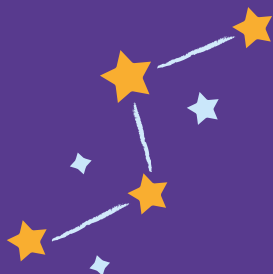
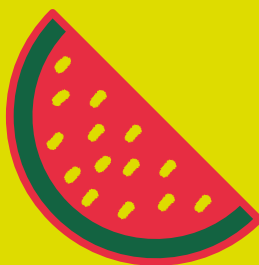
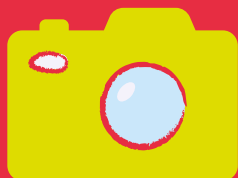
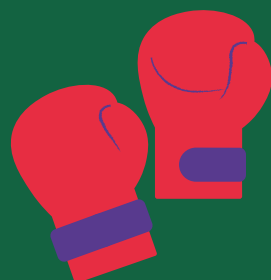
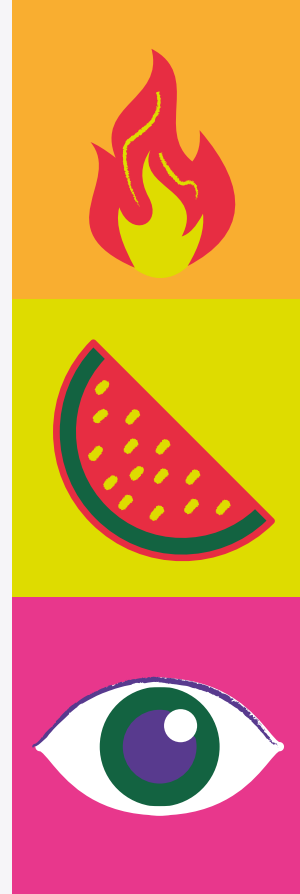


# DEAR READER 2027



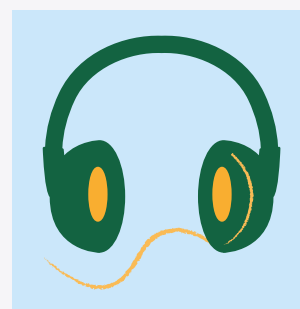
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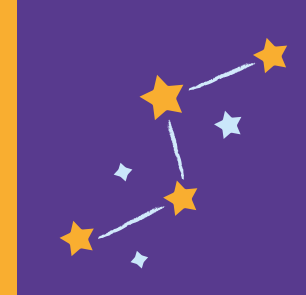


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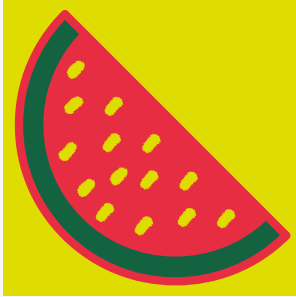
# Dear Reader

Every year we produce a fiction zine – an opportunity for us to introduce you to our new writers and for them to introduce themselves to you. If you’ve been receiving or reading the zine over the last couple of years, you’ll have been among the first to hear from Luke Kennard on the experiment that inspired Booker-longlisted *Black Bag* and to learn what debut author Djamel White needed to write Booker-longlisted *All Them Dogs* (‘a bed and a bit of self-esteem’). You’ll also know that it was a single line in an art history book that was the genesis for Lucy Steeds’ *The Artist*, which went on to become the Waterstones Book of the Year, and you might have been the first of over a million readers to realise that Clare Leslie Hall’s *Broken Country* was going to make you weep. You’ll have spent time in a Viennese love hotel, courtesy of Alessandra Ranelli’s *Sunday Times* bestselling *Murder at the Hotel Orient*, met both Oli Smith’s irrepressible Barclay Flint and Miss Hortense, the star of Mel Pennant’s award-winning new series.

This year’s zine is bigger and better than ever, and celebrates brilliant new literary fiction from Dialogue, Riverrun and MacLehose as well as John Murray and Baskerville. The novels take you from the theatres of Restoration London to a sixth form in Harrow in 1999, a boxing ring in Florida to a house in Jerusalem. They feature a troubled girl in Gloucester, convinced that her missing mother was one of Fred and Rose West’s victims, a Mbuti man captured in the Congo in the early twentieth century who was then exhibited in America, and an astrologer and his niece on the run during the Renaissance. One writer was inspired by a nightmare, another wrote to answer the questions that arose when ‘a full sentence arrived on an otherwise blank page’; some set out to explore estrangement and longing, others to have as much fun as possible.

One of the great joys of working in publishing is that, whatever our official job titles, we are – and always have been – readers first and foremost. We hope that these letters and extracts will give you a taste of why, out of the hundreds of books we have read this year, these are the ones that have given us the intense, magical thrill of discovering a voice or story that we haven’t heard before. It’s a pleasure, dear readers, to share them with you.





# A Death in the Old City

## Ahmed Masoud

I would like to invite you to come on a journey with me to the Gaza Strip. You have a specific mission: to solve a murder mystery in the middle of a war zone. You will be given a tour of the old city of Gaza – an ancient place that has seen empires come and go. There will be a trip to the seaside, cafes, restaurants and watching a production of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. My novel *A Death in the Old City* will do just that and more.

Growing up in the Jabalia Refugee Camp, North of Gaza, I read so many books, anything I could lay my hands on. I used to go to the Falafel stall to get a sandwich which was often wrapped in newspapers which I loved to read. One day, I made friends with a rich kid at school whose parents had a huge library. I found the Arabic translation of the *Famous Five* series, and I totally fell in love with Takhtakh, Louza, Atef, Nousa and Moheb. I still remember their names. The books became my shelter by opening a new world that I had never imagined. I took them with me to school, while waiting at an Israeli checkpoint at the UN Refugee Feeding Centre, to work at the cleaning products shop in the market and while Israeli troops invaded Jabalia with bullets flying and helicopters hovering above our heads. I imagined myself as a detective who would one day make my entire neighbourhood safe.



Now I am a lot older, my neighbourhood has been wiped out completely, the entire of Gaza has been destroyed and yet I am pleased that I wrote this book that preserves my home in

the turning of every page. I wrote *A Death in the Old City* to tell a story that goes beyond the news reels and sound bites of political narratives. Gaza is often associated with violence and reduced to statistics, headlines and images of destruction. But behind the reports there are people like others around the world with lives, history, fears, relationships, humour

and of course murder. To write this novel was an act of resilience. At its heart, it is a story of ordinary people facing extraordinary circumstances, navigating love, class issues, gender inequality. It's also a way of preservation: of our memories, our identity and truth.

But you shouldn't read it for just that, you should read it for being a well plotted crime fiction that will surprise you. You should read it for its characters who are like you and me, but enable you to see the world differently through their eyes. You should read it not to understand politics but to understand one another. You should read it if you are, like me, a fan of crime fiction and love how they are often not so much about the crime themselves but the characters and everything in between.

One day, we will discuss it on Gaza beach together.



"The look in his eyes was confusing. Was it sympathy? Disgust? Or simply boredom?"

'Tell me, Mrs Tanani, why do you think your husband was killed?' he asked as he flipped the page of the paper desk calendar to show today's date: Tuesday 22 December 2016. I could vaguely hear the rush of the waves from where we were sitting at El Abbas police station in Gaza City.

The detective was sitting on the edge of the desk, next to a nameplate with his name on it:

*Detective Sergeant Nouman El Taweel*  
*Head of Criminal Investigation*

As his surname said, he was indeed a tall man.

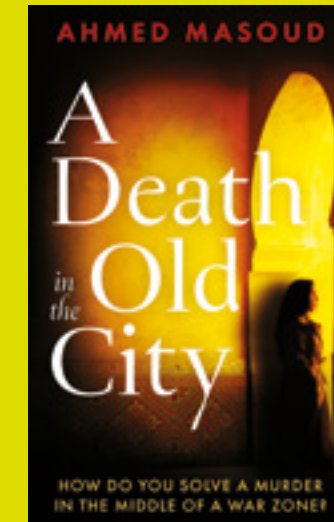
'I don't think he was killed. I know he was . . . He's dead now.'

'Oh, yes, I am sorry. I meant murdered.'

He was looking at me as if a crazy person stood there before him: a helpless woman begging an official to believe her – a human wreck. The look in his eyes was confusing. Was it sympathy? Disgust? Or simply boredom? His dark skin was dotted with beads of sweat despite the cold wind outside. His woollen turtleneck jumper reached up to his greying thick beard, which grew wildly from his sideburns and his black curly hair. Here was a man who didn't give much thought to his looks – unmarried, maybe? His small piercing black eyes gave him an intense look. The heavy blue police jacket he was wearing on top was a little bit dusty. I was not sure whether he had fallen over earlier, or he just simply hadn't washed for a long time. But something about his rugged look gave him a presence.

The office was almost empty, save for a long metal desk which had a black square telephone, a black Dell computer screen and a white keyboard. The wires trailed down to the floor, where the hard drive lay flat on its side. A big office chair behind the desk was pressed tight to the wall. Perhaps someone had pushed both items of furniture earlier, and Mr Nouman, as I found myself thinking of him, rarely sat on that half-ripped black leather chair.

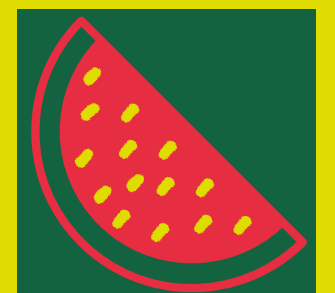
He was looking away from me as if he didn't want to tell me what he had in mind, just like all the other



detectives I had seen before, trying to avoid eye contact while most likely thinking, So what? One more person killed! It was a war anyway. He kept tapping the desk with three fingers, very lightly and repetitively. He did this every time he asked a question, which was incredibly distracting.

I followed his gaze towards the corner of the ceiling. There were none of the pictures or framed Quranic verses on the walls that were usual in Hamas government offices.

There was no electricity or heating. The wind whistled in, while a thin sliver of sunlight broke through the thick dark clouds and leaked in, giving a bit of brightness to the dark room. I shivered despite the sudden appearance of the sun. The black gown over my short-sleeved blue top and jeans hardly provided me with any warmth. Someone on the radio this morning had mentioned that 2016 was both the coldest and the hottest year on record. Apparently, we had started the year with rain and floods and now December seemed to finishing things off with extra-freezing temperatures to ensure the statistics were correct. Or maybe it was just nature's way of washing away the memories and pain of the dreadful wars.





