Next chapter

How to follow two Pulitzer prize-winning novels?

Colson Whitehead talks to Sara Collins
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‘It might seem that everything has been said about Kim Philby that is worth saying, but James Hanning’s book is excellent. The fascination of Love and Deception lies in the meticulously detailed account it gives of Philby’s strange half-life in Beirut.’

– John Banville, page 12

Contents

A farewell to Review ................................................................. 04
The books that made me by Alan Johnson ................................ 05

COVER STORY Colson Whitehead talks to Sara Collins about politics, Pulitzer’s and his new novel set in 1960s Harlem .................. 06

Book of the week: The Magician by Colm Tóibín.............................. 10

Nonfiction reviews
Love and Deception: Philby in Beirut by James Hanning ........... 12
Exponential: How Accelerating Technology Is Leaving Us Behind and What to Do About It by Azeem Azhar ......................... 13
Index, a History of the: A Bookish Adventure by Dennis Duncan ....... 14
Listen: How to Find the Words for Tender Conversations
by Kathryn Mannix ................................................................. 15

Fiction reviews
The Sisters Mao by Gavin McCrea ........................................... 16
A Calling for Charlie Barnes by Joshua Ferris ............................. 17
Tenderness by Alison MacLeod ................................................. 18
Crime and thrillers of the month ................................................. 19

INSIDE STORY Dan Saladino on the fight to save rare food crops ...... 20

BOOKS ESSAY Populism’s threat to democracy, by Jan-Werner Müller .. 24

Lauren Groff on writing Fates and Furies, plus Tom Gauld ............. 26
Farewell to Review
... and a new beginning

After 190 issues in its current format, and hundreds more in tabloid and Berliner size, it is time to bid farewell to Review. Our fiction and nonfiction reviews, essays, interviews and much more will move to the exciting new Saturday magazine, which launches next weekend, with unrivalled literary, cultural and lifestyle coverage.

When it launched in 2002, Review was the only newspaper supplement devoted entirely to books. As the launch editor, Annalena McAfee, remembers: “The contributors list was a bibliophile’s dream – Julian Barnes, Zadie Smith, James Fenton, AS Byatt, Salman Rushdie.” With a serial graphic novel from Posy Simmonds, as well as reviews, essays, columns and profiles, “the unifying factor in all these elements was the quality of the writing”.

Lisa Allardice took over as editor in 2006, just as Simmonds’s much-loved Tamara Drewe serial reached its conclusion. “So I was left, literally, with a big hole to fill for my first issue,” she says. “As a stop-gap, I suggested photographs of authors’ studies. One of the first authors was Beryl Bainbridge, who kept a gun on her desk (she did the smoking), closely followed by JG Ballard, whose Shepperton office was dominated by a huge surrealist painting of topless women, and the Writers’ Rooms series, with photographs by Eamonn McCabe, took off.”

There have been many memorable issues since then. “On the 40th anniversary of the Booker prize in 2008 we asked a judge from each year to spill the beans – which they did with gleeful candour,” remembers Allardice. “And Hilary Mantel’s essay marking 20 years since the death of Princess Diana in 2017 had a life far beyond our pages.”

Since its redesign in 2018, Review has hosted exclusive extracts from Mantel’s final instalment in her landmark Wolf Hall trilogy and Margaret Atwood’s Booker-winning follow-up to The Handmaid’s Tale, The Testaments. Ian McEwan and the late John le Carré wrote on Brexit; Dave Eggers and Richard Ford took on Trump. Celebrated interviewees have included Sally Rooney, Elena Ferrante, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Kazuo Ishiguro. More recently, poet laureate Simon Armitage, Hollie McNish and others contributed original poetry to a Review lockdown special and Anne Enright and Deborah Levy shared their pandemic diaries.

There will be even more agenda-setting literary journalism in the new Saturday magazine, appearing throughout the wide-ranging features section, as well as on the dedicated books pages. The launch will also see the arrival of new literary and nonfiction columns, alongside long-standing favourites. So as this last issue goes to press, it just remains to say thank you to all of Review’s contributors and readers over the years. We hope you enjoy the final issue – and come and find us in the new-look Saturday magazine next week.

Charlotte Northedge and Liese Spencer, joint head of books
The book that changed my mind
Isaac Deutscher’s *The Prophet Unarmed* is the second volume of his masterly trilogy on the life of Leon Trotsky. It made me sympathetic towards this extraordinary man while remaining hostile to the cult that bears his name.

The last book that made me cry
Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. So brilliant but so achingly, heart-wrenchingly sad.

The book I couldn’t finish
I got further into *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth than I did with the Ferrante; to page 677 in fact. The problem was the 672 pages I still had to get through.

The book I give as a gift
*The Whitsun Weddings* by Philip Larkin, but only because the Faber modern classics version (2016) has a foreword by me; I’m desperate to show off about it.

My earliest reading memory
*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. I was still at primary school when I read this classic. I remember being captivated by Tom’s clever ploy to get others to whitewash his aunt’s fence. I’d read lots of books before this one but nothing stuck in my mind as vividly as this scene.

My comfort read
Anything by PG Wodehouse. I’m sure I’ve read *Pigs Have Wings* at least 10 times but the plot doesn’t matter. It’s the atmosphere that beguiles the reader, the inexhaustible good cheer that seeps from the pages and never fails in its rejuvenating effect.

The book I am currently reading
*The Untouchable* by John Banville – a fictionalised version of the Anthony Blunt spy scandal. Banville has that rich prose style Irish writers seem to specialise in.

The book that changed my life
Animal Farm by George Orwell. When I was 14 our English teacher explained the subtext of the Bolshevik revolution and its inevitable conclusion – totalitarianism.

The book I wish I’d written
*Stoner* by John Williams or *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Both are as close to being the perfect novel as it’s possible to get.

The last book that made me laugh
Lots of books make me smile, few make me laugh, but *The Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith had me chuckling away throughout. Unsurprisingly, it began life as a serial in Punch magazine.

The book that had the most influence on me
Every book I’ve ever read.

The book I think is most overrated
I bought all four of Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels, convinced by the reviews that I was in for a literary treat. By page 20 of *My Brilliant Friend*, I knew I wasn’t. I am well aware of how out of step I am.

The book I currently reading
*The Late Train to Gipsy Hill* by Alan Johnson is published by Wildfire (£16.99).
Colson Whitehead is the only author to have won two Pulitzers with consecutive novels, taking on slavery and the legacy of racism in the US. He talks to Sara Collins about his latest book, a heist story set in 1960s Harlem, the joy of genre-switching and his hero Stanley Kubrick.

‘How can I obey the rules while departing from what people expect?’

Something strange happened the morning after Colson Whitehead finished his forthcoming novel. “I put the book to bed, and then I got up the next morning and Minneapolis was on fire,” he says. It was 26 May 2020, the first of three days of riots last year after the murder of George Floyd. Whitehead had chosen to conclude his latest novel, Harlem Shuffle, against the backdrop of the Harlem riot of 1964, which erupted after a 15-year-old black boy, James Powell, was shot dead by police lieutenant Thomas Gilligan. What were the odds that the day after he wrapped up a fictional contemplation of “how we pull ourselves together” in the aftermath of such an incident, there would be another one? As Whitehead himself observes, the coincidence was proof of a point he’s always making: “If you write about fucked up racial shit, wait five minutes and something else will happen.”

Long before our conversation, I’d resolved that I wouldn’t let the topic of race dominate it. For a start, it’s the subject (often the only one) that black writers are always asked to offer opinions about – an architecture of expectation that builds itself up around us. But also, it has never dominated Whitehead’s work, which has ranged in nine previous books over areas as diverse as elevator inspection, the World Series of poker and the zombie apocalypse. And there’s plenty else to talk about. Music: “I’ve done homework, college papers on Ice Cube’s first record and I’m still listening to it now. I’m brought back to other moments in my life when I’ve been writing really hard and Radiohead’s been there, Public Enemy’s been there.” Lockdowns: “I guess the cliche is that writers’ lives didn’t change that much, I’m pretty much sitting right here all day.” Whether he regrets chickening out of accepting Toni Morrison’s invitation to coffee several years ago: “When I’ve had the opportunity to meet some of my idols at conferences, I’m very reserved.”

As he puts it, via video call from his holiday home in Sag Harbor, Long Island: “When race is important, it’s there. Sometimes I’m focused on it, when it’s part of what I’m trying to figure out in writing the book, and sometimes it’s not important at all.” His two most recent novels took aim at the topic more directly than he’d ever done in the past, chronicling the stifling horrors of chattel slavery (The Underground Railroad) and an abusive Jim Crow-era reformatory (The Nickel Boys). They won him back-to-back Pulitzer prizes (he had previously been awarded a MacArthur fellowship and the National Book Award, among a host of others), and led Time magazine to describe him as “America’s storyteller”. They also resulted in requests for public commentary. (He responded to a bookshop’s invitation for a “frank talk about race” by saying: “I’m not a representative of blackness, I’m not a healer.”)

