


AWAKENINGS

 **BOOKS**
THAT SHAPE
AND SHAKE
OUR WORLD



#JMPFictionZine26



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Introduction



Welcome, reader, to a season of awakenings.

As the year begins to turn, new stories start to unfold, and a chorus of new voices can be heard. At John Murray Press, we publish books that shape and shake our world, and those arriving in 2026 are no exception.

In this edition of the zine, we're thrilled to offer you a first glimpse into these incredible novels, with each one personally introduced by their author who will also share an exclusive extract, inviting you on a journey through the unforgettable worlds they have created.

Within these pages, you'll wander through the mist of a sunken village in the Scottish Highlands, and sit in a busy restaurant beside a woman caught in the moment a single sentence will change her life forever. You'll enter the glamorous lobby of a Viennese love hotel where the concierge offers you a charming smile, and meet a man hiding in his children's playhouse after fleeing the oppressive expectations of society.

These stories will grip and entertain, inspire and challenge you, drawing out different emotions and perhaps even bringing memories of your own to the surface. So, turn the page and see what they awaken in you.

A Great Act of Love

Heather Rose

As children, our mother told us that we were descended from French nobility. A Duc and a Duchesse who had been beheaded in the French revolution. Their son had escaped to Scotland. Years later his daughter, Caroline, crossed the world to settle in Tasmania when it was still the notorious penal settlement of Van Diemen's Land. And there our family has remained for seven generations.

Caroline was a young widow when she stepped onto the shores of her new home. Apparently her husband had died falling over Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. Now even at age seven, I found this a rather curious story. Had he slipped? Had he jumped? Had he been pushed?

There was, in fact, a much darker truth to Caroline's past discovered only a few years ago. Her father, a philosopher and chemist, had murdered a woman in London. It was an infamous crime, widely publicised at the time. But surely I wouldn't write about that, would I?

And then one evening a winemaker told me of a famous vineyard in colonial Van Diemen's Land. It made sparkling wine – *champagne* as they called it then. A sparkling wine so good that one vintage travelled to Paris where it won an award at the Paris Wine Show. I was intrigued.

As I was immersing myself in that wine history, I discovered a curious coincidence. The young widow, Caroline, my grandmother's great-grandmother, had lived beside the famous vineyard. That was when *A Great Act of Love* began to take shape.

A Great Act of Love travels from the French Revolution through early Victorian England and on to colonial Australia. Along the way we meet a young boy called Quill sold into servitude on a merchant vessel, Cornelius



© Peter Mathew

– a slave stolen from Africa to work in the Caribbean, Henriette – a rather spectacular thief, and a decorated military man from the British wars in India who becomes one of the most powerful men in the colony. There is also the making of wine and the magic of champagne. This is history woven into fiction and fiction woven through history. Much of it is true, and much of it is purely imagined.

At its heart is Caroline, trained by her father to be an apothecarist, who loses everything in the course of a few short years. She travels to Van Diemen's Land to rebuild a life, only to discover that the past is always with us, inspiring us, haunting us, and drawing us back to the people we love.

'He is insane.
It is the first time she
has allowed it.'

It is a warm midsummer evening in the city of London in the year 1836. Caroline hears her father whistle outside the house in Chelsea where she is employed. She lays down the book she is reading and, wrapping a light shawl about her, she takes the stairs up to the street. He is standing by the wrought-iron fence, his manner agitated, skin ashen in the streetlight.

'Papa, what has happened?'

His eyes will not meet hers. She reaches for his hand to console him and is stung by something. She gasps and sees that her palm has been cut. She seizes his sleeve and withdraws a short knife he is concealing. It is smeared with blood but it is not from the small wound on her hand.

'What have you done, Papa?' she asks. 'Are you hurt?'

'There is nothing that can hurt me now,' he replies, as if it is a diagnosis.

And then he is gone, walking away from her. She hurries to keep up with him, but sees that it is fruitless. He is in the other world he inhabits, where nothing is familiar, sometimes not even her.

The knife is still in her hand. It gives her an ill feeling. What has it done? She wants it gone where it cannot hurt him or anybody else. She walks the short distance to the Thames and flings it into the languid black waters.

The next day the story is everywhere. A woman has been murdered on the Battersea Bridge. There are witnesses. A manhunt is underway for the well-known Frenchman Jacques-Louis Colbert, apothecary and chemist. Four days later he presents himself at the police station in Chelsea and admits his guilt. He is imprisoned awaiting trial at the Old Bailey. He refuses all visitors.

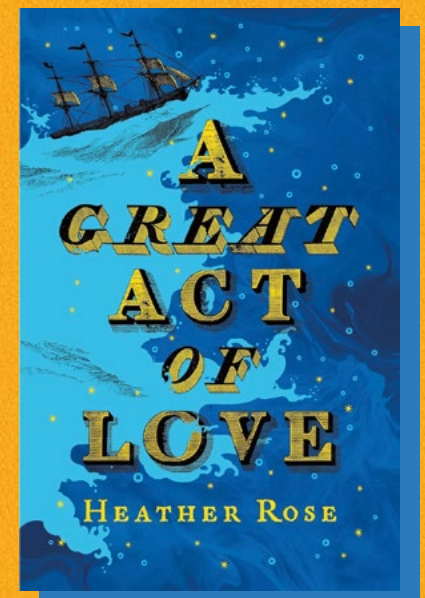
In the crowded courtroom, the judge sentences him to death by hanging. Jacques-Louis does not raise his head to look at Caroline, or her sister Augusta weeping beside her, before he is borne away by guards. Awaiting the noose at Millbank Prison, he is deemed insane. He is transferred to Bethlehem Asylum for appraisal; the Crown averse to the hanging of madmen.

He is insane, Caroline thinks, and it is the first time she has allowed it. He had held her, nurtured her, imagined a bigger world for her. She had failed to understand that he had become dangerous not only to himself but to other people. How had she let it happen?

How is she to find any peace knowing he has done this thing?

Through the year that follows, she is a wintering tree unable to respond to spring. She cannot grow new leaves, nor feel the sun or breeze. There is an immense solitude at the heart of her life. There will be no future for her in medicine. No father to assess a suitor and deem him sufficient. He has made their family name infamous.

The stain will never leave them.



The Burning Library

Gilly Macmillan

As is often the case when writing novels, inspiration for *The Burning Library* came from the collision of several ideas.

I didn't mean to study art history at university. It happened by chance when I was bumped from an oversubscribed English Literature class. I turned up to the first lecture grumpy and disinterested but by the time it was finished, I was obsessed.

What I hadn't realised is that art history is about decoding symbols. Detail by detail, the lecturer drew layers of history and meaning from a painting that looked simple at first glance and I realised that if you were willing to look closely enough, the visual arts contained all of life, just like my other passion: books.

I devoured *The Da Vinci Code* when it was published, fiercely admiring the way Dan Brown hid clues in historical artefacts and paintings, weaving them through history. I could do that, I thought, but I wasn't a writer yet and it took another twenty years for me to try.

In 2023, post-pandemic, after so much had changed, my reading tastes did too. I sought more escapism in my reads and in my writing. It was time.

When my son asked if I'd heard of the ancient Voynich manuscript, written in a language no one could translate and full of mysterious illustrations, it was the steer I needed.

Other elements of the book lined up quickly after that, jostling for inclusion.

The academic setting was born from my love of another classic novel, *The Secret History*. I chose St Andrews in Scotland for its ancient past and wild location, its detached-from-reality feel. The plot led to Italy. I travelled there, checking facts, seeking texture. In an ancient chapel in Verona, hunting for a specific tombstone, a white-robed sacristan caught the bug. As she and a friend researched in a city archive, they sent a chain



© Barbara Evripidou

of messages guiding me on a winding path through narrow alleyways to find what I needed. It was magical.

As I delved into the history of manuscripts, I found stories about books considered valuable treasures; about men who risked their lives travelling the world to find them and bring them to great libraries, safeguarding centuries of irreplaceable knowledge and secrets.

Digging deeper I discovered women amongst the earliest and most respected writers, yet little celebrated then, or now, a hidden history that inspired the creation of two warring groups of women both seeking the same ancient artefact and unafraid to use deadly means to obtain it.

I was intrigued by how women's invisibility in society can be advantageous when secrecy and ingenuity matter. I researched how they might communicate out of sight of men, in the stitches of a piece of embroidery, for example.

Into this world I placed my heroine, Dr Anya Brown, a brilliant, young academic, who first faces an uncertain future, then an impossible quest. She's inspired by all the brave, talented young women starting their own journeys through life today.

'She touched the brooch pinned on her blouse . . . a reminder of the cause she'd sacrificed everything for.'

Carefully laid out in front of her was an ancient piece of embroidery, torn along one edge.

Chaos surrounded it: printed papers and handwritten notes, piles of illustrated reference books, volumes of poetry, of symbolism, of heraldry, and several foreign-language dictionaries.

The notes wouldn't be there long. Each night, she burned her work. The fireplace was already stacked with some of today's pages. It had become a ritual she enjoyed, watching her handwriting disappear in the flames. No matter what frustrations or breakthroughs she'd experienced that day, she was mesmerized and calmed by the nightly fire, by how the edges of the pages curled as they burned, by the way they held their shape momentarily once they'd turned to ash but before they crumbled.

It was necessary to burn them. She must leave no trace of her workings. What useful things she'd discovered and recorded so far were for her eyes and the eyes of her sisters only, and she'd encoded and hidden them carefully.

She touched the brooch pinned on her blouse: a wheel, with spurs, made from gold and enamelled, a reminder of the cause she'd sacrificed everything for.

