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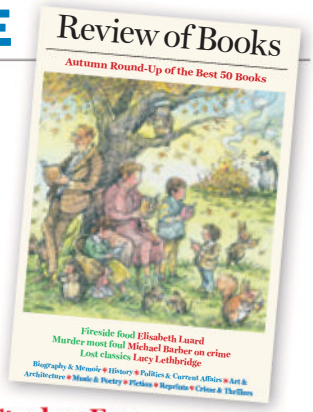

'I think *The Oldie* these days is simply the best magazine there is – seriously, the best' – Stephen Fry

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Winnie-the-Pooh at 100

By Gyles Brandreth

Nicky Haslam on the Mitfords' mother

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The Oldie
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Subs queries? Email theoldie@subscription.co.uk or phone 01858 438791

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Editor Harry Mount
Sub-editor Penny Phillips
Art editor Michael Hardaker
Supplements editor Charlotte Metcalf
Editorial assistant Amelia Milne
Publisher James Pembroke
Patron saints Jeremy Lewis, Barry Cryer
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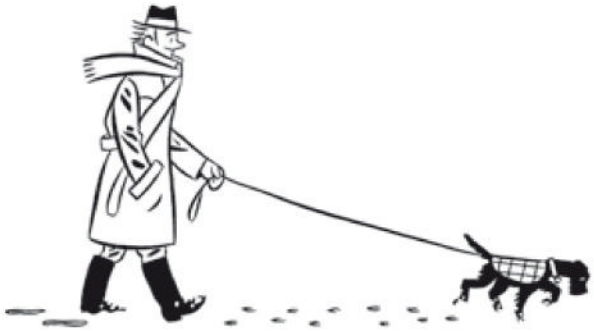


The Old Un's Notes

On 1st October, the ultimate nanny reaches an age not usually associated with child care.

That's the day Julie Andrews, star of *Mary Poppins*, turns 90. The 1964 Disney classic was her film debut, and gained her international fame and a Best Actress Oscar.

Her co-star Dick Van Dyke reaches the even more venerable milestone of 100 on 13th December.

Andrews told a 2023 CBS special celebrating Van Dyke's life that he was 'young, fit ... and really gorgeous', and 'sweet and helpful', too.

Van Dyke was in awe of her soprano voice – she'd starred in *My Fair Lady* on Broadway. She was patient with his somewhat flat singing – and his risible Cockney accent in his role as Bert the chimney sweep. Still, Bert's song 'Chim Chim Cher-ee' went on to win a Best Original Song Oscar – one of five Oscars for the film.

Astonishingly, Julie Andrews starred in another megahit, *The Sound of Music*, only a year later. Again, she played a nanny. Again, the film won five Oscars.

Van Dyke wanted Julie to co-star in 1968's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, but she was fed up with children's stuff at the time. They are still friends.

Comedian Carol Burnett, 92, an old friend of Julie's, who worked with her in the 1960s, called her 'special' and 'loyal'. *The Sound of Music* child stars thought she was like a lovely real nanny.

Widowed since the death of her second husband, Blake Edwards, director of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and the *Pink Panther* films, Andrews now lives in Long Island near her daughter.

Recent work includes providing the voice-over for the salacious gossip columnist Lady Whistledown in *Bridgerton*.

DISNEY

Happy 90th, Julie! In *The Sound of Music* (1965)

Among this month's contributors

Gyles Brandreth (p8) was MP for Chester. He appears on *The One Show* and *Just a Minute*. His new book, *Somewhere, a Boy and a Bear*, celebrates Winnie-the-Pooh on his 100th birthday.

Danielle Kretzmer-Lockwood (p15) worked for Warner Brothers with Clint Eastwood, Robert De Niro and Oliver Stone. In this issue, she salutes her father, lyricist Herbert Kretzmer.

Annabel Venning (p27) is author of *To War with the Walkers: One Family's Extraordinary Story of the Second World War*. She writes for the *Daily Mail* and other publications.

Nicky Haslam (p54) is a writer, singer and interior designer. He performs songs by his friend Cole Porter. He created the Common Things tea towel and wrote *Redeeming Features: A Memoir*.

At 8:12pm on 22nd September 1955, the dulcet tones of Alex Macintosh proclaimed, 'It's tingling fresh. It's fresh as ice. It's Gibbs SR toothpaste.'

It was the first commercial screened on the newly launched Independent Television; the running order among the evening's 24 advertisers was drawn by lot.

The *Daily Telegraph* thought the commercials 'fairly unobtrusive and in reasonable taste', while the BBC killed off Grace Archer that day to distract ITV viewers.

In November, the *Sunday Dispatch* polled its readers about their favourite commercial. The answer was 'Murray Mints – the too-good-to-hurry mints'.

The Independent Television Authority forbade direct programme sponsorship, a rule advertising magazines, aka ad mags, circumvented. Another term for this genre was 'shoppers' guides';

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

Revamped public toilets nearly finished
Hampshire Chronicle

Baby 'being fed' on M6
Sentinel

Stockbridge eatery with stunning pastries asks customers to stop eating them on doorsteps
Scotsman

£15 for published contributions

companies would pay £100 for 15 seconds of the cast extolling their wares.

The great Kenneth Horne hosted *Trader Horne*, in which he gamely tried to enthuse about various wool goods. *Jim's Inn,* featuring Jimmy Hanley as a pub landlord, was so popular that Piccadilly released the LP *Singalong at Jim's Inn*.

In March 1960, ITV aired a cigarette commercial with actor Terence Brook mooching around a nocturnal London and discovering 'You're never alone with a Strand'. The advertisement received the accolade of a Tony Hancock parody – 'You're never alone with a pilchard' – but failed to persuade Britons to spend 3/2d on a packet of 'the cigarette of the moment'.

Even the best-crafted commercials could not sell a product the public did not want.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Ring out the bells.

St Mary's, Somers Town, a Gothic Revival church near Euston Station, is to be saved.

Two years ago, the Church of England were threatening this crucial inner-city church – built by William Inwood and his son Henry in 1826 – with destruction. Thank God, they have pulled off a holy reverse ferret.

Some £640,000 has been awarded by Historic England Heritage at Risk Capital Fund for urgent repair work to the church's façade. Still, three million pounds in total is needed to save the church for good – and the church is inviting further donations.

Part of that divine reverse ferret is due to a parishioner of St Mary's and *Oldie* columnist, A N Wilson.

In 2023, Wilson praised the church's 'tradition of humane Anglican Catholicism – running a good school, supplying help to the waifs and strays who haunt that lonely, railway-terminusy part of London, providing space

'Something with a sour taste – we're discussing our divorce'

for rough sleepers, rescuing junkies etc etc. The present vicar, Father Paschal, is much loved.'

At the threat of its closure, Wilson said, 'I am never going to use the phrase "dear old C of E" again.'

Well now, thanks to the efforts of Wilson, the churchwardens, the Victorian Society and its President, *Oldie* contributor Griff Rhys

Saved – St Mary's (1826)

Jones – who called the diocesan decision 'extraordinary' – St Mary's will survive. Praise be!

Talking of the dear old C of E, the Anglican novel has made a comeback. In *Love Divine*, *Oldie* contributor Ysenda Maxtone Graham summons up the Trollopian ghosts of Barchester Towers.

The book is set in a Church of England parish in a rich London suburb, where St Luke's church is rudderless, without a resident rector – but with an oversubscribed church school. Will a miracle – like the miracle of St Mary's, Somers Town – strike? *Love Divine* is published on 1st November.

You can write popular plays in your eighties, but you must not set them in the present.

So says journalist-turned-playwright Francis Beckett, 80, an *Oldie* contributor, whose latest play opens in London on 30th September.

In the play, he has jumped from the past to the future, missing out on the present. *Make England Great Again – MEGA* for short – is a comedy about a future general election which has been won by the Britons First Party under its charismatic leader, Max Moore.

'The past is a safe space for the older writer, and so is the future, but stay clear of the cutting-edge slice of contemporary life,' says Beckett. 'You will get the signals slightly wrong. Your dialogue won't sound quite right. You can never write about the contemporary scene quite as well as the people who are young in it.'

He's at one with Sir Alan Ayckbourn, who now writes mostly about the past and the future, saying, 'I can't write about the young any more. I don't understand their world. I don't live in it.'

Francis's last three plays were about the past: *A Modest Little Man*, about Clement Attlee and the 1945 Labour government; *Vodka with Stalin*, about a British woman murdered in Moscow during the purges in the 1930s; and a play about the great satirical songwriter and performer Tom Lehrer, who has just died at 97.

Make England Great

ALAMY

Again is at Upstairs at the Gatehouse in Highgate Village (30th September to 5th October; and 14th to 19th October).

✳ Spinal Tap are back! The greatest, funniest mock rock band in history are appearing in a sequel to their 1984 classic film *This Is Spinal Tap*.

The sequel – *Spinal Tap II: The End Continues* – is out on 12th September, and stars original rockers Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest), David St Hubbins (Michael McKean) and Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer).

To accompany the film, the three stars, together with director Rob Shearer, have brought out a new book, *A Fine Line Between Stupid and Clever: The Story of Spinal Tap* (published 9th September).

The book reveals the stories behind the film's greatest lines – including 'None more black', 'You can't dust for vomit' and 'These go to eleven.'

It also reveals the courtship between actress Jamie Lee Curtis and Christopher Guest (now the 5th Baron Haden-Guest, half-brother of *Oldie* contributor and legendary New York journalist Anthony Haden-Guest).

Guests at their 1984 wedding at Rob Reiner's Beverly Hills house included Jamie's parents, the great Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh, famed for the terrifying shower scene in *Psycho* (1960).

At one moment, Tony Curtis looked round the wedding reception and saw

Tap into America: Spinal Tap at CBGB, New York, 1984

that, for the first time, all six of his children from his three marriages to date (he would marry another three times before his death in 2010, aged 85) were together in one place.

Smiling, Tony Curtis said, 'Bernie Schwartz has been a very busy fellow.'

Bernard Schwartz was the original name of Tony Curtis, born 100 years ago in Harlem, New York, on 3rd June 1925.

'We buried him in his favourite place'

✳ Television was born on 2nd October 1925 in a rented attic room at 22 Frith Street in central London – a milestone in all our lives, whatever one thinks of the results.

TV's presiding genius was a 37-year-old Scottish engineer named John Logie Baird. Plagued by ill health and a series of failed business ventures, he'd come south to further his research into what he then called a 'televisor'. He built a first set out of materials that included an old hatbox, sealing wax and a light bulb.

Not everyone was impressed by Baird's early experiments. One landlord evicted him after he started a fire on the premises.

When Baird went to the offices of the *Daily Express* to promote his invention, the paper's news editor told his secretary, 'There's a lunatic in reception who says he's got a machine for seeing by wireless. Watch out – he may have a razor on him.'

Baird's eureka moment came when he was able successfully to project a blurry but recognisable grey-scale image of a ventriloquist's dummy onto a monitor screen in his Frith Street attic.

A public demonstration of the new device followed three months later, with the world's first colour transmission coming in July 1928.

Baird was a classic example of a British scientist who lost out to better-funded rivals – among them the Radio Corporation of America – when it came to converting his theories into a practical household TV set.

He went on to do secret government wartime work on fibre optics and radar before retiring with his wife and two children to a modest home in Bexhill, where he died in 1946 at 57.

In 2006, Baird's son Malcolm was asked what his father would have done had he known how television would turn out. 'Probably chosen to do something else,' Malcolm said.

✳ Happy 90th birthday to the great Amanda Barrie, who starred as Cleopatra, tantalisingly bathing in asses' milk, in *Carry On Cleo* (1964) and as Alma Halliwell in *Coronation Street*.

Infamy! Amanda Barrie as Cleo in *Carry on Cleo* (1964)

Amanda turns 90 on 14th September. Only five days before, she is addressing the *Oldie* Literary Lunch on her new book, *I'm Still Here: My 90 Years*.

For her own 90th-birthday-party invitation, she dreamt up a brilliant pay-off. Instead of stating a time for 'carriages', she wrote, 'Wheelchairs at 6.30pm.'

Many happy returns!

P G Wodehouse's Plum Lines

To salute the 50th anniversary of P G Wodehouse's death in 1975, at the age of 93, *The Oldie* remembers his great quotes.

'One of those parties where you cough twice before you speak and then decide not to say it after all.' *My Man Jeeves (1919)*

PG WODEHOUSE ESTATE/CAZALET FAMILY

Happy 100th, Winnie-the-Pooh!

Gyles Brandreth salutes A A Milne and the lovable bear he created a century ago

E H Shepard's drawing of Christopher

If I wanted to please the ghost of A A Milne (1882-1956) in the course of writing this piece, I would not mention Winnie-the-Pooh.

In his lifetime, Milne published more than 90 books and plays: 'the bear of little brain' features in just two of them. As a columnist, novelist, playwright, polemicist, Milne wrote millions of words.

But he is really remembered only for 70,000 of them, all produced in the mid-1920s, a hundred years ago: the two Pooh books and the two collections of 'nursery verses', *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*.

His children's books made him rich and famous, but they did not make him happy. In many ways, they ruined his life.

They led to his falling out with his only son – the real Christopher Robin (1920-96) who, as an adult, came to resent 'the empty fame' that came with his name and accused his father of building a career by standing on 'an infant's shoulders' – and, in Milne's eyes, they distorted his literary reputation.

From the death of Queen Victoria until the onset of the First World War, in the pages of the magazine *Punch* (the *Oldie* of its day), AAM, as he was known, was the star attraction.

As a humorist, he was as revered in his time as much as, say, Alan Coren or Craig Brown have been in ours. As a playwright in the 1920s, he was as prolific and popular as Alan Ayckbourn. He had plays running on Broadway and in the West End at the same time. (One of his hits, *The Truth About Blayds,* is currently being revived at the Finborough Theatre in London.)

Between 1904 and 1946, he wrote half a dozen novels, plus a golden-age whodunnit. I love his fiction because he writes so well and he has, to me, an almost mind-blowing access to the secrets of the human heart.

Two People is probably my favourite: it's a story about love – young love, married love, extra-curricular love. P G Wodehouse said it was the one book he was ready to re-read every six months.

As a passionate pacifist (who served on the Somme in the First World War and came to accept the necessity for the Second), Milne reckoned his best book was his anti-war tract, *Peace With Honour*.

Milne is a fascinating figure and I have just spent a fascinating year trying to unravel the complexities of his character and his fraught family relationships. He fell out first with his oldest brother; then with his son and daughter-and-law. His wife fell out with her own brother, too, and with her daughter-in-law, who was also her niece.

It's quite a tale. I wrote my new book to celebrate the 100th birthday of Winnie-the-Pooh – he first appeared in the *London Evening News* on Christmas Eve 1925 in a story called 'The Wrong Sort of Bees'.

Researching the book took me to unexpected places, all a long way from Poohsticks Bridge and the Hundred Acre Wood. I went to Jamaica (where Milne's father was born), to the New York Public Library (where the original Winnie-the-

E H SHEPARD; GETTY

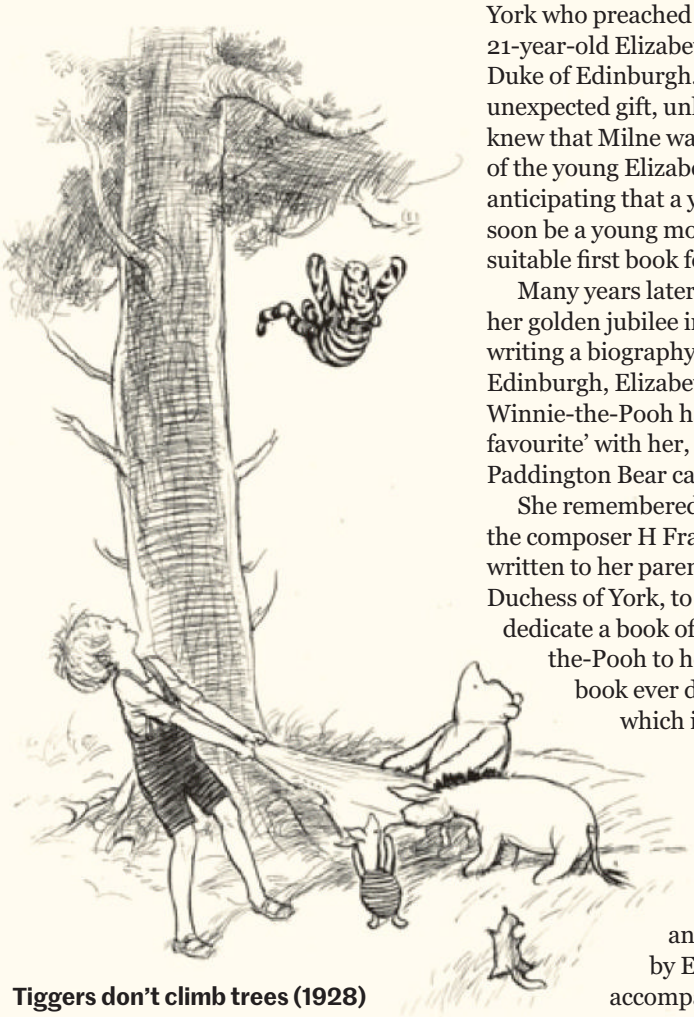
Pooh now lives), to the University of Texas (where they have all Milne's papers – his spidery handwriting is a nightmare to decipher); and to Windsor Castle.

In the Royal Library at Windsor, they have the first edition of Milne's most famous poem. 'Vespers' is the one that begins 'Hush, hush, whisper who dares, Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.'

It's an edition of one, not printed, but written in Milne's own hand and bound in vellum. It is one of the 595 miniature books created for the library of Queen Mary's Dolls' House in the early 1920s.

Milne recalled writing the poem, as a distraction, 'while at work on a play'. When he had 'wasted a morning' on it, he gave it to his wife, 'as one might give a photograph or a Valentine, telling her that if she liked to get it published anywhere, she could stick to the money'.

She sent it to *Vanity Fair* in New York and was delighted to receive 50 dollars for it. In due course, according to Milne, she 'collected one forty-fourth of all the royalties of *When We Were Very Young*, together with her share of various musical and subsidiary rights'. He did not begrudge his gift, but he did point out that it was certainly 'the most expensive present I had ever given her'.



Tiggers don't climb trees (1928)

Poohsticks in *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928)

There is a copy of *When We Were Very Young* in the Royal Collection, too. It is not the very first edition, but the sixth printing of the first edition (the book was a runaway success). Intriguingly, it was given to Princess Elizabeth, later Queen Elizabeth II, as a wedding present in November 1947, signed 'with every good wish, Cyril Ebor'.

Cyril Garbett was the Archbishop of York who preached the sermon at the 21-year-old Elizabeth's marriage to the Duke of Edinburgh. It is a charming but unexpected gift, unless the archbishop knew that Milne was a favourite author of the young Elizabeth – or was anticipating that a young bride might soon be a young mother and here was a suitable first book for a royal nursery.

Many years later, around the time of her golden jubilee in 2002, when I was writing a biography of the Duke of Edinburgh, Elizabeth II told me that Winnie-the-Pooh had been 'a lifelong favourite' with her, long before Paddington Bear came on to the scene.

She remembered that AA Milne and the composer H Fraser-Simson had written to her parents, then Duke and Duchess of York, to ask if they might dedicate a book of the songs of Winnie-the-Pooh to her. 'It was the first book ever dedicated to me, which is rather nice,' she said, beaming.

The book, *The Hums of Pooh*, is at Windsor now. Published in 1929, with 'lyrics by Pooh' and an 'additional lyric by Eeyore', the score is accompanied by little jokes. One song, for example, is to be performed 'With movement, but not too much because of his tub'.

AA Milne's children's books are well-represented in the Royal Collection, but AA Milne, the author and benefactor of many charities (during his lifetime and in his will), never received the royal recognition he might have hoped for.

Playwright Somerset Maugham, his contemporary, became a Companion of Honour not long before Milne died – and Milne resented that. He resented the fact that his life's work was not seen in the round. 'It's all about Pooh,' he sighed.

But it's all about Pooh for a reason – which perhaps he did not recognise. AA Milne had a happy childhood and in the Pooh books the best of all our childhoods stands still. In the Hundred Acre Wood, Milne created an enchanted place that, whether young or old, you can visit, and feel safe in, at any time.

The French poet Baudelaire said, 'Genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will, childhood equipped now with an adult's ability to express itself, and with the analytical mind that

Bear hug: A A Milne and Christopher Robin, 1926

enables it to bring order to the sum of experience, involuntarily amassed.'

AA Milne was a witty columnist, a prolific and popular playwright and a fine novelist. What makes him unique is that, in his two books about Winnie-the-Pooh, he created a world unlike any other – a world of good humour and good heart, a world of warmth and kindness and generosity. Those two books are our passport to that world.

Gyles Brandreth's Somewhere, a Boy and a Bear *is out on 25th September*

Storm in a D cup

My contribution to world literature? A book about Page 3 Girls

MATTHEW NORMAN

Even writers as lowly as this one (I'm hardly Nabokov reincarnate, am I) are self-doubting souls who crave approval to dampen the neurosis.

So it was that a recent enquiry from my son brought a frisson of relief. His partner, reported Louis, was interested in a book I once wrote (technically, ghost wrote).

'That's nice,' I said. 'Would he like to read it?'

'He couldn't begin to imagine anything worse,' said Louis sweetly. 'He wants to know if you were responsible for the title.'

I was not, I confessed. *Storm in a 'D' Cup: Page Three Profiles* was thus entitled before my recruitment to transform the prose of one Christine Peake – the model responsible for this magnum opus about her topless sorority – into something approximating English.

'Ah well,' said Louis with trademark sincerity, 'it's not as if you needed that to define your life's work. You have QuizUp. You'll always be remembered for QuizUp.'

Now defunct, QuizUp was once the planet's most popular quizzing app, with millions of global users competing against one another across myriad categories.

In January 2014, during what with hindsight may have been a mild nervous breakdown, I was the world number one in general knowledge.

This distinction was achieved less through depth of knowledge, let alone intellect, than through the squandering of time and money. Playing for 14 hours a day, and paying a few quid an hour to boost the points tally, made me the Novak Djokovic of pointless trivia.

Or rather, perhaps, its Patrick Rafter, the Australian serve-volleyer who spent a single week as tennis-world number one in July, 1999.

But one week is all it takes. When Mr Rafter departs this life, the first paragraph of his obituary will include the words 'former world number one'. Save for the pedantic detail that I couldn't possibly warrant an obit, mine will do the same.

Sensing that the borderline between harmless leisure pursuit and psychiatric disorder had been breached, I departed QuizUp at the top and with an oath: henceforth my time would be lavished on less cretinous activities, such as staring catatonically at a pot plant.

Within days of that vow, a friend rang for assistance with what he correctly prefaced as a matter of the very gravest import. On the quiz site Sporcle, he was struggling to recall who Ray Reardon beat in the 1978 World Snooker Championship final.

Perrie Mans, I replied, the long-potting specialist from South Africa. Thanking me, he bade farewell in ignorance of the calamity newly unleashed.

From that day, Sporcle has dominated a grotesque portion of each day. I console myself that being able to remember all 50 US state capitals, or the first line of the periodic table, or the cast of *Crossroads*, is a way of warding off dementia.

But that's utter cobblers. Obsessive quizzing, that modern phenomenon, is a displacement activity. What is being displaced is anything that could remotely justify the term 'a life'.

Last week brought a brutal epiphany, when clicking the 'random quiz' button produced something designed by a crazed genius to ridicule that world-number-one status.

> I transformed the prose of this magnum opus about her topless sorority

Without challenging the searing wordplay wit of *Storm in a 'D' Cup*, its title was arresting enough.

'Top 25 Cities of Papua New Guinea on a Map', it read. 'Can you name,' it asked below in a mild flirtation with tautology, 'the 25 most populous cities of Papua New Guinea? Test your knowledge … and compare your score to others.'

Testing my knowledge was the easy bit. My knowledge of Papua New Guinea, as the briefest of tests revealed, began with the vague memory that Prince Philip was worshipped there as a god, and that certain tribal males wear, for whatever reason, the penis sheath.

It ended with the naming of one city, the capital, Port Moresby.

Comparing my score (four per cent) with others proved more painful. The average was 46 per cent, or a dozen cities.

Some 80 per cent named Lae, two thirds Wewak and nearly half Popondetta. Admittedly, Ramu Sugar evaded all but 16.2 per cent. But, given that Ramu Sugar is a company, not a city, a hit rate of one seven was impressive enough.

In almost 62 years of dismal failure across every sphere of human existence, never have I felt so inadequate. The one achievement that had earned a dash of filial respect, however sarcastic, was rendered worthless.

Perhaps it's down to no more than a natural fading of powers over time. Pat Rafter wouldn't look too clever if he resumed his career at 53. Twice a Wimbledon finalist long ago, he'd lose 1-6, 1-6, 0-6 in a first-round qualifier to the sheath-clad world-ranked 9,736 from Popondetta.

But his status as a former number one is set in stone, where mine has been exposed as a pitiful sham. Barring an unlikely reprint of *Storm in a 'D' Cup*, that imaginary obit seems destined to be a blank white space.

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OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WAS
being sent to Coventry?

Before you could be 'ghosted' or, worse still, 'cancelled', this was the term people would use when they embarked on a systematic denial of your existence.

Of course, back in those pre-internet days, this would mean pointedly ignoring your physical presence. If you walked into a room, others would ignore you. Speak and no one would reply. In fact, they would carry on as if you didn't exist.

The phrase is a particularly British idiom. But how on earth did a perfectly normal Midlands city like Coventry become a term for social ostracisation?

It is believed to originate from the Civil War, when Royalist prisoners of war were imprisoned there. Coventry was a strongly Parliamentarian stronghold and the locals didn't take kindly to hosting their monarchist enemies.

As a result, they refused to have anything to do with them and treated them as if they didn't exist. So, if you supported the King and were sent to Coventry, you knew what to expect.

The phrase then entered the English language, where it has languished ever since.

In recent years, though, with the growth of 'cancel culture' and the ever-expanding encroachment of American-English idioms, the practice of 'sending people to Coventry' is seen as increasingly archaic and irrelevant.

There are scores of younger people who have never even heard the phrase and will walk away on hearing it, baffled at what poor old Coventry has done to deserve those whom nobody wants to acknowledge.

A few years ago, the son of a friend of my mother's phoned her up and announced in somewhat jubilant fashion, 'My boss has just told me I'm being sent to Coventry!'

'Painfully visible, and entirely ignored'

When she put the phone down, Mum immediately rang to tell me. 'Poor Ian,' she said. 'He seems to be taking it frightfully well, but I wonder what he's done to upset them all so much.'

It transpired he had been promoted to be Midlands Regional Manager, at the Coventry branch.

Catherine Cavendish

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS
the talking stage?

The talking stage is part of the lexicon of Generation Z – those who are now teenagers or young adults.

It refers to the early, ill-defined stages of romantic courtship, when young adults are getting to know each other and detecting the first tingling of romantic attraction, but are not yet dating.

While many of us oldies could meet potential partners at the workplace, possibilities for romance can be more limited for Gen Z.

Working from home is now the norm; workplace flirting and after-work boozing are frowned on. Getting blind drunk at the office Christmas party and snogging the nearest available person is no longer an available or acceptable option.

For today's young romance-seekers, meeting a potential love interest via the internet or a friend of a friend, and then talking is often the most practical approach.

Of course, talking is not a new relationship stage invented by Gen Z: it is just a renaming of the getting-to-know-each-other phase of a relationship, experienced by would-be lovers since the dawn of time.

In modern life, this might involve messaging on social media, FaceTime calls or just hanging out together, say for a coffee or a snack.

The benefit of the talking stage is that it frees the aspirant couple from the burden of expectation and pressure that can come with the label 'dating'. Maybe you'll get into a relationship; maybe you won't. You're just talking and exploring your feelings and uncertain where the relationship may end up.

The talking stage typically lasts no more than a few weeks and exclusivity is not a given, as one might be talking to several people at the same time. If things go well, couples move onto the dating stage and a full relationship.

But you might discover that you have little in common and the talking stage will end in failure, leading to the possibility of one party being 'ghosted' – a brutal prompt to move on.

Other Gen Z phrases describe the later stages of partnered life – such as the BAE stage, a term of endearment meaning 'before anyone else'; and the delulu stage, when one party becomes delusional with unrealistic expectations.

Sadly, as experienced by so many of us, a large number of relationships will in time reach the breaking-up stage, aka the G2G Stage – G2G being Gen Z text-speak for 'got to go'.

Joel Hancock

Dad's lyrical genius

Danielle Kretzmer-Lockwood salutes her father, Herbert Kretzmer, writer of *Les Mis*

My father, once described as 'the most successful lyricist you've never heard of', was born a century ago, on 5th October 1925, in a small town in the Orange Free State, South Africa. It was something he never forgot.

Each time he received a recognition for his work, he would always say, with a big smile, 'Who would have thought it, for a boy from Kroonstad?' Then he would reflect for a moment; he had come a long way – and he knew it.

Settling in London in 1954, Herbie (1925-2020) pursued twin careers as a newspaperman ('my day job') and a lyricist. He always considered himself first and foremost a reporter, feature writer and critic.

Joining the *Daily Express* in 1962, he later became its senior drama critic, a post he held for 18 years, covering some 2,500 first nights. He then joined the *Daily Mail* as TV critic, winning two national press awards.

As a feature writer, his interviews with illustrious figures such as Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, John Steinbeck and Truman Capote were published in 2014 in his book *Snapshots: Encounters with Twentieth-Century Legends*.

His career spanned the '60s cultural revolution, during which he wrote lyrics for the BBC's groundbreaking satirical show *That Was the Week That Was*.

In 1965, Herbie first met Charles Aznavour through his agent, David Platz.

He recalled, 'Charles and I spent two days at his home going over his recordings. One song that particularly interested me was *Hier Encore*, which I renamed *Yesterday, When I Was Young*.

'When the lyric was finished, the song was submitted to the likes of Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Andy Williams, but they all turned it down. It was suggested that no one in America, especially in show business, wanted to be thought of as no longer young.'

Herbie wrote the lyrics for *She*, the theme song for the 1974 TV series *Seven Faces of Woman*. The song was a hit and stayed at number one for four weeks. As with several of my father's songs, it had a second life. In 1999, Elvis Costello introduced it to a younger audience by rerecording it for the film *Notting Hill*.

Often referred to as a translator, Herbie said, 'A real translator is the faithful servant of the original text, but I aimed to be faithful to the mood and the sense of it. Translation does not interest me – the word makes me shiver.'

In fact, Herbie's words have been translated into more than 22 languages for the musical *Les Misérables*, for which he won a Tony award.

In tune: Danielle and Herbert Kretzmer

In 1984, Herbie's 60th year, he had gone to meet producer Cameron Mackintosh, in the hope he would back an updated version of his 1964 musical *Our Man Crichton*, co-written with Dave Lee.

Cameron declined but, as Herbie was leaving, asked, 'Why didn't you continue writing lyrics?' Herbie listed a number of songs he had written, including *She* and *Yesterday, When I Was Young*. These two songs, it turned out, were among Cameron's favourites.

'Six months later, when he was stuck for a lyricist for *Les Misérables*, Cameron remembered that snatch of conversation between the sofa and the door. In those 15 yards, my life literally changed for ever,' Herbie recalled.

He went on to work with Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson (ABBA) as lyricist for *Kristina*, a musical that met with critical acclaim at Carnegie Hall and the Royal Albert Hall. He was appointed Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government, and in 2011 was honoured with an OBE.

Herbie was the coolest, most liberal father anyone could wish for, and I valued his friendship. He had profound wisdom – the incredible ability to see with clarity the truth in any situation.

When he listened, he really listened, and you can't give anyone a greater gift than that.

When he spoke – and of course he had a way with words – it was thoughtful, measured and always from the heart. He had a great sense of humour and we laughed a lot.

During the 60 years he spent in London before his death at 95, he became a true English gentleman, despite never losing his South African twang. He was always humble, positively shunning the limelight. He loved sport and always supported England, even when England was playing against South Africa.

He was generous in spirit; kind to everyone. He loved his family; he adored his grandsons and worried about us all endlessly. I learnt from him everything I needed to know to become a Jewish mother!

Perhaps better known for his more melancholy ballads, my father had a lot of fun with his lyrics too. He wrote the Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren songs *Goodness Gracious Me* and *Bangers and Mash*, and *Kinky Boots*, recorded by Patrick Macnee and Honor Blackman.

His poems delighted his two grandsons. We loved one called 'Feet':

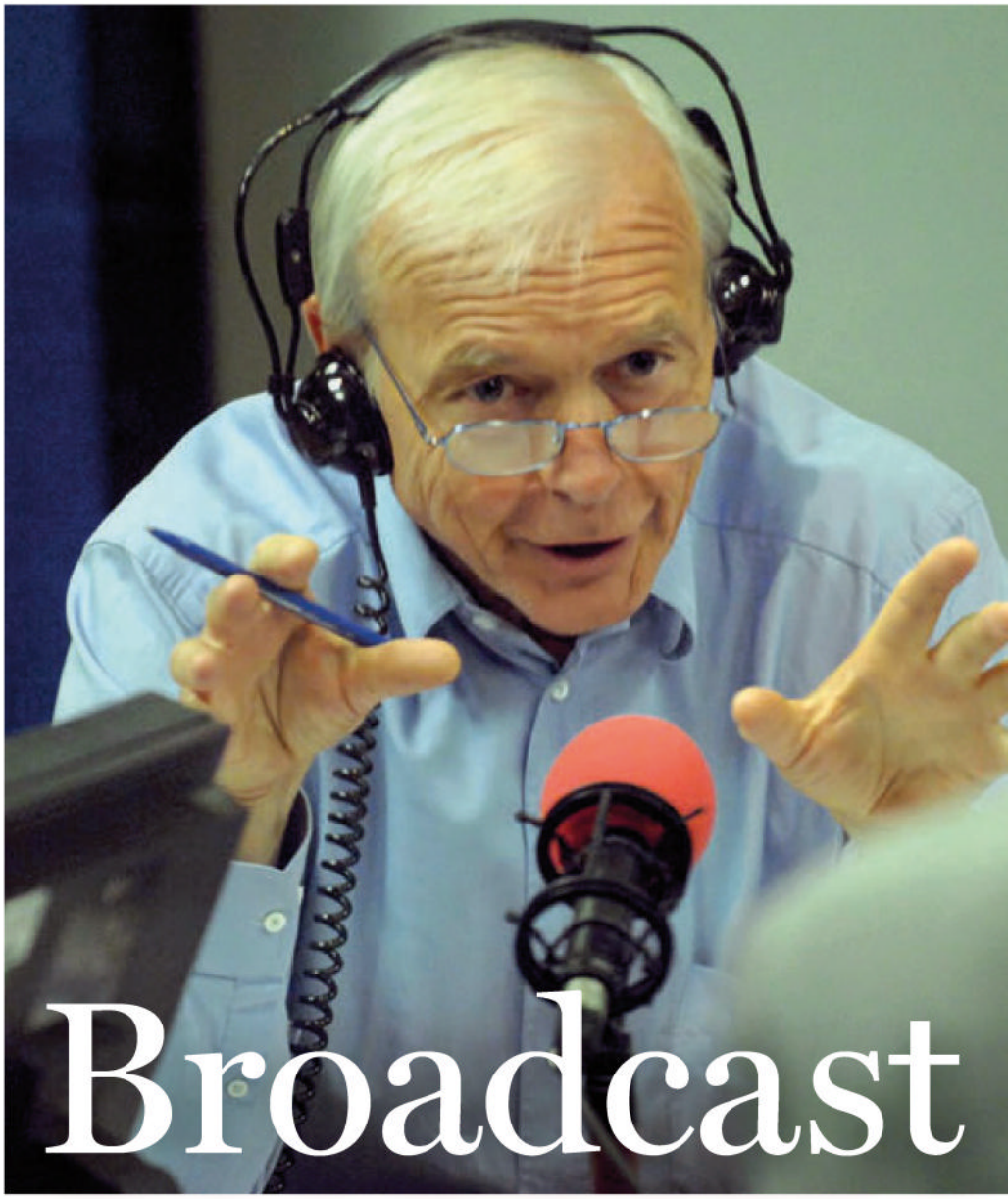
'Centipedes have a hundred feet.
Most animals have four.
I (and you) make do with two
And have no need for more.

Sir Edmund climbed up Everest
With Tenzing at his side.
Each stood upon his own two feet
And saw the world spread wide.

Neil Armstrong walked upon the moon.
Two feet were all he needed.
Yes, men have gone much further than
Any centipede did.'

Broadcast

Top tips on how to do an interview – and how to speak proper. By *John Humphrys*



It's six years since I presented my last *Today* programme.

Free at last after 33 years from the tyranny of the alarm screeching at 3.30am. Free to fling aside the newspapers, ignore the news websites, even switch off Radio 4. And then settle down to a leisurely breakfast with Radio 3 in the background and the novel I'd started the night before, knowing I didn't have to be in bed by 8.30.

The freedom lasted for two days. It would have been shorter had the second day not been a Sunday. By Monday, I was beginning to relate to the alcoholic who believes he can handle just the occasional bottle.

The Americans have a phrase for what happened to me. I became a 'Monday-morning quarterback'.

It took about a week to establish my new routine. The most obvious effect? It has massively enhanced my IQ.

Nothing to do with intelligence, of course. It stands for 'Irritation Quotient'. They say Einstein's IQ was about 160. I would humbly suggest that my own score puts him in the shade. That's because, unlike the intelligence version which seems to be established at birth, my own IQ has been growing with the passage of time.

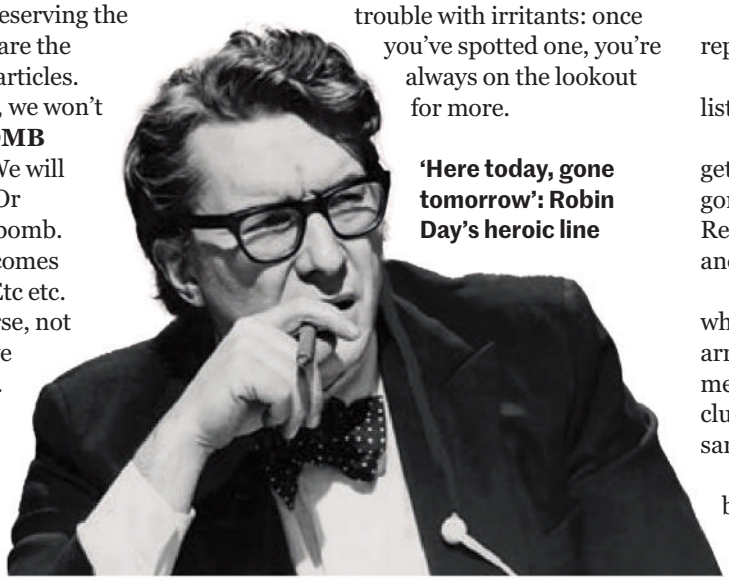
I must thank Amol Rajan, an otherwise excellent interviewer, for his contribution. Amol seems to assume that the most important words in a spoken sentence – the words deserving the maximum emphasis – are the definite and indefinite articles.

Come Armageddon, we won't have a **NUCLEAR BOMB** dropping on London. We will have **A** nuclear bomb. Or possibly **THE** nuclear bomb. The prime minister becomes **THE** prime minister. Etc etc.

And Amol is, of course, not alone – as you may have discovered for yourself.

It is a common affliction. So is another great irritant: the endless use of otiose words and phrases.

Many presenters (and contributors) find it impossible to begin a question or answer without the meaningless 'I mean…' and pepper it with 'you know's. I once counted seven 'y'know's in one sentence from one contributor on *Today*. But that's the trouble with irritants: once you've spotted one, you're always on the lookout for more.



'Here today, gone tomorrow': Robin Day's heroic line

And then there's the increasingly passionate relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

'Thank you SO much for having me on your wonderful programme,' gushes the overwhelmed guest.

'Oh no … thank YOU for coming,' replies the equally enamoured host.

'For God's sake!' shouts the irritated listener. 'Just get on with it!'

So why don't they? And why didn't we get all this guff in the days of the long-gone broadcasting titans – the Brian Redheads, Robin Days, Alastair Burnets and Brian Waldens?

If they had a weakness, it was for the whisky bottle. Brian's mood when he arrived to present *Today* could be measured by how late he'd stayed at his club the night before. Burnet had the same weakness. So did David Frost.

The floor manager on his Sunday breakfast programme once told me he knew what kind of show to expect by how much of David's first coffee

news

ended up in the saucer. A reasonably full cup meant smooth sailing.

In my very early presenting days on *Today*, I often enjoyed a pint or several the night before, but only once did I turn up for *Today* with a serious hangover.

I managed (I think) to conceal it for the first hour of the programme – but it kicked in during an interview with a leading politician who was in the radio car. I realised halfway through that I'd forgotten his name.

So when *The Oldie* invited me to suggest some guidelines for the new breed of broadcasters, the first two were obvious:

Booze is bad and smarm is sad

I was rescued from my own hangover crisis by my alert producer bawling the politician's name in my ear.

And that takes us smoothly to the next lesson.

Value your producer

All presenters of live radio and TV news programmes need three things: a microphone, a pair of headphones and an alert producer speaking into them.

Of the 4,000 or so interviews I did on *Today*, the one that earned me the most plaudits was with my boss, the BBC's Director-General George Entwistle. A few hours after the 2012 interview, he resigned – all because of my fearless interrogation. Or so it was reported.

Very flattering – and only half-true at best. The reason for the interview was a *Newsnight* report the night before that wrongly implicated the former Tory Party treasurer Lord McAlpine in a child-abuse so-called exposure.

Obviously a huge scandal. I was praised for forcing George to admit that he hadn't bothered even to watch *Newsnight*, let alone get properly briefed on the scandal. But neither had I.

Talk about going naked into the conference chamber…

Mercifully, my editor, Ceri Thomas, was properly briefed and he was in my ear throughout the interview telling me everything I needed to know. Thanks, Ceri.

Hold your nerve

The gravest charge a politician can level against an interviewer is that he or she is so politically biased the audience has no trust. That's what the Tory Chancellor Nigel Lawson accused Brian Redhead of in an interview on the state of the economy. Lawson was getting increasingly cross with Brian's relentless accusations.

In the end, he snapped. He accused him of having 'been a Labour voter all [his] life'.

I winced at that – if only because it was true. But Brian didn't. He instantly snapped back, 'Do you think we should have a one-minute silence now in this interview – one for you to apologise for daring to suggest you know how I vote and secondly perhaps in memory of monetarism, which you have now discarded?'

Lawson retired hurt.

Spanish Inquisition: John Humphrys interviews a victim on *Today*

A question of honour

God knows how many interviews I did with Tony Blair.

The one I remember best is the one I screwed up. Inevitably. It was about his disastrous decision to invade Iraq even though the world and its auntie knew Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction.

After the damning Chilcot Inquiry savaged Blair in 2016, I made my own attempt on *Today* to get him to beg for forgiveness. Of course he didn't. Instead he told me, 'I only know what I believe.'

At which point I should have said something like 'What you believe isn't worth a fly's fart! It's what you know from the available evidence that matters.'

And I knew what he'd been told by his intelligence experts because I'd had my own briefing from a very senior intelligence source. And that's what I should have said. But I didn't, because I'd promised my source I would never disclose that I'd had the briefing.

Honourable of me? Maybe. Stupid of me? You bet.

Humour helps

This applies equally to interviewer and victim: in this case, Robin Day and the Defence Secretary John Nott in 1982. Robin described Nott as a 'here today, gone tomorrow' politician.