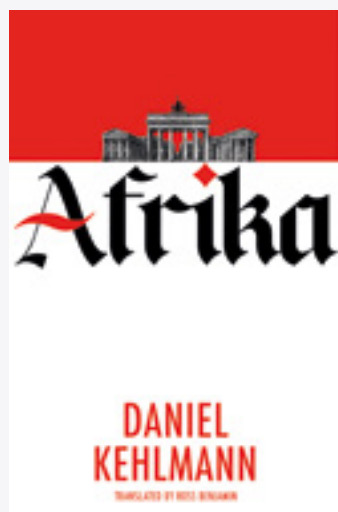


# Afrika

Daniel Kehlmann

Author of *The Director*

Translated by Ross Benjamin



by a dozen soundless lackeys with white tablecloths, dishes from the Royal Porcelain Manufactory, crystal glasses, wine carafes, and silver cutlery, the participants stood out in the marble hall, chatting and smoking, all of them impatient but in tense anticipation of the meal.

"The cooking here is really good," said the English ambassador to the French one. At the conference table they were bitter opponents, but now they were united in hunger and anticipation.

"Offal, however, they cannot do," said the Frenchman.

"The tripe isn't bad, especially when it's sautéed. The cook brought the recipe from his home village in the Palatinate."

"He does tongue well, too," said the Portuguese envoy.

"That's true," said the Frenchman, "tongue he can do!"

They all nodded, thinking of particularly successful tongues they had once been served here.

"You should never have accepted that right of preference over the Congo," said the Englishman to the Frenchman. "You know that."

"I work with the circumstances as I find them. I do not judge the work of my predecessors."

The Russian ambassador joined them and asked for

a cigar; the Portuguese handed him one.

"Doesn't look good with Bulgaria," said the Englishman.

"Not good at all," said the Russian. "There will be war. But not a large one. Bismarck no longer permits large wars." He beckoned to a lackey, who clipped his cigar and tried to light it with a match—but it didn't work; the first match broke, the second as well, the third as well.

"Hence this conference," said the Russian, while the lackey struggled in front of him. "Instead of fighting his battles in Europe, he keeps the great powers occupied down in Africa. Lets you gentlemen expand down there so that you don't do it up here. And all of you take the bait."

"There are no people down there, no people and so much ivory," said the Englishman. "Why should Belgium have it all?"

"To keep it from us," said the Frenchman.

"A good reason," said the Englishman, "but hardly a sufficient one. Besides, we will never allow it. Nor will Russia and Austria, will they?"

"For us, everything is on the table," said the Russian. "It makes no difference to us, you know. We are open to all offers, and will weigh them on the merits. We have so much land. All we still want is access to the Bosphorus." He looked at Strinetzky, who was standing silently beside them and absentmindedly feeling his nose. "And you?"



© Beowulf Sheehan



# Anton Wants to Stay

Nelio Biedermann

Author of *Lázár*

Translated by Jamie Bulloch

The world is as we perceive it. For a dove it is quiet, for a dog black and white, and for Anton and me it had become worryingly fast.

Cars, for example, now raced through the city at dizzying speeds, water boiled over even though you'd only just put it on, buses and trams always pulled away just as you got to the stop, and the sun rose and set again before you'd noticed it.

We could have put up with this if it had been the same for everybody, but other people seemed to have got quicker too, as they didn't appear to have any problems going about their lives as normal. Only Anton and I were unable to keep up. For him this was bad, because he was dead set on drawing attention to himself rather than being lost in the crowd.

But I think it's poor taste to come straight out with a person's anxieties without any context at all. And so, after a brief clarification, more on Anton's fear of being forgotten.

\*

On the day after his diagnosis, Anton awoke unusually early. Ever since he'd stopped being woken by the rustling of Anna turning the pages of her book, he'd been sleeping in till nine o'clock. He was pleased by his sleep rhythm because too many people of his age were plagued by insomnia. But that morning he was woken by a hard, scraping noise. Although he heard it clearly he kept his eyes closed in the hope it was merely a dream rather than something that could throw his well-ordered everyday existence off balance. When he remembered he never dreamed, he tried to work out what the sound reminded him of. He rummaged around in his memory until he found something: an image of his mother sweeping the stone steps outside their house with the large straw broom, her hair still chestnut-brown and the child still in the house.

But now the scraping was joined by a scratching, as if a sharp nail were being run across a piece of wood. Opening his eyes, Anton turned his head to the open window where the sounds were coming from. He couldn't make out anything to begin with; sleep and the curtains were hampering his view. But then the

wind blew the material to the side and, before Anton could piece the reddish-grey flat feet, the little black eyes and the beating wings into a coherent whole, it struck him that it was going to be another tropical day, even though it was mid-September and had been far too hot for far too long for his old body. Only after this thought did he fully discern the bird in his bedroom. At this point he probably rubbed his eyes, looked away, then back again, got up and washed his face in the bathroom, but the gull didn't move from his windowsill. He spoke to it in that voice people typically use when talking to dogs and children. The gull cocked its head and stared at him with its gleaming eyes as if he were mad.



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# Ask Me How I Know

## Mary Grace Colangelo

I'm not the first writer to be inspired by the Pleiades, the seven-sistered star cluster that, once upon a time, marked the sailing season in the Mediterranean. As Greek mythology tells it, after their father Atlas was condemned to carry the skies for eternity, the sisters were stalked by the hunter Orion. Taking pity on the women, Zeus turned them into doves and eventually placed them in the heavens as stars.

This is just one of hundreds of tales that name and place the constellation. There's something about a cluster of sisters that captivates the artist – Homer, Hesiod, Sappho, Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Ezra Pound, to name a few. So no, I'm not the first to write about the Pleiades, but I might be one of the only writers who lived the Pleiades.

I'm the third of seven sisters (yes there's also a brother, he's the youngest . . . no, don't feel sorry for him, he's always had it made). My sisters and I grew up pretending to walk through wardrobes into magical lands ruled by good and evil. We watched *The Sound of Music* and *Little Women* until we had the scripts memorized. I was certain I had a long-lost twin whom I'd one day meet at summer camp (spoiler alert, I did not). Most every game we played involved the tangled, wrestling, forever-best friendship between sisters. It's really no surprise that when I sat down to write my book, the characters who swirled through my mind were sisters.

*Ask Me How I Know* tells the story of the Carpenter women, five adult sisters and their complicated mother, all reeling in the weeks following the death of the family patriarch. Like the sisters of the Pleiades, grief weighs heavy on their hearts, but it's not the only emotion they're battling. The women are awash in the turmoil of life – the beautiful mess of motherhood, adult friendships, workplace drama, imposter-syndrome, infidelity, the weight of making life-long choices before having lived a whole life long. When they come together to bury their father and come up with a plan for their mother, their shared past is cracked open and long-buried secrets begin to bleed out.

As a daughter, sister, wife, mother and stepmother myself, I wanted to capture the complexity of womanhood in the modern world. While I'm inspired by eons-old stories, I very much live in contemporary times (I'm an unapologetic Bravo-holic, and for my fellow Swifties, yes, those easter eggs are intentional), so this story, though it reaches into the past for inspiration, sits firmly in the present.

My hope is that anyone who picks up *Ask Me How I Know*, especially moms, daughters, sisters, wives and friends, finds themselves on the page. I hope you finish this novel feeling more luminous, brilliant, forgiven, and filled with the kind of hope that keeps you blazing so bright you can't help but light the way for another.

Thank you for reading the story of my heart.



© Emily Tull, Pollakowski Photography

'She felt their father slipping away, and instead of grabbing at the wisps of him, they were tangled in the very real problem of what to do with their mother.'

'Dad's dead and we haven't stopped talking about Mom. Story of our lives.'

She said it because she was angry. She said it because she'd thrown her for-real-this-time last vape into a rusty brown trash can outside of LaGuardia before boarding the flight to Tampa. It was day five of cold turkey quitting her mild nicotine habit and Morgan would give a limb for one more drag. But most of all, she said it because it was true. Because she felt their father slipping away, and instead of grabbing at the wisps of him, they were tangled in the very real problem of what to do with their mother.

Morgan eyed her sisters, gauging their reaction. Beth flinched, but that was a given. The others stayed somber, confirming what she'd suspected: they'd all had some version of the same thought, but as usual, she was the only one with the guts to say it out loud.

Morgan considered herself the family truth-teller, unwilling to trade honesty for propriety. If that made her the bad guy, and it often did, so be it.

Three hours earlier, the five Carpenter sisters had buried their sixty-five-year-old father, who only a week before had completed another half-marathon in under two hours. He'd snapped a squinty selfie with his finisher's medal dangling from his neck and sent it out on the family text thread.

*Not bad for an old man. Who's running with me next year?*

Six days later, he'd dropped dead from a heart attack in the check-out line at Publix, where he'd popped in to buy a package of 80% lean ground beef and a birthday card for his wife, Evelyn.

Ashlyn, Morgan's youngest sister, sniffed and reached for another tissue.

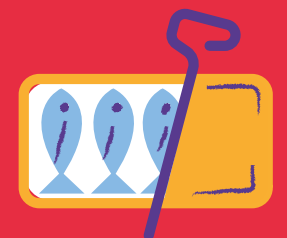
'I still can't believe this.' She shifted in her chair, dabbing at her swollen eyes. Ashlyn was six weeks



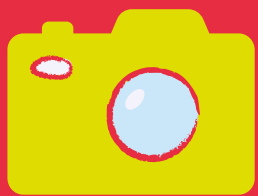
shy of her due date and barely cleared to fly to Florida for the funeral. From the looks of it, she hadn't stopped crying since she'd left Boston. Pregnancy hormones and a shocking family death were a lethal combination; plus, it was her first child, which made it all more acute. Though her sisters would agree, and Morgan would say it out

loud, everything was more acute for Ashlyn because she was the baby of the family.

'The only plan that makes sense is having Mom stay with each of us for a few months,' Caroline said, her voice quiet, but commanding. Morgan watched her brush imaginary lint off her crisp black pants with her French tipped manicured fingers. 'It buys us time to figure out something more permanent.'