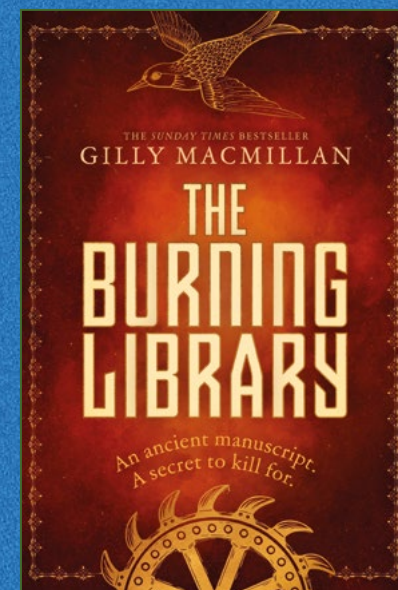
Somewhere, in one of these books or in her encyclopaedic memory, were the final pieces she needed, the answers to deciphering the puzzle the embroidery fragment posed. She could feel in her bones that she was just a hair's breadth away from finding what she needed. It would be quietly revolutionary.

She switched on a magnifying lamp and peered at the embroidery through it. The individual threads came into sharp focus. She wasn't given to fantasy, but she felt a strong connection across the centuries to the person who had made this. She was surely a woman. Female solidarity was a beautiful thing, Eleanor believed; its roots didn't just grow sideways, binding us to the women who lived alongside us, but also deep, connecting us to the past. Women needed to support one another. It was a terrible shame that not everyone agreed on how.

Eleanor was so absorbed in the fragment and all that it meant to her that she didn't hear them coming.

The cottage door gave in on the first kick. Before she could get to her feet, one of the women struck the back of Eleanor's head with a rock. Eleanor fell to the floor, blood oozed from the wound, and her consciousness slipped away.

The last words she heard were whispered close to her ear: 'You shouldn't take what isn't yours.'



Spies and Other Gods

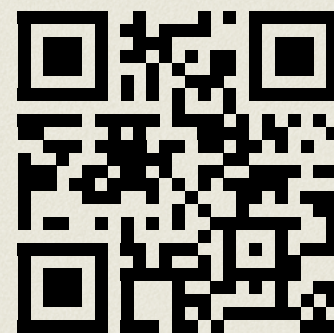
James Wolff

‘Nobody welcomes whistleblowers, Sir William. That’s the point of whistleblowers.’

If only these walls could speak. We’ve all heard the phrase countless times, but what if it was more than an idle wish? What if a building could speak? What if an organisation could speak? It seems unarguable (to me, at least) that organisations have a character that draws on their individual members but is in some mysterious way distinct from them. If this is true, if organisations do things that baffle even the people who work within them, then why don’t we hear more about the role of that collective identity in shaping events? What if an organisation not just had a character but was a character?

This was the thought pinballing around my brain when I started to write *Spies and Other Gods*. That and the fact that I worked for a very distinctive organisation – one of the three pillars of the British intelligence community – for fifteen years. Everything I experienced there convinced me that the Service I worked for had a character that was eccentric, awkward, great fun to be around, insanely defensive and instinctively deceitful, as much to its own staff as to the outside world, and it came to me in the early pages that that was a narrative voice I wanted to hear.

It was also an organisation I wanted to expose, with more affection than anger. I can still remember the thrill I felt when handed an expenses form that contained – buried among such banalities as rail travel, subsistence and petrol – the category ‘Defector Payment’, and the time I shared a lift with an elderly lady balancing her cup of tea on a stack of fake licence plates. Yes, Britain’s spy agencies are dedicated to stealing secrets. Yes, they use tools such as surveillance, undercover agents and midnight break-ins to achieve their aims. As the backdrop for a thriller, it’s hard to beat. But they are also hierarchies, bureaucracies and



Scan to hear from the former spy himself

hotbeds of grievance, ambition and complaints about the latest decision of a boss no one likes. All office life is there.

This and more deposited me at the threshold of my story. Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee, the body of MPs that oversees the spies, has received an anonymous complaint. Convinced that their decades of experience in frustrating attempts at interference will ensure no damage is done, the spies reluctantly allow the Committee to investigate. ‘Reluctantly’ because the case under consideration involves an Iranian assassin, a trail of dead bodies and some very dubious decisions.

From that starting point, the story progressed via a series of questions. What would happen if the woman who turned up to investigate had an agenda no one saw coming? What if she found a way to outsmart the spies? What if there was nothing she wouldn’t do in her determination to hold the Service to account? With those questions demanding answers, all I had to do was sit back and let the walls share their secrets.

‘The fact remains, Sir William, that a complaint has been made from within your organisation, by one of your own officers. We are taking it seriously. We urge you to take it seriously too.’

Two men, no more than five years between them. Suits, of course.

‘An *anonymous* complaint.’

‘Your point being?’

‘That the complainant’s wish to remain anonymous raises questions about their credibility,’ says Sir William.

‘I’m surprised to hear a spy chief express such an opinion.’

‘Our sources are not anonymous, Julian. We know exactly who they are. We just don’t tell you. It’s quite different.’

We’re on the top floor, where Sir William Rentoul, the head of the Service, has his office, along with the rest of the senior leadership team. The official line is that high-level foreign visitors are impressed by the views from up here, and in an organisation dedicated to the application of unseen pressure, that line holds considerable sway. Less frequently mentioned is the report from the Explosive Ordnance Engineering Department at the Ministry of Defence that refers to the ‘absorbent quality’ of staff on lower floors.

‘Nonetheless you must appreciate that some people may prefer to speak from the shadows,’ says Julian. ‘The new system allows for precisely this – it allows for an internal complainant who fears repercussions to choose anonymity.’

‘There would be no repercussions. We welcome whistleblowers.’

‘Nobody welcomes whistleblowers, Sir William. That’s the point of whistleblowers. Look, it has been a long-standing wish of the Intelligence and Security Committee that your officers should be able to contact us directly if they wish to raise a concern. The journey to this point has been lengthier and more arduous than any one of us anticipated, but we have arrived, as has our very first complaint.’

‘Julian—’

‘This entire journey will have been utterly pointless if we do not treat that complaint seriously.’

‘I am not suggesting that we ignore anything,’ says Sir William. ‘I am simply introducing the possibility that this complaint may be intended to make mischief. Now, we in the intelligence community have vast experience in the assessment of unsourced information. It’s what we do, day in, day out. With the greatest of respect, I worry that your Committee is not qualified to look into this.’

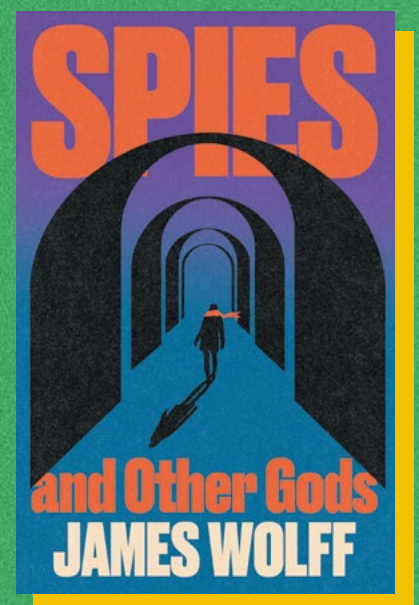
‘Surely you’re not suggesting that you mark your own homework?’

‘Julian, your Committee is made up of politicians. Together you have an important oversight role, yes, but you have no experience of running investigations.’

‘The Committee itself would not carry out the investigation.’

‘Please elaborate.’

‘May I ask Aphra to join us?’



Suckerfish

Ashani Lewis

‘As soon as her legs
break the surface, the
water takes hold of her.’

Lalita saves lives. It was one of the first things that Kolia learned about her mother, who works as a human rights lawyer, specializing in asylum seekers and torture victims.

Lalita ruins lives. Through mistreatment, Lalita has devastated the formative years of Kolia and her two younger brothers. (This took longer to realize.)

Suckerfish moves between Kolia's past, a childhood in which her mother looms large and is revered, and Kolia's present, in which Lalita is going to any length possible to try and repair relations with her estranged daughter.

I wanted to use this novel to explore questions without easy answers. How do you respond to a woman who has different priorities than being a mother? How do you respond, as a feminist, and as her daughter? I also wanted to examine complications that are specific to a diasporic mother-daughter relationship. How can a child relate to her parent's country when she cannot relate to the parent? What happens when a parent feels more responsibility to their homeland than to their child? The characters in *Suckerfish* are troubled, passionate, and variously neurotic. As the novel negotiates different ideas of 'doing good' – charity work, teaching, legal aid – it investigates some of the accompanying saviour complexes and delusions of sainthood.

Suckerfish also looks at the traps that come with denouncing one's mother. While writing it, I often returned to the much circulated Bonnie Burstow quote:

‘Often father and daughter look down on mother (woman) together. They exchange meaningful glances when she misses a point. They agree that she is not bright as they are, cannot reason as they do. This collusion does



© Henry Harrison

not save the daughter from the mother's fate.

Above all, *Suckerfish* explores questions of caregiving: what care we might owe neighbours, friends, or family. Even animal care; while I was drafting the first version of this book, I kept a photograph of a monkey above my desk. The photograph is taken from the famous, and famously cruel, Harry Harlow experiment, in which rhesus monkeys are made to choose between 'mother' sculptures made out of soft cloth or hard wire. They overwhelmingly choose the cloth mother, even when the wire mother is holding their food.

Suckerfish draws upon my personal experience of working with my mother on the cases of refugees from the Sri Lankan civil war. Also the works of Charu Nivedita, Rachel Cusk, Marguerite Duras, as well as the noir claustrophobia of certain two person plays, like 'Happy Days' or 'The Beauty Queen of Leenane.' There's much more to *Suckerfish* than claustrophobia and heaviness, I hope. Beyond the difficult questions, it's a novel about childhood and childishness: love, play, and imaginary friends.

