‘There’s no such thing as too judgmental’

Fran Lebowitz talks to Hadley Freeman
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Cover photograph: Adrienne Grunwald

For so many years, books were a home for me. I wanted to write the kind of story with open arms, with room for everyone who might want to come in.

— Madeline Miller, page 26

### Contents

- The week in books ........................................................................................................... 04
- The books that made me by Chris Riddell ................................................................... 05

**Cover story** Fran Lebowitz talks to Hadley Freeman .............................................. 06

Book of the week: *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*
by Anil Seth .................................................................................................................. 10

**Nonfiction reviews**
- *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind* by Jan Lucassen
- *The Man Who Mistook His Job for His Life: How to Thrive at Work*
- *Crude Britannia: How Oil Shaped a Nation*
by James Marriott & Terry Macalister ........................................................................... 13
- *Tunnel 29: The True Story of an Extraordinary Escape Beneath the Berlin Wall* by Helena Merriman .......................................................... 14
- *Strangers on a Pier: A Portrait of a Family* by Tash Aw ......................................... 15

**Fiction reviews**
- *More Than I Love My Life* by David Grossman ....................................................... 16
- *The Infernal Riddle of Thomas Peach* by Jas Treadwell ............................................ 17
- *What You Can See from Here* by Mariana Leky ....................................................... 17

Children and teenagers’ books of the month ............................................................... 18

**Interview** Activist and author Rafia Zakaria takes on white feminism... 20

**Books essay** Lara Feigel on her lockdown with DH Lawrence ......................... 22

**Inside story** The mystery of how humans learned to talk .......................... 24

Madeline Miller on writing *The Song of Achilles*, plus Tom Gauld .......... 26
The week in books
28 August

Future Library continues to grow
The acclaimed Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga is working on a new piece that will remain unseen until 2114.

The novelist (pictured), whose latest work This Mournable Body was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2020, has been named as the eighth author to contribute to the Future Library project.

It was dreamed up by the Scottish artist Katie Paterson, and the organic artwork is currently represented by 1,000 trees, planted in the forest near Oslo in 2014, and a collection of seven manuscripts, by authors including Margaret Atwood, Karl Ove Knausgård and Elif Shafak, which are being held in trust.

In 2114 the trees will be cut down, and the works will be printed on them. Dangarembga, who recently won the PEN Pinter prize, said: “Communicating through the project with those who will be present in a hundred years’ time is thrilling and a privilege.

The Future Library project perfectly expresses my yearning for a human culture that centres the Earth’s sustainability.”

Alison Flood

Read Hour launches in UK
An initiative that encourages people to spend an hour of their day reading is coming to the UK for the first time this year.

Launched three years ago in Finland, Read Hour is celebrated annually on 8 September, the UN’s international literacy day.

The official Read Hour will take place between 2pm and 3pm, but anyone unable to take part can join in at another time. The UK launch will be supported by Waterstones, Macmillan children’s books and Oxfam, as well as the comedian Jennifer Saunders and children’s authors Cressida Cowell and Philip Ardagh.

Finland’s most successful literary products, the Moomins, are the “face” of Read Hour’s international launch. Roleff Krä́mström, managing director of Moomin Characters, said: “We have made a long-term commitment to helping spark a love of reading and writing in young people around the globe.”

Lucy Knight

Dylan Thomas recording on sale
A copy of the 1952 recording of Dylan Thomas that is credited with launching the audiobook industry in the US is being sold by the rare bookseller Peter Harrington.

The recording was made by Barbara Holdridge and Marianne Roney, founders of Caedmon Records, who asked if they could tape a public reading that Thomas gave in New York. The resulting LP went on to sell more than 400,000 copies. This copy, which is inscribed by the Welsh poet with the words “My name rhymes with villain, I do hope you enjoy!!!”, is being sold for £2,750.

AF

Chipmageddon

As if there weren’t enough disasters, people are now speaking of the present “chipmageddon”: the worldwide shortage of microprocessors that is affecting supplies of everything from toasters and games consoles to cars.

A silicon “chip” was thus named in the early 1960s simply because it is a small flat piece of material, like a chip of wood or stone - or, of course, potato - separated by a cutting action (the verb “chop” is related). In a modern chip factory, a small circular wafer of silicon is divided into many chips, each one holding billions of transistors, which is an improvement on the few thousand possible in the early 70s. The ever-flexible “-mageddon” suffix, meanwhile - as in snowmageddon or carmageddon - ultimately takes its form from the Hebrew place name Megiddo in the Book of Revelation’s account of the end of days.

Those worried about the climate might not think that a slowdown in the number of new cars being built really counts as the end of the world, but even they might be alarmed by the fact that supply-chain issues recently caused Nando’s to close many of its outlets temporarily. Chipmageddon and chickmageddon? Where will it end?

WORD OF THE WEEK

Steven Poole

AARON UFUMELI/AP; ST-IMAGES / ALAMY

As if there weren’t enough disasters, people are now speaking of the present “chipmageddon”: the worldwide shortage of microprocessors that is affecting supplies of everything from toasters and games consoles to cars.

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The book that changed my mind
The Anarchy by William Dalrymple, a comprehensive history of the East India Company and the despoiling of the Indian subcontinent over four centuries. It changed the cosy assumptions I was taught at school about the British empire.

The last book that made me cry
Michael Rosen's Sad Book: a picture book that chronicles his grief at the death of his son Eddie from meningitis at the age of 19. It is beautifully illustrated by the great Quentin Blake and is profoundly moving and poetic.

The last book that made me laugh
The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams, which I read in order to illustrate a new edition during lockdown.

The book I couldn’t finish
The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown, a novel that is so poorly written that it fails to be so bad it is good, and is simply bad.

The book I’m ashamed not to have read
Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick, although I did listen to an unabridged audio book (with more than 20 CDs) and loved it.

My earliest reading memory
Struggling through the staid adventures of Peter and Jane. I then found a copy of Agaton Sax and the Diamond Thieves by Nils-Olof Franzén, illustrated by Blake, on my teacher’s desk and Peter and Jane were dead to me.

The book that most influenced my work
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll. As a child I was captured by Sir John Tenniel’s illustrations. My favourite was the white rabbit staring at his pocket watch. As I copied that drawing, I knew that I wanted to be an illustrator when I grew up.

The book I think is most underrated
Knight’s Fee by Rosemary Sutcliff. I could have chosen any of her magnificent historical novels. Sutcliff is a great stylist.

‘Maurice Sendak taught us playfulness could be profound’
Chris Riddell

The book I am currently reading
James Holland’s magnificent Sicily ’43, filled with first-hand testimonies from private soldiers, generals, future princes and Hollywood movie stars.

The book that changed my life
The Hobbit by JRR Tolkien. It was read to my class by our teacher. I missed the battle of the five armies at the end because I had flu, so I borrowed the book from the school library and never looked back. It turned me into an avid reader.

The book I wish I’d written
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak. It is the perfect picture book, as fresh and beguiling now as the day it was written. Sendak taught a generation of author-illustrators that simplicity and playfulness could also be profound.

The book that most influenced my work
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‘If people disagree with me, so what?’
F
ran Lebowitz is a famous writer who famously doesn’t write. “I’m really lazy and writing is really hard and I don’t like to do hard things,” she says, and it’s the rare writer who would not have some sympathy with that. Yet, as all writers also know, writer’s block, which the 70-year-old has suffered from for four decades now, is never really about laziness. Lebowitz’s editor Erroll McDonald (“the man with the easiest job in New York”) has said she suffers from “excessive reverence for the written word”.

Given that Lebowitz has, at last count, more than 11,000 of them in her apartment, there is no question that she loves books. “I would never throw away a book – there are human beings I would rather throw out of the window,” she says. So is this talk of “excessive reverence” a euphemistic way of saying that she has low self-esteem and doesn’t think she can write anything good enough to commit to print?

“I don’t think I suffer from low self-esteem,” cackles Lebowitz. “I know a lot of people object to me because they think I’m too judgmental, although I think there’s no such thing. But as judgmental as I am about others, I am far more so about my own work. I think it’s a paralysing professionalism.”

Lebowitz and I are talking by phone, which means she is on her landline in her New York apartment, because as well as refusing to write, Lebowitz refuses to own a mobile, wifi or even a computer. During lockdown, when all of her beloved bookstores were shut, she had to rely on a friend to order books online for her, and she then sent her friend cheques. When I interviewed her for a public event by Zoom during lockdown, she had to go to David Sedaris’s apartment to use his computer. And yet Lebowitz, 70, has always seemed like such a self-sufficient, independent person.

With a hit Netflix series and The Fran Lebowitz Reader now published in the UK, the American wit talks to Hadley Freeman about failing to write, her dislike of Andy Warhol and her best friend Toni Morrison.

I never thought: ‘How can I change the world?’ I thought: ‘How can I do what I want without going to jail?’

In the 1970s when she did write, and wrote hilarious, elegant columns for Andy Warhol’s Interview magazine as well as the bestselling books of collected essays, Metropolitan Life (1978) and Social Studies (1981), she would hold her own on talkshows, against male hosts and guests who demanded to know when she would get married and then offered to impregnate her. Lebowitz, a lesbian, just smiled and smoked her cigarettes.

