‘Hope is the spark’

Malorie Blackman on the final Noughts & Crosses book
“We love love love our Vitsœ system. The build quality and easiness of assembly is amazing, but it was your service that made the whole process such a joy.”

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‘The kind of cerebral love De Beauvoir writes about in The Inseparables is subversive because, for her generation, the minds of girls and women were not what made them valuable.’
— Deborah Levy, page 24
The writers’ murder club

Richard Osman’s gang of elderly detectives might have been topping charts all year in The Thursday Murder Club, but a slice of enterprising September publishing from HarperCollins is set to show that Agatha Christie did it first. The publisher is reissuing The Thirteen Problems under its original title, The Tuesday Club Murders, hoping to “reintroduce readers to the original weekday murder club”. The outing will be the short-story collection’s first hardback publication since its debut in 1932; in it Christie’s elderly detective, Miss Marple, gathers with friends on a weekly basis to solve mysteries.

“I don’t think it’s any secret to say that we’re big fans of Richard Osman, [but] this was the original,” Anna Herve, Christie’s editor, said. Osman, whose second in the series, The Man Who Died Twice, is reviewed on page 18, has bowed to Christie’s precedence, writing on Twitter: “‘The Original Weekday Murder Club’. Fair enough.”

Readers should be prepared for a slew of similarly packaged mysteries, from The Marlow Murder Club by Robert Thorogood to Ian Moore’s French who-dunnit Death and Crossants. “Christie’s sales rocketed during lockdown,” Herve said. “I think, especially now, it’s very attractive to have resolution. It’s like an intellectual puzzle.”

Lost in translation

Since I began a master’s degree in literary translation at the University of Iowa 20 years ago, there have been numerous positive changes in the way translators are paid and perceived. Take the International Booker prize, which since 2016 has split the generous sum of £50,000 between author and translator, thereby recognising the translated work as a co-creation (won in 2018 by Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk and me for my translation from Polish to English of her novel Flights).

However, often translators receive no royalties – I don’t in the US for In his speech marking the end of the Afghanistan war, begun soon after the 9/11 attacks on this day 20 years ago, Joe Biden complained that the former Afghan president had fled amid “corruption and malfeasance”, which might have sounded rather an orotund accusation.

From the French faire (to do), “misfeasance” entered English in the early 17th century via a legal treatise by Francis Bacon, who, as well as being a pioneering philosopher of science, was also attorney general and lord chancellor. It was swiftly joined by “malfeasance”, exchanging the Greek prefix mis- for the French mal, for bad or evil. They both mean wrongdoing, but have usually been reserved for the unlawful exercise of authority, or other misdeeds in public office, of which there has been no shortage of examples among US presidents.

More generally malfeasance can mean any kind of wrongdoing, and “corporate malfeasance” is the modern term for what often seems to be more common than corporate bienfeasance, which is not a word as there is so little call for it. Optimistically, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “Nature turns all malfaisance [sic] to good.” But he didn’t give a timeframe.

Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

WORD OF THE WEEK

Steven Poole

Malfeasance

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The books that made me

‘Pynchon is seen as difficult, but Mason & Dixon teems with life’
Joshua Ferris

The book I am currently reading
Said Sayrafiezadeh’s American Estrangement, Alix Ohlin’s We Want What We Want and Rachel Rose’s The Octopus Has Three Hearts.

The book that changed my life
John Gray’s The Silence of Animals. His far-ranging surveys of life and literature are delivered calmly and serve as correctives to the many different kinds of human propaganda that can drive a person insane. He was just the tonic I needed to get through a time of profound grief.

The book I wish I’d written
Too many to count, too humbling to list, and subject to change without notice.

The last book that made me laugh
The Diary of Samuel Pepys. As an eyewitness to the Restoration, the great fire of London, the bubonic plague and the second Anglo-Dutch war, Pepys refuses to lie or flatter himself. It is the fullest account of a man’s life I know, constantly eliminating, in spite of the changed mores, the many centuries that separate him from us.

The book that most influenced my writing
Oh, there were different phases, I suppose, and eras of obsession, but at some point I gave up trying to be them and got down to the business of being myself.

The book I think is most underrated
“Snowballs have flown their Arcs, starr’d the Sides of Outbuildings, as of Cousins, [and] carried Hats away into the brisk Wind off Delaware…” So begins Thomas Pynchon’s woefully undersung Mason & Dixon, one of my favourite books. Pynchon is notorious for being difficult, and Mason & Dixon does require concentration. But as both a celebration and a critique of the age of reason, the book teems with life.

The book that changed my mind
It is the mind that changes its opinion about books I find more fascinating. Why, at 20, did I fling A House for Mr Biswas across the room, where it sat unfinished for 10 years, only to pick it up at 30, devour it practically in one sitting, and think it as near to perfect as a book gets? Some version of this happened also with King Lear, Pale Fire, Memoirs of Hadrian, A Room of One’s Own, The Red and the Black, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror and Alice Munro.

The last book that made me cry
Miriam Toews’s Fight Night. It took only a line or two to be reminded of why I read fiction and why I write it. Toews doesn’t simply narrate a story; she fashions a world.

The book I give as a gift
Endless Love by Scott Spencer. This tragic love story is really a portrait of insanity, and its prose style is equal in precision and beauty to that of all the dead masters.

A Calling for Charlie Barnes by Joshua Ferris is published by Viking.
Malorie Blackman, the former children’s laureate, talks to Sian Cain about finishing her Noughts & Crosses series after 20 years, being namechecked by Stormzy and what inspired her to keep going through years of rejection.
Malorie Blackman is used to staying hopeful. She remained so when she opened her 82nd rejection, before her first book, Not So Stupid!, was published in 1990. She did when she went into bookshops and found her books hidden away on the “multicultural” shelf; she’d simply pull them out and refile them under B. She felt it even when going into schools to a sea of white faces, where the librarian would say: “But you’re just writing for black children.”

The last 18 months, however, have been a significant challenge. Having been classed as extremely vulnerable due to a health condition, Blackman has been isolating for most of the pandemic – and it is clear that, as she puts it, she “loves a chat”. “It has been a very strange time,” she says. “I was getting government letters saying: ‘Don’t go out.’ I was trying to live as normal a life as possible, knowing full well it was extraordinary circumstances. But you do what you can, so I focused on my writing. Endgame was a good thing because it felt like I was doing something. I wasn’t saving lives, but I was doing something.”

What she was doing is probably the hardest thing an author can do: writing the ending. After 20 years, six books and three novellas, Noughts & Crosses, Blackman’s most famous series, is finished. It is set in Albion, an alternative Britain that was colonised by Africa, where the black population call themselves Crosses (as they are closer to God), while the white are Noughts (poorer, institutionally discriminated against). The first book, published in 2001, focuses on Persephone (Sephy) Hadley, the privileged Cross daughter of Albion’s home secretary, and Callum McGregor, the Nought son of the Hadleys’ housekeeper. Their romance is illicit and fraught: Sephy struggles to understand what Callum is facing in their deeply segregated world, while Callum comes to see violence as the only way to advance Nought rights.

In sequels Knife Edge and Checkmate, Sephy’s daughter with Callum, Callie Rose, becomes a teenager with more opportunities than her father. And Blackman thought that was the end – until she wrote Double Cross, in which Callie and her Nought friend Tobey are involved in a racialised gang war. Then came Trump and Brexit, which prompted her to write Crossfire (2019), in which Tobey becomes the first Nought prime minister. Now finally, this month, comes Endgame, with references to a pandemic and a Nought Lives Matter movement. “What was once maybe a trilogy has become nine books. My husband calls it the longest trilogy on the planet.” She smiles. “And that’s enough!”