My mother's running to the river. She tears out of her house, leaving the front door open. She's making a noise that is a sob. The noise catches and breaks and is out of sync with her breath and never stops. She runs to the end of the street and into the road without looking, then down the foothill that takes her into park, where she trips and falls. She doesn't miss a second, she staggers back up. There are craters in her palms from the gravel now. The park is quiet; the sky is white and threatens rain. Two schoolkids sit in the bandstand, cross-legged in the unswept leafmould, figuring out how to smoke a cigarette. A parent joggles a pram outside the empty tennis courts. He stares at my mother, streaking across the empty lawns, and lets the pram go still. She's down by the river now, running along the tow path to where it will be deep enough. The park runs parallel to the street where my mother lives, and stretches out along the Thames for miles until the river flows into a lock, at which point the park disperses into a web of disorganized trails and undergrowth. There the water's deep. My mother runs and runs. The sob has lowered, flattened out. Even when it's inaudible, it's still thundering through her. The way her breath is ragged and her jaw hangs open like that. Like an animal's. She can see the lock in the distance. The lock-keeper's cottage is visible on the path ahead, its thatched roof from a fairytale, but all the lights are off and the metal shutter of the little café is down. And she can see, downriver, a weir, three steel sluice gates. The path is less kept here. Thistles, shallow ditches of black mud; loose stones, big as eggs. The trees press in, poplars, bare and spiny. Glimpses of a cycle path through the poplars, better kept but deserted. The water is high, cold, brown with sediment. It moves fast, drawn urgently to the steep, grey spillways of the weir. My mother doesn't slow down, but her sob does, pitching high and then flagging, as she lurches to the bank. The surface of the river seems drawn tight. She turns her back to it, then lowers herself in, without pausing. As soon as her legs break the surface, the water takes hold of her sweatpants and she closes her eyes at the sudden weight. The canary grass cuts her hands where she's grabbed for it in fistfuls, but as soon as the water's up to her waist she lets go. The cold is at her ribs. The cold is at her breast. The cold is in her mouth. This is it, she thinks. A flash of neon orange on the cycle path. It doesn't matter. The cold or the current or the depth will get to her before anyone can stop it. My mother cannot swim.

Strange Girls

Sarvat Hasin

‘As if a slip of time
has opened to let you
through to the last
moment of intimacy.’

When I first saw the *Strange Girls* poster, it startled me. On a yellow background, in red circus font and all capital letter: *Strange Girls Can they marry like other girls? Have children? Be happy as they are? Why? Were they born*

I was eighteen. It was a question for the ages. What will a woman do if she won't marry or have children or be happy as she is? Why has she been born? The origin of this poster has never been made clear to me. It looks like it is advertising a freak show, as if instead of a *Strange Girl's* emotional and social incapacabilities, it should instead be boasting of a third nipple.

I felt like a *Strange Girl* at eighteen. I expect we all did. The moments in which you become a person are fraught. I looked anxiously for signs of who I should be — what I should study, what I should read, what lipstick to wear, which music to like. All of this felt very important in shaping the other, bigger questions that hadn't come yet. Who I would love. Where I would live. What I would do to pay my bills.

Marriage and children were one path to a happy life but I wanted to know what the others were. In *Strange Girls*, Aliya and Ava are also looking for paths. They invent stories for the future: lives they will love, lovers they will have, great things that they will achieve. As many young people do, they believe that their lives are entwined. That they will always be as close as they are at eighteen, sitting in their dorm room watching a film, drinking coffee, chatting idly about the kind of women they want to be like. They don't know, as we know, how fragile those bonds can be. They don't know that it won't as be as easy as it is in that moment to love each other, to build your life around another person.

At university, our lives can be very simple. Aliya and Ava wake together, they go to the



© Angelique Neumann

same classes, they eat the same baked beans on toast for breakfast and listen to the same songs. These similarities can hide the reality of a friendship, of how adrift it can be in the choppy worlds outside a campus. I wanted to write a book about that — about how it can feel after university when all the differences that were previously smoothed over rear their ugly heads. When it matters who has money and who doesn't. Where you come from. What your parents expect of you. All the social and racial and religious dynamics that dominate the world come flooding in.

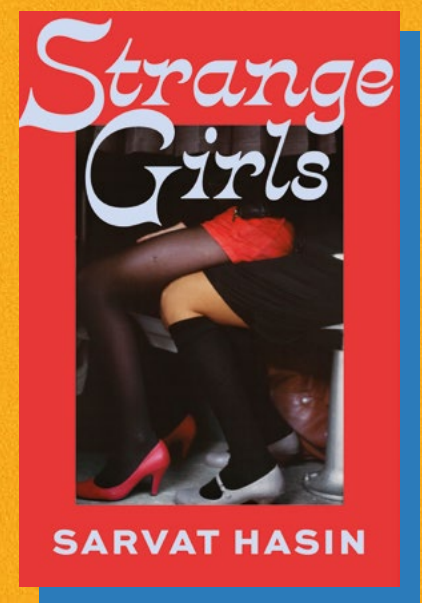
Will the *Strange-ness* that unites them always be enough?

We'll say hello, probably hug. I remember Aliya's hugs, the evolution of them. The reluctant almost retiring lean as if it was a social custom she couldn't quite understand and then the squeeze as if she didn't want to let go.

We won't say we've missed each other. We'll make small talk: the weather, the wedding, impersonal things. It will be awkward at first, as it is when people who were once close meet again, but perhaps we'll pick up the thread. I have heard there are relationships like that, that go dormant for years but are able to delve back in just as they were before, as if a slip of time has opened to let you through to the last moment of intimacy. Perhaps this will be us — as if only yesterday, we were lying in my bed, drinking coffee at midnight, watching *The Thin Man*, the halls beneath us reverberating with bass, knowing the party would never be as good as being with each other.

Except there will be a man in the room, scratching in the corner, his arm around Aliya's shoulders, his hand in the bag of crisps, the smell of his aftershave hanging in the air, his machismo killing the singular joy of Myrna Loy's diction.

I plan to stay in this flat with its stained-glass windows for the rest of the weekend. My train back is on Monday night. Three days to make chitchat with her husband, to learn if he takes milk in his coffee, if he's the kind of man who leaves teabags on the kitchen sides and just walks away from them. I've never lived with a man before. The idea that the longest I will spend under the same roof as an adult man will be with her husband is a little upsetting. Mostly in that Aliya has a Husband. He is a Thing I cannot imagine, despite having zoomed in on his pictures to check the quality of his skin, the bags under his eyes, the stain on his shirt that turned out to be a smudge on my screen.



Black Bag

Luke Kennard

The experiment at the heart of *Black Bag* is based on Charles Goetzinger's study in 1968; he enlisted an actor to wear a head-to-toe black bag and sit silently in his lectures and classes for a full semester, observing the effect it had on students. At first they hated black bag's presence but, as the weeks went by, they became almost affectionate towards him. For Goetzinger this was proof of the 'mere exposure' effect: that we will accept and eventually love a stimulus through nothing more than repeated encounters with it.

When I read about this I was immediately drawn to the actor who had accepted the role of black bag, and I wanted to think about how it would play out in the 21st century. My narrator is a failed actor at the exact stage in his life – thirty-seven – when you have to admit that you've failed. His best friend Claudio is a successful Twitch streamer.

I love my unnamed narrator, although I can see how some people might find him frustrating. I'd probably find *them* frustrating. Your goal in writing a novel should be to alienate the kind of people you wanted to leave you alone anyway. This is the first thing I've written in first-person and I feel like it unlocked something for me. I like speakers who are trapped in their own heads, irritable and dissatisfied. I fine-tuned it by reading a lot of August Strindberg's diaries and journals, ignoring the parts where he believes he's being secretly electrocuted by invisible rays fired at his bed frame.

I'm not sure if *Black Bag* is a book about 'being a man' any more than any other novel featuring male characters, but the narrator has a kind of fixation on his own gender – the expectations others have of him, his anxieties and thwarted ambitions; the ways he defiantly doesn't measure up to a standard he doesn't believe in anyway. Judith Butler writes about masculinity as a *phantasm*, which has to be



© Peg Fulbrook

violently protected as a concept because it's so violently meaningless. Like a made-up ancient origin myth for a country. Justine, a professor my narrator falls in love with, is probably the most interesting character to me. Part of her side-hustle outside academia is trying to work out why the men in the tech industry are so dysfunctional. I wrote this when they were just obscenely wealthy and not directly involved in politics.

It also felt timely to poke a few holes in artificial intelligence, although as I redrafted it tended to be the case that the reality had already outstripped the satire, so I kept having to push it further. I genuinely believe that if a general artificial intelligence made a full-length movie distilling the grand sweep of human culture into roughly two hours it would be a terrible, high-concept fantasy dystopia about masturbation. I expect to be proven correct by the end of the decade.

'Am I to be barefoot?'

'Yes. Shoes would communicate.'

Have I done this kind of work before?
No, I suppose not, unless you count—
Dr Blend talks over me: In a sense that must be irrelevant for an actor, mustn't it?

I am not unaccustomed to being talked over.

In a sense, whether you have undertaken a certain role before ought to be immaterial; your job is to find the path of least resistance to its imitation.

Well, quite.

I find myself emulating his clipped and outmoded English, his paternalisms, code-switching the way I'd call a man enlisted to fix my sink mate. You are Big Father, I am Little Father.

I was selected primarily for my stature and slight build. He hopes I won't mind him saying.

No, I rather thought that was the case. Nonetheless I'm confident I can—

So shall we?

Of course.

He stands and clears his throat then crouches to open the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet. He unfolds and lays out what looks like a large, black leather suit-bag on the little bed in the corner. It looks about my size, a reversible grey metal double-zip all the way up the side. There are two hemmed holes for legs at the bottom.

Should I undress?

If you would.

Completely?

To your underpants.

Ah.

I have not done any laundry in a while and it has become my habit to wear nothing but jeans on the lower half of my body.

I'm glad you told me.

I'll keep my jeans on, I offer.

I take off my jacket, unbutton my shirt and he unzips the bag. I lie down on the padded bench, gather the bag around me and poke my feet through the holes, then I straighten out. The bag finishes just below my knees and the holes are tight around my upper calves. My

jeans have ridden up inside the bag, creating what I assume to be the desired effect. Two bare chicken legs just protruding.

Perfect, he says.

Am I to be barefoot?

Yes. Shoes would communicate.