One of the leitmotifs in Martin Scorsese’s second and most recent documentary about her, Pretend It’s a City, are the shots of a solitary Lebowitz strolling around New York in her distinctive uniform of a long overcoat, Levi’s 501s and loafers, observing everything and detached from it all. So doesn’t she resent that her aversion to technology now makes her so dependent on others? “No, I just think, isn’t it lucky I have friends who have these things and can do them for me?” she says, with the smile of one who has arranged her life exactly as she wants it to be.

Today, Lebowitz has become what is commonly described as a “public speaker” (Scorsese’s first documentary about her is titled Public Speaking). But really she is an extremely successful wit, and certainly the most celebrated American female wit since Dorothy Parker - although, unlike Parker, she doesn’t write (or drink). She makes witty observations, and people pay to hear them. This is very different from being a comedian, because Lebowitz is not a joker, and she certainly doesn’t script her thoughts. She is an off-the-cuff opinion-haver, and people all over the world – pandemic permitting, she will embark on a massive European tour next year – flock to hear her quick-witted opinions on everything from holidays (“How horrible must your life be if you think: ‘You know what would be fun? Let’s take the kids to the airport, sit there for a few hours and get yelled at’”) to whether it matters if people relate to a book’s protagonist: “A book is not a mirror – it’s a door,” she declares in Pretend It’s a City.

So it never bothered her when she was growing up in New Jersey that she didn’t see too many suburban Jewish lesbians in novels? She makes a loud bark of laughter: “I never would have thought about it, not in a million years! I’m not really a revolutionary, I’m more of a dandy. I never thought: ‘How can I change the world?’ I thought: ‘How can I do what I want’...
Fran Lebowitz

Without going to jail?” For a while in the 1980s and 90s, Lebowitz promised that she was working on a novel.

“There are about a hundred pages,” she says, when I ask about it. “But whole generations have come and gone since I last looked at it.” When it became clear that waiting for Lebowitz’s novel was as futile as waiting for Godot, her US publishers had the bright idea of combining Metropolitan Life and Social Studies into one book and selling that, titled The Fran Lebowitz Reader. Despite now being over 40 years old, the essays still glitter, every bone-dry sentence pared down and packed with her unmistakeable personality. Starved of any new Lebowitz content, her fans have taken to quoting lines from the Reader like religious texts: “All God’s children are not beautiful. Most of God’s children are, in fact, barely presentable ... Generally speaking, I look upon sports as dangerous and tiring activities performed by people with whom I share nothing except the right to trial by jury.”

It has never gone out of print in the US and, at last, it is now being published in the UK. This is surely a testament to the success of Pretend It’s a City, which was a big lockdown hit for Netflix. “I’m pretty sure I profited from the virus because I think many people watched my series because they weren’t allowed out,” she says. However, it balances out because Lebowitz, who lives on her own, had no income during the pandemic after all her speaking engagements were cancelled: “That was stressful. I became a person standing in the supermarket going: ‘Why are grapes so expensive? What is this, Cartier?’”

Pretend It’s a City, which Lebowitz co-produced, should buy her more than a couple of bunches of grapes. Over the course of seven delightful and unexpectedly lyrical episodes, viewers watched her do nothing other than share her acerbic opinions with Scorsese, who chortles away in the background. When Saturday Night Live parodied Pretend It’s a City, comedian Bowen Yang, as Lebowitz, barked out aperçus such as “People ask me: ‘Should I be a writer?’ And I say, ‘No! Be something useful! Be! A piece! Of melon! Wrapped in! A prosciutto!’” Kyle Mooney, as Scorsese, promptly has a heart attack next to her from hysteria.

Lebowitz did not see the parody (“I can’t stand to watch myself”) but I ask if Scorsese laughs as much with her off-camera as he does on. “I always struck Marty as funny, I don’t know why. But Marty is also really funny,” she says fondly. (When Scorsese was making The Wolf of Wall Street, he cast the famously judgmental Lebowitz as the judge who sends Leonardo DiCaprio to prison – an in-joke between pals.) Pretend It’s a City is nominated for an Emmy, for outstanding nonfiction series, and Netflix is very keen that its star goes to the event in September. But Lebowitz is not tempted: “The Emmys are in LA,” she says. No elaboration necessary.

With the bouquets, however, come the brickbats. At the height of Pretend It’s a City’s success, the New York Times ran a column headlined “Everybody Loves Fran. But Why?”, in which the writer expressed mystification as to why Lebowitz, with her “misanthropic, cranky, besotted view of Manhattan life”, is so popular with young people. “She determines that wellness must be an idea imported from - and here is the moment to clutch your bagels - ‘California’,” the journalist wrote with an audible eye roll.

I ask Lebowitz if she was hurt by the column. “You expect critics, and this was hardly the first time I got bad press. But I thought that specific thing that you’re referring to was very antisemitic, and that is the last thing you’re still allowed to do. My editor called me and he said: ‘Don’t you think this is antisemitic?’ and he’s not Jewish, so his sensitivity is not as high as mine. But I heard that a lot of people were talking about [the article] online and I’ll tell you what surprises me is how people, who are totally unrelated to whatever’s being written about, will take these huge sides over things,” she says.

I say it feels as if today people see opinions as a statement of who they are, and therefore a disagreement of opinion feels seismic. “I think that’s true. It’s replaced morality. But I never cared what people think of what I think. I’m not saying I don’t care what people think about me, because I’m human. But if people disagree with me, so what? I’ve never understood why [my opinions] anger people. I have no power, I’m not the mayor of New York, I’m not making laws. These are just opinions!”

She grew up in New Jersey, the elder daughter of furniture upholsterers. She was bookish but a terrible student, and was repeatedly expelled from school for what she has described as “nonspecific surliness”. I ask her when she knew she was gay. “This is something that’s very hard to explain to young people today. Being gay, it was illegal then. Forget fighting for gay marriage, how about just trying not to go to jail? So you never saw it, it was never talked about, it didn’t exist in the world. So if I hadn’t seen occasional mentions of it in books, I would never have heard of it. I had a friend who grew up in a very blue-collar environment in Wilmington, Delaware, and she thought she was the only [lesbian] in the world, and that was a common thing then.

“I have a very vivid memory of when I was 12 and in the backyard reading, and I remember having this exact thought: ‘Well, I suppose if there’s such a thing in the world as lesbians then someone has to be them. But why does it have to be me?’” Because I instantly knew that I could not live like that in the world I was living in, and I was pretty happy in that world. Of course, what most people did was they stayed in that world and
pretended to be straight, but that never occurred to me.” Given that homosexuality was a crime then, was she ever scared of being arrested? “It was never scary for me because the police were mostly arresting gay men, because that infuriated them more [than lesbians]. Truthfully, I was more afraid of my parents [finding out].”

Lebowitz mentions her parents and especially her mother in her public talks often, and always very fondly. When did she come out to them? “We never discussed it,” she says. “I mean, they were aware of it, I brought girlfriends home, but we never talked about it. That was because of me, but it was also me knowing they didn’t want to.”

What is she like as a girlfriend? “Terrible. Terrible! I loathe domestic life and I’m not the monogamous type. I’m really great for, like, the first three months, and that’s how long it lasts for me.” So is three months her longest relationship? “Well, I’ve been with people for longer, but I wasn’t being a good girlfriend. I’m a terrible girlfriend, but I’m a great friend.”

Pretty much as soon as she arrived in New York, as a teenage high school dropout determined to be a writer, she was making friends. She was hanging out in Studio 54 and Warhol’s The Factory, but she never felt intimidated. “Social situations don’t frighten me,” she says. Susan Graham Ungaro, the editor of the first magazine where she worked, happened to be going out with (and later married to) the jazz musician Charles Mingus. In Pretend It’s a City, Lebowitz describes taking Mingus to her parents’ house for Thanksgiving, and Mingus taking her out for breakfast with Duke Ellington.

While working at Interview, she became friends with the notoriously unfriendly Lou Reed. “I mean, Lou was difficult, no one would ever say he wasn’t difficult. We had a real fight the first time we met. But, you know, we liked each other,” she says. One person she didn’t especially like was Warhol himself. “I noticed that Andy sought out people who were very fragile psychologically, and he encouraged people to take drugs, so it was not really an atmosphere that I wanted to be around. I saw him every day for years, but we never talked that much.”

In her last year of working at Interview, Warhol paid her in paintings. Alas, she liked his paintings about as much as she liked him, and so she sold them cheaply to pay the rent, and two weeks later he died, sending his prices stratospheric. “I will always believe that he did that deliberately,” she says. What, died? “Yes, he knew I’d sold them and he said to himself: ‘This’ll show her!’”

Toni Morrison was one of her best friends for almost 40 years, up until Morrison’s death in 2019. In clips of them talking on stage, Lebowitz looks uncharacteristically awestruck by her, while Morrison giggles delightedly at everything she says. “People don’t know how fun Toni was because she had such an intimidating presence, but she was really fun,” says Lebowitz a little wistfully. Did it take a while to get past that intimidating presence? “No, it was an instantaneous friendship. I don’t know how to describe it, but it was like falling in love, except it lasted.”

When Lebowitz was 12 her mother told her, “Don’t be funny around boys. They don’t like it.” That was only one of the many rules she went out and broke. Lebowitz is the opinionated older woman young people love; the lesbian whose sexuality has never been subjected to debate or scrutiny; the high school dropout who washed up in New York and instantly became a famous writer; the writer who doesn’t write. But doesn’t she regret giving up the writing, given she was such a natural? She hesitates a fraction: “Not consciously. Maybe unconsciously, though how would I know?” Then her rhythm picks up as she finds her patter again: “But I really enjoy the speaking engagements. It’s not work, it’s everyone having to listen to my opinions, and that’s all I ever wanted”.