Noughts & Crosses may be her best-known work, but Blackman has written more than 70 books. She is a Bafta winner, a former children’s laureate, the recipient of an OBE. Her influence is everywhere: “I’m
Malorie Blackman

Malorie Blackman the way I sell books,” Stormzy raps in his song “Superheroes”; “Look I’m just a writer from the ghetto like Malorie Blackman,” sings Tinie Tempah in “Written in the Stars”. The bestselling author Candice Carty-Williams also credits Blackman as an inspiration: “Noughts & Crosses emboldened me to write what I wanted, and not think about the consequences.”

But mention any of this to Blackman and she gets flustered. She’s just the nerd in the Doctor Who shirt, whose own daughter reacted to hearing Stormzy’s rap with: “Does he have any idea how uncool you are?” “I wear my geekiness proudly,” she says now, from her cozy attic, tugging on that shirt. (In the episode of Doctor Who that she co-wrote, the Doctor meets civil rights activist Rosa Parks.)

It is hard to think of a simpler or more brilliant premise to explain racism to children than Noughts & Crosses, or a more affecting story for those experiencing it. The first book made the BBC’s Big Read poll of the UK’s all-time favourite books, and was later named one of the best books of the 21st century by this paper. It has become a play and, recently, a BBC TV series (with a cameo from uberfan Stormzy).

In the world of Noughts & Crosses, racism is not “fixed” by putting black people in charge - it is simply inverted. This is what seems to unnerve some of her critics (the Daily Mail called the BBC show “naked race-baiting”): Albion is another version of the Britain we are living in now.

Blackman has already moved on to her next work: a memoir, her first nonfiction, which will be published in Britain we are living in now. “Especially the YA. I think they reveal a lot about where my head is or where my heart is.”

Blackman was born in Clapham and grew up in Bromley, where she still lives with her husband Neil and adult daughter Elizabeth. She was one of five children; her father drove a bus and her mother worked in a pyjama factory. Both came to Britain as part of the Windrush generation from Barbados, which Blackman has visited. “It was lovely to go because it is where my parents are from. But I thought I’d feel like it was my home more than it did. It felt like a holiday destination.”

As a child, Blackman lived in her head. She was a daydreamer who loved the library for its warmth and quiet, and adored fairytale and myths, Star Trek and Doctor Who, even when her friends didn’t. “I was known as the weird one, the misfit, but that’s fine. I used to get told off for daydreaming so often, which is ironic, because that’s how I make my living!”

Her mother and father wanted her to experience all the advantages they never had; a quality she reflected in the characters of Callum and Sephy, who see their child Callie as a symbol of Albion’s potential. “They pour all their hopes for the future into Callie, which is what I think my mum and dad did. Their thing was all about education, education, education. It was the key to open any door. And I still believe that. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if it hadn’t been for my love of books when I was a child.”

Blackman worries for her daughter’s generation. She received financial assistance that meant she could stay on in sixth form and attend college, but “my daughter certainly did not get any of that. I had two libraries within walking distance, now so many libraries are closing down. My daughter is going to be retiring at a much, much older age than I will. We’re supposed to be creating a better world for them and I think my generation failed. What kind of planet are we going to leave for our children, or their children? We can’t say they’ll clean up our mess. We have at least got to start cleaning it ourselves.”

Blackman wanted to be an English teacher, until her careers adviser told her: “Black people don’t become teachers.” She encountered her first black character in literature (Othello) while doing her A-levels. (She would later retell the story of Othello in space for her 2016 novel Chasing the Stars.) She read her first book by a black author at 21 (The Color Purple by Alice Walker). It was in the 1980s, while working in computing in London, that she decided to write.

“There was such a dearth of books that featured black characters – I could either whinge about it or do something about it,” she says. “I think my generation failed. What kind of planet are we going to leave for our children, or their children? We can’t say they’ll clean up our mess. We have at least got to start cleaning it ourselves.”

It has been said that Blackman didn’t write about racism until her 50th book, Noughts & Crosses. But she doesn’t see it that way. “I was being criticised from my very first book for not writing about racism. But as far as I was concerned, my characters were black, I had black children on the covers – I was writing about racism,” she says. “I’ve had good friends tell me I could have sold a lot more books if I put white people on the covers, but that was never gonna happen. And I thought that because I had all these other books behind me, I wouldn’t be called an ‘issues writer’. Of course, people always call me that now, for God’s sake!”

Though she had written so many books by that point, including bestsellers Hacker, Pig Heart Boy and Whizzziwig, she realised that she had been accumulating details for Noughts & Crosses her whole life. The observation that no plasters matched her black skin. Being told to go back to where she came from as a child and innocently wondering, “Clapham?” Getting sent out of class the first time she wore her hair loose.
Cover story

Under the influence
Stormzy is a fan; Blackman’s memoir will be published by his Merky imprint. TV productions of Noughts & Crosses, left; and Doctor Who

“There was such a dearth of books that featured black characters - I could either whinge about it or do something about it”

in an afro. Being accused of stealing a train ticket by the conductor because she was in first class. Asking her history teacher why she never mentioned black scientists and inventors and being told that there were none. Her careers adviser’s fateful comment.

She is grateful now that she started writing young, when she had the energy to keep going despite the rejections from publishers, booksellers, librarians. “Why does it never work the other way?” she asks, of the librarian who thought she wrote only for black children. “Was she saying all the books I read as a child were for white people because they featured white people? A bookseller once said to me: ‘Oh, we don’t stock those books because we don’t have a big multicultural population around here.’ Yeah, you don’t have a hobbit population around here but you’ve still got Lord of the Rings!”

In 2013 she became the UK’s eighth children’s laureate and immediately made headlines with a campaign to improve diversity in children’s books. Sky News reported her comments under the inaccurate headline “Children’s books ‘have too many white faces’” and Blackman was bombarded with death threats against herself and her family. Sky later apologised, but the damage was done.

“I had people telling me to go back to where I came from, this is not your country. It was deeply unpleasant. Sometimes you can have some really interesting things, fun things, good things on social media. Other times, it has been a toxic bin fire. But so many authors and illustrators rallied around me. Even people I didn’t know were saying: ‘Listen, anything you need, I’m standing right next to you.’ It restored my faith in humanity a bit.” It can get wearing, however. “Sometimes I just feel really tired. Because it does feel like you’re fighting the same battles over and over. I’m in my late 50s and I’m still having the same conversations I had in my teens and 20s. How much patience do you have to have?”

What she finds most bolstering is the occasional letter or email from a child who didn’t like reading until they picked up one of her books. “If I have any legacy at all, I’d love it to be that. If I have served any purpose on this planet, I think – I hope – it’s been to switch a few people on to reading and maybe even turn a few people into writers as well. That would be amazing. I hope I’ve done that.”

There’s that word again: hope. Blackman smiles. “Sometimes I feel like I’m holding on to hope for a better future by my fingernails. It is hard when it feels like we’re taking steps backwards – you have to trust that the overall momentum will be forward. Brexit was a step backwards for the country. Trump was definitely a step backward for the west. But when things are really dire, all you can hold on to is the hope that things will change. My books might not be happily-ever-after, but I do try for hopefully ever after”
The Argonauts writer’s bold new project reimagines freedom in art, drugs, sex and climate

Lara Feigel

 Cancel culture jeopardises the freedom of art to disturb. #Me Too has stopped people experimenting with the erotics of passivity. Sobriety is freer than drug taking. It’s probably appropriate, in a book about freedom by one of our most radical and forward-looking thinkers, that the conclusions should be at once so adventurous and so unexpectedly old fashioned.

The question of freedom preoccupies many of our most ambitious thinkers. As the pandemic and climate crisis encourage increased state control, as freedom becomes a buzzword of the right, how can we keep faith with the liberation movements and liberal humanism that shaped us? Recently Olivia Laing excavated the culture of the past century in search of freedom. Now Maggie Nelson has written a tremendously energising book wrestling with freedom in four realms: art, sex, drugs and climate.