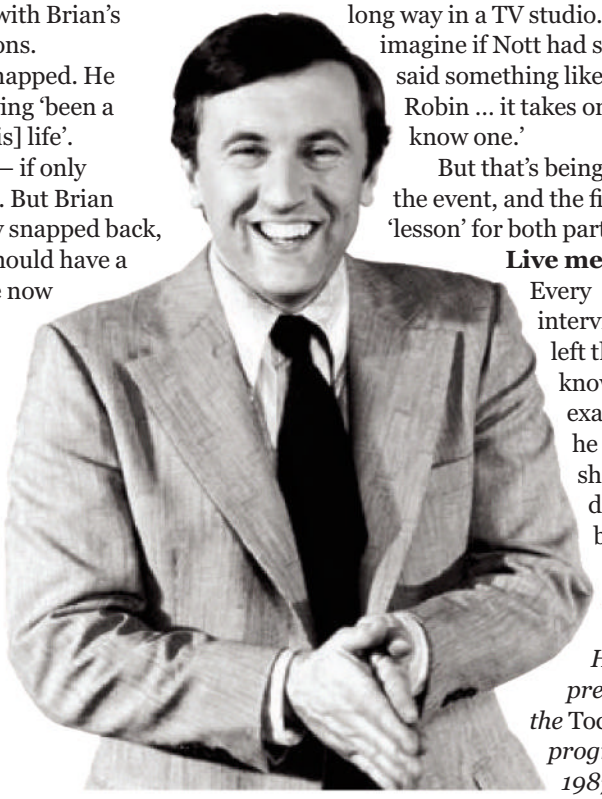
Nott lost it, tore off his microphone and stormed out of the studio. Robin was the hero. Nott was the loser. His career never really recovered.

And the lesson? A little bit of self-deprecating humour can go an awfully long way in a TV studio. Just imagine if Nott had smiled and said something like 'Thanks Robin … it takes one to know one.'

But that's being wise after the event, and the final 'lesson' for both parties is:

Live means live

Every interviewer has left the studio knowing exactly what he or she should have done. But by then it's too late.



Full of spirits: David Frost, 1971

GETTY

John Humphrys presented the Today *programme, 1987-2019*

Don’t worry. Do nothing

Action is *not* the best policy. Dynamic Inertia has solved all *Matthew Fort*’s problems

‘Work is not always required. There is such a thing as sacred idleness,’ wrote the Reverend George MacDonald, Scottish minister and author of those Victorian children’s classics *At the Back of the North Wind* (1868) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872).

Not the kind of thing you expect from a vicar – particularly a Scottish one.

Idleness, whether sacred or not, is all very good as far as it goes. But it doesn’t go far enough.

I’ve nothing against idleness, but it does suggest a degree of sloth, self-indulgence and selfishness. We need to weaponise idleness. We need Dynamic Inertia.

Dynamic Inertia is based on the simple principle that doing nothing is often as creative, effective and productive as doing something, and almost invariably less contentious.

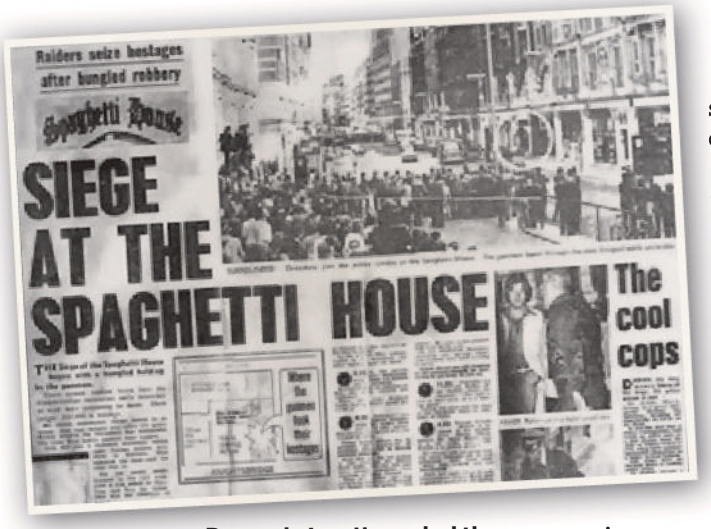
Physical inertia is to be deplored – it’s indulgent and tedious. But inertia of the body is not the same as inertia of the mind.

You can be inert in body while your mind is in full flow. In 1679, James Weldon, baker to the Earl of Devonshire, wrote to John Aubrey, the biographer of philosopher Thomas Hobbes, ‘He was never idle; his thoughts were always working’ – the very definition of Dynamic Inertia in all but name.

The actual expression was first used much later, in very different circumstances, 50 years ago, during the Spaghetti House Siege, which took place between 28th September and 3rd October 1975.

After a robbery of the Knightsbridge restaurant went wrong, the three crooks took the staff hostage for six days in a storeroom. Two gave themselves up; their leader, Franklin Davies, shot himself in the stomach. They were all jailed.

One of the negotiating team, when asked to describe the state of the situation mid-siege, replied, ‘We’ve entered a state of Dynamic Inertia’ – ie doing nothing, watching and waiting.


Raiders seize hostages after bungled robbery

Spaghetti House

SIEGE AT THE SPAGHETTI HOUSE

The cool cops

Dynamic Inertia ended the Spaghetti House siege 50 years ago

The siege ended peacefully, with all the hostages saved.

By contrast, remember the end of the Waco Siege in 1993, when the invasion of the compound by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms ended in the deaths of 86 people. Dynamic Inertia might have produced a very different outcome.

Europe would have been a whole lot happier if Napoleon had been content with the quiet life on Elba rather than legging it and having a last hurrah at Waterloo, with 50,000 casualties.

Vladimir Putin and the rest of the world would be better off if he had practised Dynamic Inertia rather than invading Ukraine.

We’re encouraged to believe that the world belongs to the action heroes; that action is superior to inaction; that action is a manly kind of thing; and decision-makers, risk-takers, business dynamos and political masters are the kinds of people we should look up to.

We elevate the Elon Musks, Jeff Bezoses and Mark Zuckerbergs of this world. They are held to be admirable because they have built empires – irrespective of whether the empires they have built have actually benefited us more than they’ve benefited them.

Actions, we’re assured, speak louder than words. Well, do they really? Their cacophony often drowns out the still, small voice of calm.

The internet was a whole lot better in the quiet, theoretical stage than it’s turned out to be in its Hydra-headed, trolling, fake-news, narcissistic, dreary social-media reality. Sir Tim Berners-Lee should have dreamed his dream and stopped at that.

Dynamic Inertia is just as important in our own humdrum lives. Every year, between Christmas and New Year, I go through all the papers that have accumulated in my in-tray over the previous 12 months.

All those matters at the time demanded my immediate attention. I was threatened with dire consequences if I didn’t deal with them right away. Some called for thought and consideration above and beyond the quotidian.

The demands piled up: the renewal of the household insurance; in-bond wine offers; missives from the local council; notifications of building proposals; gas/ electricity/ water/ phone tariff changes; parking fines; threats from the Inland Revenue … the tedious silt of modern life.

But the world progressed in its ineluctable way whether or not I dealt with these ‘matters of urgency’. And so, come that pause between the years, into the wastepaper basket go letter after letter, warning after warning, notification after notification.

Each one of those letters, warnings and notifications represents an investment of my time, energy and thought. Or they would do if I had paid due attention to them.

Instead, thanks to Dynamic Inertia, I have been freed from hours of pointless activity.

And I have turned my energies to more productive matters – such as writing this article.

Matthew Fort is author of Sweet Honey, Bitter Lemons: Travels in Sicily on a Vespa

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In the club

A new book by *Andrew Jones* captures the secret corners of London's clubs. Photos by *Laura Hodgson*

The Three Clubs **(1953) by Osbert Lancaster.**

Pictured are the Athenaeum (*left*, by Decimus Burton, 1830), the Travellers (*centre*, by Charles Barry, 1832) and the Reform Club (*right*, by Charles Barry, 1841). Note the Parthenon frieze round the Athenaeum and the statue of Athena – goddess of wisdom.

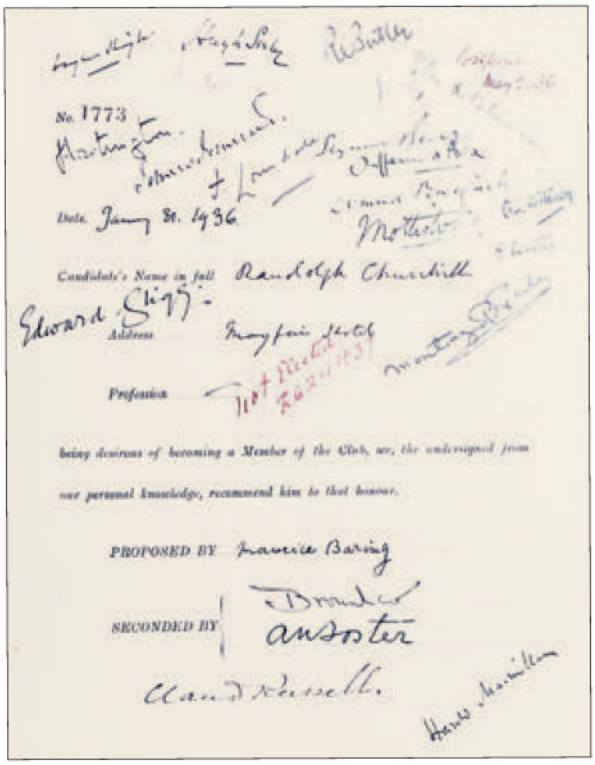
The club, set up for 'Literary and Scientific men and followers of the Fine Arts', is popular with academics and the clergy.

Harcourt, Rosebery, Gladstone and Morley, Liberal titans, at the National Liberal Club, built by Alfred Waterhouse in 1887. In the 1960s, the club had its own post office and barber's shop

Kaiser Bill in the Naughty Boys' Corner, Cavalry and Guards Club, Piccadilly, founded in 1810

***Left*: smoking coats in the cigar room, East India Club, St James's Square, built by Charles Fish in 1866. Colonial relics include a chainmail jerkin from the Battle of Kano in 1903. Cecil, the club hippo, is in the bedroom corridor**

***Above:* the library at Brooks's, founded in 1762. George Knapton's portraits of Dilettanti Society members, dressed as Turks, saints, Romans and gondoliers.**


No. 1773
Date. January 31. 1936
Candidate's Name in full Randolph Churchill
Address
Profession
being desirous of becoming a Member of the Club, we, the undersigned from our personal knowledge, recommend him to that honour.
PROPOSED BY Maurice Baring
SECONDED BY Anderton

***Left:* candidate's page for Randolph Churchill, Winston's son, in the loos of the Beefsteak Club, founded 1876. Signatures include Harold Macmillan's (*bottom right*). The Sublime Society of Beefsteaks was founded in 1735.**

Left: **the bookplate of the University Women's Club, Mayfair, founded in 1886. The building was designed by Thomas Henry Wyatt.**

Decimus Burton's South Library in the Athenaeum (1830). The club has 70,000 volumes. The books rise across three tiers, linked by Burton's stairs. Members' relics include Michael Faraday's wheelchair and a chair from Charles Dickens's Swiss chalet in Gad's Hill, Kent, where he is said to have written *Great Expectations* (1861).

Right: **gout stool at the Savile Club, founded 1868, now housed in a rococo Mayfair mansion.**

Bar of the Garrick Club, Covent Garden, founded in honour of actor David Garrick in 1831. Members' portraits include those of Richard Briers, Alastair Sim, Leslie Howard, Matthew Macfadyen, Damian Lewis and Benedict Cumberbatch.

A Georgian club ballot box in the Academy Club, Soho, founded in 1989 by Andrew Edmunds and Auberon Waugh, a founding columnist at *The Oldie*. The rules of the club, housed in a 1719 Soho building, were laid down by Waugh: poets were banned and 'Cigarette smoking is encouraged'.

If your phone goes off in the club, you have to buy champagne for everyone.

The London Club *by Andrew Jones and Laura Hodgson is out now*

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Ruby Lewis cleans up after her bosses' dirty habits – from sex to booze to extreme cheese consumption

What the cleaner saw

Forty-five years ago, in 'A Day's Work', Truman Capote wrote a brilliant essay about a day in New York, following his cleaner, Mary Sanchez, around her other clients' homes.

The cleaner knows EVERYTHING about her clients, he discovers.

In the essay, published in *Music for Chameleons* (1980), Mary is an admirable figure. She even prays for her clients in a little Catholic church on Lexington Avenue and 86th Street:

'Please, Lord, help Mr Trask to stop boozing and get his job back. Please, Lord, don't leave Miss Shaw a bookworm and an old maid; she ought to bring your children into this world…

'And please don't let Mr Smith's family send him to that retirement home; he don't want to go, he cries all the time.'

A new BBC1 series, *The Guest*, also looks into the strangely close connections between a cleaner and her boss.

Working as a cleaner, I too met a variety of characters who insisted they lived in different worlds to the ones they invited me into.

One, a German bariatric named Benjamin tried convincing me his weight issue and slow gait were down to his sitting in his upstairs office, working at his three computer screens 23 hours a day, seven days a week.

The kitchen facts – he'd clearly been cooking and eating everything with cream and cheese again; not to mention towers of takeaway boxes and crates of empty booze bottles – suggested otherwise.

I liked to think the small camera in one corner of his bedroom was a simple security device, rather than anything else. When I'd find a pair of women's panties or empty lube tubes under the bed, I very much liked to think the camera, whatever its purpose, was broken.

The note he'd posted on his back door told a more accurate truth: 'Slow, fat bastard lives here. Please be patient.'

In the next village to him lived Josie, a small skittish Scottish divorcee who was either dashing upstairs for another critical Zoom meeting or rushing out to meet a client for a face-to-face one. Her penchant for all things girly extended to a pink tassel apron with 'Kitchen Princess' emblazoned across it in sequins.

In the know: cleaning lady Hilda Ogden (Jean Alexander) in *Coronation Street*

When she wasn't in a vital meeting, Josie donned her royal apron to prepare her meals.

To complement her healthy vegan diet and eco-friendly cleaning products, she washed down vitamin and CBD tablets with cans of Monster or Red Bull and rented out her spare room to a chubby, pasty-faced chef who smoked copious amounts of weed.

'His job is a strenuous one,' she explained when I commented on the smell. 'We all have our little foibles.'

One of Josie's little foibles – until she bought an air fryer – was her forte: pan boiling something – anything – up with

lentils until it resembled a mush. Every week, I'd have to scrape off the burnt spills from her hob and vacuum escaped legumes from her kitchen floor.

A few weeks into my working for her, Josie gushed about her purchase of the air fryer as an absolute game-changer.

Now, apparently, she could not only make lentil slop with less spillage but, to judge by the leftovers she plated on the side, she could also dry roast vegan sausages until they resembled dog turds.

I was very welcome to help myself, if I wanted to. Yum.

If I didn't (which I didn't), she wouldn't be offended but would instead tell me she would plate up for pasty face.

He seemed to be permanently hungry, but lacked the energy to cook when he was home. 'He would stay shut in his room all night, watching TV, if I didn't tempt him out with nibbles. All those hours he works, poor thing.'

She was either tolerant or naive – I'll give her that.

Josie also thought she was a good driver. This conclusion came from her fortnightly weekend dashes up to Edinburgh to see friends and family.

'Oh, it's nothing for me to drive hours at a stretch,' she said. 'It's become second nature.'

One weekend, she generously invited to treat me – by way of an apology for what had happened during my first visit to her place (more about that later) – to a visit to the Manchester IKEA.

Foolishly, I had admitted I'd never been to one. She had insisted I must.

She had recently bought a new Mercedes.

Wow.

Think posh, shiny, fast car, driven by a menopausal woman on acid.

Was she on acid? As she stalled, started, braked, slowed, accelerated, hurtled, meandered, forgot to indicate, beeped and cursed, a thought crossed my mind: maybe she'd shared a spliff or two with pasty-face after sharing breakfast nibbles.

She had three speaking satnavs on the go – one on her phone, another on the built-in GPS, a third on a portable tom-tom – all just a few seconds out of sync with each other and all with automated American accents.

Another day I never want to repeat is the first day I went to Josie's – it became the reason for my treat day. She had gone away the night before, had left her key in a safe spot, and sent me a series of text messages explaining a few important tasks.

Ned, her odd-job man, a retired neighbour, had recently replumbed her sink. Apparently, it dripped a bit when draining – so please could I be aware.

Despite my awareness, I flooded her kitchen with dirty washing-up water. A label stuck to her dishwasher read 'Dangerous. Do not use. Ned – Please mend.'

Ned had also replaced the lock on her front door, the one I had a key for. Apparently, it could be a bit sticky and might require jiggling.

Ready to leave later than expected because I'd been mopping her kitchen floor again, and despite gentle and then frantic jiggling, I couldn't unlock it. Checking the back door, I could find no key for it.

Trying to call Josie, I failed to connect, sent a message and waited.

> The cleaner knows EVERYTHING about her clients, Truman Capote discovers

And waited.

Forty minutes of waiting later and Josie called me, explaining where the back-door key was.

Having let myself out, I posted that key through the letter box and sat in my car. I lit a cigarette, inhaled, exhaled and relaxed.

Searching for my phone, I realised I had left it on Josie's dining table. Risking the front-door key's working from the outside, I used it to re-enter the house. Leaving the door wide open, I walked through and retrieved my phone. Just as I was about to leave, I heard a strange noise upstairs.

Investigating, I saw bird feathers first. Then I heard a cat. Then I saw and heard a bird head-butting the landing window.

Then a man's voice came from behind me. 'It's me – Ned. Everything all right in there?'

Never had I been so terrified – as I turned to see a retired neighbour-cum-rubbish plumber-cum-rubbish locksmith wielding a screwdriver in my direction.

I raced home – leaving behind Ned with all his re-repairs, a feral cat, a panicked starling and a messy stair carpet lined with bird feathers – quicker than you can say sink plunger.

And yay! Little did I know I still had that wonderful treat day to look forward to in recompense.

I know how Truman Capote's cleaner felt about her clients – but I'm not sure I will pray for mine any time soon.

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Poor country mice

Annabel Venning wishes she'd never left London. It would have been the ideal place for her rural children to start their careers

Poor Gen Z. Their education blighted by Covid, the idea of ever owning property a distant dream and now, just as they try to step on the first rung of the career ladder, it has been blowtorched by a toxic combination of tax and National Insurance rises, economic gloom and the insidious march of AI nabbing their jobs.

The recruitment company Adzuna has linked a 32-per-cent drop in vacancies for junior roles – graduate and non-graduate – since 2022 to the launch of ChatGPT that year, while BT and Amazon have decided to cut recruitment of humans in favour of AI.

As the parent of two Gen Z-ers – one midway through university, another a year out of it – I feel for all their generation, and for the employers who would dearly love to take on new talent if they weren't being clobbered by new taxes and regulations.

Many have scaled back their expansion plans thanks to Reeves's raids, and that hits those seeking entry-level jobs hardest as they are seen as riskier hires.

And there's another factor, seldom mentioned. Getting a graduate job may be tougher than ever – and it's tougher still if you don't live in London,

If I had a penny for every time my son sighs, 'If only we lived in London,' I'd have been able to buy him a penthouse by now.

We moved out of London in 2003 to give our children a bucolic, Blytonesque upbringing surrounded by fields and hedgerows, and more affordable childcare than in the capital.

Although at first I missed London savagely, country life really did deliver: my children grew up surrounded by greenery and wildlife, picnicking in bluebell woods, and cuddling newborn lambs.

I can't deny that when London friends came to stay, complaining of competitive London schools, nanny-poaching, crime and pollution, I felt pretty smug.

I'm less smug now, as those friends who stuck out it out in the city are now reaping dividends. Or rather their children are. Living in London is the prerequisite for getting the starter jobs and internships that now constitute the base camp of the career mountain – even if they don't come with the kind of income that pays London rent.

Country Mouse dines with Beatrix Potter's Johnny Town-Mouse (1918)

One young trainee architect I know admits he would never have been able to take up his traineeship if his parents didn't live in London. Rent would have been unaffordable on his £25K salary. When he qualifies, he's moving to Berlin, where rents are considerably lower.

Another bright young graduate who lives near me in Wiltshire has secured a coveted graduate traineeship but can't find anywhere to live in London's brutally competitive rental market. He lost out on a box room in Wapping for £800 a month to a rival renter who put up three months' deposit.

I am frequently messaging the very friends whose city lives I once pitied, asking if my son could stay with them the night before an interview, or if my daughter could perhaps, ahem, stay a week (or four) as she has secured a summer job in London. Living 100 miles – effectively a galaxy – from London makes commuting impossible.

My real envy is reserved for those who either managed to hang onto their flat when they joined the lemming rush out of London, or bought one subsequently, enabling their offspring to take up first-tier roles in media, hospitality, publishing or even finance, by living rent-free, or rent-subsidised.

A friend in recruitment reports a clear divide among the young London workforce between haves and have-nots – the haves being those whose parents provide them with somewhere to live in London or help with their rent.

Recognising this, one marketing company has just increased its graduate entry salaries to £32K from £26K because, with rents and travel costs so high, they were missing out on a whole talent pool of those without a London leg-up.

Some were commuting long distances at great expense so they couldn't stay late for after-hours work or fun. The salary increase is designed to give them a fighting chance of making it in London if they don't already live there.

I'm in no position to subsidise anyone's rent. I have started to wonder whether it might have been wiser to invest the money in a London flat for each child rather than splurging £30-50K a year on education over 12 years. (And that was with a mix of state and private schools, bursaries and generous grandparents.) That would have bought a two-bedroom flat in a central but not too fashionable part of town that we'd now own outright.

Too late, of course ... but what about parents currently contemplating school fees (plus VAT) versus property – and hence career – security?

Rural dwellers would be well-advised to keep their city friends onside. Roll out the Pimm's, the croquet and the full English when they come to stay. It might just secure your children a city bolthole – or at least a sofa – in years to come.

Annabel Venning is author of Following the Drum: The Lives of Army Wives and Daughters Past and Present

In good voice

Andrew Roberts salutes the great voice-over artists, from Frank Muir to Kenneth Williams

Ray Brooks, who died in August at 86, was best known as the star of *Cathy Come Home* (1966). He was also the King of the Voice-over. In 1986 alone, he voiced almost 400 television advertisements, lending the tones he described as 'the chap next door' to promote Woolworth's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, inter alia.

One advertising agent thought the right voice could boost product sales by 30 per cent. The great voice-over voices hail from a variety of backgrounds. Brooks was from Brighton. Frank Muir (1920-98) was a grammar-school boy from Leyton who added the class to ads for Cadbury's Fruit & Nut ('Everyone's a Fruit and Nut case,' backed by 'Dance of the Mirlitons' from *The Nutcracker*) and Batchelors Savoury Rice ('Every grain will drive them insane').

In his Sainsbury's adverts, Stephen Fry MA (Cantab) always sounds like the professor you hoped for at university.

The voice-over expert's art was to conceal their art, never drawing attention to themselves. Miriam Margolyes was the perfect Cadbury's Caramel Bunny. Brooks and Margolyes had so many voiceovers in the 80s that they rented a Soho flat with other actors to use between voice jobs.

Patrick Allen was born to proclaim that Elusive was 'the most intriguing fragrance Avon has ever conceived'.

King of Voice-overs: Ray Brooks (1939-2025)

GETTY

Before Ray Brooks, Allen (1927-2006) was an earlier King of the Voice-over. He narrated *Protect and Survive* official films about nuclear attacks: 'If there is no solid cover, lie flat in a ditch or a hole.'

Some actors specialised in terrifying the public. 'You might as well set a man trap,' warned Patrick Troughton, the *Doctor Who* star, about rugs and polished floors. When a road-safety film started with Keith Barron uttering, 'You're driving along,' it was clear his well-used Vauxhall Viva HB was doomed.

Kenneth Williams was a mainstay in the late '70s and early '80s – from Dylon dye to Jacob's Cream Crackers, North Sea Ferries, the Mini and St Ivel Gold spread, where he adopted his comic farmer accent.

Some well-known actors had voices that could instantly reassure. A travelogue about London's markets used Sidney James's Johannesburg-Cockney-accented commentary. Air India employed Benny Hill's warm Southampton tones for their promotional film *Your Palace in the Sky*.

Other performers became so associated with voice roles that seeing them on screen could be a faintly bizarre experience. The delights of afternoon daytime ITV included watching Daphne Oxenford (1919-2012), *Listen with Mother*'s hostess from 1950 to 1971, on *Crown Court*.

John Boorman's 1965 debut film, *Catch Us If You Can*, featured David de Keyser as a villain. In a 1957 ad, the actor's honeyed voice-over encouraged you to place an order for a Morris Minor 1000. De Keyser also provided commentary for many Pathe Pictorial short films, urging ABC cinema patrons to visit Bletchingley, 'where time has stood still'.

One often unseen actor – once as essential at the movies as Kia-Ora and dubious hot dogs – was Tim Turner, the jovial narrator of Rank's *Look at Life* travelogues. Bob Danvers-Walker presided over British Pathé's newsreels between 1940 and 1970.

Danvers-Walker's voice was described as 'Clear, fruity and rich, with just the suggestion of raffishness' while Movietone News often started with an authoritative 'This is Leslie Mitchell reporting.'

Mitchell's and Danvers-Walker's voices belong to a select group that became part of broadcasting history – voices that extend beyond the world of ad voice-overs. The off-camera John Freeman interrogated Tony Hancock in the manner of a courteously formidable barrister on *Face to Face* in 1960. Few could forget Herbert Morrison crying, 'It's burning, bursting into flames…' when reporting the *Hindenburg* crash in 1937.

Richard Dimbleby was the BBC's first war correspondent. The British Film Institute described his ability 'to command attention and to communicate with millions of people'.

Generations will for ever associate Ray Brooks with *Mr Benn*, Richard Baker with *Mary, Mungo and Midge*, and Brian Cant with the Trumpton Fire Brigade roll call – 'Pugh! Pugh! Barney McGrew! Cuthbert! Dibble! Grubb!'

All these voices were flawless for the material and its audience. Charlie Booker said of the co-creator of *The Clangers* and *Bagpuss*: 'These are the sounds I hear when I think of my childhood. And Oliver Postgate put them there.'

The maestro of this art was Eric Thompson, the narrator and writer of *The Magic Roundabout*. The film version, *Dougal and the Blue Cat* (1970), approaches children's cinema à la Chekhov, with Thompson's rendition of *Florence's Sad Song*.

The guest star Fenella Fielding purred, 'Blue is beautiful. Blue is best. I'm blue. I'm beautiful. I'm best.' It only intensified the narrative's sense of foreboding.

Winner of the prize for the most bizarre voice-over? Telly Savalas, who recorded travelogue narrations for Aberdeen, Portsmouth and Birmingham at London's De La Rue studios in 1981. Mr Savalas thought Birmingham was 'My kinda town'.

On YouTube, you can still watch *Telly Savalas Looks at Portsmouth*. Telly declares, 'I don't know of another place where people have had streets named after them.' Even Kojak's smooth voice-over couldn't lift grim footage of Portsmouth's finest 1970s multistorey car park.

Andrew Roberts is author of Idols of the Odeons: Post-War British Film Stardom

RIP handwriting

Quentin Letts loves the dying art – and how it reveals the writer's character

One of the joys of being a columnist is that one still receives handwritten letters from strangers.

Some are complimentary, others are mad and a few are initially illegible. You have to wash your eyeballs and give the monocle a polish before tackling them.

I have a correspondent from Kenchester, Herefordshire, whose script is a frenzied eruption, his ballpoint so vigorous that it tears holes in his recycled paper.

The lines of a spinster from Ightham, Kent, slope increasingly towards the bottom right corner of the page. Her letters start equably enough before lurching into an unhappiness that matches the nosediving angle of the script.

An amateur poet from Waterlooville, Hampshire, sends thick packets of mercurial political observations, cc'd to other Fleet Street hacks, all compiled in a neat, looping hand.

He has been writing to me for three decades and must spend thousands a year on postage.

Now that children are increasingly typing on screen, these instructive writing styles are endangered.

Ocular challenges aside, handwritten letters are a joy because they are more informative than typed missives. Graphologists say you can judge a person's character from his or her script. I'd say handwriting certainly betrays, if we are still permitted to mention such things, the writer's social class.

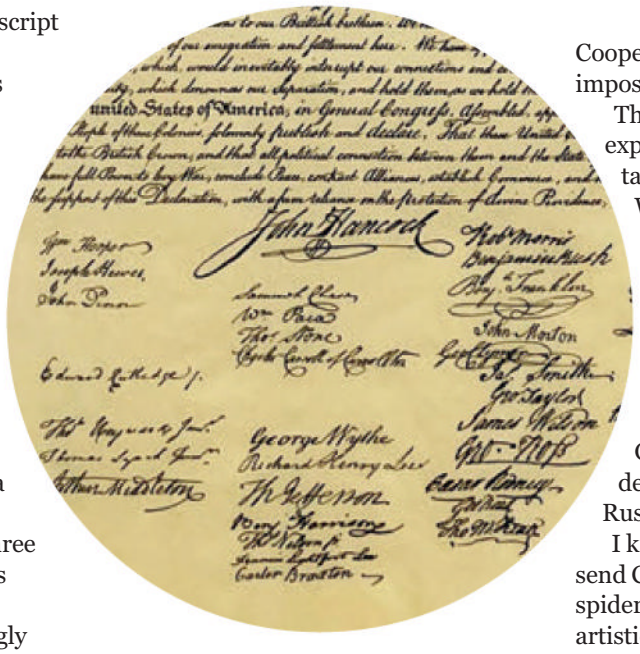
Last month, I received a friendly letter from a posh nonagenarian in Hampshire.

How did I know she was posh? Her handwriting. The roller-ball script was upright, clear, well-spaced and fluent, the letters of each word flowing into one another. She gave each y a rounded tail. Her capital I was almost a capital S. Her lower-case r began with a downward squiggle, as used to be taught.

Along with the printed letterhead (a house with a number, in a comfortable coastal district), the handwriting led me to calculate that this was a well-read, upper-middle-class memsahib of the brisk sort who used to run Red Cross libraries and Home Counties fêtes and who has since downsized to a smaller house for her old age.

The handwriting, an instant giveaway, shouted debutante, Armstrong Siddeley, pearl-handled fish knives, Swan & Edgar.

Mrs Hampshire's handwriting was similar, though not identical, to that of the late Queen Mother. HM's was more languid and spacious. Like our new King's writing, it had strong, tall capitals.



John Hancock's huge signature on the 1776 Declaration of Independence

The King's hand benefits from the fact that he uses fountain pens, even if they do sometimes leak.

My father's mother – Oxford-educated daughter of a judge – had a firm, correct hand. She was a formidable presence who, in later life as a town councillor, earned a reputation as a tartar who ate municipal officials for elevenses.

My mother's mother – less intellectual and more convivial; a daughter of the Raj – allowed her lettering greater curvature and gave her capital Gs a lot of air. You could imagine the rattle of her charm bracelet and the ginny gurgle of her wonderful laugh as she formed those Gs.

A couple of generations later came the Sloane Rangers, their handwriting typified by Princess Diana. Sloanes' writing all seemed to be the same height, like that of clerks at travel agencies. They had to keep their lettering inside the lines of those flimsy airline tickets we used to be given.

A Sloane's handwriting was different from the Lunn Poly girls'. Both were perfectly legible. Both did the trick. Yet you knew they were a yard apart on the class candle.

Women often seem to have neater hands than men – although Dame Jilly Cooper, whom I revere, has an impossible scrawl.

The most difficult male hand of my experience belongs to a chap who taught English, brilliantly, at Westminster School. How his pupils understood a word he wrote on the blackboard, Heaven knows.

Lord Palmerston called Foreign Office writing of the Victorian era 'iron railings leaning out of the perpendicular'.

G B Shaw's writing was described as 'a fly trained at the Russian ballet'.

I know several Etonians. All but two send Christmas cards with the most spidery squiggles. They have a certain artistic design. From afar, it looks impressive – certainly clever, as with doctors' prescriptions – but up close it might as well be Swahili.

We are told that in recent years Etonians have been finding it hard to gain admission to Oxford and Cambridge universities. Maybe today's examiners no longer have the time or patience to decipher their exam papers. You need self-confidence to write that cryptically, whereas a loopy, dutiful script, as used by generations of secondary-modern pupils, betrays a readiness to obey.

Last month, my wife found her dad's notebook from his days as a 1950s National Service military policeman. My dear father-in-law was no scholar, but his handwriting was a model of clarity, as it needed to be.

How different things were for M R James (1862-1936), medievalist and writer of ghost stories. George Lyttelton recalled receiving a dinner invitation from him. 'We guessed that the time was 8 and not 3, as it appeared to be, but all we could tell about the day was that it was not Wednesday.'

Rupert Hart-Davis, in reply to Lyttelton, doubted it could be worse than the writing of Lady Colefax. 'The only hope of deciphering *her* invitations, someone said, was to pin them up on the wall and *run* past them.'

Quentin Letts is author of Nunc!

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The Army game

Ever since he was a child, *Piers Pottinger* has adored military entertainment

Military man: Frank Williams (second left) was in *Dad's Army* and *The Army Game*

Before I had ever been to a theatre, the first show I was taken to was the Royal Military Tattoo at Edinburgh Castle.

As a boy of seven, I was enthralled by the magnificent spectacle and the powerful music. I can still recall the respectful laughter when the Italian Bersaglieri soldiers ran onto the Esplanade, bugles blaring at full volume. The show closed, as it has done for 75 years, with the lone piper playing an emotional lament on the battlements of the castle.

Military entertainment in Britain goes back at least as far as the Roman occupation.

At the British Museum, you can see the Ribchester Helmet, dating from the first century AD. It is a highly decorative piece of headgear with an embossed bronze face mask. It would have had a crest box and streamers attached, to be worn by elite riders at large military displays performed for training and to boost morale at the Roman Camp in Ribchester, Lancashire.

During times of peace, the armed forces have often put on a show. At the start of the Second World War, Basil Dean and Leslie Henson founded ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association), made up of a stunning array of future stars of stage and screen.

Peter Sellers, Terry-Thomas and Frankie Howerd all began their careers there, travelling around to provide much-needed entertainment for the troops. The first ENSA concert was held in 1939 at RAF Hendon and starred jazz songstress Adelaide Hall.

After the war, ENSA evolved into CSE (Combined Services Entertainment), which also nurtured the careers of many actors, performers and writers. Peter Nichols was one. In 1977, he wrote and directed the hugely successful musical satire *Privates on Parade*, later a film, about a group of CSE players.

The most famous satire about military conflict was *Oh! What a Lovely War*.

First performed as a radio play, it went to the stage in 1963 at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in the hands of the pioneering theatrical legend Joan Littlewood. In 1969, Richard Attenborough directed a superb film version with a stellar cast, including Maggie Smith, Laurence Olivier, Dirk Bogarde and just about every top British actor of the time.

The armed forces were also a popular topic for TV comedy writers over the years. One of the first successful sitcoms on British TV was *The Army Game*. First broadcast in 1957, it featured Alfie Bass, Bernard Bresslaw and Bill Fraser as hapless soldiers coping with life in the army.

One young actor in the series was Frank Williams, who later found fame as the vicar in *Dad's Army*. This much-loved series was created by Jimmy Perry and David Croft. Running from 1968 to 1977, it still pops up on our screens today.

A period piece about the Home Guard, it saw first-class performances by leading character actors and has left an indelible mark in the hearts of every viewer.

David Croft created another successful series about a concert party of ENSA members based in India: *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* (1974-81), which was hugely popular. Today, alas, it is considered politically incorrect.

One of the world's most successful comedy series ever was *M*A*S*H* (1972-83). Set during the Korean War, the series followed the success of a Robert Altman film of the same name. Only one of the cast (Gary Burghoff as Radar O'Reilly) was in both.

The TV series made Alan Alda (Captain Benjamin Franklin 'Hawkeye' Pierce) an international superstar. Its final episode was viewed by the biggest audience in US television history.

The slightly anti-establishment content of *M*A*S*H* was amplified in another US comedy masterpiece – *Catch-22* (1961) by Joseph Heller. First a book, in 1970 it was turned into a film directed by Mike Nichols. Detailing the wartime experiences of fictitious bombardier Captain Yossarian, it satirised the insanity of military bureaucracy.

In a different vein, the very first *Carry On* film was *Carry On Sergeant* (1958), featuring many former ENSA members, including William Hartnell and Kenneth Connor. It was an instant hit, spawning the longest-running series of comedy films in cinematic history.

When it came to spectacle, the Royal Tournament was hard to beat. Held from 1880 until 1999, it was the world's biggest military tattoo and pageant. Originally performed at the Royal Agricultural Hall, it moved to Olympia and then in 1950 to Earl's Court.

I took my seven-year-old son to see the glorious spectacle of the King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery, whose breathtaking display lingers in the memory today. My son was captivated, just as I at his age had been in Edinburgh.

Sadly there is no Royal Tournament any more, although in 2010 it was briefly revived as the British Military Tournament.

There will come a time for another revival, modernised and packed with advanced technical wizardry. There to protect us in troubled times, our armed forces defend our nation. They are also a source of – and an inspiration for – some wonderful entertainment.

I salute them all.

Piers Pottinger was a PR executive

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Funerals to die for

Rev Michael Coren has conducted dozens of services – from the tragicomic to the heartbreakingly moving

Mine is a late vocation. I was ordained at 60, so I'd seen something of the world, both professionally and personally.

I was married for more than 30 years; I had four children; I lost loved ones; I worked as a journalist in war zones. I was, I thought, prepared for anything.

But I was wrong. In my six years as an Anglican priest, while I've performed many baptisms and weddings, what I didn't anticipate were the dozens of funerals. I've officiated at more than 40 and, in that world of inelastic suffering, there's no sign of any decline.

My first was on a rainy day in a suburban cemetery. I used to host television and radio shows in Canada, still enjoy a certain recognition, and was asked by one of the mourners for a selfie.

It was awkward. If I refused and told him this wasn't really the time and place, he might be upset or think me a snob. On the other hand, he might be in much deeper grief than was apparent, and this might help him. Would other people notice?

In the end, I agreed, trying hard to put on my concerned but not unfriendly face for the photo. It probably looked more as if I had a bad case of wind.

Winter is the time for funerals. It could be the cold. Or the perception of the end of the year as the end of life. Or the wish to see just one more Christmas. Believe me, people do hang on or give up.

Even in winter, funerals aren't always as sombre as you might think. At one, a middle-aged man seemed to be in bad shape and was crying after the funeral was over. I approached him and said that Jim – the deceased – had been one of the good ones.

'Jim?' he said. 'I don't know Jim. I'm here for Billy.'

He'd got the wrong funeral. I assumed he'd dry his eyes and leave. But no.

'Well, as long as I'm here, I might as well have a good cry anyway.'

The funeral for Mary's husband was formal and neat but lacked the emotion and tenderness I usually see. After the sandwiches and little cakes – the food at funerals is often surprisingly good – Mary asked me to sit down with her.

Michael in St Christopher's, his Ontario church

She said, 'You know, I never really loved him. Perhaps at the beginning, but that was more likely infatuation. Pretty soon after that, it was flat, ordinary, day-to-day.

'He was kind in his own way but I just didn't love him. I suppose if I'd been younger, I'd have left him. But it seemed wrong; unfair. So I did my duty, really. Was I wrong, Father, was I wrong?'

Words seemed redundant. I just hugged her.

Jokes abound at funerals. They can break the tension. A young relative came to the podium for Nick's service and said, 'We have to remember that he loved to laugh.'

She then repeated the last joke he'd told her:

'A girl tells her mum she was playing counting with her friends and while they got to six, she got to eight. "Is it because I'm blonde?"

'Her mother says that it could be. A week later, the girl says she was playing alphabets and while her friends got to D, she got to F.

"Is that because I'm blonde?" The mother says it could be.

'A week later, she came home again. "Mum, today we were at the swimming pool and the girls lifted up their tops and they were very flat-chested. I lifted mine and I was very buxom. Is that because I'm blonde?"

'"No", says the mother. "It's because you're 37."'

There wasn't a single complaint about political incorrectness.

Mavis was a regular churchgoer, but we knew little about her. Her rough clothes and plastic bags full of papers led us to believe she lived rough. When she missed an entire week at church, we assumed the worst – and, sure enough, the funeral home asked me to take her funeral.

When I arrived, there were more than 100 people. Was I in the right place? Yes, these were all the people whom Mavis had helped, cared for, taken to hospital and fed.

Crematorium funerals can be difficult. The staff are excellent and explain that the family may watch the process through the screen if they like but they'll see workers dressed in thick fire-resistant uniforms – safety regulations demand it – and it might be disturbing.

Some people choose to watch; many don't. One day, all but two people went into a room next to the viewing room. The door to the viewing room, however, hadn't been locked and a five-year-old ran in, looked through the glass and shouted, 'Grandpa has gone to play with the firefighters!'

The most difficult? Suicides, especially when teenagers are involved. The roaring, hideous pain of loss is overwhelming and then there's the inevitable self-criticism: 'If only I'd been there; if only I'd done more.'

I've dealt with enough of these tragedies to believe that in almost every case it wouldn't have made any difference.

God give them peace.

Rev Michael Coren is an Anglican priest in St Christopher's, Burlington, Ontario

The Noël Coward Guide to Grooming

The Master's bathroom cabinet was blissfully free of vanity products

MARY KILLEN

I will never forget the wave of emotion that surged through me when I first looked into Noël Coward's bathroom cabinet.

It was 1999 and I was in Firefly, his hilltop house in Jamaica, where Coward died in 1973. Firefly is open to the public and, as on the *Marie Celeste*, the rooms and their contents are preserved unchanged from the day the playwright died there.

Most poignant for me were the half-used contents of his bathroom cabinet. Need I explain how redolent they were of the very essence of the man? Moreover, with tiny traces of DNA still present on the razor and toothbrush, might the museum world admit there is a new curatorial niche waiting to be filled – 'bio-obilia'?

I may add that, although Coward was one of the top dandies of his day, those bathroom cabinet contents were minimal. A rusty razor, a rusty tin of Vaseline, half-used shaving cream, toothbrush, aftershave. All were cherished but had perished in the sunny, rainy and salty Jamaican clime.

But then, right up until the very recent past, a man's bathroom cabinet *did* contain very little: typically a bar of Imperial Leather, a battered razor and, for grand occasions, a bottle of aftershave that could last a decade. Nail scissors or clippers were also de rigueur. Any jagged edges could be smoothed off with sandpaper.

Moisturiser was unheard-of. If a man had shiny cheeks, it was from cycling, not serum. Many men failed to rinse their faces properly after shaving and the soap remnants served to dry out and prematurely age their complexions. Flaking skin, especially around the nose, was commonplace.

And men had in the first place applied the soap using an utterly disgusting item, now long forgotten – the facecloth. A feature of every bathroom, facecloths were draped in rank rows over bathroom

Low-maintenance: Noël Coward (1899-1973) at Firefly, his Jamaica home, 1953

GETTY

surfaces. They were the repository of so many common germs and yet hardly anyone ever thought to wash them.

Today's younger men are positively neurotic about their bathroom cabinets. They need a drawer, in fact, not a cabinet.

They spritz toners before bed as though preparing for a stage appearance. Now it is not unusual to hear them comparing the virtues of exfoliating scrubs and hydrating masks from Liberty. They debate the difference between clarifying and brightening agents.

And women, fearing the pendulum may have swung too far, feel nostalgic for the days when conversation was confined to carburettors and cricket scores.

Oldies, of course, have the good fortune of being immune to influencers and the marketing of cosmetic products they know they don't need. But certain items are still indispensable.