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Lebowitz’s people
Clockwise from left: with Martin Scorsese; with Andy Warhol - ‘We never talked that much’; Toni Morrison was one of her best friends for almost 40 years
Our world and the self are constructions of the brain, a pioneering neuroscientist argues

Gaia Vince

For every stoner who has been overcome with profound insight and drewled, “Reality is a construct, maaaan,” here is the astonishing affirmation. Reality—or, at least, our perception of it—is a “controlled hallucination”, according to the neuroscientist Anil Seth. Everything we see, hear and perceive around us, our whole world, is a big lie created by our brains, like a forever version of The Truman Show, to placate us into living our lives.

Our minds invent for us a universe of colours, sounds, shapes and feelings through which we interact with our world and relate to each other, Seth argues. We even invent ourselves. Our reality is an illusion, and understanding this involves tackling the thorny issue of consciousness: what it means to, well, be.

Consciousness has long been the preserve of philosophers and priests, poets and artists; now neuroscientists are investigating the mysterious quality and trying to answer the hard question of how consciousness arises in the first place. If this all sounds a bit hard going, it’s actually not at all in the masterly hands of Seth, who deftly weaves the philosophical, biological and personal with a lucid clarity and coherence that is thrilling to read.

Consciousness, which Seth defines as “any kind of subjective experience whatsoever”, is central to our being and identity. What does it mean for you to be you, as opposed to being a stone or a bat? And how does this feeling of being you emerge from the squishy conglomeration of cells we keep in our skulls? Science has shied away from these sorts of experiential questions, partly because it’s not obvious how science’s tools could explore them. Scientists are fond of pursuing “objective” truths and realities, not probing the perspectival realms of subjectivity to seek the truth of nostalgia, joy or the perfect blueness of an Yves Klein canvas. Also, it’s hard. Seth might use other words, but essentially, he is exploring the science of people’s souls—an daunting task.

All of this, of course, makes consciousness one of the most exciting scientific frontiers. Seth has been researching the cognitive basis of consciousness for more than two decades and has pioneered new ways of analysing the inescrutable and measuring the incalculable in his quest to deduce the constituents of our feelings down to their atomic basis. This much-anticipated book lays out his radical theory of our invented reality with accessible and compelling writing.

We take for granted the idea that we journey through life as the starring character in our own biopic. But this hallucination is generated by our minds, Seth explains. The brain is a “prediction machine” that is constantly generating best-guess causes of our sensory inputs. The mind generates our “reality” based on the predictions it makes from visual, auditory and other sensory information, and then verifies and modulates it through sensory information updates. These perceptual expectations shape our conscious experience. When we agree with each other about our hallucinations we call it “reality”; when we don’t we’re described as “delusional”.

Sometimes these disagreements can help us to peek past what William Blake called the “doors of perception”. One such discombobulating event that you may have experienced was #TheDress: an overexposed photo posted on social media in 2015, in which a striped dress looked blue and black to some people, and white and gold to others. The version that people saw depended on whether their brain had taken into account an adjustment for ambient lighting. People who spent more time indoors were more likely to see the dress as blue and black, because their prediction machine was primed to factor in yellowish lighting when preparing the hallucination. Those who spend more time outside have brains primed to adjust for the bluer spectrum of sunlight.

The dress phenomenon, Seth argues, is “compelling evidence that our perceptual experiences of the world are internal constructions, shaped by the idiosyncrasies of our personal biology and history”. In objective, non-hallucinated reality, though, the dress doesn’t have physical properties of blueness, blackness, whiteness or goldness. Colour is not a physical property of things in the way that mass is. Rather, objects have particular ways that they reflect light that our brains include in their complex Technicolor production of “reality”.

“Seth deftly weaves the philosophical, biological and personal with a lucid clarity and coherence that is thrilling to read”.

Seth deftly weaves the philosophical, biological and personal with a lucid clarity and coherence that is thrilling to read.
science and Seth gently walks us through the optical illusions, magic tricks and fascinating experiments that build his case. We are, his research shows, much more likely to perceive things we expect. In a study in which people were shown flashes of different images in their left and right eyes, hearing a cue for an image meant they were more likely to “see” that image yet be unconscious of the competing image shown to the other eye. Sometimes, our hallucinated world is wildly out of sync with everyone else’s – we lose our grip on reality. “What we call a ‘hallucination’ is what happens when perceptual priors are unusually strong, overwhelming the sensory data so that the brain’s grip on their causes in the world starts to slide.”

Seth has experimented with shifting his own reality – he describes using virtual reality headsets and taking LSD. I learn to my surprise that hallucinogens really do take you to a higher level of consciousness – your amount of consciousness can now be measured independently from wakefulness. This has had life-changing consequences, Seth explains, enabling “locked-in” patients to be recognised as conscious, despite their apparently inert state.

What then is the ground zero of consciousness in a living being – or indeed, an artificial one? At its most fundamental, it’s an awareness of self, knowing where you end and the rest of the world’s matter begins, and Seth explores a diversity of self-perception from parrots to octopuses – whose suckers attach to almost everything but their own skin, because they can taste themselves. He interrogates self-knowledge from inside out, dismantling the idea that our emotions produce bodily expressions, such as tears. Instead, Seth argues, our emotions are a response to the mind’s perception of our bodily reactions: we are sad because...
Hunting is hard. You have to run fast, for miles, often in the heat of the day. You have to keep your eyes fixed firmly on your prey. You must cooperate with fellow hunters as, if you don’t, you won’t eat. For 98% of human history, hunting and gathering has been our work. Work was never a picnic and it isn’t now.

Writing this book certainly can’t have been. Jan Lucassen, a Dutch historian and author of a number of books on globalisation and migration, has set himself a task that makes stalking mammoths look quite simple. He has set out to chronicle the history of work, from our first strides as *Homo sapiens* to the rise of the robot. The result is an encyclopedic survey that’s also a whistle-stop tour of human history – and it is fascinating.

It all seems to have started pretty well. We ran. We jumped. We chased. We ate. We shared our food. We may even have shared the childcare. And then we started sowing crops and herding goats. Agriculture was born and, with it, greater gender and societal inequality. “Better-nourished mothers”, Lucassen writes, “had more babies” and spent more time in childcare. Some households had bigger yields and these “aggrandizers” could take on non-agricultural crafts and sometimes leadership roles. The seeds were sown for the stratified societies we live in now.

It would be easy to see how a history of work spanning such a vast timeframe could be full of vague extrapolations from archaeological studies, but it’s the detail that makes this so gripping. In Uruk in Mesopotamia (now Iraq), in the fourth millennium BC, for example, there were leather workers, washermen, reed workers, barbers, weavers, builders, metal workers, potters, priests, musicians and scribes. In these early cities, administrative centres took care of the workers and handled “the redistribution of goods”. This was often on a rather paternalistic model. Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria invited 69,574 guests to a banquet that lasted 10 days. In Mesopotamia, by about 1000 BC, there were wage workers, self-employed people, subcontractors and slaves. Combined with the reciprocal and “tributary” models of labour relations (“tributary” being based on obligation to the state, with non-monetary reward), these are, he asserts, the six categories of labour relations. “From this point,” he says, “the history of work may be conceived as an endless shift between these basic forms.”

Much of it sounds gruelling, but there’s nothing new about pride in a job well done. “I am a craftsman who excels in his art and is at the forefront of knowledge,” says one Egyptian Lucassen quotes, from 2000 BC. He boasts about his understanding of hieroglyphs around 3,500 years before Gutenberg presented his printing press. But book printing, Lucassen explains, was invented before Gutenberg in China and Korea in the 8th century AD. Manuals for agricultural and textile technology were, apparently, extremely popular.

Lucassen takes us on a breakneck journey from the first strike, by workmen at a temple during the reign of Ramesses III, to the stage-managed productivity of Aleksei G Stakhanov in Stalinist Russia, and from Inca irrigation (and human sacrifice) to the Amazon that now seems to rule the world. The breadth of the scholarship is breathtaking, but the prose is clear with dashes of dry wit. After quoting the utopian reflections of the Chinese historian Sima Qian (c 145-86BC) on the goods that “will naturally flow forth ceaselessly” from a worker who “delights in his own business”, Lucassen observes wryly: “Another Chinese literate preferred to point to the reality, rather than theory, and expressed compassion for his toiling compatriots.”

Lucassen’s own compassion shines through this magisterial book: for all those who have and continue to toil in tough conditions, often with minimal reward. One of the most shocking themes to emerge is the scale of slavery. Between 900 and 600 BC, the Assyrian empire deported more than 4.5 million men, women...
and children, set to work as prisoners of war. Slavery seems to have existed in most societies and been condoned by most religions, including Christianity and Islam. Most voices have been silenced, but Lucassen quotes a few. One is a man called Oluale Kossola, who told the American writer Zora Neale Hurston how he was captured in Benin in 1860 at the age of 19. “My eyes dey stop cryin,” he said, “but de tears runnne down inside me all de time.”

For most of us in the modern workplace, our tears are usually for reasons that are more banal. We don’t like our boss. We didn’t get a pay rise. Our performance review didn’t go well. These are the focus of Naomi Shragai’s book The Man Who Mistook His Job for His Life. “The workplace is a theatre,” she says, “where everyone is acting out their own unique family drama while simultaneously attempting to cooperate and deliver results.”