For centuries, people have grappled with whether “freedom from” is preferable to “freedom to”, and whether inner freedom is a mere luxury. Nelson isn’t interested in engaging with historical thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who staked their lives on how to avoid one person’s freedom resulting in another’s captivity, but she engages deeply with these questions herself. She takes from Michel Foucault the idea that liberation is the achievement of a moment, while freedom is an ongoing practice. For her the practice of freedom is fundamentally a practice of mind characterised by indeterminacy, necessary “if we want to divest from the habits of paranoia, despair and policing that have come to menace and control even the most well intentioned among us”.

Nelson’s book is written as part of a conversation with friends and mentors. She has a gift for bringing on to the page serious intellectual debates that are full of personalities figuring out what to do with their lives. She’s less interested in defining freedom for subsequent generations than making an urgent intervention. This is invigorating because she opens the conversation to her readers as fellow interlocutors - she describes it as “thinking aloud with others” - in an astonishingly moving way. The book’s register is between the academic style of her book on the New York School and the charged, slangily poetic style of The Argonauts. It forms a companion volume to her 2011 book The Art of Cruelty. Collectively her writing across genres is emerging as a unified project, Lacanian in its commitment to desire, intellectually stringent, faithful to the avant-garde tradition, while also freely diverse in its genres and forms.

The four sections are loosely cumulative. The art chapter centres on the relationship between freedom and care, which Nelson worries have been opposed too easily: “beyond today’s tinny stereotypes of bully and snowflake … perpetrator and victim, lie dimensions and archives of artistic freedom of critical importance for all makers and viewers”. She doesn’t want artists to have to acknowledge the harm induced by their work; she doesn’t want art that disturbs its viewers to be removed from galleries. Yet she wants to keep the gains of critical theory, the decentring of the subject, the unmasking of authority.

And so to sex, where similarly, Nelson worries about the increasing policing of the freedom of others, suggesting that we might attend instead to voicing our own desires - “the far more crucial and challenging question of what we ourselves do or want to do, and how our desires and behaviours square (or don’t) with the political stances we aspire to elsewhere”. She follows Foucault in seeing power as circulating everywhere in sex, meaning that we can’t eliminate power from desire and should instead dream up more enabling and liberating forms of power (I’d have liked to hear more about what these might entail). Though we’re right to call people out for professional misconduct, she worries we’re in danger of simmering in “resentment, frustration and complaint”, and that the structures in play are regrettably patriarchal and heterosexual. We need instead to act (in David Graeber’s terms) as if already free, and to honour the ways good sex can be painful, difficult and unequal. She’s refreshingly furious with the lead singer of Pinegrove who has announced he’s no longer going to sleep with his fans because there is an “unfair dynamic at play”. Who is he to tell these women they don’t want what they think they want? Rather than joining forces with the bureaucrats charged with policing sex, Nelson wants us to acknowledge “the ravenous, turbulent fact of female desire”.

If the sections on art and sex form a kind of diptych, so do the sections on drugs and climate. The argument here is that constraint offers a
richer experience of the practice of freedom than limitlessness. Writing out of her own experience of heavy drinking, she argues both that drugs give you the feeling of freedom while actually diminishing the space left for freedom, and that drugs reveal our “porousness to nonhuman people” (this becomes crucial in considering nature’s agency). There are some compelling readings of addict memoirs, where she shows freedom gaining meaning in relation to its limits. She’s clear in her commitment to inner freedom, conceived in Buddhist terms as a “renunciation, undoneness, abandonment” accessed through reaching so low a point that you touch the bareness of your bare life.

We don’t have this freedom when it comes to the climate. We can’t pursue our addiction to fossil fuels, burning down our atmosphere and building it back. Here Nelson grapples with how our freedom to exist at all is conditioned on ceasing to fetishise freedom as the defying of limits, and reimagining it (she’s drawing on Naomi Klein) as “the practice of negotiating with the various material constraints that give our lives shape and possibility”. The hope is, as with addiction, that there can be freedom found through constraint, through collective thriving, through indeed a form of bottoming out that involves giving up and embracing discipline. She hopes that a freeing renunciation and escape from self can come into play when we surrender to nature, folding ourselves into ecological time.

The climate section was for me the least satisfying, perhaps because we have less freedom to diverge in our opinions here. The unsatisfactoriness is probably fitting as a way to experience our present impasse – arguably we need to embrace intellectual limits as well as material ones, buckling down behind an orthodoxy. But somehow also the lack of interest in wider intellectual traditions that characterises the book gave the writing a thinness here. There’s a kind of magpie delight to Nelson – she quotes without giving writers their own contexts. It feels strange to have Foucault given centre stage without some sense of his complex, shifting intellectual background or without a sense of Nietzsche and Pierre Hadot behind him. It feels strange, too, for the perspectives she brings to bear to be so broadly the perspectives of liberal humanism (indeterminacy, subjectivity, ambivalence) but for the book to claim so determinately that the needs, desires and trajectories of the liberal humanist subject are no longer available to us.

Arguably, this is a central dilemma of our age. And arguably, what makes this book so exciting is precisely the balancing act that enables Nelson to tear everything up at the same time as she retains faith in the values (desire, artistic freedom, difficulty) that shaped her. Reading it, I had a visceral experience of seeing how this can be done in good faith, how we can think as Nelson does about sex and art while also believing in the necessity for a new order. One of the few historically distant writers Nelson quotes is Ralph Waldo Emerson, who she returns to pleasingly throughout, reminding us that hers is a distinctly American lyric, and that she too sits at the feet of the ordinary. At one point she has in her head his line: “This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.” There is such boldness to imagining our moment as a good moment, such freedom in writing it into being. We have to hope this book will act as a call to thought, allowing other writers to return to freedom with all its messiness and difficulty, ushering in a collective conversation about the genealogy of freedom and the future of the liberal humanist subject, helping us to find out what to do with these times that may turn out to be good after all.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
An impressive analysis of what went wrong during the Covid crisis and how to prepare for the next one

Oliver Bullough

Everyone has someone who made them feel inadequate in lockdown, whether it was a neighbour who grew tomatoes in their window box, one of those tweeters who learned three languages between March and May, or just a friend who didn’t feel the need to get drunk every night. For me, that person was Adam Tooze.

While I was struggling to teach long division to my kids and begging editors for deadline extensions, he was – seemingly effortlessly – being a voice of sanity on social media; writing an improbable number of lengthy articles about how Covid-19 was rewiring the world economy; coherently explaining the long-term consequences on multiple podcasts; and sending a regular email newsletter, which discussed China, the EU or Vasily Grossman with equal felicity. As if that wasn’t enough, he was also – it turns out – writing a book.

Tooze is a professor at Columbia University, and Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World’s Economy is his fourth book. He specialises in analysing how the US Federal Reserve and other central banks – proved crucial to its long-term consequences. That book was published within a decade of the crisis, and at the time seemed daringly contemporary, since few historians will tussle with events so close to the present day. Compared with Shutdown, however, it was ancient history. This book analyses events that were occurring as he wrote about them.

Tooze approaches economics from a liberal Keynesian perspective and, as a US-based Briton who grew up in Germany, is proudly cosmopolitan. He does not hide his opinions – not least, about the foolhardiness of Brexit – but Shutdown is a seriously impressive book, both endlessly quotable and rigorously analytical. Tooze synthesises a huge volume of information to argue that we must prepare for a new wave of crises or risk being sunk by them.

The core of his analysis is that this is the first crisis of the Anthropocene – the epoch of significant human impact on the planet or, as he calls it, “an era defined by the blowback from our unbalanced relationship to nature”. We have been consuming too recklessly, and eventually the planet was always going to bite back.

With Covid-19, the result of humans getting too close to viruses previously safely contained in wild animals, that finally happened. The wonder is only that it took so long. “For the last century we have been riding our luck,” Tooze writes.