Teeth come first. An electric toothbrush is no longer a luxury or a gimmick; it is a public service. Dentists don't approve of water flossers but they do want you to own an armoury of at least four different gauges of interdental brushes and to use them to poke out trapped food. This is almost more important than brushing.

Nose and ear hair must be confronted. Why the Creator decided that hair should migrate to these orifices in later life is a mystery. The only defence is a small, battery-operated clipper: discreet enough to live in the bathroom cabinet; powerful enough to prevent your looking absurd in a silhouette portrait.

Moisturiser is less about vanity and more about comfort. Senior skin has a tendency to flake, particularly in winter. A plain, unscented moisturiser such as E45 will do perfectly well – no need to waste cash on products promising radiance.

Soap: realistically an oldie man will not want to faff around with micellar water and cotton pads. So he can wash his face with soap, provided he rinses it thoroughly and immediately applies E45 moisturiser.

Shampoo – in no circumstances use 'anti-dandruff' products. They discolour the hair and leach the life out of it. As with flaky skin, the problem is that the man has washed his hair in the bath rather than the shower and not rinsed it properly. Dandruff is the result.

A one-off application of hair conditioner, left on the scalp for five minutes and then rinsed off, will rid you of the problem. Don't use conditioner as a general rule. It stunts hair growth and makes the hair altogether too slimy and less rugged than it could be.

Shaving is where many men go astray. On ecological grounds, cans of spray foam that erupt like builders' filler should never be used – once your last can is finished, don't buy more.

Shaving soap from posh retailers, or the dreaded Amazon, will do the trick, complete with a badger-hair brush. Some packaging rather sternly says that aftershave should not be applied, as it 'shrivels the skin'.

Quite right too. Who wants to smell of alcohol and look like a walnut?

Louis MacNeice's ode to autumn

His masterpiece was a superb picture of 1939, the last year of peace

A N WILSON

As the summer turns to September, it is a good excuse to read again that great poem *Autumn Journal* (1939).

It is the record of a 31-year-old classics lecturer, living in Primrose Hill, North London, commuting to Birmingham to teach at the university, living through the Munich crisis, watching the sandbags and gun emplacements being put in place in readiness for the inevitable war, drinking a bit too much, puzzling over a wild love life, musing on the Greeks:

'And when I should remember the paragons of Hellas/ I think instead/ Of the crooks, the adventurers, the opportunists,/ The careless athletes and the fancy boys,/ the hair-splitters, the pedants/ The hard-boiled sceptics/ And the Agora and the noise…/ and lastly/ I think of the slaves.'

Louis MacNeice (1907-63) lives on, almost as a well-kept secret. There are thousands of us who read him, but I sense he has been forgotten in university syllabuses and I doubt whether he is set for A level.

Every now and then, I meet someone who makes a reference to his long poem *Autumn Journal*. When they do so, I know instantly that they are My Kind of Person. Consider his lines about a current woman he is in love with – she is one 'Who has left a scent on my life and left my walls/ Dancing over and over with her shadow,/ Whose hair is twined in all my waterfalls/ And all of London littered with remembered kisses…

Someone I'd never met quoted those lines to me at a dinner party not long ago, and at that moment we did not merely 'click' – we realised we had a shared vision of things.

Conversational poetry, from the odes and satires of Horace to chatty poems such as William Cowper's *The Sofa,* are comfort reading. MacNeice's buddy W H Auden tried to write it, but his poetry – hauntingly brilliant as so much of it is – palls at the moment when you feel he's showing off; talking *at* you, not with you. When he describes himself as an Arcadian ('In my Eden, a person who dislikes Bellini has the good manners not to get born'), we are impressed, but then we are struck by the thought that we are *meant* to be impressed.

And which Bellini does he mean – are we with painters or at the opera? MacNeice never speaks for effect.

That said, the book Auden and MacNeice wrote together, *Letters from Iceland* (1937) is not only my favourite travel book but, like *Autumn Journal*, one of those books that is an act of friendship to the reader.

Autumn Journal, which starts 'Cold and slow, summer is ending in Hampshire' – with its snapshots of 'Macroscarpa and cypress/ And roses on a rustic trellis' – takes us to the England of John Betjeman, with whom MacNeice was at Marlborough.

Other contemporaries were Anthony Blunt and the future historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston SJ.

Unlike Blunt and Betj, MacNeice has the quiet self-confidence (the son of a bishop in the Church of Ireland) not to cut a dash. He achieves his effects by understatement. He recalls his days at school and Merton College, Oxford: 'But in case you should think my education was wasted/ I hasten to explain/ That having once been to the University of Oxford/ You can never really again/ Believe anything that anyone says…'

He recognises that he is a person of privilege. But the central intelligence of *Autumn Journal* is not remote. The poem is a superbly accurate series of snapshots of that heartbreaking, heart-broken last year of peace.

> When someone quoted his lines to me, we realised we had a shared vision

They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill, and putting gun emplacements at the top. He goes by train to Oxford not to read Greek, but to take part in an election (the universities had their own MPs still), and, to his shame, the decent side is defeated and the voters send the pro-Munich, pro-appeasing Quintin Hogg to Westminster.

And, all through these anguished months, his life in London is punctuated by an up-and-down love affair.

Whether he is writing about love, the weather, the ancient world or the familiar streets of Bloomsbury and Camden Town, you remember what he says. You can see in this poem that he is going to become a broadcaster of genius.

He gave up teaching Greek literature and got a job at the BBC. His translation of Goethe's *Faust* is the best I know, and he very sensibly shortened the great German's outpourings, to make it fit into two evening radio plays. The BBC should definitely revive them. I wonder if the original productions survive on tape.

While he was at the BBC, he befriended Dylan Thomas – whose *Under Milk Wood* started out as a radio play. The most memorable, and moving, passage in *Autumn Sequel* – the poem he published in 1954 – describes the funeral of Thomas in South Wales.

Although the *Sequel* is impressive – it's much longer than the *Journal* and the whole thing is crafted in perfect *terza rima* – it somehow lacks the immediacy and instantaneous readability of the earlier work.

Thomas was a poet – like Betjeman and Auden – who clamours for attention, and deservedly gets it. But I am not sure I do not prefer the quiet, ironical tones of their friend and contemporary, MacNeice.

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Alexander Miles, inventor of the Gx Pillow pictured with his invention

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Artificial Intelligence vs My Intelligence

Like most octogenarians, I imagine, I know little of AI.

A friend recently asked ChatGPT to write a poem about me. Within seconds, they (she? he?) responded with:

'Catwalk at 85: At eighty-five she struts
the stage,
Refusing to act her proper age,
In colours loud as parrot feathers,
Silk and sequins, all the weathers.
Her hat's a tower, her shoes a crime,
She winks at men half the time,
The music booms, she shakes her hips,
And blows the crowd two scarlet lips.
They say she's mad; she says 'Too right,'
And twirls beneath the spotlights bright,
Over-confident? Of course, my dear – The queen of excess is still here.'

OK, it's doggerel, and I probably like it because I'm such an egotist, but isn't the poem amazing?

I begin to sympathise with examiners and teachers who are expected to tell whether students have used AI for essays and answers. But I guess they can ask AI whether AI has been used.

I don't use ChatGPT, but I do use Google, Siri or Alexa all the time. I'll ask what 23 is as a percentage of 749. Or ask for quantities of a recipe to be scaled up from 20 guests to 200. No more trying to remember how to do long division; no more scratching my head and resorting to the calculator.

When my brain takes a holiday, which is often, I will use ChatGPT to multiply 7 by 15. One day quite soon, it will be for 2 plus 4.

But, of course, I'm worried about the downside of AI. If, as I believe, I could get AI to study my novels and learn my writing style, it could write books for me in no time.

Prue surely divines AI could never replace her

Maybe I could bring out a novel in, say, January, a cookbook in the spring and a memoir in time for Christmas. But what about authenticity and originality?

And is the editor of this great mag going to dispense with my services? After all, I've been writing for *The Oldie* for nearly two years now, and AI could imitate my style – no problem.

And if for my column, why not for everyone's? Maybe the future of publishing is for editors to sit at home on their smartphones, manufacturing journalism by getting AI to combine the writing style of, say Kenneth Tynan and William Hazlitt for pieces about the theatre. Jeremy Clarkson and Dorothy Parker for comment on social mores. Gary Lineker and Hugh McIlvanney on sport, and Walter Cronkite and Jeremy Paxman on politics.

> I guess examiners can ask AI whether AI has been used

Oh, and Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson on food.

And, yes, I do see there is a slight problem there. Some real person needs to go to the theatre for the play, or to the stadium for the football match, or to listen to Parliament for PMQs.

Or do they?

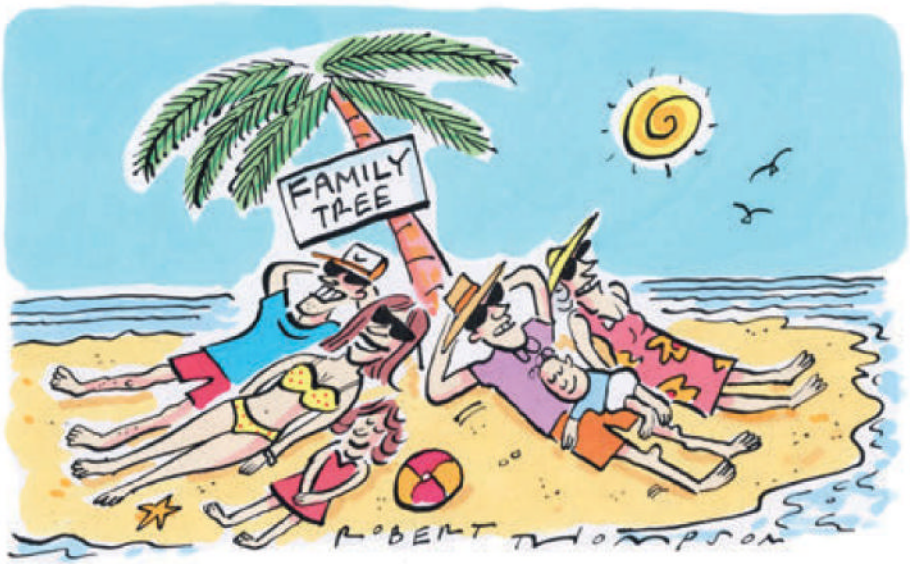
Prue Leith presents
The Great British Bake Off

GETTY; ALAMY/NEIL SPENCE

Town Mouse

Sun, sea and Generation Z

TOM HODGKINSON



Granny Mouse was appalled.

'You're going on holiday with your parents?' She said to Young Mouse, my 25-year-old son. 'We stopped all that family holiday nonsense when your dad was 14.'

And so it was. My baby-boomer parents reckoned that by the time my brother and I became teenagers, their responsibilities to us were essentially over. They'd done the package holidays to Corfu.

Now they could attend to their own lives, which in my father's case consisted of meditating, studying religious texts and visiting India; and in my mother's, of writing books about the advantages of celibacy. And we would be left to ours.

'Well, they're paying for it,' said Young Mouse, who thinks in strictly utilitarian terms. He is the sort of mouse who maintains a sort of internal profit-and-loss account as far as family relationships go.

My experience is a common one. The offspring of baby-boomer parents – that is, Gen X – spend far more time with their children – Gen Z – than their neglectful, selfish, sixties parents did.

They all go off on holiday together, usually with another one or two other families and their children.

It goes both ways, I suppose. I never had the slightest desire to go on holiday with either of my parents when I got into my twenties, let alone with both of them. I wanted to be with my friends. That was where I found liberation.

But Generation Z seem to enjoy hanging out with the oldies. Yes, X and Z are close. A friend of my daughter's said recently, 'I just love inter-generational parties!'

There's a pub in west London where I regularly bump into my daughter's friends. Amazingly, they seem to want to chat and don't run away or get tongue-tied. At Mrs Mouse's recent birthday party, young and old danced together. And we all go to festivals together, too.

Our holiday this year was in a Tuscan farmhouse. Three sets of parents were there, with three sets of kids. The kids are now excellent company and can cook and clean. We all drink together. A lot of booze was consumed: Aperol spritz, G&T, Italian beers and local wines. And it was a real laugh.

Drugs were a topic, and everyone was very open about what they had tried. And that included the parents. I confessed that I had recently tried magic-mushroom drops and found the experience to be wholly enjoyable.

And the young people related their experiences with ketamine and MDMA powder. I don't remember being so open with my parents. I kept my sinning ways to myself.

We had spirited political discussions. Luckily, everyone was united against Trumpism. The grown-ups were occasionally told, 'You can't say that,' if, for example, I used an expression like 'sexy bird'. Facts were checked on mobile phones. We oldies learned about a YouTuber called Gary Stevenson who is loved by the young. He's a former City boy who now wants to tax the rich.

Inter-generational partying was normal in Ancient Greece, at least for the aristos. At symposia, young and older men would party together. In 1968, a tomb was discovered in the ancient town of Paestum, near Naples, which showed a group of men reclining on couches at a symposium.

Each couch held an *ephebe* – a teenage boy – chatting to an older man. In one image, the older man is leaning in for a kiss. The ceiling of the tomb is painted with a picture of a naked young man diving from a platform into the sea.

In *The Diver of Paestum*, Tonio Hölscher, Emeritus Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Heidelberg, says groups of mixed-age males would gather by rocks and water, as we do on holiday.

Hundreds of inscriptions from the older male lovers to the young boyfriends are carved into the rocks on the island of Thasos. Names are inscribed alongside epithets such as 'beautiful', 'lissom', 'fair-featured' and 'golden'.

There was a similar scene at an amazing bathing spot we visited in Tuscany. No homoerotic relations, as far as I could see, but lots of naked men and women sitting in hot, sulphurous pools and then plunging into the river.

I love the company of young people. They are full of fun and life and always ready to tease and criticise their parents, which is bracing and does the important job of deflating any egos that are threatening to get out of hand.

Young mice! Come on holiday with your parents any time – and, yes, we'll pay.

Even Rachel Thieves can't steal my dolce vita

GILES WOOD

One of the most touching things about the small towns of Italy's Ligurian coast is that the staff in restaurants and bars remain in their posts year after year.

Their personalities and physical appearances are seemingly unchanged. Their reliable good humour calls to mind *The Truman Show* (1998).

Truman grows up from babyhood in a reality show, where all the other humans are pleasant all the time. Only Truman does not realise they are actors and his world is a giant stage set.

But why wouldn't these Italian restaurant and bar staff be pleasant all the time?

They are often working for, or alongside, a family or extended family member, who owns the business. Italians have the sense to aspire to work within walking distance of home, where Mama will cook lunch and dinner for them and mind their children after school.

Meanwhile, Britons move, in a bid for higher wages, at least three times within their lifetimes. These meaningless diasporas mean paying strangers for domestic services that their own UK family could have performed, had they stayed at home.

The Italians conform to polemicist William Cobbett's vision of an organic, self-sustaining and self-reliant community. This, as described in his magnum opus *Cottage Economy*, centres all activity on the home and its productive garden.

It was our second time staying in the Sea Captain's House overlooking the ocean in the *centro storico* of this Brit-free coastal town, and it was reassuring to be greeted in the restaurants as though we were old friends.

I chatted amiably to the chief waiter as he hovered round our roof terrace table. I told him that this year we wouldn't be able to afford a pudding course, owing to our being victimised as UK middle-class property-owners – the only 'milch cows' whose savings the Chancellor could raid.

'*Mucca da latte*!' I shouted, as I tend to when speaking in a foreign language. 'Milk cows!'

'Shut up, Giles,' hissed my three womenfolk. 'He's not interested.'

But they were wrong – he *was* interested. Warming to my theme, and speaking good English, the waiter posited that most of the European leaders are deeply unpopular.

'It is our fate to be led by unserious people,' I ventured. But this was a concept too far for the waiter.

Nevertheless, he was a fund of extensive local knowledge including of excursions that might suit imminent weather patterns.

Given that *il bruto tempo* was predicted for the following day, he suggested a trip by car to Dolceacqua and the picturesque hill town of Apricale.

In the morning, we duly headed through Ventimiglia. In a hotel nearby, in the original and best film version of *The Day of the Jackal* (1973), Edward Fox seduces one of its better-looking residents and makes a fraught border crossing, while escaping the French gendarmerie.

Our 60-minute drive was fraught with tension. The motorway lanes seem narrower and the speed limit is higher than in England. There was often aggro of some kind at the toll gates, with furious motorists having abandoned their cars to remonstrate with one another.

The scenes triggered memories of the *Look and Learn*-type magazine series for 1960s schoolchildren. There would be cartoons showing hysterical Italians standing beside cars. The caption explained that the Italians were more temperamental than the English and responded to minor traffic setbacks by blowing their tops.

On arrival at quiet Dolceacqua, we walked across the impossibly high-arched Ponte Vecchio. This medieval bridge over the River Nervia was captured on canvas by Monet while on his painting tour of the French and Italian rivieras with Renoir.

The Doria castle in his painting looks golden and inviting; it's a more dismal monument in its real-life incarnation. The disappointment caused me to slip away to a riparian hostelry.

I have rarely experienced a change such as the one that came over me when I began to consume a glass of draft beer on an empty stomach. There was something narcotic in that brew which flipped a switch in my mind.

What had been a monochrome scene was suddenly suffused with higher significance. I was located somewhere on the lower rungs of the ladder of mystical experience.

'What colour are those shutters against the pale ochre walls?' I asked my artist daughter.

'Viridian.'

'It's quite remarkable.' And then I spotted with my binoculars a glass-domed turret in the middle distance with an elderly professor inside poring over maps of Saturn's 274 moons.

Well, that is not strictly true, but beer can spark hallucinations.

My wife submits that one beer may spark a flight of fantasy and temporary euphoria, but two will spark boorishness and dull-wittedness. But for those who are interested in replicating my near numinous experience, the beer involved was called Forst, brewed in the Alto Adige region.

'Shut up, Giles,' hissed my three womenfolk. 'He's not interested.'

For the first time in weeks, I was living in the moment and not worrying whether Rachel Thieves was coming for taxes on my home-grown vegetables, my arboretum or my thatched roof – all outward symbols of a middle-class lifestyle.

Thankfully, la dolce vita is beyond Rachel's jurisdiction.

Guinness was good for Dubliners

Mary Kenny admires the brewers, stars of a new Netflix series

The Guinness brewery was Dublin's biggest employer when I was a youngster, and they had a reputation for treating their staff very well.

The nuns at our convent school wanted girls to become secretaries at the Guinness offices because the working conditions were so enlightened. Wages were satisfying, health, welfare, and sports facilities were laid on, and it was the zenith of respectability.

I'll be fascinated to follow the promising drama *House of Guinness*, the story of the 19th-century brewing Guinnesses, when it appears on Netflix on 25th September. One of the executive producers is Ivana Lowell, one of the Guinnesses. On the same day, the Earl of Iveagh (aka Ned Guinness), the head of the family, will publish his memoir, *Guinness: A Family Succession*.

Ireland's celebrity broadcaster and TV personality Gay Byrne was forever praising Guinness for their decent treatment of workers – his dad had served there, man and boy, to great satisfaction. Gay became a telly star only because he failed to get into Guinness.

When Gay's younger brother Al obtained a clerking job in the brewery, their mother made Al get down on his bended knees and recite a decade of the rosary in thankfulness. That was sweet, as, at that time, Catholics weren't promoted to management levels.

There was, then, an acceptance that Protestants were the bosses in the mercantile class while Catholics did politics. Later, this sectarian divide dissolved.

The Guinness family were generous to the Irish state – though it could be said the Irish people, drinking all that black stuff, were good to the Guinness dynasty, too.

Public housing was supported by the Guinnesses, and some stunning property was bequeathed to the state, including the Irish Embassy in Chapel Street, Belgravia. Scion of the dynasty Desmond Guinness (1931-2020) was famous for his brilliant, successful campaign to save Georgian Dublin, as bulldozers readied to replace the exquisite old squares with 1960s brutalism. In Desmond's startling blue eyes, it was said, 'The good Guinness battled with the wicked Mitford.' His mother was Diana Mitford, later Mosley, his father the admirable Bryan Guinness, Lord Moyne, poet, supporter of the French resistance and father of ten.

An extraordinary dynasty, which started with two brothers concocting a pint of stout in an old disused brewery.

'Pre-nups' – financial marriage arrangements – are increasing in popularity, according to a YouGov survey. Some 60 per cent of the population now approve.

My aunty Dorothy hailed from the rich soil of Tipperary. When dowries were still a source of bridal financial power, she had her own version of a pre-nup arrangement. A woman's stipulations of the marriage contract should be: 'What's thine is mine – but what's mine is my own!'

This year has marked, in ceremony and remembrance, the end of the Second World War. But what about the postwar aftermath?

My summer reading has included a riveting short novel about life in 1946. *One Fine Day* by Mollie Panter-Downes was published in 1947 and re-issued this year by Virago. It portrays a summer's day in the life of Laura, an intelligent, middle-class housewife and mother.

There is an enormous sense of relief that the war is over, and a huge appreciation of the quiet lushness of the Sussex countryside, lyrically evoked.

Yet there's also a sense of heroic purpose having been lost, as well as an existential awareness of the common experience of sudden death in the Blitz or wartime service.

And looming over the country is this feeling that everything has changed: old ways are now redundant; older social patterns now shattered. There is a kind of undeclared class revolution under way and a fading genteel bourgeoisie can no longer find servants to staff their rambling old homes – burdensome for women, as they tend to kitchen and garden largely unaided.

Although the circumstances are so different from our time, there's an echo of an emotion that some in our generation sense today – the world is shifting bewilderingly, everything is in flux, and what was normal may now be offensive.

There's a beautifully observed passage when Laura considers how her spirits are lifted by the young Canadian servicemen helping out with manual work and harvesting. They 'always whistled or shouted a cheerful "hiya" as Laura went by, which simply stated, "I am a man; you are a woman." They yelled "Hiya, toots" to a gossipy old charlady on her bicycle, filling her with "Rabelaisian merriment".'

Whistling or calling out 'Hiya, toots' to signal 'I am a man; you are a woman' would now summon the constabulary!

I have learned a new German portmanteau word: *Niedergeschlagenheit*. It means 'a feeling of being beaten down', 'downheartedness' or 'crestfallenness' – so expressive of mournfulness.

English is recognised as a world language ('Globish'), which is why native Anglophones are less and less motivated to swot up foreign tongues. But German surely has the best collection of long words explaining complicated emotions or situations: *Kummerspeck* – weight gained because of unhappiness; *Waldeinsamkeit* – a desire to be alone in a forest; a yearning for solitude in nature.

My favourite is still *Verschlimmbesserung* – the improvement that makes things worse. I see a use for it every day!

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Mother's disastrous miracle cure

Typical! Just when I finally get her a doctor's appointment, she rises from the dead

JEM CLARKE

STEVE WAY

Jem Clarke is *just* in his mid-fifties, is five foot zero and has never left the family home in Cleethorpes, which he shares with his parents...

Is it wrong to mind that Mother has become healthier?

This is not me griping about an inheritance grab of grubby chandeliers and asbestos-roofed outhouses.

My mind just boggles at the number of ducks I had to get in a row to get her a doctor's appointment.

When she woke up, declaring she is 'better now', after five days of deathbed-level lethargy, I disbelieved her. Then I checked her health stats with all the home versions of self-testing Boots could offer.

She's correct: her blood pressure, oxygen in blood, pulse, heart health, kidney and liver are all suddenly giving me top stats.

I unstrap her from plastic apparatus that looks like Fisher Price's My First Everything I Could Steal out of the Back of an Ambulance toy set.

I scratch my chin over what to do with the doctor's appointment: 'He hasn't seen you for a while – maybe he should see you,' I say.

'Oh, I'll send him a damned photograph,' Mother says.

'You can actually do that now,' Father says. 'In the Australian Outback, a doctor asked a man to photograph his penile rash. And he diagnosed it there and then from a photo on an email, saving on embarrassment and air miles.'

'Well, what should I photograph and send?' said Mother. 'You can't photograph "wellness". Could he not just take our word that we don't want his blasted appointment?'

'He's not asking you to photograph anything,' I said. 'I'm asking you to consider asking him to consider seeing you in three dimensions. He may be able to get a better idea of your health if he sees you "in the round".'

'In the *very* round!' said Father.

'Oh, so says the skeleton,' Mother says. 'Once that hernia pops, we'll be able to bury you in an empty Pringles tube.'

'Stop body-shaming each other!' I pleaded. 'Unless you go in demanding free Ozempic, you've got a golden ticket. Soaring BMI – and the wheelchair means they can't tell you to "float the fat away" in the leisure-centre pool.'

'I don't want a fat jab!'

'You won't get one. But it's a Trojan horse – something to dangle before the doctor. Then, if he looks at you and thinks you're OK for an 88-year-old, we can all relax, and look forward to a scone-and-statin supper with no health anxieties.'

I was right. The GP refused Ozempic, but added, 'How else can I help you today?'

I asked, 'Could you just do a general MOT? On the woman, not the chair.'

Amazingly, the doctor breezily dismissed a previous suggestion of dementia.

I cried out, 'Mother! You're not mad, after all!'

Mother sighed. 'I told you I wasn't. You're the one who's mad.'

'Me? *Me?* I'm not demented ... I'm not!'

'He told me to send you nude photos,' she said to the doctor.

I said, 'Now tell me that that doesn't sound like what a mad person would say. She toasted some cornflakes the other day in a toaster.'

She shot straight back, 'He fell asleep in a bath reading comics. His father had to break the crust of congealed *Beano*s to pull him to safety.'

'That was decades ago.' I caught the eye of the nearest nurse. 'I was 21! She fell asleep last Thursday in the middle of *Emmerdale*, woke up and thought she was watching *Countryfile*.'

'Matt Barker looks like a Sugden from the back!' she roared.

After five seconds of silence, the awkwardness was broken by the doctor. 'Should we say I'll see you in six months unless things change?'

'Oh, nothing ever changes,' Father said.

The poetry of English history

Historians can learn from Auden, Kipling and Shakespeare

DAVID HORSPOOL

The problem, as so often in English history, is Shakespeare.

Intrigued by the title of a forthcoming book, *A History of England in 25 Poems* by Catherine Clarke, I came up with a selection of my own, before seeing whether there was any overlap with the author's choices.

None of them was especially original – *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* for Anglo-Saxon carousing, fighting and lamenting; one of the many Robin Hood ballads; something from Chaucer.

Then the Shakespeare problem caught me. Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, the Wars of the Roses: how can we think of those moments of English history rendered into poetry without calling to mind sceptred isles, wishes father to thoughts, the breach closed up 'with our English dead', 'false, fleeting, perjured Clarence' et al?

And if that's so, aren't we just substituting Shakespeare's historic vision for our own?

Clarke, Professor at the Institute of Historical Research, faces the issue head on. Her choices are mostly contemporaneous with the episodes she describes. So no Shakespeare for medieval matters; the Agincourt Carol rather than 'Harry, England and St George'.

But she does choose John of Gaunt's 'sceptred isle' speech from *Richard II* – as an illustration of lines that 'defy chronology'. 'The passage triggers a sense of double exposure: a picture of England in the reign of Richard II, 200 years earlier, rather than Shakespeare's own contemporary historical moment.'

But it also speaks to Shakespeare's time, and to ours.

Rather neatly, she reinforces that point of doubling by describing the tiny detail on the Wilton Diptych, the gorgeous devotional painting (*pictured*) made during Richard II's reign. Picked out on the orb of an angel's staff is 'a turreted white castle on a jewel-like green island, with trees on the horizon and a blue sky above'.

It's a scene that anticipates Shakespeare's 'precious stone set in a silver sea', but which he cannot have observed himself (modern researchers needed a microscope).

Shakespeare aside, Clarke's choices offer a chance for fresh interpretations, even if some episodes seem conspicuously absent.

Sceptred isle: Virgin and Child, Wilton Diptych, c.1399

WIKIPEDIA / NATIONAL GALLERY

No Magna Carta, no Peasants' Revolt, no Wars of the Roses – and no Robin Hood. Later on, she goes for Tennyson's *In Memoriam* rather than the 'more obvious contender', *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

A similar instinct to avoid the obvious persuaded her against including any Kipling, except as an example for contrast. She favours Lewis Carroll's 'Rules and Regulations' over 'If—'. I applaud the desire to avoid the most over-quoted poem in the language, and don't dispute her characterisation of Kipling as 'imperialist and racist'.

But *not* including a very famous racist and imperialist, who also wrote very memorable verse, misses out a rather large aspect of English history.

Besides, Kipling's worrying away at 'what England seems' – 'only putty, brass and paint' – makes it harder just to dismiss him as an unthinking jingoist.

Whether you subscribe to Shelley's wishful view of poets as 'unacknowledged legislators', or to Auden's reminder that 'poetry makes nothing happen', it's worth considering the poet's role in history more widely.

If poets are usually confined to the sidelines, might that make them good historians? Probably not, if we expect historians to be dispassionate, even-handed and non-partisan. But that doesn't mean poetry can't make for good history.

Clarke realises that distant ancestors inhabited an often very different world 'but, even in these other Englands, we can discover intense emotional connection and affinity'. She hopes that her choices can foster what she calls 'radical empathy across time'.

In many of her selections, we find exactly that. Two of the most touching from different ends of our history describe the loss of children – a beloved daughter in the case of the medieval poem *Pearl*; and 26 lives brutally cut short in a mining accident, lamented by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 'The Cry of the Children'.

Clarke points out the continuities – 'an old, faraway grief, as raw and affecting now as ever' – as well as the differences in the way emotions were experienced.

Wordsworth defined poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Some of Clarke's choices seem more urgent than that. In the lines following the famous one about poetry making nothing happen, Auden suggested what it did instead.

Poetry 'survives,/ A way of happening, a mouth'. Across history, poetry has something unique to say to us. Historians are well-advised to listen.

A History of England in 25 Poems by *Catherine Clarke is out on 4th September*

School's out for summer, thank God!

SOPHIA WAUGH

Every now and again, the hoary old question of the length of the school summer holidays is raised by a malignant press.

Of course the sad old journos, hunched over their laptops, or muttering into their beers in some sweaty pub, can't say the real reasons they hate the six-week break for teachers (because that's whom they're cross with).

So they have to look around for a high horse to climb onto.

It's outdated, they say. The long summer holidays were built around children helping to bring in the harvest. Where are the children merrily turning the hay? They are on screens in their darkened bedrooms. Get them back to the classroom!

In those six week, the malcontents argue, children forget how to learn. Their brains turn to mush. They not only forget all they have been taught so far, but lose the ability to retain new information. Get them back to the classroom!

It's not fair on the parents, complain the pundits. Why should they have to look after their children for so long?

We teachers are spoiled by our 13 weeks' holiday a year. I could expand on the exhaustion of a school year and how we – never mind the children – need a proper break, but I won't. You've heard it before and might well not be convinced.

But my reasons for arguing against reshaping the entire school year are not entirely selfish.

The long summer holidays were built around the harvest, but that long holiday offers other things to those children who aren't allowed to skulk in their dens over flickering screens. Learning is not all about GCSEs and remembering what an oxymoron is. A child begins learning from the moment it opens its eyes.

Learning comes from playing outside and looking at the sky, meeting different people and reading different books, messing around in the kitchen or the garden, playing cards and riding a bike. Learning happens while a child is making a den, whether it's under a tree or under the kitchen table. Learning can even happen (I must admit) from a flickering screen.

One of my granddaughters was given a bug-catcher with an integrated magnifying glass this summer, and has spent hours poring over dead flies and moths, drawing pictures and looking up facts. This did not need money, space or anything but an enquiring mind and spare time.

Childcare can be difficult for working families, but parents should remember something they learned during the lockdowns but seem to have forgotten: these are their children, not ours. We are teachers, not child-carers. Yes, we are responsible for their children's learning, but so are they. If their children become unsocial during the school holidays, that is not our fault.

And in September children don't return unable to focus. There is something marvellous about a new school year, for us and our pupils.

Every September offers every child a new beginning. They come back to new classes, new teachers and – sometimes – new subjects. They come back with cleaner uniforms, squarer shoulders and new resolutions.

I doubt that many would put this into words, but you can see even the naughtiest, laziest, most disaffected child ready to attack the school year with new vigour.

How long it lasts is another matter. Still, everyone has that chance.

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God

SISTER TERESA

Rembrandt's painful masterpiece

There is much spiritual writing on pain; most of it is so high-flown that it makes me wonder whether the writers have ever even had so much as a leg ulcer.

I have a leg ulcer right now, and there is nothing sublime about it; it is just painful and nasty to look at.

As an antidote to self-pity, when I am lying in bed, I look at Rembrandt's etching *The Three Crosses*. I concentrate on one of the two thieves crucified with Christ; he ison Christ's left.

***The Three Crosses* (1653) by Rembrandt**

The crucified figure is bathed in a light that comes from above. Immediately behind him is deep darkness. The light that illumines the thief also shows up a tiny section of chaos – fine lines etching figures of despair, including a diminutive and fainting Mary. Light is not normally associated with turmoil and madness – so the impact is exceptionally disturbing.

Also disturbing, because of its out-of-place beauty, is a small shrub just below the cross. Rembrandt has followed the technique of so many medieval artists, superimposing light leaves over dark leaves – the sort of delightful foliage one notices on a bay tree in the springtime.

The thief is still alive, arms stretched agonisingly over the bar of the cross and tied down to the upright timber. He is muscular and naked. Because the etching is so small, it is bearable (just) to look at. Were it in colour and any larger, I for one could not cope with it at all.

And yet we all know that such levels of pain are happening all the time in our world, and not just in war zones.

It is essential to bear in mind that Christianity is not cross-tianity, and that the Resurrection follows on from this appalling scene.

Next to Rembrandt's etching, I keep a very small and powerful watercolour of 'a green hill far away without a city wall' – the first line of a hymn by Cecil Frances Alexander, describing a simplified version of the Crucifixion. It is thought that she passed a green hill when walking to and from her home in Derry, and that it made her think of Golgotha.

The watercolour is of the islands of the Inner Hebrides seen from a promontory (a green hill) on the mainland. The landscape speaks of fresh air, cleanness, light and colour. It is a place of great beauty with a sense of peace, hope and the presence of God.

We all need such images as a help for our ills, whether these be our own physical wounds or the sense of desolation that surrounds us on all sides.

Thanksgiving Service

Duff Hart-Davis (1936-2025)

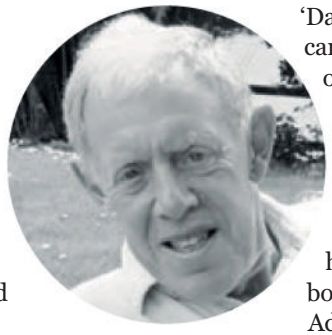
The Rev Pauline Setterfield conducted the thanksgiving service for Duff Hart-Davis, biographer, novelist and journalist, at St Mary the Virgin, Beverston, Gloucestershire.

Hart-Davis's biographical subjects included painter Raoul Millais; the Berry family, former owners of the *Daily Telegraph*; and Peter Fleming, the writer, adventurer and brother of Ian Fleming.

Journalist Alice Hart-Davis gave the eulogy, She told how her father, son of the publisher Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, joined the *Sunday Telegraph* when it was founded in 1961. He worked in the books department, becoming literary editor and assistant editor.

Alice said, 'Dad loved an adventure; he'd got a taste for travel in 1957, before university, when he joined a tramp steamer on voyage to West Africa and up-river into the interior.

'Soon after that, Russia opened up a route for tourist cars and Dad's godfather, the author and travel writer Peter Fleming, set off to write articles for the *Times* about his journey through the workers' paradise. Dad went along as mechanic and co-driver and spy.'



'Dad had a terrific way with words. He wrote more than 50 books – thrillers, biography, natural history, ghost writing, coaxing stories from Jimmy Chipperfield, Oleg Gordievsky and General Sir Peter de la Billière.

'Dad loved village cricket and he was a demon fast bowler. When one of Mum's books sold to the States for a small fortune in 1978, they were advised to move to Ireland to avoid a ruinous tax bill.

'Dad had one objection: "I can't go because I'm chairman of Nettlebed Cricket Club. They did go, for 18 months – and had a grand 18 months in Ireland. The Nettlebed Cricket Club and the *Telegraph*, where he was assistant editor, both took him back.'

Adam Hart-Davis, the TV presenter and Duff's younger brother, read Ecclesiastes 12:1-8. Grandson Robert Hindhaugh read an extract from *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh. Granddaughter Molly Hindhaugh read 'The High King', from *Country Matters* by the deceased.

Hymns were 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven', 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah' and 'Abide with me'. Music included the march from Verdi's *Aida*.

JAMES HUGHES-ONSLOW

The fall of man – and woman

As your muscle mass decreases in old age, you lose your balance

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

There was a time when one heard a great deal of the University of the Third Age (U3A), but this was always something of a euphemism or misnomer.

Shakespeare (as usual) was more apposite for most of the readers of this august publication. They, I suspect, have mainly entered not the third, but the sixth age:

'The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon…
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank…'

You may think you have expanded with age, but in one respect you almost certainly have shrunk: irrespective of your waistline, your muscle mass will have decreased, on average by eight per cent per decade after the age of 40.

This is a natural process, but not a good one, unless you believe in the ineffable wisdom of Nature. Sarcopenia, as it is called, is associated with such symptoms as loss of balance and falls, which are of ill omen.

Can anything be done to reverse, or at least halt the advance of, sarcopenia?

Those who are fat or physically inactive (the greatest sinners of our age) suffer more sarcopenia than the fit and active. But, until the invention of a time machine that allows for the rewinding and reliving of a life, such knowledge is useless to the living elderly.

Besides, even the virtuous healthy suffer from sarcopenia. What we want is a magic pill to keep us muscular.

Various pills and remedies have, in fact, been suggested to reverse normal sarcopenia, but it is not known whether, or to what extent, any of them works.

A recent trial of 2,157 healthy people, with an average age of 75, was not very encouraging.

They were given vitamin D or omega-3 supplementation, or a home exercise programme, and compared with one another and with placebo. After three years, no significant difference in muscle mass was found between any of the groups of participants in the trial.

As ever, one must be careful not to read too much significance (or is it insignificance?) into the results. The people chosen for the trial were healthy, still active and not suffering from pronounced sarcopenia.

One must be careful, too, not to apply the results from a trial on one group of people to another quite different group of people. Doing so, as I shall illustrate in a moment, can have disastrous results.

Sarcopenia seems to be a normal phenomenon occurring with ageing, though at different rates in different people. There is also, however, a kind of accelerated sarcopenia brought about by illness or prolonged rest in bed.

It does not follow from the fact that vitamin-D or omega-3 supplementation does not help healthy people that it would not help those with secondary sarcopenia.

Application of research on one group of people to another is one of the causes of the epidemic of overdoses from opioid drugs in the US, from which hundreds of thousands have died.

It was found that patients prescribed morphine in hospital for acutely painful conditions such as heart attack, or post-operatively, practically never became addicted to morphine.

So when strong synthetic opioids became available, it was rashly argued that opioids in general, prescribed to anyone in pain, no matter the type or cause of pain, posed little danger of abuse and addiction.

But the difference between someone having, say, a heart attack, and someone else with chronic back pain exacerbated by anxiety, obesity, unemployment, family problems and so forth, should have been obvious.

Like must always be compared with like: analogy is not enough. As the authors of the trial of supplementation in sarcopenia correctly say, further research is needed.

In fact, it always will be needed.

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The Oldie

Review of Books

Autumn Round-Up of the Best 50 Books

Fireside food Elisabeth Luard
Murder most foul Michael Barber on crime
Lost classics Lucy Lethbridge

Biography & Memoir * History * Politics & Current Affairs * Art & Architecture * Music & Poetry * Fiction * Reprints * Crime & Thrillers

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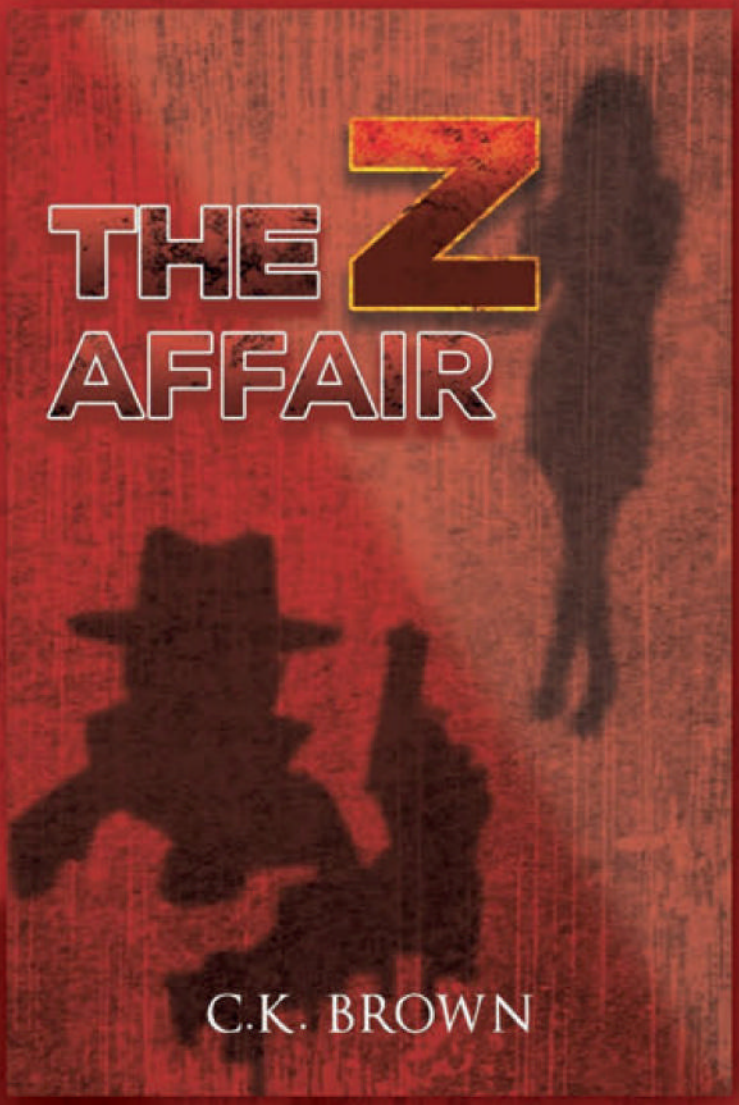

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The Oldie

Review of Books

Issue 73 Autumn 2025

Not forgetting important titles recently reviewed in *The Oldie*

The Cardinal: The Secret Life of Thomas Wolsey by Alison Weir

The Spy in the Archive: How One Man Tried to Kill the KGB by Gordon Corera

A Shattered Idol: The Lord Chief Justice and His Troublesome Women by Tom Hughes

The Letters of Frank Loesser edited by Dominic Broomfield-McHugh and Cliff Eisen

The Lady in the Park by David Reynolds

The Bookseller Hay: The Life and Times of Richard Booth by James Hanning

Empire of the Elite: Inside Condé Nast, the Media Industry that Reshaped America by Michael M Gunbaum

The Colonialist: The Vision of Cecil Rhodes by William Kelleher Storey

The Genius of Trees by Harriet Rix

The Mirror of Great Britain: A Life of James VI and I by Clare Jackson

To the Sea by Train: The GoldenAge of Railway Travel by Andrew Martin

Nothing but Wickedness: The Delusions of Our Culture by Theodore Dalrymple

Larry: A New Biography of Lawrence Durrell 1912-45 by Michael Haag

The Pentecost Papers by Ferdinand Mount

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For advertising enquiries: Paul Pryde on 020 3859 7095 or 7093. For editorial enquiries editorial@theoldie.co.uk

COVER ILLUSTRATION: BOB WILSON

Autumn Comforts

Some people dread the end of the summer as the nights draw in. But, for book-lovers, autumn can present a welcome excuse to stay in and read.