# Bad Associations

## Rebecca Wait

Gloucester is a strange town. Technically, it's a city, because it has a cathedral, but it feels too small and run-down to deserve that title these days. Cheltenham, just down the road, is much fancier. But Gloucester had its glory days. It was a Roman fortress, then a medieval centre. Its docks kept it relevant until the end of the Victorian era. After that, decline and fall. There have been attempts at regeneration in recent years, and now the area round the quays is glossy with glass shopfronts and restaurants, but the money hasn't gone far, and most of the city is as tired as ever. It has the highest crime rate in Gloucestershire, and it isn't a close competition.

If it isn't clear, I love the place: the precision of its Roman roads, and the sprawl of its crooked backstreets, the grubby brickwork, the litter, the mobs of seagulls, the glorious cathedral, the random chunk of old city wall displayed, with a certain pathos, below a grimy pane of glass outside Boots. I will champion Gloucester with my dying breath.

The other thing Gloucester's known for, of course, apart from its Roman history and its cathedral, is Fred and Rose West. The tourism board tends to keep quiet about that part.

The gothic revelations of the Wests' two-decade campaign of torture and murder dominated the news when I was a child in the '90s, growing up in the neighbouring county, rural north Oxfordshire, arable farming country, unlike the wetter, greener dairy farms of Gloucestershire.

Fred and Rose had rural upbringings too, grew up in the mud, but they moved to Gloucester as a couple in 1970. Another throw of the dice, and maybe they'd have ended up a few miles away in Tewksbury instead, or Cinderford. (Not Cheltenham – they could never have afforded Cheltenham.) But they didn't. They wound up in Gloucester, on Cromwell Street, where their house, number 25, would eventually become known as the 'House of Horrors'.

The trouble with such nightmarish crimes unfolding in a small place like Gloucester is that, wherever you

go, you're never far from the locus of horror. Cromwell Street is part of the dense network of streets inside the small circle of the ring road, squashed in there along with the cathedral, the docks, the high street, the famous Cross. Try as you might, you can't get much more than a stone's throw away.

This proximity is what I started with. Two kids on a street corner, in Gloucester in the '90s, watching policemen carry boxes of human remains out of an unremarkable house. Two kids, and one of them has lost someone, and the other is about to. What next? They grow up, they come and go from each other's lives, they search for what was lost. What are their chances? Gloucester isn't a hopeful place for the missing. The city is small, but it has a way of swallowing you up.



'She watched the boxes as they came out, and wondered what, precisely, 'human remains' might mean.'

On the news they were saying they'd found three bodies buried in the garden. Holly had known they had something even before it was reported. She'd been here on Tuesday and seen the men bringing out the big black boxes. They were dressed like handymen in blue boilersuits.

She'd gone closer to the crowd of reporters by the front of the house, touched the sleeve of one of them and said, 'What's in them boxes?' He'd looked at her a few moments, sizing her up, a stray in her too-big school jumper, her too-short trousers, the tatty rucksack that came with her everywhere. He said tersely, 'Human remains, love. Shouldn't you be in school? This is no place for a kid.'

Holly looked at him narrowly. She was only twelve, but she thought she'd probably been in worse places than him.

All the same, she backed off. But she watched the boxes as they came out, and wondered what, precisely, 'human remains' might mean. How many pieces the bodies had been in, to fit into the boxes. What was left of them now. Maybe not very much. Maybe just the bones.

She had brought Adam with her today, since it was a Saturday, and he'd never dodge school. They stood across the road from number 25, at a distance from the reporters, so they could get a better view of any comings and goings.

'It's a small garden for such a tall house,' Adam said. He sounded like he was on one of those property programmes on TV.

They'd already been round the back and stood on some bins to see into the garden, before a copper had chased them away. And they'd put a white tent up now

anyway, so you couldn't see much. It was like they were having a very small wedding back there, in that very small garden.

'It's narrow, though,' Holly said. 'The house. Tall, but not big.' The garden was still a good enough size for three bodies, she thought. At least three. Probably not something you'd hear on a property programme.

'Horseshoe above the front door,' Adam observed. 'For luck.'

They were both silent for a while, contemplating this.





# McParland

## Michael Hughes

I'm going to let you in on a secret. For years I have been leading a double life.

Long before I was a published writer, I trained as an actor. At first I worked mostly in theatre. The roles were often very good; the money, not so much. And the schedule of all-day rehearsals and eight shows a week didn't leave time for much else.

When I decided to take writing more seriously, I went looking for TV work. The scripts were sometimes ropery, but the pay was much better, with plenty of days off. I finished my first novel supported by my earnings as a wisecracking angel in a beer commercial.

So I've always felt comfortable living two separate lives. And one happy accident makes it much easier. To lead a real double life, you need two names.

The original me is Michael Hughes, the name on my books. But when I first came to join the actors' union Equity, I discovered my birth name had already been registered by someone else, and I couldn't use it.

The obvious choice was my mother's maiden name. I wasn't convinced. In my youthful hubris I thought it sounded too Irish. I had moved from rural Northern Ireland to London full of grand ambition, and I didn't want to be typecast. Instead, I went back a generation, to her mother's mother, and called myself Michael Colgan. (At the time, I was unaware I had chosen the name of one of the most powerful men in Irish theatre. Suffice to say he never hired me.)

Ever since, there have been two of me out in the world. And if the actor delights in passing himself off as someone else, then the writer seems compelled to explore the same dynamic. My first two novels both feature a double agent character, an informer betraying secrets to the other side. Sometimes I have wondered if this fascination with hiding your true self is really my Colgan half muscling in on the action, insisting his story is told.

My third novel finally brings that figure centre stage. It tells the true story of a nineteenth century detective who spent two and a half years living under a false

identity in the Pennsylvania coalfields to infiltrate a gang of murderous Irish miners known as the Molly Maguires.

This new novel closes another circle. It is titled *McParland*, after the man whose story it tells, the infamous Pinkerton detective James McParland. But McParland is also my mother's maiden name. That man was her grandfather's uncle, my great-great-granduncle, and his notorious exploits are part of my own family history.

McParland, then, is the very name I shunned as a young actor. These things always come back to bite you in the ass. It seems it's time at last to fully embrace my Irishness. Fine by me. This might be the role I was born to play, bringing my two lives together, turning the facts into fiction, hiding behind the truth.



© Julia Hawkins

# 'I might yet talk my way out of this bloody fate.'

So you are the men they have sent to kill me.

I know the routine. I know it very well. I have seen it so often from the other side. Word was passed to the bodymaster which train I am on. That man chose and equipped a handful of trusted brutes. The local constable was informed today is one of those very special days when no witnesses can be found to come forward, and you can bet your last tanner any likely suspect will be furnished with a cast-iron alibi. Just how I would have planned it myself. A clean job.

Let me guess what is in store. Will you pour out a barrel of boiling tar upon my crown? Will you swing hurleys at my knees and ankles to make sure I leave this place on a stretcher and never walk straight again? Will I wake up tied to a post in a barn and branded with a red-hot iron on the paps and under the arms and behind the knees? No questions put to me at all, just plain bloody torture, so the marks will be seen when I am found and the warning served? Will I be dumped by the crossroads shot in the back of the head, eyes burned to black pits, tongue pulled out and clipped off, my very manhood torn from me and stuffed between my teeth?

Such are the brave sons of Erin. Plucking the wings off a fly. Picking your fights when you know the opponent is held back by the years he wears on his back and the knocks he has suffered in past brawls.

But I am no fly, and you may tell that to your bodymaster. I am the goddamn spider.

I knew very well you were on to me. I have some friends in this place still. That young lad here was sent to meet the train and warn me I was not, under any circumstances, in fear of my very life, to set foot in the town. Once again I find I must pose myself the old familiar question. Will this day end with my eyes fast closed by a restful sleep, or with a hot bullet sunk deep in my brain? And close behind, the inescapable corollary. Which of these do I truly deserve?

You may decide the answer. But I have to accept I am guilty as charged. I betrayed your cause. I betrayed my closest comrades. I lied to gain their trust, and I broke the sacred oath that bound their secrets. I made those men love me, then led them into the hands of their enemies. I have nothing more to hide. Nothing more to lose.

But that young lad watching reminds me I must set



the right example for the next generation. Give my remarkable story the knockout ending it demands. So I determined I should walk out to face you, with open hands. No doubt every one of you could outrun me, outshoot me, and outpunch me. My gifts are of a different order. I can win a man's faith. I can earn his trust. One last roll of

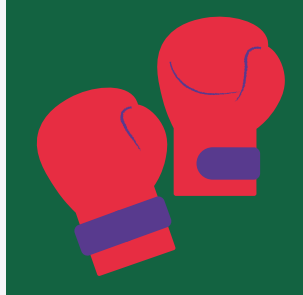
the dice. I might yet talk my way out of this bloody fate. I have done it before and lived to tell the tale.

And here is that tale. If these are to be my final hours, then today is as good a day as any to settle the account, and better than most. The man himself, large as life and twice as ugly, ready to mine out the shining truth from the lies and bluster. The incredible adventures of the great detective James McParland among the Molly Maguires of Pennsylvania. Two and a half years deep undercover inside a secret gang of murderous Irish miners sworn to kill any who betrayed them.

But I am in no hurry. Settle yourselves and listen close. You are honourable men, in your own way, and I know you will not deny me the defendant's right to present all the evidence before sentence is passed. The detective in me requires the story to emerge out of the relevant facts, the background, the ambitions, the circumstances, the procedures. Lay the fat file on the table with a thump and leaf through patiently, one report at a time. Everything from the great currents of history that have shaped my destiny to the daily decisions that brought me inside the dark heart of a violent conspiracy. Who I am, where I came from, what I did, how it came about, and why the hell. If I have learned nothing else in my life, I have learned this. A fellow must get straight his own story before someone else does it for him.







# Ring of Night

## Laura van den Berg

I walked into my first boxing gym a decade ago. I had arrived at a moment in my life – burned out, grieving – where I knew I needed to learn to live differently. At my first class, I was not allowed to throw a single punch. Instead, I practiced stepping forward and back, left and right. The coach described the fighter's stance as a solid place I could always come back to, and one thing I knew for sure was that I longed to feel something solid.

I had no natural gift for the sport and yet I kept coming back. Years passed. I stuck with boxing and boxing stuck with me. Eventually I began to spar and to compete in the amateurs. I've now had five fights, with a record of three wins and two losses, and I have more fights on the horizon. Stepping into the ring has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life.