He tells the story of the crisis chronologically, and roams the world as he follows the virus from China to Italy to the United States, picking out examples to reveal how unprecedented its impact has been. Traffic at Heathrow Airport dropped to levels last seen in the 1950s, the US stimulus was the largest ever, economic output dropped more quickly than had ever been recorded. The scale of government intervention was so huge that he calls it a revolution, but he also points out that it was a strange one. Conservative administrations everywhere were taking radical measures long demanded by politicians of the left, and were egged on by the usual guardians of orthodoxy in the World Bank and IMF. But they were doing so not to build a new society, but to preserve the old one. The result is paradoxical:

Conservative administrations everywhere were taking radical measures long demanded by politicians of the left

they wanted to support the market, and used the full power of the state to do so; central bankers justified their interventions by the need to maintain the integrity of financial markets, as if that were a more legitimate aim than improving people’s lives.

For progressives, this is depressing. The state can still use its powers to do huge things but it can apparently only use them in the service of the powerful and the wealthy. As soon as their crisis is over, those powers will be put back in their box. Tooze insists that this would be a mistake. By virus standards, Covid-19 isn’t that bad, but look at the damage it’s done. We need to be prepared for the next crisis, because it will be worse. Failing to act will condemn us to more deaths, more shutdowns and more expense, so we need to start preparing now. It is a message encapsulated in a line from John Maynard Keynes, from 1942, which Tooze quotes more than once: “Anything we can actually do, we can afford”. There’s something hopeful in that.

To buy a copy for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com.
In 2018, the actor and screenwriter Michaela Coel addressed the bigwigs of the television industry at the Edinburgh festival. She had been invited to deliver the 43rd MacTaggart lecture, a prestigious spot that had previously gone to Dennis Potter, John Humphrys, Greg Dyke and three Murdochs: Rupert, James and Elisabeth. In 43 years, Coel was only the fifth woman to take the podium and the first person of colour. Not for nothing did the event chair and head of Sky Arts, Philip Edgar-Jones, remark how her presence “makes you wonder what we’ve been doing all these years”.

Coel’s speech is the centrepiece of *Misfits*, a small book with big ideas that provides revealing snapshots of a career in television from the vantage point of an outsider. Before being invited to speak, she had never heard of the MacTaggart lecture – “Then again, back then I’d also never heard of Depeche Mode or Sarajevo.” The success of her debut drama *Chewing Gum* and its hit follow-up *I May Destroy You* means Coel has beamed on to the radars of TV viewers everywhere. Even so, as a black working-class woman operating in an industry dominated largely by white middle-class men, she remains on the outside looking in – or, as she designates herself, a “misfit”.

Coel lays out her path into television from a childhood in London’s Tower Hamlets, where strangers pushed dog excrement through her letterbox, while drawing on “the resilience born from having no safety net”. At 23, after dropping out of two universities, she went to drama school, where she was the first black woman to have enrolled in five years, and where a teacher used a racial slur during an improvised exercise.

She discloses her poor treatment at the hands of the TV industry, describing an encounter with an unnamed producer who, shortly after she won an award, said: “Do you know how much I want to f**k you right now?” She also recalls being drugged and sexually assaulted by strangers and how “the first people I called after the police, before my own family, were the producers”. She was met not with empathy but awkwardness. She asked for her writing deadline to be pushed back and for the channel to be told the reason. “The deadline was pushed back,” she reveals, “but the head of comedy never found out why.”

Elsewhere, Coel talks of the reminders of her “misfit” status, such as the gift bags handed out at her first awards ceremony that contained dry shampoo, tanning lotion “and a foundation even Kim Kardashian was too dark for. (A reminder: This is not your house.)” While shooting “in a place far, far away”, she and a colleague were going home when men started following them and hurling stones. “The producers saw shooting ‘in that place’ as a low-cost haven. They didn’t consider the experiences of the Brown and Black cast ... because they didn’t see things from our point of view.”

On encountering obstacles, Coel was frequently told “that’s the way it is”, a mode of thinking invariably used to justify poor decisions while preserving the status quo. Her objective with her address, and this spry, sharply articulated book, is to question why things are the way they are, to fix the “faulty house” that is the television industry and argue for new perspectives, both behind and in front of the camera.

This commonsense approach and instinctively questioning nature extends to the very existence of *Misfits*. Does it, she wondered in the *New York Times* last month, really constitute a book at all? It’s a valid question, not least because videos and transcripts of her original speech have long been available online. While the text has been updated and bookended with added thoughts and reflections (including a lengthy and not always cogent metaphor involving moths), this is not a new piece of work. Nonetheless, the problems it exposes - sexism, racism, egregious complacency - remain burningly relevant. That Coel’s original speech didn’t bring about an instant revolution in the industry would surely justify its transformation into a book.

Bringing about change can be a slow business but in her 33 years she has already achieved more than most. No one else is making the kind of taboo-breaking television that she is, and few have fought as hard, and compromised so little, to create it on their own terms. Her speech provides a startling glimpse into the mind and practices of a remarkable talent.

*To buy a copy for £9.29 go to guardianbookshop.com.*
When my kids were young, I would joke about their reading preferences. Of the youngest (who was maybe 13), I would say, “We don’t know if he can read.” If Wonderworks had been around then, I would have sat my son down and read Angus Fletcher’s exploration of the history and psychology of literature to him. I think it might have convinced him that there are benefits and pleasures you can get from literature that are unique and valuable. Unlike many writers who have analysed how various forms work, Fletcher focuses on what cognitive psychologists have learned about what parts of the human brain do and how they do it, and connects that to innovative works in the history of literature and their related forms – songs, opera, film and TV. He explores many works we are familiar with (The Odyssey, Hamlet, Don Quixote, Mrs Dalloway, 30 Rock) and others we may never have heard of (the Epic of Sundiata, the Dream of the Red Chamber, Varney the Vampire). His desire is not to rate them but to show how they have contributed to the ever-widening appeal and power of invention and narrative.

We all have literary preferences, and fashions come and go. The prominence of stark realism (for example, Anthony Trollope) gives way to fantasy (The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Turn of the Screw). Fletcher makes sure that all genres are explored (and there’s no evidence of what he prefers) because all genres tweak the brain – both thoughts and emotions – in different productive ways. In his section on “penny dreadfuls”, Fletcher discusses the way that authors in the 19th century used suspense and empathy (and cheap paper) to draw in a different audience – “street urchins, coal cabbies, rat catchers, costermongers, and other members of the Victorian poor and barely literate”. The instalments drew on suspense to build their sales but, according to Fletcher, they also employed a sense of ongoing connection with the characters combined with “partial dopamine” – some pleasure in the semi-resolution of the suspense, but not so much pleasure that we are able to stop reading. Interestingly Thomas Peckett Prest, a prolific producer of penny dreadfuls, got his ideas from his failed career as an opera singer and his acquaintance with the works of Monteverdi.

Maybe one of the most arresting sections is Fletcher’s exploration of how Virginia Woolf came up with Mrs Dalloway. We know that most authors owe a lot to previous writers, but we don’t always know who they were thinking about when they got their own ideas, or how those influences meshed. Fletcher details how Woolf suffered from the misogynistic theories of mental illness and “rest cures” that were rife in her day, and used reading to comfort herself. A novel by Dorothy Richardson introduced her to stream-of-consciousness, then she read Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time, which she enjoyed, but it was James Joyce’s Ulysses, which she didn’t enjoy, that fed into the idea of jumping around among several different consciousnesses and using all of them to explore daily life. Fletcher writes, “She wanted us, her readers, to know the psychiatric benefit of experiencing our own ‘freedom’… As modern neuroscience has revealed, the style of Mrs Dalloway can indeed create a sensation of psychological freeness that provides the therapeutic peace that Woolf herself was seeking.”