I actually rather like being barefoot; inside or outside, I tell him. When I was in Argentina I didn't wear shoes or socks for four days, and people don't realise quite how intense a connection it gives you to the—

He zips the bag up in one motion and the leather presses against my nose.

There are hidden vents.

Yes, it's quite all right. I can breathe very—

Breathing shouldn't be an issue.

I can't see, I say.

No. You will not be able to see.

It's possible I might walk into things.

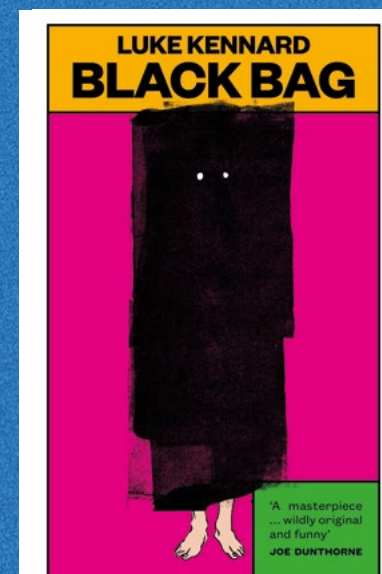
Very much so.

Very well.

In the lectures you will simply lie on a desk at the back of the room. In the seminars you will sit in a chair.

Ah yes, I say.

You should not appear to be dead. You should, as much as possible, relax. We do not want the students to think you a corpse.



The Last Witch on the Knock

Aimée MacDonald

‘Kate reaches out, then,
and she grabs the girl,
and she doesn’t let go.’

Thomasin leaves her toxic boyfriend, absent father and friends she loves to hate for a summer in the Scottish countryside with her eccentric Aunt Agnes and stern little cousin, Nina. They live in a run-down town set against sprawling fields and ragged hills, and the place becomes an unexpected home for Thomasin, despite the strange straw dolls peppering the high street. It is only when Thomasin swims out far beyond her reach in the local reservoir and is saved by a bloated doll floating, seemingly by chance, towards her, that events embedded in the town’s past start to bleed through her body into the present and Thomasin becomes haunted by Kate, a girl killed for witchcraft over 300 years ago – a girl who manifests herself not just through visions and dreams, but through Thomasin’s flesh, which bears a strange, warped scar from their first meeting.

Through dreams and doors and screens, the women become unwillingly inseparable, drawn together by the cursed town and the Knock hill – the site of Kate’s murder and a thin place between centuries, where Kate McNiven turns from young woman to witch and Thomasin’s scar threatens to split into a hole, revealing the other girl under her skin.

The idea for this novel first came when I was visiting my grandparents in Perthshire. After leaving their house, my mum and I walked up the Knock hill in Crieff, the town she grew up in. It was the late summer after a storm, and humid. The ferns were dark orange and rotting but everything smelt like the freshness that comes after heavy rain. My grandfather was a local historian based in the Crieff and Strathearn area, and it is in one of his books where I first read of the local legends of witches in the area. Kate McNiven, the supposed last witch to be killed on the Knock, was one of these legends, and she captivated me, instantly. Being up there



© Jamie MacDonald

made me want to make for her something other, a different sort of mythos.

I wanted to write a relationship that wasn’t friendship or love in a more ordinary way, necessarily, but a sort of mutual haunting. I wanted to write about being a young woman, inhabiting that space before true adulthood, the feeling of liminality and the weirdness that brings, the way you end up feeling haunted, regardless, and the way these strange feelings might transcend time.

The Last Witch on the Knock is also, though: a bitten fingernail pressed into the flesh of a soft apple; oily aubergine dripping through the holes in bread onto a stolen dress; sun-faded shop signs warping in stagnant heat; the green glow of a petrol station on an empty country road; a giant grey dog; a necklace with blue beads like eyeballs and a jumper with blue yarn like hair.

The novel is a portrait of two weird, ordinary women over a sweltering summer, and it is my version of a local story that has already been told to me, and that might have been told to many others – that might have kept them awake at night.

It feels as though something is scratching my left side, the side the straw woman grabbed me from, just below the breast where I can first feel my ribs. Just a tickling, a stroking, even, but when I get closer to take a look – left leg up on the sink, hands pressed against the mirror – there is only the tiniest red mark. I touch it with my finger for a moment and, when I push down, I think I feel something pushing back.

I draw my focus back to myself, out of my head. I have always had a vivid imagination, but recently there has been no room for it because I have been so sad. In the mirror, I smile. This is technically a holiday, I think. I should stop trying to kill myself, or whatever it is I am doing.

OK. OK. I repeat this to myself out loud and I can see Leo rolling his eyes and saying: Pull yourself together, Thomasin. You are not being normal.

Stepping up and into the bath and being swallowed by the hot water. White tiles patterned with blue flowers. No moths to spray with shower heads. Clear plastic mat beneath my feet. Mud still under the toenails. Fade away and radiate.

I wash the jam and the toast and the reservoir and the straw girl from my hair and my body.

In a dream, Kate McNiven puts her fingers in a girl’s side and drags her from the water. The water in her time is a river running into a loch, but in the dream it is bigger and flatter. Sun beats down on the surface and Kate sees the girl as though she is seeing her from a great distance and then they are close enough for their noses to touch and Kate has a feeling of great uncanniness because she knows she is dreaming and yet she is here too, in the water, and she feels herself in these two places at once and she does not wish to help the girl, the girl who is tall and strange and does not belong, but to grasp her, to float with her to the shore because with that uncanniness is a terrible foreboding, an assuredness that bad things are coming and she has to hang on tight. Kate reaches out, then, and she grabs the girl, and she doesn’t let go.

Kate shifts in her sleep, then wakes. She hears the clattering of the kitchen, the movement of other women around her. She wonders how she could have slept so deeply and yet be so tired.



All Them Dogs

Djamel White

'I was Wardy. Tony bleeding Ward. Lethal weapon forged in 1997 with a rap sheet that'd put them all to shame.'

All *Them Dogs* is the story of Tony, a gangster in his late-twenties, who reinstates himself in the west-Dublin gangland he'd left behind. When an attraction emerges between him and his new associate, he must navigate the perils of vulnerability in the brutal world he has chosen for himself.

It took a few goes before I started taking myself seriously, but I knew I had something with the voice. Tony Ward, chest puffed, blinders on, impulsive, was the propulsive mechanism that got the first few drafts of *All Them Dogs* down. I'm comfortable in dialogue, and this almost felt like monologue, and Tony was always hurtling himself forward with little time for forethought or to heed the potential consequences of his actions. It was a perfect storm really, and there was a feedback loop in place with my MFA which really lit the fire under me to get the ball rolling – people were waiting to read! I always say if people are reading and responding, then the work is getting done. The problem with the way I was producing chapter after chapter for peer review was it became sort of a picaresque. Each chapter a new day, a new scenario. I knew I wanted plot, but I'm really not a planner at all. The effort it would take to get me to plan, by the end I wouldn't be bothered doing the writing. It all just had to occur, again and again, and cut and splice and what have you, until there was something cohesive. But the voice was the through line; the mindset always 'keep it fucking moving.' The process and the character converged on me. Twice in this novel Tony makes mention of the fact that if a Great White stops moving it dies. It's not actually true, I don't think, but he believes it. Basically, neither of us could stop. For Tony, slowing down means sitting with his vulnerabilities; instead he's running in a straight line while the roof collapses behind him. For me, if I ruminate, the lid gets shut, I go back to bed. I



© Conor Horgan

wrote most of this novel in bed, in fact. I have a self-pouring kettle on the locker that I used to make an instant coffee as soon as I woke up so I could hammer out the words before having to do anything else. Just go. Awakening to write meant that I was waking up as Tony, frenetic, tapping madly. Certain scenes my heart really hammered, the car in high gear, white knuckles on the keyboard/steering wheel. It was a once in a lifetime thing, I don't think I could do it the same way again. That's the beauty of it, maybe.

First thing you always notice going into a stranger's gaff is the smell. Damp and smoky, that sickly-sweet smell of a spoonful of gear. It paints a picture. Once you've seen one gaff you've seen them all.

I let the Opel roll into the spot in front of the apartment building. One of Finto's fellas coming up short on his dividends, we'd been told.

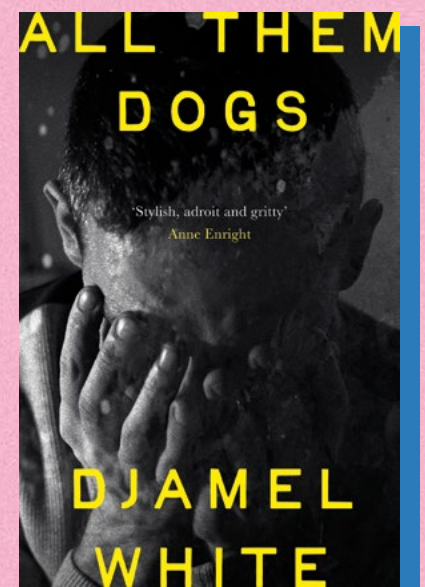
Made-in-Turkey Finto Maher, with the hairline to his eyebrows and the gnashers like he had the back side of a train ticket stuffed into his mouth. Rough cunt, but weren't we all?

Flute there, stony and quiet in the passenger seat as usual. I was starting to think that he was just an odd bastard with not much more to him. Didn't stop me following his lead, though. Not that I enjoyed being told what to do. I was Wardy. Tony bleeding Ward. Lethal weapon forged in 1997 with a rap sheet that'd put them all to shame. Wild card just waiting for my time in the sun. Let someone else do the thinking. The things you tell yourself.

I knocked the engine off. The Opel was a boxy little hatcher with a baby-blue paintjob. A Corsa-A GSI. They don't make them like this anymore, and I don't mean the engines. I couldn't give a rat's about what's under the hood, I'm talking about the way this yoke looked. All them straight lines. Cars of its like today look like bubbles. They lack character. The Opel used to be my ma's, but really it'd been mine before it was ever mine. Once I started stealing the keys it wasn't long before she let me have it altogether. First thing I ever owned, and it had been waiting patiently for me in Kenny Boyle's driveway all those years I was away in England.