Does he feel the weight of this responsibility as a public figure? “My commentary is in the novels. If you want to know what I think about racial issues...”

PHOTOGRAPH Adrienne Grunwald

Saturday 18 September 2021 The Guardian 7
Colson Whitehead

in America you can read *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*. I’m not going to write an opinion piece reiterating that in 900-word form.” He is curious when people say writers have a duty to be political: “Why do I have more of a duty to be political than a plumber or a teacher? We’re all engaged in this thing called society and we all have a duty that we embrace or reject or are just too busy working to engage with in any public way. I’d rather be working on my next book than trying to get a deadline for the New York Times on the end of Trumpism.”

*Harlem Shuffle* is billed as a crime novel, charting the adventures of Ray Carney, a furniture salesman whose unwavering pursuit of upward mobility means he occasionally serves as a fence for stolen jewellery and electronics: “There was a natural flow of goods in and out and through people’s lives, from here to there, and Ray Carney facilitated that churn.” Carney’s cousin Freddie ropes him into a plan to rob the Hotel Theresa, and the novel expands from there into a character study that Whitehead describes as “a portrait of Carney in three different phases in his life as he gives in more and more to his criminal side”. If you’re among the millions who only discovered Whitehead after the game-changing success of *The Underground Railroad* in 2016 (or the recent TV adaptation by Oscar-winning director Barry Jenkins), this may seem like a surprising foray into genre territory, but those who have followed his entire career will be familiar with his gift for fiction that slips in and out of the usual constraints.

When he’s “trying to figure out a story”, he always asks himself: “How can I obey the rules while departing from what people expect?” In this instance, writing about a heist has allowed him to assemble a group of people who are trying to control their own destinies, characters who, as Whitehead says, are always telling themselves: “If you can pull off this heist, you can reverse your fortune; if you just plan enough, you can transcend your frailty.” It’s a stark contrast with the hopelessness of many characters in *The Underground Railroad*, yet both novels indulge in a kind of fantasy about the possibilities of escape, demonstrating how Whitehead’s fiction can reveal “the strangeness of the familiar and the familiarity of the strange”, to borrow the New York Times’ description of the effect of his zombie-apocalypse horror, *Zone One*.

Did his experiences of the global disaster of Covid chime with the ones he imagined when writing *Zone One*? “I had no idea that toilet paper would become the currency,” he deadpans, “that the sweepers in *Zone One* would be getting rid of the zombies that are locked up in apartments, but next to the zombies would be just piles of quilted toilet paper; that people would say: ‘Oh, the zombie disease, it’s just like the flu, we’ll survive it if we have a good immune system, I’m not going to get the zombie vaccine, that’s crazy!’”

He is also often asked about the parallels between his historical novels and current events. When it was published in 2020, he described *The Nickel Boys* as his “Trumpian” novel, perhaps because the debate it embodies, between idealism or cynicism as a response to injustice, is often read as a reflection of the concerns of many in the US after the election of the 45th president. As he has said: “How do you find hope for the future, when so many of us are compelled and driven by our own worst natures?”

Does this mean *Harlem Shuffle* should be viewed as post-Trumpian? He laughs. “It feels sort of divorced from contemporary concerns,” he says. “It just seems like its own thing.” He describes it as the product of a childhood spent “watching TV all day”, speaking fondly about his early fascination with classics such as *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (“where a bunch of robbers steal a subway train”) and *The Return of the Pink Panther* (“where Christopher Plummer steals the Pink Panther diamond”). Stanley Kubrick’s 1956 noir film *The Killing* was a big hard-boiled influence. “I’ve always had an affection for those kinds of stories where very flawed people try to outwit fate.”

Like many of his earlier novels, *Harlem Shuffle* is infused with ironic humour. Even in tragic moments, people are capable of absurdities. Laughter chases sorrow. In one scene, Freddie recounts how he navigated his way through the riots, desperately trying to get something to eat: “I’m like, how am I going to get my sandwich in all this mess?” It reminded me of the people taking selfies during the 2020 BLM protests, I say. “When we talk about the civil rights movement in the mid 60s,” Whitehead responds, “there were people who felt threatened by these young folks who were messing with the order. There were young kids in high school or in college who were engaged and then there were people like Freddie who just wanted to get a sandwich.” He wanted to show the “panorama” of people who would have been caught up in a riot like that, he says. “It’s not like all of Harlem was marching with Dr King. There were different factions.”

Having written two books that deal with the intractability of racism, Whitehead also alludes in

Malcolm X addresses a rally in Harlem, New York, 1963

Saturday 18 September 2021
this one to the idea that justice is never done. In the aftermath of the riot, when discussing whether Gilligan might ever be imprisoned, a local bartender remarks: “Put a white cop in jail for killing a black boy? Believe in the tooth fairy.” Yet in April, almost a year after Whitehead had finished writing his novel, Derek Chauvin was convicted of the murder of George Floyd and sentenced to just over 22 years in prison. “Suddenly there was a little bit of hope,” says Whitehead, though he cautions against taking anything for granted: “All gains are so precarious and have to be preserved. Once Obama was elected we took for granted that we had sort of moved along, and you can’t take it for granted, you have to vote, you really have to protect these meagre freedoms or they will be taken away.”

There’s that subject of race again. But *Harlem Shuffle* is not a novel “about” race. “There’s the engine of racial injustice in *Underground Railroad* and *Nickel Boys*,” Whitehead says, “but in this book the big bad is New York real estate. The overriding concern, the overriding force that warps people’s lives is where do you live, can you get a better apartment, how do you get it, who is building the apartments? As the book progresses we get a different point of view on who actually runs the city and who builds the city.” Among other things, it is also a powerful evocation of mid-century Harlem, which Whitehead felt drawn to write about as the “centre of black life in the 60s”, as well as the site of some of his earliest memories - of “being a very tiny person, walking up Broadway”. Until kindergarten he was “at 109th and Riverside, Riverside being a Carney sort of avenue”. But he hasn’t lived in the neighbourhood since then, having grown up in Manhattan, where he moved as a child and lives now, and therefore he relied more on research than nostalgia. He enjoyed long afternoons spent location scouting, “just walking around and taking pictures”, before going home to figure out which landmarks had existed in the 1960s and which had not.

I ask him whether the tremendous success of the last few years created a weight of expectation that felt daunting when he turned his attention once again to the blank page. “I’m so excited about what I’m working on that I’m not really thinking about other people,” he replies. Whitehead loved writing Carney so much that, at the moment, he’s thinking of revisiting his world again. Which means that, although he was “blown away” by Barry Jenkins’s adaptation of *The Underground Railroad* and has seen it “2.5 times”, he isn’t ready to hand this latest novel over to anyone for adaptation just yet.

As a self-described movie fan, would he ever adapt one of his own novels himself? Whitehead laughs, citing his experience of writing *The Intuitionist*, speculative fiction about an elevator inspector, and saying to himself: “How many times can I bear to write the word elevator?” Carney aside, this has always seemed to be his golden rule: when he’s done with a subject he tends not to revisit it. As he says of one of his favourite directors, Stanley Kubrick: “He did *The Shining*, he did *Clockwork Orange*, he did *Dr Strangelove* and they’re all very different. He picks a genre and a story that appeals to him and he figures out how to do it. He was always switching it up, you know - if you do it once, then why do it again?”

*Colson Whitehead’s Harlem Shuffle is published by Fleet.*
An exquisitely balanced epic that explores the life and times of the Nobel-winning author Thomas Mann

Lucy Hughes-Hallett

In August 1939 Thomas Mann was in Sweden, staying in a seaside hotel. The mornings, as always, were devoted to his writing. After lunch with his family, he would take his afternoon walk on the beach.

Most of the hotel guests gathered in the lobby early to await the arrival of the foreign newspapers, but the Manns didn’t bother. They were not thinking much about international affairs. As Colm Tóibín describes it in this compelling fictionalised biography, it was a tranquil, drifting time. Then on one morning Katia Mann broke the prohibition on disturbing her husband at work. She came to his room to tell him that war had broken out.

Days of suspense ensued. Telegrams. Anxiety. Last-minute rescue when places were found for them on a plane chartered by the Swedish authorities to evacuate foreign nationals. As they flew low through German airspace, Thomas – persona emphatically non grata in his native land since he had fled six years earlier – was trembling.

In London, there was a hitch. Mann was working on Lotte in Weimar, his novel about Goethe. Among his papers was a sketched plan of a dining room, with scribbled names around the table: just the sort of thing, thought the customs officer, a spy might be carrying. Mann tried to explain. This was an imaginary table plan, an aid to his fabrication of an imaginary conversation, which would, he hoped, tell the reader something real about a writer who had died a century earlier. Flummoxed by the apparent futility of the project, the customs man waved him through.