In these frightening times, Fletcher nonetheless has hope for the future of literature (and therefore of the human race). I almost believe him. Often, the famous works that we are drawn to (Macbeth, The Scarlet Letter, The Plague) are frightening and, we think, should fill us with despair, but Fletcher makes a convincing argument that using even the saddest books to experience new feelings and to learn from them is the way forward for both writers and readers.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
There’s the Beatles and Bond but the telly is on the blink - is this how the 60s truly began?

Nicholas Wroe

In Whitehall, prime minister Harold Macmillan unexpectedly sacked a third of his cabinet; in a North Cheam pub, the Rolling Stones performed to a paying audience of two; in Barrow-in-Furness, Nella Last, after a lunch of “soup, salad, ham & the last bit of chicken”, had to call the television rental shop when her set wouldn’t “hold” ITV. And so David Kynaston’s determinedly democratic take on Britain’s postwar history rolls into the summer of 1962 with, as ever, large and portentous events jostling with the quotidian details of life to conjure a snapshot of an era.

On the Cusp: Days of ’62
by David Kynaston,
Bloomsbury,
£18.99

Kynaston occasionally takes a step back for more thematic looks at longer term issues. In exploring immigrant life he observes the first deportations approved by the home secretary, rising far-right intimidation and violence but also growth in immigrant-owned businesses. When examining rural life he notes increased industrialisation and use of chemicals – the herbicide paraquat was launched in 1962 – but also some stirrings of environmentalism and Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring becoming a bestseller. Other literary events that summer included a dismissive one-paragraph review of Catch-22 in the TLS and a Cheltenham festival panel comprising Romain Gary, Joseph Heller, Carson McCullers and Kingsley Amis brought together to discuss “Sex in Literature” – which disappointed the organisers who had hoped they would make for “good copy”, but instead they “made little except jokes”. The funding and future of the BBC, the north-south divide and Britain’s relations with continental Europe were all subjects of vexed debate.

Kynaston says that he wrote much of the book in lockdown “about a country where doors and windows were about to be pushed open a little wider”. His ongoing achievement – aside from managing the prodigious quantities of material - is to convince his readers, who know well what comes next, of real lives being lived in near real time, and of a future as unwritten then as ours is today.

To buy a copy for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.
A story of a young man caught up in conflict cleverly reworks the grand African adventure novel

**Aminatta Forna**

“...come and get me, birthday or no? Are they faux amis,” muses Manu, the reluctant hero of *Freight Dogs*, “false friends or true?” In times of war, trust nobody.

That’s the lesson of Giles Foden’s first novel since 2009’s *Turbulence*. In the opening pages we meet a teenage Manu Kwizera at a Jesuit boys’ boarding school in 1990s Bukavu, now in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire. Manu grew up in a small village, herding cattle by day, but a scholarship to the school improved his fortunes. War changes everything. When his family’s compound is raided by Congolese army soldiers who murder his parents and rape and kill his sister, Manu is taken hostage, only to be freed soon after by a rebel faction, led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila. After being forcibly conscripted, Manu deserts, throwing himself on the mercy of an American pilot whom he persuades to fly him out of the country, thus entering the mercenary world of an extraordinary complex war, which is sometimes known as Africa’s world war.

Manu is a Banyamulenge, a Congolese and a Tutsi, none of which multiple identities means much to him. He is a football-loving teenager, whose dream is to go to university and study “something technical to do with machines”. That much comes true when, as a result of a bet between Cogan and a Russian pilot, Manu is taught to fly. The rest of the time he is buffeted on the winds of a war in which race or ethnicity are the justification for violence. Factions dissolve and reform. The Banyamulenge find themselves on the fault lines of many of these shifts, neither Congolese nor Rwandan and increasingly seen as traitors in their own country.

*Freight Dogs* is an ambitious and intricate novel. Foden’s understanding of the nature of war, and of this war in particular, is exemplary. His desire to tether the lives of his characters to real-world events is admirable if hard to follow at times. I found myself taking notes. A timeline and a list of the main players would, I think, make a welcome addition.

That may make it sound heavy going, but the effort is worth it, for *Freight Dogs* is also a fast-paced adventure yarn featuring battles, exploding volcanoes, buried secrets, a deathbed revelation, daredevil flying and an elusive love interest. In this Foden has cleverly reworked the grand African adventure novel epitomised by Rider Haggard and Wilbur Smith, or later, John le Carré’s *The Constant Gardener* or Michael Crichton’s *Congo*. For a start, Manu is not white. Nor is he seeking thrills, treasure, fame or even justice. He isn’t trying to do anything except stay alive and preserve his own sanity.

Thus, the acoustics of the book are differently calibrated. The east African backdrop is more than jungles, big beasts or even violence. Manu is at the centre, not the periphery. In this, *Freight Dogs* brings to mind Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, deeply political novels disguised as thrillers that twist the tropes of a genre towards another goal. Manu is less hard-headed than Nguyen’s unnamed protagonist, but he is similarly a man to whom things happen, with little or no control of his own fate and at the mercy of greater and more enduring forces. This book is a testament to all those civilians, in Congo, Afghanistan, Syria, Colombia and elsewhere, whose lives have not so much been touched by violence as tossed around like flotsam on the waves of history and conflict. “I just seem to have been pushed around by war,” says Manu, “since almost the day I left school.”

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Manu is not white, nor is he seeking thrills, treasure, fame or even justice. He is trying to stay alive and preserve his own sanity.

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

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**Freight Dogs**

by Giles Foden, W&N, £18.99

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W&N, £18.99

by Giles Foden,

Fiction

The Guardian Saturday 11 September 2021
This tale of 12th-century nuns is a brilliant, assertively modern celebration offemale creativity

Alexandra Harris

The author of Fates and Furies has been much acclaimed, especially in the US, for sharp yet exuberant writing about contemporary marriage, parenthood, sexual rivalry and the threats that lie in the midst of daily routines. Now, in an appealingly unpredictable move, Lauren Groff has turned her attentions to 12th-century English nuns. The result is a distinctive novel of great vigour and boldness. From mystical visions that may or may not be divine, to the earthy business of abbey pigs, diseases and account books, Groff does it all with purpose and panache.

We meet protagonist Marie emerging from a forest on horseback, like a knight errant at the start of a medieval romance - except not, because she’s a young woman, it’s a drizzling March day and “the world bears the weariness of late Lent”. She has been ejected from court by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine: “thrown to the dogs”, or at least sent off to be prioress at a remote royal abbey. Appalled by the prospect of “thrown to the dogs”, or at least sent off to be prioress at a remote royal abbey. Groff gives the poet a distinctive novel of great vigour and boldness.

Matrix
by Lauren Groff,
William Heinemann,
£16.99

Groff does it all with purpose and panache. Groff's way of working with history is often to revise it with intent. Marie dedicated her lais to a “noble king”, presumably Henry II; her fictional counterpart writes the poems for Eleanor, sending the collection as a “blazing arrow” towards her. The literary conventions of courtly love are shrewdly redeployed so that instead of a knight stricken with love for an unreachable and closely guarded woman, we have gallant, fierce, undefeated Marie offering her soul to the queen.

“I wanted to get as far away from Trump’s America as possible,” Groff has said. But this is not historical fiction as an escape route from the present. It is an assertively modern novel about leadership, ambition and enterprise, and about the communal life of individuals. Groff refuses easy feminist wins: Marie takes on the role of priest but without the balance to see that the boss should not also be hearing her underlings' confessions.

The emphasis on Marie when she arrives among half-starving sisters (rarely a strong point in medieval romance) is among the novel’s most striking aspects. Specialist nuns weave and bake, Goda runs the farm, insane Gytha is painting wild scenes in the margins of manuscripts. The beautiful Welsh sister, Nest, has her work cut out at the infirmary, which is also an apothecary, dentist’s surgery and old people’s home.