Flute got out first. This area was the council's abandoned child. They were coming to the rescue all too late, building reams of new gaffs for foreigners to clash with poor Irish locals who'd been left here the whole time listening to the screech of hot motors in the early hours of the morning. What stood was apartments and low-roofed houses, blocky and different-coloured. Big black streaks of damp down the cream-coloured sections. These buildings were meant to look cheerful, to convince the people who moved in back then that this was a place where they'd be looked after.

The December air was baltic, but my flash new Arc'teryx jacket did well to keep it out. Flute had the fur from the hood of his Canada Goose parka pulled in close to his head. I told him earlier he looked a fucking eejit in it. Paired with those all-black Air Max Pluses, he cut the same shape as half the youngfellas who dealt for chaps like the one we were about to meet, and the ones who like to let on that they did. Outstraight, everyone wanted to look like a real-one but it didn't take much to find out who was only a spoofer these days. Flute would tower over any of those little wannabes anyway, the size of him. The parka was too short for him nearly. I would have sized him up by one, brought him somewhere to take in the extra length so it landed just right on the thighs. His wide shoulders meant his sleeves came up a bit short for my liking too. I wasn't jealous of big lads for that reason. At least I could stay looking sharp no bother to me.



Night Babies

Lucie McKnight Hardy

John Murray | 9781399826365 | HB | £18.99 | 23rd April 2026
 @lucie_mcknighthy

The landscape is integral to any tale of folk horror – it is imbued with ancient terrors and holds its secrets close. To awaken them is to unleash dark forces.

The environment, and a sense of place, is usually the starting point for me when planning a new piece of work. To immerse oneself in the topography of a place, to soak up the idiosyncrasies and eccentricities of a terrain, means to get to know it intimately, and this can be a major driving force behind the creative process. The places I enjoy writing about are those that are drenched in history, with a rich seam of tradition running through them that can awaken the creative spirit, infuse my plot and inform my characters.

I also find that my best stories come about when two distinct ideas come together, ostensibly very different ones, with no obvious connection. This might take the form of a collision, where each distinct source of inspiration will strike the other, and it's my job to gather up the pieces and form them into a coherent whole. Or it might take the form of a collusion, whereby they mesh together, and each informs and encourages the other to grow – a symbiotic relationship.

In the case of *Night Babies*, there were two locations which formed the building blocks of the novel – two very different places that inspired me, two settings so intensely at odds with each other, yet distinctively and profoundly beautiful in their own right.

Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance, has been the location for many happy family holidays (and is the name of my daughter). When I think of the city, I see rich, vibrant colours: the lucent blue of the sky; the orange terracotta of the roof tiles of the Duomo; the glitter of the jewellery in the shops in the Ponte Vecchio. The colours of the Bannau Brycheiniog – the Brecon



© Sarah Haile

Beacons – are less vibrant, but just as striking. There's a quiet beauty to the dun-hued rise of the mountains, the variations on green played out in the fields, the foreboding greys of the sky.

Both are places drenched in history, and *Night Babies* features, and is strongly influenced by, elements of both environments. An old chapel overlooking a reservoir, circled by the red kites which are endemic to the Beacons, ridges of pine trees standing sentry on the horizon. What lies beneath the water? An apartment in a palazzo in Florence, masterfully rendered frescos adorning the walls and ceilings and depicting Roman gods and goddesses engaged in acts of debauchery. And a cherub, its dark eyes deep-set, condemnatory. Gazing in silent judgement.

Night Babies was born out of the strong sense of place that both locations evoke, each a character in its own right. The landscape in a tale of folk horror contains ancient mysteries where dark forces lie in wait. Awaken them at your peril.

‘The light flickers, once, twice, my face and that of whatever is behind me.’

There, behind me, a face. Eyes burnt deep into their sockets, inky smudges, the pale flesh that surrounds them thin, blue-veined. A gaze so intense, so cruel, directed only at me, and I am at once back at the bathroom in Florence, the demonic cherub painted on the door, but this is worse. This is a painting brought to life; the inanimate made living.

The light flickers, once, twice, my face and that of whatever is behind me disappearing and then reappearing in the mirror until suddenly all is dark. The light has gone out and I'm standing there in the darkness, the porcelain of the basin cold under my fingers.

I try to find some words, and my mouth is open, but I can't speak. I reach out to approximately where I think the door must be, and run my hand over it until I find the handle. I try to push it down but it won't move. I rattle the door but nothing happens. 'Kit?' I whisper, my voice hoarse, at once wishing my eyes would grow accustomed to the dark, but not wanting to see what waits behind me. I fumble for a light pull, but can't find one. 'Kit,' I shout. 'Enough's enough. Open this fucking door now!' I can feel panic rising in me, and concentrate on my breathing, even as I push against the door.

And then there's the whisper of something against my leg. I'm not sure at first if it's actually there, so fleeting and elusive is it. Just above my knee, on the soft flesh of my thigh, the sensation of a hand or hands, at first stroking and then grasping, firmer, through the denim of my jeans. My skin crawls, but I reach down in the darkness and swipe at the place on my leg where I felt the touch. Nothing, of course, and the sensation disappears as swiftly as it arrived.

‘Kit! Now!’

And then the door opens and light floods in and there's Kit, frowning, concerned.

‘What is it?’ He sounds worried, and – if I'm being honest – a little bit annoyed. I spin round, but of course there is nothing behind me. No demons or cherubs, and no small hands clutching at my legs, either.

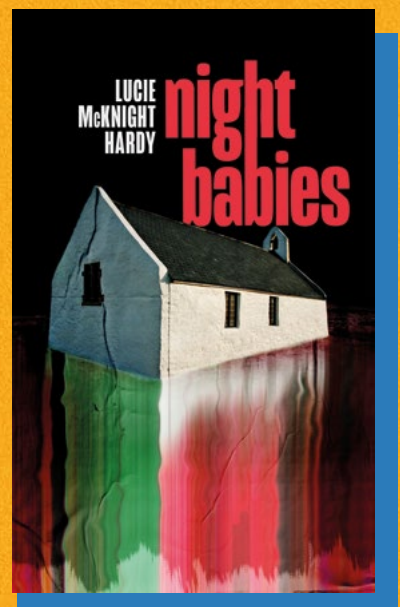
‘The door. You locked it. And you turned the light off. There is anxiety in my voice, and a panic that is alien to me.

‘No I didn't. Don't be daft. Why would I lock you in the bathroom?’

‘You must have done. The door was locked. I couldn't make it budge.’

Kit surveys the outside of the door and the handle, and then stands next to me in the bathroom and examines the inside of the door.

‘There's no lock on the outside, Astrid. There's no way I could have locked you in.’ I copy his inspection of the door. He's right. ‘You must have locked it yourself,’ he says with a shrug.





Murder at the Hotel Orient

Alessandra Ranelli

The Hotel Orient is discussed in hushed, champagne-soaked whispers. Aliases are required, photography is forbidden, and debauchery is encouraged. Rumours claim the infamous Viennese ‘love hotel’ has saved more marriages than it’s ended.

It’s not a place tourists know. Hell, I lived in Vienna for years before I did, and it took years still before I braved entering.

It was the worst week of my life. I’d been dumped (by text), rejected from grad school (via email), and fired from my job as a pastry chef (in person, *in German*).

After my final restaurant shift, I swapped my chef coat for the sort of dress that demands trouble. I ventured to the Loos Bar, searching for a dirty martini in which to submerge my sorrows then hold them down with an olive pick until their last, desperate breath bubbled to the surface. It was a mood. The bar was packed, the patrons wild. I was wedged between an unemployed jack-of-all-trades who’d ‘studied *near* Boston’ and a handsome pilot. Over espresso martinis, they debated who’d had more mistresses, until Harvard guy threw a cuff-linked punch and got kicked out. Meanwhile, a broken-hearted rich kid kept ordering rounds for the house, then walking away, leaving his phone shivering on the counter, texts pinging from someone with a devil emoji in lieu of a name. I gathered the devil was a woman.

A theater director in his 70s, drunk on free cocktails, leaned close to me and said, ‘If I was a younger man, I’d invite you to get a room at the Hotel Orient.’

He probably figured I wouldn’t understand, my being American. But I said, ‘First of all: *How dare you*. Second: Would you *please* take me? I won’t sleep with you, but I’m dying to go.’

Which isn’t to say I was opposed to a rendezvous at the Orient with a relative stranger, just not with this one.

On the taxi ride over, he clasped my hand, his mottled skin soft and thin. The moment I walked inside, I was in love. With the hotel, not the guy. The place was straight out of an Agatha



© Saowalak Jan-ardisorn / Nookpixel 2024

Christie book, or a Bogart film.

We booked the *1,001 Nights Suite*, and as the sound-proofed door shut behind me, I realised what I’d done. No one knew my name. Or his. He could slit my throat, steal my purse, and scam, leaving me a Jane Doe for the *Polizei* to zip into a body bag.

Nevertheless, I persisted. I blame the dress.

In the grand marble bathroom, beneath the domed teal ceiling lit by gold stars, I removed my stockings, and he rolled up his trousers. We soaked our feet in the tub, sipping champagne while he shared legends of old Vienna and the Hotel.

He made gentle passes; I gave firm refusals. Eventually, he went to lie down. When I stood, I saw he’d removed his underpants. Faded white. The sort bought in a multi-pack. Washed until the elastic warped. He’d folded them neatly beside him, and laid the duvet across his lower half. That was my cue to leave.

Stockings and shoes in hand, I darted for the door. He chased, begging me to wait. I yanked my arm from his grip and escaped into the hall, laughing. In the front office, I chatted with the night concierge while putting on my heels and insisting I hadn’t slept with the guy. She shot me a gentle, sceptical smile.

Outside, the sun was rising, though the moon was still out, peering between buildings, curious who’d left the Orient. The cobblestones on St. Stephen’s Square gnawed my weary feet as I tripped home, where I fell into bed, still in the dress.

I slept four hours, then awoke with a champagne headache and an idea for a book.