Like subject, like author. This is the second time Tóibín has Mann reflecting, after winning his Nobel prize in 1929, that his literary tone – “ponderous, ceremonious, civilised” – identifies him as being precisely what the newly ascendant Nazis most detest. A mandarin style, a reserved manner, a dislike of political passion – these are quiet, unflappable attributes but, as Tóibín persuasively suggests, they are to be treasured as bulwarks against the sleep of reason and the monsters it spawns.

The Magician is first and foremost a portrait of the artist as a family man; there is comparatively little in it about Mann’s development as a writer or about his status in the literary world. Rather, it places him at the centre of a panoramic vision of the early 20th-century German cultural scene. Throughout his adult life Mann did his utmost to insulate himself against that scene – turbulent and threatening as it was – but, for all the rigour with which he forbade people to disturb him in his study, the outside world kept breaking in.

Mann came from a line of successful Hanseatic merchants. His mother was Brazilian, an exotic figure in staid, bourgeois Lübeck. Widowed, she moved her family to Munich, where she and her children encountered a less convention-bound, more riskily exciting society. Thomas became fascinated by the Pringsheim family – rich, Bohemian, Wagner-worshipping, Jewish. He courted Katia, the daughter of the house, being primarily attracted, in Tóibín’s account, by her provocatively flirtatious relationship with her twin brother. He wrote a story in which the Pringsheim siblings merge with Wagner’s incestuous Siegfried and Sieglinde. Apparently unshocked, in 1905 Katia accepted his marriage proposal. Six children followed.

For all the rigour with which he forbade people to disturb him in his study, the outside world kept breaking in.

Another thing they had in common was a liking for strenuous ratiocination and very long sentences. This is where Tóibín’s interest in them becomes more surprising. Tóibín’s own prose can be Olympian in its cool simplicity, but simple it is. His limpid short stories and novels, such as Brooklyn, whose emotional power depends largely on the modesty of its style, could hardly be more different from Henry James’s elaborate creations, or from the troubled tone of Mann’s Dr Faustus or the labyrinthine musings of The Magic Mountain.

In The Magician Tóibín has Mann reflecting, after winning his Nobel prize in 1929, that his literary tone – “ponderous, ceremonious, civilised” – identifies him as being precisely what the newly ascendant Nazis most detest. A mandarin style, a reserved manner, a dislike of political passion – these are quiet, unflappable attributes but, as Tóibín persuasively suggests, they are to be treasured as bulwarks against the sleep of reason and the monsters it spawns.

Buddenbrooks was his first novel, and it was a tremendous success. Soon he was celebrated and rich, but the family over which he presided was not as stolidly well-established as...
the grand house he built seemed to suggest. Both his sisters committed suicide. His two elder children, Erika and Klaus, were flamboyantly unconventional—promiscuously bisexual, precociously talented as actors and writers, but too politically reckless and financially feckless to make careers for themselves. There were drugs. There were scandals. Eventually there was another, more devasting suicide—Klaus’s—which Tóibín presents as a test of Mann’s humanity, a test he fails when he chooses to continue his lecture tour rather than attend his son’s funeral. And repeatedly there were young men at whom Tóibín’s Mann looks as yearningly, without ever touching them, as Mann’s Aschenbach gazes at Tadzio in *Death in Venice*.

Tóibín’s cast is large, and there are glittering vignettes. Erika marries WH Auden, not for sex (they are both gay) but for a British passport; in a wonderfully comic scene Tóibín summons up Auden being acridly bitchy about Virginia Woolf. But always behind the parade of characters lours the dark background of Germany’s decline and fall and subsequent division. Tóibín expertly balances the private and public, and he follows Mann’s trajectory from patriotism to disillusion with non-judgmental finesse.

Tóibín imagines Mann, on the eve of war, alone in his opulently fixtured and fitted new house, reading German poetry and listening to German music, thinking how much he treasures Germany’s “deepening sense of its own soul, the intensity of its sombre self-interrogation”. The first world war, though, dismayed and confuses him. He writes a nationalist essay that he afterwards regrets. When Hitler comes to power in 1933, Mann—his Jewish wife, his socialist brother Heinrich and his outspokenly dissident children—is marked. He is no longer impressed by Teutonic high seriousness.

He escapes first to Switzerland, moving on to the south of France, where he frequents the cafes where other German exiles gather—social democrats bickering with communists—and finally to the US. He watches the second world war from transatlantic safety and has illuminating encounters with the powerful. Tóibín’s chilling account of his conversation with the financier and newspaper proprietor Eugene Meyer is masterly. Meyer passes on a message that emanates—but no names are mentioned—from President Roosevelt. After their talk, Mann—appalled—resolves to move to California, well away from the centre of power.

When he pays a return visit to postwar Germany he is repelled by the machinations of west and east alike, each bloc attempting to make propagandist capital out of a visit that he had intended to be a celebration of concord. Politics has failed Mann and he turns his back on it. Tóibín grants him one last unconsummated infatuation with a compliant waiter, and then leaves him, an old man ready for death.

This is an enormously ambitious book, in which the intimate and the momentous are exquisitely balanced. It is the story of a man who spent almost all of his adult life behind a desk or going for sedate little post-prandial walks with his wife. From this sedentary existence Tóibín has fashioned an epic.

**To buy a copy for £16.52 go to guardianbookshop.com.**
The story of Kim Philby’s volatile third marriage sheds new light on a tale of secrecy and betrayal

John Banville

In a coolly furious essay published in book form in 1968, Hugh Trevor-Roper singled out Kim Philby’s “truly extraordinary egotism and complacency” as forces that seemed to the historian “to have dominated Philby’s character and determined his lonely and difficult course”. Trevor-Roper knew whereof he spoke, for he had served with the Secret Intelligence Service during the war and saw much of Philby during those years. His observations on his former friend are shrewd. Only a man who believed in himself utterly could have given himself utterly to a cause, as Philby did.

Yet he was no fanatic; anything but. John le Carré - who, incidentally, Trevor-Roper strongly attacks in his Philby monograph - pointed out that in the depths of the “fanatic heart” there lurks a doubt, and doubt, in such a heart, is a fatal weakness. There is a question as to whether Philby had a heart at all. His capacity for self-control was well nigh inhuman. He was a secret communist as far back as 1933 - though never a member of the Communist party - and for nearly 35 years, no one in British intelligence knew.

Indeed, it seems that no one knew the man at all. Yuri Modin, the KGB controller of the Cambridge spy network, said: “He never revealed his true self. Neither the British, nor the women he lived with, nor ourselves, ever managed to pierce the armour of mystery that clad him ... in the end I suspect [he] made a mockery of everyone, particularly ourselves” - a judgment that is especially suggestive in its last two words.

It might seem that by now everything has been said about Philby that is worth saying, but James Hanning’s book is excellent. It is not that he has many new revelations to make, although he does offer fresh material on, for instance, Anthony Blunt’s espionage activities as late as 1962. The fascination of Love and Deception lies in the meticulously detailed account it gives of Philby’s strange half-life in Beirut, where he was banished in 1956 mainly under pressure from the American counter-intelligence agencies. Suspicion had fallen on him after the defection of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean in 1951, and he was quietly fired from MI6, with regret all round. Many in the service considered that he had been shabbily treated merely because he had been loyal to his friend, the drunken and increasingly desperate Burgess.

The heart - in all senses of the word - of Hanning’s book is the story it tells of Philby’s third marriage, to Eleanor Kerns, an American he met in 1956 in Beirut. In fact, it was she who met him, at her husband’s behest. She was the wife of the New York Times correspondent in the Middle East, Sam Pope Brewer. Brewer had known Philby in America, and when the latter arrived in the Lebanese capital to take up a job as a journalist, Brewer was keen to renew an old friendship. Hanning writes: “He knew Philby as a family man who had had to leave his wife and five school-age children behind in England, and wanted him to feel welcome in Beirut.”

Brewer had already cancelled two appointments to meet him in the St George Hotel, the expatriates’ favourite watering hole in the city, and having to cancel yet a third time, he sent his wife in his place to greet the newcomer. The folly of an overly complacent husband knows no limits.

The Beirut of the 1950s is a storyteller’s dream, and the St George is a dream within the dream. Hanning makes rich use of both the city and the hotel, to the point that they are supporting characters in his book. When Eleanor met Kim on 12 September 1956, the consequences were inevitable. Philby was polished, witty, handsome in a shy sort of way, and as one observer put it, “his very being carried a sexual suggestiveness”. Even Trevor-Roper, in his essay, admitted that he “still look[ed] back with pleasure to the time which I spent in his company”.