There is blessedly little lecturing and moralising in Matrix. It won’t tell us whether Marie’s utopia is a triumph of creativity and love, or a greedy corporation with a CEO high on her own charisma, or an absolutist state, or nothing more than “a queer little English abbey hiding behind its maze”. It may be all those things, but we can still agree with Marie when she reflects that “there is a place here even for the maddest, for the discarded, for the difficult”. Those who love Marie describe “a grandeur of spirit so vast that it takes one’s breath away”. There’s a grand spirit, too, in this novel that makes her.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The Thursday Murder Club foursome return in a comic crime sequel alert to the realities of old age

Lynne Truss

The success of Richard Osman’s first comic crime novel, The Thursday Murder Club, came as no surprise. The formula is fiendishly clever: four senior-citizen friends living in a Kent retirement community have decided to eschew the usual 5,000-piece jigsaws to pool their intelligence and solve murders. It helps that their leader, Elizabeth Best, is ex-secret service, but the others possess complementary gifts. Ron is a bolshie former union agitator; Ibrahim is a highly organised retired psychiatrist, happy only when making lists or explaining something. Most memorable of all is the cheerful, unshockable former nurse Joyce, who is likely to comment favourably on the shade of someone’s blouse while in the presence of a headless corpse. She provides a decent proportion of the narration and a very large number of the laughs.

The second book in the series wastes no time allowing time to pass, which is sensible. The plot introduces some new bad people: a local teenage thug; a tough-nut female drug dealer; a high-level underworld “middle man” from whom mafia diamonds have been stolen on impulse by a raffish ex-husband of Elizabeth’s. A plan to thwart all of these bad people requires the full measure of Elizabeth’s genius, but of course she manages it all, while at the same time (here’s the clever part) raising none of the usual concomitant risks of going mano a mano with dangerous criminals. Yes, a sense of jeopardy is entirely absent.

If you are happy to let other pens dwell on guilt and misery, you can relax and enjoy this novel, which is superbly entertaining. And it’s never just about the laughs. The comedy in The Man Who Died Twice allows for all its characters to be alert to sobering realities: of time running out; of losing loved ones to death or dementia; of feeling unsafe in the modern world; of grown-up children finding you stupid and tiresome. It’s this self-awareness that grounds them and makes us look forward to seeing them again. On a personal note, it’s a particular challenge to read this book while attempting a sugar-free diet. I managed to steel myself to all the Twixes, but the throwaway reference to chocolate fingers on p284 nearly broke me.

To buy a copy for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The world in James Kennedy's Dare to Know (Quirk, £9.99) has one disturbing difference from our own: in the 1980s an experimental physicist discovered subatomic particles, named thanatons, with a mysterious link to human deaths. An offshoot of this discovery has led to a booming business in death prediction: for a fee, anyone can learn exactly when they will die. The unnamed narrator, one of the first to master the skill, knows its real price: “gaining proficiency with thanaton theory changed you … the very act of calculation subtly distorted space-time around it”. In a bleak moment, he breaks the rules to find his own date and time of death, and discovers the fatal moment was earlier that same day. How has he survived? Like the narrator, the author has degrees in both physics and philosophy. His first novel for adults connects the two subjects as it explores questions of free will, psychology and human history in a fascinating, compulsively readable thriller.

Silvia Moreno-Garcia continues to impress with her ability to make familiar generic materials fresh. In Certain Dark Things (Jo Fletcher, £16.99) she reworks the vampire romance as a sleek and brutal noir thriller set in Mexico City. She has created her own taxonomy of vampires and then grounded them in the world of violent criminal gangs and the hard, grubby realities of urban life. Domingo is a street kid attracted by the beautiful young woman he sees on the subway. She is Atl, one of the few remaining Tlahuinpochtli, the only vampire species native to Mexico, and she’s on the run from some Necros (another species, originally from Europe) who want to kill her. A fan of vampire comics and films, Domingo is thrilled. But Atl is no innocent victim and, even if she starts to care about her new friend, vampires are predators and humans are their prey. Is there any chance for love – or survival? Moreno-Garcia’s critical perspective on romance narratives and her love of noir keep the story balanced on a knife edge between hope and horror. Even the most jaded reader will be won over.

Rian Hughes’s second “novel, graphic” The Black Locomotive (Picador, £16.99), like his first, XX, uses typography and graphic design as an integral part of the story. When the point of view changes, so does the typeface, and photographs, maps and charts add atmosphere and context to a story that is constantly mutating. Deep below the streets of London, workers digging a new Underground line encounter an enormous structure made of an unknown material, seemingly dating back to the stone age. An artist invited on to the site becomes obsessed with “the Anomaly” – his view, contrasted with that of the engineers and manager, brings a cool, Ballardian note to a novel that goes from the mundane to the mind-bendingly cosmic. Engagingly odd, and a love letter to London.

The fantasy of quick and easy transfer of mind/soul/personality into other bodies is a staple of sci fi. In Five Minds by Guy Morpuss (Viper, £12.99), it is how humanity has “sorted out its overpopulation problem”. The titular minds belong to Alex, Kate, Sierra, Ben and Mike who, as teenagers, turned down options involving android bodies, early death or ordinary hard working lives to form a commune within Mike’s honed body. They’ll get upgrades and financial support for the next 124 years – but each personality is awake only four hours a day. If you can accept the highly contrived setup, this is a pacy, exciting and most unusual crime story.

AI 2041: Ten Visions for Our Future by Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan, translated by Emily Jin and others (WH Allen, £14.99), consists of 10 stories by the award-winning Chinese author Chen Qiufan. Each addresses an aspect of artificial intelligence, and is followed by a detailed explanation from AI expert Kai-Fu Lee of how the fiction could soon be reality. They include self-driving cars, quantum computing, virtual reality, robots and software. The tone throughout is positive, even utopian, but when it comes to the inevitable losses of millions of jobs, not even science fiction can provide a map for a social transition to prioritise human need over greed.
The myth of progress

From 9/11 to the storming of the Capitol, a new book by Biden biographer Evan Osnos covers 20 tumultuous years in the US. He talks to David Smith about Trump, Afghanistan and the beginning of a new era.

In the months after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Americans were shaken by “a sudden sense of vulnerability”, Evan Osnos writes. There was an eagerness, in those early days, to avoid the divisiveness of the Vietnam era. So much for that. In 2003, President George W Bush invaded Iraq and polarised the homeland. The novelist Norman Mailer warned of “a pre-fascistic atmosphere in America” and suggested that democracy was “a condition we will be called upon to defend in the coming years”.

Twenty years after 9/11, and eight years after his return to the US from reporting tours in the Middle East and China, Osnos, a staff writer for the New Yorker magazine, grapples with Mailer’s prophecy in his new book Wildland: The Making of America’s Fury. The title is explained in the prologue, which quotes from Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong: “A single spark can start a prairie fire.” The image of a landscape primed to burn haunted Osnos, living and working in Donald Trump’s Washington. He came to understand it as a parable for a time in American history “when the land and the people seemed to be mirroring the rage of the other”.

The author’s years away gave him a fresh gaze on the US, and his antenna is finely tuned to the way America is perceived abroad. Speaking from a friend’s basement via Zoom, he recalls a conversation with a neighbour in Beijing. “This retired factory worker had never been out of the country but watched the news every night on Chinese state television. I told her: ‘We’re moving back to the US,’ and she said, ‘Ah, the US. Be careful because it is a very prosperous country but everybody has a gun.’”

As a reporter working in various authoritarian countries, it was not Osnos’s job to be a flag-waving salesman for American principles — democracy, progress, the rule of law, trust in empirical facts — but his mere presence conveyed the message implicitly. Then, he says, “I came back to the US and really found those principles under threat, even before Donald Trump was in office.”

On Osnos’s first day back at the New Yorker in
2013, the US government shut down, the latest political stunt by hardline Republicans determined to thwart President Barack Obama at all costs. “I remember calling the White House and getting voicemail, and if there is any more distinct metaphor for a country that is sleepwalking through a period of profound global competition, that was it. It really was that first day back at work where I began to say what has gone wrong here?”

