleefully violent, self-aware deconstruction of the genre – film rights have already been acquired.

Sara Flannery Murphy’s **Girl One** (Raven, £14.99) is set in 1994, when Josephine, “Girl One” from a 1970s experiment in human parthenogenesis, is a 24-year-old student determined to replicate the work of Dr Joseph Bellanger, the scientist credited with making nine “miracle babies”. He died in a fire that consumed all records of the experiment, so it was never repeated. But when her mother goes missing, Josephine’s search uncovers new information. Bellanger did not recruit subjects for his experiment, but had been approached by a group of women to help them conceive. Interest in parthenogenesis was genuinely a thing in the 70s, mainly among lesbians and radical feminists eager to escape male domination, but there’s scarcely a hint of feminist motivation here. Once Josephine has reunited with two of the other offspring they find that, separated from their mothers, they have superpowers: one can heal; the other can kill with a touch; and with a look, Josephine can force men to obey. In this superhero origins story, the concept of parthenogenesis might as well have been a radioactive spider bite.

P Djèlí Clark’s debut novel **A Master of Djinn** (Orbit, £8.99) is set in an alternative-history version of Egypt. In 1912, a century after the mystic al-Jahiz made an opening into the realm of spirits, Cairo is a modern, multicultural city running on a combination of magical, alchemical and steam-powered technology. Muslims and Copts co-exist with devotees of Hathor; djinn and humans work together; even women have won the right to vote and are employed in jobs formerly given only to men.
'If there was a revolution, I'd be there'

The award-winning experimental author Claire-Louise Bennett on drawing inspiration from Beckett, how Marxism changed her life and why she resists identifying herself as a writer. By Alex Clark

A conversation with Claire-Louise Bennett is a dizzying experience: one minute as rowdy as a fairground, the next more like a reflective walk through woodland. She laughs a lot, and raucously, to the point where the ends of her sentences often disappear; and then she might pause for long enough for you to wonder whether the Zoom connection has failed. Our chat extends, but is not limited to, Beckett, suitable paint colours for bedrooms, the abolition of the monarchy, Heidegger, why theatre would be better in the morning than the evening, avant-garde writers Ann Quin and Annie Ernaux, writing on the dole and the difficulty of finding summer reading (“You can’t be reading Gombrowicz all the time”).

Oh, and banana bread, on which I intuited that Bennett had no fixed opinions until everyone started talking about it: “I’m not making any fucking banana bread ever now,” she says. “You’ve ruined it for me.” She isn’t opposed, though, to lockdown pastimes, at one point brandishing a terracotta pot that she has painted to look like a lion: “probably not very sophisticated, but I enjoyed it immensely.”

But her main achievement during the pandemic is Checkout 19, a fantastically various novel consisting of seven sections in which we loosely follow a narrator – sometimes an “I”, sometimes a “we”, at different ages and in different places – through an intricate collage of ideas, sensations and emotions. It runs to 224 pages, but at times feels like dozens of interwoven and overlapping stories. Included in them are a deep dive into the secret world of reading (“The books looked back at us and something inside of us stirred”) that juxtaposes EM Forster with Anaïs Nin, Clarice Lispector with Sidney Sheldon; the fable-like story of a man named Tarquin Superbus, a sort of aristocratic dilettante from an unspecified previous era who conjures up images of commedia dell’arte, Shakespeare’s Malvolio and a figure from a Goya painting; and the story of a woman from her schooldays to an ambivalent, rootless adulthood.

Checkout 19 follows Bennett’s acclaimed 2015 book of short stories, Pond, which presented the reader with 20 vignettes of a solitary woman’s life in a coastal town in Ireland (Bennett lives in Galway, and emigrated from the UK to Ireland two decades ago). Two years prior to Pond, she had won the inaugural White Review short story prize, after many years of what amounted to writing for herself; in her early 20s, she tells me, she decided that she wouldn’t try to get published for another 10 or 15 years, until she had figured out how to create and structure a piece of work that would produce “a meaningful and fulfilling and enjoyable reading encounter”.

It was, she thinks, her involvement in theatre that provided a breakthrough. She had worked on performance pieces and installations and had originally conceived of Pond as a theatre piece, but then “I realised that it actually could stay flat on the page and didn’t need to be performed. It sort of performed enough on the page.” The switch from one medium to another was tricky, she says, “because I was interested in theatre. But I hated plays, which is a bit weird. And I hated actors.” She roars with laughter. What did she hate? “Just this sort of thing that happens: you’re sitting in the audience, and then an actor comes stomping on and they start talking straight away, and you just think: ‘Shut up!’ It’s too much all at once, and it’s all very loud. And then someone else says something, and it’s all chat, chat, chat. And you just have to go with it.”

The exception is, she adds, Beckett, “probably the only person I can really think of who manages to subvert that very, very well”. She is drawn in particular to the way Beckett represents our physical selves: “You don’t get this whole thing just landing in on you; you might just get the mouth or them from the waist up. That’s a bit gentler, you’re kind of like: ‘OK, I can handle that.’ And then in other ways, he’s able to fragment or tap into a different frequency of being here.”

The frequency of being here is both what Bennett responds to in others - Quin’s work, she says, “doesn’t feel just like experimentation. That feels like someone really trying to get at what being alive at that moment feels like and is like” – and what she tries to represent in her own work. She’s been writing
since *Pond* came out, she explains, but for a time—perhaps in part because of talking about the book so much, and feeling herself pinned down by others’ descriptions of her work—she struggled to come up with something that felt like a book.