Eleanor was no slouch herself - one of Kim’s sons, who was a teenager when he met her, described her as “hot”. She had worked in advertising before the war, but after the attack on Pearl Harbor she went into public service as an information specialist, drawing up papers on matters of civil defence. Hanning writes that the US office of war information
When Eleanor met Kim on 12 September 1956, the consequences were inevitable ... ‘his very being carried a sexual suggestiveness’

“considered her reports the best any government agency had produced”. In 1943 she was sent to Istanbul to work in propaganda aimed at persuading neutral Turkey to join the allied cause. She probably did some spying on the side, and was taught how to look after herself – in her 1968 book The Spy I Loved she reveals that she knew how to kill a man in 30 seconds. Hot is the word, all right.

But at whatever temperature, she was a gentle, loving soul and remained loyal to Philby despite his repeated betrayals. As suspicions about his guilt increased among British intelligence officials, so did his drinking, which led to repeated domestic accidents and injuries. When his old friend Nicholas Elliott, an MI6 officer also stationed in Beirut, met him in 1962 he found him helplessly drunk and with a bandaged head – he had fallen and cracked his skull on a radiator. Drunk or sober, he clung on to his secrets. When under Eleanor’s care he sobered up and recovered from his wounds he was again his old, eminently clubbable self. However, he must have known the game was nearly up. When Elliott confronted him, saying British intelligence knew he had been spying for the Russians for years but was willing to offer him an immunity deal, Philby confessed.

Yet this part of the story is exceedingly murky. Was Elliott bent on unmasking him, or was he there to alert him that arrest was imminent? One source is adamant that at the end of the confrontation between the two men, when Philby asked, “What now?” Elliott replied: “You’ve got 24 hours’ head start.”

On the evening of 23 January 1963, Philby disappeared from Beirut. Eleanor heard hardly a word from him for months. When he did contact her, he was as cool and charmingly insouciant as ever. She eventually joined him in Moscow, where matters ran smoothly until he began an affair with the wife of the defector Donald Maclean. Even this affront Eleanor might have put up with. The last straw, however, landed when she challenged her husband to say, if he were made to choose between her and the Communist party, who would win. A friend reported, according to Hanning: “She said he looked at her in disbelief and just said ‘The party, of course.’”

And yet. Anthony Cave Brown, the author of a book on Philby, suggested that the affair with Melinda Maclean was embarked on at the behest of the KGB, who wished him to be rid of Eleanor because she was an “operational embarrassment”. Despite his love for Eleanor, did Philby choose the party over her, and deliberately drive her away? Hanning dismisses the notion, but in the case of Philby, can we ever be sure of anything?

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{ Technology } We ignore advances in renewable energy, AI and biotech at our peril - but we can make them work for us

PD Smith

A 2020 survey found that 60% of people felt the pace of change in life was too fast. Faced with steam engines or lifts for the first time, previous generations probably thought so too. But according to the technology analyst and entrepreneur Azeez Azhar we have entered a period of unparalleled and destabilising change.

Azhar identifies computing and artificial intelligence, renewable electricity and energy storage, biotech and manufacturing (such as 3D printing) as the areas in which “new technologies are being invented and scaled at an ever-faster pace, all while decreasing rapidly in price”. The problem is that our society is evolving at a more gradual pace. As a result, a divide is opening between technology and society that Azhar terms the “exponential gap”. According to Azhar we’re very bad as a species at understanding exponential change. Yet individuals and companies ignore it at their peril. In 2007, Microsoft’s Steve Ballmer famously dismissed the iPhone, saying: “It has no chance of gaining significant market share.” As Azhar points out: “He fell into the exponential gap.”

In a phrase borrowed from CP Snow’s 1959 lecture on the Two Cultures, Azhar says there’s now a “gulf of mutual incomprehension” between technologists and the rest of society. Politicians often show a profound ignorance of even the most basic technologies: “They are like people trying to fuel a car by filling its trunk with hay.” This is worrying, as the world is certainly changing. Think of the state-sized technology companies – most of them less than two decades old – that now dominate the marketplace. Such companies avoid tax laws and created a data economy in which our private details are bought and sold.

Azhar is unapologetically bullish about the power of technology. But, as well as highlighting the astonishing advances that are being made, he speaks powerfully about how we need to shape technology to put it back in the service of society, and offers insights into how to protect citizens and workers in the new digital economy. To build a world in which “we are the ones who decide what we want from the tools we build”.

To buy a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Can a good index be compiled by computer software, or is there an art to this overlooked endeavour?

Keith Kahn-Harris

Index, a History of the: A Bookish Adventure
by Dennis Duncan, Allen Lane, £20

It may be a sign of the joylessness of contemporary academia, or simply of inattentiveness to detail, but I have never paid much attention to the indexes in the scholarly books I have published. As for my non-academic books, I don’t think I ever even asked the publishers to commission an index, save for an index of languages in my forthcoming one.

More fool me. Although I’ve used indexes to file content from books I’ve used in research, the index at the end of Dennis Duncan’s book shows they can be savoured as literary creations.

Actually, Duncan includes two indexes. The first was generated by computer software and, despite being heavily pruned by the author, its usefulness is limited. While it directs the reader to potentially being heavily pruned by the author, it’s usefulness is generated by computer software and, despite

- It becomes redundant.
- The modern age has seen the index become a standard component of the scholarly book, part of a vast project of codifying and systematising the ever-growing abundance of human knowledge. Yet the dawn of modernity also saw the zenith of the index as a playful literary creation. Duncan discusses the now largely extinct art of indexes to fictional works, from Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa to Virginia Woolf’s Orlando. He also reveals how the satirical index was used to venomous effect as a weapon in 17th- and 18th-century literary and political spats. In the 19th century the politician and historian Thomas Macauley, recalling how a hapless Whig predecessor had been skewered by a slyly subversive indexer, exclaimed, “Let no damned Tory index my History!”

- The “actual” index though, isn’t just more useful; it is a literary accomplishment in its own right. The “A’s” alone remind us of the scope of Duncan’s history - from “Alexander the Great” to “AskJeeves” - and of the way the book cracks open the taken-for-granted building blocks of literary life.

A good subject index tantalises, condenses and surveys; it is both a gateway to other delights and a creation in itself. Indexing of this kind involves training in deep reading that takes years to acquire. Duncan emphasises the point by adding a note that: “This index was created by Paula Clarke Bain, who is a professional indexer and a human being.”

While Duncan certainly puts the human back into the story of the index, the book also tells the story of a tension within the drive to index. The carefully created subject index is only one kind of index. There is another kind, the “concordance”, that breaks the text into its constituent words and reassembles them in an ordered fashion. As Duncan shows, from medieval times onwards the creation of concordances of the Bible and other vast texts was part of a wider effort to make them more usable - for the preacher preparing a sermon, for example - and more time-efficient.

For the concordance or any other kind of index to be possible at all required the development of a whole host of scaffolding. Index, a History of the is also the story of the shift from clay tablet to scroll to loose-leaf handwritten Codex to the printed bound book; of the slow “discovery” of page numbering and other ways of marking and referencing text. It is the story of anxieties - dating back to Plato and extending as far as Google and beyond - that the easy accessibility of the written word is the enemy of deep thought and contemplation.

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A palliative care doctor’s empowering guide to having the discussions that we often try to avoid

Joanna Cannon

“Right now, there is quite likely to be a conversation you are trying to avoid,” writes Kathryn Mannix in her new book Listen: How to Find the Words for Tender Conversations, a follow-up to With the End in Mind, her moving and bestselling exploration of how to die well. “We all have moments when words fail us,” she explains. “This book is an invitation to notice and expand the skills we all possess.”

Using her wide experience as a consultant specialising in palliative care, an area where good communication is paramount, Mannix examines why we may shy away from broaching certain topics with our loved ones, what tools we can use to make those conversations easier to have, and the stumbling blocks we all may encounter along the way. While the author’s background means that the end of life features strongly in this book, it is by no means exclusively about palliative medicine, and it takes the reader through a broad range of situations from adoption to sexuality, from the death of a child in early pregnancy to growing old. Mannix uses real scenarios, from her personal and professional life, to illustrate her theory, and as a result, wisdom, grace and humility shine from every page.

Avoiding the words “difficult” and “challenging”, Mannix prefers to describe the conversations we may try to avoid as “tender”. Tender is a much better adjective, she explains, because it describes a situation where distress may be nearby, but where we do our utmost to minimise the risk of experiencing pain.

As medical students, we are taught repeatedly how to palpate a tender abdomen, gently and with great care, always watching the patient’s expression as our cue to continue. Negotiating a tender conversation, however, is usually taught less thoroughly, she goes on to tell the reader. Breaking bad news becomes a series of bullet points: set the scene, check how much the patient knows, fire a warning shot (“I’m sorry, Mrs Jones, but I have some bad news”).