So Osnos went back to three places from his past – Greenwich, Connecticut, where he grew up from the age of 10; Clarksburg, West Virginia, where he moved at 22 to work as a newspaper photographer and Chicago, Illinois, where he interned at the Chicago Tribune – in an effort to trace the roots of the present malaise. Greenwich was a privileged town intimately associated with moderate Republican politics, personified by Prescott Bush, the father and grandfather of presidents, who believed in ideas such as raising taxes to pay for science education and research. So when Trump won the Republican primary there in 2016, Osnos had to reckon with how members of the party in his home town had put their faith in the brash, vulgar populist.

“I found that to be one of the areas that was most in need of elaboration as an American and as a political observer,” Osnos says. “Because the casual rendering of Trumpism around the world was, these are desperate people who have effectively pulled the fire alarm of American politics. What had really happened was that some of America’s most powerful people had made a choice to advance the candidacy of somebody that many of them would say privately was totally unfit to hold the presidency. But they made these calculations for their own personal or professional or business interests that put somebody in office who then wreaked the havoc that we recognise.”

For Osnos, it all came down to personal ambition. “We’ve created instruments on Wall Street that allow greed to take its full fluorescent form, and we’ve created systems in politics that allow somebody like [Republican senators] Josh Hawley or Ted Cruz to be able to pull together the full instruments of personal political enrichment and advance themselves at the expense of their party, their purported values and so on. One of the things that runs through this is the honing of the tools. Hedge funds are just fundamentally different from banks in the 18th century.”

This perfecting of tools is manifest in Greenwich where, despite one of the lowest crime rates in the country, walls around private houses grew from 2ft or 3ft to 6ft (“Fuck you” walls, as one local official calls them) - a product of one of the most extraordinary expansions of wealth in American history. The rich had found ways to merge businesses, cut expenses and grow stock markets. The middle and working classes were left behind.

“One of the themes that runs through Greenwich and West Virginia, and also Chicago, is the segregating power of race and class,” Osnos says. “Because it is possible if you live in
The myth of progress

pockets of American bounty to shield yourself from the full encounter with American distress. In fact, you can live your life almost perfectly insulated from it.” He cites the statistic that life expectancy for adult men in McDowell County, West Virginia, is 18 years lower than for those in Fairfax County in the neighbouring state of Virginia. “Are we then surprised that our politics are coming apart when people are living, on the most elemental biological level, more or less non-intersecting lives?”

The myth of progress in the US has been shown to be just that, Osnos says. “One of the details that became vivid to me was that, by measures of intergenerational mobility in the US, now it is harder for a child to out-earn their parents than it is for a child in China to out-earn their parents. That is in some ways so contrary to the myth that we tell ourselves in this country that it should be a five alarm fire.”

At the opposite extreme from Greenwich is Clarksburg, in the green highlands of northern West Virginia, where Osnos moved in January 1999 to intern in the photo department of the Exponent Telegram newspaper for $230 a week. When he returned two decades later, he found the town of 16,400 people ravaged by unemployment, poverty and the opioid epidemic. A one-time Democratic stronghold – the Kennedys campaigned here – had shifted decisively to Trump. “I was looking in my old apartment and the window was broken and there was a sheet over the window and it was flapping in the breeze. I just had the sense that something had gone deeply wrong in the economic groundwater.”

This is coal country. West Virginia is richly endowed, but in recent decades the profits had been going out of state, again thanks to the most innovative tools of financial engineering. Hedge funds, swooping in like vultures, were able to extract the final, juiciest morsels from a dying industry. Trump offered hope to people who felt they had nothing to lose. “Coal miners would say: I didn’t love Donald Trump, he didn’t really seem like my kind of guy, but he came here, he spoke to us, he said he was going to save this industry and what else did you expect us to do?”

West Virginia is also a prime example of the “news deserts” left behind when local newspapers are killed off by the internet. Many residents turn instead to TV cable networks such as Fox News, or rightwing groups and conspiracy theorists online. “You’ve had the decline of local news in the same period of time that you’ve had the growth of this nationalised news discourse, which in some quarters, particularly on Fox, is clearly designed to agitate, to generate fear, to promote a sense of hatred of the other,” Osnos says.

As local communities become more fractured, “people go into their homes. All of a sudden they’re connected to people far away. They’ve created new identities. They no longer think of themselves as, ‘I’m from this county and I should look out for my neighbour.’ They think of themselves as: ‘I’m united in this grand project with people who are very far away.’”

Trump was defeated last year by Joe Biden, who promised to heal divisions and unify the nation - essential, in his view, for America to prove that democracy can still deliver better than autocracies such as China. That partly explains why Biden was eager to pivot away from Afghanistan before the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. But it did not prove so simple.

“I’m struck by how swiftly the Taliban swept away so much that American politicians had described as permanent exports – democracy, human rights, a standing Afghan army,” says Osnos, whose previous books include a well received biography of Biden. “Americans were never asked to engage fully in the war in Afghanistan and, in the end, the roots we put down there barely extended beyond the topsoil.”

In Wildland, two tumultuous decades in American history are bookended by 9/11 and 1/6, the latter referring to the deadly insurrection by Trump supporters at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 that briefly disrupted Congress’s certification of Biden’s election victory. What no one could be sure of that day is whether it was the end of that era or the beginning of something new and even darker.

It depends, Osnos says now. “We are contending with a political system that became so sclerotic and out of touch with the public that one of the two major parties is participating in a delusion that 6 January did not happen or did not matter. To imagine that we’ve put the trauma of Trump behind us is a very dangerous fantasy, not only because he could be back, but because the underlying conditions which produced him are still raging.”

However, the future does not look entirely bleak. “I do find reason for some hope in this unmistakable reality of the racial disparities of the Covid epidemic and then of course the [Black Lives Matter] protests last summer,” he says. “Awareness has political potential too, and we may actually begin to look back on this as the period when we’ve just begun to recognise the full scale of the problem and to address it. But the idea that we’ve extinguished the fire is probably the most dangerous thing we could tell ourselves.”

The myth of progress, Osnos concludes, “is participating in a delusion one of the two major parties now. “We are contending with a political system that became so sclerotic and out of touch with the public that one of the two major parties is participating in a delusion that 6 January did not happen or did not matter. To imagine that we’ve put the trauma of Trump behind us is a very dangerous fantasy, not only because he could be back, but because the underlying conditions which produced him are still raging.”

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An intimate friendship

Deborah Levy

The Inseparables, the thinly disguised story of Simone de Beauvoir’s passionate adolescent relationship with Élisabeth Lacoin, was deemed too intimate to release during her lifetime
De Beauvoir’s strong feelings and hopes for Lacoin were also the beginning of her political education. At the time they were at school together, women could not vote, were coerced into marriage and societally encouraged to accept an existence that mostly involved servicing the needs of their future husbands and children.

So, what sort of girl was Élisabeth Lacoin? Her avatar in The Inseparables is named Andrée, De Beauvoir is Sylvie.

In her very first encounter at a private Catholic school with Sylvie, new pupil Andrée announces she was “burned alive” while cooking potatoes at a campfire. Her dress caught alight and her right thigh was “grilled to the bone”.

Andrée’s bold and playful tone is captured perfectly in Lauren Elkin’s translation from the French, which conveys, in pared-down prose, Andrée’s beguiling sensibility and the ways in which Sylvie is enraptured by her confidence, her cartwheels, her talent for literature, for playing the violin, riding a horse, mimicking teachers.

Sylvie is bored and intellectually lonely, so meeting this clever, irreverent girl changes her life. Sylvie tells us: “Nothing so interesting had ever happened to me. It suddenly seemed as if nothing had ever happened to me at all.”