‘Her title was Concierge, but her real job was Keeper of Secrets.’

The first rule of the Hotel Orient was discretion.

It was late. The tourists had abandoned the streets, leaving their drunken footprints woven across the icy cobblestones. Only the most resilient troublemakers remained, those who could handle the cold. A deceptive hush fell over Vienna, soft as the snow. The city drifted towards carefree slumber, never dreaming the Hotel Orient would soon break its first rule.

The love hotel lingered at the end of a shadowy street, drawing people towards its light. Over the entrance, the glowing stained-glass awning cast muted orange and blue flames onto the snow-kissed sidewalk, which scattered around the reversed silhouette of the word Orient.

At night, the glass doors were locked. A twinkle from the chandelier glimmered through the slit of the velvet curtains, immodest as a pale ankle peeking from beneath a long hemline.

The brass doorbell gleamed, begging to be touched. Sterling was inside, awaiting the next curious passer-by brave enough to enter. *Go ahead, Darling, ring the bell.*

Her title was Concierge, but her real job was Keeper of Secrets, tasked to protect the private affairs of the anonymous clientele. It was dishonest work, and barely paid the bills, but Sterling adored it. After a decade working there, she understood the Orient’s quirks. The compartment beneath the creaky floorboards in Room 18. The bullet hole in the lobby ceiling, mere inches from the chandelier’s mount. The scorch marks on the window frame in Room 6, scars from a bitter husband’s attempt to destroy his cheating wife’s favourite suite.

The fire was back in the 1980s, well before Sterling was born. But on crisp winter evenings like this one, she swore she could smell the smoke. Though it might be from a guest’s post-coital cigarette.

The anonymous patrons were as rich, wild and glamorous as the Hotel itself, and the Concierge knew everything about them, except their names.

Or that, by morning, two of them would be dead.



Alan Opts Out

Courtney Maum

‘What in the world was left, honestly, to ring from the American dream?’

This summer I visited Matinicus, an American island twenty-two miles off the coast of Maine so remote and underserved you have to pack every imaginable supply and cross your fingers that you get to use them. With transport dependent on calm seas and clear skies – both rare – it’s a roulette run by Mother Nature as to whether you’ll reach Matinicus at all.

The island boasts piercing water temperatures, bobbing birds, and not a lot beyond that. There aren’t any stores, bars, or cafés – if you forgot lemon, sugar, gin for your martini? I’m afraid you’re out of luck. Money won’t solve your problems – if you even remembered cash, there are only two things you can do with it: buy lobsters from the wharfmen or cookies from a woman whose honor-system pastry shack is open from 10am until the goods run out. The power is irregular, the WiFi is unstable, the water is so rusty that you can’t wear anything white. As one local advised me regarding medical emergencies, ‘If you plan on getting hurt, check the weather first.’

During my week on Matinicus, I was on vacation with my husband, but given how the island forced us to reconsider our relationship to shopping, the main character of my novel, *Alan Opts Out* was certainly there as well. When a botched account bid forces my advertising executive to reconsider everything he’s believed about consumerism, to the horror of his social-climbing wife, he decamps to their daughter’s playhouse to ‘live off the land’ in the back yard, even though they only have a half-acre and reside in one of the fanciest neighborhoods in the United States.

Alan would love Matinicus – Alan IS Matinicus. After a week of living with little on an island, I felt Alan had pushed me to recognise that most of my problems are better solved with a dip in



© Colin Lane

frigid ocean water instead of cold, hard cash. I need for nothing, but want for much. Alan taught me that.

At the week’s end, we were able to fly out thanks to uncommonly clear skies, and when we landed, we reached a planet we no longer recognized. Why were people driving such enormous cars? And look at the bins overflowing with utilitarian trash! Why was that woman throwing out a Coke can when, with a pair of sturdy scissors and two hours spare time, she could have fashioned it into a salad server?

Matinicus is a place where your footprint is tangible and your actions matter. On our penultimate day there, our neighbors took too many hot showers and knocked the island out of power. Alan would not have approved.

Maybe if Shawn had proffered an account bid for ouzo or cachaça, Alan wouldn’t feel so empty. If there was one area left in marketing with extractable value, it was global spirits. While affluent white Americans had embraced (and basically attempted to colonize) mezcal, they didn’t appear to know much about soju or pulque yet, or any of the other specialty beverages specific to whatever culture was waiting to be ‘discovered’ around the world. But sitting in the recently detailed leather of his car, Alan had to admit that he couldn’t think of a sector beyond niche spirits that hadn’t been squeezed to death for all that it was worth.

The proof was in the entertainment industry: the radio played nothing but covers of old classics, Tracy Chapman’s ‘Fast Car’ and Guns n’ Roses’ ‘Patience’. At the movies, it was one Marvel sequel after another. When ‘Barbie’ was a success, the powers that be snapped up the rights to Polly Pocket, a toy that had been discontinued over twenty years ago, then brought back from the dead. In home design, people previously used steps to get into a pool, but now there were zero-entry ramps on which people broke their necks. Pizza crust was made with cauliflower. Smoking had become vaping.

Wine had no more wine in it. What in the world was left, honestly, to ring from the American dream? At this point in the two thousands, the Dream had built up a lot of brand equity. Everyone knew what it looked like, what it smelled like. It looked like a modern farmhouse with a manic amount of shiplap. It smelled like piñon and rescue puppy breath. It had hair extensions and no visible laugh lines. The thing was – well, the realization that was growing inside of Alan in his sedan – he had played a hand in creating the American dreamscape of the 21st century. And it was kind of a nightmare?

Bitter Melon

Liv Little

‘Her world collapsed with the quiet clink of cutlery and a curry she could no longer taste.’

There are certain universal truths, experiences that bind us as human beings, and grief is one of them. As much as we might will it, wish it, and generally do our utmost to avoid it, it will find us. We may grieve for past versions of ourselves, or our dreams, or we may even find ourselves grieving over the inevitability of death.

As a child, I was one of those people. I used to lie awake and worry profusely about the fact that I, and everyone I loved, would at some point cease to exist, at least in physical form. It didn't matter that I'd grown up with a Buddhist for a mother, who would so eloquently try to soothe my distress. And it didn't help to read books on the topic or listen to experts either. My relationship with death and grief shifted when I lost my stepfather, and a couple of years later, my own dad.

My upcoming novel is an amalgamation of all the things my grief has imprinted upon me. *Bitter Melon* is about all the messy, painful bits that accompany grief, but it is also a story of hope, reconciliation, joy and a father and daughter finding one another after a lifetime of distance. It is about complicated families, and the pain that is passed down through generations. *Bitter Melon* pays tribute to my father's beloved Jamaica in the form of an epic road trip. I wanted to dive into how we act when the end is near, bodily autonomy and the right to die. But most importantly, this is a book about love and the bittersweet.

Delroy and Jalissa are a father-daughter duo whose relationship can be defined by fractured communication and the gaps in their understanding of one another that accompany long periods of absence – also by love even if it is not always felt.



© NXSH

When we meet Jalissa, she is fresh from heartbreak and a miscarriage at 14 weeks, while Delroy is grappling with the recent diagnosis of an illness he is reluctant to name. They both have reasons to hide and reasons to feel shame. When the opportunity for a road trip to Jamaica presents itself, it offers them both the thing they have been craving: to run away – distance from their lives and their pain.

What follows is a kaleidoscopic road trip (think *Little Miss Sunshine* meets *The Farewell*) where they meet all sorts of oddballs, estranged family members, lovers and discover secret(?) family histories. It's through this time together that Jalissa and Delroy come to know themselves and each other more intimately and profoundly than they thought possible.

Jalissa barely looked up, too absorbed in the food in front of her. A few spots of curry splashed onto her white shirt, like stars dancing across the fabric.

Robbie fidgeted in his seat, his agitation apparent. ‘I need you to look at me.’

She paused, her fork hovering halfway to her mouth. Slowly, she set it down, her pulse quickening.

‘I... I've been thinking,’ Robbie said, his voice cracking just slightly, ‘and I don't think we're happy anymore. I think we should take some time.’

Jalissa blinked. The words didn't make sense at first. ‘What does “time” mean?’

‘I just think we need space.’

‘Space?’

‘No, it's more than that... I think we should break up.’

Her world collapsed with the quiet clink of cutlery and a curry she could no longer taste. Robbie rambled, trying to ease his guilt.

‘You can stay in the flat for as long as you need. I'll be gone for the holidays with my family in the Cotswolds...’

Jalissa didn't respond. Her mind was spinning. Robbie was ending it, right here, right now, with no real fight. Without asking her how she felt.

Her hand instinctively moved to the thin gold band on her finger. With a sudden motion, she took it off and dashed it at him across the table. The clinking sound of metal hitting the wood felt louder than the hush that followed. Couples around them looked on in horror.

He left.

It wasn't until Anchali returned with a large box of tissues that Jalissa realised her face was wet. The tissue box was placed delicately in front of her. She wiped her face, trying to regain composure. But as she dabbed at her eyes, she couldn't wipe them away fast enough.

So she surrendered to the moment, letting her tears fall into her mango sticky rice. After all, she deserved something sweet.



Clara and Christina

Andrew Cunning



Never meet your heroes.
That was Flaubert's advice.

But what if, after years of writing and research, you do get the chance to sit with the writer you've spent a decade thinking about, obsessing over? A person whose mind you've followed line by line, book by book.

This is the situation Clara Wilson faces in *Clara and Christina*.

As an undergraduate Clara discovered the novels of Christina Darnell, award-winning but largely forgotten British author. She fell in love with Christina's prose immediately, as nineteen year old and then gradually, over years, with the agile, wise mind that produced these fictions. Who is this woman? Clara wonders. What is she like? Clara devotes her undergraduate and masters dissertations to the work of Christina Darnell, writes a PhD on her novels and essays and, as the novel tracks, writes the first full book on Christina Darnell ever published.

At the outset of the novel, Clara discovers Christina is living in Belfast, too, and writes to her agent to request an interview. With no new novel in years, no public talks or interviews, Clara doesn't expect a response.