While these rules may provide the foundation for a tender conversation, they allow neither for the nuances of the situation nor the needs of either the giver or the receiver, and sticking to them could have dramatic consequences, as we discover at the very beginning of this book in a story that starts with a punch in the face.

Rather than bullet points, a conversation should be more like a dance, Mannix explains – an analogy she returns to many times during the course of the book. “The conversation, like a dance, requires participants to join in and take turns.” One person may lead, she says, but never forces, while the other follows but is never pressured. Conversations, like dances, need practice, and she recommends that after every second question, we stop to make sure we have got the steps right. Question, question, check. Question, question, check. Like the 3/4 timing of a waltz.

There are many, many self-help books out there, but to put Mannix’s words into that category would be doing them a disservice. Listen goes further than a self-help book. It is more of a self-awareness book. It is a book that enables and empowers, a book that helps us to discover the tools we already possess and allows us to put them to good use. Rather than being told the best way to live our lives, reading through these pages feels more like having a long and rewarding conversation with a really good friend.

Perhaps the most important component in all of the chapters, however, is the telling of stories – not least because it is storytelling that helps us to understand ourselves, and others, so much better. As with Mannix’s first book, there are many moving tales within these pages. Jim, a man in end-of-life care, who needed to rediscover the dignity in washing and shaving himself before he felt ready to die. Mannix’s own widowed uncle, who still set a place at the dinner table for his wife, long after she had passed away, not through denial but because it made perfect sense to him.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
Moving between 60s London and 50s China, a dazzling novel considers the role of art in communism

Lara Feigel

“We’re the children of Europe. Sons and daughters of a violent civilisation. No one should be surprised if we choose to be violent.” So speaks one of a commune of well-educated Maoist revolutionaries as they stage an artistic happening in London in 1968. At the heart of this world are two sisters, Iris and Eva. Irish novelist Gavin McCrea has had the fruitful idea of juxtaposing their forays into revolutionary theatre with the ballets staged in communist China by Jiang Qing, the charismatic, ill-fated wife of Mao Zedong.

This is McCrea’s second novel, following the rightly acclaimed Mrs Engels, which told the story of Engels’s time in London from the point of view of his illiterate quasi-wife, Irish Lizzie Burns. In that novel, McCrea dazzled us with Lizzie’s voice; it sang off the page, her linguistic freshness partly resulting from her gifted phrase-making. Here, the voices are quieter, but McCrea creates a pungent idiom for Jiang that gives forceful life to her character. “I purged myself on to their paper and returned it fragrant with my vomit and my shit,” she writes in an imaginary letter from prison. “Never will they get what they want from me!” McCrea’s new book is a capacious work of social realism – appropriately, given its curiosity about the art produced in the final stages of communism. It is full-throated in its evocation of London in the 60s, but also attentive to psychological states (there are impressive descriptions of tripping on LSD).

Themes and questions flit across sections, like the Chinese lanterns that so many of the characters love to make. At its largest, the book asks what the role of art is in radical politics, and whether having a social or an artistic vision ennobles us as individuals. Almost as important are questions about motherhood, given vitally tender life in both countries. In China, there is Jiang and her daughter Li Na. In London, there are Iris and Eva and the absent mother whose attention they never stop competing for, and whose eventual reappearance sends them both into a violent frenzy in the book’s brilliant, psychedelic climax.

Motherhood is a rich topic here partly because parenting and family life are such fraught areas in communist thinking. In some moods, Jiang follows the party line in finding family loyalty incomprehensible: “What utility did these attachments have in revolution, where actions, not blood, proved one’s worth?” In a similar spirit, Iris tells a friend that “the best day of my life was when I learned that love isn’t a duty, that I didn’t have to love anyone, including my mother”. Yet Jiang persists in seeking out the daughter who will ultimately betray her, longing for affection. And Iris always has a feeling of missing her mother – not the individual woman but the idea of a mother, “a warmth or a certain kind of touch. An order and cleanliness in a room”. This is the figure of the mother familiar to us from psychoanalytic thinking, who continues to shape our actions however much we resist her. The book seems to be on Eva’s side when she tells her sister that all her most rebellious political actions are motivated by the desire to attack the mother she has rejected.

Does this mean, then, that in McCrea’s world the political is merely personal, that we fool ourselves when we consider our personal desires secondary to our drive to transform society? The strength of both these novels about moments of communist history is that he makes the visionaries he describes so wholly human. In doing so he undermines the more forthright communists as political thinkers, showing how fully they fail to live according to their own ideals.

Yet this doesn’t negate them: McCrea evidently finds the communist vision compelling. This is partly because it yields such rewarding narrative materials, but what makes these novels really interesting is his underlying sympathy with the substance of the vision. He uses his feel for novelistic psychology and family dynamics to breathe rich life into the communist project. In Engels’s 1870s, in Mao’s 1950s and in the hopes of the 68ers, there’s a promise of a better world that these novels find more appealing than deceptive. The committed communists in his novels are maverick madmaniacs, all of them, yet they have an allure, if only because they cut through the torpor and bourgeois mediocrity around them. McCrea is writing into a culture that hasn’t found a better alternative to these ideals. He is wary of the violence, he knows that horror is most dangerous when it’s disguised as idealism, but he can’t quite let go of these people. It feels right that, in reading this dazzingly ambitious yet modestly human novel, we should be drawn to them in our turn.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianbookshop.com.
The funny, moving and surprising story of an optimist destroyed by the American dream

Sam Leith

“A Attention must be paid.”
The standout line in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* - the anguished admonishment of Linda Loman that her husband’s suffering deserves the dignity of being noticed - seems to serve as an invisible epigraph to Joshua Ferris’s tragicomic fourth novel. The titular Charlie Barnes is, like Willy Loman, what the last US president would have identified as a loser; a man in his declining years who has chased the so-called American Dream and choked on its exhaust fumes. When we meet him, it is 2008 and he is in his “scuffed and tired home” in an unlovely suburb of Chicago. He has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and believes he has just weeks to live. Thrilled, in his unselfaware way, with the opportunity to demand others pity him as much as he pities himself, he’s ringing old business associates to rub his diagnosis in their faces, and calling his scattered brood of semi-estranged children demanding they visit. Then he discovers he doesn’t have pancreatic cancer after all. He can’t even get his final act right.

Unlike Willy Loman, Charlie – sarcastically nick-named “Steady Boy” - is a creature of the age of entrepreneurialism; not a career-long wage slave but someone who has put himself in debt to pursue chimera after chimera. He hoped to revolutionise asset management for elderly people and went broke. There was a proprietary weedkiller called “Endopalm-T”, whose excellent toxicity wasn’t confined to its effect on plants; a doomed entertainment franchise called “Clown In Your Town”; a novelty Frisbee in the shape of a flying toupee called the “Doolander”, which didn’t land with the public.

*He’d spent half his life prepping the next big thing. It never panned out. Steady Boy did not, in fact, have a hard time holding down a job. He just never wanted to be a sucker, a schlub, or a midlevel this or that. Like anyone, he hoped to make a killing, become a household name, live for ever. Well, he would not, now. That was just a done deal.*

*We need to stop calling him Steady Boy.*

Yet in all these schemes there was something not just egotistical or acquisitive, but a thread of utopian ism. The Doolander was inspired by the joy of a spontaneous toupee accident “shortly after Nixon’s second inauguration”; in financial services Charlie wanted to get rich by giving the customer a fairer deal. But his disappointment has curdled into moral outrage. As the financial crisis exposes Wall Street’s fraud, he rails against the rottenness of the system. This isn’t an overtly political novel - it’s a family story - but history is its background music.

Now here’s Charlie, past the age of new beginnings, living in palookaville with his basement cluttered by bales of marketing materials for long-defunct businesses. His personal life, too, is a mess. His career has been shaped not only by the vain dream of coast-to-coast success, but by a romantic nature and an uncontrollable libido. His fifth marriage is a happy one. His wife, Barbara, is devoted to him; but his children from his previous marriages hate her (or, at least, disdain her) and he’s powerless to bring them together.

What gives this novel its special tenderness and torque is its framing. We are reading what we are told is the “strictly factual” account of Charlie’s life, as narrated by his youngest son, Jake, a successful novelist who boasts of staying with Ian McEwan in the Cotswolds. As Jake wanly observes, his father has never seen the point of his career writing fiction; yet the techniques of fiction are everywhere in the way Charlie shaped his own life.