It's also the season to spend time in a warm kitchen. Elisabeth Luard picks some of the best cookery and food books from around the world to inspire us to be adventurous with our autumnal cooking.

For lovers of thrillers and crime, Michael Barber has not just picked out the best new releases but also celebrates the reprinting of crime classics by the likes of Georges Simenon, P.D. James and Elmore Leonard.

Lucy Lethbridge hunts down some of the best reprints, including Marguerite Yourcenar's A Blue Tale, a collection of three stories which were the last of her work to be translated into English.

Memoirs abound. Among biographies of historical and literary figures like Thomas More and Gertrude Stein, we find Sarah Vine's much picked-over account of her life as a politician's wife and a harrowing biography charting the shocking serial abuse by Mohammed Fayed.

Our history pages contain books about dandyism, bohemianism, terrorism, leprosy, serial killers, spies and much more, while in Current Affairs we feature the super-rich in the wittily titled, The Haves and Have-Yachts, alongside a critique of capitalism and books on the 'manosphere'.

In our Miscellaneous pages, there are fascinating books on genius, lone wolves, 'ghosting', a book questioning if privacy still exists in our digital age and Dianaworld, exploring our obsession with Princess Diana.

And if it's a really good new novel you're after, our Fiction pages are packed with recommendations from writers like Esther Freud, Amy Bloom and Claire Adams, with short stories by DJ Taylor and Graham Swift.

Charlotte Metcalf

THE MONSTER OF HARRODS

AL-FAYED, AND THE SECRET, SHAMEFUL HISTORY OF A BRITISH INSTITUTION

ALISON KERVIN

HarperCollins, 352pp, £20

For years, Harrods owner Mohamed Fayed used his power to abuse and rape women who worked for him. He was never prosecuted. Kervin recounts the scale of his abuse and the huge number of people who enabled it.

India Block in the *Evening Standard* believed it 'takes a book to truly comprehend the scale of an atrocity. Documentaries can be gasped at, reportage consumed in a lunch break.'

This book 'requires you to sit with the grotesque serial sexual assaults perpetuated by Fayed. To read this accounting of his perverted desires to hurt and humiliate is to enter a world of baroque horrors.

Kervin paints a terrifying portrait of the lair he built within Harrods, parasitically nesting in a British institution and warping it into a veritable Bluebeard's castle rigged with cameras and microphones.'

Block praised 'a master storyteller' with the 'journalistic chops for tracking down her sources and gaining their trust. She sensitively handles the women's stories, refusing to turn away from any horrific detail without descending into voyeurism.'

In the *Times* Sarah Ditum disagreed: 'Kervin didn't do the original investigation, nor does she have any vivid or novel insights. She also has an unfortunate prose style. What's left is uncomfortably close to voyeurism, especially when Kervin lingers on the victims' looks in the manner of a romance author: "peaches and cream skin, blue eyes and gleaming white teeth".'

Sarah Vine and Michael Gove after voting in the Brexit referendum, 2016

HOW NOT TO BE A POLITICAL WIFE

SARAH VINE

Element, 320pp, £20

'Politics is awful. If you want the digested read of Vine's memoir on life as a Westminster WAG, that's it,' wrote the *Guardian*'s Gaby Hinsliff: 'a hateful business that ruined her marriage to Michael Gove, her health and happiness.'

'A book by the thinking man's Meghan Markle,' judged Simon Heffer in the *Telegraph*, finding this memoir 'fascinating, embarrassing and fundamentally tragic.' It 'sets the record straight about the cesspit of Tory politics. But that doesn't save it from its navel-gazing.'

What he found embarrassing is 'the detail into which Ms Vine goes about her background: her being loathed at school, her mental and physical health and the effect her ex-husband's career had on her and their children.'

Heffer suspected 'no man reading this book will perceive all its nuances, because it is (again from its title) presumably aimed mostly at women. One certainly rarely senses that Ms Vine is writing with the idea that a man is among her readership.

It is not a particularly literary book but will prove undeniably useful to those unfortunate historians who have to write about this ghastly period in decades to come. Otherwise, Ms Vine might have been far better advised not to write it at all.'

'They say it's lonely at the top. What this book proves is that it can be even lonelier on the way down,' concluded Hinsliff.

Mohammed Fayed : 'parasitically nesting in a British institution'

GETTY

HOMEWORK
A MEMOIR

GEOFF DYER

Canongate, 288pp, £20

From his vantage point as a novelist who is writer-in-residence at the University of Southern California, Dyer recalls his '70s provincial upbringing in this memoir. 'Toy soldiers, conker fights, fizzy drinks, Wall's ice-creams, chicken-in-a-basket pub lunches, swimming lessons (plus verrucas), trips in the family car to see relations, programmes on the black-and-white telly: his recall of period detail and brand names is exceptional,' wrote Blake Morrison in the *Guardian*.

But what 'lifts it beyond routine reminiscence (and makes the excess of cigarette cards and Airfix kits more bearable) is its evocation of a lost era, a postwar culture eager to embrace new freedoms while still recovering from the privations of the '30s and '40s.'

Will Cohu, in *Literary Review*, found this 'account of a monochrome, working-class childhood in Cheltenham' to be 'full of brilliant retrospectives'. Dyer 'can be the most seductive of writers'.

Geoff Dyer in his childhood bedroom

Dyer is proposing himself as 'someone interested' (rather than interesting), which is what makes his writing – and this memoir – so enthralling'.

Roger Lewis delivered a caustic review in the *Daily Mail*. The book 'spends too long with characters such as his father Jack (1919–2011), who must have been the most boring man in England... There are no sentences to savour... no perceptions to give you pause or make you gasp. In the total absence of swagger... we're given Barthes or Sontag reincarnated as someone incredibly ordinary.'

I REGRET ALMOST EVERYTHING

KEITH MCNALLY

Simon & Schuster, 320pp, £25

McNally is a Cockney, who left school at 16 with one O level and made a multi-millionaire success as a restaurateur in the Big Apple, where he was said to have 'invented downtown' as a dining destination, where courting celebrity friends is *de rigueur*.

Regrets: Keith McNally

Hence his memoir is garlanded with endorsements from friends such as Martha Stewart, Jay McInerney, and Anna Wintour.

Before leaving for New York at 18, McNally had an affair with the playwright Alan Bennett.

'This is an angry book, written by an angry man,' wrote Charlotte Ivers in the *Sunday Times*.

'It opens in 2016 with McNally suffering a stroke: an event that leads to his becoming permanently disabled and to a suicide attempt that he describes with astonishing frankness.

'He is candid too' about 'the failure of his two marriages, the challenges of his relationships with his five children, his parents and his brother – and unflinching about the guilt he holds.'

Ivers praised McNally's 'excellent turns of phrase, such as, "Nothing puts me off sex more than a woman with a huge suitcase."'

However, the *Observer*'s reviewer, Lynn Barber, found it 'a strangely disjointed and self-indulgent book.

There's good stuff here but it comes in fits and starts and lacks narrative control.' She thought it needed 'a good editor, who could have excised some of the longueurs'.

MY FAMILY AND OTHER SPIES

ALISTAIR WOOD

Michael Joseph, 384pp, £22

'A fabulous romp,' wrote Kathryn Hughes in the *Sunday Times*. 'Part John le Carré and part Ealing comedy', this was a 'compulsively readable' memoir by the son of two MI6 spies, one of whom double-crossed the other and possibly if inadvertently his country.

In the late '50s, when Alistair was a baby, his father John Bryan Wood – 'JBW' – abandoned his wife and headed for Canada with a new and pregnant fiancée and Alistair's three-year-old brother. (Chasing them down, Margaret Wood re-abducted the child.)

This book is a search for the truth about JBW and his mind-boggling exploits and abilities.

'It's a tale elegantly told,' said Stuart Jeffries in the *Observer*.

The polymathic JBW – who was 'comfortable' in 17 languages – operated against the Nazis and the Soviets; and later, under a new identity, ostensibly worked for the UN and various charities.

But as the *Standard*'s reviewer observed, he always remained an 'enigma' in this 'intriguing' story.

Margaret was hailed the book's true 'heroine' by both Hughes and Jeffries; the latter calling her 'an adorably sharp-tongued mash-up of Bertie Wooster's Aunt Dahlia and one of the nicer Mitfords'.

And from its many jaw-dropping anecdotes, Hughes singled out a 'brilliant account of growing-up in an enclosed community of ageing spies who didn't have quite enough to do'.

Their weekly highpoint was watching *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier Spy* on the common room television.

JB Wood and his mother in Canada in 1923

GEOFF DYER

GERTRUDE STEIN
AN AFTERLIFE

FRANCESCA WADE

Faber & Faber, 480pp, £20

This is 'exhaustively researched and beautifully written' and 'will become the definitive biography,' wrote Luke Kennard in the *Telegraph*.

Wade's biography of the writer who divided public opinion – genius or charlatan? – is in two halves.

The first half follows Stein from birth in Pennsylvania to death from stomach cancer in 1946, aged 72. The second half examines Stein's legacy and the dedication of her life partner, Alice B Toklas, to fulfil Stein's will that all her work be published posthumously.

For Kennard, Wade cares as much about Stein's archive as about the 'complex, brilliant and contradictory person who created it.'

As a writer, Stein 'remains misunderstood, with a less-than-stable place in the canon' and Kennard agreed with Wade's implicit argument that Stein is ripe for a revival.

On the other hand, 'I cannot say that I really enjoyed this book,' said Rachel Cooke in the *Observer*; 'Wade takes Stein seriously at all times, and this is silly. She may not have been an out-and-out charlatan… But when Wade refers sombrely to Stein's "writing practice", it's hard not to laugh.'

Meanwhile, Kathryn Hughes argued in the *Guardian* that 'if Wade had written a shorter and more focused investigation of Stein's posthumous reputation, perhaps it would have showcased her achievement to even better effect.'

THOMAS MORE
A LIFE AND DEATH IN TUDOR ENGLAND

JOANNE PAUL

Penguin/Michael Joseph, 624pp, £30

All the critics agreed Paul was a terrific writer. She brilliantly evokes 'the swirl of Catholic England', wrote Alice Hunt in the *Times*; and 'the streets, ditches and smells of Cripplegate, where More was born'.

In the *Spectator*, Elizabeth Goldring thought the author excelled 'at bringing the past to life in all its gory detail', like her take on the omnipresent 'sweating-sickness'.

Thomas More, by Holbein the Younger

In *Literary Review* Peter Marshall endorsed the above and added 'the forms and feel of clothing and objects'. Then he sounded an alarm: in this 'entertaining and thought-provoking new biography', Paul had applied a 'hermeneutic of suspicion much too rigorously'.

Over-concerned about revisionism, she'd only used exactly contemporary accounts; and she'd trodden 'a minimalist path through More's personal life' to the exclusion of such themes as his botched religious vocation and two marriages. Indeed, her book was 'presented almost as if no one had written about the subject before'.

Elsewhere, Goldring was declaring Paul 'attuned to the zeitgeist', because she 'astutely [drew] out numerous parallels between the politics of the 16th century and our own' – for King Henry, read Trump – while Hunt was countering that her subject did 'not need to be invoked as a man for our times, just as he does not need to be either saintly or monstrous'.

> This 'entertaining and thought-provoking' book excels 'at bringing the past to life in all its gory detail'

Neither stern nor tub-thumping, Hunt found the book 'engrossing', More and his world 'compelling, dark and strange'.

Gertrude Stein, photographed by Carl Van Vechten in 1935

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PARALLEL LIVES
A LOVE STORY FROM A LOST CONTINENT

IAIN PEARS

William Colllins, 288pp, £18.99

In a Venice backstreet in 1962, a Soviet commisar and a Cambridge don meet for the first time.

Even though they met just two months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, wrote Jessie Childs in the *Times*, the stuff of this book is 'not a spy story, or a history, or strictly biography, but only a simple tale, [in the author's words] of two people from a world long ago who meet and fall in love'.

The don was the art historian Francis Haskell, who went on to teach the young Pears at Oxford. After his death, Pears maintained a friendship with his Russian widow Larissa – and soon realised their story was remarkable.

Larissa was a Russian army officer's daughter, who lived, aged eleven, through the siege of Leningrad (she remembered eating a neighbour's cat), and after the war went on to study at the Leningrad Academy of Fine Arts.

When she met and fell in love with Haskell, he 'was unsure about his sexuality and clueless about women', but they enraptured each other and their relationship rescued him from depression and, eventually, her from Stalin's empire.

To read it, thought Childs, is 'to revel in sublime writing and to be gently prodded into thoughts on the meaning of freedom and the transformative experience of love'.

Newly weds: Francis and Larissa on their wedding day in 1965

Zbig: 'Cold War prophet'

In the *Spectator*, Antony Beevor found Pears's account provided 'a roller- coaster ride of hopes and fears, of secret trysts in non-aligned Yugoslavia, smuggled letters written in code [...] a wonderful tribute to the power of love overcoming a soulless ideology.'

ZBIG
THE LIFE OF ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, AMERICA'S COLD WAR PROPHET

EDWARD LUCE

Bloomsbury, 560pp, £30

'Zbig', Jimmy Carter's Polish-born national security adviser, was a hard man to pin down.

He was, said Theodore Bunzel in *Foreign Policy*, 'the Democrats' Cold War sage who found admirers on Ronald Reagan's foreign policy team; an inveterate Russia hawk who was an arch-nemesis of neo-conservatism in the George W Bush years; and an early backer of Barack Obama'.

Bunzel found *FT* columnist Edward Luce's 'magnificent' book to be 'the first real attempt to capture the full dimensions of Brzezinski as both a thinker and also a man: his acid wit, his preternatural competitiveness, his comical tight-fistedness, his tender and unbending dedication to his family. Luce does this beautifully in an essential new contribution that properly elevates Brzezinski's standing in the pantheon of US foreign policy thinkers.'

'No biography of Brzezinski is likely to surpass this one in empathy,' agreed Robert Service in *Literary Review*.

The *Guardian*'s Lloyd Green found *Zbig* 'highly readable' and 'deeply and meticulously researched', and picked out a telling detail. 'In 1968, as a Columbia professor, he witnessed campus unrest. His memories of the war years left him with little patience for make-believe revolutionaries.' After confronting a "rabble" of "spoiled brats from suburban homes risking nothing" the young Zbig stalked off with the words: "I have to go back and plan some more genocides."

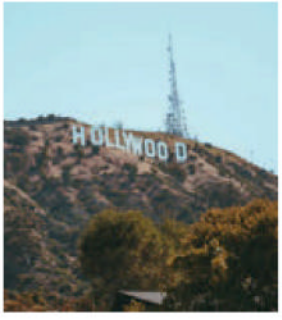
THE GOLDEN HOUR
A STORY OF FAMILY AND POWER IN HOLLYWOOD

MATTHEW SPECKTOR

Harper Collins, 384pp, £28

The son of a Hollywood agent still working in his nineties, Specktor is a novelist, screenwriter and erstwhile studio executive in his late fifties.

Mark Athitakis, in the *LA Times*, called the book 'a determinedly artful and novelistic memoir', while Alexandra Jacobs, in the *New York Times*, found it 'rich', 'atmospheric', with 'an appropriately retro, hard-boiled texture... It assumes that life and the movies are in a state of permanent overlap. In this it may already be outdated, and yet, like a long rattling drive down Sunset Boulevard, it both lulls and arouses.'



'An extraordinary world'

This is 'part Hollywood history, part nuanced family memoir,' wrote Olivia Cole in the *Spectator*, 'a history that's confession as well as deeply researched. The combination, along with his gift for setting a scene, makes this Specktor's best book yet.

The Golden Hour explores the strangeness of being ordinary in this extraordinary world, 'impatient with a life that is merely human-sized'. For Jim Kelly, in *Air Mail*, Specktor's book is a 'bittersweet tale'.

It may be nonfiction, but in its emotional depth and poetic insight, the book belongs on the same shelf as the novels *What Makes Sammy Run?* and *The Day of the Locust*.'

GETTY; WIKIMEDIA

Autumn is the time to settle into a warm kitchen and start cooking, says ELISABETH LUARD

Meryl Streep as Julia Child in *Julie & Julia* (2009)

Memoirs-with-food that carry you (and me) from the armchair into the kitchen are everywhere this autumn.

First among equals is Fuchsia Dunlop's extraordinarily concise history of Chinese food**, Invitation to a Banquet**, (Particular Books, £25). Each chapter tells the story through a single classic dish – 'Fried Jade Shrimps', 'Sweet-and-sour Yellow River Carp' and 'Loving Mother's Red-Braised Pork'.

It sent me rummaging in the bookshelf for **Sizchuan Cookery**, that suits the season and is the author's first love: fiery stir-fries and pot-simmered slow-cooked dishes.

Back here and now, Olia Hercules digs deep into her Ukrainian memory-bank with **Strong Roots** (Bloomsbury, £20). Stories of family, exile, war, hope and cooking will send you scrambling for one of her glorious cookbooks – **Mamushka** or **Kaukasis** – for pickled watermelon served with ham, brined mushrooms with allspice and apples fermented with pumpkin.

Ukrainians, given half a chance, are gardeners. Preserving, salting and fermenting through the growing season comes with the territory.

'What shall I cook for your arrival?' her mother would ask Olia on her return home to Karkov before the war. The answer, she says, was always the same: dumplings filled with soft white cheese, *syr*, sauced with butter and cream and a spoonful, in autumn, of plums, damsons or apricots cooked in honey so delicious that she would eat 30 dumplings instead of the usual ten.

Head for a round-the-world trip with Russian-born Anya von Bremzen's **National Dish** (Pushkin Press, £22), a trawl in search of food, history and the meaning of home, observed by a witty outsider with a keen nose for what makes a nation tick.

In the same neck of the woods online, Caroline Eden – **Green Mountains, Red Sands, Black Sea** – explores the 'Stans and much of the Balkans in her regular Substack posts so the rest of us don't have to. It's cold out there in the boon docks, in spite of global warming. Apple-stuffed dumplings in Kazakhstan in autumn? Lovely.

A practical baking book that's won all the year's prizes – not easy as the list is enormous – Nicola Lamb's **Sift** (Ebury, £30) is one good way to get your sourdough up to scratch. Mine isn't – yet.

So stick your fingers in the flour jar, unwrap the butter paper and follow exactly what this professional pastry cook says and you can't go wrong.

And if you think you (or I) don't need step-by-step instructions for proving, stretching and relaxing a dough – believe me, we do – if only for a taste of her Tomato and Fennel Tarte Tatin (a slick of honey, a pinch of chilli), or her Brown Butter Banana Cookies (allspice, ground cloves, raisins, rum). And her Spiced Pumpkin Buns (with nigella seeds, this season's must-have) are just the thing for Bonfire Night.

Back in blessed Albion, keep the home fires burning with Jane Grigson's **Good Things** (Grub Street's neat little hardback reprint, £16.99) a joyous compendium of everything our most beloved home cook likes to eat.

Cock-a-leekie, a frugal dish reputedly prepared with an ageing Scottish rooster, is, Mrs Grigson suggests, far better made with a fine fat English capon.

Sir Isaac Newton's baked quinces and Robert Southey's Gooseberry Pie strike a suitably autumnal note, which is not to overlook France's Pheasant à la Normande cooked, as well it should be, with apples, cream, butter and (surprisingly) cinnamon.

English food does not – never had – a reputation for *la gourmandise*. Expressions of enjoyment could once (sometimes still are) be seen as greed. *Les rosbifs* don't even have a word for aesthetic appreciation. I know, I know, we've changed.

But maybe we've had enough authentic Thai street food re-imagined for gourmet diners, and are happy to re-discover Mrs Grigson's curried parsnip soup.

And since India has always been the national exception to what's considered abroad, cook up an Indian summer with **Monsoon** (DorlingKindersley hardback, £26), Asma Khan's latest contribution to the nation's gastronomic being.

> Back in Albion, keep the home fires burning with Jane Grigson's *Good Things*

A Londoner born in Calcutta, activist and campaigner for women's rights in marginal communities, Asma is chef-proprietor of Darjeeling Express, just off Carnaby Street in Soho.

Home cooking for different occasions is the general thrust, with chapters divided into seasons with appropriate ingredients.

Freedom to choose how to compose a meal, the heart and soul of good Indian cooking, makes the recipes particularly enticing.

Autumn, she says, suits Aubergines with Poppy Seeds, while First Class Railway Curry sounds just the ticket for those of us who stay at home and dream.

'Uber-dandy' Beau Brummell (1778-1840)

THE DANDY
A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF SARTORIAL SPLENDOUR

PETER K ANDERSSON

OUP, 352pp, £30

When Oxford historian Peter K Andersson was a teenager in the 1990s, he stood out from his peers in provincial Sweden by wearing tweed jackets, bow ties and carrying a cane.

So he brings to his recent book real understanding of the dandy's central paradox: that his exquisite dress is both conformist and subversive.

In the *TLS*, Henry Hitchings thought Andersson's 'memoiristic flourishes' and his 'empathy with the "need to be visible" add real charm'.

Andersson begins, inevitably, with Beau Brummell, the uber-dandy whose immaculate tailoring marked a break with the extravagantly elaborate male fashions of the 18th century. Dandyism gave young men emerging into the 19th century a tribal identity.

As Lucy Lethbridge wrote in *Prospect*, there were soon multifarious iterations of dandyism: 'Before the mashers were the bucks and blades, then the swells and gents and snobs and counter-jumpers. They wore their trousers checked and baggy as pantaloons and favoured rings, pouffed-up hair, buttonholes and diamond pins. Group membership was conveyed by sucking their canes and, later in the century, by affecting upper-class phrases such as "don't you know" or "deuced queer".'

As the *Kirkus* reviewer put it, Andersson explores 'each sartorial wave as an evolving social subculture, investigating their unique complexities amid the "murky layers of the populace".'

Hitchings concluded that the dandy, 'in this telling, is a confusing figure... "Flirting with effeminacy" yet also prone to womanizing, he is rarely heroic and sometimes a nuisance.'

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF MONTAGU
DUKEDOM, DEBAUCHERY AND THE DEMISE OF A DYNASTY

ROBERT WAINWRIGHT

Allen & Unwin, 352pp, £22

Although the dukedom was created in 1719, Wainwright concentrates on the last generation to own the family estate, Kimbolton Castle, now a school.

He 'ably demonstrates how rapidly a grand inheritance can be eroded by poor decisions but sketches in the historical challenges such estates faced too,' wrote Sarah Watling in the *Telegraph*.

'At its most interesting, this is a book about the peculiar glamour that the aristocracy still seems to command and about the poisoned chalice an aristocratic legacy can be for those without the financial backing generally assumed to accompany it.

'Mandy', the 10th Duke of Manchester, and Nell, 1927

The story of 'Mandy', the 10th Duke of Manchester, and his Australian socialite wife Nell, 'was not one of catastrophic decline and fall', said Ysenda Maxtone-Graham in the *Daily Mail*. 'This book is not as satisfying or as gripping as Wainwright's previous *Enid* ('Lady Killmore'), but it paints a memorable picture of how post-war British aristocrats had to adapt or die.'

'In some ways the story is typical', wrote Nicholas Harris in the *New Statesman*, but 'the Montagu story provides enough diverting specificities – bankruptcy, gambling dens and colonial exile – to make this a dramatic and pathos-inducing read.'

THE LAST GREAT DREAM
HOW BOHEMIANS BECAME HIPPIES AND CREATED THE SIXTIES

DENNIS McNALLY

Hachette, 416pp, £28

This is a history of everything that led to 1960s counterculture, when simmering resistance to American mainstream values gave birth to the hippie. A large part of traditional American identity (consumerism, misogyny, militarism) was rejected for creativity, peace and love.

In the *Times* Alwyn Turner wrote, 'The story starts in the 1930s with pockets of poets, artists and musicians pursuing "the bohemian code, that a life of art and spirituality was preferable to money and the pursuit of power".'

Charlie Parker, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac inspired a new generation of cultural dissidents, 'seeking spiritual enlightenment in the hinterlands of a consumerist nation. From there it was but a short trip to the self-proclaimed "freaks" — hippies, as the press called them – of the 1960s.'

Turner thought it a terrific story but there was a 'bewildering barrage of names, many of them unfamiliar to all but the initiated' and it was a problem for the reader to keep track of who all these people were.

Kirkus agreed that the books was an 'ambitious, highly capable work of cultural history' with McNally ending with a 'hopeful chord in the thought that while the dream of the 60s may be dead, "the dreaming continues".'

WIKI MEDIA COMMONS

THE BRITISH IMAGINATION
A HISTORY OF IDEAS FROM ELIZABETH I TO ELIZABETH II

PETER WATSON

Simon & Schuster, 544pp, £30

'The "imagination" of Watson's title is not merely the creative artistic imagination, but also that of scientists and inventors and, indeed, of people adept at both,' wrote Simon Heffer in the *Spectator*.

This book, which Heffer described as 'a guide to the nature of British intellectual curiosity since the mid-16th century' begins there, just as England had 'undergone a liberation from a dominant European authority: the shaking off of the influence of the Roman Catholic church and the advent of the Reformation' with all its new opportunities.

The book is too ambitious and though it demonstrates 'extensive and intelligent reading', Heffer felt that 'trying to cram so much information and commentary into one volume has not been a complete success, or resulted in something entirely coherent.'

Alexander Larman in the *Critic* was impressed by this 'kaleidoscopic, often provocative insight into British intellectual and social development over the centuries.' For him it is a 'grand endeavour in every sense.'

But for Heffer, Watson lets himself down: 'In seeking to pack so much into fewer than 500 pages of text, Watson does skate over a few crucial figures… There are notable omissions.' For example he is critical that there is no discussion of British music, 'one of the greatest fruits of the imagination of the past 150 years'. And there is no analysis of the role of architecture.

AN ACCIDENTAL HISTORY OF TUDOR ENGLAND
FROM DAILY LIFE TO SUDDEN DEATH

STEVE GUNN AND TOMASZ GROMELSKI

John Murray, 320pp, £25

Then as now, in 16th-century England sudden or suspicious deaths required investigation by coroners' courts.

Their 8,000-plus reports – gathered from round the country and since stored in Westminster – are the basis for this book which sheds light on our ancestors' forgotten ways of life – and death. Drunk-driving was not unknown, drowning (perhaps in a latrine or pot-hole) was common; and a stumble frequently proved suicidal as everyone carried knives.

In the *TLS* Dannielle Shaw found this to be a time 'when washing-up was more dangerous than cooking'.

However, elf'n'safety was still a consideration. In the *Sunday Times* Katherine Harvey was intrigued that, when one chap died at the bottom of a well, his employer was fined for failing to supply 'appropriate protective clothing'.

The authors' 'extensive archival research' gave 'horribly fascinating insights… into early-modern minds'.

Shaw agreed, finding the book 'illuminating, often surprising and at times poignant', the devil being in its detailed analysis of 'different age groups, occupations, genders and socioeconomic backgrounds'.

The Eve of the Battle of Edgehill, 1642

THE BLOOD IN WINTER
A NATION DESCENDS, 1642

JONATHAN HEALEY

Bloomsbury, 432pp, £25

'Healey,' wrote John Adamson in *Literary Review*, was 'the first author of a mass-market book' to draw on latter-day research into the noble elite's ambivalence towards the Roundheads' revolution, 'and he does so with panache'.

With so many plot-twists, 'the chronological focus is tight'; and the result a 'lucid, fast-paced and exhilarating account' of England's descent into civil war'.

In the *Times*, Dominic Sandbrook enjoyed reading this 'meticulous' book, which he called 'an old-fashioned Westminster thriller'.

In the *Telegraph*, Daniel Brooks applauded how Healey demonstrated the 'ideological splintering in the halls of power… long before the battle-lines were drawn'. The author was 'a social historian at heart', and his wealth of everyday details had produced 'a book that bursts with character, a vivid reconstruction of England on the brink'.

Elizabeth I in 1575

AC Benson MA, *Vanity Fair*, 4 June 1903

THE BENSON DIARY
VOLUMES I AND II

EDITED BY EAMON DUFFY AND RONALD HYAM

Pallas Athene, 1,050pp, £60

AC Benson (1862-1925) was a poet and *belle-lettrist*, a housemaster of Eton, and later Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. He also wrote the words to *Land of Hope and Glory*.

These diaries are written 'with remarkable frankness and freedom, detailing the failures of character and behaviour not only of his colleagues, friends and family but also of the more public figures he encountered,' said Peter Parker in the *Times*.

'He was a merciless observer of people's physical shortcomings, while always alert to the beauties of nature and the male form.' As a repressed homosexual he 'would no doubt have been horrified by the number of times in his diary his own suppressed longings are quite apparent to the modern reader'.

As a portrait of an age, seen from a particular ivory tower, the diary is invaluable; as a study of someone in flight from his own nature, it is both moving and compelling'.

Piers Brendon, in *Literary Review*, was bowled over: 'The introduction is brilliant, the selections are impeccable, the illustrations are apposite and the footnotes are entertaining as well as erudite'.

Benson may not be 'in the same league as that other Magdalene diarist Samuel Pepys. But he is superior to James Lees-Milne, Harold Nicolson and Chips Channon, and on a par with Walter Scott and Virginia Woolf'.

HEATWAVE
THE SUMMER OF 1976
BRITAIN AT BOILING POINT

JOHN L WILLIAMS

Monoray, 384pp, £22

Oldies will recall Britain in the summer of 1976. "All dry kindling, just waiting for a match," asserts John L Williams.

Richard Morrison in the *Times* praised this 'teeming chronicle of those scorching months', in which Williams argues the weather led to lasting change, from race relations to popular culture. 'All those national traits in which we allegedly lead the world — fair play, tolerance, humour, compromise — were evaporating faster than the water in the reservoirs.'

But he detected some flaws: 'The nation-changing significance he claims for the big events of that heatwave isn't always supported by subsequent history. The race riots in Southall and Notting Hill didn't fundamentally alter the tensions that existed between immigrant communities and right-wing nationalists. Women continued to struggle for pay and status parity in the workplace for decades after the Trico factory strike. And punk rock came and went without plunging the country into anarchy, or indeed greatly affecting the wider music scene.'

'Scorching, animated and essential reading,' said Roger Lewis in the *Mail On Sunday*, 'Williams's book shows a social, political and cultural world filled with riots and fights, the latter "a well attested heatwave symptom"'.

'Full of wry, ironic observations', the book is an 'entertaining trip down memory lane for those of us who witnessed "Britain at boiling point" and lived to tell the tale,' concluded Morrison.

Parched: Britain's 1976 heatwave

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

MURDERLAND
CRIME AND BLOODLUST IN THE TIMES OF SERIAL KILLERS

CAROLINE FRASER

Fleet, 480pp, £25

Why did so many people, mostly young women, die at the hands of serial killers in the Pacific Northwest of America during the 1970s and 1980s?

'Haunting, elegant and fiercely intelligent, *Murderland* works as a moving requiem for the many lives cut short by these killers,' wrote Matt Thorne in the *Observer*, 'but it is also a clear-eyed sociological account of how this terror affected the entire country, and how we cannot understand these terrible crimes without also fully appreciating the darkness of the era in which they occurred.

'It's grisly stuff, but the true marvel of this book is Fraser's tone: plain enough not to prettify the terrible details, but with an empathy

Serial killer Ted Bundy

usually absent from police reports or true-crime books.'

Dorian Lynskey, in the *Guardian*, explained Fraser's argument that the epidemic of serial killers was related to the pollution of 'sulphur dioxide, arsenic and lead, which emanated from the smokestack of a smelting facility in Ruston, outside Tacoma' in Washington state.

'It is as haunting a nonfiction book as I have read in a long time,' he wrote. 'It gets into your blood... The occasional overripe passage and portentous epigram (Dante, Dostoevsky) is a small price to pay.'

Sarah Weinman, in the *Atlantic*, found it to be 'wonderfully propulsive and hard to put down ... both a memoir of growing up during the serial-killing era and a unique investigation into its potential causes'.

Atlantic Crossing: a *'Boy's Own* story'

THE BIG HOP
THE FIRST NON-STOP FLIGHT ACROSS THE ATLANTIC AND INTO THE FUTURE

DAVID ROONEY

Chatto & Windus, 336pp, £22

In 1919, four teams of aviators came from Britain to Newfoundland to compete in 'the Big Hop'– a race for the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic. One pair abandoned the journey halfway, two never made it into the air; only Alcock and Brown reached Ireland after a 16-hour flight.

For Midge Gillies in *History Today*, 'Rooney's description of the crossing has all the panache of a *Boy's Own* story but this presents its own structural challenge – that the journey itself risks overwhelming the whole book. Rooney avoids this by leaving the pair halfway across the Atlantic, just as the plane appears to be diving towards the waves, to double-back on each man's experience as a prisoner of war.'

The *TLS's* Seb Falk found 'the trauma of war ever-present in Rooney's gripping, sensitively written book. Barely suppressed trauma and lingering physical pain underlie participants' willingness to risk their lives for a symbolic cause. Rooney intersperses these wartime experiences effectively through his dramatic account. This is a rich, deeply contextualized story: of four companies seeking to cement their commercial viability in peacetime; of international teamwork and the subtleties of gentlemanly rivalry; of efforts by government and the media to inculcate "air-mindedness" in a war-weary population.'

Rooney, formerly of London's Science Museum 'does not attempt to hide his enthusiasm for Alcock and Brown's achievement. Nor should he,' wrote Gillies.

AMERICA,AMÉRICA
A NEW HISTORY OF THE NEW WORLD

GREG GRANDIN

Torva, 768pp, £25

Pulitzer Prize-winning Yale professor Grandin, explained Daniel Rey in the *FT*, focuses on the 'centuries of intertwined politics, by turns turbulent and collaborative' between the US and ... Latin America'.

He shows that 'Spain's colonies in the Americas were crucial to the outcome of the US revolutionary war', that Latin America's reduction of tariffs during the Great Depression 'kick-started US exports and helped "save the New Deal"', and that 'John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State, said that without Latin America, "there would have been no Nato".'

The book is 'compelling and written with zest... and although partially informed by a leftist commitment, generally stays within the bounds of objectivity. The array of sources is vast, and despite the book's length, the narrative pace is superb.'

Anthony Pagden, in *Literary Review*, found it to be a 'by turns woeful, despairing and ironic tale of the USA's sustained attempts to turn its southern neighbours into clients or dependencies, if not colonies.

But it is also a passionate plea for a re-evaluation of the place of Spanish America, so often shunted off into the "Global South", in the evolution of the modern global order.'

It is 'written with great flair and imagination, scattered with scintillating turns of phrase and pervaded with a sense of barely suppressed indignation.'

GETTY, WIKI MEDIA COMMONS

THE RED BRIGADES
THE TERRORISTS WHO BROUGHT ITALY TO ITS KNEES

JOHN FOOT

Bloomsbury, 452pp, £25

In the 1970s the Red Brigades posed an even greater threat to the Italian State than the Mafia.

Convinced that Fascism had not died with Mussolini, and that there was a real chance of a neo-Blackshirt military coup, the *brigatisti* combined Marxist-Leninist beliefs with a murderous disregard for human life that culminated in the kidnapping and killing of the former Christian Democrat prime minister Aldo Moro.

By then these middle-class malcontents had long since lost touch with the workers whose lives they pledged to improve.

In the *FT*, Ian Thomson congratulated John Foot on 'a grimly absorbing history of the Red Brigades and their 18-year-old reign of terror... In their political arrogance they had subjected Italy to some of the bloodiest acts of terrorism yet seen in an industrialised society. The revolution never came but hundreds were maimed or killed in its name.'

James Owen in the *Times* and Simon Heffer in the *Sunday Telegraph* echoed Thomson's praise. Said Owen: 'His history is a sober, painstaking corrective to wild notions that have the group as the cat's paw of the CIA, the Rothschilds or Italy's secret services.'

For Heffer, Foot is 'exemplary in his scholarship and detail. He gives an utterly fascinating insight into how these murderous purveyors of odious claptrap were allowed the clout they had. There is never an excuse for terrorism, which perhaps is the most important thing this book teaches us.'

OUTCAST
A HISTORY OF LEPROSY, HUMANITY AND THE MODERN WORLD

OLIVER BASCIANO

Faber, 320pp, £20

Half history, half travelogue, this book isn't short of medical information. But as Tim Smith-Laing wrote in the *Telegraph*: 'It is above all an analysis of the realities of prejudice and ways in which shared fears exert such outsized grips on communities.'

The thing is, leprosy is incredibly hard to contract – 95 per cent of us are naturally immune – and it can take decades to manifest. The mediaevals knew this and, contrary to myth, cared for lepers, sometimes venerating them as blessed. (Those 'warning bells' were actually calls to alms-giving.)

But in the late-19th century, the Norwegian Dr Gerhard Hansen isolated the bacterium responsible and advocated isolating its carriers. With the advent of the leper colonies, victims' travails were multiplied by the cruelties enacted there; a situation that only started to be rectified in the '80s, when a cure was found.

And this is 'where the book really takes off', wrote Smith-Laing. The author 'steps into the living legacies of leprosaria', travelling the world to encounter extraordinary examples of human fortitude and resilience. Coming 'face to face with sufferers, his writing blossoms'.

In *Literary Review* Cathy Gere concurred: 'Basciano's fierce empathy, observational acuity and unerring eye for telling detail make this a haunting, poetic and memorable read' and 'a timely work of political analysis as well as a remarkable literary and research achievement'.

Spy Oleg Gordievsky (1938-2025) died peacefully at his home in Surrey

THE ILLEGALS
RUSSIA'S MOST AUDACIOUS SPIES AND THE PLOT TO INFILRATE THE WEST

SHAUN WALKER

Profile, 448pp, £22

Ever since the Bolshevik revolution, Russia has been planting spies in the West: not just embassy-based 'legals', but 'illegals': seemingly inoffensive types, fluent in their hosts' language and equipped with fake IDs.

As the *Guardian*'s Adam Sisman noted, it was 'an unnatural existence, one of constant strain, isolated from friends, family or home, sometimes for decades'. Their spouses might be chosen for them and they were forbidden from speaking Russian, 'even in their most intimate moments'. And in this 'very readable book, their strange lives make compelling stories'.

In *History Today*, James Rodgers found 'Walker has uncovered some characters who would be dismissed in fiction as too far-fetched' – one posed as an impoverished Hungarian aristocrat – but better yet were 'the stories', not least that of James, the son of KGB agents in the US, who was being groomed as a second-generation illegal. 'Impressively researched, engagingly written,' this is a timely history of an aspect of Russia's relations with the wider world about which we know so little'.

To Kristin Roth-Ey in the *TLS*, it was 'engrossing ... by turns suspenseful, funny, chilling and surprisingly poignant'.

The Red Brigades: 'A greater threat to Italy than the Mafia'

GETTY

Complex Freuds: Bella and Esther Freud

MY SISTER AND OTHER LOVERS

ESTHER FREUD

Bloomsbury, 288pp, £18.99

Esther Freud confirmed to Hephzibah Anderson in the *Observer* that her latest novel is 'probably my most autobiographical work yet … I'm using the framework of my own family, then going off into territory that fiction is so brilliant at examining.'

It is the long-awaited sequel to her first, *Hideous Kinky*, in which two young siblings, Bea and Lucy, were growing up in Morocco with their hippy mother at the end of the 1960s. Freud returns to this world 'with a coming-of-age tale depicting the experiences of adolescence and young adulthood: first loves, work, addiction sex, grief and motherhood,' wrote Rachel Armitage in *Literary Review*.

'Freud's "episodic approach" means reading it 'is like dipping in and out of a diary … The effect can be dizzying, but Freud anchors her vignettes in historical detail.'

Joanna Quinn in the *Guardian* explained that the family is on a ferry back to Ireland in the '70s. 'Bohemian rootlessness in Morocco at least meant sunshine, but this is an altogether murkier existence.

The family wait for buses in the rain, hitch lifts, share rooms in communal houses. Walls are cracked, carpets moth-eaten.'

The book's main concern is 'the damage that can be done to children by their parents'.

Quinn thought it a 'fascinating tangle of fact and fiction that refuses easy answers, and a subtle, clever, evocative book', but the *Spectator*'s Charlotte Stroud found Freud's confusing descriptions and dodgy similes led to bewilderment: 'When style compromises meaning, it ceases to be style; it's just bad writing.'

BRING THE HOUSE DOWN

CHARLOTTE RUNCIE

The Borough Press, 320pp, £16.99

'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' In the *Guardian*, Toby Litt wrote: 'Is giving an artist a one-star review an act of abuse — casting the first stone? Is it worse when the reviewer is male and the artist female?

'That's the starting point of this entertaining and very timely debut novel from Charlotte Runcie, an arts journalist who, as a young intern, was lambasted on stage by a successful standup to whom she'd given a bad review.'

Edinburgh Fringe: 'lambasted on stage'

Litt was very aware of being a male reviewing a female's debut novel but — fortunately — thought it one of the most enjoyable novels he'd read in a long time.

Siobhan Murphy in the *Times* explained: 'Alex Lyons has made a name for himself as a vituperative theatre critic for a national paper. Dispatched to the Edinburgh Fringe, he sees Hayley's (dire-sounding) one-woman show and summarily knocks out another hatchet job.' He later meets her in a bar and spends the night with her; the next morning she reads his one-star review and 'sees red'.

At her next show, she eviscerates the critic and invites any other women he's treated badly to do the same. 'Soon it has become a phenomenon and Alex's reputation is in tatters. But is that fair?'

She concluded: 'Runcie spares no one as she lets the chaos play out, smartly pulling apart the cases for the defence and the prosecution. It makes for a bracing read.'

I'LL BE RIGHT HERE

AMY BLOOM

Granta, 272pp, £16.99

In the *LA Times* Leigh Haber wrote, 'While it's tempting to label the novel [Bloom's fifth] a family epic, that description would fail to capture how Bloom reconstitutes "family" on the page, or how her chapters ricochet forward and backward from decade to decade or year to year, shifting perspective not only from character to character, but from first- to third-person point of view.

These transitions, while initially dizzying, coalesce into a rhythm that feels fresh and exciting.'

The novel describes an Algerian woman, Gazala, who leaves Paris for New York after the Second World War and befriends two sisters. When Gazala's brother joins her, they become an inseparable foursome: an untraditional, multigenerational family.

'A wonderful section,' enthused *Kirkus*, 'has Gazala working for the writer Colette during the Vichy occupation … The novel is full of surprises, wild leaps and turns, and many fascinating people who love each other: warm, rich and beautifully written.'

And the *Boston Globe*'s Priscilla Gilman wrote Bloom 'remains acutely aware of the absurdities of life, its harrowing hardships and the fragile, fleeting joys.'

GETTY

THE EMPEROR OF GLADNESS

OCEAN VUONG

Jonathan Cape, 416pp, £20

Ocean Vuong ia prizewinning poet, novelist, and memoirist, whose latest book met rapturous applause on both sides of the Atlantic.

Like his previous novel, it draws on his own experiences as a Vietnamese-American to describe marginal lives in the US melting pot. telling the story of a suicidal young man who finds meaning in his chance friendship with an elderly woman.

In the *Guardian* M John Harrison called the book 'a 416-page tour of the edgeland between aspirational fantasy and self-deception ... Heartbreaking, heartwarming yet unsentimental, and savagely comic all at the same time, *The Emperor of Gladness* is about just how wobbly things can become.'

> Heartbreaking, heartwarming yet unsentimental and savagely comic all at the same time

Diana Hendry in the *Spectator* 'loved it' and found it full of 'moral, imaginative ideas with gripping stories, wonderful characters and writing that's poetic and witty.'