There is much that society will throw at Andrée to intimidate and flatten her, not least religion and the desire not to disappoint her controlling, conservative mother. And to make life as complicated as it actually is – which novelists must do – Andrée loves her mother. Sylvie can jealously see that all other attachments are not as important to her friend. How can she compete with this maternal bond?

When Sylvie, who hates needlework, goes to great effort to sew Andrée a silk bag for her 13th birthday present, she suddenly realises her friend’s mother, Madame Gallard, doesn’t like her any more. De Beauvoir hints that Andrée’s mother understands that the sewing of the silk bag is a labour of love, and disapproves of these strong feelings for her daughter.

Sylvie falls in love with Andrée’s mind. Obviously, her manner and liveliness make her body attractive too. Yet, this kind of cerebral love is subversive because for De Beauvoir’s generation (she was born in 1908) the minds of girls and women were not what made them valuable.

The long conversations between Andrée and Sylvie about property, justice and equality are nothing less than a revolution at a time when girls and women were encouraged to keep their thoughts to themselves.

“They teach you in catechism to respect your body. So selling your body in marriage must be as bad as selling it on the street,” Andrée says.

The enigma of female friendship that is as intense as a love affair, but that is not sexually expressed, is always an interesting subject. Yet, while Sylvie, as a teenager, listens to Andrée speaking of her passion for her male cousin – she has taken up kissing him and now smokes Gauloises – she also owns her emotions.

“I suddenly understood, in a joyful stupor, that the empty feeling in my heart, the mournful quality of my days, had but one cause: Andrée’s absence. Life without her would be death.”

Sylvie is endearingly vulnerable because she risks loving Andrée. The idolised subject of her affection does not reciprocate the strength of her feelings, nor does she believe herself to be lovable. What I find most touching in The Inseparables is the description of Sylvie losing her faith. In various interviews, De Beauvoir described the experience of suddenly not believing in God as “a kind of awareness”.

When Sylvie is 14 she realises during confession with the school priest that her relationship with God is changing. “I don’t believe in God! I said to myself ... The truth of it stunned me for a moment: I didn’t believe in God.”

The priest picks up on this new mood and chastises her. “I have been told that my little Sylvie is not the same girl she was,” said the voice. “It seems she has become distracted, disobedient and insolent.” Instead of being apologetic, Sylvie becomes rebellious. Andrée asks Sylvie: “If you don’t believe in God, how can you bear to be alive?” Sylvie replies, “But I love being alive.”

Does Andrée love being alive? At her family’s country house, to which Sylvie is invited, Andrée pushes herself so perilously high on a swing that Sylvie fears it will topple over. She wonders anxiously if “something had broken inside her mind, and she couldn’t stop”.

When she is again in dispute with her harassing mother and wishes to get out of a tedious family engagement, Andrée cuts a deep wound into her foot with an axe while chopping wood.

In the fairytale The Red Shoes by Hans Christian Andersen, the female protagonist wears a beloved pair of red shoes to church. She is told that it is improper to do so, but she cannot resist. To cure her vanity, a magic spell is cast, in which not only can she never take off her red shoes, but she is doomed to dance non-stop in them for ever. Eventually, she finds an executioner and asks him to chop off her feet. He obliges, but her amputated feet continue to dance.

Is Andrée her own executioner? She needs to use the axe to separate from her mother, but instead turns it on herself. This scene is a prelude to what De Beauvoir saw as the execution of Andrée Gallard by society. If she had always secretly thought that “Andrée was one of those prodigies about whom, later on, books would be written”, she was correct.

Simone de Beauvoir would write it, and here it is •

This is an edited extract from Deborah Levy’s introduction to The Inseparables. © Deborah Levy, 2021.
The spies who handed out poisoned sweets to children, or pricked Frenchwomen with needles full of venom in the metro – obviously they deserved to die, but the defeatists baffled me. I didn’t bother asking Maman; she always said the same thing as Papa. My little sisters walked slowly; the wrought-iron grill of the Luxembourg Gardens seemed to go on for ever. Finally I arrived at the school gate and climbed the front stairs, joyfully trundling my satchel overflowing with new books. I recognised the faint odour of illness, mingled with the smell of wax on the freshly polished floors. The teachers kissed me. In the cloakroom I was reunited with my schoolmates from last year; I didn’t have any particular attachments among them, but I liked the noise we all made together. I dawdled in the main hall, looking at the display cases full of old dead things that came here to die a second time – the feathers fell from the stuffed birds, the dried plants turned to dust, the shells lost their shine. When the bell rang, I entered the classroom they called Sainte-Marguerite. All the rooms looked the same; the students sat around an oval table covered in black moleskin, which would be presided over by our teacher; our mothers sat behind us and kept watch while knitting balaclavas. I went over to my stool and saw the one next to it was occupied by a hollow-cheeked little girl with brown hair, whom I didn’t recognise. She looked very young; her serious, shining eyes focused on me with intensity.

“So you’re the best student in the class?”

“I’m Sylvie Lepage,” I said. ‘What’s your name?”

“ Andrée Gallard. I’m nine. If I look younger it’s because I got burned alive and didn’t grow much after that. I had to stop studying for a year but Maman wants me to catch up on what I missed. Can you lend me your notebooks from last year?”

“Yes,” I said. Andrée’s confidence and rapid, precise speech unnerved me. She looked me over warily.

“That girl said you’re the best student in the class,” she said, tilting her head a little at Lisette.

“Is that true?”

“I often come in first,” I said, modest. I stared at Andrée, with her dark hair falling straight down around her face, and an ink spot on her chin. It’s not every day that you meet a little girl who’s been burned alive.

I was about 50 when I wrote Human Traces, published in 2005. In the bright glow of hindsight it seems to be the book of someone who, at the middle point of life, is pausing to take stock and to confront what he believes to be his Waterloo. You can hear the intake of breath and flexing of muscles in the opening pages. If not now, when?

The question the novel attempted to answer was simply: what are we? What kind of creature? So ingenious, yet so unstable. Masters of the planet, yet separated from all its other inhabitants by our possession of the gift – or curse – of consciousness. Eternal refugees from a lost Eden, of whom one in a hundred suffers from severe delusions.

Anyone can ask these questions, read books and have thoughts about them. The novelist’s task is to embed the ideas into living people – into characters whose strife and disappointment are something that the reader can engage with. To begin with, this was easy enough. By setting it at the end of the 19th century and having as its main characters two psychiatrists, I could dramatise the opposite approaches to the question. Thomas’s interests lie in the biological basis of madness. Jacques, whose training is in Paris, is more interested in the talking cures.

The research for all this was exhilarating. It took me to Paris, to Austria, to California and to remote parts of the Serengeti. Back in England I visited what had once been county asylums, built on a wave of Victorian optimism. I was just too late, the hospitals had recently closed and their patients discharged. In north London, Friern hospital had a main corridor that was one-third of a mile long. Off it had opened many locked doors. The asylum had opened its arms to the mentally sick, but it could offer them no cures. A doctor who worked at Friern told me that two thirds of his patients had been born there.

One day I drove to Broadmoor to meet Dr Gwen Adshead, who said she would show me round and answer questions if I gave a class in creative writing. I was a little anxious, but secure.

The class was tight and the class went off all right. I talked about a poem by Thom Gunn, called “Considering the Snail”. Since my visit, Broadmoor has become men-only and the patients with personality disorder are no longer treated there, but in the hospital wings of prisons. Much else has changed since I wrote Human Traces. In 2003, for instance, we didn’t know that Homo sapiens had interbred with other human species. I had no idea that I myself would turn out to be 3% Neanderthal.

I have always wanted to return to this territory, and Snow Country, my new novel, revisits the sanatorium that Thomas and Jacques set up in the high days of hope. The big question remains unanswered; but now it’s 1934 and the world faces fresh challenges. There are new characters and different stories to tell.

Snow Country by Sebastian Faulks is published by Hutchinson Heinemann.
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