Harvey, Illinois

Ferris’s novel is set in a Chicago suburb

Jake adores his father: he sees him clearly with all his faults, or seems to, but worships him. Charlie may be a fraud, a fool, a faithless husband and a failure, but he is a decent human being. This novel is funny - Ferris has lovely comic timing and a great way with the sheer silliness of a family’s mental and physical brc-a-brac - and very moving. At times it tips over into outright sentimentality, only for that to emerge as part of the book’s design; a weakness not of Ferris’s but of Jake Barnes. This is the story of one disappointed idealist told by another, of one unreliable narrator described by another, and it is animated by filial love. Attention is being paid.

To buy a copy for £14.78 go to guardianboookshop.com.
This elegant account of DH Lawrence’s inspirations and the Lady Chatterley trial is a propulsive read

**Barney Norris**

From the vantage point of the present moment, the life and work of DH Lawrence resemble an earthquake that disrupted and rearranged consciousness among readers; that disruption regenerated the soil artists have been tilling ever since. It is testament to the magnitude of this earthquake that whenever aftershocks occur, they still have an uncanny ability to shift the ground. Geoff Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage*, a wild work riffing on Lawrence’s equally wild *Study of Thomas Hardy*; Rachel Cusk’s daring novel *Second Place*, currently Booker-longlisted, drawing on reminiscences of Lawrence.

Then there is the most significant aftershock of all – “the end of the Chatterley ban”, credited by Philip Larkin with ushering in sexual freedom. In 1960, in the wake of a change to British censorship laws, Allen Lane, publisher of Penguin books, resolved to issue an unabridged edition of Lawrence’s final novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, previously a banned book due to its sexually explicit nature. The resulting prosecution and acquittal of Penguin and Allen Lane was a watershed in the history of freedom of speech.

In her novel *Tenderness*, Alison MacLeod traces *Lady Chatterley’s* sources in the thickets of Lawrence’s own biography, then follows its tortured progress towards the light through the indecency trial. In doing so, she offers up two visions of what a novelist can be – the novelist as alchemist, turning the straw of his life into gold and not counting the cost, and the novelist as historian of ideas. Her focus shifts elegantly, imagining Lawrence as he nurtures ideas in sequences rich with poetic memory, then recounting the trial with journalistic rigour. Here she is aware of the vantage point she writes from – when EM Forster enters, “he nods to us as he crosses the threshold of the court, the only person yet to notice. He is a novelist of rank, and he senses the eyes of posterity.” The novel ends with a deeply moving imagined sequence, an afterlife of happiness for Constance and Mellors that is beautiful and unexpected. These shifts seem effortless because MacLeod’s subject sits above them all, uniting threads – the story of how a story made its way into the world. It’s a brilliant insight to build a novel on, all of us knowing the book will triumph and willing it towards us. It makes for a propulsive, addictive, joyous read.

The only questionable leap is MacLeod’s decision to counterpoint the history of *Lady Chatterley* with a story about Jacqueline Kennedy during her husband’s presidential campaign, and the tribulations of the FBI agent who covertly photographs her attending a similar “Chatterley trial” in the US. This sequence, it should be noted, is masterfully achieved, chronicling FBI director J Edgar Hoover’s efforts to keep the book from the world, and full of deep resonances with the story unfolding on the other side of the Atlantic. But it never really impacts on the journey of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and seems somehow separate, useful for rhythmic variation but distinct from the rest. MacLeod may have been reaching for the echo effect of *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham’s novel about Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, but there is something un-Lawrentian about choosing one of the most important women in the world as counterpoint. Lawrence wrote in *A Collier’s Friday Night* “as many things happen for you as for me” – his work is one of the well-springs of 20th-century artistic humanism. Evoking the great and good doesn’t necessarily rhyme with his poetics, although the story is well told, and Harding, the FBI agent, is a beautifully shaped character.

There is much to love in this novel, because MacLeod loves so much of what she has put into it. She loves Lawrence, whose work is spectrally threaded in quotes and echoes, giving the novel a beguiling sense of gatheredness. There is also a sustained love song to Sussex, where MacLeod lives. This abiding theme, and MacLeod’s descriptions of stories forming in Lawrence’s mind, recall Matthew Hollis’s study of the last years of Edward Thomas, *Now All Roads Lead To France*, and *World Without End*, his widow Helen Thomas’s memoir.

The triumphant emergence of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is given fitting tribute; it reminds us that moments like the *Chatterley* trial are precious, and must be cherished and defended, because progress is never inevitable. Victories for freedom should be sung from the rooftops. That is what MacLeod has done.

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Laidlaw revived; suspense in Sydney; a quest for justice; political intrigue; and deaths in Japan
Laura Wilson

Using notes left by the founding father of “tartan noir” William McIlvanney (1936-2015), bestselling Scottish novelist Ian Rankin has completed a prequel to the author’s magnificent trilogy featuring police officer Jack Laidlaw. Set in Glasgow in 1972, The Dark Remains (Canongate, £20) is not so much an origin story – the bookish, thoughtful and often acerbic loner, blueprint for Inspector Rebus and many others, seems fully formed and entirely recognisable – as a homage. When lawyer Bobby Carter, right-hand man to gang boss Cam Colvin, is stabbed to death, the police are concerned that this may be the opening salvo in a turf war between the city’s criminal factions. Although a lowly DC, Laidlaw ignores the orders of his blundering superior and strikes out with his own investigation. Ever-changing loyalties and betrayals abound – not least Laidlaw’s selfish neglect of his wife and children – and although the denouement may be predictable, and Rankin’s prose might not quite match McIlvanney’s inimitable style, The Dark Remains is an immersive and satisfyingly dark read.

Set in Sydney, the latest book from the bestselling Australian author Liane Moriarty, Apples Never Fall (Michael Joseph, £20), is an engaging mashup of family drama and psychological suspense that offers a mystery - the disappearance of 69-year-old Joy Delaney on Valentine’s Day 2020 – then trawls back through the past half century to unravel it. The Delaneys are a tennis family: Stan and Joy met as champions and toured the circuit together before setting up an academy. Although their four children are good players and spent their formative years practising relentlessly, none had the precise combination of physical and psychological qualities that make a champion – unlike Stan’s star pupil, who seemed set to give the pair vicarious glory until he inexplicably jumped ship to another coach. Now retired, Stan and Joy find themselves rudderless, and when a young woman turns up on their doorstep, distressed, they allow her to move in – much to the dismay of their children, who soon begin to suspect that she is not, as she claims, a victim of domestic violence. This is a complex and satisfying tale of the sacrifices we make, the way we betray one another and the slippery nature of memory: perfect holiday reading.

The Rosebud Native American Reservation in South Dakota is the setting for a fascinating debut novel, Winter Counts (Simon & Schuster, £14.99) – the first in a projected series featuring vigilante-for-hire Virgil Wounded Horse – written by David Heska Wanbli Weiden, member of the Sicangu Lakota Nation. Struggling with issues of identity, Virgil acts on behalf of those failed by the unsatisfactory combination of toothless tribal police and a US criminal justice system that all too often declines to prosecute wrongdoers. But the professional becomes personal when his 14-year-old nephew Nathan almost dies from a heroin overdose. With the help of ex-girlfriend Marie Short Bear, Virgil is determined to prevent the influx of the drug into the community, but the cartels are powerful and such authority as he has is extremely limited. Winter Counts is both a solid take on a trope familiar to readers of crime and western genres - the lone man’s quest for justice – and an authentic and humane view of a largely unreported world, ravaged by years of systemic oppression.

For those old enough to remember, the fuzzy outlines of quite a few real people will be visible behind the fictional characters in Robert Peston’s first novel, The Whistleblower (Zaffre, £14.99), set during the run-up to the 1997 general election, when John Major’s Tory government was ousted by a Labour landslide. Central to the action here is Gil Peck who, like his creator, is a political and financial journalist who has OCD – although presumably that’s where the resemblance stops, as Peck is also unscrupulous, obsessive, addicted and careless of the feelings of others. When his estranged sister, a Treasury official, dies in an apparent road accident, he smells a rat, and the resulting investigation uncovers financial shenanigans and undue influence in high places. While it’s not hard to guess who dun what, this enjoyable, intelligent thriller will be catnip for news junkies.

The Wrong Goodbye (MacLehose, £18.99) is the first novel by Japanese bestseller Toshihiko Yahagi to be translated into English, by Alfred Birnbaum. It’s a self-styled homage to Raymond Chandler, set in and around the US naval base at the entrance to Tokyo Bay, featuring hard-drinking police officer Eiji Putamura. His chance meeting with American pilot Billy Lou Bonney kicks off a sequence of events – dead and missing women, black marketeers, former Vietcong moles, triads – that have their roots in the Vietnam war. A clear indication of exactly when the book is set – around 2000, according to my arithmetic – would have removed an unnecessary layer of confusion from this complex, atmospheric thriller.
**A growing crisis**  
*Dan Saladino*

It’s not just animals that are facing extinction, the world’s crops are in rapid decline. Here’s why it matters what is on your plate.