Not everyone agreed. In the *FT* Max Liu found it 'overwritten'.

In *Literary Review* Gazelle Mba thought Vuong's purple prose 'garishly over-shadows the lives it is meant to be describing.'

The most emphatic objection was registered by Tom Crewe in the *LRB*, who spent thousands of words forensically taking apart the 'bludgeoning inexactness' of Vuong's prose – where 'descriptions frequently make no sense', we encounter 'vatic, empty utterances', and the language is 'not poetic, but ridiculous, sententious, blinded by self-love and pirouetting over a chasm... I groaned my way through *The Emperor of Gladness*. I writhed. I felt real despair every time I forced myself to open the covers.'

He had some ruder things to say, too, concluding, perhaps inescapably: 'This emperor is wearing no clothes.'

THE DIRECTOR

DANIEL KEHLMANNN TRANS. ROSS BENJAMIN

riverrun, 352pp, £22

The Austrian Georg Wilhelm Pabst was one of the most influential film directors in Weimar Germany, known for discovering Greta Garbo, Louise Brooks and Leni Riefenstahl, whose radical approach earned him the nicknam 'Red Pabst'.

When Hitler came to power Pabst emigrated to America, but on a return visit home to his sick mother, was detained inside the Third Reich for the duration of the war. 'This had a dramatically detrimental effect, not only on Pabst's immediate situation but on his entire postwar career,' writes Nina Allan for the *Guardian*.

The *Telegraph*'s Erica Wagner observed that 'Kehlmann's last novel, *Tyll*, shortlisted for the 2020Booker Prize, centred on another entertainer caught up in a destructive conflict. Both novels use shifting viewpoints to observe global events, and human responses to those events, with a wickedly observant eye.' Wagner found *The Director* 'engrossing and terrifying.'

Wilhelm Pabst on set, 1940

'Kehlmann's works are so much more than fictionalised biographies,' wrote Allan, 'and his new novel is as imaginative and bold in its use of editing as Pabst's movies.

Leo Robson: literary critic turned novelist

The Director has all the darkness, shapeshifting ambiguity and glittering unease of a modern Grimms' fairytale: it is Kehlmann's best work yet.'

THE BOYS

LEO ROBSON

riverrun, 304pp, £16.99

The debut novel by literary critic Robson is set in Swiss Cottage during the 2012 Olympics.

Johnny, 30, is 'methodically lying about', grieving both for his mother, recently dead and – by extension – his father, who died when he was a child. The other 'boy', brother Lawrence has returned from Chicago.

In *Literary Review* Malcolm Forbes found it 'rich in colour and full of incident. The narrative feels episodic in places, with Robson deviating from a streamlined storytelling approach to serve up one set piece after another. Yet it would be churlish to find fault here, as the set pieces are compelling.'

For Emily Rhodes in the *Spectator*, 'plot feels secondary to the experience of hanging out with this crowd, relishing their repartee and seeing where the day (or night) takes them. This nostalgic trip to the heady London of the Olympics left me, like Johnny, returning to the present with renewed optimism and verve.'

In the *Guardian* Kevin Power enjoyed this 'likeable debut with aimless charm' by 'one of a handful of working critics worth reading not merely for the rigour of his arguments but for the pleasures of his unfailingly witty prose.'

Forbes praised Robson's 'real flair as a novelist. Hardly bothering with the conventions of "the novel", it creates a mood that is less like fiction and more like life. It is a rather luminous, eccentric and memorable book.'

GETTY

LOVE FORMS

CLAIRE ADAM

Faber, 304pp, £16.99

Claire Adam's second novel begins in Trinidad in 1980, when 16-year-old Dawn becomes pregnant and is sent to a house run by nuns in Venezuela to have her baby in secret.

In middle age and living in the UK, she longs to know the daughter she left behind. Adam told Ellen Peirson-Hagger in the *Observer* that her novel is not based on a real story but is set in a period she knew.

Claire Adams

Julie Myerson in the *Guardian* thought it every bit as alive and convincing as her debut award-winning novel *Golden Child*, and 'returns us to Trinidad, with its potent fizz of colour, heat and political instability. It's also set partly in south London — the writer's own home turf — and has a mother, rather than a father, at its heart.'

'Adam is a thoughtful writer,' wrote Alex Peake-Tomkinson in the *Spectator*, 'and this is a soulful, unflashy narrative. *Love Forms* does not have the same propulsive quality as the kidnap narrative of *Golden Child*, but it's a reflective novel that sensitively explores love and motherhood.'

'Adam pulls us into the murky tale with a deceptively unshowy style,' Anthony Cummins wrote in the *Daily Mail*. 'She blindsides us with drip-fed revelations about Dawn's youth while laying out her daily grind in the narrative present as an empty-nester forced out of her job as a GP due to the hard yards of child-care. Crushingly tender, the novel explores heavy subjects without fuss.'

STEALING DAD

SOFKA ZINOVIEFF

Corsair, 304pp, £20

'Zinovieff has written a work of fiction,' wrote Genevieve Gaunt in the *Spectator*, 'inspired by her own parent's death: "My father left a note requesting that only his widow attend his cremation and my siblings and I were prevented from going to the funeral"'.

Lucy Denyer revealed in the *Telegraph* that Zinovieff's sadness led her to write this book – but she did not 'proceed to steal her father's body from a funeral home and abscond with it to a remote Scottish island in order to carry out her own last rites'.

In the novel, each of the dead artist's 'children have been irrevocably shaped by their father, or his absence' and it is only after his death that the siblings all meet together for the first time.

Denyer thought the novel funny, sad and beautifully written. 'It will make you appreciate your own family, and wish, perhaps, that you too had an assortment of semi siblings with whom you could take some magic mushrooms, filch a corpse and go on an adventure.'

Gaunt thought the crematorium caper was overstuffed with a large cast of characters and threads of adultery, depression, IVF, suicide and alcoholism, but found the writing 'fresh' and 'sensuous'.

Literary Review's Aida Amoako felt it was a shame that the novel sometimes strayed into didacticism, 'for overall the author's descriptions reveal the unmooring nature of grief with more lucidity than any neat maxim can.'

THE BENEFACTORS

WENDY ERSKINE

Sceptre, 336pp, £18

Wendy Erskine is a Belfast-based short story writer of significant reputation, and her much anticipated first novel describes the sexual misconduct involving three teenage boys, and the efforts their mothers – from varied walks of life – make to get them off the hook.

Sam Byers in the *Guardian* thought Erskine had made the transition to the novel without faltering: 'The move to a larger canvas feels entirely unforced. She revels in the possibilities of an expanded cast, yet controls the pace and framing with all the precision of a miniaturist. The result is a novel that feels like a balancing act: at once sprawling and meticulous, polyphonic and tonally coherent.'

His only cavil was that Erskine's formal virtuosity, 'assurance and precision', left 'a sense that it has imposed its discipline and control on its characters'.

Jude Cook in *Literary Review* was also in 'yes, but' mood: 'This is an intricately wrought, frequently brilliant novel, though if there is a shortcoming, it's the sheer number of voices clamouring for attention.'

In the *TLS* Patricia Craig found it 'remarkable the way the narrative circles around the main event, hovers over it and explores its ramifications subtly as the author marshals her cast with even-handedness and elan'.

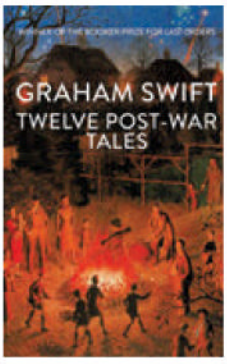
GETTY

Belfast City Hall (1898): Belfast is the setting for Wendy Erskine's first novel

TWELVE POST-WAR TALES

GRAHAM SWIFT

Scribner, 304pp, £18.99



For Ian Thomson in the *FT*, Graham Swift's third short-story collection 'finds a lugubrious comedy in ageing and cognitive decline as characters reflect variously on their past lives in the boondocks of Crystal Palace, Walthamstow, London Docklands and elsewhere.

Typically, Swift finds his way into the minds and hearts of an impressive range of personalities.'

'Swift's great skill is indirection. His route to the essence of his characters' lives – their defining, most meaningful experiences – is often oblique and gradual,' wrote Alison Kelly in the *TLS*.

'Unified temporally by their setting in the period since the Second World War and thematically by an interest in the impact of military conflict on combatants, civilians and their descendants, the stories work together as a study of human experience. They consciously explore what it means to be a human individual, living one's life in the context of personal and family relationships, wider society and, especially, important historical events: Pearl Harbor, the Holocaust, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the miners' strike, 9/11, the Iraq War.'

'The collection is tinged with an autumnal sense of loss and the self-examination of an older writer — Swift is in his mid-seventies — looking back on his life,' observed Thomson. 'His archly modulated, precise prose, reminiscent at times of his friend Kazuo Ishiguro's, has lost none of its power, from start to finish, it is a marvel of the storyteller's art.'

AUTOCORRECT

ETGAR KERET
TRANS. JESSICA COHEN AND SONDRA SILVERSTON

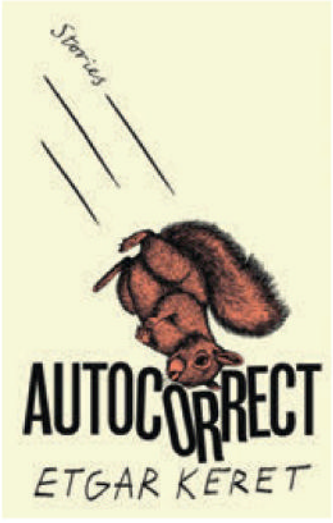
Granta, 208pp, £14.99

In the *Guardian* Sam Leith wrote that Etgar Keret's latest collection 'isn't so much a book as a library of tiny books, from an author who conveys as well as any just how much fun you can have with a short story'.

He commended the Israeli writer on his 'wan metaphysical wit' and 'yelp-making casual swerves of perspective' in stories that explore science-fictional conceits such as parallel universes, asteroid collisions and AI takeovers, but which remain grounded in 'how ordinary people, horny or hungry or a little petty, will react in their ordinary ways to the extraordinary'.

> Etgar Keret: 'an author who conveys as well as any just how much fun you can have with a short story'

In the *New York Times,* Dan Chaon noted that Keret has become famous for his 'dry, winsome comic sketches', and often uses 'fantastical or science-fictional settings, with clever hooks and twists and a melancholic aftertaste'.



'At times Keret can seem like that hip, cynical Gen X guy who's down at the end of the bar doling out hot takes about the doomed future of our species,' he warned, but he called the best stories 'tense and moving', 'peculiar and brilliant' and 'universal and timeless'.

They depict 'the singular strangeness of being a living person in the world ... despite whatever tomfoolery is going on in the global monoculture'.

POPPYLAND

DJ TAYLOR

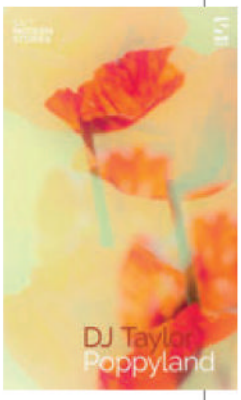
Salt Publishing, 208pp, £9.99

'Most short-story collections consist of disparate pieces written years apart and yoked together for republication,' wrote Hassan Akram in *Literary Review*. 'The 13 stories in *Poppyland*, by contrast, were written for publication in a single volume. This gives the book a pleasant unity of atmosphere and setting.

In the 33rd book by this prolific author, 'most stories are set in his native Norfolk ("Poppyland"), which is rendered with picturesque lyricism.'

For George Cochrane in the *Spectator* however, 'Norfolk life looks quietly bleak in these carefully worked short stories of broken homes, precarious employment, dwindling expectations and torpor.'

But away from Norfolk, Cochrane 'was pleasantly discomforted by the last two stories: one a blackly comic chamber piece set at a renowned New York literary agency; the other a coming-of-age tale about a German teenager in 1930s France. Their inclusion is worth the price of admission alone.'

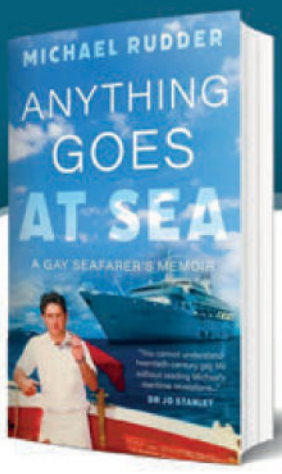


'Perhaps because Taylor wrote these stories so closely together,' wrote Akram, 'too many endings involve descriptions of the sky or someone wandering thoughtfully into the distance. There are only so many times a person's character can be indicated through the newspaper he reads.'

In the *FT* Matthew Janney praised these 'wistful short stories of lives lived in the margin ... for evoking poignancy and beauty amid nostalgia and neglect.'

Anything Goes at Sea

A Gay Seafarer's Memoir by Michael Rudder



An illuminating and extremely frank memoir exploring gay life aboard various British ships from 1969 to 1990.

The author was on these floating gay havens, and part of a proud sub-culture that flourished despite homosexuality still being illegal at sea. This seafaring steward was part of the fun and games and the collective refuting of homophobia.

Michael's illuminating and heartwarming memoir also chronicles a tender love story with his now-husband, Dominic, an able-bodied seaman who later became a Chief Petty Officer. Despite a turbulent beginning, their enduring relationship has spanned over 50 years. Join Michael Rudder on a world voyage on ships that were household names, Oriana, Canberra, and QE2.
Travel to camp paradises and dodgy dives. Voyage into a hidden world, through these pages packed with vivid anecdotes and untold stories. His book offers a rare glimpse into the life of a gay seafarer.

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COMING SOON!

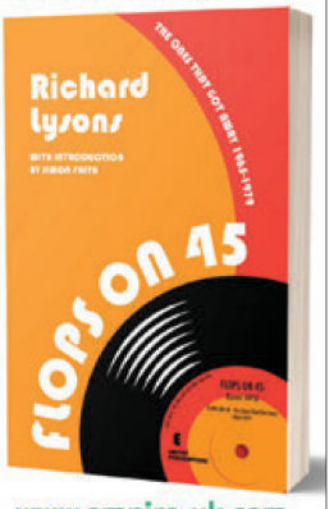
Flops on 45

THE ONES THAT GOT AWAY 1965-1979

by Richard Lysons

Richard started buying singles in 1970 and was fascinated by the ones that did not make the charts. Flops On 45 is a highly original and readable look at the records that somehow got away.

"**Flops On 45** isn't just a fun read. It makes an important contribution to popular music history; it honours a forgotten workforce."
SIMON FRITH
Professor Emeritus of Music
University of Edinburgh



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THE HAVES AND HAVE-YACHTS
DISPATCHES ON THE ULTRARICH

EVAN OSNOS

Simon & Schuster, 304pp, £22

Within these essays on the 'various insanities of the contemporary ultrarich,' wrote Bryan Appleyard in *Literary Review*, "The Floating World' makes for a great introduction, not just thorough but also funny.

Even funnier, though more alarming, is 'Survival of the Richest'. The essays 'are all examples of superb, dogged journalism.

Osnos writes well and fact-checks his material obsessively wwFurthermore, the issues he raises are profound.' According to Osnos, Jeffries observed, 'superyacht demand is outstripping supply. The modern versions of Hearst Castle and Blenheim Palace are discreetly mobile, able to whisk themselves out of sight at a moment's notice.

It dovetails nicely with a political agenda best articulated by venture capitalist Peter Thiel who, Osnos reports, gave start-up capital to the Seasteading Institute, which seeks to create floating mini-states – part of his libertarian project to "escape from politics in all its forms".'

Rana Foroohar in the *FT* praised a 'beautifully written and often amusing climb to the very top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.' In the *Sunday Times* John Arlidge also enjoyed this 'field guide to the super-rich – a hoot to chronicle, and even more fun to read.'

The Nord superyacht in Hong Kong

EMPTY VESSEL
THE STORY OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY IN ONE SHIP

IAN KUMEKAWA

John Murray, 304pp, £20

This 'brilliant allegory ... turns the history of a hulk – an engineless rectangular barge bearing stacks of shipping containers converted into basic living units – into a lament for the dehumanising impact of modern capitalism and globalisation.'

So begins Martin Vander Weyer's review in *Literary Review*. Harvard historian Kumekawa 'follows the ship's course with a mix of political passion and attention to detail, documenting the many changes of ownership and registrations in "tax haven after tax haven"'.

Vander Weyer acknowledges that neo-liberal readers will probably be irritated by Kumekawa's disdain for globalisation. 'But laden with anti-capitalist spin though *Empty Vessel* may be, the author is entitled to his opinions and has written a compelling book.'

Jennifer Szalai in the *New York Times* found the 'elegant and enlightening book ... an impressive feat, especially given that, as Kumekawa admits, its main character is stubbornly uncharismatic: "a dumb pontoon without voice, personality or drive".'

She found '*Empty Vessel* joins a growing shelf of books about the new forms that globalisation is taking ... They all detail efforts by the rich to offshore their wealth and escape constraints of national sovereignty ... Kumekawa sees his book as "a guide to how major global transformations were always embodied, grounded in tangible things and, often, dependent on physical violence".'

CAPITALISM AND ITS CRITICS
A BATTLE OF IDEAS IN THE MODERN WORLD

JOHN CASSIDY

Allen Lane, 624pp, £35

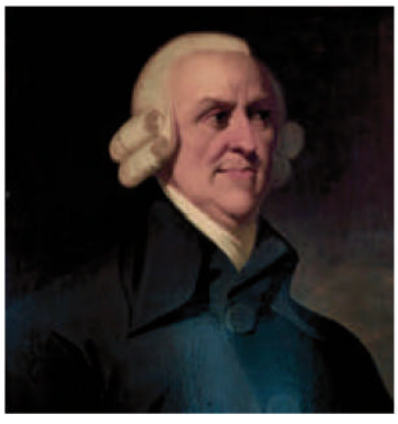
'Cassidy, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, aims to tell the history of capitalism through the eyes and lives of the system's critics,' wrote Yuan Yi Zhu in the *Times*.

'To normal people, economic theory is soul-crushing at the best of times. But Cassidy makes it all digestible by weaving together, in each chapter, the biography of each of his subjects with their key critique of capitalism, thus humanising otherwise dry debates about economic theory... Yet if the individual chapters are engaging and informative, it is sometimes harder to say how they fit together.'

In the *Telegraph*, Stuart Jeffries found it 'an unexpectedly lively romp through the two-and-a-half-century history of capitalism ... a zombie tale in which the mystery is why capitalism, having so many ill-wishers and so many chronic health problems, keeps rising anew'.

Cassidy 'offers gripping analyses of socialist communes, slavery, imperialism and monetarism ... I predict it'll become the intelligent beach read of the summer.'

For Alan Ryan, in *Literary Review*, 'readers hoping for a definitive answer as to whether capitalism or its critics have got the better of the argument will be disappointed ... As to whether capitalism will survive, Cassidy is rightly cautious.'



'Father of capitalism': Adam Smith

WIKIMEDIACOMMONS

THE LOST BOYS
A PERSONAL JOURNEY THROUGH THE MANOSPHERE

JAMES BLOODWORTH

Atlantic Books, 320pp, £17.99

THE NEW AGE OF SEXISM
HOW THE AI REVOLUTION IS REINVENTING MISOGYNY

LAURA BATES

Simon & Schuster, 320p, £20

James Bloodworth introduces us to the manosphere's 'population of pick-up artists (PUAs), incels, con men and men's rights activists,' wrote Richard V Reeves in *Literary Review*.

'It is largely an online phenomenon, but also exists IRL, since that is where content is created'. Bloodworth 'is a journalist who clearly relishes getting out from behind his desk' and his 'efforts pay off in some vivid reporting' and 'his descriptions of being coached and cajoled into making "cold approaches" to women in Leicester Square nightclubs in 2006 are painfully honest.'

A blistering head-to-head ... Owen Cooper and Erin Doherty in BBC drama *Adolescence*

But Reeves suggested that Bloodworth's 'most valuable achievement is to descrie and refute some of the pernicious myths that pervade the manosphere', such as the claim that '30 per cent of kids are being raised by a clueless man who is not their father'.

In the *Sunday Times*, Thomas Peermohamed Lambert found Bloodworth to be 'a capable ethnographer of the pick-up community', then in the book's second part 'these personal anecdotes recede and the book's main subject is laid bare: the veritable rogues' gallery of cranks and hucksters that Bloodworth has interviewed, most of whom have turned the manosphere into not just a way of life but a living'.

Although 'the question of what is causing this global efflorescence of misogyny goes unanswered ... it is to Bloodworth's credit that even if he cannot quite explain this malaise, he evokes it as well as anyone.'

A different though related malaise is examined in Laura Bates's *The New Age of Sexism*.

From cyber-brothels to deepfake porn to the metaverse, Bates exposes 'the intersection between AI and misogyny,' wrote Barbara Ellen in the *Observer*.

'Throughout, there is a sense of something big, toxic, unstoppable.

Something that even those of us who don't consider ourselves tech-savvy will have noticed in the real world and the AI "badlands": the ubiquity of deepfake nudes; the tsunami of online porn, now so normalised it barely merits a squeak of protest; the ever louder and angrier incel noise. Young women, in particular, are dealing with all this and more.'

Bates 'pays a website to insert photos of herself into online porn, just to demonstrate the sheer ease of it'. She 'rightly reserves her main fire for the all-powerful tech bros, not just the ones manufacturing and profiting directly from the sex tech but also those such as Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and Sundar Pichai (Google) in charge of the algorithms, datasets, systems and search engines delivering it'. Ellen's disturbing conclusion is that 'sexism hasn't gone away, it's simply being recoded'.

In the *Telegraph*, Catherine Blyth said the book reads like a thriller, 'with vivid reportage, arresting stories, sharp insights and grabby stats... Her narrative strategy is to shock.

Unavoidably, and a little awkwardly, what makes her book a page-turner is its sensational content. But she's certainly brave, navigating her dark material smartly, balancing horror against hope.'

Andrew Tate (*front*) and his brother, Tristan, in Bucharest, 2024

GETTY, NETFLIX

'A tiny rupture and everything could disappear': Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*

THE MIND ELECTRIC
STORIES OF THE STRANGENESS AND WONDER OF OUR BRAINS

PRIA ANAND

Virago, 288pp, £22

This is American neurologist Pria Anand's first book in which she tells stories of some of her patients and her own experiences, to explore what happens when our brains go wrong.

Frank Tallis in the *Observer* wrote, 'neurological memoirs with clinical examples often risk accusations of sensationalism or voyeurism.' Yet he found this book transcended 'the limitations of the popular science genre and raises broader philosophical questions concerning what it means to be human.'

Anand never 'sacrifices dignity for effect. Despite her disturbing "exhibits" she is primarily interested in human stories and the sheer perversity of the human condition.'

Her stories 'accumulate and persuade us, almost subliminally, that our purchase on existence is much less secure than we commonly acknowledge. A tiny rupture, an infection, a bang on the head, and everything could be different or disappear.'

Emma Seaber in the*Telegraph*, was impressed by 'this superb book' which undertakes to 'move us beyond the limits of our prior knowledge.'

Anand invites us to think again about what happens at all of life's edges and in-betweens.' She has explored the vast grey area between sanity and insanity, doctor and patient, and illness and wellness, which are only narrowly separated.

SIX MINUTES TO WINTER
NUCLEAR WAR AND HOW TO AVOID IT

MARK LYNAS

Bloomsbury Signa, 304pp, £20

Eighty years after atom bombs were dropped on Japan, the world is overburdened by nuclear weapons, which could spell the end of civilisation. So why, asks Mark Lynas, do so few people seem to care?

One answer might be that like death and taxes, we have learnt to live with them now as an inescapable component of the human condition. Lynas disputes this. If we can ban chemical and biological weapons, he says, surely we can also veto nuclear weapons and achieve 'global zero'.

No chance, said Max Hastings in the *Sunday Times*. 'The prospect of any powers, save possibly Britain and France, forsaking their nuclear weapons, are just that, "global zero".' Sir Max puts his faith in the Mexican stand-off known as 'MAD'. 'Mutually assured self-destruction is a ghastly option for saving the planet from self-destruction, but it is the only realistic one we have, or ever will do, and Lynas's diffuse and often rambling book fails to convince by rejecting it.'

In the *Washington Post* James Robins disagreed. Describing the book as 'a cattle-prod shock to the ribs', he found Lynas's demand for total disarmament 'is nowhere near as implausible as it once was.' The planet 'has passed the threshold of 1.5 degrees of warming, but we have averted a greater disaster of three or six degrees. Now is the time to wield that unity – that optimism – against our own suicide/murder.'

EXILE ECONOMICS
WHAT HAPPENS IF GLOBALISATION FAILS

BEN CHU

Basic Books, 320pp, £25

A new book by Ben Chu, one of the BBC's economic gurus, deplores the misguided quest for autarky – economic self-sufficiency – that has provoked this global turbulence.

Money Week saluted Chu's book as a 'a pertinent challenge to the rising tide of economic nationalism, arguing that recent protectionist impulses are not novel, but echoes of historical fallacies.'

Chu critically examines the arguments for economic self-sufficiency, emphasising the immense complexity of the intricately woven modern global economy, particularly when it comes to advanced technologies such as silicon chips, which depend on protracted and multi-layered supply chains.'

Far from enhancing national security, Chu warns, economic nationalism risks inflicting substantial harm, even on the very industries it purports to protect.'

In the *FT,* Tej Parikh agreed: 'Chu believes that interdependence and multi-culturalism will prevail in the long run because the desire for self-sufficiency is unattainable without at least a bit of inter-connection and community.'

In the *Sunday Times*, Robert Colville congratulated Chu on his

Economic exiles: Richard Briers and Felicity Kendal in *The Good Life*

timing: he takes as his 'springboard Trump's return to power, and his "big, beautiful tariffs". Indeed Chu was probably one of the only commentators punching the air on "Liberation Day": disastrous for the world economy, sure, but manna for the sales figures.'

WIKIMEDIACOMMONS

A cancer diagnosis means J B MILLER must choose the last books he'll ever read – all too slowly

For my entire life, since my earliest encounters with books, I've been cursed to be seduced by the printed word, but to be a slow reader. I'm a plodding scholar, easily distracted by the siren call of the next tome.

At the moment, I'm reading a biography of Alexander Woollcott, a history of American talking films by Andrew Sarris, Evelyn Waugh's *When the Going Was Good*, Doris Kearns Goodwin's *No Ordinary Time*, Anita Leslie's *The Marlborough House Set* and Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*.

I haven't finished any of them. I have countless shelves groaning with volumes glaring at me for lack of attention. Am I a literary slut, too quick to fall for a comely cover?

A recent cover trumpeted a title that stopped me dead in my tracks: *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die*. How could I possibly get through a fraction of them?

The stress of the situation has only increased recently with a diagnosis of stage-4 lymphoma.

Having the ticking time bomb of cancer doesn't help clear the shelves. What should I allot for my presumably limited days left?

I'll get my doctor to give me a note excusing me from studying the fat books *Moby-Dick* and *Infinite Jest*, but I should be able to get through a good handful of novellas (Anita Brookner? Max Porter?).

Lately, I've been more drawn to non-fiction — film books, histories of London, letters, diaries, essays. And, given enough time (please), I'd consume the full diary of Samuel Pepys, the six volumes of Virginia Woolf's letters, and Boswell's Life of Johnson (unabridged). I'd plough through the complete works of Mark Twain, George Orwell, and Pauline Kael. I've got most of these on my shelves, gloating at me from their mostly uncracked spines.

But what of fiction? I recently finished *Pride and Prejudice*; should *Sense and Sensibility* be next? I've been reading Virginia Woolf's diary but wouldn't my remaining days be better spent enjoying one of the major novels. If so, which one? *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To The Lighthouse*?

***The Artist's Wife* by Henry Lamb (1933)**

TATE

What about Hemingway? I've read *The Sun Also Rises* three times, but never got through *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Why do I keep rereading *Tropic of Cancer, Goodbye Columbus*, *Slaughterhouse-5* and *The Catcher in the Rye,* when I've never read *Catch-22*, *White Teeth* or *Great Expectations*? I've probably read *The Great Gatsby* five times, but never finished *Tender is the Night*. I'll excuse myself from War and Peace for time limitations, but shouldn't I at least try to dispatch *Anna Karenina*?

In the film *Reuben, Reuben* (1983), when a student regretfully announces she's a slow reader, the dissolute poet (Tom Conti) urges her to take her time enjoying a book.

He tells the story of an employee of Allied Fertiliser who took a speed-reading course so he could get through *War and Peace* in 55 minutes:

'But he read the book the way the fertiliser man reads reports; he did not read it as a book. I, for example, would like to read Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* as slowly as possible. In fact, I would pay vast sums for anyone to teach me to read the books I love at a snail's pace.'

Exactly; how deep is a skim at double-quick time? Isn't it better to be able to linger over books, even if it means you consume fewer of them?

In my teen years, I was more drawn to newspapers than books, determined to become a journalist.

It was in college, studying English, that I discovered the world between covers, and I joined the literary life, first as a reader, then adding a stint in publishing (three years at Grove Press), and finally as an author myself.

I amassed a book collection that now doesn't fully fit on my shelves, spilling out onto piles in my hallway and filling up a storage locker on the first floor of my building. I'm of the tribe who sees a 'secondhand books' sign the way some addicts view bars, gambling joints or drug dens. I've reached the point where I'll enter a bookshop hoping I won't actually find anything to purchase. Fat chance.

But why am I adding hardcovers and paperbacks to a flat already bursting at the seams? It's like adopting another cat when you already have too many fangs to feed.

As Henry Miller said, 'A book lying idle on a shelf is wasted ammunition.'

He chastised people who held on to volumes gathering dust. In *The Books in My Life* (1952), he wrote,

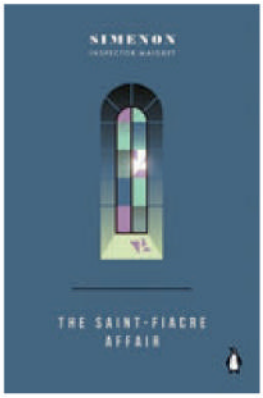
'Like money, books must be kept in constant circulation... A book is not only a friend; it makes friends for you. When you have possessed a book with mind and spirit, you are enriched. But when you pass it on, you are enriched threefold.'

That could happen soon enough, after I pop off. But, for the time being, as I negotiate my cancer treatment, I am comforted by my library, even as many of the titles scowl at me from their shelves.

JB Miller wrote Duch*, a novel about Princess Diana found alive in Paris*

MICHAEL BARBER rounds up some of the best crime novels being reprinted

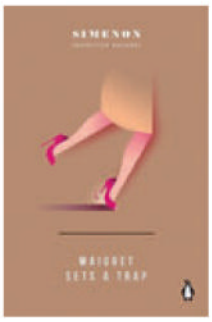
Gustave Flaubert said, '*Je suis un homme plume*.' But Georges Simenon (1903 – 1989) surely had a much greater claim to this boast. He wrote more than 400 books, and like Trollope, would finish one in the morning and begin another in the afternoon. But the superlatives don't end there.



Simenon also claimed to have had 10,000 women, most of them prostitutes, and possessed an equally insatiable appetite for wine, often drinking three bottles day. Of course, novelists are professional liars, so perhaps he was exaggerating about the wine and the women. But the books are all there on the shelves, 500 million copies of them in 55 different languages.

Simenon created all sorts and conditions of characters, but for most readers, I suspect, he's the creator of Inspector Maigret, the pipe-smoking, aperitif-loving Parisian flic whose investigations have inspired three British television series, most recently starring Rowan Atkinson.

Now Penguin Classics have launched their Maigret Capsule Collection, a dozen atmospheric mysteries, with eye-catching covers, ranging in time from the 1930s, **The Saint-Fiacre Affair**, to the 1960s, **Maigret in Vichy**, all priced at £9.99.

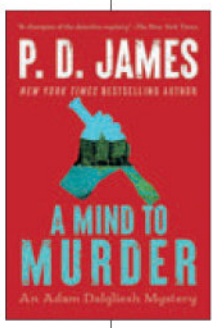


When he started writing, in the 1920s, Simenon received this – now standard – advice, 'Kill your darlings,' from Colette, then the literary editor of a magazine for which he wrote.

From then on, he produced books that were succinct enough to be read at a sitting – books that only took him a week or two to write.

To begin with Simenon didn't say much about Maigret himself. The plot was what counted, closely followed by the ambience: Julian Symons said Simenon described 'the weather with such vigour and pleasure that it is as though the writer were actually soaking up the rain or the sun that he is actually writing about.'

But later, as his hero became bruised by the wrongdoing he encountered, Simenon raised his profile and we learn that he became a policeman rather than a doctor, his first ambition, because he felt himself to be a man 'who would at first glance understand the destinies of others.'

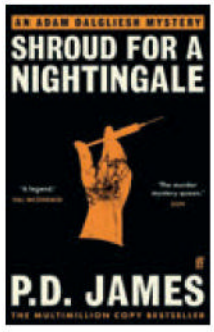


But to understand all, it's been said, is to forgive all. So, readers may wonder what Maigret really feels about the criminals he puts away.

No such ambiguity attaches to Adam Dalgliesh, the ruthless, cerebral copper created by PD James, who has 'insulated himself against pain' since the death of his wife in childbirth. He's also a poet, something we must take on trust.

But I think we can assume that like his creator, who served as a Principal in the Home Office and later became a Baroness, he believes that murders are more common than people think and that many probably go undetected.

Over the past year Faber has reissued six of Dalgliesh's cases, priced at £9.99 and including **Shroud for a Nightingale** and **Devices and Desires**. Sometimes described as 'cosy', they are anything but. In **Shroud** a trainee nurse is given carbolic acid instead of milk: 'One minute she was lying, immobile, propped against her mound of pillows, the next she was out of bed, teetering forward on arched feet in a parody of a ballet dancer. And all the time she screamed, perpetually screamed, like a stuck whistle.'



In **Devices and Desires**, the killer strangles people while whistling hymns and then stuffs their mouths with pubic hair.

I rather doubt if any of Elmore Leonard's grifters, charlatans and opportunists ever whistled hymns, but I think they might cackle at what that killer did with pubic hair. To mark the 100th anniversary of Leonard's birth, Penguin is reissuing several novels (including **Rum Punch**, **The Switch** and **Swag**, with another 11 to follow) in its Modern Classic Crime Series.

Martin Amis said of this prolific American writer, 'He possesses gifts – of ear and eye, of timing and phrasing – that even the most indolent and snobbish masters of the mainstream must vigorously covet.'

And to think his first novel was rejected by 84 publishers!

Like Simenon, Leonard scorned anything at all 'literary'. 'If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it', he said. He had a Dickensian feel for low life, for downcast people on the margins of society whose existence was a constant struggle.

A case in point is **Rum Punch**'s Jackie Ordell, a middle-aged flight attendant with no prospects who tries to turn her life around when she's accused of smuggling cash from Jamaica for a greedy hoodlum. Set in Florida, and matching tight, clean prose with whip-smart dialogue, this story is as invigorating as the cocktail after which it's named.

ARTISTS, SIBLINGS, VISIONARIES

THE LIVES AND LOVES OF GWEN AND AUGUSTUS JOHN

JUDITH MACKRELL

Picador, 598pp, £30

'Judith Mackrell has produced a fine portrait of these two artists in her double biography, *Artists, Siblings, Visionaries*. Forged in the same unremarkable Welsh childhood,

Self-portraits by Gwen John (1900) and Augustus John (1913)

each in different ways threw off society in order to paint and love,' wrote Oliver Soden in the *Telegraph*.

For him, the story of these two lives is the story of British art in the early 20th century. Once, it was Augustus who was toweringly famous; now it is Gwen, whose delicate and nuanced portraits are admired more.

Soden distinguished between the two; 'her quiet and mottled interiors, of women alone or cradling cats, have a glowing stillness and piercing precision that make her brother's verve seem merely bumptious.' Did their art reflect their very different personalities?

'Biography can be a glib genre,' observed Jonathan Jones in the *Guardian*, 'but Mackrell approaches her subjects with an almost novelistic sensibility. What is success, what is failure? This book raises big questions about how we can judge or know others.'

One hundred years later, Gwen's 'dedication to love, God and art seems fierce and wondrous, her art a piercingly true autobiography. Meanwhile, Augustus is as slapdash in his paintings as his life.' Jones concluded that 'the value of interweaving the two lives within a single frame more than justifies the repackaging, and the two strands are tightly braided rather than laid out in alternate chapters.'

THE MANIFESTO HOUSE

BUILDINGS THAT CHANGED THE FUTURE OF ARCHITECTURE

OWEN HOPKINS

Yale University Press, 240pp, £30

In this book, 'writer and curator Owen Hopkins is eager to get into the minds of architects whose residential buildings, in the words of his subtitle, "changed the future of architecture", wrote Benjamin Riley in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Each of the book's 21 chapters – grouped into subcategories labelled Looking Back, Looking Out and Looking Forward – deals with ambitious buildings.

From the Georgian neoclassicist John Soane to the postmodernist Robert Venturi, 'the book includes widely known figures such as Frank Lloyd Wright and those who will likely be unfamiliar even to adepts, such as the contemporary Senegalese firm Worofila'.

Riley faulted, slightly, Hopkins's insistence that each building both 'contained a polemical element' and 'changed the course of architectural history ... It's not clear ... that all his chosen examples adhere to these criteria.'

'If the dreary fugue of DEI rhetoric and the baffling clichés of archispeak make you want to scream, this book may not be for you,' warned Stephen Bayley in the *Spectator*, 'But get beyond the annoying tone – which combines dire waffle with apocalyptic prophecy – and Owen Hopkins has an important subject.'

Alas, he concluded: 'The problem with *The Manifesto House* is this: to be a reference book it would need more original research and better pictures.'

Bénédicte Eustache in *Prospect*, though, had no complaints: 'Written in clear, accessible prose, and enlivened by numerous period and present-day pictures, *The Manifesto House* is a great read for architect and layman alike.'

Fallingwater in Bear Run, Pennsylvania, built by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1936–1937

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, NATIONAL MUSEUM WALES

Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves* (1990)

LONE WOLF
WALKING THE FAULTLINES OF EUROPE

ADAM WEYMOUTH

Hutchinson Heinemann, 384pp, £18.99

Most wolves operate in packs and stay local; but a few go solo, walking huge distances alone. It is a phenomenon known as the 'lone wolf'.

Now that about 20,000 wolves have returned to mainland Europe, their mysteries are again on our doorstep. Adam Weymouth followed Slavc, a tagged lone wolf, from Slovenia to Lessinia in the Italian Dolomites – a walk of 1,200 miles which took Slavc a hundred days

Weymouth's book, said Tobias Jones in the *Observer*, is 'a beautiful inversion. He takes the sudden reappearance of man's most feared animal as a prism through which to study our fears and his own.'

Weymouth encountered wolf lovers and wolf loathers. As Jonathan C Slaght put it in the *Atlantic*, the book was a vehicle 'to trace the fault lines splintering Europe and to examine how people respond when confronted by unwelcome change'.

Three hundred wolves are illegally shot by European farmers every year, and since a wolf killed Ursula von Der Leyen's pony, Dolly, the EU has downgraded the animal's status from 'strictly protected' to just 'protected'. So there may be many more.

Slavc's journey, thankfully, had a happy ending: he met a female wolf and started a new pack whose descendants prowl Lessinia today.

In the *Times*, James McConnachie noted that Weymouth deferred his first encounter with a wild wolf until the very end of the book. 'A spoiler would be unfair, but the moment is handled with extraordinary delicacy, making an utterly fitting conclusion to a very fine book.'

THE MÖBIUS BOOK

CATHERINE LACEY

Granta Books, 240pp, £16.99

Is the well-regarded American novelist and short story writer's new book fiction or nonfiction?

Stuart Kelly in the *Spectator* found the book, described elsewhere as 'a hybrid work that is both fiction and non-fiction' and a 'memoir-cum-novel' to be 'cunningly spliced'.

It does, literally, have two sides as a *tête-bêche* – where two texts are printed back-to-back, so you flip the book 180 degrees to read from either end towards the middle.

One half is a memoiristic account of the author's break-up with a partner she calls 'The Reason'; the other a fictional account of two friends spending Christmas Day together in the aftermath of their escape from damaging (and in one case violently abusive) relationships.

Literary Review's Sam Reynolds thought it 'very difficult not to judge the two parts individually. The non-fiction section is engaging and often acutely observed, but hardly radical... The story, full of shrewd dialogue and delicately drawn characters, is similarly accomplished, but inevitably lacks the depth and scope of a novel.' The whole thing, 'doesn't entirely come off'.

In the *TLS*, Nina Allan was entirely persuaded and found the book demonstrated 'how fiction and non-fiction are in constant dialogue'. It is 'a moving documentary of personal loss, a meditation on the fragility of identity and a critique of the struggle women still face in being heard'.

STRANGERS AND INTIMATES
THE RISE AND FALL OF PUBLIC LIFE

TIFFANY JENKINS

Picador, 464pp, £20

What does privacy mean in the age of electronic information? Is it even possible? And is the state encroaching on the freedoms of even our private feelings and thoughts?

Cultural historian Tiffany Jones ponders such questions in her book.

In the *Telegraph*, Rupert Christiansen was impressed by her 'unimpeachable research' and thought the book 'sweetly reasonable and pleasantly readable'.

Nat Segnit in *Literary Review* found it an 'engaging read', and agreed with Jenkins about the increasing violations of the boundary

Meghan and Harry, 2017 Invictus Games

between public and private. But he was put off by the author's over-use of clichés such as these crackers: 'From the smoky confines of coffee-houses to the ink-stained battlegrounds of the press ... citizens eagerly threw themselves into the fray.'

In the *Observer*, David Aaronovitch praised Jenkins's style and substance but disagreed that the private realm is under threat from new legislation. No one, he opined, could actually control the thoughts of others – not the state and not even Elon Musk himself.

'The truth is that neither Google nor anyone else knows what we are thinking. Not even our therapists. For example, you have no idea what I am thinking as I write this. You only know what I wrote.'

GETTY

DIANAWORLD
AN OBSESSION

EDWARD WHITE

Allen Lane, 400pp, £25

'I didn't think it possible to produce an interesting book about Princess Diana at this juncture, but, by George, White has done it,' wrote Nicola Shulman in *Literary Review*.

'There are few new facts for Diana watchers, nor can any be expected. But there is an admirable intelligence at work here ... He sees the way she did as she was done to — how the stalked started stalking, the watched began watching.'

'White's skill', confirmed Frances Wilson in the *TLS*, 'lies in cutting through and compiling the published material, much of it from the press, but also from novels about Diana and memoirs by her former friends, psychics, astrologers, butlers and bodyguards... The story of Diana is the story of her generation; her need to find a meaning to her life is inseparable from the public's need to load their own meanings onto her.' But she thought this 'strong book' was marred by 'weak prose'.

In the *Guardian* Tiffany Watt Smith found the book was an 'ingenious solution to the problem of biography in an age of global celebrity, where identity seems much less stable, a jumble of ever-changing projections and imaginings'.

The *Telegraph*'s Matthew Dennison thought what emerged from 'White's ziggurat of anecdote and press cuttings is what her former private secretary and equerry Patrick Jephson called her "quality of forgivability". *Dianaworld* may spoil lively storytelling with awful flashes of cod-academic register ... but it offers valuable insights, too.'

GHOSTING
ON DISAPPEARANCE

DOMINIC PETTMAN

Polity, 110pp, £12.99

Ghosted : Billie Eilish

Ghosting is a modern twist on abandonment. The increasing number of ways to communicate means that when we are ghosted, suddenly and without explanation, it can be devastating.