For some of us, even the phrase “deliver results” is enough to send a shiver down the spine. This is a book geared firmly towards business and the office. Shragai is a psychotherapist and executive coach who helps businesses and people with work-related problems. It’s a self-help book, complete with exercises and tips. I didn’t do them, but then I don’t have colleagues or a boss. This book reminded me why.

Felicity is enraged when her boss promotes an underqualified but attractive colleague over her. William lives in fear of missing an email. Melissa is a “neurotic overachiever” who worked 18 hours a day until her hair fell out. Shragai tells their stories and others in order to make wider points about fear of rejection, narcissistic bosses, office envy, control freaks and bullies. What can sound trivial in the telling can, of course, seem Shakespearean to the teller. Shragai shows how change often begins with understanding. She is wise, experienced and often gives good advice. The trouble is that quite a lot of it will feel pretty basic.

More compelling are the glimpses of Shragai’s own life: “dying” on stage in her former career as a standup comedian; memories of her Hungarian father, who was liberated from Auschwitz, acquired a mobile home park in California, lost all the money he made and spent his last years doing charity work dressed as Santa Claus. Shragai has clearly had a fascinating life and I wanted to hear about more of it. She has certainly had a more interesting time than most of the clients she describes.

The Man Who Mistook His Job for His Life could well help some people who are struggling at work. I hope it does. As Lucassen points out, “most people on this planet spend more than half of their waking hours working”. That’s a big chunk of a life. I suppose we should just be grateful if we’re paid for it.

To buy The Story of Work for £21.75 or The Man Who Mistook His Job for His Life for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Nonfiction

{Environment} A story of missed opportunities and industrial decline is told with rare insight and vivacity

**Conrad Landin**

This November the eyes of the world will turn to Glasgow. “Cop26 meeting is last chance, says Alok Sharma as he backs UK’s plan for new oil and gas fields,” the Observer reported. The contradiction in this sentence is all the proof you need of the central themes of Crude Britannia: that Britain’s economic prosperity is inextricably linked to oil, and that breaking this link appears a more distant prospect than human extinction.

Journeying through landscapes of rigs and refineries, campaigner James Marriott and former Guardian energy editor Terry Macalister interweave history and psychogeography. One theme is how oil made pop music. Some examples seem contrived, but not “Stanlow”, released in 1980 by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. The song opens with a recording of a diesel pump at the Merseyside refinery of the same name. After reading Marriott and Macalister’s soul-stirring interviews with former refinery workers and OMD’s Andy McCluskey, whose father worked there, it becomes impossible to see the name Stanlow without hearing echoes of the band’s “intriguingly melancholic” melody.

As the authors say, it’s “a premonition” – of the industrial decline and missed opportunities, when Margaret Thatcher used tax revenues from oil to cushion rising unemployment while placing the North Sea in the hands of international capital. It’s a story that is told too rarely, and Marriott and Macalister should be commended for giving it such vivacity. Crude Britannia can also be a harrowing read. The authors shine a spotlight on the framing and execution of the “Ogoni Nine” who had protested against Shell pipelines in Nigeria. Shell continues to deny involvement, but in 2009 the company paid out £9.7m in compensation to the activists’ families as part of a “process of reconciliation”.

Climate campaigners are forging new cultural identities around renewable energy, but governments have failed to secure jobs in Britain as fabrication contracts go overseas. With oil defying past expectations of scarcity, perhaps it’s no wonder we can’t let go.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
For Berlin’s heroic diggers, the route to freedom was a 135-metre tunnel beneath the Wall

Philip Oltermann

It was a plan that seemed to defy not just caution but geography: to build a tunnel to help East Germans escape to the west – in cold war Berlin, of all places. The German capital is mainly built on oozing wet sand that requires effort to keep it in place. There are elevated areas, such as the district of Wedding, where the groundwater level is lower and the earth more firm, but after 1961 that part of the city also happened to be one where houses on either side of the Iron Curtain stood furthest apart, by Bernauer Straße. Tunnelling here underneath the “death strip” – the heavily guarded corridor between the walls – looked like a suicide mission.

And yet, in four months during the summer of 1962, a group of daredevil diggers achieved the seemingly impossible: constructing a 135-metre tunnel that ran between a factory building in the west and a tenement block cellar in the east. In the biggest and most spectacular escape mission since the erection of the wall the year before, 29 men, women and children managed to slip to the other side.

The story of Tunnel 29 – named after the number of people it allowed to escape – has been told and re-told. A 1962 NBC documentary that controversially helped fund the tunnellers is said to have changed American attitudes to the East Berliners’ plight. In Germany, there have been memoirs, more documentaries and a 2001 TV drama. But with her 10-part Radio 4 podcast series Tunnel 29 in 2019, the journalist and broadcaster Helena Merriman found the perfect medium to bring the story to a new audience. Her book retains most of the qualities that led her podcast to be downloaded more than 6m times.

For the tunnellers and the escapees, the route to freedom involved a slow crawl through an intensely confined space, less than 3ft by 3ft, and Merriman excels at recreating the physicality of their experiences: the smell of dense clay, the click-clack of a woman walking on the street above in high heels. The fear of water rushing in, of Stasi listening devices embedded in the soil, of border guards digging down to meet and greet them with a stick of dynamite.

As the stubborn clay demands sturdier, more expensive tools, the tunnel grows from a private enterprise into a project that is tolerated, if not directly funded, by American journalists, West German political parties, police and the CIA – meaning its discovery would not just have dashed the hopes of the escapees but risked creating a geopolitical crisis. Merriman hitches her story to a band of protagonists – digger Joachim Rudolph, wannabe escapees Renate and Wolfdieter Sternheimer, spy Siegfried Uhse – and expertly ups the tempo until the narrative tension is as taut as in a thriller.

Because the publication of Tunnel 29 coincides with the 60th anniversary of the building of the Berlin Wall, Merriman has front-loaded her book with some broader historical context, and this is where the adaptation from audio to text works least smoothly. The present tense serves the author well to describe the thud-thwack of the tunnellers, but when it comes to the tick-tock of geopolitics it can have a dulling effect, not least because Merriman’s story of the battle of Berlin, Stalin’s blockade of the city and the Socialist Unity party’s consolidation of power in the east, while expertly summarised, hardly explores uncharted terrain.

In Germany, there has in recent years been a subtle but noticeable shift in how the division of the country is culturally represented. Not Ostalgie (“nostalgia for the east”) or full-on revisionism, but a creeping feeling that the story of an inevitable triumph of good over evil on its own does not suffice to cover people’s real experiences.

A new book by the historian Robert Rauh, published in Germany this month, poses the uncomfortable question of whether the building of the Berlin Wall initially had more popular support among East Germany’s population than previously conceded.

Exploring these moral grey zones can, and perhaps should, be narrative nonfiction’s strong suit. Merriman has burrowed her way deep into interviews, news reports and Stasi files to fashion an impressive real-life page-turner, but as a book on the enduring legacy of the Berlin Wall, it doesn’t quite manage to break through to the other side.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The Malaysian writer’s investigation of his family roots in China explores themes of belonging and trauma.

Max Liu

**Strangers on a Pier: A Portrait of a Family** by Tash Aw, 4th Estate, £8.99

Years ago I was queueing in a fruit and veg shop in Cornwall with my half-Chinese dad when an elderly woman came up and asked him: “Where are you from?” “Liverpool,” he said. “But where are you really from?” she persisted.

This question is common-place for the children and even grandchildren of immigrants but it is difficult to answer, in part because, as Tash Aw, a Malaysian writer of Chinese descent, says in this brief but searching memoir, people rarely think of themselves as immigrants: “That is something others describe you as.”

Aw feels resigned to being misunderstood when “the explanation of where I’m from and who I am might seem too complicated” and chooses instead “to pretend to be whatever someone assumes I am”. Writing offers more room to explore the vexed question of origins and, in this memoir, an opportunity for Aw to add colour to a family portrait that has until now been marked by “opacity” and “cloudiness”.

Both of Aw’s grandfathers migrated from southern China to the Malay peninsula “at some point in the 1920s”. The imprecision of the date is telling. China’s Qing dynasty had recently ended but, Aw thinks, his ancestors “did not know they were living in momentous times” and “wanted only to escape crushing poverty”. He gently probes his parents for information, but conversations with his father are stilted. His mother tells him a disturbing story about a man who came to Malaysia with Aw’s grandfather and eventually drowned himself in a river. Aw is shocked, but when he asks his mother to elaborate she says: “So boring, what is there to tell?”

Many readers of east Asian heritage will recognise the “casual vagueness” that Aw observes in his parents. The past is to be avoided, there is always some trivial matter to take precedence and societies bent on progress create simplistic myths to fill the silence. But are we right to encourage our parents and grandparents to confront “unexamined trauma” concerning events that are far from our own experience, even if we believe we carry its legacies within us?

It’s a question that has been posed in recent years by writers such as Ocean Vuong and Madeleine Thien, and one that Aw negotiates sensitively in his memoir’s second half, which is addressed to his maternal grandmother. He recalls growing up in Kuala Lumpur, spending summer holidays with his extended family in the countryside and feeling like an “imposter”. Later, Aw won a scholarship to Cambridge where the “studied nonchalance” of well-off British undergraduates was in stark contrast to his own fastidiousness. Today, he lives in London and is the author of four novels.