Before long, I knew I wanted to write about the gritty and unglamorous world of amateur boxing. I wanted to write about the culture of small-town gyms, where intergenerational groups of people from wildly different backgrounds pull together for a common cause: to win fights. I wanted to write about how the ring flushes the hidden parts of the self out into the light. Who does a fighter become in the space of a round? What do they do with fear, anger, despair, power? I wanted to write about the coaches who oversee these spaces and who, depending on the day, act as athletic instructors, social workers, doctors, therapists, priests. I wanted to write about that heart-shattering walk to the ring on fight night.

The novel that emerged is *Ring of Night*. Tina Chance is a champion boxer fighting out of a small-town Florida gym. Her world is blown apart after her older sister is murdered, and she begins a clandestine investigation that pits her against opponents far scarier than anyone she's faced in the ring. Meanwhile, a stranger with a fake name and an unsettled past arrives in town to carry out an investigation of her own. They don't know it yet, but their histories are powerfully intertwined. I came to understand boxing as a counterpoint to the

secrecy and wanton violence that rips through Tina's world. This idea might feel counter-intuitive, given the brutal nature of the sport, but as Tina observes at one point: 'Here the violence was contained, bound tightly by rules and codes. She knew what she would find in the ring and she knew that she could face it.'

Some of the first books I ever loved were mystery novels. I love that feeling of wanting nothing more than to read through the night, and I wanted to write a novel that would grip readers as tightly as a nail-biting boxing match. I hope *Ring of Night* holds you in suspense until the final bell.



© Lucy Bohnsack

'The language that ruled Ring of Fire was simple: jab, block, slip, circle, sweat, suffer, win.'

One morning Coach found Tina asleep outside Ring of Fire. She was curled tight as a snail on the cracked concrete driveway, a denim jacket balled up under her head. Coach's dog, a yellow lab with a crooked tail, broken in three places by the previous owners, trotted up to the sleeping girl and sniffed the wild nest of her hair with caution.

Two weeks had passed since Tina's older sister, Angela, was found dead in an abandoned house. Murdered. Coach hadn't seen Tina since her sister's funeral, and he knew she wasn't just sitting at home with her mother. He had heard things, from people in the neighborhood who had seen her out at night, barely able to speak or stand up. He had gone by her house, but no one came to the door. One night he had even gone out looking for her, driving his truck up and down the hot, shadowed streets, stopping in a few neighborhood bars. But in the end she had been the one to find him.

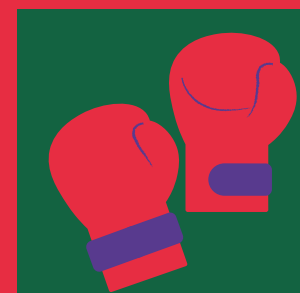
Coach always got to the gym early. He wouldn't switch on the standing fans or the lights right away. He would move through the perfect silence, cut only by the sound of Sweet Pea sniffing around and making sure things were as they should be. Sometimes he found bits of trash to pick up: an empty water bottle, the plastic crushed in the center, or a mangy white towel, streaked with blood, that someone had left hanging on the ropes.

The gym had no windows, just a front entrance and a back door. Otherwise no view of the rest of the world, as though everything that mattered in life was contained right there, in the ring. It was true that the events of the outside world rarely seemed to penetrate. Coach had one enlisted fighter who had been deployed to Iraq. They'd all mourned him, even though he was still alive, and pressed on. Coach's son used to box, but now he worked for a congressman in south Florida; when he came up to visit he would start in about the surge, single-payer healthcare, carbon footprints – language that may as well have belonged to another planet. The

language that ruled Ring of Fire was simple: jab, block, slip, circle, sweat, suffer, win.

The flag of Dominica, with the Sisserou parrot in the center, was mounted on the wall behind the ring, alongside an American flag. The center of the ring was patched with black duct tape, and the ropes drooped a little and the faded blue mat was stained with tears and sweat and blood. He had witnessed so many fighters find themselves here; in this place, everyone was given a chance to discover who they were and how far they'd go to get what they wanted.

In the mornings he would sit on the edge of the ring and rub down Sweet Pea's shoulders and back like the dog was one of his fighters. Then he would check voicemails on the office landline, take note of who he needed to call back. Sometimes another coach looking to match-make for a local show. *I have a male novice, 165, three fights, real tough. Got anyone?* An old white physician's scale stood in the corner of the office; it weighed two pounds heavy, a fact Coach kept to himself. The walls were covered in fight posters, a mix of local bouts and famous fights, including an old poster for Frank Bruno, the only world champion to ever hail from Dominica. The posters let the kids know that the sport did not start and stop with them, that it had a history as deep as any country.





# The Best Boy in the World

Seán Farrell

Dear reader, I like what some French people say when they're explaining the lead up to vomiting. It starts with *une crise de foie*. The first time I heard the phrase I didn't know the word for liver (*foie*) but I knew the word for faith (*foi*), which sounds the same. Using my prejudices about the French, I made my own interpretation. I imagined they were saying they'd been sick because of a crisis of faith. They no longer had the mettle to ride the waves of nausea; their belief system had failed. They were telling me that their inability to control themselves was due to some existential problem with their character.

I came to learn that actually the phrase is much more medical and frank. The idea is that you have ingested too much, that too many rich things have gone into your system and your liver is having problems processing them. This makes your stomach sick and in extreme cases can lead to *les vomissements*.

\*

And, dear reader, I like the phrase some people use for the very first version of a novel they've written. *The vomit draft*. Among their other character flaws, writers are over-sensitive and I like to think that the creative urge can be seen as a response to the richness of life. That all my experiences, all the joy and terror, all the things I hear about and see are just too much for me and I have to be sick in a bucket. And then, being a writer, rather than pour the contents of the bucket under the hedge at the far end of the field to feed the foxes – or, if stuck in a city, flushing it down the toilet – I find myself unable to let go of it. I find myself shouting at my family to leave me alone for a few hours every day because I have tipped the contents of the bucket out onto a clean table and I am studying them intently. I am convinced that riches lie therein, that I can assemble something coherent from this mess, that like some ancient soothsayer I can read these entrails and pronounce some meaning from them.

\*

So, dear reader, my writing is my reading. Each reading has inspired more writing, and each draft has prompted new invention. The writing has served the reading until eventually it has had to stop. The final proofread is over and the writer is no longer the reader. This is a terrible moment, this loss of control. The strange shapes on the page can no longer be rearranged.

\*

Dear reader, I believe that everyone has a language individual to themselves, and that your translation of my writing is a creative act of your own.

I have had a crisis of faith. I have had more joy and sorrow than I know what to do with. I have been sick in a bucket and cleaned up as best as I know how.



© Conor Horgan

'Rickie follows his brother to the shed, stretching his legs so his feet land in the large shoe marks ahead of him.'

Rickie trots into the back garden with the *Sunday Times* clutched to his chest. He's also taken a picture he made of the house, the only other paper he could find in the hurry. The picture is good; he used a ruler so all the lines are right and the house has three dimensions, and he included every colour marker one way or another. The garden helped with that. In the windows he has drawn happy faces: his mother in one, his father in another, and him and his big brother Adam in the third.

Rickie's feeling a bit bad about taking it from the fridge; he did give it to his mum, but it's kind of still his, and he can do another one anyway. Past the vegetable rows and the greenhouse, near the fence at the end, Adam is waiting by the copper beech tree. When Rickie arrives he hands it all over. His brother studies the picture and wags a finger.

—Not this, mate, it's lovely. It's brilliant.

Rickie's lips squeeze together as he tries not to smile. Adam removes the TV guide and sports section and puts the artwork in it so it's safe. He taps what's left:

—We only burn the useless stuff – like the news.

The two boys search for sticks together in the dry brown circle under the branches; everything that Rickie selects he presents to his brother for appraisal. The little wooden knuckles make them look like stick-man fingers. Adam encourages him: That's the business; Now you have it. He says, Go on my son! Go on my son! It's the same kind of things he says when they are watching their team, the mighty Everton, on TV.

When Adam has decided they have collected enough, he shows Rickie how to separate the newspaper, opening it wide so the pages dollop on the ground. They scrunch the sheets up into tight twists, taking it in turns until there's a huge heap on the ground. The ones Rickie does aren't as good, but Adam says that those ones are just as important because they'll burn faster and help the others to catch.

Rickie follows his brother to the shed, stretching his legs so his feet land in the large shoe marks ahead of him. On the shelves there's tangled string, cardboard



boxes, a few lengths of skirting board, bits of curtain rail.

—Are we allowed? asks Rickie, and Adam tells him they can do what they like.

There's an old pallet in the greenhouse and they carry it over together. Adam stomps and snaps it until there's a heap of splintered pieces, some of which are long

and sharp as blades. They dirty their clothes pulling out branches from the pile behind the compost heap, and talk about making a den in the dry space below, where strings of spiderwebs sway in the darkness. The heavy wet branches could go on top for a roof, dry ones underneath to hold them up. But that's for another day.



Extract





# The Book of Martyrs

## Nick Beckett

**T**he *Book of Martyrs* began with an image that came, quite unexpectedly, into my mind. Two figures, wreathed in mist, walking across a desolate moor. Where had they been? Where were they going?

One thing I knew: they were travelling through a dangerous world. One of deep political and social divisions. Of obscene wealth and abject poverty. Of climate upheaval, famine, and disease.

I was thinking, of course, of Europe in the late sixteenth century.

I've always loved the Renaissance. The books, plays, and paintings we've inherited from that time seem to me more colourful, more alive, than anything before or since, despite – or perhaps because of – the harsh times in which they were produced.

I wanted to take readers back to that period, but with characters who seemed as real, and as fresh, as anyone you'd meet today. Minimal *thee* and *thou*, and definitely no *hey nonny nonny*. The people in my book would appear to the reader with the same force and immediacy as the people of the Renaissance appeared to one another.

Back to those two figures marching through the storm. Who were they? I needed my protagonists to be on a long, possibly endless journey. There were so many different places I wanted to explore through their eyes. One of them became a travelling astrologer, an elderly man with the same combination of mystical powers, showmanship, and downright foolishness characteristic of Renaissance figures such as Queen Elizabeth's conjuror John Dee, or Simon Forman, the notorious astrological physician who never stayed out of trouble for long, even after he died (but that's another story). As for the other, I wanted the complete opposite: someone like those quick-thinking, sharp-witted young women you find in Shakespeare's comedies. Thus, Simon and Kate Mayfield were born: a rogue physician and his adoptive niece, companions in what the Elizabethans called coney-catching and we would term con-artistry.