But the reply comes: Christina is happy to be interviewed.

Clara and Christina follows the two women's conversations over a series of Sunday mornings. Clara wrestles with balancing her ambitions for her burgeoning academic career with her deep love for the work of the woman now sitting in front of her. Christina, largely hidden behind her fiction, remains so, and doesn't reveal much about her own life. Instead, she reveals a way of thinking and of living that Clara might have missed in her questioning. Ultimately, Clara is offered an opportunity to learn finally what Christina's fiction really means.



© Jonathan Ryder

This novel had its awakening about seven years ago. I, like Clara, was writing a book on an acclaimed writer. My Christina Darnell was Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Gilead*. And, just like Clara, I emailed Marilynne's agent to ask for an interview and, within a few months, found myself flying to Iowa City to sit with her for an hour to discuss religion, politics and fiction. That interview went into my book and years later, inspired another, this time a work of fiction.

What would it be like, I wondered, if this one-hour, one-off interview had continued over a course of weeks and months. What might we have discussed? What might I have learned?

This novel is, in part, an answer to these questions.

It is, I suppose, my challenge to Flaubert.

'She wondered how anyone lived through it without a decent novel and a quiet room.'

Clara set the book down on her bed, its spine parallel to the speckled ceiling. She pushed it down against the duvet to keep her place. The blue blanket she'd pulled over her knees, one she'd had since she was young, was threadbare, and the cold air streaming through the window hit her bare legs. Her head was busy, her heartbeat elevated. She looked down. The book sat beside her, a lifeless object implausibly unaware of the spell it had cast. Clara could *see* the girl. The paints. The attic room. She lifted it and looked at the spine.

Christina Darnell.

Never heard of her.

Clara looked again at the back cover, read the praise.

A first novel that comes from some other place entirely.

Compassionate, wise, daring. A book so fully realised, it is impossible to imagine it written line by line.

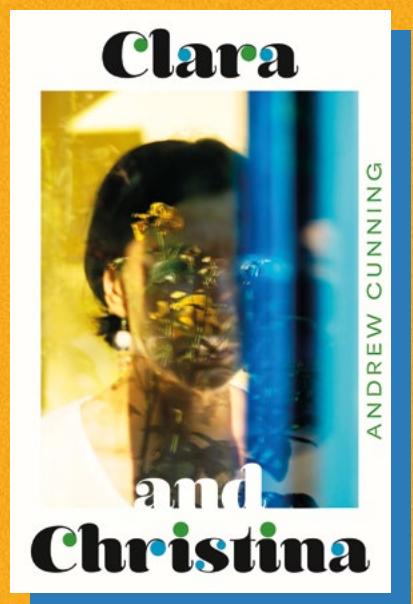
Her room, a small square her mother had painted green and pink when she left for university three months previously, was still recognisably her own. The bookcase, stuffed with old paperbacks, sat along the wall of the headboard, comfortably within arm's reach. Beside her old school texts, a small yellow lamp gave off warm light, enough for Clara to read by even at night. She couldn't have counted the number of novels she'd gone through in that small room over the years. Crime thrillers and horror novels her mother had dutifully taken to the charity shop along with Clara's dungarees and scuffed trainers as she'd outgrown them; literary classics she'd plodded her way through, understanding little but enjoying the rise and fall of their long, winding sentences; apocalyptic and dystopian novels taken from the school library and never returned. The room had been a sanctuary, she thought, even if her new campus quad and tiered lecture theatres made it seem uninhabitably small for the first time.

Clara thought ahead to Christmas, to the usual family visits, tubs of chocolates and small talk, to petty fights over washing up and the distant past. She wondered how anyone lived through it without a decent novel and a quiet room.

Downstairs, her mother was on the phone making a complaint about a recent increase in their monthly internet bill. Later, she would shout up the stairs that dinner was ready; chips, beans and sausages, and they would speak about Christmas and the unsettlingly warm weather. Her mother might ask what she was reading, though, since Clara had moved to Belfast, Julie had struggled with knowing what to say next after hearing the title of her daughter's latest book. After dinner, they would visit her aunt and talk about her health, the threat of water charges and the upcoming referendum. Clara looked at her old alarm clock. The one that had woken her up for school every morning for seven years. There was still time.

She wanted to read the opening again.

Clara turned the pages of the book and found her place.



The Mirror Halls

Cailean Steed

‘We couldn’t remember anything about before. Me or your mum. There’s only the House, and the Halls.’

The *Mirror Halls* can be found in the space between dreaming and awakening. They are a conduit between reality and the world of dreams, accessible only by special caretakers who walk the Halls and guard the sleepers of the world. The Halls are the nucleus around which my novel is formed, alongside the story’s other key location: the lost drowned village of Call, deep in the Scottish Highlands.

Toby is a young widowed mother, lost in her grief and wrestling with the darkness in her past, but she is certain of one thing: as a very young child, she visited Call, and stood on the shore on the loch and looked down at the drowned homes under the waters. The problem is, there is no evidence that Call ever existed, and no one has ever believed her. No one – apart from her late husband Ben, who was entranced by her story of the drowned village, and promised to help her find it. After Ben’s death, Toby becomes obsessed with the legend that is told about Call; that it is a lost place where lost things may be found. Befriending Jude Ofori, a writer and researcher who is searching for Call for her own reasons, Toby embarks on a journey to discover the village and – she hopes – find what she has lost. But Toby and Jude discover that there is a reason that Call is impossible to find, and that there is a group of people who will stop at nothing to keep it secret.

Paralleling Toby’s story, a seventeen-year-old girl named Ash finds herself adrift in Dublin, reeling from the death of her mother. A mysterious message left for Ash in a dream leads her to the Mirror Halls, where she discovers that her mother was once one of the caretakers of the Halls, one of the people who protected dreamers. But her mother ran away, and raised Ash on the run, never telling her the secrets of the Halls. Ash, determined to become



© Julie Broadfoot

a caretaker herself, sets out to uncover what really happened to her mother to make her abandon the Halls. Along the way, she learns how to dip into dreams, and how to fight off the shadowy creatures that stalk dreamers. But she begins to realise that not everything in her new life is as it seems, and that the world of dreams is in danger from an ancient evil.

How alike they are, the sleeping and the dead, exclaims Gilgamesh in the world’s oldest known story. The connection between dreams and death, between love and grief, between reality and stories, is what drove me to write this novel. I wanted to write something sprawling, layered, immersive, like my favourite authors David Mitchell, N. K. Jemison, and Ruth Ozeki do. I also wanted to write a book that paid homage to the portal fantasies I loved as a child: *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *His Dark Materials*, *Alice in Wonderland*. So step through the looking glass with me, will you?

I want to see the Halls, Ash said. She could see it all so clearly, in her mind: endless, ever-changing corridors with softly appearing and disappearing mirrors. She wanted to walk amongst them, peer into them, watch them fade away and return. She wanted, more than anything else, to walk where her mother had, see what her mother had seen. And to try, maybe, to untangle the mess of their lives and find the reason her mother had never told her about any of this.

‘Tomorrow,’ he was saying. ‘You need to rest first. We’ll start fresh.’

‘What about ... the Man? The one who brought you and my mother here?’

‘Ephialtes.’ Boötes said it like he was presenting her with a precious jewel. ‘He’s in charge of everything. And not just here – there are HalfWay Houses all over the world.’

‘Everywhere?’ Her mind couldn’t quite grasp that. There were more places like this?

‘Everywhere. They’re hidden, to keep them safe, but you can find them if you’re one of us.’

‘And there’s people like you in all of the Houses, too?’

‘Caretakers, yeah. People like me, and like your mum, when she was here.’

Ash was silent a moment, looking out at the hush of the library, the shelves of books stretching up to the dome above. She could imagine her mother here, young, wandering, running her fingertips along the spines. ‘But ... where did you and mum come from?’ she said.

‘How do you mean?’

‘You said you were, what, nine or ten, mum a bit older when you came here? So, you must have been somewhere before.’ As soon as she’d asked it, she felt like she’d done something wrong, said something that should have remained unsaid. Boötes’ cheerful demeanour dipped, and he looked away.

‘I mean, we couldn’t remember anything about before. Me or your mum. There’s only the House, and the Halls.’

‘But ... you must have had families, or something?’ At first, he didn’t answer.

‘I think ... I think sometimes, not remembering things is a blessing,’ he said quietly, eventually. ‘The House was a refuge for us. Wherever we were before ... it’s probably a good thing we couldn’t remember it. Or maybe we came from nowhere.’ He looked up, and smiled. It was like the sun breaking out on his face, completely at odds with his mood a moment before. Ash blinked at the sudden change.

‘Ephialtes always said we came from the stars.’

Death by Noir

Olly Smith

‘Lewesians take great pride in who knows what. And some know a great deal more than others.’

Death by Noir is the story of an ebullient English wine merchant, Barclay Flint, proprietor of The Bottle Bank, who falls under suspicion for the disappearance of a local winemaker. To clear his name, Barclay uses his wine detecting skills to crack the case. Barclay’s awakening as a sleuth is central to the plot and sets up a series of novels titled *The Bottle Bank Mysteries*.

Death by Noir is set in the English county of Sussex and the narrative’s ticking clock is governed by the extraordinary Bonfire Night celebrations which take place annually in Lewes on 5th November. Giant effigies are paraded through the streets of this medieval Sussex town in a flaming torchlit procession of bonfire societies all dressed in a cavalcade of historical costumes. While there is a great deal of mystery and suspense, the book is also full of joy; the delight Barclay Flint feels in sharing a glass of wine is incalculable and, with his exuberant language and flamboyant tailoring, the story is suffused with affection for wine’s delicate magic as well as a sense of passion for the health of our natural environment.

I was inspired to begin this novel after more than twenty years writing about wine, broadcasting on BBC One’s flagship food and drink show *Saturday Kitchen* and visiting innumerable vineyards around the world from Bhutan to the USA. Living in the burgeoning English wine region of Sussex and formerly working as a screenwriter specialising in animation, this book unites three key strands of my world: wine, writing and the environment – in the UK, I am a patron of The Bumblebee Conservation Trust.