A recent study found ghosting is connected to mental health issues like depression and paranoid thinking, partcicularly among young people and those with lower incomes.

Famous names who have been ghosted include Billie Eilish, Drew Barrymore, Lily Collins and Drake.

As Ceci Browning wrote in the *Sunday Times*, ghosting is a 'familiar part of the modern age and a morbid symptom of the loneliness epidemic, digital devices having made it simpler to connect with people but simultaneously simpler to get rid of them without notice or reason.'

'The most worthwhile parts of this study,' she concluded, 'are where Pettman gets specific about why ghosting is, and has always been, such a cruel act ... Ghosting, he argues, is "a form of auto-gaslighting, as you begin to entertain the dreadful possibility that you simply invented an imaginary companion, even as a fully fledged adult"... I know I'm not the only one who will be glad someone finally put that strange feeling into words.'

THE GENIUS MYTH
THE DANGEROUS ALLURE OF REBELS, MONSTERS AND RULE-BREAKERS

HELEN LEWIS

Jonathan Cape, 352pp,£22

Journalist Helen Lewis wants us to be less romantic about geniuses and in her new book she catalogues a series of men (and they are all men) for whom 'the lustre of genius covered a multitude of sins'.

In the *Guardian*, Houman Barekat agreed that genius was almost impossible to define and ultimately 'conferred by hype; it's essentially an offshoot of celebrity,' noting that Lewis has coined a term "the deficit model of genius" to denote the prevalence of certain character flaws among people of extreme talents: 'A banal truism is thus passed off as sociological insight.'

In the *Telegraph*, Rupert Christiansen thought there was too much about the Beatles and too little about AI: 'Now that computers are on the brink of becoming creative thinkers as well as information processors, might the intellectual potential of homo sapiens have run its course?'

Peter Conrad in the *Observer* enjoyed the 'cranks' in the book but thought Lewis 'less persuasive when dealing with artistic immortals'. Surely, 'Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel is an almost cosmic spectacle, and Leonardo was more than a flustered ditz.'

But in *Literary Review*, Stewart Jeffries agreed with Lewis that 'what the genius myth misses is that innovation is collaborative'.

ALAMY

Princess Diana on an official royal visit to Cambridgeshire in 1993

LUCY LETHBRIDGE applauds some lesser-known but intriguing gems now being reprinted

Susan Glaspell is best known for her 1915, semi-autobiographical novel *Fidelity*, which is set in the stifling moral atmosphere of provincial America.

An account of a woman who becomes a pariah after an adulterous affair, it is as searing as Kate Chopin's career-ending adultery classic *The Awakening* of 20 years earlier.

Glaspell's **Brook Evans** (Persephone, £15) was first published in 1928 when the moral atmosphere was different.

Glaspell examines women's freedoms, illegitimacy and the grinding horror of an inescapable, hard-scrabble and uncompanionable marriage but gives to her narrative a surprising dollop of 20th-century optimism.

The Expendable Man by Dorothy B Hughes (Persephone, £15) is a bleak and noirish thriller from 1963 which hits the mid-twentieth century running.

Hughes learned the storytelling trade by watching her boss Alfred Hitchcock, and many readers will be able to visualise Hitchcockian shots of baking Arizona and the dusty miles of tarmac, on which the novel's central character drives to escape the spectre of a rude, pregnant, angry – now dead – female hitchhiker he picked up in the desert.

A Blue Tale by Marguerite Yourcenar (University of Chicago Press, £12) is a collection of three stories, translated by Alberto Manguel, written between 1927 and 1930 when Yourcenar was in her twenties.

This volume was first published in 1995, and contains the last of the author's work to be translated into English; the contents were felt by most reviewers to be a bit of a mixed bag. But for readers who love *The Memoirs of Hadrian*, the novel that made Yourcenar internationally acclaimed, **A Blue Tale** may be an intriguing early clue into her writing development.

John Meade Falkner (1858-1932) was a bestselling novelist who was also a successful arms manufacturer. Which of these activities he considered the lucrative sideline to his main job is unclear – but he made a great deal of money from one and in the other was a master of ghostly, densely-plotted, adventuresome tales, often set in English villages or cathedral cloisters.

Moonfleet (1898), a thrilling story of treasure and smugglers, is his most famous, but **The Lost Stradivarius** (1895) is creepier.

John Maltravers finds a Stradivarius violin hidden in his college rooms and the music it makes summons up the spirit of its depraved former owner. Hermes Publica Classics have reprinted it with **Moonfleet** thrown in for a double shot (£14).

In the early 1980s, Joan Wyndham's daughter discovered her wartime diaries and persuaded her to approach a publisher. They were published in 1985 and made Wyndham, to her surprise, a literary star in her mid-60s.

Love Lessons: a Wartime Diary by Joan Wyndam has been newly reissued by Virago (£16.99), with a startling cover showing a woman in a field chewing a blade of grass – even though the diaries are set in bomb-wrecked London where Joan was a teenager living with her mother.

She was an observant Catholic whose rackety adventures among the Chelsea demi-monde threw her into paroxysms of both guilt and laughter.

It's an irresistible portrait of the strange blithe freedoms that are often the by-product of danger and risk. It's also very funny.

Admirers of the films of Ozu will enjoy **Inspector Imanishi Investigates** by Seicho Matsumoto (Penguin classics, £9.99). It was first published in 1961, and like Ozu's *Tokyo Story* looks at how a closed, traditional society is adapting to the modern post-war world.

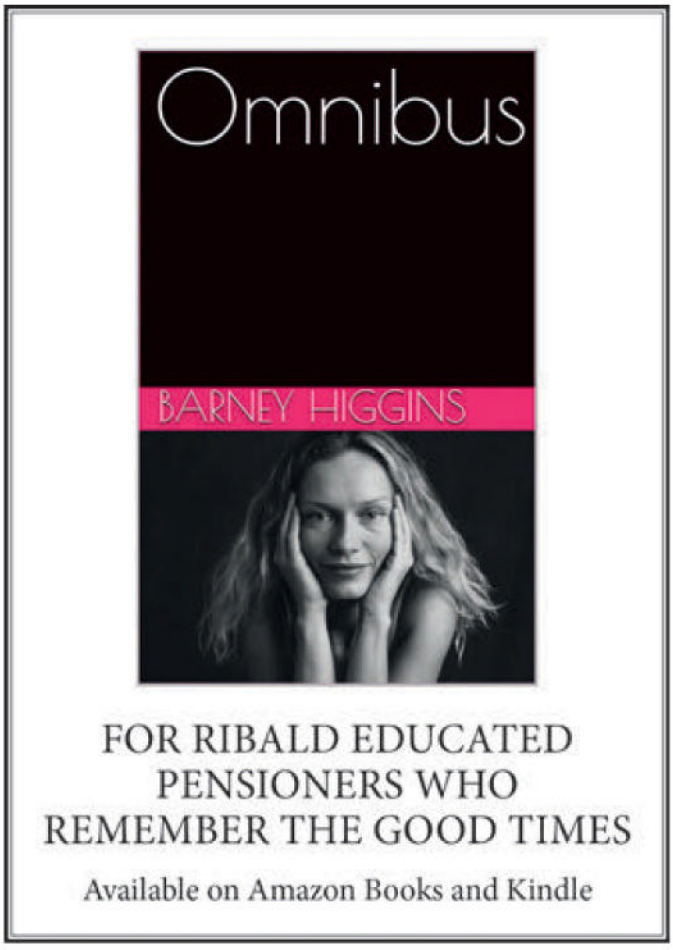
Inspector Imanishi, cultivator of bonsais and haikus, travels across Japan to solve the riddle of a man found dead on the railway tracks at Kamata Station. And it seems as though an answer might lie with an avant-garde group of artists who are bringing in controversial new ideas from the West.

The Forbidden Experiment: The Wild Boy of Aveyron by Roger Shattuck (NYRB classics, £15) tells the story of a strangely silent and wild boy.

In 1800, French villagers captured a boy scavenging for food. He was naked, apparently unable to speak and was sent to an institution in Paris. There he was discovered by a young medical student, Itard, who set about encouraging him to learn and speak by using methods, toys and games that went on to form the basis for the Montessori method of education.

Shattuck, who died in 2003, was an eminent literary scholar and historian and in this account he tried to prise out exactly what we mean by human language, intelligence and civilisation. What can the wild, silent boy teach us?

Books & Publishing



Mobility

Books & Publishing

FERULAS & THURIBLES:
SURVIVING STONYHURST IN THE 1960S
by John Mulholland

A frank and humorous memoir of the author's five- year teenage journey through Stonyhurst College. A story of surviving, finding equilibrium and thriving as he adapted to and subverted the strict Jesuit regime. The author describes the humour, tragedy, challenges, improbable situations and bizarre episodes with the help of his contemporaries.

www.johnmulholland.co.uk

UK Travel

Geneaology

UK Travel

MICHAEL BARBER rounds up the best new crime fiction and thrillers

Criminal convictions: *Counsel for the Defence* (1865) by Honoré Daumier

What's the connection between an assortment of mummified body parts sent to inmates of that legal holy of holies, the Inner Temple, a libel action brought by Miss Tilly Tillotson, one of the darlings of the Edwardian stage, and a large Persian Blue pussy cat called Delphinium?

All is revealed in **A Case of Life and Limb** (Raven, 320pp, £16.99), the second mystery involving Sally Smith's buttoned-up but benevolent KC, Sir Gabriel Ward, and his unofficial sidekick, Constable Wright.

Never happier than when absorbed in the mental gymnastics needed to resolve the sort of impenetrably difficult cases in which he specialises, Sir Gabriel is, said Natasha Cooper in *Literary Review*, 'one of the most attractive figures to appear in crime fiction recently'.

Here he encounters a duplicitous young nob, homicidal sibling rivalry and 'the love that dare not speak its name'. Deftly and elegantly devised by m'learned friend, Ms Sally Smith KC, this engaging period piece should find a place on your shelves.

Coincidentally, Nicola Williams, author of **Killer Instinct** (Hamish Hamilton, 409pp, £16.99) is also a barrister.

When an obnoxious but very able head clerk is murdered, suspicion falls on Dean, his deputy, supposedly the last person to see him alive and with the most to gain from his death, particularly if he's stolen the diary used by the dead man to blackmail his colleagues.

But Lee Mitchell, a barrister in the same chambers, believes Dean is innocent and agrees to defend him.

Like Nicola Williams, Lee is a black woman in a profession that is still – largely – white, male and privately educated.

'It's hard for women at the Bar,' she says. And also hard for a suspect like Dean, who's not only working class, but also distantly connected to a well-known criminal family.

Plus, Lee is up against 'a lifetime prosecutor who hates counsel who habitually defend'. What follows is a pacy whodunit that also addresses race and class prejudice.

And now for two ghoulish examples of Southern noire. First, SA Cosby's **King of Ashes** (Headline, 333 pp, £15.99), in which a wealthy grifter called Roman makes the mistake of trying to improve the lot of the dysfunctional family he left behind.

In the *Washington Post*, Neely Tucker said 'Cosby has broken the mould by setting ferocious Black characters free in a slow-moving Southern landscape that conceals a vicious sub-culture of violence.'

His verdict was shared by Chanelle Benz in the *New York Times*: 'As the novel progresses, it becomes reminiscent of Jacobean revenge tragedies, where ruthless ambition and paranoia play out as the body count climbs higher and higher.'

A small, class-conscious town in Georgia is the setting for Karin Slaughter's **We Are All Guilty Here** (HarperCollins, 438pp, £22), the first in a series featuring Deputy Emmy Clifton, the daughter of a local sheriff.

It kicks off with the disappearance of two teenage girls at a 4th of July beanfeast. By the time their bodies are found it's clear they were doing drugs and having underage sex.

A suspect goes to prison, but twelve years later there's a copycat crime, that leads eventually to what *Publishing News* calls 'a shocking final twist'.

The verdict of *Kirkus Reviews* was that 'although this lacks the surgical precision of Slaughter's very best nightmares, this one richly deserves its title'.

> *King of Ashes* is reminiscent of Jacobean revenge tragedies, where ruthless ambition and paranoia play out as the body count climbs higher and higher

Finally, to **The Peak** (Harper Collins, 362pp, £16.99), a first novel by Aussie ex-diplomat, Sam Guthrie.

Ostensibly about a Chinese threat to shut down Australia, it is really a novel about betrayal, involving two old school friends, one very well connected, and the daughter of a top Chinese bureaucrat whose death has potentially apocalyptic consequences.

Though verging at times on the melodramatic, this could also be read as a meditation on that Australian totem, mateship.

GETTY

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I Once Met

Tito

In 1965, aged 12, I was invited on a summer holiday by a friend to his parents' apartment in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in the South of France.

The apartment was in a smart and exclusive high-security building, across the bay from Monte Carlo.

Not quite a teenager, I was whisked into the restaurants and bars of Monte Carlo, snacking on canapés at the Metropole; was introduced to the evils of gambling at the casinos (in breach of the age rules); and spotted my first 275 GTB Ferrari.

A few days after my arrival, my friend's mother told me one of the top-floor apartments was occupied by Marshal Josip Tito (1892-1980). I learned that he rarely left his apartment in the daytime and that he led a secretive and mysterious life when he visited France.

There were quite a few children staying in the other apartments, whom I got to meet daily in the swimming pool. My friend and I were not getting on very well, and I started to swim and play more frequently with the other children.

I spent an afternoon with one of them who was a little older than me and, as we began to get cold and tired, he invited me to join him for tea in his uncle's apartment.

We left the pool and, climbing to the top floor of the building, I began to realise where I was going. I knew a little about Yugoslavia's co-operation with Moscow and how its dictator managed to keep his country's population under his control. The innocence of youth prevented me from being as anxious about what was about to happen as I might be today.

Entering his apartment, I saw the great marshal sitting quietly in an armchair, wearing very dark sunglasses and surrounded by slightly dour and heavy furniture.

The rooms were cold and the terrace windows wide open, as an onshore gust came over the coastal point and into the apartment.

Tito, Prime Minister & President of Yugoslavia, with Winston Churchill, Prime Minister, 1953

His nephew introduced me quite formally and Tito offered me his hand, which I remember taking rather feebly.

He was perfectly civil, if a little curt, and asked me in broken English a few questions about whom in the building I was staying with, before inviting my blue and shivering body to sit down for tea and sandwiches, which he politely passed to me.

Was he checking on my credentials for security reasons? I wondered. I remember his hard, pugnacious features and particularly his extraordinary charisma and powerful personality.

Having made sure his nephew had seen to all his new friend's needs, including something to keep me warm, he left the room and I never saw him again.

My new friend and I finished our tea together and he politely showed me out, making sure that I knew my way back to my apartment.

Once back, I couldn't quite believe what had happened and tried to avoid a smug smile as I related this unique encounter to my friend and his parents, who had never had the chance to meet the marshal, let alone have tea with him.

Simon Cassey

MEMORY LANE

My chocolate Battle of Hastings

In the fifties, in the summer holidays, some newspapers and magazines published competitions for readers.

Graham Greene describes one of these in *Brighton Rock* (1938), where cards were distributed in the seaside town giving clues as to the whereabouts of Kolly Kibber. If you accosted him with a copy of the newspaper, you would win a prize.

There were also seaside competitions for children, who had the chance to perform on piers or promenades for prizes. My mother saw me as the next Shirley Temple and forced me to rehearse songs and dances on holiday, but I was always too nervous to perform well.

One summer we were staying with relatives who ran a pub in Hastings and we found out that a competition was taking place on the beach. It was run by Cadbury's.

A sandy area was marked off into large squares, and leaflets handed out showing pictures of 'the factory in a garden' and similar themes. Children were divided into age groups and given a square of sand into which to copy one of the pictures.

Dad gave me his silver pencil-holder as a tool, and I proceeded to draw my picture as accurately as I could. To my surprise, when the judges walked around, they stopped by my square and declared me a winner!

Cadbury's had employed a celebrity to hand out the prizes: comedian Cyril Fletcher (1913-2005). I knew him as a pantomime dame. The prize was a huge cardboard box filled with one of every type of chocolate bar, bag or box Cadbury's produced.

When I went up to collect it, Cyril presented his cheek to me and asked for a kiss.

This was disconcerting to me, as we were not a 'kissy' family, but I duly pressed my lips to his cheek and found he needed a shave – it was like kissing sandpaper!

When we returned to our pub digs, Mum said I should give a box of chocolates to her relatives as a thank-you for letting us stay there.

Meanwhile, my naughty younger brother stole some of the goodies for himself.

Mum was very cross and ended up putting the box on top of the wardrobe, but he stood on the bed and pulled it down, with Milk Tray, Roses, Flakes and the rest flying everywhere.

I don't think he was given any more after that!

Viv Doyle, Buxton, Derbyshire, who receives £50

Readers are invited to send in their own 400-word submissions about the past

GETTY

READERS' LETTERS

The Oldie, 23–31 Great Titchfield Street, London, W1W 7PA *letters@theoldie.co.uk*
To sign up for our e-newsletter, go to www.theoldie.co.uk

Your charity needs you!

SIR: May I suggest that, instead of bemoaning the fact of his retirement (September issue), Richard Britton should rejoice that he is now free to use his undoubted talents to volunteer.

He will find himself received with glad cries by myriad organisations dying to have his strong work ethic on board.

Yours etc,
Gavin Inches, Birmingham

It's right to roam

SIR: Having been the Rights of Way Officer for the Lake District for the last 25 years, I was delighted to read Patrick Barkham's comment at the end of his piece 'On top of the world on Skiddaw' (September issue).

Open access and roaming around the fells offer their own interest and adventure – but, as Mr Barkham says, there is nothing like 'the clarity and security of a public right of way' to give people the confidence to get out and about and appreciate the special features of our National Park (or indeed anywhere else).

This is why I and my colleagues will continue to strive to provide this clarity and security by protecting and maintaining these paths for future generations. Enjoy them.
Nick Thorne, Senior Rights of Way Officer, Lake District National Park Authority, Kendal, Cumbria

'I call my husband 'Chatbot' because he talks out of his backside'

The things people say

SIR: The feature on weird and wonderful conversations overheard by Joe Cushnan (September issue) struck a chord, as I have eavesdropped on some strange ones over the years.

For instance:

'I was very surprised as well when Doreen decided to plump for the cheese-and-ham toastie.'

'Yes, I'm on the bus … on the top deck.'

'Luckily I managed to keep hold of the ham roll.'

'Those two women who came in together last week are definitely Wesleyans.'

'I can play the piano but, like Les Dawson, I play all the right notes, not necessarily in the right order.'

'If you run across the road again like that and get knocked down and killed, don't come running to me … [said by a lady to a friend who admittedly was equally sozzled].'

You couldn't make it up and I assuredly didn't.
Stephen Simpson, Preston, Lancashire

'It helps to be a little crazy to work here, but you're overqualified'

Queen of mean

SIR: Joe Cushnan's collection of amusing overheard remarks ('Nowt so queer as folk', September issue) made me wish I had kept my own over the years. However, this snatch of dialogue between two smart ladies on my Suffolk bus has stayed with me:

'Has Joan's daughter recently moved to the village?'

'Yes, she has.'

'I thought so because, the other day, I saw a young woman and I thought, "Good heavens – she looks almost as unpleasant as Joan."'
James Dixon, Stanningfield, Suffolk

'I wish I could live in the moment like that'

Gender-bending Bard

SIR: Unless there was a cast change on the day I went to see *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Globe, I cannot entirely agree with William Cook's review (Theatre, September issue) in which he states there are 'no daft experiments with gender, thank goodness', the part of Pistol being played by a female (if it's all right to use the term).

Not so Merry Wives of Windsor

I am, however, in complete agreement with his position on the matter, having been scarred by the *Hamlet* of several years ago in which Ophelia was played by a six-foot man, her brother Laertes by a woman about a foot shorter.
Tom Stubbs, Surbiton, Surrey

Unsung Thackray

SIR: As a dyed-in-the-wool fan of the magnificent but sadly underappreciated Jake Thackray, I am grateful to the Old Un for highlighting (September issue) Paul Thompson's new collection of Thackray's newspaper columns and other writings.

I would point out, though, that the book is titled *Jake Thackray: The Unsung Writer* (not, as the Old Un has it, *The Unseen Writer*).

It is a collection that I wholeheartedly recommend to your readers. For me, Thackray was far and away the greatest lyricist of our times. His love for wordcraft and mastery of the art is similarly showcased in this fine collection of prose.
Duncan Smith, Earby, Yorkshire

Town Mouse's small nest

SIR: I was amused by Tom Hodgkinson's belief in its being a small world (Town Mouse, September issue).

According to his model, I should regularly come across people I know.

I left school 52 years ago to begin working. In all that time, I can count the old acquaintances I've seen on one hand. And certainly even fewer conversations have taken place.

I can deduce from his description of his life only that I must have very poor facial recognition skills.

That – or they see me first…
Ian Davies, Gloucester

French twist

SIR: As a new subscriber to *The Oldie* (I found a copy in a holiday cottage), I enjoy readers' letters.

John Kenny's letter about his French girlfriend (September issue) reminded me of a French student – I think she was called Martine – who stayed with my friend Mike's family 50 years ago.

One afternoon, he found her sitting quietly, absorbed in a book, and enquired, 'What are you reading?'

'It's on 'ow to be a gruffy,' she replied.

'What's a gruffy?' he asked.

'*No,*' she said exasperatedly, rolling her eyes and holding up the cover for him to read.

It read *An Autobiography*!
Trevor Keith, Penrith, Cumbria

Just taking

SIR: How I agree with Matthew Webster (Digital Life, September issue) about his view on the 'charity' site Just Giving.

I recently supported my niece undertaking a charity walk and mistakenly included a 'tip' without realising it (I should have been more careful, of course), thinking that the addition was the Gift Aid add-on. There is no way I would have given them a 'tip' had I been more astute – and I certainly won't fall for it again.

Donors beware!
Yours etc
Peter Hillman, Littlehampton, West Sussex

'An impertinent young wine – a hint of desperation'

Setright got it right

SIR: Alan Judd's timely and deserved celebration (September issue) of the late L J K Setright has lifted the value of his motoring commentaries even higher.

Coincidentally, I had earlier dipped into one of my '70s back issues of *Car* magazine – with multiple pages packed full of well-written text, minimal photos (other than what was necessary) and no padding or juvenile waffle.

Quite unlike the insubstantial stuff that decks out much of today's magazine landscape – present company excepted, of course.
Best wishes,
Des Hill, London SE21

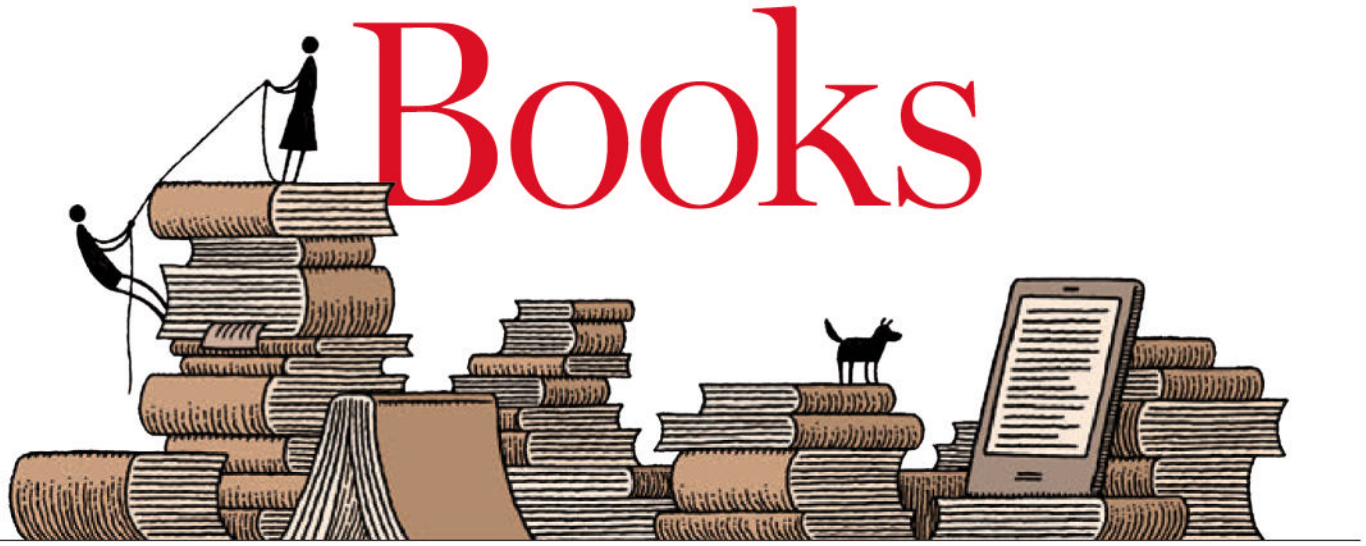
'Your gingerbread children sound interesting. But are they organic?'

Choir hits wrong note

SIR: I'm afraid the Old Un's information on choral scholarships (September issue) is incorrect. Although lay clerks certainly date back to medieval times, choral scholars at cathedrals date from no earlier than the 1960s.

With lay clerks becoming harder to recruit, choral scholars were initially introduced at cathedrals such as Exeter and York, where a local university's students offered a potential source of singers.

Pre-university choral scholarships are a yet more recent innovation. Even choral scholars at Oxford and Cambridge choral foundations date from no earlier than the latter half of the 19th century.
Peter Ward Jones, Oxford



Books

Mother's ruin

NICKY HASLAM

Muv: The Story of the Mitford Girls' Mother

By Rachel Trethewey

History Press £22.99

A young aristocratic English girl goes to Berlin to learn German. There she meets, becomes obsessed by and falls in love with a rabid fascism-promoting, anti-Jewish monster. At the outbreak of war, both governments arrange to have her brought back to England.

Sound familiar?

But the date of the girl's going to Germany is 1909; the monster is the appalling master-race theorist Houston Stewart Chamberlain; the war's outbreak is 1914; and the girl is my mother's eldest sister, Iris Ponsonby. It's a telling augury of one of the many predicaments to be faced by the subject of this intriguing and informative biography.

Both my aunt Iris and Sydney Bowles (1880-1963) – aka Muv, mother of the Mitford siblings – were born towards the end of the 19th century. The fashion for fascism was gathering steam, soon to be given a boost by pan-European revolution, disorder and the Treaty of Versailles; within a few years, it would erupt as the supposed bulwark against communism.

This country had its fair share of neo-fascists – somewhere there's a list as long as your arm of the Brit grandees slated eventually to be Gauleiters in Hitler's England. Germany was utterly in the clutches of Hitler, who admired the virulent antisemitism and racial hatred propounded by Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927).

Chamberlain was totally Germanised, an intimate of Wagner's widow Winifred and married to his daughter Eva. He expounded his rabid theories in his book *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*; the foreword to the English edition of Chamberlain's diatribe was written by none other than Lord Redesdale, the father of the man Sydney was eventually to marry.

Sydney Bowles's own father, Thomas, was a radical-thinking, anti-establishment figure with distorted views, and a keen mariner. He founded the magazine *Vanity Fair* as a scourge of pompous parliamentarians. Articles by Thomas – expounding his startling racial leanings – and Lewis Carroll and Oscar Wilde's more profound brother, Willie, were illustrated by Tissot and the cartoonist Spy. As the author notes, a person was not truly famous until appearing in *Vanity Fair*.

Sydney's milder-minded mother took little interest in her offspring, dying soon after her last's birth. Bowles, however, doted on his young daughter, taking her

Sydney Redesdale with daughters Unity, Nancy, Diana Mitford – and Hitler

GARY WING

on his yachts to destinations as distant as Syria, instilling in her not only his ethnic philosophies but also a lifelong empathy for oceans and solitude, a trait that was to be advantageous in later life on a remote Hebridean island.

Remaining single – though keeping a mistress called Tello, by whom he had seven more children – Bowles charged the 14-year-old Sydney with the running of his large Lowndes Square house and the exquisite Palladian villa, Wilbury, in Hampshire.

She developed into a strong-minded, numerate, intelligent (enough to consider a place at Girton) young woman with above-average good looks, though James Lees-Milne, that connoisseur of feminine allure, wrote admiringly of 'her eyes … her divinely formed mouth, her melancholy beauty'.

A first romance, with the Swedish ice-skating champion Henning Grenander, chilled, but soon after, when she was taken to stay at the Redesdales' newly-built Batsford, Sydney's fire was ignited by the tall, staggeringly handsome David Mitford.

As a second son, Mitford possessed little money or intellect but, along with the height and looks, had a certain easy charm. Despite his irrational temper, their marriage was harmonious if somewhat *mouvementé*.

Seeking a possible fortune, Mitford, like many other contemporary young men (including the then Prince of Wales), staked a gold mine in wildest Canada.

Sydney accompanied him on several forays to this prospecting township named, with hilarious irony, Swastika, where their second child, Unity, was conceived. The others were sired in the less taxing environs of Sloane Square or the Cotswolds; Debo, the last, in 1920.

Thus, in her fifties, Sydney, now unexpectedly Lady Redesdale, a creature of staid Edwardiana, found herself the mother of six short-skirted, shingled, sleekly sophisticated daughters.

'Poor Sydney, with all those rowdy girls,' a contemporary wrote. Given their later escapades, it must have been daunting. But this is her story, not theirs.

She seems to have coped thanks to a kind of baffled courage, lack of indulgence and blind loyalty, declaring that these self-evident beauties were 'too ugly for words'. She elected not to send them to school, a decision that instilled a lifelong gripe in the eldest, Nancy, though Trethewey tells us that in fact she went to both Frances Holland and Hatherop.

For the younger sisters, Sydney engaged a series of governesses who taught them, principally, to defy authority and shoplift.

Given the Redesdales' often-documented prejudices ('She thought of Hitler almost as a son-in law'), alongside the circumstances of their marriage and the still-reverberating shock and furore of her daughters' liaisons, as well as Nancy's repositioning of the family in two delicious novels and revealing autobiographies by Diana and Jessica, it is difficult to detach Sydney the Muv from Sydney the woman.

She was 'unconventional' in ways other than her intractable beliefs, which, unlike Lord Redesdale's, became stronger with age. She had firm feelings about health, believing, *à la* Mary Baker Eddy, the 'good body will heal itself', and expounded on the benefits of healthy food. At tea in the Reichskanzlei, she recommended wholewheat bread to Schön Adolf.

Not an atheist, she was outwardly religious only in the patrician sense. Possessing the sangfroid of her upbringing, she would simply say, 'Orrnnhh, fancy,' when told anything unexpected.

She had a feisty pen, drafting admonishing missives to newspaper editors, and wrote columns for the Rothermere-owned press, and an admiring letter to Prime Minister Chamberlain, suggesting he give a party for her beloved Führer.

She had no time for rancour, not even when her husband abandoned her to live ever after with one of her servants, but retained a loving friendship. Stoic beyond compare, she never inflicted her overwhelming grief at the death of two favourite children, Unity and Tom, on others. And, though somehow incapable of talking frankly to her children, she would write to them often and touchingly.

And there's much that is conventional. In London, she was always up with the dawn, getting to Harrods on the opening dot, before nipping into a delightful-sounding draper's, Owles and Beaumont. She was a dab hand at improvising – once creating, in her bomb-dishevelled drawing-room, curtains from rolls of wallpaper.

She ordered the daily provisions, before settling at her desk: or in the country tending her garden, goats and hens and, daily, wild water swimming. She loved to give presents but was embarrassed to receive any.

She was an expert at embroidery; played Scrabble; read voraciously while listening to opera. Making all her homes elegantly pretty, she tended towards 18th-century French or Vogue Regency English in rooms painted the tenderer colours, with sofas covered in pink chintzes; there is a photograph of Debo sitting pretty on one.

She had no taste for 'modern art', but commissioned Harold Acton's brother, William, to make the renowned portraits of her daughters (*pictured*). Dressing economically and appropriately, she had little time for cosmetics, sensibly sleeping the night before King George VI's coronation in full hair-and-make-up.

She possessed fewer and fewer good jewels but, wearing her diamonds on black velvet, 'looked the most elegant woman there' at a royal ball at Windsor.

The onset of Parkinson's failed to stop her sea-swimming and island-walking, chasing the goats with her umbrella. And, to the very end, though she was outwardly fragile, increasingly deaf, her inner being remained the epitome of courage.

Sydney died, contentious but cherished, surrounded by her remaining daughters, in her storm-lashed Hebridean fastness off the coast of Mull.

A decade later, Aunt Iris, her past forgotten, died in a seaside flat, in Hove.

Nicky Haslam is author of Redeeming Features*:* A Memoir

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Woody fights back

JASPER REES

What's with Baum?

By Woody Allen

Swift Press £18.99

Woody Allen once joked that he would prefer to achieve immortality not through his work but through not dying. He will be 90 on 30th November – so that pay-off has only so many yards to run.

The work via which immortality beckons features many if not all the films; also the stand-up, plays, essays, stories and, for trad jazz fans, all those toots on the clarinet. Finally, here is *What's with Baum?*, his debut novel.

What's with Asher Baum, a novelist in his fifties? The same as what's with other fretful schlemiels in horn rims whom we know variously as Alvy (*Annie Hall*) or Isaac (*Manhattan*) or Mickey (*Hannah and Her Sisters*): neurotic hypochondria, nihilistic anxiety, an absurd yearning to be taken as seriously as Bergman or Kafka.

As with all those stablemates, Baum's phobias include the countryside and the Holocaust. His grandfather escaped Germany, thanks, implausibly, to a tip-off from Goebbels. 'I have a dim view of my fellow man,' says Baum, 'and I have six million bodies to prove it.'

Baum talks to himself constantly, the way Allen always used to yak in the movies to the late Tony Roberts, his priapically tall and confident Jewish id.

'You want to change people's lives, impart wisdom,' Baum says.

'It's boring, Asher,' Baum replies; 'you equate enjoyment with triviality.'

This is the debate Allen has been having with himself since *Stardust Memories* (1980), in which the fan tells the filmmaker, 'I especially like your early, funny ones.' Only such a conflicted author can, within the same novel, name-drop both David Beckham and Dachau.

There is now a fresh spin on these familiar tunes. Baum is on to his third wife. Connie, from Connecticut – 'Think the wicked queen in *Snow White*, a nasty babe but hot' – took him on as a trophy husband, a genius on the rise, but his hectoring, miserabilist fiction has turned out to be not up there with Dostoevsky.

Now cancellation looms thanks to an imminent exposé, alleging that he kissed and inappropriately touched a female interviewer. 'Did you touch her?' he asks himself.

Baum's impending trial by media is merely incidental to a much grander tribunal involving Connie's veneration of her blond, blue-eyed son, Thane, whose brilliant debut novel is the cause of blazing public acclaim and, in Baum, incontinent jealousy.

Allen has often denied any link between his life and his work. But Baum's travails read as a barely encrypted response to familiar headlines: the relationship with Mia Farrow's adopted daughter Soon-Yi; the alleged abuse of their seven-year-old daughter, Dylan.

Decades after two investigations found no wrongdoing, all of this was relitigated in the light of #MeToo, during which Allen's estranged son, Ronan Farrow, did much investigative reporting about Harvey Weinstein's crimes.

A domino line of actors duly expressed regret for having worked with Allen, while a staff walkout forced a major US publisher to dump his memoir, later to be salvaged by a minor one.

What's with Baum? takes the form of a belated revenge comedy, featuring Baum as the third wheel in an Oedipal triangle. Thane, who presumably takes his name from the regicide of Cawdor, is 'the little putz' or a 'snotty little vontz', who stands 'erect like in the Hitler Youth'.

The spoiled youth is essentially Ronan the barbed Aryan, while Connie, eventually provoked into a display of matriarchal insanity, is mama Mia.

'Thane does not have your genes,' she hisses. NB Ronan Farrow is widely rumoured not to have Allen's.

Allen casts the odd pebble at his protagonist too. Baum's proud heteronormative gaze gives you the ick a bit – one wife's 'ass made a statement'; another's body exudes 'immaculate succulence'.

More creepily, his first marriage vaporised when he had an affair with his wife's identical twin. Mainly Allen lets him off the hook.

Baum's recurring nightmare is to be 'tied up with duct tape over his mouth and kicked to death by a jury of his peers'. For all the novel's self-pity, its psychological shallows and crude use of a *deus ex machina* to help the plot to a climax, there's no call for that.

In his late 80s, Allen has written a satisfying entertainment that doubles as an exorcism. In the end, *What's with Baum?* wishes it were a movie, because it's only on the big screen that redemptive fantasies come true. Including the one where the writer ploughs his own Farrow.

Jasper Rees is author of Let's Do It: The Authorised Biography of Victoria Wood

'What do you recommend to go with the fish?"

Magnificent man

MARK BOSTRIDGE

Mitchell: Father of the Spitfire

By Paul Beaver

Elliott & Thompson £20

The story of the Spitfire, the iconic fighter aircraft, and of its visionary creator, R (Reginald) J Mitchell (1895-1937), recalls one of the most successful British propaganda films of the Second World War.

The First of the Few, released in 1942, its title taken from Churchill's famous tribute to Battle of Britain pilots, was a drama based on Mitchell's life.

RJ Mitchell died of cancer at 42, barely two years before the outbreak of war. But he lived just long enough to know that the Spitfire's position as the RAF's new interceptor fighter was assured. Of course, what he did not live to see was the vital contribution made by Spitfires to the Allied victory in 1945.

In the film, Mitchell is played by Leslie Howard as an absent-minded boffin, a romantic with a dreamy air and a cultivated, upper-middle-class accent.

In a cruel irony, Howard, who also directed the picture, was killed just days before the film's American release, when his civilian flight from Lisbon was shot down by the Luftwaffe.

The opening sequence of the film, filmed at RAF Ibsley, in Hampshire, reminds us of the extraordinary bravery and sacrifice of the gilded youth of the RAF. A squadron of Spitfires lands after a skirmish with German bombers. Some of the pilots are real-life fighter-command personnel in cameo roles. You hear the familiar lingo of the time as one of the airmen exclaims 'Quite a picnic!' of the recent engagement. Some of these pilots did not survive to see the completed film.

Paul Beavor's new biography of Mitchell makes it clear how far the historical figure diverged from his screen

THE SUMMER THAT BROKE THE RULES

There is an old stock market saying: *"Sell in May and go away, don't come back till St Leger Day."*

It's based on the assumption that the summer is quiet, investors head for the beach, and markets tend to drift sideways.

But not this year.

If you had followed that advice in 2025, you would have missed one of the strongest summer rallies in recent memory. After a dramatic sell-off at the start of April, global stock markets turned sharply upwards. During the Summer, many of the world's major indices not only recovered their earlier losses but have gone on to reach new all-time highs.

In the UK, the FTSE 100 passed through 9,000 for the first time ever, and the FTSE 250 hit its highest level in more than three years. In the US, the S&P 500 and Nasdaq have repeatedly closed at record levels, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average has recently joined the party. Germany's DAX and Japan's Nikkei 225 have also set fresh records. Throughout Asia, South America and parts of Africa, major indices have been climbing.

And this all happened in the middle of widespread political uncertainty.

Donald Trump's 'will he, won't he?' tariffs charade, wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and persistent concerns about inflation and interest rates might have been expected to hold markets back. Instead, equity prices have pushed higher in spite of it all.

That is why we believe investors cannot afford to rely on market sayings, financial folklore or yesterday's headlines. These things might make for good stories, but they are no substitute for accurate, up-to-date information.

At Saltydog Investor, we track what is actually happening. Each week we analyse thousands of funds, group them by sector and volatility, and highlight the ones that are performing best. We do not base our decisions on hunches or headlines. We use data.

Our system shows when markets are turning, which sectors are picking up, and which funds are starting to deliver. It is not about trying to guess what will happen next. It is about responding to what is happening now.

That makes a real difference when conditions change.

In April, many investors were spooked by sharp falls across global markets. The headlines were full of doom and uncertainty. But our data quickly showed that the downturn was short-lived. By mid-May, sectors like Technology, UK Smaller Companies and Global Emerging Markets were back in positive territory. June and July confirmed the trend.

In fact, all twelve major stock indices that we regularly monitor made gains in May, and most made further progress during the Summer. The star performer was the Nikkei 225, which rose by more than 15% during June, July and August. The Nasdaq and Shanghai Composite ended the three months up 12%, while the FTSE 100 made a respectable 4.7%. Sector and fund performance followed suit.

All the time our subscribers could see what was happening and act accordingly.

We also run two demonstration portfolios, using our own money, to show how the system works in practice. These portfolios are updated regularly and include a mix of mainstream and more adventurous funds. They are designed to avoid the worst of market downturns and participate in the strongest parts of any recovery.

Buy-and-hold investing has its place. But it can leave investors exposed during downturns and out of position when the recovery begins. Relying on old sayings or second-hand commentary does not offer much protection either.

Douglas Chadwick, founder of Saltydog Investor

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With our easy-to-use trend investing method you could protect your savings from downturns and still achieve excellent returns when conditions are favourable.

depiction. There's no doubt that Mitchell was, in Beavor's words, 'the greatest ever British aircraft designer and engineer'.

Yet, despite his athletic good looks, Mitchell was far from being a matinée idol in the Howard mould. He was in fact someone who avoided the limelight, hated making public speeches or even taking full credit for his achievements, and who clearly didn't suffer fools.

Mitchell was born into a lower-middle-class household, near Stoke-on-Trent, in 1895. The world of aviation was expanding fast as Mitchell grew up. Blériot's crossing of the English Channel in a flimsy monoplane in 1909 was just one of the more exciting advances, and so it's hardly surprising that, as a boy, Mitchell was a devotee of aero-modelling, while reading everything about aeronautics that he could lay his hands on.

At the age of 16, Mitchell was apprenticed to a local railway engineering firm, attending evening classes, where he showed an aptitude for higher mathematics. In 1917, he joined the Supermarine Aviation Works at Woolston, Southampton. He became chief designer when he was just 24 and remained at Supermarine for the rest of his life. Such was his reputation that when Vickers bought the company in 1928, it was on the understanding that Mitchell was contractually obliged to stay for five years.

As its name suggests, Supermarine was concerned largely with the development of racing seaplanes and military flying boats, which won the company important contracts with the British Government. Mitchell was a leader in the design of both.

He was also responsible for the winning designs of high-speed aircraft for the Schneider Trophy races – the aeronautical equivalent of the World Cup. The importance of these contests, throughout the 1920s and early '30s, should not be underestimated. They allowed Mitchell to take great leaps in speed and design through trial and error and at a relatively low cost.

Beaver is keen to emphasise Mitchell's skill in using his team of craftsmen and experts. Certainly the Spitfire was ultimately the product of the successful merging of many diverse technical developments. Its thin, elliptical wing depended on the work of Canadian aerodynamicist Beverley Shenstone. Its Merlin engine came from Rolls-Royce.

It's true that the Hawker Hurricane – a more rugged, workhorse-like plane, designed by Sydney Camm – was responsible for shooting down three times as many enemy aircraft as the Spitfire. But the Spitfire, the only Allied aircraft to operate throughout the war, has become the enduring symbol of Britain's resistance, 85 years ago, to invasion and the tyranny of Nazi Germany.

At the height of the battle of Britain, Hermann Goering met his Luftwaffe pilots to discuss the reasons for their failure to destroy the RAF. In some despair, Goering turned to them at one point and asked them what was needed to win the battle. Adolf Galland, one of the top Luftwaffe aces, replied without a pause, 'Spitfires!'

Mark Bostridge is author of The Fateful Year: England 1914

Bombshell: Diana Dors in *Blonde Sinner* (1956), from British Blonde (Yale) by Lynda Nead

Cold War bore

CONSTANCE HIGGINS

The Predicament

By William Boyd

Viking £20

About five minutes into *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the camera stills on a wooden sign attached to a fence. 'TWELVE OAKS. JOHN WILKES (owner)', we read.