It was only as I was writing the book, however, that I discovered the final ingredient: humour. The Elizabethans couldn't go for too long without cracking a joke; even *Hamlet* has some decent gags. And one of the greatest works of Renaissance literature, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, is the original odd-couple comedy, with the would-be knight and his sceptical squire, Sancho Panza.

Simon and Kate, I decided, were a mismatched pair permanently on the road, and frequently on the run, using their contrasting skills to solve crimes – and save their skins – all across Renaissance Europe.

This novel is the first stage in their journey. It's set in Devon, the very best place in the world to go for moorlands, rain, and mystery. Like the Renaissance itself, this book is full of both joy and terror. At its heart is a murder rooted in one of the darkest chapters in England's history; a reminder that the past is never too far away, and never truly gone.

Dear reader, I hope you'll join Kate and Simon Mayfield on the road in *The Book of Martyrs*.



© Paul Clarke

'First things first.  
She opened the door and  
prepared for bad news.'

Kate Mayfield woke up tying her boots. Even before she met Simon, she'd developed the ability to get moving before coming to. It was around the same time that she learned to sense approaching danger. And last night, she had felt it again; it was like the way the air tasted when a storm was about to hit, hard and metallic. So she'd packed her bag ready, and gone to bed in her clothes.

Dazed, she pushed back the sackcloth tacked over the window, and tried to guess the time. It was no longer quite night, but day had yet to arrive. Respectable folks were still abed. Not even servants were up yet. It was an hour with which she was all too familiar.

Someone was hammering at the bedchamber door. The sound had forced its way into her dreams and prompted her out of bed before she was even conscious. Her still groggy mind wandered unbidden to the sounds and images that had passed through her head as she slept. She took hold of her thoughts and forced them back to the here and now. Kate didn't like to think about her dreams. She left them untouched, like some noxious substance best buried and avoided. The mattress shifted and rustled behind her; the maid with whom she had been sharing these past couple of weeks murmured a mild rebuke then turned over and snored. Kate envied anyone who could sleep that soundly.

So, she thought, as her head cleared and she walked the short distance to the door, they were off again.

First things first. She opened the door and prepared for bad news.

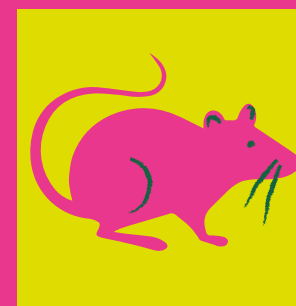
There stood young Harry, looking like the ghost of himself. The boy was their host's apprentice, but if he had received a moment's instruction in trade, Kate hadn't seen it happen. He seemed instead to be set to every bit of work that needed doing around the house. She was amazed he put up with it. Yes, he was bound to his master for seven years, but even so, the least you could say for Plymouth was that with all its comings and goings by land and sea, it should be an easy enough place to escape.



She had a horrible feeling that she was about to put this theory to the test.

Harry was shaking so violently that his candle's flame darted about, threatening to catch the sleeve of his nightshirt. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Kate was not unsympathetic. She knew the boy

had a problem with his words when he was harried or tired; they clogged up his mouth like a tough piece of meat. But he was diligent and trusted by the merchant under whose roof she and Simon were staying. At night, Harry slept on a truckle, a small, hard couch that pulled out from under his master's bed; most likely he'd been hauled abruptly from sleep and dispatched to get her and Simon out of their chambers, the house, and finally Plymouth as quickly as he could.





# The English Boys

## Sameer Rahim

Sometimes you meet a friend who changes your life forever. That's exactly what happens to my narrator, Adam, in his first week of sixth form at Harrow High in 1999. A mixed-up teenager flitting between identities, Adam is instantly, irresistibly drawn to the new boy, Suleyman. A charismatic, larger-than-life personality, Suleyman spends his free time mastering the great works of English literature, guided by his hero, Samuel Johnson.

Soon, the boys set up a lunchtime club called the Samuel Johnson Society, where – like the great figures who attended Johnson's own legendary eighteenth-century club – they set the world to rights. Johnson might seem an unlikely hero for two British Muslim boys, but as Adam puts it: 'We don't choose our heroes, they choose us.'

Set at an ordinary school in suburban west London, in the shadow of the more famous Harrow School, *The English Boys* captures a pre-9/11 era of cultural fluidity. While most boys are listening to Oasis or fantasising about playing at Wembley, Adam and Suleyman turn to great books to navigate a strange, sometimes hostile, school environment.

In the extract opposite, Suleyman leads a session of the SJS. Joined by Flora, another awkward outsider, the boys puzzle over the appearance of the 'romantic beauties of Islam' in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. The example is real. I remember stumbling across it myself, at around the same age as Adam, and feeling a rush of elation. For a moment, like Adam, I felt as though people like me were being recognised in the pages of the English canon. And like Adam, I felt foolish and dejected when I discovered my mistake.

I was always a reader before I was a writer. The books I devoured as a teenager were a way of expanding my sensibility beyond my upbringing – and taught me something about how to be English, still an unfinished journey for me. As *The English Boys* recognises, there's comedy in being what V.S. Naipaul called a 'mimic man', or what we'd now call a 'cosplayer'. But as he grows up, Adam comes to see that none of the labels thrust

upon him – Muslim, English, cultured, civilised – holds a monopoly on truth.

What really connects Adam to Suleyman isn't shared beliefs or interests, but a friendship built on laughter and love. And it's that friendship that the events of the novel will test to breaking point.



© Mike Turner

# 'Miss said the English boys had a club and I shouldn't be left out.'

'Today we investigate a puzzle near the start of the *Life*,' announced Suleyman at the second meeting of the Samuel Johnson Society. 'The pair are on their English travels and Boswell writes: "When I found that he saw the romantic beauties of Islam, in Derbyshire, much better than I did, I told him that he resembled an able performer upon a bad instrument." Now, Adam, the *romantic beauties of Islam* . . . What do you think of that?'

'It means . . .' I said slowly, 'there were Muslims in Derbyshire?'

'Most likely,' said Suleyman. 'Perhaps a Mughal prince invited by an English Duke or an Ottoman trader seeking favours. It is not unimaginable.'

We were interrupted by a soft rapping on the door. I opened the door ajar. Standing outside was Flora, her long curly hair tangled up in her purple-rimmed glasses.

'Miss Lightfoot said to come,' she said shyly.

'Come,' boomed Suleyman, 'take your seat.'

Flora's white shirt was done up to the top and her wrists braceleted with colourful scrunchies. Her hands were tattooed with smudged revision notes and daily reminders.

'Miss said the English boys had a club and I shouldn't be left out.'

'Most welcome,' said Suleyman, beaming at Miss Lightfoot's praise. 'Though it might take a while before you become an official member. Secretary Adam is a stickler for the rules.'

'I hope I can join,' said Flora, turning to me with an intense whisper.

'For now,' I said, pretending to consult my notes, 'let's classify you as an honorary observer, pending nomination and approval of full membership.' She nodded and blushed. Though this was the first exchange I had ever had with a girl who wasn't my sister, strangely enough I didn't feel awkward. Perhaps it was because I didn't find her attractive, and thus could treat her like a human being.

For Flora's benefit, Suleyman read the passage again.



'You look for yourself,' suggested Suleyman, passing over his copy. She read aloud. When she came to the *romantic beauties of Islam, in Derbyshire*, the phrase sounded different coming from her mouth. Instead of pronouncing it *Der-bi-shire*, as we had done, she said *Dar-bi-she*; and instead of *Iss-*

*laam* she said *Ez-lamb*.

'Could be the name of a place?'

'Flora is right to be cautious,' said Suleyman. 'We must check the map.'

We went to Miss Lightfoot's library and discovered a large burgundy atlas. Licking his fingers, Suleyman turned the stiff pages until he reached Derbyshire. He read out some village names: *Fawfieldhead, Lower Elkstone, Alsop en le Dale, Grindon, Wetton* trying to detect any aural echoes of Boswell's *Islam*.

'Look,' said Flora. West of the A515, sitting comfortably on the River Manifold, was the village of *Ilam*.

'What are you guys exploring?' Miss Lightfoot crouched by the table like a friendly waitress.

Suleyman explained everything.

'Oh, *Ilam*?' she said. 'Shortened version of *Eyes Lamb* – an inversion of *Lamb's Eyes*, I believe. It's meant to be very beautiful.'

Suleyman praised Flora for spotting *Ilam*. 'Always we must strive for accuracy,' he said, 'no matter how inconvenient to our heart's desire.' His eyes narrowed as he re-assessed the girl in front of him. 'Your application, I can safely say,' he added, 'will be looked upon with favour.'



## Extract





# The House in Talbiya

## Omer Friedlander

**T**he *House in Talbiya* follows several generations of two families, one Israeli and one Palestinian, over a century. The story moves from Prague to Jerusalem, Ramallah, Berlin and New York, but always the question of home remains at its center. The eponymous house is a sprawling white limestone villa, surrounded by a garden of fruit trees and flowers, in the elegant neighborhood of Talbiya in Jerusalem. The physical house is an important anchor in the novel for both families, the focus of their longings, dreams and memories, but what I am really exploring is the idea of home, of belonging, or on the other hand of exile and estrangement. For the Palestinian Khoury family, the memory of their lost home in Talbiya becomes a symbol of their lost homeland, of Palestine. When the Jewish Glaser family move into the same house that belonged to the Khoury family before they were displaced during the Nakba, then the two families, like mirror images of each other, are connected by the house in Talbiya.

Even though the novel tackles big historical and political issues of displacement and war, for me, the question of home began with very small, personal experiences. I've always had a conflicted relationship to home. My twin brother and I were born premature, so our first home was an incubator. We spent two months in that strange aquarium in the hospital in Jerusalem. Our organs developed in a chamber of regulated temperature. Perhaps these early experiences are the origin of my complicated relationship to place.

My second home was on Ruppin Street in Tel Aviv. The apartment was small and cramped, but it looked out in the direction of the sea. The kitchen had blue tiles. A wild mulberry tree grew in the yard. We lived in this apartment for six years when suddenly our parents decided we were moving to America. My first memory of Princeton was its trees. In this small university town in New Jersey, there were more trees than I had seen in all of Israel. It was not the familiar dusty green of old olive trees and parched grass. It was bright, alive. The floors of our new home were made of some dark lacquered wood. Outside, the entire world was green.