The most famous of these, the Booker prize-longlisted *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), followed a quintet of characters in 21st-century Shanghai. It fizzed with a verbal energy and a social sweep that simultaneously captured the dizzying pace of urban Asia and made it difficult for the reader to get close to his characters. Aw’s memoir is, by contrast, an intimate work in which the personal subject matter and smaller canvas allow for careful contemplation. The clarity of Aw’s writing means that, even when he makes a generalisation, you sense he’s arrived there after considerable thought: “This is what it means to be modern in Asia today: you are required to detach yourself from the past and live only in the present … ”

At first, I wondered why Aw hadn’t written a longer book about his family. The “abnormally high rate of suicide” among its male members, which he mentions in passing, sounds as if it warrants a book-length investigation of its own. The second time I read *Strangers on a Pier*, however, I was surprised by the brevity of passages that had struck me first time around. Aw has honed his ideas to a sharpness that may have had less impact in a longer work. The white space that surrounds his text works as a visual prompt for readers’ reveries about their own roots.

While travelling, Aw notices things and conveys in a few words the larger truths they illustrate. One of the most memorable examples occurs on a bus in Singapore, when he spots a woman crying during a video call with a little boy. Aw speculates that she has left her family and moved thousands of miles for work. For people from the part of the world where he grew up, Aw reflects, “the normality of separation” is ingrained but produces pain “so deep that it can’t be spoken of in any way other than perfunctorily”. His memoir is affecting because, as well as reaching a better understanding of his own family history, he sees his ancestors in today’s migrants and reminds us that their stories are complex and remarkable, wherever they are from.

To buy a copy for £7.82 go to guardianbookshop.com.
From Tito's gulags to a kibbutz, a powerful retelling of a Jewish woman's life, from the author of A Horse Walks into a Bar

Alex Clark

David Grossman’s concisely devastating novel was inspired by the life of Eva Panić Nahir, a Jewish woman from the former Yugoslavia who, having been imprisoned and tortured as a traitor in one of Tito’s gulags, came to Israel with her daughter, married a widower, and created a politically and socially active life on a kibbutz. But that condensed biography barely scrapes the surface of a story so emotionally, ideologically and morally complex that it takes all of Grossman’s considerable skills to render.

He is not the first artist to attempt it; the Serbian novelist Danilo Kiš made a television series about Eva, and there was a documentary in 2003. But Grossman, who had a “profound friendship” with her for more than 20 years until her death in 2015, evidently felt that there was more to say, and has responded to Eva’s wish for her and her daughter Tiana’s story to be told once more. In doing so, he has demonstrated that the novel – elastic, expansive, amenable to painful fragmentation – can provide a space for the most harrowing and resistant material.

Grossman does it by approaching his central story crabwise; a method that will be familiar to those who have read his International Booker winner A Horse Walks into a Bar, in which he tackles issues of art and transgression through the lens of standup comedy, or his deeply affecting exploration of grief, duty and national identity To the End of the Land. In More Than I Love My Life’s earlier sections, Vera - his version of Eva - is a character of almost comic-book charisma, 90 years old and celebrating her birthday with a family of numerous branches, consisting of blood relations and more contingent, ad hoc alliances. Vera’s first husband, Milosz, is long dead; so, more recently, is her Israeli husband, Tuvia. Tuvia’s son, Rafi, has had some form of intense relationship with Nina, Milosz and Vera’s daughter, and together they have produced Gili, the novel’s awkward, pained 39-year-old narrator.

Nina has largely disappeared from the family’s life, and is immensely troublesome both in presence and absence. When she returns for the party, she comes trailing a sense of disarray and impending disaster; and that’s before she reveals that she has an incurable illness that will attack her brain and wreak havoc on her memory and consciousness. In what appears to be a moment of desperate whimsy, she asks her mother, Rafi and Gili to make a film for her to watch when she no longer knows quite who she is.

It’s an elaborate setup, made even more so by the thickness of backstory that precedes this strained quartet’s journey to film Vera’s life, culminating in a trip to Goli Otok, the Croatian island on which Vera was imprisoned. But it also resolves to much clearer emotional realities: a mother who has abandoned her daughter, and a daughter who has then replicated the same behaviour with her own child; the types and hierarchies of love that will always leave someone feeling as though they are second best; the impossibility of taking on another person’s sense of betrayal and anger and expunging it on their behalf; the endless merry-go-round of handed-down trauma.

There are specifics at play, too. Grossman returns repeatedly to Vera’s experiences during and immediately after the second world war, showing us critical moments - most notably Vera’s refusal to denounce her Serbian husband, leading to her arrest and separation from a young Nina - from multiple viewpoints. The series of passages in which Grossman recreates Vera’s life on Goli Otok, where she is forced to stand on the top of a mountainous outcrop in baking sun for hour after hour in an attempt to break her will, take on a horrendous dreamlike quality.

But after all that sacrifice and bravery, what is left? On one side is Vera, a character beloved of the family she has nurtured, undaunted by loss, determined to stand firm in the service of every principle she holds, every decision she has made. On the other, though, is the small child she left behind her, and the extraordinary acts of self-erasure and self-harm - through sexual surrender, endless movement, habitual severing of bonds - that Nina has acted out over half a century.

The question that the novel poses is not one of who was right and who was wrong, but of how painful events and actions can be accommodated without a complete breakdown of familial bonds. Is Nina’s future the only place where mental scars can be truly erased? How will Gili stop being “a hologram of the mess” created by her parents? For all its determination to stare into the abyss, this scrupulous, anguished novel does suggest a more hopeful resolution - albeit one that might take decades to reach.

To buy a copy for £16.14 go to guardianbookshop.com.
This picaresque adventure is a homage to 18th-century novels that resonates with our own superstitious times

Alice Jolly

The Infernal Riddle of Thomas Peach
by Jas Treadwell, Hodder, £16.99

This novel is a virtuosic performance. A literary homage to Fielding and Sterne, it tells the story of Thomas Peach, who moves to a remote corner of Somerset in 1785 to nurse his ailing wife. But his wife is never seen, and gossip is rife. Is Mr Peach “a scholar of mysterious arts”, and has he imprisoned his wife “in order to get his grasping hands on an inheritance”?

When Mr Peach travels to Bristol, he encounters a young woman who is apparently possessed by a demon. This meeting leads, in true 18th-century style, to a sequence of picaresque adventures that present the reader with “puzzle and conundrum on every side”. But it is not the narrative that matters here so much as the vigour and rhythm of the narrative voice, which belongs to a curious chorus of “necromantic spirits”, who are by turns digressive, discursive, comic and wise. The galloping rhythm of their storytelling creates a heartbeat that sounds through each page of the book. From mysterious mentions of the profession of horse boiler to saucy references to games of frog-in-the-breech, the world the “spirits” create is rich in eccentric period detail and gentle humour.

All this is most enjoyable, but why create an exact copy of an 18th-century novel? The reader always suspects that Peach’s “remarkable secrets” will prove less interesting than expected. Sure enough, the book stumbles to a halt rather than resolving or explaining.

Yet, strangely, this proves more satisfying than disappointing. This may be because Treadwell has discovered unlikely resonances between the 18th-century novel and our own times. Rumour, farce, ridiculous happenings, amoral characters, the losing battle between reason and superstition. A world in which one damn thing happens after another and all we can do is shrug. Does any of this sound familiar?

Treadwell’s book entertains and impresses but also rambles and frustrates. Yet he must be congratulated for an extraordinary feat of literary ventriloquism and also for reminding us what literary historical fiction does best: create an entirely convincing historical world while also using that world as a lens through which to view the present day.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.

Worldly woes come to a small village in a German bestseller that is sprinkled with matter-of-fact magic

James Smart

What You Can See From Here
by Mariana Leky, translated by Tess Lewis, Bloomsbury, £8.99

The okapi lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo, its glossy brown body sloping up from zebra-striped legs. It’s an unlikely presence in western Germany, but that’s not why Selma is unsettled when she sees one, calmly wandering the woods of the Westerwald in her dreams. She is scared because every time she dreams of an okapi, someone dies.

What You Can See From Here has become a phenomenon since its 2017 publication, selling more than 600,000 copies in Germany alone. This translation reveals a warm and curious book that – despite the odd exotic visitor – has a very local focus, its eyes set on a small community in a nameless village, its drama sprinkled with matter-of-fact magic.

At its heart is Luisa, Selma’s thoughtful granddaughter. Luisa’s mother is wrapped up in her flower shop and an affair with the ice-cream seller, and her father is obsessed with his psychoanalyst. So Luisa relies on others, including the devoted Selma.

Selma’s vision and its grim aftermath shatter Luisa, but life goes on. She falls for a stranger, gets a job and acquires a wolfhound. Her father leaves to travel, instructing the stay-at-homes to “let more of the world in”. The world, of course, comes to the village anyway: there are petty thefts and failed businesses, admissions of love and acts of sabotage.

Strangeness is rarely far away. Selma’s sister-in-law Elsbeth is afflicted by gossipy imps. Even the more pragmatic characters hear voices and give credence to prophecies. There are dashes of magic realism, as well as a hearty dose of the Brothers Grimm, and Leky’s clear, direct prose gives the everyday and the fantastical equal weight. The result is that mundane events acquire a patina of myth, while rumours and superstitions feel like truths that have bloomed amid the Westerwald.

Some of Leky’s cast make sense of this rich, often cruel world via aphorisms, Buddhism or psychoanalysis; others are simply grumpy. It’s a mix that stops the novel feeling too folksy, despite its quirkiness, and makes it a clear-eyed tonic in troubled times.