Every time Barclay sips a glass of wine, he considers it an awakening. Awakening his senses – sight, scent and taste – and the stories



© Alun Callender

revealed within every bottle. The people who make it, the delightful places where vineyards thrive, kinship with biodiversity and everything else which makes a wine specific. Land to hand, grape to glass, to Barclay each bottle is a prism containing a series of clues as to the wine’s identity – a delightful riddle, a puzzle to be solved in the name of pleasure. Turning his wine deciphering skillset to solving crime raises the stakes from sipping to survival. Enlisting the help of The Bottle Bank manager and climate activist Pearl Finch, delivery person and county moth recorder Teddy Olsen and octogenarian dance teacher Minty Jarvis, Barclay Flint must fathom the disappearance of a local winemaker to clear his name.

Under the green scoops and chalk pits of England’s South Downs, the little town of Lewes folds into the softness of an ancient Sussex landscape. A living pocket of mysteries surrounded by local vineyards, the flint terraces and cosy pubs are not as they seem. On November 5th, some weeks from now, Bonfire Night will blow this ancient town apart. The townsfolk will take to the streets in a nighttime parade of masked costumes, burning crosses and giant effigies detonated beneath fireworks loud enough to make the Greenwich Meridian tremble towards London. Each bonfire society’s darkest secret is the hidden location of their cache of explosives and huge statues tucked behind barn doors and farm gates across the local hills. Lewesians take great pride in who knows what. And some know a great deal more than others.

From an open window above the Victorian stained-glass door of The Bottle Bank wine shop, the jovial sound of humming is cascading into Priory Street below. Crows are squabbling over the roof and on the doorstep, a bottle of white wine with no label is glimmering in a dewy late summer sunbeam. The sound of a hand clap sends the crows from the roof scattering as Barclay Flint stares delightedly at himself in his shaving mirror. ‘The Library of Libations’ he murmurs, rolling it around his palate as a connoisseur would revel in a glass of rare champagne. The last creamy ridge of soap from his morning shave is resting on his neck like ermine round a kingly robe. Barclay is proud of his smooth, radiant and stout demeanour. Although in his mid-fifties, he likes to think of his appearance as ‘youthful poet’ and tells himself that a paisley-festooned silk purple dressing gown is very similar to a glass of wine – all about the detail. Wiping the last foam from his neck, Barclay briskly pom-poms his way to the door of his bijou flat, his robe billowing in his wake. ‘Minty!’ he sings out, before realising that Minty is already halfway down the hall stairs wrapped in her large vibrant green cardigan. Minty turns slowly and addresses him.

‘Nineteen fifty-two it was when I left Antigua, did I know where I was coming?’

‘It would be rude of me to presume.’

‘This riddle of a place. The thing I learned quick? When someone such as Barclay Flint starts singing before breakfast time, trouble’s coming.’

‘Do you know, Minty, I could swear you look five years younger this morning.’

‘Hold your smooth talking, spit it out, man.’

‘New name for the shop: The Library of Libations.’

Minty takes a breath and tightens the grip on her bag of bird seed. ‘The pigeons need feeding, you’ve had a sherry for breakfast and the shop’s already got a perfectly decent name.’

Stomping down the stairs, Barclay calls after her. ‘I only had one glass. Manzanilla. And it was as cool and crisp as a salty snowball!’

Underdogs

Louise Powell

Originals was launched in 2014 to champion risk-taking, genre-breaking fiction and non-fiction. From memoirs and short stories to speculative fiction and adventure writing, it is a place where readers can find something, well, original. Many Originals authors have gone on to win or be shortlisted for a whole host of prizes including the Booker Prize, the Desmond Elliott Award and the Women's Prize for Fiction.

I was born flapping.

Not the hand-waving, palpitating kind; my flapping revolved around greyhound racing at County Durham's independent tracks. Also known as 'flapping' tracks, these venues operated outside of the National Greyhound Racing Club's rules and regulations. Anyone could train, race and gamble on a dog at a flapping track – including a family who lived below the poverty line with a newborn named 'Louise'.

From my earliest days, I was a regular at the likes of Easington Greyhound Stadium, cheering on my family's dogs. There was our bonny fawn bitch Fly, who kept watch over my cot by day, but left all the other runners gawping at her backside come racenight. Craig Noe would be at my side as I walked to school, then teach me lessons in winning at the track. I'd barely change out of my uniform and I'd be helping my Dad to brush my bonny lass Molly down – and pestering him to allow me to join them during the pre-race parade.

Twenty-five years on, however, I'm unable to race my greyhound Right Paddy at the track of my youth. Easington shut in 2017 to become a new-build estate of executive homes, and the last flapping track in the UK recently closed its doors. While I continue to enjoy the licensed form of greyhound racing, I ache for the flapping years and the lively, working-class community who made our sport so special.

I've been powerless to stop the closure of flapping tracks, but I've devoted the past 6 years to telling stories about them. These stories have



© Rob Irish

taken a variety of forms, from audio drama to short film; non-fiction to social history podcasts. Yet all that while, I've been working on a novel which revolves around my beloved Easington. A novel that's inspired by the people who went to that track, and is 'telt' in the dialect of us flappers.

That novel is UNDERDOGS. It's the story of ten-year-old George and his long-term unemployed Dad, Reg. Between struggling with poverty and a recent family tragedy, the pair's prospects are looking bleak – until local bigwig Bertie awakens them to the possibility of a brighter future.

A charismatic former miner, Bertie spearheads a gambling ring which revolves around Easington Greyhound Stadium, and makes use of an ever-changing network of local men. When Bertie makes Reg his latest recruit, George finds himself having to help his Dad to carry out the job that promises to transform their lives – if they can successfully navigate the unfamiliar world of the flapping track.

It's a very adult world, viewed through a young lad's innocent eyes. A world full of grown-ups, who seem to know quite a bit about Reg, and bairns that bullied George. But the biggest challenge to father and son comes in the form of the bookmaker Baz, who's desperate to get Bertie back for the events of fifteen months ago

...

'I'd just gone ten year auld the day that I met Bertie. Well, I say 'day', but it was half five in the mornin and it was Januree, so really it was night.'

Time was, ya could ask anyone east of Durham where to find work, and they'd tell ya, Easington Colliery. They didn't mean the pit that give the place its name, mind; that was five year gone be nineteen ninety-eight. They meant this red brick terraced house with cream lintels, a scrubbed step and two hangin baskets fuller violas. And what they really meant was the bloke who answered the knock to his green door.

Thin as a greyhound he was, with blonde hair gelled back from his high forehead. Grey eyes that went platinum in bright light and cheekbones sharp enough to cut diamonds. Always clean shaven, with this pointy jaw that shone with the sorta aftershave ya can only buy from Fenwick's. He'd a pug's nose but a wolf's teeth, and two fangs were plated with gold. Twenny-four carat; just like the crucifix that hung from his veiny neck and the sovereign rings round every finger. He'd a royal blue jumper over a starched white shirt and jeans that clung to his bony legs; black brogues that glowed how coal does in a fire.

Bertie, this bloke's name was; and everybody knew it.

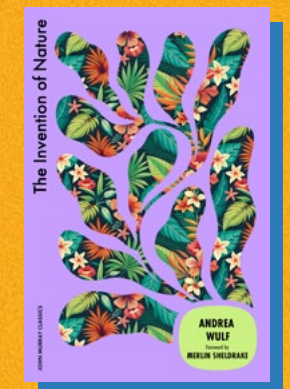
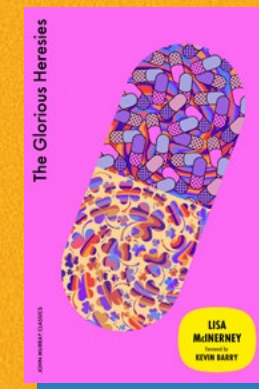
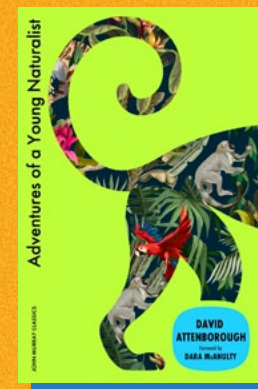
I'd just gone ten year auld the day that I met Bertie. Well, I say 'day', but it was half five in the mornin and it was Januree, so really it was night. Proper stinker of a night, an all: wind that come from Siberia to turn the minin terrace into a ski slope. Wish I coulda left ya in bed, George, me Dad said while we hauled ourselves up the hill be lampposts and windowledges; but I telt him I was used to early mornins now. Cos this was the fifteenth in a row that'd seen us on this street, chins in our fleeces and eyes peeled for two hangin baskets.

Which swang either side of a green door, same as every other mornin; but where before they'd been fuller purple violas, now there were loadsa yellor ones. And it was one big gasp that me and me Dad did, while we gripped each other's hands. And that silent terrace seemed to echo with heavy breaths and poundin footsteps; men's fingers and nails that strained for the knocker that I pulled me Dad towards. So quick, he almost tripped over his laces; but he caught the brass greyhound just in time.

And we found ourselves inside this kitchen. Oblong, it was; about five yards long and four wide, with walls the colour of pound coins. Two L-shaped rows of cupboards that coulda been made of gold ingots, with cast iron greyhounds' heads where normally there'd be a handle. This marble worktop, a silver sink and a splashback that looked to have been tiled with diamonds; more diamonds in the leaded window next to the closin door. It'd been varnished gold; so had the floorboards and the four chairs round the kitchen table that Bertie brung them baskets of yellor violas towards.

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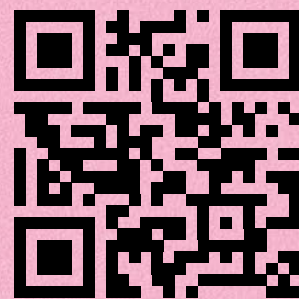
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