I have spent the past half a decade living in New York City. A few years ago, returning to my childhood bedroom in Tel Aviv, I felt like a visitor, a stranger. I began to realize that this was no longer my home. At the same time, I felt a peculiar longing for the past, for my idea of home that has, in a sense, disappeared. This dual feeling of estrangement and longing toward home is partly what I wanted to explore, on a much bigger scale, in *The House in Talbiya*. As one character in the novel says: 'Home was a dream, home was far away, home was the past.'



© Yam Traiber

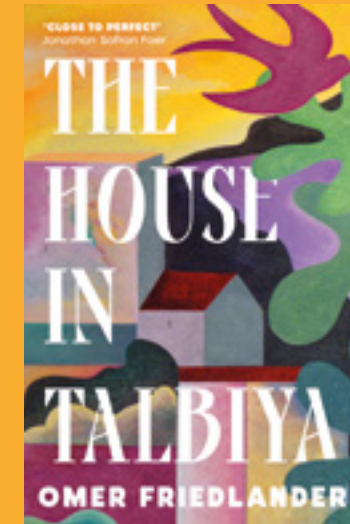
'Fuad knew for every tree he planted, there was a double.'

Fuad Khoury inspected the rocky plot of land in Talbiya, spotted with olive and mulberry trees, and decided to build a home there. He purchased the land from the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, and hired the help of a notable architect, one of the finest in Palestine. They drew up plans for a grand villa made from local limestone. The material was high quality, the contractor told him. The home would last for generations.

There would be a garden with fruit trees in front of the house. Fuad wanted a library with glass doors and a collection of thousands of books. He hoped his children would grow up to become professors one day. His wife, Hala, was already pregnant with their second child. There would be many rooms in the house, in preparation for the future.

Fuad placed a small piece of gold in the bedrock of the home, for good luck. While the villa was being constructed, the Khoury family stayed at the Grand New Hotel, by the Bab El-Khalil gate, overlooking the Old City Citadel. In the past, the hotel hosted Kaiser Wilhelm II and General Edmund Allenby, and now it would be the temporary home for the Khoury family. The hotel was close enough to the plot of land in Talbiya that Fuad could walk there every morning and check on the progress of the construction, while his wife enjoyed the hotel's continental breakfast and swam in its turquoise pool.

Fuad's pleasure was his garden. Standing around covered in dirt, he wore thick gloves. He tended to his garden daily, planting bulbs and seeds, raking the soil, pruning the dead leaves. Sometimes he flung aside the gloves and touched the earth with his bare hands, relishing the dirt under his fingernails. He dug holes and trenches, and watered the garden with a hose. In one plot, he planted dahlias, chrysanthemums, and even tulips shipped from Holland. In another plot, he planted mint, thyme, tomatoes, and passionfruit. He wanted wooden lattice panels installed on the archway to encourage the passionfruit vines to climb the eastern side of the house. He fenced it all off with prickly pears.



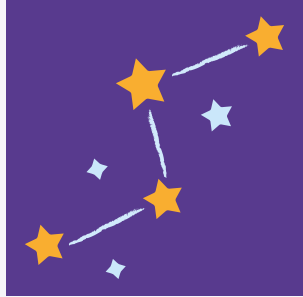
There was already a lemon tree in the garden, but its branches were withered and dead. Fuad cut them off. He dug a ring around the lemon tree for watering, to revive it. He planted pomegranate trees, and a single fig tree at the center of the garden. Fuad knew for every tree he planted,

there was a double. There were always two trees. One above ground, and another below. There was the tree that was visible, with its branches climbing skyward, and another tree below, with a network of roots in the earth, mirror images of each other.

Fuad could hardly wait for the garden to grow. Soon, all the trees would bear fruit, each one in its own time. Fuad imagined Hala picking a lemon from the garden, juicing it for a salad or a cold lemonade in the summer. He imagined eating plump purple figs straight from the tree. This garden would be his sanctuary. But Fuad would have to be patient. A paradise took time to cultivate.







# The Life and Times of Ota Benga

JJ Bola

**T**he *Life and Times of Ota Benga* is a historical fiction based on the life of a Congolese man named Ota Benga, a Mbuti man labelled 'pygmy', cannibal, savage, who was captured from Congo in 1904 to be exhibited at The St. Louis World's Fair, and then The Human Zoo, in New York, United States of America.

We are not that removed from the histories of a century ago. They live on in our present day. This story, though known and written about, has been quietly kept in the shadows. I want to bring it to the light, but more so from the perspective of Ota himself. What it might have been like to be separated from family, to be in distant lands away from your loved ones, and, arguably, most importantly of all, to long so desperately for home.

I believe these hidden stories of the past help us to understand the conditions of our present. Our perspectives, our beliefs, but most of all our humanity. Telling a story such as this shapes who is seen as human, as a valuable life in this world, and who isn't. I was inspired to write this story largely because I read too many books as a teenager, and because I am stubborn. This compelled me to tell untold stories about the places that I am from. But most of all, because I believe in literature's ability to empower and foster empathy, by putting us in the shoes of another who we would never have thought to walk in.

This is the story of a journey, but not just Ota's, or the people around him at the time. It is also our own, the journey that we are currently on, wheresoever we may be headed. I hope that it is a story that resonates with you, touches your heart, but also helps you to reflect on this life we live as human beings and realise just how sacred it truly is.



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*Kasai River, Kasai, Congo Free State, 1903*

The forest was alive, the forest was God. The mother. The father. The everything in everything. Dawn sky broke through the canopy of trees, streaks of bright light; birds tweeted and sang their praise to the new day. Leaves rustled and twigs snapped under the shuffling feet of the children who skipped to the happy beat of their own laughter as the elders marched on. The heat, the hot humid air, hung thick. Clean sweat dripped off glistening skin, red like earth, brown like earth. The ancestors, we walked not too far ahead, but never too far behind. The ancestors, we are because we were – and we will always be. We, too, like the forest, were alive. We, too, like the forest, were God. We who lived in the land of the spirits and beyond. We who dwelled in the magic of the night, which gave birth to morn. The fruit of life grew among us. Our hands gathered the dust of stars and spread it through the land, blessing the earth. Our feet ran lightly among the trails. Our songs filled the air; the resonating harmony of our voices hovered above the drumbeat. The dance and the song of millennia. Since the dawn of time, the cradle of civilisation, here we were.

\*

Here, on this night, this dark night – where darkness was good, where the moon dangled above, as though on a string – was the ritual, the awakening and rejoicing. The men gathered, leaving their wives, the women, and children in their huts. Each hut gave their offering of sustenance to appeal and appease the forest, to appease us. The fire was lit. Its crackling sounds and orange ember glow swept through the forest, lighting up the trees. The molimo horn played, the smooth wood-brown of its skin held up into the night, as the trumpet-like sounds that resembled a leopard's roar grew hauntingly louder. The men sang and danced, rhythmically moving their bodies and feet in the heat of the forest, faster and faster. Each one, imitating and emulating, giving back to the forest, the same way the forest gave to them. And through the

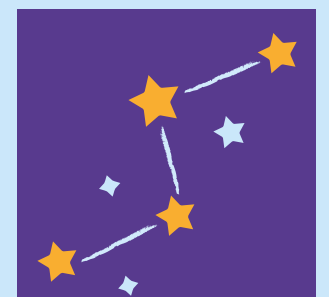
'Our hands gathered the dust of stars and spread it through the land, blessing the earth.'



night they played, and played, until the forest was silent once again, waiting for dawn.

Ota woke from his soft slumber, in the silence of the forest, subsumed by darkness. He breathed and felt his chest rise and lower, heart tenderly beating as he laid on his back on the mat in his hut. His wife, Kemba, beside

him, he looked at her, stretched his eyes through the dark to see the outline of her tender face, sleeping. Her visage he has committed to memory, etched into the canvas of his mind as though he were an artist, and she his subject. He smiled, slowly untangled their interlocked fingers by their sides as he raised himself to sit, and felt the tension from his smooth, rounded shoulders run down his back. Ota wrapped his lower body with cloth, and trod carefully out of his hut, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. The forest lay still in its sleep, not yet touched by the light of day.





# The Owl Carver

## Andrew Cotter

I'll start with a confession . . .

My sinful confession is that I have written a novel set in the Highlands, but I am a Lowlander. An outsider. I come from a southern part of Scotland where the hills are no more than gentle folds, yet it is the more dramatic mountains that call me north time after time. I suppose I'm really no different to the vast majority of people who experience this sparsely populated landscape only as a fleeting visitor. Apart from that tiny number of people who are born and bred there, we are all outsiders.

Even if you have never visited at all, you might still have an idea of what the Scottish Highlands are like: mountains and lochs, castles and myth – everything that the tourist industry or TV, films and social media will happily present. And of course it is those things, but there is so much more to find there, if you scratch away at that beautiful veneer.

Whenever I have made my own trips north, I have been looking for some sort of escape and a discovery of the quiet, usually by gasping my way through the snow towards some distant summit. Yet I've always been struck by the tiny communities, those scattered and isolated places in the glens in the hills or on the coastline and wondered about those people who live there – what they might do, where they have come from. Sometimes I imagine that they, like me, are trying to escape, only in a more permanent way.

At heart, *The Owl Carver* is a simple mystery or thriller, but I hope that it also peels away those outer layers of The Highlands, to reveal what lies beneath. There is certainly suffering in its history and a darkness in its beauty. The landscape there has never been only a painting, an aesthetic or an idea. It is a home for people, with all of the hopes and desires, frailties and failings that people can possess wherever they might live.

I wanted to write a story about those human weaknesses and our constant yearning for somewhere or something else. The book also contains that yearning of nostalgia – the one craving which only humans possess and one which can never be truly satisfied.

Given my own history, it would also be remiss of me not to feature a dog as the chief emblem for everything that appears more simple in the natural world – an antidote to our own complexities. Because above all, *The Owl Carver* is about human emotions and desires. How they spark the decisions we make in life and where those choices might lead us. Perhaps they even take us down a road that can go no further, ending in a tiny village, crowded in by mountains on the edge of the sea.



© Jon Super

'No earth and no sky,  
only a whiteness that came at  
them, screeching and clawing  
at any bare skin.'

There is no finer sight than a storm; black and fattened by the sea, rolling in like a wave. Unless you are in its path, on a mountain and trying to escape.

Only one of the walkers, high on the peak, noticed its birth. Maddie had sensed a very slight difference to the energy of the air and felt the lifting of the wind. It was she who had seen the mustering of cloud far out over the Minch and turned to watch it form into a vast creature, darkening in mood as it grew.