To buy a copy for £8.36 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Island adventures, a sci-fi thriller, TS Eliot’s cat and teachers chased through the forest by monsters

Imogen Russell Williams

The remote wildness of a Scottish island blended with Celtic folklore and Hindu mythology: Jasbinder Bilan’s *Aarti & the Blue Gods* (Chicken House) is a gem for readers of eight-plus. Aarti lives alone with her exacting, cruel aunt, cut off from the world and her own history - until a boy washes up on the beach, and she makes an extraordinary discovery. Deftly interweaving the tangible and the numinous, this richly layered adventure confirms Bilan’s striking, original talent.

From *Scavengers* author Darren Simpson comes *The Memory Thieves* (Usborne), a tense sci-fi thriller. In the Elsewhere Sanctuary, young residents, including Cyan, submit to Dr Haven’s memory modifications to escape deep-rooted trauma - but when Cyan finds a cryptic message carved into a whale skeleton, and sees a new arrival resist the regime, he begins to rebel, too. Simpson combines fast-paced visual storytelling with a complex, thought-provoking message about coming to terms with the past.

A philosophical standalone, *Poison for Breakfast* (Rock the Boat) from Daniel Handler AKA Lemony Snicket, is narrated by the author, who realises one morning that he is investigating his own murder. Or is he? This little book feels like opening a window to let in air and light. It’s filled with curious information and powerful feelings, and is humorous, sad, meditative and rapturous by turns.

For seven-plus, *Maddy Yip’s Guide to Life* (Andersen) by Sue Cheung follows the eponymous heroine on a quest to discover her talent. Everyone else has one, so surely she must too ... but thwarted by distressing clumsiness, disgusting cakes and defiantly fleeing guinea-pig assistants, will Maddy ever discover her unique gift? A highly illustrated, frequently hilarious start to a new series.

Written by Geoffrey Faber’s granddaughter Polly, and published, naturally, by Faber, *The Book Cat* is illustrated with bright-eyed charm by Clara Vulliamy. It’s the fanciful account of Morgan, wartime street kitten turned purrfect publishing house cat under the auspices of TS Eliot. Morgan then trains other kittens as writers’ companions to get them out of London - a sweet feline twist on the classic evacuee story.

A picture book for five-plus, the gorgeous *My
Nottingham succeeds on his second attempt. Angry and unsettled, Sully challenges Nottingham to a race – to be the first to climb the impossible tree, the tree without a name. But will one of them make it to the top without tragedy?

Spare, brief, limpidly clear, this novella from a multi-award-winning author distils the thin-skinned, painful sensitiveness of teenage boys, desperate both to stand out and fit in.

Beautiful Voice (Frances Lincoln) by Joseph Coelho, illustrated by Allison Colpoys, is a story that unfurls as delicately as a flower, infused with Colpoys’s glowing swirls of colour. The shy narrator doesn’t speak in class – until her teacher Miss Flotsam provides the perfect conditions for her to write a poem, and then to recite it, in her newly discovered voice.

In picture books for younger readers, two very funny counting books stand out. In 10 Silly Children (Pavilion), new talent Jon Lander takes us joyously from sensible activities – sitting still, having a bath, cooking, gardening – to fold-out flaps in which extreme silliness holds sway: think dressed-up lions and feasts of worm pie. It’s all conveyed in playful, free-feeling hand-drawn sweeps of colour, while solemn injunctions not to open said flaps give the book a conspiratorial feel, perfect for reading aloud.

And Ten Delicious Teachers (Walker), by Ross Montgomery and Sarah Warburton, features a handful of heedless educators who have missed the last bus home and take a shortcut through the forest – to the delight of the hungry, brightly coloured monsters who pick them off, one by one. Funny and irreverent, it’s easy to imagine this one being a huge hit.

Also from Walker, Ergo, by Alexis Deacon and Viviane Schwarz, is the deceptively simple story of a little yellow chick discovering that she is not the world, and neither is her eggshell. Ergo’s progress from certainty to doubt, exploration to new discovery, is comic, engaging and profoundly thought-provoking, for readers of any age.

Teenagers

Time travel and tragedy in south London, a daring race to the top of a tree and an unlikely friendship

The Upper World
by Femi Fadugba
Penguin, £7.99
When teenage Esso somehow starts seeing glimpses of the future, he is haunted by a vision of a bullet fired in an alley; but can the future possibly be changed? Fifteen years on, Rhia is filled with questions about her parents and the moment that ensured she never met them. Does Dr Esso have answers for her – or is his talk about time travel just disturbed rambling? From the streets of south London to the unearthly strangeness of the Upper World, this is a superbly original debut. Written with ambition and panache, it effortlessly blends theoretical physics with all-too-human tragedy.

The Sound of Everything
by Rebecca Henry,
Everything With Words, £8.99.
Complex, challenging Kadie has been bounced from foster home to foster home, betrayal to betrayal. But though the noise of the everyday often threatens to overwhelm her, she has a talent for music – one that prompts her to forge an unlikely alliance with Dayan, also a gifted musician. As envious girls begin a campaign of online hate against her, can Kadie bring herself to trust Dayan and let him in? A brilliantly assured first novel, evoking all the stored-up, defensive hurt of the rejected child. IRW
‘A lot of white female professors told me to quit’

Activist and author Rafia Zakaria tells Nesrine Malik that there is no one-size-fits-all feminism and that the goal of her work is to comfort women of colour who have been ‘gaslit’

Rafia Zakaria’s new book Against White Feminism starts with a sort of Sex and the City scene entitled “At a wine bar, a group of feminists ...” In it, some well-heeled white women are gathered for a drink in New York. The only brown woman in attendance, Zakaria winces and wilts under the glare of their innocent questions, as she tries to avoid the responses she tends to receive when she tells her true story – ones of pity, discomfort and avoidance.

Zakaria was born in Pakistan and at the age of 17 agreed to an arranged marriage to a Pakistani man living in the US. “I had never experienced freedom, so I gladly signed it away,” she writes. The marriage was unhappy, and she left her abusive husband at the age of 25, seeking refuge in a shelter with her toddler. What followed were years of precarity in the US. She tells me, from her home in Indiana, that she wrote the book because “I am a Muslim brown person from Pakistan, and the assumption when I meet people in the west is that all the oppression I’ve ever faced, all the hardship that I’ve ever faced, were back in Pakistan, and were the consequence of cultural mores and beliefs.” With Against White Feminism, she wanted to challenge that “liberation trajectory” of the Muslim woman’s story, so that women who live in the west stop thinking “Oh it’s so bad over there” – it must be “so great here”.

By writing the book, Zakaria hopes to decentre white feminism or, at least, call attention to the fact that it is a template that does not work for everyone because it is limited in its utility by white supremacy. “A white feminist,” Zakaria writes, “is someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played in universalising white feminist concerns, agendas and beliefs as being those of all of feminism and of all of feminists.”

In the book, Zakaria outlines how a one-size-fits-all white feminism has been complicit in interventionist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in destroying native aid and empowerment structures in low income countries, and in denying the cultural backwardness of western societies vis-a-vis women’s rights.

Her “trauma” is central to her motivations for writing the book. In 2002, when she ran away from her husband with “a baby on her hip”, she had no money, bank account or credit card. She managed to leave sheltered accommodation only when a black woman offered her an apartment. It was the first time she could “exhale”, she says. “I had been running for so long.” After a few difficult years, she managed to finish law school and complete a postgraduate degree in political philosophy. At one point, a stranger paid for her groceries at the supermarket when her daughter brought an unbudgeted bag of popsicles to the till.

“That moment of not having enough money to pay for your food is really seared into my memory. I felt so much shame, so much absolute disappointment in myself because I had to take charity to feed myself and my kid.” Graduate school, with its subsidised childcare and flexible hours, was a refuge, a place where Zakaria could be “poor and smart”.

The white women she met on the way, all of ostensibly impeccable liberal and feminist credentials, did little to help her. In law school “a lot of white female professors told me to quit”. When she felt she had finally found her place in the NGO world, white women “obstructed” and sabotaged her “in every possible way” from doing her job. “Every time I would write a report there would be 10 people who would shred it, telling me how I was wrong and I was failing and I didn’t know this and I didn’t know that. Basically it was a trap, I was set up to fail. So then you can tell the story that we gave so and so the job and we’re so inclusive, but she decided she didn’t want to do it.” Zakaria is softly spoken and quasi-academic in her speech, but her tone sharpens when she lists these slights and humiliations, as it does when she recounts other incidents that made her feel like a sort of shop window display of a brown woman for the benefit of a white audience. “I was either never allowed to speak or entrapped.”

One of the problems with white feminism according to Zakaria is that it is still connected to the patriarchy through the power pool of white men. “That shared culture can be drawn on and augmented by ideas such as ‘lean in’ [Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 bestselling book advocated a can-do brand of feminist
self-empowerment] that undergird the white feminists you might encounter at Google. “This model of feminism has “gotten far and shattered ceilings, I won’t lie”, she says. But once white feminists succeed, they hoard the spoils. “If white men have welcomed you to the executive suite, the way you protect your position there is you continue to please white men.”

What about the women of colour who get to the top, remain silent and so are also complicit? “There are a lot of benefits in being the token woman of colour. There are doors that open for you, things available to you that are not available to a trouble-making brown feminist like me, because I am going to ask questions and I’m not going to take it.” But she sees these women as co-opted by necessity, rather than by conscious agreement and shared interest. “I have sympathy for them; for literally hundreds of years that has been the only way to get anywhere close to power.”