In eastern Turkey, in a golden field overshadowed by grey mountains, I reached out and touched an endangered species. Its ancestors had evolved over millions of years and migrated here long ago. It had been indispensable to life in the villages across this plateau, but its time was running out. “Just a few fields left,” the farmer said. “Extinction will come easily.” This endangered species wasn’t a rare bird or an elusive wild animal; it was food, a type of wheat: a less familiar character in the extinction story now playing out around the world, but one we all need to know.

To most of us, one field of wheat might look much like any other, but this crop was extraordinary. Kavilca (pronounced Kav-all-jah) had turned eastern Anatolian landscapes the colour of honey for 400 generations (about 10,000 years). It was one of the world’s earliest cultivated foods, and is now one of the rarest.

How can a food be close to extinction and yet at the same time appear to be everywhere? The answer is that one type of wheat is different from another, and many varieties are at risk, including some with important characteristics we need to combat crop diseases or climate change. Kavilca’s rarity is emblematic of the mass extinction taking place in our food.

Many aspects of our lives are becoming more homogeneous. We can shop from identical outlets, see the same brands and buy into the same fashions around the world. The same is true of our diet. In a short space of time it has become possible for us to eat the same food wherever we are, creating an edible form of uniformity. “But hang on,” you might say, “I eat a greater variety of foods than my parents or grandparents ever did.” And on one level, that is true. Whether you’re in London, Los Angeles or Lima, you can eat sushi, curry, or McDonald’s; bite into an avocado, banana or mango; sip a Coca-Cola, a Budweiser or a branded bottle of water. What we’re being offered appears at first to be diverse, until you realise it is the same kind of “diversity” that is spreading around the globe in identical fashion.

Consider these facts: the source of much of the world’s food – seeds – is mostly in the control of just four corporations; half of all the world’s cheeses are produced with bacteria or enzymes manufactured by a single company; one in four beers drunk around the world is the product of one brewer; from the US to China, most global pork production is based around the genetics of a single breed of pig; and, perhaps most famously, although there are more than 1,500 different varieties of banana, global trade is dominated by just one, the Cavendish.

This level of uniformity has never been experienced before. The human diet has undergone more change in the last 150 years (roughly six generations) than in the entire previous one million years (around 40,000 generations). We are living and eating our way through one big unparalleled experiment.

For most of our evolution as a species, as hunter-gatherers and then as farmers, human diets were enormously varied. Our food was the product of a place and crops were adapted to a particular environment, shaped by the knowledge and the preferences of the people who lived there. As an animal, I had evolved over millions of years to eat the food of my environment. As a human, I now have to eat the food of the world.
of the people who lived there as well as the climate, soil, water and even altitude. This diversity was stored and passed on in the seeds farmers saved, in the flavours of the fruits and vegetables people grew, the breeds of animals they reared, the bread they baked, the cheeses they produced and the drinks they made.

Kavilca wheat is one of the survivors of disappearing diversity, but only just. It has a distinctive history and a connection to a specific part of the world and its people. It is only during our lifetimes that this singular grain, perfectly adapted to its environment and with a taste like no other, has become endangered and pushed to the brink of extinction. The same is true of many thousands of other crops and foods. We should all know their stories and the reasons for their decline, because our survival depends on it.

My entry into food journalism took place during a crisis. It was 2008, and while the world was mostly focusing on the financial turmoil ripping through the banking system, a momentous food story was also unfolding. Wheat, rice and maize prices were spiralling to record highs, tripling on global markets at their peak. This pushed tens of millions of the poorest people on Earth towards hunger and also fuelled the tensions that later exploded into the Arab spring. Riots and protests toppled governments in Tunisia and Egypt and helped trigger the conflict in Syria. For the first time in decades, people were asking serious questions about the future of our food. With 7.5 billion people on Earth and a projected 10 billion by 2050, crop scientists began telling the world that global harvests needed to increase by 70%. Calling for greater diversity seemed like an indulgence. But now we’re starting to realise that diversity is essential for our future.

Evidence of this shift in thinking came in September 2019 at the climate action summit held at the United Nations headquarters in New York. Emmanuel Faber, then CEO of the dairy giant Danone, told the business leaders and politicians present that the food system the world had created over the last century was at a dead end. “We thought with science we could change the cycle of life and its rules,” he said – that we could feed ourselves with monocultures and base most of the world’s food supply on a handful of plants. This approach was now bankrupt, Faber explained. “We’ve been killing life and now we need to restore it.”

Faber was making a pledge to save diversity backed by 20 global food businesses, including Unilever, Nestlé, Mars and Kellogg’s – companies with combined annual food sales in 100 countries of about $500bn. At the event, Faber expressed concern that in parts of the dairy industry 99% of the cows are a single breed, the Holstein. “It’s oversimplistic now,” he said of the global food system. “We have a complete loss of diversity.”

If the businesses that helped create and spread homogeneity in our food are now voicing concerns over lost diversity then we should all take notice. The scale of what we’re losing is only now dawning on us, but if we act now, we can save it.

The decline in the diversity of our food, and the fact that so many foods have become endangered, didn’t happen by accident: it is an entirely human-made problem. The biggest loss of crop diversity came in the decades that followed the second world war when, in an attempt to save millions from starvation, crop scientists found ways to produce grains such as rice and wheat on a phenomenal scale. To grow the extra food the world desperately needed, thousands of traditional varieties were replaced by a small number of new super-productive ones. The strategy that ensured this - more agrochemicals, more irrigation, plus new genetics – came to be known as the “green revolution”.

**On the brink of extinction**
Wheat fields in Antalya, Turkey

**Human diet has undergone more change in the last 150 years than in the previous million years – we are eating our way through one big experiment**

| Inside story |
Because of it, grain production tripled, and between 1970 and 2020 the human population more than doubled. But the danger of creating more uniform crops is that they become vulnerable to catastrophes. A global food system that depends on just a narrow selection of plants is at greater risk of succumbing to diseases, pests and climate extremes.

Although the green revolution was based on ingenious science, it attempted to oversimplify nature, and this is starting to backfire on us. In creating fields of identical wheat, we abandoned thousands of highly adapted and resilient varieties. Far too often their valuable traits were lost. We're starting to see our mistake – there was wisdom in what went before.

Of the 6,000 plant species humans have eaten over time, the world now mostly eats just nine, of which just three - rice, wheat and maize - provide 50% of all calories. Add potato, barley, palm oil, soy and sugar (beet and cane) and you have 75% of all the calories that fuel our species. As thousands of foods have become endangered and extinct, a small number have risen to dominance. Take soy, domesticated in China thousands of years ago, a bean relatively obscure outside Asia until the 1970s and now one of the world’s most traded agricultural commodities. Used in feed for pigs, chickens, cattle and farmed fish, which in turn feed us, soy plays a starring role in an increasingly homogeneous diet eaten by billions of people. These dietary shifts taking place at a global level, all pointing towards uniformity, are unprecedented.

An individual human diet even a few thousand years ago was far richer in diversity than the one most of us eat today. In the Jutland peninsula of western Denmark in 1950, peat diggers discovered the intact body of a man who had been executed (or possibly sacrificed) 2,500 years ago. Inside the man’s stomach was a porridge made with barley, flax and the seeds of 40 different plants. In present-day east Africa, the Hadza, who are among the last of the world’s hunter-gatherers, eat from a potential wild menu that consists of more than 800 plant and animal species, including numerous types of tubers, berries, leaves, small mammals, large game, birds and types of honey. We can’t replicate their diets in the industrialised world but we can learn from them.

I am not calling for a return to some kind of halcyon past. But I do think we should consider what the past can teach us about how to inhabit the world now and in the future. Our current food system is contributing to the destruction of the planet: one million plant and animal species are now threatened with extinction; we clear swathes of forests to plant immense monocultures and then burn through millions of barrels of oil a day to make fertilisers to feed them. We are farming on borrowed time.

I can’t claim saving endangered foods will provide answers to all of these problems, but I believe it should be part of the solution. Kavilca wheat, for example, can
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A version of the red list dedicated solely to food was created in the mid-1990s by Italy’s Slow Food movement and named the Ark of Taste. The group that created it saw that when a food, a local product or crop became endangered, so too did a way of life, knowledge and skill, a local economy and an ecosystem. Their call to respect diversity captured the imaginations of farmers, cooks and campaigners from around the world, who started to add their own endangered foods to the Ark.

As I write, the Ark of Taste contains 5,312 foods from 130 countries, with 762 products on a waiting list ready to be assessed. I have met many people saving endangered foods, including the farmer who showed me the rare field of Kavilca wheat. There are likely to be other champions in your own part of the world. You can help, too, by finding the foods that are endangered in your area, whether an apple variety or a local cheese. By eating these, you can help to save them.