At first, she expressed it only as a worry, low and quiet, almost to herself.

*I don't like this any more. I don't like it.*

Then louder, pleading.

*We have to move faster. We have to GO.*

But try as she might to tell the expedition leader, her warnings were ignored. Her friend, so concentrated on the task, either didn't hear or wouldn't listen.

By the time the storm filled the entire sky behind them, it was too late. They were still up on the plateau with the ground now sloping gently towards the summit when it began to consume the mountain, the wind growing with alarming speed and flurries of snow turning heavier, swirling and mixing with shrapnel grains of ice that whipped around from the deep cover underfoot. So they pushed on with a greater urgency towards their goal. They knew that they only had to drop to the bealach and from there down into the glen beyond and then be guided by the river, which would take them away.

To safety.

Although which way was that now?

Maddie was following, but her friend had lost all sense of direction. She had started to turn around, one hand holding on to her hood with her arm protecting her face, lifting her head slightly from its bowed, defensive position as if to avoid the worst of the blows, looking one way then the other, but realising that there was nothing to see. No earth and no sky, only a whiteness that came at them, screeching and clawing at any bare

skin. The plateau narrowed from here and fell down to the top of a ridge, which would lead them to the saddle and from there they could descend, but they had no idea if they were still set on the right course in a world that now extended no more than a few feet before them.

They had to picture what they had been able to see only a few minutes before and stumbled blind, forced to bend forward and brace, feet apart, yet still losing their balance with every blast of the wind's temper. A giant, unseen hand was pushing them, playing with them. They were so close that they could touch, but still having to yell above the roar, then turning their heads away from the sting of snow and spindrift. Maddie with her heart beating faster in a rising panic, shouting over and over again but not being understood, as so many of her words disappeared into the gale.

*... scared ... really SCARED. ... Get out ... here ... OUT of here NOW ...*

Her friend wanted to stop. Saying she needed to rest.

*Can't stop. We have to go on. Keep moving. Run ... Keep MOVING. Must keep ...*

Then a crack, like gunfire, and the ground beneath them was no longer there.







# The Shelf Life of Evelyn Shine

Sana Krasikov

When my family arrived in America from the Soviet Union, I remember my mother complaining that instead of Bulgakov and Tolstoy, she now had to read *The Three Little Pigs*.

She was not entirely joking. In Russia, she had been a serious reader. But in the United States, she was forced to learn English from the same books I had! I would wake up and find tiny Russian words pencilled above the English in my copies of Beverly Cleary, Betty Miles, E. L. Konigsburg, and Judy Blume.

Those books taught us more than English; they taught us about American culture, domestic life, manners. In this strange country where my mother and I were both beginners, we were discovering America together.

Years later, I was stunned to learn that many of the writers who'd welcomed us had been banned or challenged in the country that seemed the very definition of freedom. In 2018, after immersing myself writing a book about an American woman stuck in Russia (*The Patriots*), I found myself wondering: how was it possible to ban books in America? And why were books for young readers so often the head of the spear in the cultural war?

This question ultimately led me to write *The Shelf Life of Evelyn Shine*.

In 1968, when the book begins, Evelyn is twenty-six, newly motherless and restless in a marriage. She signs up for an evening class in writing for children because she wants a few hours out of the house. What she finds instead is a voice, and a path into the hearts of thousands of children. But while she is so good at telling truths about childhood, she avoids facing the hardest truths of her own.

Evelyn is an amalgam of many of the remarkable writers who introduced my mother and me to America. And while her inner life is imagined, she belongs to a very real generation of women who, in another age, might've set out to write 'The Great American Novel' but instead poured their genius into books for the young, creating a whole new genre.

The novel follows Evelyn across this golden age of realistic children's lit – from the sixties to the eighties, and into the backlash that came after it. It also turns on a bitter irony: how a woman who becomes a kind of literary godmother to thousands of girls can turn into someone who has barely anything to say to her own daughter.

As I wrote, I kept returning to one question: what do adults owe children? Protection, honesty, freedom, witness, or some impossible combination of all these?

I kept thinking not only about the generation of women she represented, but also about my mother, who had to grow up all over again in middle age. Then again, we're all constantly coming of age, aren't we? I wanted this book to be for every reader who still feels connected to the books of their childhood, and who understands that growing up can take a lifetime.



© Alexis Calice

'Yet even in that chlorinated haze, she couldn't have imagined her future, just five years off, already burdened by marriage and motherhood.'

In the years after she became a household name, and a reluctant authority on adolescence, Evelyn Shine would tell interviewers that the American teenager had been born not with the invention of rock n' roll, but with the invention of the polio vaccine. She liked to say that all those anthems of their rebellion and promiscuity – 'Unchained Melody,' 'Love Me Tender,' 'Rock Around the Clock' – were only the finishing touch. Their patron saint, dispensing his carnal blessings from car radios during long marathons of backseat kissing, was not Elvis but the bespectacled Dr. Salk, whose shots made all that saliva-swapping possible in the first place.

And though Evelyn knew this wasn't the whole story, that by the vaccine's arrival in 1955 the 'teenager' was already a hotly debated species, it was true enough for the Evie Shein who had turned thirteen the same month the vaccine's success was announced over the school P.A. system. She and her friend Lydia had walked to Lydia's house that afternoon, car horns honking and church bells chiming around them as if it were V-Day, the day the nation's children were set free into the world.

It would take another year for normalcy to return: for her father to stop driving his pickup all over the county to deliver babies for women too fretful to set foot in a hospital, and begin driving Evelyn's eleven-year-old sister Pearl to chess tournaments around the state. As for Evelyn, it chiefly meant the reopening of the public pool. There she and her friends could sit for hours in sun-baked squalor, displaying their spanking-new bodies after the long coma of public quarantine. From the scorched grass around the concrete, they watched boys catapult themselves off the diving boards. It had been Evelyn's idea to write the boys' names inside the flaps of paper fortune tellers, those oracles that, with every pinch and pull, revealed who each girl would kiss, marry, and have children with. Of her friends, she was the smallest, the flattest in the chest, the most innocent-seeming, and the possessor of the most avid, lecherous imagination.

Yet even in that chlorinated haze, she couldn't have imagined her future, just five years off, already burdened by marriage and motherhood. It was harder still to picture that 1956, by then dubbed *The Year of the Child*, would come to feel like the last year of her own childhood.

About none of this did she speak in her later public appearances, or to the press so eager to cover the famous writer, just as she never spoke of Lydia, or Finn, or her father, or Pearl. Always careful to recall her childhood in such blurry, soft-focus terms that it could have belonged to anybody.

Which, in a way, it did.





# Tide

Anna Richmond

**T**ide was born from a nightmare, a kind of looped system of intrusive thoughts. It goes like this. Imagine you're a mother. Imagine that motherhood, just as you predicted, is a trap. Not a cage, as such. Nothing with so easy an exit strategy as slipping a key in a lock. More like flypaper. Pheromone-laced and sticky, no hope of wriggling loose. Now imagine that, despite all of that, despite being caught like a fly amongst so many other caught flies, the worst thing that could ever happen would be to be released, prised gruesomely off the paper. And how many ways there are for that to happen, as a mother! How many ways there are to lose your child. How quickly it could happen, if you were to turn away precisely at the wrong moment.

This book is a kind of exorcism of those intrusive thoughts, dragged down into the sludge of the Thames and given monstrous form. Imogen, *Tide's* fly-trapped mother, takes her son mudlarking on the banks of the Thames, only to witness him – too late – dragged into the water by a creature she can't understand. She tells the police and her husband what she saw, but why would they believe that story, when there's a clearer, more plausible alternative: she wasn't watching. She wasn't ever really watching.

It's a huge blessing in many ways that I wrote the bulk of this book before actually becoming a mother myself. It meant that I wasn't using my own living child as a surrogate dead one. I didn't think: what would I do if the worst possible thing happened to my family? I could only think: what will Imogen do, now that the worst possible thing has happened to hers? It saved me a lot of afternoons that might otherwise have been spent breaking my own heart. Instead, I set about destroying Imogen, who I came to love so much for her refusal ever really to let me. In her worst moments, inside Imogen's mind is a tough place to be, but over the course of *Tide's* three parts – the day of her son's

loss, the subsequent unravelling marriage, and the gradual rebuilding of a new way of living – we move with her from despair to a fragile kind of peace.



“I’m only washing it, Mummy,” he says in a tone that suggests I’m being insane, and I’m beginning to wonder where he learned to look at me like that.’

I slip the rucksack off my back to feel around for another cloth. When I look up again, Thomas is gone. For a plunging, hideous second, I look out at the river, and then I see movement – Thomas, up ahead, in silhouette at the top of the concrete boat ramp. He’s looking straight at me, arms by his sides, blurred by the rain. I call for him to wait, and in that same moment he takes a step down, then another. I shout to him again to stay on the path, to come back up, but he ignores me or doesn’t hear and I break into a slow jog, still shouting at him not to move. By the time I reach him, he’s already as low on the ramp as he can get without his boots going under again, dipping whatever he has in his hand in the rushing water.

‘I’m only washing it, Mummy,’ he says in a tone that suggests I’m being insane, and I’m beginning to wonder where he learned to look at me like that, how to roll his perfect eyes just so, when I notice that same darkness, that mass of weeds moving towards him with what looks oddly like purpose. It extends back into the centre of the river, tapering out into a point downstream, and I’m watching, only watching, when Thomas takes a shuffling step forward on his haunches, then slips. His hands slap hard against the wet concrete and the darkness breaks the surface. I shout Thomas’s name one last time, lurching towards him as the dark patch surges up, breakneck speed, slick like oil. A black mass of thick flesh slices through the air and there is a hanging second of deep pink, ivory white, before a mouth snaps shut around my son like a sprung trap and drags him back into the water. It only takes a moment, and then everything is still again.



Extract





# We Killed Anji Alexander

Mira Jacob

One thing we fiction writers don't often talk about is how each book tells us how to write it. There are reasons we don't talk about it, chief among them maintaining the illusion of creative control and sanity with our friends, family, and readers, but the truth is, every book starts with a whisper from the other side of an invisible forest, and we follow it.

*Shruti did not regret sleeping with her sister's husband until after work.*

That's the first whisper from my forthcoming novel, *We Killed Anji Alexander*. It arrived as a full sentence on an otherwise blank page, leaving me with two pressing questions: 1) who wrote this? and 2) what the hell is wrong with Shruti?