The sharpest of Zakaria’s criticism of white feminism is reserved for white female journalists. “There’s a certain arc that the editors want,” she says, that these journalists deliver. “In the case of Afghanistan, there was very much an idea that this was America taking feminism to Afghan women,” and “liberating them from the Taliban. There are colonial precedents to sending female reporters out there. These white women are sent in as emblems – our women are brave and they are out taking pictures and writing stories and getting your story out to the world. But the assumption is that there isn’t anyone in Afghanistan who can write in English and tell the stories of Afghanistan to the world.”

When it comes to her native Pakistan, a country from which white feminists believe she was saved, Zakaria has little time for their concerns. When Imran Khan, the prime minister, was challenged by Judy Woodruff of PBS earlier this year about comments he made that appeared to blame women for incidents of rape in Pakistan, Zakaria saw the episode as a manifestation of “a legacy of cultural ranking that no one has really bothered to take apart. That cultural ranking says that cultural crimes occur in these places and those sorts of cultural crimes don’t exist in other places in the west. There isn’t some particular British form of violence against women, it’s just violence against women.”

With her book, Zakaria hopes to console the scolded and scold the consolers. “I don’t think white women are truly aware of how uncomfortable other women feel, how much they have to edit themselves, how fed up they are.” While she harbours some hope that white feminists will listen to her advice on how to cede space and examine their prejudices, she says the real goal of her work is to comfort women of colour who have been “gaslit”.

“I struggled very much. I had come from trauma, I went into trauma. I feel a very strong sense of responsibility towards other women like me, who’ve been through traumatic marriages, migration, being a single mother.

“I struggled very much. I had come from trauma, I went into trauma. I feel a very strong sense of responsibility towards other women like me, who’ve been through traumatic marriages, migration, being a single mother. The odds are so stacked against someone with my experience, my racial background, my economic background, to be in the conversation at all. And so since I’ve somehow slipped into the conversation I feel a responsibility towards other women who are just as smart as me, just as articulate. Now I’m here, I’m going to say all those things. I believe that you can tear things down when they’re not working, and build them up again. That is one of my core beliefs, because I’ve done it” •
Up close and dangerous

For decades he was wildly out of fashion, now DH Lawrence is everywhere – from novels and biographies to a new adaptation of Lady Chatterley’s Lover. Lara Feigel explores his allure

When the clock struck for lockdown last March, many of us found ourselves condemned to live alongside people in more intense proximity than we’d bargained for. Flatmates, spouses, children were no longer occasional companions but a constant presence. For me, this has been the case with DH Lawrence.

Having committed to writing a book on him, suddenly I found myself sequestered with him. There was a time when this would have felt sexually charged. In my 20s, I fell for his vision of bodily life, as so many of his female readers had done. “His intuitive intelligence sought the core of woman,” Anais Nin wrote after his death. Visiting the shrine at Lawrence’s former ranch in New Mexico in 1939, WH Auden mocked the “cars of women pilgrims” traipsing “to stand reverently there and wonder what it would have been like to sleep with him”.

But for me, this phase has long passed. Since then, I’ve read the women – Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett - who have found him more dangerous. I’ve read the essays where Lawrence condemns “cocksure women”, celebrates the phallus, propounds ideas of racial hierarchy, rails against democracy and urges us to hit our children. Returning to these has felt claustrophobic during the months of our proximity, perhaps especially because intense closeness is a feature of Lawrence’s writing. He invites it from readers – his prose claims almost excessive personal investment. And his characters are often too close, engrossed in each other or captivated by an idea of themselves they have got from another person and can’t escape from.

Emerging from lockdown, I found it peculiar to discover that three other women had also been locked away with him. Rachel Cusk’s Booker-longlisted novel, Second Place, takes as inspiration Mabel Dodge Luhan’s memoir about Lawrence’s time in New Mexico. Dodge – a New York socialite before she settled there with a Native American husband – invited Lawrence to stay, hoping he’d describe the area in his work. Her memoir records all that she and Lawrence put each other through. Lawrence put considerable effort into Dodge’s moral and sartorial improvement (persuading her to dress like his mother). But he vilified her in life and fiction as a wilful woman.

In Cusk’s novel, a painter called L is summoned to stay with a female writer called M in a house in the Norfolk marshes. They remain frustratingly distant, yet are sometimes flooded by closeness so frightening that it nearly costs the narrator her marriage to Tony (the name of Dodge’s husband).

Why does Cusk need Lawrence for this, given it’s an idea she’s had before? She has read him for years, but I think she needed this moment of reckoning with a revered male genius for the next stage in her...
autobiographical project. Cusk’s narrator isn’t only Dodge, though. M has characteristics of Lawrence the writer, sharing his androgyny, his sense of the self as inhabited more fully when stripped of personality.

Reading Lawrence during lockdown - at a time when, as a woman living alone with children, all my resources of will have been required - I presented his suggestion that female wilfulness is dangerous. I was grateful, reading the memoirs of women who knew him, when they resist him. “Your puppets do not always dance to your pipe,” the poet HD told him in her autofiction Bid Me to Live. And now, weeping, Cusk’s narrator tries to get L to understand “that this will of mine that he so objected to had survived numerous attempts to break it, and at this point could be credited with my own survival and that of my child”.

To spend sustained time with Lawrence is to argue with him. He argued with everyone, and most of all with himself. Part of why he still matters is his love of ambivalence and oppositions - there was no thought that wasn’t enlivened for him by considering its opposite - and this can bring out equivalent energies in his readers. It’s satisfying to find Cusk arguing with him, and to encounter Frances Wilson doing so in her biography of Lawrence, Burning Man, published earlier this year.

Wilson insists here that his novels weren’t his greatest works. Women in Love was not, she says, the “flawless masterpiece that Lawrence believed he had written”. I disagree with her larger judgments, but she constructs a thrilling romp of an argument that enables her to defend him as well, making a case for his essays as great works of art.

I too have done my share of defending Lawrence, as well as arguing with him. I have defended him, in particular, from Millett – another woman who’s been pushed into extremes of judgment by Lawrence’s excesses. Millett’s book Sexual Politics was in some ways a necessary corrective to the cult of Lawrence, led by the Cambridge don FR Leavis, who championed his writing in his 1955 book as “an immense body of living creation” with redemptive power for humanity.

I have decided that Millett was spectacularly wrong about Lady Chatterley’s Lover, because she doesn’t read it as a novel. For the last few years, when I have taught Lawrence, my female students have fallen in love with Lady Chatterley’s Lover and then I have given them Millett to read and they have changed their minds, condemning him for reducing women to passive sexual objects. Yet Millett doesn’t take into account how fully he inhabits Connie as well as Mellors. This is one of the great portrayals by a man of a female character, up there with Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina. If, as Millett suggests, the male body is more lyrically portrayed than the female, isn’t this because we see it through Connie’s eyes – because the female gaze is allowed to be as objectifying as the male gaze?

For Millett, the gamekeeper is Lawrence. But in the novel, Mellors’ is just one, flawed point of view. There are times, I think, when Lawrence found him as overreaching, as foolish, as the modern female reader does. This is surely the case during his famously repulsive speech about his ex-wife’s clitoris – which he describes as a hard beak tearing at him with “a raving sort of self-will”. When Mellors says this to Connie, I think Lawrence gives us room to see his speech as a partial view of a failed marriage. Connie doesn’t agree with Mellors – she pushes him to reflect on his own part in the difficulties. It becomes the kind of scene Lawrence does so well, portraying minute-by-minute gyrations of love and hate. They bicker; he tells her that women are self-important and she tells him that he is. She has arranged to stay the night – it will be their first whole night together – but he tells her to go home. They make up, and go quietly to bed; it’s not till the morning that they undress and, in a glow of spring sunlight, she examines his body openly for the first time and they have sex.

After wrangling with Millett, it has come as a relief to read Alison MacLeod’s forthcoming Tenderness and to find in it a large-hearted celebration of Lady Chatterley’s Lover. MacLeod’s novel fictionalises two main time periods: the moment in Lawrence’s own life when he had a love affair with Rosalind Baynes, and the trial of Lady Chatterley’s Lover in 1960 (preceded by a hearing in New York). MacLeod moves, with dexterity and ease, between the heads of Lawrence and various defenders of the novel. These range from Jackie Kennedy (an enthusiast of the novel, whom MacLeod imagines secretly attending the US hearing), to an FBI agent who falls for the book he has been charged with helping to ban. “The book must be read,” MacLeod quotes Lawrence writing, “It’s a bomb, but to the living, a flood of urge – and I must sell it.” MacLeod shows the flood of urge seeping through the lives of its readers, so that Kennedy, reading those lines about how “a woman has to live her life, or live to repent not having lived it”, wonders how her own existence can contain more life.

The rethinking of Lawrence led by Millett was necessary to help us get away from Lawrence as the prophet celebrated by Leavis and to rescue him from the prejudices he failed imaginatively to transform. Now, we are free again to confront him as we wish. And it turns out that Lawrence can still offer vital sustenance and provocation to his female readers, and can still produce in us rather drastic and exuberant fruits. We may have moved on in our sense of sexuality and gender, but he still speaks to so many of our desires - for many-sided complexity, for trenchant argument that remains open to contradiction, for books and lives driven by mood rather than plot, for selfhood freed of personality, for the awakened female gaze.