Such foods represent much more than sustenance. They are history, identity, pleasure, culture, geography, genetics, science, creativity and craft. And our future.

This is an edited extract from Eating to Extinction by Dan Saladino, published by Cape on 23 September.
Populism in the pandemic
Jan-Werner Müller

It is a liberal fantasy to imagine that bungled responses to Covid have lessened the allure of Modi and Bolsonaro. They are learning fast how to subvert voting

When the pandemic struck, newspaper opinion pages were full of pieces predicting the end of authoritarian populism. Surely Donald Trump, Narendra Modi and Jair Bolsonaro couldn’t survive their mishandling of Covid-19? Finally, people were waking up to the reality of what these leaders represented.

Trump may not have lasted, but the expectation that the pandemic might see off populism is mistaken. Liberal observers have long assumed that populists are by definition incompetent demagogues. But populism is not all about promising simplistic solutions in a complex world and, contrary to a complacent liberal narrative, populist leaders are not incapable of correcting failed policies. The threat of authoritarian populism is compounded by the fact that these leaders are learning from each other – though what they are copying are not more effective strategies to combat the pandemic, but techniques for disabling democracy.

When despairing about the rise of populism, liberals have been eager to identify underlying causes. And indeed, there are striking similarities in the way far-right populist leaders govern in different parts of the globe: Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jarosław Kaczyński, Viktor Orbán, Modi, and, as a hopefully historical example, Trump. But similar outcomes do not prove similar causes. Rather, the reason for the emergence of what we might as well call a far-right populist art of governance is that leaders can copy each other’s best (or worst) practices. They are busy perfecting the art of faking democracy: ballot boxes are not stuffed on election day, but between them we see voting rules manipulated, media outlets taken over by business leaders friendly to the government, and civil society systematically intimidated and therefore election outcomes are rarely in doubt. Liberals, meanwhile, are drastically underestimating their adversaries.

Populist leaders are not all nearly as incompetent and irresponsible as Trump and Bolsonaro’s handling of Covid would suggest. Their core characteristic is not that they criticise elites or are angry with the establishment. Rather, what distinguishes them is the claim that they, and only they, represent what they often refer to as the “real people” or also the “silent majority”.

At first sight, this might not sound particularly nefarious. And yet this claim has two consequences deeply damaging for democracy: rather obviously, populists assert that all other contenders for office are fundamentally illegitimate. This is never just a matter of disputes about policy, or even about values. Rather, populists allege that their rivals are simply corrupt, or “crooked” characters. More insidiously, the suggestion that there exists a “real people” implies that there are some who are not quite real – figures who just pretend to belong, who might undermine the polity in some form, or who are at best second-rate citizens.

Obvious examples are minorities and, in particular, recent immigrants, who are suspected of not being truly loyal to the polity. Think of Modi’s policy of creating a register of genuine citizens. Ostensibly, this is about identifying illegal immigrants; but especially in combination with new refugee policies that effectively discriminate against Muslims, its actual message is all too clear to Hindu nationalists. Or think of Trumpists who would never really engage in argument with critics, but simply denounce the latter as “un-American”.

Populists reduce political issues to questions of belonging, and then attack those who are said not to belong. That is not a matter of mere rhetoric. Sooner or later, the appeal to the real people – and the exclusion of supposedly fake people – will have effects on streets and squares: Trump rallies have been associated with a local increase in assaults. The concept of “trickle-down aggression” – coined by the feminist philosopher Kate Manne – captures this dynamic.

Populist leaders present themselves as the great champions of empowering the people, and yet always exclude particular people. The shameless attempts by US Republicans to suppress the vote (and subvert election outcomes) are playing on the sense that the “real America” is white and Christian – and that black and brown people should not really be participating in politics in the first place. Meanwhile, Bolsonaro is gearing up to repeat Trump-style claims about a stolen election, should he lose the vote next year; he will have learned that, beyond casting doubt on the legitimacy of those not casting a ballot for you, bringing at least parts of the military to your side might be decisive.

In Hungary, Orbán has long provided a model from which others can learn how to stretch laws to the
limit in order to create pliable courts and media organisations. They can also study subtle tactics of how to mislead the EU and the Council of Europe long enough to entrench partisan advantages.

When Poland’s Law and Justice Party returned to power in 2015, it could reach for Orbán’s manual of how to build an autocracy under the eyes of the EU. Like the Hungarian leader, it learned the lesson that, during its first time in office, it had wasted political capital on culture wars, instead of capturing independent institutions. To keep oneself in power, one must control the judiciary, the election system and TV in particular – once that has happened, one can wage culture wars and incite hatred against minorities to one’s heart’s content.

None of this is to say that the new authoritarian systems are invincible, but we need to better understand their innovative techniques. Some are so dangerous because they are getting technologically more sophisticated: Pegasus spyware, the use of private companies to spread misinformation, or the extensive use of social media by leaders such as Modi (the world’s most tech-savvy populist) are only the most obvious instances. Still more dangerous than digital autocracy, though, is the ability of authoritarians to disable democracy, while at the same time advancing democratic-sounding justifications for their actions.

What is happening in the US and the UK is a prime example. The push by the Johnson government to make the presentation of voter ID mandatory can look reasonable on paper: nobody is against the prevention of voter fraud. Northern Ireland already has such measures in place, as do countries on the continent. But, as we should have appreciated, legal measures can be deployed to, in effect, shrink the demos, the political body, for partisan purposes: minorities, the unemployed and especially the poor – lacking drivers’ licences and passports for travel abroad – are most likely not to have the time and resources to secure the required forms of ID. We have also learned the hard way that the staffing of election commissions is not some bureaucratic trifle (as Tom Stoppard observed, “It’s not the voting that’s democracy, it’s the counting”), but can make the difference between keeping and losing democracy.

Why do populists so often get away with these kinds of measures? We have not grasped the extent to which they have succeeded in imposing their distorted understanding of basic democratic practices. The vast majority of those identifying as Republicans regard voting as a “privilege” tied to responsibilities, while Democrats respect it as an unconditional right.

It is not true that masses of people are longing for strongmen and are turning away from democracy. But it has become easier to fake democracy. That is partly because defenders of democracy have not argued for its basic principles well, and partly because they keep underestimating their adversaries.

Jan-Werner Müller is professor of social sciences at Princeton University. His latest book, Democracy Rules, is published by Allen Lane.
‘It started out as two novels’
Lauren Groff

I began Fates and Furies during the long, hot Florida summer of 2008. I was in a strange liminal space between the spring publication of my first novel, The Monsters of Templeton, and the birth of my first son at the end of August. My study at the time had been carved out of our rickety, uninsulated, un-airconditioned garage, and writing out there in 37-degree heat while enormously pregnant was excruciating physical work.

My misery was compounded because I was working on my second novel, Arcadia, a book that I undertook in order to wrestle with the moral implications of bringing a child into a world in which climate change was intensifying. The fourth part of the novel was set in the near-future of 2019, with a global pandemic and widespread environmental collapse, and when writing these imagined horrors became too devastating, I stopped working to dream of something that was in many ways the narrative’s opposite: a colourful, playful opera.

I had been married two years earlier, under duress, because I hate the institution of marriage for its ingrained misogyny, but my husband was being made unhappy by my dithering. Though I caved, I thought it would be interesting to write a book questioning marriage by presenting wildly divergent perspectives from within a long union. I threw huge sheets of butcher paper on the walls, one for the husband’s story, the other for the wife’s. It was a tremendous relief to leap up from the hard work of Arcadia with an idea for one wall, where I’d scribble a scene or observation, then waddle, sweating, to the other to write the same thing from a different viewpoint.

The butcher paper stayed up for years, gaining torn-out images from magazines, short stories and poems and tens of thousands of rubbish words. I had my son, published my first story collection, published Arcadia, had my second son. When we renovated the upstairs of our house, making a more civilised indoor study for me, I had to throw out the butcher paper because by then it was filthy, bug-gnawed, mildewed and totally indecipherable because of the humidity. It didn’t matter; the story had taken hold.

I began to rewrite the pieces I’d scribbled on the walls, and they became drafts that I rewrote obsessively. Over the years, the idea for the project had morphed from an opera into two novels that told a different story depending on the order in which they were read, with the (probably foolish) plan to sell them at the same time and leave it up to chance which book the reader undertook to read. When I thought I was finished with these two books and gave them to my agent, Bill Clegg, he summoned me to a vegan bakery a thousand miles away in Brooklyn to tell me gently that the two novels I had thought I had written were actually only one novel, which I’d have to rewrite from scratch. I wept. I did it. In both real life and in my work, I had been disgruntled at feeling forced to make a unity out of autonomous parts; in both, I’m delighted that my first impulses, dead-end roads that I followed fanatically for years, have been proved wrong.

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