As it turns out, there is plenty wrong with Shruti Oomen, the dark-skinned older sister of white-passing Indian American actress and cultural icon Anji Alexander, but there is plenty right, too, something that surprised me as I wrote what would become the third chapter of the novel. Shruti is tired of cleaning up Anji's messes, terrified of her relapsing into her painkiller addiction, and so besotted with her one-year-old niece Cleo that it makes her teeth ache. Then, just hours after sleeping with Anji's husband Paul, her sister's strangled body is found in a park in upstate New York.

The next whisper came from Elaine, Anji's manager, who back in 2001 advised the budding actress to never mention her ethnicity so she could be considered for mainstream roles. Then came Ranjika Rajasinghe, the manager of the Sri Lankan restaurant where Anji was last seen alive. After that, Ranjika's fentanyl-addicted brother Shehan showed up, as infuriating and endearing as any addict I've ever known.

By then I was used to waking up with the urgency of someone else's story pulling me to my desk, but what I didn't realize was how much time I would spend

following them into the forest, losing myself for hours, days, months. By the time I got to Anji's grown daughter Cleo, I was living in another world entirely, one haunted by refractions of an actress who did not live to tell her own story, and will not rest until the rest of us do.

Told in ten points of view spread out from 2003 to 2039, this book pulled me into the wildest forest I've ever entered. In many ways I'm still there, waiting with my characters, ready to share what we've learned about women, and power, and fury, and love. Hope you enjoy listening.



© Joanna Eldridge Morrissey

'A hot mess, all of it, and at a better moment in Elaine's marriage, a totally valid reason to beg off their ill-timed family camping trip.'

I. ELAINE HARKIN

JULY 12, 2019

Eleven hours after

1.

Eight in the morning, and everything gets worse. Already, it's bad for Elaine – her star client of almost two decades, Anji Alexander, ignoring her calls, her wife, Dahlia, furious about Elaine's preoccupation with Anji ignoring her calls, their children, Shanice and Martin, wary of whatever Elaine has done to make Dahlia furious and Anji. And now this: a battalion of emails rising like ghost ships as she paces outside the Brookside campground's public bathroom, trying to get a steady signal.

RE: ANJI MISSING, PLS ADVISE.

RE: ANJI MISSING, PLS ADVISE.

RE: ANJI MISSING, PLS ADVISE.

RE: ANJI MISSING, PLS ADVISE.

RE: ANJI MISSING, PLS ADVISE.

Missing? Elaine's eyebrows go up, stay up. Last she'd checked with Sonal, Anji's assistant (last night, feigning cramps to get an hour alone in a bug-infested bathroom stall) the actor she managed from obscurity to A-list was holed up in her Granite Falls hotel room, still sulking over having to give up the lead in *The Bandit Queen*.

'First I'm too light-skinned to play Phoolan Devi, now I'm too American?' She'd raged to Elaine last March, when the pushback to her playing the Indian feminist icon began. 'Does anyone think this movie would even be getting remade without me?'

Of course she was right, Elaine had assured her then, and of course the delusional South Asian mob saying she was 'the white person's brown person' was a prime example of wokeness run amok. But fifteen minutes after they'd hung up, when Anji had tweeted as much, the words morphed from Elaine's private observation to Anji's big mistake, spreading from retweets to subtweets to memes to think pieces, each iteration somehow more ridiculous, more entitled, more shrill. By the time *The Atlantic* posted 'The White Feminism Lurking Inside Brown Bodies' in June, Anji had stopped responding to Elaine's phone calls entirely. A week after that, her texts.

A hot mess, all of it, and at a better moment in Elaine's marriage, a totally valid reason to beg off their ill-timed family camping trip. But still, missing? An exaggeration, surely. Wouldn't Elaine – whose every single day was tied to managing all things Anji-related – have felt it? Wouldn't someone, many someones, have called by now? Her text messages are reassuringly empty. Then, like a sentient demon, her phone begins to ping, and ping, and ping, each ping depositing a text from the constellation of people required to keep Anji stabilized: her agent, lawyer, publicist, sister, and husband. At the top of the heap is Sonal.



Extract



# Wits

Stephanie Bain

**W**its started from a desire to have as much fun as possible while writing a novel. If I was to commit to years of waking in the dark to write, then I wanted the writing process to be pure joy. I wanted it to be playful and energising. I wanted to surprise myself and make myself laugh.

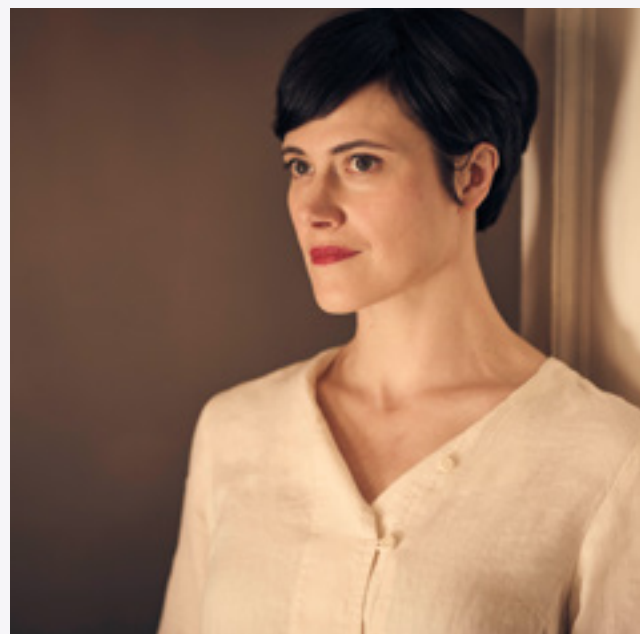
I was on the hunt for fun when I read *Dramatic Exchanges*, edited by Daniel Rosenthal. This collected correspondence from the National Theatre's archive showed theatre folk in all our ostentatious, hysterical, manipulative, flirtatious, camp glory. It was so familiar to me – at the time Head of Programming and Literary at the Almeida Theatre – as if the contents of my inbox had been emptied onto the page. That was it. I would write an epistolary novel set within the theatre world.

I sensed that form and content would align. One maddening challenge of the epistolary form is that characters do not tell the reader truthfully how they feel. They only write what they want their addressee to read. Without recourse to the bread and butter of the novel, *interiority*, the epistolary form falls back on the bread and butter of the play, *subtext*. I discovered that dramatic irony, the aside, the soliloquy, all work well within an epistolary novel, placing the reader in an active role, akin to that of an audience member. So, it would be a novel about theatre that would feel like a play. But what kind of play?

It seemed obvious to turn to the heyday of the epistolary novel, the age of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, *Pamela*, *Evelina*, the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries. I already harboured a secret love of Restoration comedies. The rhythms of their lovers' patter have the bounce of a 1940s screwball comedy, but with a seriousness about the stuff of the heart – the conflict between sex and love, ambition and connection, freedom and responsibility. An epistolary novel that felt like a Restoration comedy would, of course, have a masquerade, a play-within-a-play, an Act 4 duel.

I became fascinated by the 'Female Wits' of Restoration Theatre, who were some of the first women in English literary history to earn a living by their pens. Their plays were popular, provocative – Aphra Behn and Margaret Cavendish's writings implicitly celebrate female-female desire – but they faced misogyny, ridicule, even sabotage by the men on whose toes they were treading. In 1697, the playwright Mary Pix claimed that the theatre manager George Powell had plagiarised her play *The Deceiver Deceived*. When I read about this, I may have fist-bumped the air. There it was. The nugget of a plot!

The characters in *Wits* are fictional but are inspired by the lives and works of some of these playwrights. I like to think of Aphra Behn, Mary Pix and Margaret Cavendish as the shadow inspirations that lie beneath my Mariana Quinn, Thomasin Rivers, and Frances Petherbridge. I hope that I have done them proud.



© Paul Stuart

'For though we may compete for our share of audiences, or for the single portion of a season given over to female wit, we sisters of the quill must sometimes stand together'

3 October 1674

Dear Thomasin,

Do not burn this letter. I have dragged myself, bottle-headed, from my bed after a late night carousing with *The Sorceress of Surinam* company to write to you and I do not wish my efforts consigned to the grate. I know you were vexed by my poaching Nell for the Sorceress, but as a comic lead she has no equal and so she may choose to whom she lends her exquisite timing. I suppose she must prefer my wit.

Hush. *The Sorceress* will be out of the repertoire in a few weeks and I will return her – merry as ever – to Drury Lane for the rest of the winter season. Do you have something new for her? A Neapolitan courtesan accidentally wed? A Duchess disguising herself as a highwayman? Despite the ferocious rivalry that the pamphleteers would like to charge us with, you know I will always turn myself out for a new offering from Mrs Rivers. Though I agree with the critics that you were poorly let down by the acting in your latest, for when Mr Davenport has to convey a soul seized and contorting itself in moral anguish, he is somewhat literal in seizing and contorting his upper lip. His performance caused me to muse upon the infinite variety the Lord has created in humankind for there you were applauding poor, gurning Davenport from the gallery, whereas I would rather have committed my pages to the flames than allow my well-crafted words to be so mangled.

I imagine that if you were not inclined to commit this missive to the flames when you began reading, then you are ready now.

Hold! Do not do it!

For though we may compete for our share of audiences, or for the single portion of a season given over to female wit, we sisters of the quill must sometimes stand together. So, lift that freckled little hand of yours away from the grate and attend me a moment.

Have you seen George Petherbridge's latest at Lincoln's Inn?

\*

A good conceit, but poorly execute . . . Great chasms of implausibility opened up inside the play. Why did Alcina need to woo Merribone for her sister? Why was she sticking her giant hooter of a nose in? And yet the scene with Diana concealed

inside the cabinet, watching Merribone make love to her sister, was genius. The linguistic dexterity! Words twisting meaning upon meaning, each metaphor more vulgar than the last, as if Petherbridge had swallowed a pimp's Phraseology.

Then it occurred to me that I recognised the scene. I had acted it out. I recall, we had been to see Dryden's *The Wild Gallant* with my cousin – the one who looks like a pigeon – and you had caught a cold. You are a terrible invalid and so I stayed with you and comforted you in that ridiculously large bed you had taken to. I distracted you from your mournful sniffles with spiced buns and Suffolk cheese and challenged you to write a better play than Dryden. And there in the bed, in a sea of paper, ink, quills, and cheese crumbs, your first play *Cupid Caught* was born.







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