Lara Feigel’s Free Woman: Life, Liberation and Doris Lessing is published by Bloomsbury.
How did humans learn to talk and why haven’t chimpanzees followed suit? Linguistics expert Sverker Johansson looks at the facts and busts some long-held chauvinist myths

How and when did human language evolve? Did a “grammar module” just pop into our ancestors’ brains one day thanks to a random change in our DNA? Or did language come from grooming, or tool use, or cooking meat with fire? These and other hypotheses exist, but there seems little way to rationally choose between them. It was all so very long ago, so any theory must be essentially speculation.

Or must it? This is the question presented as an elegant intellectual thriller by The Dawn of Language: Axes, Lies, Midwifery and How We Came to Talk. Its author is Sverker Johansson, a serene and amiable 60-year-old Swede who speaks to me over Zoom from his book-crammed home study in the city of Falun, where he works as a senior adviser at Dalarna University.

Johansson actually began his academic life as a particle physicist, but, he now explains: “I felt a growing frustration with that field, because it was becoming more and more industrialised. I felt like the guy on the Ford assembly line, screwing screw number 37 over and over and over again. That’s not what I want to do as a researcher.” He smiles. His first detour was into neutrino astronomy, and then he became fascinated by linguistics, and the puzzle of how language exists at all.

He began attending yearly conferences devoted to the question, and wrote an academic book, Origins of Language: Constraints on Hypotheses (2005). His new book, however, is not merely a popularisation of that one. For one thing, he says, he has changed his mind about the Neanderthals. Scientists have since sequenced the entire Neanderthal genome, and we now know that Neanderthals interbred with modern humans before dying out only about 30,000 years ago. This means, for Sverker, that they could almost certainly talk. “If two people have kids together,” he points out, “I very much doubt that one was without language and the other one with.”

In his book he offers a rousing defence of the Neanderthals against decades of prejudice: “Even today the word ‘Neanderthal’ is used as a pejorative term for people with the kind of primitive attitudes we do not feel are appropriate for a Homo sapiens,” he writes. “It is both bigoted and sad that another kind of human should be devalued in this way simply because they were different [...] The Neanderthals were Europe’s original inhabitants, the only true Europeans. We and the Neanderthals went our separate ways about half a million years ago. It was in Europe that they evolved from earlier forms of humans, whereas we Homo sapiens are relatively recent immigrants from Africa.”

A determination to redress unthinking prejudice is also behind the curious fact that Johansson is, on one possible estimation, the world’s most prolific author. In parallel to his studies in the origins of language, he also maintains a web-crawling bot (LSJbot) that scrapes geographical, meteorological and other data and automatically creates short Wikipedia articles. “Wikipedia has excellent geographic coverage where young white males live,” he explains drily. “North America, Europe, generally industrialised countries - but Africa was basically a blank spot. Suppose there is a disaster in some village somewhere. What do you do but Africa was basically a blank spot. Suppose there is a disaster in some village somewhere. What do you do?

There was also, it turns out, a gender imbalance in theories of how humans came to speak. Sverker’s general approach in his book is laudably empirical - “I was trained in the hard sciences and the habits of thinking carry over,” he says. Which means casting aside any existing theory that simply doesn’t accord with known facts. And one known fact is that women are just as good as men at using language. One common hypothesis, that language evolved through sexual selection - men competing for the attention of women - can therefore be dismissed. “Women and men talk equally well,” Johansson says. “They have the same language capacity. Unlike songbirds, for example. And that means that an explanation for language has to be gender-neutral or near enough.”

The intellectual field has been notable for its preponderance of confident men with allegedly all-encompassing theories, and Sverker made a point of striking a blow against unthinking sexism. “The position is evidence-driven,” he notes mildly, “but I made a choice to deliberately make it prominent. As, I would say, counter-fire against all the male-chauvinist theories that have been published over the last century.”

This approach sees Johansson, like Sherlock Holmes, eliminating hypotheses one by one. Noam Chomsky’s theory that a brain “grammar” module
suddenly appeared by virtue of a single large genetic mutation, for example, is also discarded because such a “supermutation” is not “biologically plausible”. Robin Dunbar’s thesis that language evolved out of grooming habits in larger social groups, meanwhile, fails to account for “why baboons, whose troops may contain a couple of hundred individuals, have not evolved an alternative to grooming”.

But group size and social interaction are key in a different way, according to what Johansson finally reveals as his preferred thesis. This is partly inspired by the work of American anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, who argues that cooperative childcare played an important role in evolution. Johansson agrees, and thinks that the cooperation necessary was the spark for the evolution of language in turn. “Because human children are so difficult to deliver,” he writes in the book, “having help can mean the difference between life and death.” Midwives and grandmothers turn out to be key.

Any such theory must pass what Johansson calls the “chimp test”: it must explain why chimpanzees, so genetically close to us, did not also evolve language. The idea that it evolved through status-seeking does not pass the test, because chimpanzees already have quite sophisticated politics without needing language. But this woman-centric theory does pass, because female chimpanzees leave their birth troupe when sexually mature, and can easily give birth with no help. So special bonds of trust and cooperation are not necessary.

A cluster of such considerations – also taking into account evidence of tool use, culture, and other things – leads Johansson to conclude, in a disarming thrill of revelation: “The combination of trust and helpfulness, just the right family and group structure, a language-ready mind and an ecological niche in which cooperation was an advantage turn out to be unique to Homo erectus, and explain why no other animal possesses language.” That is, our ancestors had already begun to talk around a million years ago.

There is much more in the book, including enjoyable sparks of sardonic humour – “In the absence of detailed knowledge about the way mirror neurons work,” he writes, “there is a comprehensive literature that consists in speculation as to what they are for”; or, when discussing animal communication: “When it comes to most of their signals only the squids know what they mean.” It is in many ways a model of popular-science writing in its imperturbable, reasonable weighing of competing ideas. “I hope the reader might see a way of thinking and a way of treating evidence that might be new to many of them,” Johansson agrees.

He’s already at work on a follow-up book to be called The Footprints of Language. “That’s about what happens next, right after we have language. How do we get this enormous diversity of languages that we have in the world today, of 7,000 languages and hundreds of different language families? But it’s not simply chaos: there’s a lot of pattern in these languages.”

Why should we care about all this? “Well, there are two types of answer,” he says benignly. “One is basically plain curiosity – where do we come from? The same kind of drive behind creation myths, right? And the other is more practical. Do we have any use for knowledge about language evolution? And there, I would say, it helps us better understand language itself: the mechanisms of language. And that would be helpful in thinking about language disorders and how to support and repair them.”

In the meantime The Dawn of Language is a fascinating story in its own right, and surprisingly optimistic about human nature, in its emphasis on the necessity of trust and cooperation for language to have ever got off the ground. “If you look at our relatives,” Johansson says, “it becomes rather obvious. We’re not perfect. People certainly fight a lot, but it’s like I wrote in the book – put 300 people in an airplane and they will sit quietly enough across the Atlantic. Put 300 chimps in the same place. What will happen?”

“We are not perfect,” he repeats. “But we are more cooperative: we have an easier time cooperating in large groups, and with people we don’t know. We understand reciprocity better: we can do it at larger scales. And we are better at suppressing aggression. Even if you feel you want to strangle the guy across the aisle because he’s incessantly talking, you don’t.” Instead, perhaps, just marvel at the fact he can talk at all •
‘It helped people come out to their parents’
Madeline Miller

It was the early months of 2000. I was about to graduate with my classics degree and begin a master’s. I was already working on my thesis, on a topic that had long frustrated me: the way that some scholarship dismissed the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, labelling them “good friends”. I’d read Plato’s Symposium, where Achilles and Patroclus are not just presented as lovers, but the ideal romantic relationship. I knew that interpreting their relationship as romantic was a very old idea, and I was angry at the way homophobia was erasing this reading.

During this time, a good friend called me. He was involved with a Shakespeare theatre group. He planned to direct that year, and he wanted me to direct with him. I had no theatrical experience, but he said he was directing Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare’s version of the Iliad. Achilles and Patroclus were both in it.

Directing Troilus and Cressida was a revelation. I realised that the things I wanted to say about Achilles and Patroclus weren’t a master’s thesis after all. They were a novel. Along with being a classicist, I had also dreamed of being a writer. Books and poetry were a lifelong haven for me, and I had been writing since I was a child. I even wrote a contemporary novel while in college, but everything came out anaemic, spiritless. Until, that is, I realised I could write about the thing I was most passionate about: Patroclus’s story.

That summer, I began to write with his voice. As I typed, I felt giddy but illicit. I feared that my classics peers and professors would hate the idea. There is a long history of gatekeeping in classics. Attempts to expand the lens of scholarship have sometimes been met with open hostility, and women and scholars of colour have been undermined and belittled. A young woman taking the revered and traditionally male epic material of the Iliad and centring it as a gay love story might not thrill people. But still I kept writing. For so many years, books had been homes for me, places I’d found welcome when I couldn’t find it elsewhere. I wanted this book to be that kind of story: one with open arms, with room for everyone who might want to come in.

In the decade since it was published I’ve been honoured to hear from readers who put excerpts in their wedding vows, who made quotes into tattoos, who taught it in their classes. (My fears about a classical backlash never came to pass; the classics community has been wonderfully supportive.) I’ve heard from people who said it helped them come out to their parents, and others who said it inspired them to get their PhDs, or to start their own novels. Every writer wants their book to have its own life, but I never in my wildest dreams imagined that my Achilles and Patroclus would get to have such a rich and rewarding one.

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