“Oh God, I wrote some awful shit. Really very bad! At least I’m able to tell, that’s something. But it’s a horrible feeling when you keep on doing it.” How did she know that it was no good? “I felt my flesh was all sort of crawly and grey. And I wanted to get away from myself, really. I remember being in Madrid and just writing, oh, it was such horseshit.” The answer, in Madrid, was unexpected: she went to see an exhibition of the surrealist Dorothea Tanning’s work, and found it so powerful that she wrote a short book about her, *A Fish Out of Water*, which was published last year by Milan-based Juxta Press.

Lockdown also produced a more conducive atmosphere for writing, allowing Bennett to “stay still”. She began to incorporate pieces of writing she’d done nearly 20 years previously, and liked the different temporal textures that created, the alternative tones and registers and emotional intensities. She made few changes to those older pieces, and it becomes clear from talking to her that she dislikes things becoming too fixed, or perfected. She describes the experience of reading Beckett as giving her “a sense of space and a kind of an ease, almost; you know, I don’t know if there is any kind of meaning and I don’t like to get too attached to ideas anyhow. I’m quite able to sort of just hang in a way.”

Bennett identifies herself as a writer when she’s writing, and resists the label at other times; she is wary of the “they” that seems to crop up repeatedly in contemporary discourse, and alive to the idea that language itself has been shaped by the dominant classes throughout history, with particularly scorching effects for the working class and for women. Asked recently to write about a book that changed her life she says she realised that Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology*, which she studied at A-level, had had a profound effect. “After that, I just thought: ‘Oh, my God, everything’s just made up. And it’s made up by the ruling class, and there isn’t such a thing as reality. It’s all just ideology, and it’s there to suit them, and we’re all a load of plebs … And they can shove it!’”

This is, she says now, a very concise and strong version of how she felt, but “that was the upshot”, and after that she felt the impulse to hoe her own row. She could well, she adds, have called *Checkout 19* “I’m not going along with this”.

If Bennett appears wedded to artistic flexibility, she says she is more emphatic on a political level; she is firmly opposed to the systems of privilege that enable a monarchy, or the election of “a complete buffoon” such as Boris Johnson. “There’s no ambiguity on that. If there was a revolution, I’d be there.”

She praises the practical support offered to artists and writers in Ireland; she received benefits when she was writing *Pond*, having explained to the authorities what she wanted to do, “and I just can’t imagine anything like that ever happening in a million years in the UK”. I don’t imagine she’d think of her books in such a transactional way, but it seems to me that the authorities have had a pretty good return on their investment.”
Further reading

Books to envisage a post-human Earth
Cal Flyn

Our actions affect the lives and habitats of other creatures more than any other species on Earth. So much so, some scientists have adopted the term Anthropocene to refer to the current era, defined by atomic testing, the climate crisis and the development of plastics. Evidence of human activity will survive long after we are gone, both within the fossil record and in the state of the planet more generally.

There is some wonderful writing on this subject, not least David Farrier’s Footprints, a nonfiction book that seeks to predict the traces we will leave behind: from the nuclear waste sealed deep within concrete tombs to the future rust-stained remains of our megacities. The World Without Us by Alan Weisman was a 2007 mega-bestseller along similar lines, which asks what would happen if, for some unspecified reason, all humans disappeared from the planet tomorrow. Drawing from hundreds of interviews with engineers, scientists and archaeologists, it unfolds like a thriller: bridges collapse, subway tunnels flood, skyscrapers fall to the ground.

We are familiar with these visions, thanks to disaster movies and speculative fiction. Mary Shelley’s The Last Man, published in 1826, is one of the earliest examples; the titular last man is Lionel, sole survivor of a global pandemic spread through the air. The collapse of society is accelerated by climactic upheaval; sea levels rise, villages are swept away by floods, doomsday cults take hold, refugees travel north.

Since Shelley’s time, the planet has warmed by 1°C due to human activity; sea levels have risen by 20cm. Environmental anxiety has spawned a whole new genre, “cli-fi” or climate fiction, which explores how the world might look after global warming takes full effect. Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower follows Lauren, a teenager struggling to survive in a dystopian US, where much of the south has desertified and, outside of a few fortified regions, the rule of law has collapsed. In a time of uncontrolable wildfires around the globe, melting permafrost and fears of a Gulf Stream collapse, speculative fiction has never felt so prescient.

When I was researching my new book, Islands of Abandonment, I went in search of places where “the worst has already happened” - landscapes wrecked by war, natural disaster, pollution, irradiation, industry. In Montserrat in the Caribbean, I found the former capital standing two storeys deep in volcanic flow. In Chernobyl, an exclusion zone bigger than Cornwall, I appreciated Mary Mycio’s Wormwood Forest. This “natural history” of the nuclear disaster charts the effects of the region’s irradiation and subsequent abandonment on its wild inhabitants. In the absence of people, brown bears have returned for the first time in a century, and wolves have increased sevenfold.

Still, when confronted with the scale of the wreckage - physical, temporal, social - one realises how thin this silver lining might be. We can only hope that, as a species, we might learn from our past mistakes and begin to live more lightly on this Earth.

Islands of Abandonment by Cal Flyn (William Collins) has been shortlisted for the Wainwright prize for nature writing.
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