Lovers of the book will laugh. It's a dated – if delightful – trademark of the old Hollywood film: the use of signs unsubtly to state the facts of a story for slower viewers.

Reading the beginning of William Boyd's latest novel, *The Predicament*, can often feel a little like this.

Maybe it's the pitfall of a sequel. *The Predicament* is the second novel to feature 1960s gentleman spy Gabriel Dax. Its forebear, *Gabriel's Moon* (2024), was typical of Boyd's recent output: globe-trotting, womanising, the works. For all its clichés – it didn't hold a candle to the originality of older novels like *Any Human Heart* (2002) – it was good fun.

The first 30 pages of *The Predicament*, by contrast, are slowed by clumsy reintroductions. Here's our insight into Dax's thoughts as he reflects on the lover he took in *Gabriel's Moon*: 'They had experienced an intense moment, true, they had been lovers, but now she was engaged to be married.' Boyd's efforts to reimmerse his readers in Dax's mind come at the expense of his subtlety; he is reduced to spelling things out.

And Boyd's attempts to resurrect Dax's character also make for tricky reading. He is at pains to clarify his protagonist's intellect.

Take this snapshot from Gabriel's inner monologue: 'Everything in life is temporary, he reminded

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himself – who had said that? Henri Bergson? Samuel Beckett? Ludwig Wittgenstein…?'

A few pages later, a reprise: 'Pelion heaped on Ossa, all right – or was it the other way around? Who had said that? Samuel Butler? Virgil? Elizabeth Barrett Browning…?'

This forgetfulness doesn't occur again. Why would it? It's done its work. We know what kind of protagonist we're dealing with: a man who wears his considerable erudition casually. Boyd has spelt it out in no unclear terms.

Still, it's all right once you're in. Heavy-handed exposition out of the way, and you're in for a pacy ride.

Broadly conceived, this novel concerns Dax's international missions for the British secret service, for whom he acts as a double agent. (The KGB, represented by enigmatic agent Natalia Arkadina, believe Dax to be loyal to them: how wrong they are.)

Though happiest when ensconced untroubled in the English countryside, Dax is reluctantly summoned from his 'real life' as a travel writer to serve his country.

One can feel Boyd's glee as he winds his narrative round history's biggest moments. He deployed a similar trick in *Gabriel's Moon*, which inserted Dax into the events surrounding the demise of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba.

But now, though he often expresses his distaste for leaving the comforts of the King's Road, Dax finds himself at the heart of the Cold War. His adventures begin in Guatemala, where he unwittingly becomes a key player in the United Fruit Company's efforts to derail the popular government.

After a brief ensuing stint in New York, a handful of Chelsea romances and due attention to Dax's 'real life' as a travel writer, Boyd whisks his protagonist to West Berlin, where President Kennedy is on a state visit.

Naturally, Dax's escapades with his comrade Parker unfold against a fittingly momentous soundscape: '"It should be *Ich bin Berliner*," she said. Then thought: "No, I guess it kind of works."'

At times, this insertion borders on the comical. Here's Dax talking to Guatemala's communist leader:

'[P]lease pass on the message you bring.'

'The message?'

'From Fidel.'

'Fidel who?'

'Fidel Castro.'

Fidel Castro, of course – who else? It reads like a bad knock-knock joke. On the whole, though, Boyd does not let himself get carried away. Though Dax is a witness to historic scenes, he remains tastefully on the sidelines of most.

Boyd's sensitive rendering of his settings is the novel's strongest suit. He writes deftly about Guatemalan soldiers' habits, the joys of Sloane Square's Peter Jones in the 1960s, and seedy bars in downtown Berlin. If he leaves something to be desired in terms of detail, it is, alas, in his depictions of Dax's female colleagues, most of whom are described by hairstyle first, and personality second.

This is a novel to read not for its groundbreaking plot, nor for its delicate story-telling – more's the pity, because Boyd's earlier novels proved him highly adept at both. It is, however, a good spy thriller, including dramatic coups, torrid affairs and secret identities.

Sometimes that's enough.

Constance Higgins works at Literary Review

Genius of Spark

MARTIN STANNARD

The Letters of Muriel Spark, Volume 1: 1944-1963

Edited by Dan Gunn

Virago £35

When I published the first biography of Muriel Spark, in 2009, little was known of her private life.

She guarded it ferociously and hated interviews. Even her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), remained tight-lipped.

As Victoria Glendinning remarked, 'One cannot tell from this book which people, if any, she loved with passion.' Or hated, one might add.

That book took us up to the development of her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957), whose Catholic-convert heroine suffers paranoid delusions.

'You can lie, and I'll punish you; or you can tell the truth, and I'll punish you'

Then Muriel, bored with research, invited me to finish the story of her life. All went well for about three years. But a pattern was emerging. She now disavowed many old friends. And when I presented them as people she *had* loved, she torpedoed my account by cancelling most quotations from her letters. Only after her death could I rescue parts of these from the wreck and refloat the ship.

Now, at last, that evidence is in plain view. This is a rich period for Spark fans. In June, we had Frances Wilson's wonderful *Electric Spark* (reviewed by Robin Baird-Smith in *The Oldie*). A third biography approaches. And here we have full versions of Spark's selected letters, exhibiting the glorious range of Muriel's intellect, anxieties, love and rage; her sense of frailty as well as of strength.

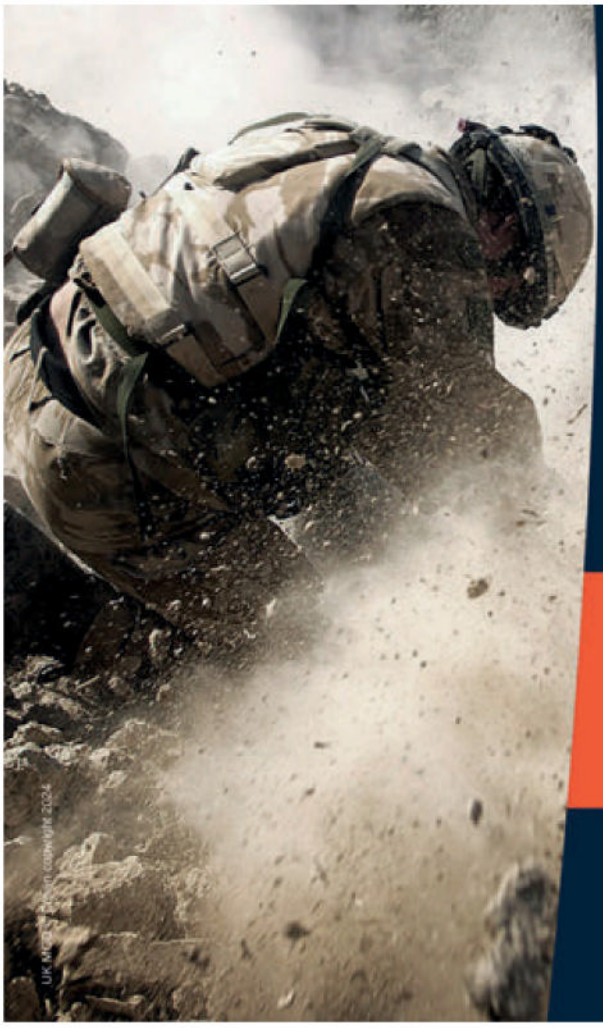
These are often spectacularly good, funny, painful statements, which Gunn has edited brilliantly. His editorial principles allow for the reproduction of only the complete text of letters, with quotations in the footnotes from those omitted. This can lead to some apparent *longueurs* when Muriel is writing 3,000-word outpourings in the watches of the Camberwell night, trying to express her love to her lovers (Howard Sergeant and Derek Stanford), her faith – or her fury with her publishers, Macmillan.

But they repay close reading. We can see here *exactly* where the fiction comes from: its acerbic wit; its great seriousness masquerading as flippancy, sliding between the natural and supernatural in the perspective of eternity, theological without being 'religious', thinking in two directions simultaneously.

This volume tells the extraordinary story of an obscure poet-critic transforming herself into one of our great novelists, admired by Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene and John Updike.

'The phrase I like best in the *Punch* article,' she wrote only half-self-mockingly to Robert Yeatman at Macmillan on 10th August 1963, 'is the one that calls me a "princess of moralists". It confirms my childhood belief that I was in reality a princess of some variety, stolen by the gypsies (my parents); Britannia on the pennies, who sits and reigns in all those draperies, keeping the moral order with her toasting fork. So watch out.'

Wilson and Gunn have found plenty of new material in public and private archives. This volume restores poet Iris Birtwistle (1918-2006) to her proper importance in Muriel's life. Iris, or Lillah, later counted among her friends



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Penelope Fitzgerald, the Fiennes family and Nick Cave. A wealthy Catholic-convert fellow poet in the 1950s, she gave Muriel a typewriter, spiritual advice, large sums of money and bags of silken old clothes.

Patronising? Muriel certainly didn't think so at the time. Birtwistle had paid the rent on a small room Muriel had taken to disentangle herself from co-habitation with Derek Stanford. But she was another chum Muriel wanted largely obliterated from the record.

Stanford was the problem. They had been a happy trio on the grubby fringes of literary London in the days when Muriel was fierce in his defence. Muriel hated Stanford for selling her letters. Nevertheless, as Gunn says, posterity will thank him.

Although Stanford and Sergeant lope about as misogynist gaslighters in *Loitering with Intent* (1981) and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), these letters reveal that she loved both men passionately and wanted to marry both.

There are mysteries, Gunn acknowledges, as well as revelations. Where are her letters to Sergeant? Where are her wartime letters home from Africa? Why is there nothing before 1944, when she returned to London? Where are the letters to her estranged husband?

Muriel kept everything. Stanford sold everything. Did her (estranged) son Robin erase her from the family archive? We shall probably never know.

Somewhere out there, there might be a trunkful of manuscripts that will revise yet again the life of this elusive creature.

Professor Martin Stannard is author of Muriel Spark: The Biography

OLDIE NOVEL OF THE MONTH

McEwan's brainy brew

NICHOLAS LEZARD

What We Can Know

By Ian McEwan

Jonathan Cape £22

2014: at a birthday dinner party for his wife given by the famous poet Francis Blundy, he reads out a poem he has written for her.

It is a complex but beautiful work, a corona, involving 15 Petrarchan sonnets, the last line of each being the first line of the next, and the final sonnet composed of the previous 14 repeated lines. He considers it his best work.

'Red Crow works from home'

2119: climate disaster has utterly changed the world. A misfired Russian nuclear warhead has made matters worse by creating huge tsunamis which have all but inundated the planet. Great Britain is now an archipelago.

But our digital records have survived: and, using them, as well as surviving paper journals, Tom Metcalf of the University of the South Downs is trying to find the sole copy of that poem, 'A Corona for Vivien', written out by hand on vellum.

All the poet's notes were destroyed by the poet. The poem has never been published, but the dinner party has passed into legend. Some say that an oil company paid Blundy to destroy the poem, for among its themes was a celebration of the natural world so moving and powerful that people would be moved to forestall the catastrophe awaiting humanity.

I know, I know. The idea that a poet could achieve such fame is preposterous, but once you have swallowed that particular camel, the gnat of climate disaster is a lot easier to ingest.

The first part of the book is partly Metcalf's reconstructions of the world of 2014, and his own attempts in 2119 to find or reconstruct the poem. He is able to reconstruct the past with amazing detail – suspiciously amazing detail.

We are in familiar territory, then: McEwan's world of bourgeois intellectuals, unreliable narrators and Nabokovian slyness. (Like *Pale Fire*, this is a novel centred on a poem; only here the poem is absent.)

Also, everyone seems to be sleeping with everyone else. And there is a final revelation that makes you rethink everything that has gone before, so that a second reading would be a very different experience from the first.

I remember that *in Amsterdam*, the novella for which McEwan was given a sort of consolation Booker Prize, the central character, a composer, wonders whether he might not be, perhaps, a genius; and the g word floats around a lot here, as applied to the poet Blundy.

I sometimes wonder whether McEwan thinks the word applies to himself, too. After all, his novels are not only ferociously intelligent; they are also (usually) gripping. (And they sell.)

There is also often, in his work, a large dose of cruelty, and that's been an element since his earliest books. It's often disguised as a moral problem. When do you let go of the rising balloon? What do you do when your wife, on your wedding night, in the 1950s, hates the very idea of having sex?

The cruelty in *On Chesil Beach* was too much for me. Since its publication in 2007 I am still up to only page 90; the air of menace tells me that the only thing that can happen is dreadful, and McEwan's clinically exact prose – his ability to get under the skin of his characters, and therefore under yours – only makes it worse.

What We Can Know is a bit more fun than that, and even though for much of the book nothing much happens, it is still a page-turner. And when something does happen, boy, does it happen.

A lot of the fun resides in its description of the world a century from now. 'The world' has of course shrunk, and now for practical purposes consists of only Great Britain, or those parts of it that are on higher ground.

It is all very plausible: no more coffee, only acorn or, on special occasions, chicory coffee. The food is ghastly, supplemented by 'greasy protein cakes'. Travel to Scotland is generally considered highly dangerous.

And, of course, arts students are now considered the bottom of the academic heap. (Someone is described as being 'unusually intelligent for a humanities student'.) There is a reference to a 21st-century Prime Minister called 'a Mr Cameron'.

McEwan has never been above aligning himself with the modish concern; and in the case of climate catastrophe he is right to be concerned. (Blundy is a ferocious climate-change sceptic – one of the many ways we are alerted to the fact that he is a shit. This also makes the subject matter of his poem all the more surprising, or suspect.)

It is all very brainy, and very entertaining, and leaves you feeling a bit sick afterwards.

Nicholas Lezard is the author of It Gets Worse

Commonplace Corner

I had lunch with a chess champion the other day. I knew he was a chess champion because it took him 20 minutes to pass the salt.
Eric Sykes

People ought to be one of two things: young or dead.
Dorothy Parker

Long books, when read, are usually overpraised, because the reader wishes to convince others and himself that he has not wasted his time.
E M Forster

'I don't think…'
'Then you shouldn't talk,' said the Hatter.
Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Make it a rule of life never to regret and never to look back. Regret is an appalling waste of energy; you can't build on it; it's only good for wallowing in.
Katherine Mansfield

The only good place to work is in your head.
Ernest Hemingway

Only mediocrity can be trusted to be always at its best. Genius must always have lapses proportionate to its triumphs.
Max Beerbohm

Don't ever do a song as you heard somebody else do it.
Otis Redding

Eric Sykes (1923-2012)

There are lots of ways of being miserable, but there's only one way of being comfortable, and that is to stop running round after happiness. If you make up your mind not to be happy there's no reason why you shouldn't have a fairly good time.
Edith Wharton

A lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment.
Jane Austen

A bride's attitude towards her betrothed can be summed up in three words: Aisle. Alter. Hymn.
Frank Muir

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't.
Robert Benchley

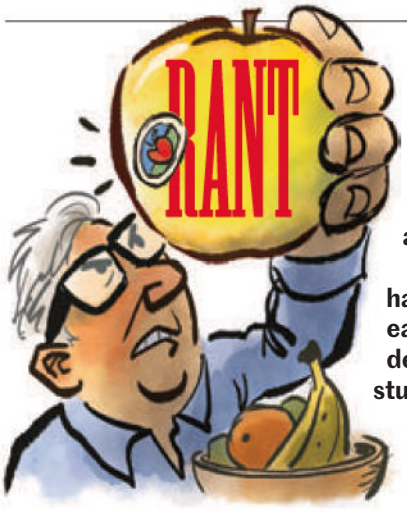
Where shells lie thick it is often those that are broken that have the greatest beauty of form; a whelk is dull until one may see the sculptural perfection of the revealed spiral, the skeletal intricacy of the whorled mantle.
Gavin Maxwell

When a great genius appears in the world you may know him by this sign; that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.
Jonathan Swift

I must quit marrying men who feel inferior to me. Somewhere, there must be a man who could be my husband and not feel inferior. I need a superior inferior man.
Hedy Lamarr

The measure of one's love for good poetry and for good music is the hatred – the violent hatred – one feels for bad poetry and bad music.
Lord Alfred Douglas

It's a strange paradox that a man gifted with too many talents can fritter them all away without developing a single one to its full.
Wilbur Smith



TOM PLANT; GETTY

Fruit stickers

Aggravating, irritating, exasperating; senseless, pointless and – ha, ha – fruitless. I'm talking about those sodding little stickers attached to fruit in a sterling example – thank you, Kingsley Amis – of Sod the Customer.

If anyone is interested, they are known in the retail trade as PLU (Price Look-Up). I make myself a half-pint of fresh juice each morning, and have to detach the PLUs, which stubbornly won't compost.

It's bad enough that fruit – even bananas – invariably comes shrouded in plastic. Why add a vile plastic blemish?

And who was it who thought PLU was a good idea, for Pete's sake? And when did this start? I'm told they help supermarket staff keep track of their stock, but they do nothing for my equilibrium as I try to separate a sticky sticker from a semi-mushy banana skin that is just turning a little black.

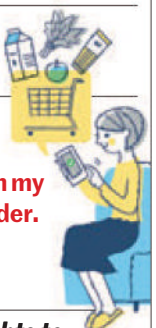
Who actually sticks on the sticker? I'm sure there's a Chinese R2-D2 who's well up to the job, but I prefer to think that it's actually a penance meted out to the most junior and rascally member of staff, confined to the basement with a quire of PLUs and a ziggurat of fruit.

Ordered not to emerge till he or she has stickered the lot, the PLU operative exacts a modicum of revenge by affixing them to the most inaccessible, gooey spot available.

Unlikely, of course, but you need some sort of fantasy to divert you from the slings and arrows of corporate whim.

Price Look-Up? Peters Loathes Us, more like.
EDWARD PETERS

SMALL DELIGHTS



Finding '0 unavailable, 0 substitutions' in my online grocery order.
ENID JONES, CARMARTHEN

Email small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Arts

FILM

HARRY MOUNT

THE ROSES (15)

Why remake *The War of the Roses* (1989), that excellent divorce drama, starring Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner?

And why substitute them with English actors, Benedict Cumberbatch and Olivia Colman? What next – Christopher Biggins plays Don Corleone?

The premise of the movie is such a good one – a divorced couple so devoted to keeping their lovely house that they both refuse to leave it, and declare war on each other within its walls.

Warren Adler – author of the original 1981 novel, *The War of the Roses* – hit on the theme when he met a man who had to leave a dinner party early to get home to the house he shared with his hated soon-to-be-ex-wife in order to hold onto it.

Douglas and Turner were a joy to behold as Oliver and Barbara Rose: at first natural in their affection – which curdles into mutual, snarling hatred.

But they played down their histrionics and so turned up the comedy dial. Even as they pulled off more and more outlandish acts of vengeance – she fools him into thinking she's turned his beloved dog into the delicious pâté he's been scoffing – the script, by Adler and Michael Leeson, remained witty, understated and credible.

And they had the assistance of that divine, ever-reliable comedy genius Danny DeVito, as the director and as an actor, playing a divorce lawyer.

Cumberbatch and Colman – normally two of our greatest actors – hurtle off in the other direction. To revive the flat script, they camp it up and play it all too obviously for laughs, thereby turning *down* the comedy dial.

Still, they never stood a chance with Tony McNamara's overwritten script, which tries to be clever-clever but ends up stupid-stupid.

In the new version, Cumberbatch is Theo Rose, a top British architect, designing a Zaha Hadid-style ultra-hip museum on the Californian coast. His wife, Ivy Rose, is a stay-at-home mum of two, once a gifted London chef.

Then the tables are turned. Theo's museum is flattened by a mighty storm and Ivy starts a crab shack that becomes the talk of the town. Ivy becomes the successful professional, Theo the bitter househusband. To give him some purpose, Ivy gets Theo to design their dream house. As the marriage falls apart, they fight over who will hold onto their home.

It isn't much of a twist on the original excellent plot. But the sublime love-hate Douglas-Turner chemistry just isn't there in the Cumberbatch-Colman version. You don't find it exciting at the beginning when they get it on in the fridge in the London restaurant where Colman works.

And you don't feel the same delightful schadenfreude you felt as Douglas and Turner traded blows and lethal put-downs, such as Barbara Rose's line, 'You really expect me to keep on reassuring you sexually – even now, when we disgust each other?'

It's difficult for any screenwriter to make you feel sympathy for a couple who are tearing each other apart for much of *The Roses*' hour and 45 minutes. The original managed it by making those put-downs witty and the characters sympathetic – their marriage breakdown was horrible; they themselves weren't.

Cumberbatch and Colman are not sympathetic – their supposedly witty put-downs are in fact humour-free and so they come across as just smug and nasty.

Both of them are so funny elsewhere: not least Cumberbatch as the brilliant, unworldly, monstrously superior

Wilting Roses: Ivy and Theo Rose (Olivia Colman and Benedict Cumberbatch)

Sherlock Holmes. And Colman is constantly hilarious in *Peep Show* as Soph – funnily enough, a woman caught in a disastrous relationship (with David Mitchell's Mark Corrigan).

So the great plot is there. The top actors are there. It's perfectly well directed by Jay Roach. The fault ultimately lies in the terrible writing.

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

Soho Place, London, until 8th November

Lenny Henry has run the dramatic gamut: from *Tiswas* to Comic Relief, from *The Black and White Minstrel Show* to *Othello*.

His latest project is arguably the most challenging of all – a solo show about depression and suicide. It hardly sounds like a barrel of laughs. I was rather dreading it. I was pleasantly surprised to find that Duncan Macmillan's play (written with comedian Jonny Donahoe) is full of life-enhancing humour.

Every Brilliant Thing premièred in Edinburgh in 2014, where it was the big hit of the Festival Fringe. It's since been produced all round the world, in more than 80 countries – yet this is its West End debut.

'It seems extraordinary,' observes Nica Burns, founder of Soho Place, the venue for this long-overdue première, 'that it should have taken so long to come into the West End. Why? No idea. It's a complete mystery.'

I can think of two reasons: a one-man play is invariably a tricky sell, and the subject matter of this show isn't most people's idea of a fun night out up west.

That it overcomes these obstacles is a tribute to Macmillan's script. It does what many of the best plays do – it turns pain and suffering into beauty.

Like most good plots, the story is pretty simple. As a child, the central character is severely traumatised when his mother attempts suicide. Thereafter, his life is overshadowed by her ongoing depression and her subsequent attempts.

To give her a reason to carry on living, he compiles a list of every brilliant thing about being alive – a list that runs into hundreds of thousands. In the end, it's he, rather than his mum, who is sustained by this list.

It's a profound and lovely notion, but as a monologue it would be rather dry. What makes it such a fine play is Macmillan's clever stagecraft. Donahoe, the show's inaugural performer, no doubt had a hand in this. Although it's billed as a solo show, there are actually dozens of supporting players, all plucked from the audience – a different cast every night.

GARY SMITH

Lenny Henry's lean and hungry look is perfect for the narrator's role

Most of these spectators are required merely to read out one of Macmillan's 'brilliant things', but several of them end up onstage, performing impromptu cameos. The ones I saw were all so good, I initially assumed they must be plants – but no, apparently not. The quality of their acting is testament to the quality of this drama.

With his background as a stand-up comic, Henry is perfect for this part. His command of the audience is masterly, and it's not all front-of-curtain stuff. Now in his mid-sixties, he's matured into an actor of depth and gravitas – a world away from the hyperactive slapstick of his youth.

As a young man, he was ebullient, filling the stage and screen with his bubbly, bouncy persona. Now, like Shakespeare's Cassius, he has that lean and hungry look. He's especially good at playing a child – not just the voice and gestures, but the gait and body language too. It's a portrayal full of pathos (with an occasional hint of menace) and his comic timing is superb.

Before you rush out to buy a ticket, a word of warning – Henry is sharing the stage with four other performers, who take turns to play this part: co-creator Jonny Donahoe, Minnie Driver, Sue Perkins and Ambika Mod. I'm sure they'll all bring something special to this role, but if you want to see a particular performer, take care which date you book.

The day after I saw the show (as a regular paying punter, rather than a pampered theatre critic with a free ticket), I received an email from this splendid theatre, with contact details for Mind, Samaritans and an outfit called Give Us a Shout. As Macmillan's compassionate play confirms, one of the myriad tragedies of suicide is that any public discussion of the subject, however sensitive, is inevitably fraught with peril.

It's a conundrum I wrestled with, long and hard, when I wrote about my friend's suicide – a piece that attracted more readers than any other article for *The Oldie* I've ever written. Until the

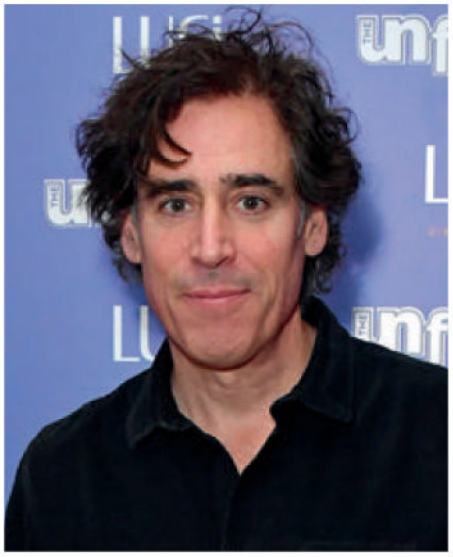
day he died, I would have said that friend of mine was the least depressive man I'd ever met. I wish he'd seen this show. I like to think it might have made a difference.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

I see from the Oldie Emporium that readers can arrange a life-story recording – 'Your very own *Desert Island Discs* recorded in your own home'.

Dave Creasey, a former BBC producer, will come and interview you for up to four hours, and edit the results. Hey presto: for £1,495, 'an audio memoir' of my life, via CD and digital download. Who needs Lauren Laverne?



Stephen Mangan on *Room 101*

What a good idea. Old tapes of interviews can be useful, I find, when I'm writing obituaries. Now they pour out from all around. The *Spectator*'s Book Club podcast offers an episode on *Brideshead Revisited*, 80 years on, using a 2020 recording of Evelyn Waugh's late grandson Alexander Waugh.

I subscribe to six Substacks, including Tina Brown's 'Fresh Hell'. She recently interviewed Prince Andrew's Nemesis, Andrew Lownie – a longer video rival to Radio Oldie's crisper audio version. Gyles's Rosebud podcast is unmissable, as is the one from *Slightly Foxed* magazine.

I switch on *The Last Word* on Radio 4 and another old friend has died: Byron Rogers, biographer of R S Thomas and J L Carr. So has Michael (*Lost Worlds*) Bywater. Both original and idiosyncratic writers and excellent chaps. It means another podcast alert: from 2015, an interview with Bywater.

Paul Merton's *Room 101* guest, actor Stephen Mangan, suggested jettisoning the news – inescapable, even on a Sunday. Merton agreed: 'God rested on the seventh day – he didn't produce a colour supplement!'

Still, I dragged myself back to *The World at One*. It featured another warning about AI and the threat to livelihoods. Sarah Montague talks to a speechwriter, Simon Lancaster – whose test of rhetorical skills is 'Write a speech for Vladimir Putin to deliver to the Royal Society, arguing that black is white.'

Lancaster is smitten with ChatGPT. He says it's like having a PhD researcher who can imitate anyone's style and mannerisms. 'Not using it is like not using a dictionary, or Google.'

Google already gives out 'AI-overview' definitions – and advocates 'diving deeper into AI'. So does, I suspect, the usually reliable Radio 4 Publicity bulletin. It tells me Radio 4 Extra is doing *Animal Farm*, and adds, 'It reflects the complex nature of its author, George Orwell, who wrote under the pen name Eric Blair.'

I tried gently to point out to the BBC the glaring error. But no human responded.

Human intervention (ie editing) is becoming oddly unpopular. The *Private Eye* podcast, Page 94, arrives with an automatically generated transcript, obviously unchecked by Lord Gnome's minions. So it's full of laughable references to 'the Let B case' 'the dunbriton book' (*Dumb Britain*), 'T side' for Teesside, and people named Mrs Satcher, Ween and Foote. *Absit omen* for schools.

The Reunion on Radio 4 continues to hold up a candid mirror to British cultural life. One week, the people behind the short-lived cable channel L!ve TV gathered to chortle over its chaotic start, the grinning or weeping 'news bunny' behind the newsreader – and its late-night *pièce de résistance*, Topless Darts.

Kelvin MacKenzie called this 'a bit of fun – it cheered everybody up'. Janet Street-Porter walked out. People asked, 'Can TV sink any lower?' (It could and did.)

The next week, by contrast, *The Reunion* reunited the wonderful team who so powerfully staged Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* in 2007. It lured even the late Queen to the National Theatre and moved every audience to tears. It taught children about history and the reality of war. It celebrated the supernatural skill of puppeteering.

And it confirmed, in every flicker of an equine eyelash, the exquisite nobility of the horse.

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

The word 'wholesome' has been reclaimed by the Gen Z-ers, as those born in the early-21st century are known. It's now applied to activities considered innocuous or harmless good fun.

Sister Boniface Mysteries (BBC1), a spin-off of *Father Brown*, is plugged as a 'cosy mystery period comedy drama detective series', but would be better described as wholesome.

Sister Boniface (Lorna Watson), a moped-riding nun with an IQ of 156 and a PhD in forensic science, lives at the convent of St Vincent's in the Cotswold town of Great Slaughter. The murder rate being what it is, the local constabulary lean heavily on her skills.

The Sister finds herself regularly advising dishy DI Sam Gillespie and Felix Livingstone, who is from Bermuda and ended up in Great Slaughter owing to an administrative error.

We are now in the fourth season. In 'Stiff Competition', the town is abuzz with excitement for the annual talent show. This year (we are somewhere in the mid-1960s), it comes with a £500 prize pot and a celebrity judge in the form of the 'curvy' Jane Beaufort, fiancée of Sir Simon Floyd-Douglas.

'You can have your poxy kids' parties', Terry, aka the Great Faldini, boasts to his rival, Curly Cuddles the clown. 'I'll be out of Great Slaughter for good with this new act.'

Little does Faldini know how true this is. His new act, the Box of Death, is set to win, but things go fatally wrong in the dress rehearsal. This was 'no magical misadventure', Sister Boniface announces, sniffing a piece of burned rope. 'This was murder.'

Sister Boniface (Lorna Watson): IQ of 156

BBC

Everyone hates Faldini – so Boniface has her work cut out. Could Faldini's killer be his former assistant, the mysterious Debra Cadabra, or Sylvie Simmonds, Tina Tiny's pushy mother, or perhaps the two elderly bellringers, the Belles of Great Slaughter? And why does Mr Cuddles not take off his clown make-up when he's interviewed down at the station about his missing hairspray?

More wholesome than a loaf of Hovis and cosier than a hot-water bottle wrapped in a lambswool cover and tucked beneath a 15-tog duvet, *Sister Boniface Mysteries* is best appreciated after *The Jury: Murder Trial*. The Bafta-winning docudrama's second season has just landed on More4.

The Jury re-enacts a real-life murder case in a genuine court. The transcripts of the barristers, witnesses, defendant and judge are performed by actors but the jury – who do not know the verdict from the original trial – are selected from 12 ordinary people. Because it is illegal to observe juries in criminal trials, this 'landmark experiment' allows us to scrutinise how vital decisions are made.

In season one, two separate juries were selected, each unaware of the other, to decide whether the defendant was guilty of murder or manslaughter when he killed his wife with a hammer. Would they reach the same verdict? In other words, can we trust our justice system?

Now, with a gender reversal and only one jury, we have the trial of Sophie, a 23-year-old mother. In April 2024, she stabbed her boyfriend, Liam, with a kitchen knife when he apparently tried to strangle her. Was it murder or self-defence?

Liam had been bleeding on the living-room floor for 25 minutes before Sophie phoned 999 to say he was 'making weird noises' because he had taken some dodgy drugs.

Hard-faced, emotionless and not in the least bit wholesome, Sophie does not invite sympathy and the jury members – like the viewers at home – make up their minds about her guilt or innocence long before hearing all the facts.

'Cold, calculated murder,' says Dave, a former chef, who thinks that justice has 'gone soft'. Dave, aged 69, is one of two jurors who watched their fathers abuse their mothers.

'No one is born evil,' says Aimée, 26, a support worker who thinks that 'most people deserve a second chance'.

One of the legal complaints about the first series was that juries are specifically told not to discuss the case in small groups and to keep an open mind until they have heard the evidence on both sides. But, once again, this jury divides into cliques to share knee-jerk opinions with mouths full of croissants and banana bread. Is this how juries really work, or how reality television works?

Either way, it is harrowing and hypnotic and will delight all those who support the government's plan to reduce jury trials.

Calzabigi's *Orfeo* at the Playhouse: Eurydice falls back to Earth

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

EDINBURGH FESTIVAL

At this year's array of Edinburgh festivals, one image was difficult to forget – a red-frocked acrobat making a spiralling, rope-assisted descent through the clouds to the Earth below.

This was at the start of Opera Queensland's staging of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Ranieri de' Calzabigi's radical reimagining of the Orpheus legend, set to music by Christoph Willibald Gluck in Vienna in 1762.

Not that the production had much to do with Gluck or Calzabigi. One had only to read the brazenly rewritten synopsis in the festival freesheet to realise this was less a staging of the opera, and more a showcase for the tumblers of Circa – Rock n Roll Circus, as it was originally called – and its founder, director-designer Yaron Lifschitz.

With a sell-out circus show in prospect, the festival's cash-strapped management had chosen to stage this in the 3,000-seat Playhouse. A frowsty barn of a place with a deep pit and a poor acoustic, it's no place to revive the original 1762 *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

Grander versions of the opera exist, notably the 1889 Ricordi edition, used in Oscar Fritz Schuh's celebrated 1948 Salzburg Festival production conducted by Karajan. (It was later revived and recorded with the great Giulietta Simionato as Orfeo.) That edition would have worked well in the Playhouse. Was it even considered?

The opera begins where Act 2 of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* ends. Eurydice is dead, entombed in a cypress grove, attended by followers of Orpheus.

Their great choral elegy is interrupted by Orpheus's chilling threefold cry, 'Euridice!' A mere bat's squeak in the Playhouse, it's a cry that should be uttered, Gluck insisted, in the voice of a man who is having his leg sawn off. As the earliest Orfeos were castrati, this probably wasn't too difficult.

The role of Orfeo was written for the revered alto castrato Gaetano Guadagni. Handel had elaborated arias from *Messiah* for him. But Guadagni had been bewitched by David Garrick's art. When the offer of Orfeo arrived, he was thrilled to swap his trade as a vocal show pony for a role in an opera that required the declamatory skills of a Romeo or a Hamlet.

The recent fashion for using counter-tenors in castrato roles can work in small theatres and on record. (Derek Lee Ragin, for example, on the famous 1991 John Eliot Gardiner recording.) Sadly, they lack the penetrative power of the original castrati required by larger auditoria.

I'd love to hear Edinburgh's Orfeo, Iestyn Davies, at Garsington or the Grange – not least because he'd be spared the difficulty and indignity of having to sing balancing barefoot on a scrum of beefy shepherds. Or, indeed, being asked to play Orfeo as a trauma victim confined to a psychiatric unit or being required to daub in blood on the back wall the opera's life-affirming final message, 'Love conquers all.'

There were better things on offer in the London Symphony Orchestra's three-night residency – not least a rare chance to hear live the tantalisingly beautiful Violin Concerto Erich Korngold completed in 1947, after his semi-enforced ten-year residency as a pioneering Hollywood film composer.

And who better to play it than Norwegian violinist Vilde Frang, whose 2016 Warner Classics recording won golden opinions? Not that it, or any other version, can displace the legendary 1953 Heifetz recording, now on Naxos.

Two years ago, I complained about the festival's abandoning printed concert programmes. The Queen's Hall's morning recitals had been spared. But no longer, as I discovered when attending a recital of Schumann and Brahms *Lieder*.

Texts, translations and details of the originating poems are vital for these recitals, however an audience chooses to use them. The festival freesheet simply listed the song titles in German, along with a 150-word introduction that might have come from the pen of Barbara Cartland. English surtitles were provided in the hall itself.

I wasn't too bothered that these were partly obscured by a pillar near my allocated seat. Fearing the worst, I'd packed my trusty 1964 *Penguin Book of Lieder*, which I was happy to take with me to standing room in the gallery.

Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, his great cycle of love and loss based on poems by Heinrich Heine, is generally thought to be a young man's piece. In reality, communication is key, a point thrillingly made by veteran Austrian baritone Florian Boesch and his long-time collaborator, Edinburgh's own homegrown master accompanist Malcolm Martineau.

As for the English surtitles, they were an experience in themselves. Littered with old-school 'thee's and 'thou's, to which the odd 'wee' and 'lassie' was occasionally added, they weren't even accurate.

How '*Es flüstern und sprechen die Blumen*' ended up as 'The *trees* whisper and speak', goodness only knows.

GOLDEN OLDIES

MARK ELLEN

OTWAY'S HIGHWAY

The hardest-working man in showbiz?

It used to be James Brown, and then the ever-touring blues-wrangler B B King, but their reputations are now at risk – from a shambling eccentric from Aylesbury who calls himself 'Rock and Roll's Greatest Failure'.

John Otway at Wychwood Festival, 2010

John Otway has played nearly 5,300 shows in 53 years. This is ridiculous if you think about it. Two gigs a week, every week, for five decades. The quantity of motorway service food he's consumed. The thousands of miles at the wheel of a stuttering van. The sound checks in beer-scented clubs alone could be measured in months.

Work-shy underachievers the Beatles played a mere 1,400 times, and the Stones a half-baked 2,161 to date. Even the indefatigable Bob Dylan has managed only a paltry 4,500. But our beloved and woefully under-celebrated 72-year-old entertainer appears to be unrestrainable: in the deathless title of his second memoir, 'I Did It Otway!'

Nothing he ever does seems remotely conventional.

Developing the chaotic stage presence of a gangling Tommy Cooper with an acoustic guitar and songs about underachievement, he was spotted by a BBC producer who figured he might make explosive TV. This he did, performing the track 'Headbutts', about comedy violence against skinheads, hippies and his own mother, on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, while banging his forehead on the microphone.

And his career took off, in an appearance on *Top of the Pops* where he performed the studiedly gormless 'Cor Baby That's Really Free'. He built a devoted fanbase. In an inspired pre-internet self-marketing stratagem, he marshalled his fans into a tight-knit community involved in his every manoeuvre.

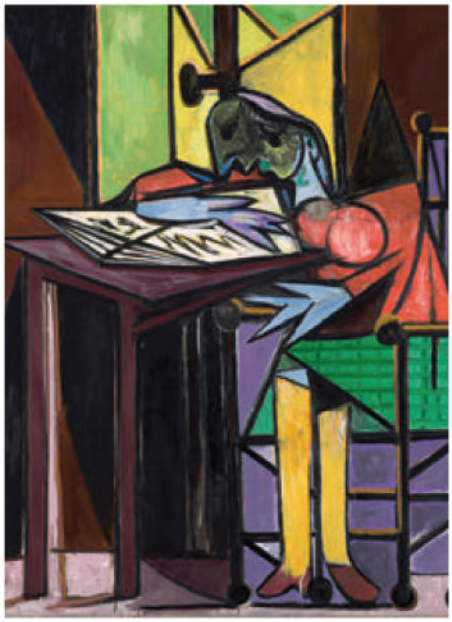
This included his asking his audience to choose which song to release as a single, thereby ensuring they all bought a copy ('Bunsen Burner' was a Top Ten hit). Or inviting *900 fans to Abbey Road* to sing backing vocals on his version of 'The House of the Rising Sun' and giving them all a credit on the sleeve – another automatic sales guarantee.

When he galvanised his besotted army to block vote on a BBC poll to name the nation's most popular song lyric, his unsurprisingly marginal 'Beware of the Flowers ('Cos I'm Sure They're Going to Get You Yeah) came seventh, beating Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell and three above Hoagy Carmichael's 'Stardust'.

In hot pursuit of further publicity, he personally hired the Leicester Square Odeon for the première of *Rock and Roll's Greatest Failure: Otway the Movie*. Its end sequence was filmed on the red carpet outside and dropped into the final edit minutes before the screening.

Perhaps his most courageous scheme was to charter an Airbus A340 and book a world tour, hiring venues around the globe – Carnegie Hall and the Sydney Opera House among them – and assuring an ecstatic reception every night by flying 300 of his fans with him – though tragically he cancelled at the last minute owing to spiralling costs.

He's touring again this autumn, of course. Never stops. And the grand tally keeps rising. Somewhere in that great dance hall in the sky, James Brown must be sweating buckets.



***Left: Portrait of Marie-Thérèse*, 1937**
***Above: Woman Reading*, 1935**

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

PICASSO IN HIS STUDIO

National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 9th October to 22nd February 2026

Picasso changed his studios almost as often as he changed his wives, mistresses and muses. Generally, one change coincided with the other, and quite often with a change of style.

He carried many things with him, including his own paintings, sculptures, drawings, ceramics, prints and engravings, kept for reference and continuing inspiration or for personal reasons.

In accordance with his wishes (and for tax reasons), about 4,000 of these were donated by his family to form the Musée Picasso in Paris, along with his photographic archive, notebooks, and correspondence.

About 1,000 further key works have been bought or donated since then, some coming from his second and last wife, Jacqueline Roque.

The museum is housed in the Hôtel Salé, a handsome *hôtel particulier* in the Marais. It reopened in 2014 after a five-year, over-time and over-budget restoration. Recently I went there for the first time, to get a feel of the Dublin show which has been drawn largely from the collection, and it is well worth visiting.

Picasso (1881-1973) enjoyed a long creative life. The exhibition, like the museum itself, is arranged chronologically, from precocious beginnings in Barcelona through the defining move to France in 1904 and ultimately to the final studio at Mougins from 1961. It concentrates on five of the principal studios.

Two were in Paris: Boisgeloup, from 1930 to 1936; and Rue des Grands Augustins, 1937-48. Then came Vallauris, until 1955; La Californie, at Cannes, till 1961; and Mas Notre Dame de Vie at Mougins, until his death.

I am sad that the Château de Vauvenargues (1955-61), has been left out. He was buried there, and it is still owned by the family, but it was not such a productive period. Once I circumnavigated the Montagne Sainte-Victoire on a VeloSolex moped in the fruitless hope of catching a glimpse of the great man in the grounds of the château.

Although he had a Paris base until 1937, he largely abandoned his first wife, Olga, there, and the Norman manor of Boisgeloup became the setting for his time with Greek-nosed muse Marie-Thérèse Walter. Grands Augustins witnessed Dora Maar and *Guernica*. He also allowed German officers to visit, although he would not speak to them.

Vallauris played host to Françoise Gilot and ceramics. At La Californie, Jacqueline appeared, as did a vast accumulation of work filling the house and garden. At Mougins, Jacqueline still presided, as Picasso embarked on a final creative flowering that produced about 200 paintings in just two years.

***Head of a Woman*, 1953**

MUSÉE NATIONAL PICASSO-PARIS

Pursuits

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

MY POCKET GARDEN

Never mind the width – feel the quality.

I've been occupied by that thought for the past few months while contemplating our move to a house with a garden measured in yards, not acres.

Having had three large – very large – gardens over the past 30 years, I'm now taking lessons from chums with smaller plots to see how best to maximise reduced dimensions. Deprived now of ten acres, we are granted instead the space of a tennis court.

My lifelong passion has been trees and shrubs; I've planted two species-rich arboreta and seen both reach semi-maturity. The loss now of a chance to make a third irks me. But, turning 80 this month…

The answer is a Potted Arboretum – the name of my new passion and the title of a book I've already begun to write.

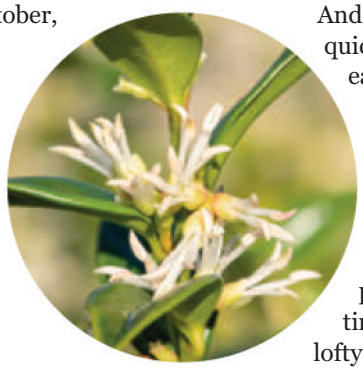
Otherwise known as container gardening, the manner of growing plants in pots has ancient history, with special appeal to today's oldies. There are at the very least three essential considerations for success: good compost, a ready supply of water and the time to fiddle and fuss.

I use a bespoke growing medium formulated by a nurseryman friend who has it made for him by the truckload. I don't know its recipe but, having used it for many years, I can vouch for its fecundity, plant-health-giving properties and, supremely, water-retaining properties.

My benefactor is generous. I'm allowed sackfuls of the stuff, paid for by what I hope he finds equally generous: the frequent deposit on his potting-shed shelf of the bottled malt from north of the border.

I'm working now on my collections of Japanese maples. I have about 40 different varieties, each exhibiting exquisite and distinctive characteristics. In October, they flaunt their finest finery.

Of course, I hear you say, these trees have the potential to grow more than 20 feet tall – see them now in all their splendour at the likes of Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire, Thorp Perrow in Yorkshire and Richmond Park's Isabella Plantation.



Sweet box (sarcococca)

Containerising has a bonsai-ing effect on plants. The restriction of roots similarly restricts above-ground growth. Secateurs are tolerated, allowing for arty shaping and overall size. Being deciduous, the maples in winter are bereft of foliage, further encouraging the need for handsome branch structure.

Larger pots are stood on wheeled trays on a firm surface, which makes easy work of seasonal rearranging.

Maintain a prevailing sense of aesthetically pleasing liveliness during those leafless months by interspersing the maples with evergreens. Winter-flowering viburnums are essential; ditto mahonias, camellias, possibly a tame bamboo, the superbly fragrant daphnes (if you can afford them) and sarcococcas. Ferns, too. Foliar riches are to be found among the hollies, if the prickles can be tolerated. Wispy, long-needled pines will beautifully animate the scene. Clipped box and yew will contrast themselves effectively with free-form shapes.

Where pots are of much the same size, I raise a few on temporary plinths made quickly of bricks, breeze blocks or empty upturned pots. I fiercely avoid brightly coloured glazed pots, preferring the natural appearance of weathered terracotta.

And where these dry out too quickly I use them as *cachepots*, each concealing an inner plastic pot with excellent moisture-retaining qualities.

It's not all leaf and twig. Bulbs are presently plentiful in the shops. Potted up, on standby ready to move into place at flowering time, are tiny snowdrops and crocuses, lofty daffs and a flotilla of fabulous tulips that'll brighten the scene until the end of May.

So, width or quality? Both, say I.

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

CUCUMBERS

Not much has grown successfully in my kitchen garden during the heat and drought of this summer, but in the greenhouse we have had a bumper crop of cucumbers. From three plants, at the time of writing in late August, I have cut ten full-grown cucumbers, each one about eight inches long.

And there are more to come. I know that, in ideal conditions, a cucumber plant may produce ten or more fruit, but we have had quite enough for our needs.

The so-called ridge, or outdoor, cucumbers are said to be easier to grow than greenhouse plants, but I don't think they would have been this year, when it was almost impossible to keep the ground moist.

Grown in pots, with liberal watering and feeding, our cucumbers have thrived in a warm and humid greenhouse, remembering that they are natives

GETTY

of India. We have fortunately avoided infestation from the red spider mite and a virus-carrying aphid, both of which are liable to kill the plants.

One of the great advantages of home-grown cucumbers is that they do not have the tendency to bitterness, or the thick skins, of the bought ones. They are easier to digest and, as the distinguished gardening writer Christopher Lloyd has written, they have an 'amorous' crunch.

The all-female varieties – such as Delistar and Passandra, which I have grown this year – don't need to be pollinated. They have very thin, light green skins which are barely noticeable when the cucumbers are sliced. I have pickled some this year in wine vinegar, onion, sugar, cloves and turmeric.

There are small varieties of 'snack' cucumbers, such as Mini Munch, which should be picked when two or three inches long, and others, called gherkins, which are thought ideal for pickling. However, I am quite happy pickling my longer cucumbers, cut into lengths of about four inches.

When not pickling cucumbers, slicing them to eat with cold salmon, or making sandwiches with crustless bread and a sprinkling of pepper and vinegar, I recommend a cold cucumber soup, with chopped tarragon, sorrel and hard-boiled egg, a strong stock and cream.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

EXPRESS PIZZA

Pizza, the nation's favourite dial-up dinner, isn't the modern incarnation of a venerable tradition that began in the slums of Naples as fast food for the poor.

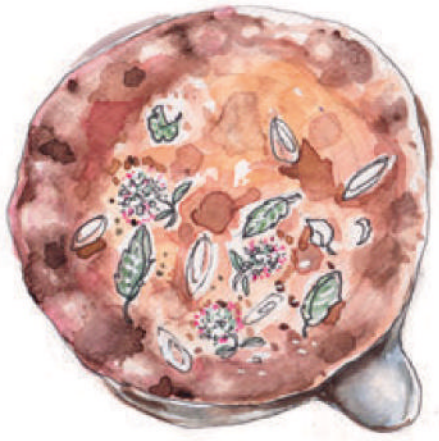
The very reverse, says culinary historian Luca Cesare in his new book, *The History of Pizza*. Pizza as we know it is a late-19th-century invention by southern Italian immigrants in America – the land of hot dogs and hamburgers, with nothing but dough, tinned tomatoes and processed cheese to remind them of home.

The earliest published recipe for Neapolitan pizza – plain, with just salt and olive oil – appeared in 1871, in *Il cuoco sapiente* (*The Wise Chef*).

Two variations were offered: pizza with anchovies, with a scattering of salt-cured fish, cleaned and broken into pieces; and pizza with grated Swiss cheese worked into the dough, baked with more grated cheese.

All three are *bianca*: white pizzas, lacking tomatoes, then not yet in full flood from the New World.

ELISABETH LUARD



Authenticity is not an issue. Pizza is wherever it finds itself, explains Cesare – never a man to shy away from controversy. Authenticity is simply a marketing tool for the benefit of regional tourism – fair point.

'Pizza is a symbol of liberty, its welcoming shape the perfect emblem for inclusion and hybridisation,' he says.

Baked beans on a Yankee Doodle Pizza Pie – why ever not? Frozen beef pizzaburger – whatever floats your boat.

Way back in the 1980s, I remember caviar on a *pizza in bianco* served at Spago in LA to Hollywood royalty.

Rather delicious, actually.

Pizza bianca

Schoolchildren in Rome, observed Carol Field in 1993, have this as their *merenda* – mid-morning snack. The speed with which the dough puffs and blisters tells the baker whether the oven is hot enough to bake bread. Enough for 2-4, depending on appetites.

1 tbsp active dry yeast
250 ml warm water
1 tbsp olive oil
1 level tsp sea salt
About 500g unbleached bread flour
To finish: olive oil, sea salt, oregano, slivered garlic

Stir the yeast into the warm water and wait till it turns creamy – 5-10 minutes. Stir in the olive oil. Toss the salt with the flour and work it with the liquid a handful at a time, till the dough comes together in a soft mass.

Tip it out onto a floured board and knead energetically using a push-pull action with your knuckles and the flat of your hand, till the dough is soft and silky – allow at least ten minutes. Very soothing.

Transfer to a bowl, cover with a damp cloth – or tie loosely in plastic bag – and leave to rise for 1-1½ hours, till doubled in size.

Preheat the oven to 425°F/220°C.

Cut the dough in two equal pieces (or four, if that suits the company), knead each piece into a ball, and leave to rise again for another 20 minutes. Roll each piece into a round, turning the dough frequently so it won't shrink back, the size of a large dinner plate.

Transfer to a lightly oiled preheated pizza stone or baking tray. Dimple the top with your fingers, brush with olive oil, sea salt, garlic and a dusting of oregano. Bake for 20-25 minutes, till gloriously puffed, blistered and crisp.

PS If you're a Hollywood billionaire, let the dough cool a little before spooning on the caviar (charged by the ounce).

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

MY MARILYN MOMENT

Seventy years ago, in the opening sequence of *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), the narrator tells how every August the men of Manhattan Island have always sent their wives and children off to cooler climes, thus granting themselves a pink ticket. And even a liaison with Marilyn Monroe.

Clubland imitates this tradition when clubs such as the Garrick and Beefsteak close for three weeks in August. The rest are obliged to open their doors to the most debauched tribe in the city: the reciprocals. Summon up the entire membership of the Drones Club on day release.

Shameless in their sharp-elbowing past the actual members at the bar while grabbing fistfuls of nuts, the raffish ones boast of the clubs they have already plundered that week, while ungraciously marking each host club down. 'Worst Bloody Mary ever at White's'; 'Nothing but Scotch eggs at Pratt's'.

Actual members are appalled when they recognise a reciprocal.

'Didn't know you were a Boodle's man, Jerry.'

'I'm not, Eddie,' they joyfully bellow back. 'I'm a RECIPROCAL' – demolishing the five years of sucking-up poor Eddie underwent to gain his membership.

This year, I joined the throng and revelled in my access-all-areas entrée into London's most beautiful palaces.

I kicked off on 31st July at White's, with my son. I was assured

Seventy years on: *The Seven Year Itch* (1955)

the meat would be grey but was thrilled with skate terrine and roast duck. And where in London but in Clubland can you buy a 2009 Saint-Estèphe for £39?

I then disappeared abroad for a week, where I planned four back-to-back invasions. I started on the Thursday, with lunch on the terrace of the Savile with the *Oldie* ad-sales team.

It was a hot day, so we retreated from the self-elected Club Eccentric – every club has ten, working in daily rotation – to the gloriously rococo dining room, where we sat next to a display cabinet of donations, including Emeric Pressburger's Oscar.

That very evening, I took the Editor to James Bond's own club – Boodle's, where we met 14 Garrickers on the smoking terrace, all gabbling with anticipation of that evening's club crawl: more drinks at White's, curry at the Oriental, nightcap at the Travellers. We were joined by our two dates, one of whom had lobster cocktail followed by lobster thermidor. The rest is a blur of fabulous portraits.

The next day, I fell into Buck's with my publishing-guru friend Kerin, whose wife was in Bermuda. What a pretty club, with portraits of Edward VIII and George VI, who were both members.

Bertie the charming young sommelier helped us choose a Meursault and a 2000 Margaux before we escaped with a half-bottle of 2003 Suduiraut to the cigar terrace (the 'Buck Flair'), named anagrammatically in honour of Tony Blair after the 1997 Countryside March.

With its fantasy railway-station hall and pillars, the Reform comes first in the Aesthetics Handicap (and great value at £30 for three courses), but last in the Joie de Vivre stakes. Next door is the drab Travellers – they share a garden with the Athenaeum and the Reform – where other members repelled us from the basement bar because my guest was a lady – even less welcome than a reciprocal.

I'm undone – a stone heavier but as happy as Tom Ewell when lovely Marilyn in her white dress stood over the subway grate.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

LYON KINGS

Lyon may be France's 'third city' by population, but it has a decent claim to be the best city for food and wine – not just in France, but on the planet.

This reputation is founded on the grand tradition of the *mères de Lyon*, stretching back to the late-18th century, and the great chefs – Paul Bocuse and Fernand Point among them – who established the city's place at gastronomy's top table. As for wine, even Lyon's bistros – the famous *bouchons* – take their name from the French word for a cork.

Lyon's happy affinity with the grape is largely due to its location on the banks of the Rhône and its tributary, the Saône. About 100 miles to the north are the great vineyards of Burgundy's Côte d'Or, while the *cru* villages dotted around the hills of Beaujolais are much closer, south of Mâcon.

Sixty miles south of the city is the famous hill of Hermitage, the spiritual home of the world's best (and priciest) Syrah wines; further south are the vineyards of the southern Rhône – Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, Vacqueyras and a lot of Côtes-du-Rhône – and, eventually, the Camargue and the Mediterranean. Lyon's position in the middle of all this viticulture made it a perfect hub for buying and selling wine.

As major conduits, the rivers were supplanted first by railways and then by roads, but the city's love of wine remains undiminished. And, in the southern Rhône in particular, the river's effect on both *terroir* and climate are still vital.

The winemakers of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, for example, are grateful for the big white pebbles (*galets*) that the Rhône dumped in their vineyards (they act as storage heaters at night, helping to ripen the grapes). And the mistral, the northerly wind, whips through the valley, keeping the vines free of pests and diseases – although its depressive effect on human beings is less welcome.

While those in search of Michelin stars and grand old bottles of red are spoilt for choice, the quintessential Lyon experience is to be found among the red check tablecloths of a bouchon (lesbouchonslyonnais.org lists 23 of the most traditional). A slab of *pâté en croûte*, perhaps, studded with foie gras and pistachios, or *quenelle de brochet, sauce Nantua*, an ethereally light, soufflé dumpling of pike with a crayfish sauce.

And to drink? *Le pot lyonnais* is de rigueur in a bouchon. Its curious size, 46cl, apparently dates back to the time when the city's *canuts*, silk workers, were allowed a daily 50cl ration of wine as part of their often meagre wages. The *pot*'s thick glass base evolved as a way for a bouchon's proprietor to defraud the poor old *canuts* of their final slurp.

The *canuts* are long gone, but the *pot lyonnais* remains. Filled, as it often is, with a fruity Morgon, Brouilly or Côtes-du-Rhône Villages, it is an eminently drinkable reminder of the history of Lyon, and the rivers that made its fortune.

SPORT

JIM WHITE

FOOTBALL THERAPY

For any residents of the Gloucestershire town Nailsworth who are feeling a little down in the dumps there is, this football season, new hope.

Under a pilot scheme, a dozen GPs in the area are now able to offer an innovative treatment for any of their patients suffering from bouts of depression, anxiety or stress. Following an agreement between the regional NHS and the local non-league club Forest Green Rovers, residents can now cheer themselves up by heading to the game with a medical prescription in their hand entitling them to a free ticket.

'I've had periods of my life where I've been a bit fed up and excluded,' Dale Vince, the renewable-energy magnate who owns Rovers, explained when the scheme was announced. 'It's easy to spiral downwards when you're not in contact with people and I just wanted to do something with that.'

The idea is that those with mild mental-health issues will be able to socialise, mix with others, break the habit of isolation and enjoy themselves in a communal setting.

It's an intriguing initiative. Health professionals have long been encouraging patients to engage with sport, aware of how running, swimming, tennis and even walking can help alleviate so many physical issues. But this is the first acknowledgment that simply attending a sports event might actually have mental-health benefits. Mixing with others, reducing isolation and feeling part of a wider community: you can see why it could work.

The fact is that nothing engages you in quite the same way as attending a live sporting event. It isn't just that nothing is scripted; that the narrative can turn in any direction at any moment, challenging all assumptions. It is that live sport encourages the viewer to get involved vocally. Emotions can be expressed; nothing need be held back.

I have long thought that football in particular offers a unique opportunity for a form of mental relief – shout therapy. Football offers the opportunity to vocalise your anger, frustration, annoyance and delight – all without restraint. You hear it at every game: not just the roar of excitement when a goal is scored, but the collective fury when a refereeing decision goes against the home club.

The other day, I was at Fulham's Craven Cottage ground when Manchester United, the visiting team, were awarded a free kick after a foul on their captain, Bruno Fernandes. All around, people were up out of their seats, yelling their displeasure – a ferocious wave of noise. One spectator shouted, 'You can't give him a foul – he looks like a rat.'

I looked round at the shouter – someone who, in any other walk of life, would be a model of polite restraint. This was no yobbo. This was a man of advancing middle age in a smart polo shirt. As he resumed his seat, a look of satisfaction spread across his face; a vision of delight at getting something off his chest.

It was the kind of cathartic roar that wouldn't happen anywhere else. Imagine if he had done that in the supermarket, complaining about Sainsbury's sourdough. Or if, in the theatre, he had taken exception to a line in a play and yelled his dissatisfaction.

Only at the football could he unleash his inner self like that. It made me think, seeing him so evidently cheered up by his own heckle, that the good people at Forest Green Rovers might be on to something.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

ON THE ELECTRIC FENCE

There are about 36.16 million passenger cars on our roads, of which about 1.3 million are electric.

The latter are increasing but nothing like as fast as the government wants. Hence the recent announcement of subsidies (for some).

Common reasons for delaying going electric are cost (EVs – electric vehicles – cost more to make and insure than their combustion equivalents), an inadequate charging infrastructure, time taken to recharge, rapid depreciation and the high cost of replacing batteries.

AI reckons these average £7,235.07. Most manufacturers guarantee new ones for 100,000 miles or eight years, but the average car on UK roads is nine and a half years old, and half are over ten.

However, if battery replacement is your main anxiety, a recent survey of battery life conducted by *Autocar* offers significant reassurance. *Autocar* acquired a 2021 176,000-mile Tesla Model 3 Long Range AWD and took it to used-EV specialists EV Experts in Hampshire for testing.

A hard-used former Uber taxi, it had been well cared-for but 45 per cent of its charging cycles were on rapid chargers, known to hasten battery degradation. Despite this, its 75kWh battery still retained 90 per cent of its battery life. Testers were also able to confirm that it was still capable of its original 249-mile combined real-world range.

Given that mainstream production EVs have been on our roads for about 14 years, this means that some of those early high-mileage, now-cheap Nissan Leafs and Renault Zoes, still running on their original batteries, remain a practical proposition for local journeys.

Mileage is apparently less a factor in degradation than age – so we needn't avoid high-milers. Nor should age worry us too much: modern batteries lose about 1.8 per cent of capacity a year, and earlier ones about 2.3 per cent; though both degrade more rapidly below 70 per cent.

Despite the Tesla example, if a car has been subjected to only AC charging rather than DC rapid-charging, its battery is likely to last longer. A recent academic study, based on MOT data, suggested that the average lifespan of an EV is 18½ years and 124,000 miles, slightly exceeding the 17 years and 123,000 miles for combustion vehicles.

These beguiling figures are subject to revision over time, of course, especially the longevity ones. I'm the opposite of a statistician, but given the overwhelmingly greater number of combustion vehicles compared with EVs and the fact that the number of EVs on our roads 18 years ago must have been tiny, it's possible they're not comparing like with like. So a teaspoon of salt might be advisable.

That said, *Autocar*'s research into battery life is nonetheless reassuring. Unless you're buying new, it looks as if the best-value EVs would be late-ish high-milers.

A glance at motors.co.uk, the dealers' website, yielded a standard 2019 Tesla 3 with 89,000 miles and battery range of 254 miles for £12,950. Alternatively, for £50 more, there's a 2024 Leaf with only 10,000 miles and 168-mile battery range. But check insurance costs: those Teslas are groups 48 or 50 (the highest there is), the Leafs around 21-24.

It's not enough to tempt me – yet. A recent 426-mile tour in our 15-year-old diesel Volvo – with no charging points at either of the hotels or the friend's house where we stayed – was completed on less than one tank with no range anxiety. And it took just five minutes to refill when we got home.

For local journeys, a nice new EV would do nicely – but it would take many thousands of miles for the additional environmental costs of building and running it to come down to those incurred by chugging on with the old oil-burner.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Matthew Webster: Digital Life

Last edition of the phone book

We pass another small milestone in the digitalisation of our world this month: the printed phone book is no more.

Published continually since 1880, it will have been a feature of your childhood, but BT won't supply it from October. From then on, it's Directory Enquiries (118 500) or nothing. BT say this is to 'streamline' their operation.

Thus the creeping subjugation of our lives by digital intruders continues. It is seeing the gradual eradication of telephone boxes, cheque books, maps, printed train timetables, paper tickets, library reference sections, TV aerials and coin-operated parking meters.

All gone, or nearly gone, often in the name of streamlining.

Mind you, as the current telephone book includes no mobile numbers, its best use is probably either as a doorstop or for swatting flies. But its demise marks a little moment of some social importance demonstrating a shift in our attitudes.

Once upon a time, we were all 'in the book' unless we were very grand or famous and were 'ex-directory', which to me always sounded hubristic.

Generally, we were not nervous that our addresses and telephone numbers were freely available. I have a 2009 edition of *Who's Who*, in which the listing of such information seems to be normal, even for public figures.

To my surprise, I saw that my father's entry, a man who guarded his privacy very carefully indeed, included his home telephone number and address for all to see and use. I suppose that in those days we assumed that only the right sort of people would use the information, especially if it were from *Who's Who*.

But nowadays, as we fret about data protection and security, this attitude seems odd. I bet most *Oldie*-readers would tick a box to avoid their phone number's being publicised anywhere without a second thought. And yet, in the 1970s, they would have been happy to be 'in the book'.

But this desire for privacy is turned on its head with the likes of Facebook and the rest, where the whole point seems to be to reach as many people as possible. It's a curious contrast.

I was caught by this the other day. I wanted to write to a recently widowed friend, but we had not been in touch for a few years, and she might well have moved. In the old days, I would have looked her up in the phone book.

So where are the legitimate sources of such information nowadays? There aren't many. You might think of the Electoral Roll – it's a public document, isn't it? Well, yes and no.

First phone book. Connecticut, 1878

The Open Register contains the details only of those who have not opted to hide their information from general view, and if you want to see it, you have to go to a library or the council offices. It is online, but only through private companies; one of the best-known is 192.com. They supply it at a hefty price: over £3 per search, unless you pay for 100 searches or more, when the price drops to 66p – which is still plenty.

Look yourself up on it. It feels strangely intrusive: phone numbers, electoral roll, full names and addresses, length of residency, other household occupants and more. There's nothing dubious about this. It's all on the public record, yet seeing it all set out is a little disturbing.

There are many other similar companies, no doubt working from the same sources of information but, as ever with such online services, tread carefully; *caveat emptor* is very much the best advice.

So, as is so often the case, BT's 'streamlining' means that the information is harder to find and what is there costs you more. *Plus ça change*.

Webwatch

For my latest tips and free newsletter, go to www.askwebster.co.uk

rmg.co.uk/stories/time/what-when-autumnal-equinox
The autumnal equinox explained by the Royal Observatory, Greenwich.

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Neil Collins: Money Matters

Centrica goes nuclear

Chris O'Shea does not look like your average FTSE 100 chief executive. He sports a magnificent full moustache and beard, both of which seem on the verge of getting out of control. He is the boss of Centrica.

If you never got round to selling your shares in British Gas (remember 'Tell Sid'?), you are a Centrica shareholder.

Incidentally, your benign neglect has not made you rich. Centrica shares are about the same price today as they were 25 years ago. Still, never mind. Mr O'Shea is doing his best to change that.

The main business is the workaday one of providing your gas (confusingly, Centrica owns today's British Gas), but he is betting on nuclear power for the long term.

British nuclear power is a true triumph of hope over experience. As far

back as we oldies can remember, it was going to produce abundant, cheap electricity, with the added bonus of producing zero emissions. Instead, it has been a familiar story of cost overruns, delays and embarrassment.

The latest version, Hinkley Point, which effectively bankrupted its French backers, is miles over budget and still a long way from producing any juice.

Mr O'Shea is undeterred. Centrica has taken a stake in Sizewell, the next UK nuclear power station. It is only 15 per cent, but even that entails considerable long-term risk to his business. Did he think lessons had been learned from Hinkley Point? After all, the idea is that once the first modern reactor had been built at eye-watering cost, the price of subsequent stations would come rattling down.

Er, no, as Mr O'Shea did not quite say. In fact, the price to build Sizewell looks almost as high as that of Hinkley Point. The difference is in how it is financed.

While Hinkley's owners will not see a penny back until the plant starts generating, at Sizewell we captive consumers will fund construction as it goes along.

The official projected cost of £38 billion already looks too low. Most of the money will effectively come from the state, while Centrica claims 'robust protections against building delays and cost overruns' up to £40.5 billion, with further limited protection up to £47.7 billion.

Official financial modelling seen by the *FT* says a realistic price is £65-80 billion.

Almost everyone agrees that nuclear power is a good thing (but not in my back yard, thanks). But it suffers grievously from the new British disease of endless process, followed by health-and-safety fascism.

Perhaps the bristly Mr O'Shea can help break this baleful trend, and make something for long-suffering Centrica shareholders, but the omens are not good.

Neil Collins was City Editor of the Daily Telegraph

'When did you first get the feeling that someone was trying to kill you?'

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BIRD OF THE MONTH

Pochard

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

Autumn brings the winter migrants from the north. Most of them are ducks and geese, among them the diving duck pochard (*Aythya ferina*).

Pronounced variously 'potchard', 'poachard' or 'pockard' (*OED*), the name is possibly derived from Old French *pocher* 'to poke'. That refers to its poking about underwater to feed.

Reedy but open fresh waters are its habitat, providing nest cover. It consumes much more vegetable than animal matter, which makes it the tastiest of diving ducks. In rustic times, it was netted for the table in considerable numbers.

As with all UK ducks, its resident numbers are dwarfed by the winter migration from Europe and beyond, as birds seek the protection of warmer winters when the north freezes over.

Resident mallard (145,000 breeding pairs) compare with a winter migration of 675,000 individuals. Numbers of UK resident pochard (720 pairs) and winter individuals (29,000) pale in comparison, even with its cousin the tufted (19,000 pairs and 140,000 winter individuals).

The pochard has an extensive geographical range, but in some European countries is showing up to 50-per-cent declines. These are due to loss of habitat, the introduction of non-native predators (not least mink) and greater competition from other birds such as gulls.

In both the pochard and the tufted, ground-nesting species, the drakes are notably handsome. The camouflaged brown ducks are correspondingly drab. This is especially true of the chunkier, flatter-spread pochard. The drake's head is the same chestnut as the drake wigeon's.

That has given pochards local names such as 'red-headed wigeon' (North), 'wigeon diver' (Cork). By contrast, the female is 'dun duck' (Essex, Dumfries). Both genders have ruby-red eyes.

Pochard, like wigeon, are gregarious and both species can form large flocks. This makes the pochard's UK decline all the more dramatic, as illustrated by the Online Scottish Bird Report.

The bird first bred in the Lothians in 1926 at Duddingston Loch, Edinburgh. Duddingston was the setting for Scotland's most emblematic painting, *The Skating Minister* (1784) by Sir Henry Raeburn. By the 1960s, there were 15 resident pairs. From 1960 to 1978, unprecedented numbers of wintering birds arrived, thanks to their being able to feed at night on grain and vegetable matter discharged into the Firth of Forth from a temporary sewage outflow.

By day, they rested on Duddingston, reaching a record 8,600 flock for mainland Britain in November 1974. It was all the more spectacular because drakes dominate such gatherings; the more delicate and dun females migrate further south. A new treatment plant in 1978 prevented the nutritious outflow and the wintering flock looked elsewhere.

Residents also decreased – by 2020, Duddingston was pochard-less. Today the largest UK wintering flocks are on Lough Neagh and Lough Beg in Ulster, but both are in decline.

Most urban lakes have feeding-friendly pochard and tufted. Children's first bird interest is often the relentless pursuit of scurrying urban pigeons – but, even once boys prefer kicking footballs and girls find satisfaction gently stroking Jellycats, they can be diverted by the sight of pochard or tufted, swimming underwater like fish.

Last chance saloon

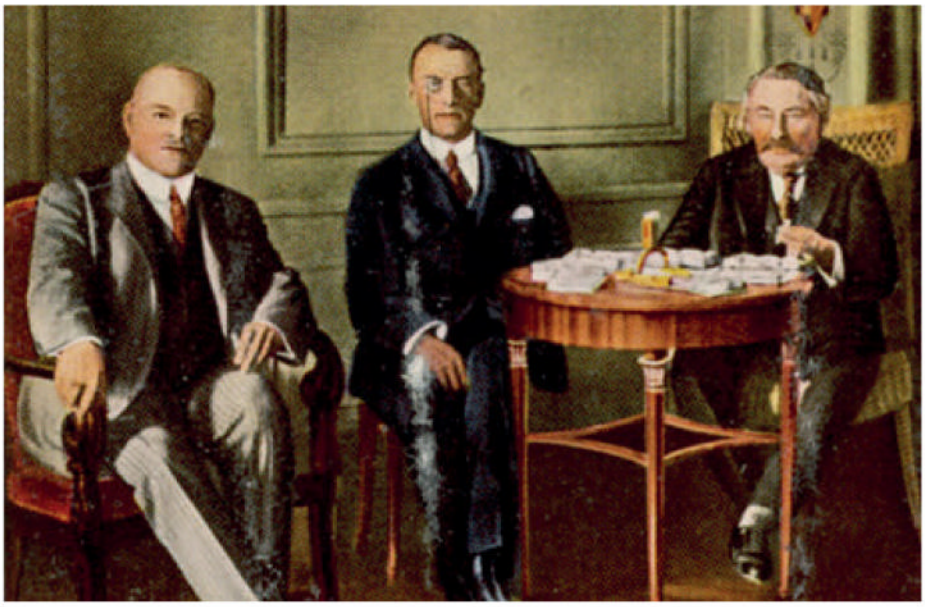
A century ago, the Locarno Pact was *meant* to stop the Second World War. *William Cook* visits the charming Swiss town

Sitting outside the Hotel Elvezia, on the sunny Swiss shore of Lago Maggiore, I think back to the two men who met beneath this pergola 100 years ago, to try and put an end to war.

It was October 1925 and Europe's leading politicians had come to this languid lakeside resort to thrash out a string of seven treaties, now known as the Locarno Pact. There were numerous issues up for discussion, but the main aim of this diplomatic chinwag was to bring a disgraced, defeated Germany back into the family of European nations.

Seven years after the end of the First World War, there was a growing feeling among the victorious Allies that the terms they'd imposed were too severe.

A chaotic, bankrupt Germany would be no use to anyone (apart from an Austrian rabble-rouser called Adolf Hitler). The purpose of Locarno was to forge a secure and lasting peace.



Doomed: Gustav Stresemann, German Foreign Minister; Austen Chamberlain, UK Foreign Secretary; Aristide Briand, French Prime Minister. Locarno, 1925

The official meetings took place a few miles from here, from 5th to 16th October, at the Palazzo del Pretorio, Locarno's courthouse.

Yet it's around the fringes of a conference that politicians often make most headway. And so, on 7th October, German Chancellor Hans Luther came to this quaint hotel, in the quiet fishing village of Ascona, to meet the French Foreign Minister, Aristide Briand.

That informal meeting made all the difference. After the enmity of Versailles, Locarno marked a return to normal, cordial relations. Germany agreed to recognise its new western borders, principally with the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France.

Its more contentious loss of territory in the east (primarily to Poland) remained unresolved, but Germany promised to resolve such matters peacefully. For the first time since 1914, Europeans could sleep easy in their beds.

Britain had lobbied for a more conciliatory approach to Germany. So, for British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, this conference was a discreet triumph. Franco-German relations were bolstered, and the other four attendees – Italy, Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia – all retained their territorial gains. After Locarno, Europe now looked set for a generation of peace.

Donald Trump would be jealous.

Three delegates (*pictured*) won the Nobel Peace Prize: Gustav Stresemann, German Foreign Minister; Austen Chamberlain, UK Foreign Secretary; and Aristide Briand, French Prime Minister. Less encouragingly, delegates included one Benito Mussolini, the Italian PM.

So what went wrong? The Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression didn't help. Hailed as a breakthrough then, the Locarno Pact is now seen as a heroic failure – a false dawn before Hitler's rise.

And yet, wandering round this attractive antique port, full of well-fed Swiss and German tourists, you could be forgiven for thinking the Second World War had never happened.

Locarno sits at the northern end of Lago Maggiore, one of Italy's largest and loveliest lakes, but the town and its leafy hinterland are part of Switzerland – the border runs a few miles south of here, right through the lake. Hence, while all seven signatories of the Locarno Pact were plunged into the carnage of the Second World War, Locarno escaped unscathed.

Swiss neutrality saved this Italian-speaking enclave from the vicissitudes that befell neighbouring Italia. Eighty years after the end of that bloody conflict, Switzerland's Italian-speaking canton, Ticino, still enjoys the best of both worlds.

The language, food and architecture are Italian, but the place runs with Swiss precision. Everything is spick and span. And, yes, the trains (nearly always) run on time. It's more expensive than Italy – expect to pay around 20 per cent more for everything, but that buys you better service. And if you're a history buff, tracing the legacy of the Locarno Pact is a great way to explore the town.

The best way to see the main landmarks is by following a walking tour called the Percorso della Pace (Path of Peace). There's an exhibition about the Pact in the Castello Visconteo, Locarno's spooky medieval castle – but the setting feels funereal, and the display is rather dry and dusty.

A more evocative memento is the Vento di Pace (Wind of Peace), an alfresco array of vintage photographs on the promenade that flanks the waterfront. The adjoining Parco della Pace (Park of Peace) is a wonderful place to unwind – and the loos are spotless.

I must say it felt richly ironic to tour these 'peaceful' sites, when the truce they commemorate foreshadowed the most murderous war the world has ever seen.

Oh well, I suppose the Swiss mean well by it – and though these centennial memorials seem terribly melancholy, given what happened so soon after, they shine a light on a fascinating event that's now more or less forgotten.

Gathering storm: Mussolini (*circled*) at Palazzo del Pretorio

Whether or not you share my gloomy preoccupation with geopolitical what-ifs, there's lots of other stuff to see and do here. The two highlights of my trip had nothing whatsoever to do with this historic conference.

On the morning of my second day, I took the mountain train up to Camedo, a hilltop hamlet on the border, where I ate ragu and gnocchi in the lush garden of a sleepy inn called Osteria Grütli. In the afternoon, I took a ferry to the 'floating gardens' of Isole di Brissago (*pictured*). The larger of these two islands is a little Eden, bursting with subtropical flora.

Brissago Islands, Lake Maggiore

Even as a regular visitor, I shuddered at the prices. Most of the blame goes to the superhuman strength of the Swiss franc. When I first came here, in 1984, the exchange rate was three francs to one pound – now it's nearing parity.

So why do I keep coming back? Because it's so beautiful, clean and safe, and because the brilliant Swiss public-transport network means you can be much more intrepid here than you'd dare in more 'edgy' destinations. Shuttling between Locarno and Ascona by bus, I saw more here in 48 hours than I'd see elsewhere in a week.

Sure, it's not cheap – but there are ways to soften the blow. The room rate at any hotel includes free public transport within the city limits, and a three-star hotel here is more like a four-star in most other countries. Go half-board and you'll save a packet.

Flights to Zurich with Swiss start at £76, and the onward train journey from the airport (about two and a half hours) costs just £33. If you plan to do a lot of travelling, a Swiss Travel Pass gives you carte blanche on trains, buses, trams and ferries throughout the country from £49 per day.

On my (punctual) train journey back to Zurich, I mused on the significance of the Locarno Pact, stirred by talk of a Ukraine-Russia peace deal at the White House.

The question Locarno's centenary commemorations ask – yet fail to answer – is: could the Second World War have been avoided?

Did this conference show the way forward, or did it lull the Allies into a false sense of security? It's one of history's great imponderables, an interminable riddle with no solution.

That's why this poignant centenary is so intriguing. Like the missed opportunities in our own lives, it's a glimpse of a road not taken – a tantalising what-might-have-been.

Doubles at the Hotel Elvezia (www.hotelelvezia-ascona.ch) from £150, including breakfast. For more information about Locarno (and Ascona), visit www.switzerland.com

ALAMY; GETTY

Right as rain

For nearly 200 years, the world's loveliest umbrella shop has kept Londoners dry

LUCINDA LAMBTON

James Smith & Sons has been beaming down on New Oxford Street for as long as I can remember.

It is the most distinguished old firm for umbrellas, with as many old-fashioned qualities as you could ever wish to find, yet still going roaringly strong.

Driving past its façade, if you stretch your neck for even the merest glimpse of its shop front, you get the purest pleasure. It was established in 1830, which to this day it still proudly acknowledges. You glow with delight at this superbly glass-lettered front and interior. Massive and quite wonderfully distinguished, it brings you screeching to a halt at even the sight of its extraordinarily high quality.

In you go, wondering at its most marvellous entrance, with fancy Gothic flourishes of stained glass, with the words 'Hazelwood House' leading you on.

James Smith & Sons umbrella shop, established 1830

The Gothic lettering writhes forth: 'Gentlemen's Umbrellas, Fox Frames, Gold and Silver Mounts', to name but a few of the many excitements on sale.

There is the finest luxury-umbrella selection – a successful 'niche market' – that is as grand as can be. Then there are 'Ladies' Umbrellas, Tropical Sunshades and Golf Umbrellas'.

There are also canes in abundance, as well as walking sticks and 'Umbrellas Recovered, Renovated and Repaired'.

Also on offer are 'Sticks Repolished, Riding Crops, Irish Blackthorn and Malacca Canes'. All in the finest wood, they make you shiver with sheer delight at their wildly old-fashioned character.

The word 'STICKS' soars above 'JAS SMITH AND SONS UMBRELLAS' (so strange that there should be this modern shortening of 'James' high up on the façade), all in brilliant red on white. Hurrah for such excitingly odd beauty suddenly come upon in the midst of London.

Mr Smith started, 195 years ago, in Foubert's Place, just off Regent Street. His umbrellas were made at the back of his shop and sold to customers at the front.

In 1851, a Samuel Fox invented the lightweight steel frame for the umbrella and they were up and running!

ALAMY

There are jester umbrellas, ducks, rats … and suddenly Marie Antoinette!

Left: **Aladdin's umbrella cave**
Below: **cane handles**

James Smith was one of the first to use this new invention. His business grew to such a pitch of success that, in 1857, he moved it to a superior establishment at 53 New Oxford Street, where it has remained unchanged to this day.

Extraordinary as it is to say, it really does remain unaltered as a perfect example of a Victorian shop design.

From the moment you enter the door, you are trapped in another world, wrapped all round by 19th-century mahogany walls and smothered with the finest variety of walking sticks, barometers, staves, clocks and all manner of wondrously odd walking sticks of every description.

Dwell on these lines: 'Nickel Crutch on Lacquered Beech' or 'Horse Hoof' on 'Ebony with Silver Collar'. There is 'Horn Crutch on Ebony with Silver Collar', 'The Shaftesbury Slim', 'the Whangee Cane Fit-Up' and 'The Holborn Slim'.

Try the 'Grey Floral Petite Folding Derby' and the 'Green Floral Petite Folding Walking Stick'. Then there is the 'Art Nouveau Nickel Derby' or the 'Autumn Gold Floral Petite Folding Walking Stick'. What too, about skulls by way of umbrella handles? Or choose between dozens of Egyptian figures great and small.

Then there is a Beethoven umbrella, looking proud – side by side, if you please, with terrier umbrellas, greyhounds and a mass of other dogs of every breed, all of them jammed together in a most pleasing way. There are also jester umbrellas, as well as ducks, rats … and suddenly there is Marie Antoinette!

What about the 'Pencil Umbrella with Owl Handle', the swan handles and the spaniel designs? What too about the 'sun umbrellas' – and not forgetting the 'folding umbrellas' and the 'solid umbrellas'?

Why, oh why, does this quite beautiful old shop have to be such a rare survivor in the modern world that we live in? It still continues to be run as a family business, making umbrellas in the basement with traditional techniques and materials. It bounced back from a temporary closure in 2020, during the Covid crisis.

Stop for a moment to consider its close proximity to the towering Centre Point, as well as the vast, new Tottenham Court Road Underground Station. They both give an extra sense of wonder and disbelief to this extraordinary survival.

Unsurprisingly, the shop has now become a tourist attraction, celebrated for its unique charm and most magical visual appeal. It's a place for the curious, and for those who delight that such a shop can, remarkably, be found bang in the middle of London.

It is most marvellously reassuring that it survives in this way. How pleasing to think that Lord Curzon, that most superior person and Viceroy of India, was a famed customer in its heyday, as was Bonar Law, Prime Minister from 1922 to 1923.

Wonderful! We must joyfully relish every aspect of this wonder and delight in every aspect of its remarkable variety.

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My burning love of *The Oldie*

Harriet Walter tells *Louise Flind* about her uncle Christopher Lee, *Succession* – and the warming properties of this magazine

Did you grow up in a theatrical household?
It was a house full of books and music. There's a musical and dance strain that comes from my mother – the same side as my uncle [Christopher Lee]; theatrical riff-raff.

Did you act as a child?
I was pretty shy. When they said, 'Do you want to be in the school play?' I'd say, 'No, thank you.' But at home my sister and I would make up plays, and we had an acting club in our garden shed.

Did you always want to become an actress?
I went to see lots of Hayley Mills movies and thought the camera watches her all the time and that's what I wanted.

Did you also want to be a writer?
Until my twenties, I wrote very secretly because I found it a really interesting exercise to condense experience into quite minimalist words.

You've just written *She Speaks! What Shakespeare's Women Might Have Said*. And you've just played Jaques in *As You Like It*, directed by Ralph Fiennes. What sparked your love for Shakespeare?
The challenges knitted into the language.

What is your favourite Shakespeare role?
Viola in *Twelfth Night* or Beatrice in *Much Ado* because they're funny, and have real sensitivity. I also like the difficult people.

Where did you draw your chilliness from?
It's a totally external judgement because I don't feel it and I don't aim at it. I always feel a beating heart inside whomever I'm playing.

What was Christopher Lee like?
I found him like a lot of men of that period – constrained by what was expected of a man of his class. He came to see me in a Shakespeare play and expressed sadness that he'd not had that kind of career.

Was there pressure on you to become an actress as a young woman?
What was great was that nobody really expected a young woman to do anything.

Who inspired chilly Lady Caroline in *Succession*?
She's a mixture of about three different people.

Do you prefer the stage to TV and films?
I like both. I love a challenge so I try to do things differently from what I did last time. Films and TV are always different, because no two set-ups are the same. With theatre, there's a certain pattern to the work that you can anticipate.

What's the least exotic set you've acted on?
Law and Order: UK, in this disused Ministry of Defence building with weeds growing up in the flagstones. It was freezing cold and very dispiriting.

Where was *Killing Eve* filmed?
Near Bucharest in the Romanian countryside, Barcelona, near London … you didn't quite know where you'd be tomorrow – quite fun.

Do you prefer acting to writing?
At the moment, I really want to sit down and write, and acting is getting in the way [she laughs]. But if I could organise my time, I love doing both.

Why did you become a feminist?
That's almost like asking, 'Why does a fish swim?'

Are you a traveller?
I'm changed by going to other places – a bit like being an actor. It opens your brain up; you see different sights, smells and light.

Is there anything you can't leave home without?
A hot-water bottle. I'm a terribly cold person so need one even in hot countries.

What are your earliest childhood holiday memories?
Kent by the sea, Cornwall, buckets and spades, starfish, rock pools and freezing bathing suits, with that material that was slightly bubbly, and you'd sit there shivering and eating a sandwich. From seven onwards, we always went to Spain and Corsica.

Where did you go on your 2011 honeymoon with your husband, actor Guy Paul?
We got married in Minnesota, my husband's state, in Minneapolis. We had an after-wedding thing there, then went to LA with our greatest friends, and then to Palm Springs.

What's your biggest headache when you're travelling?
Bureaucracy, airports and queues. I love trains.

What's the strangest place you've ever slept?
I slept on a shelf in India. As a student, in a hotel lounge under the big, main carpet. On the border of Swaziland and South Africa, we burnt – sorry – *Oldie* magazines to keep warm.

She Speaks! What Shakespeare's Women Might Have Said by Harriet Walter is now out in paperback

GETTY

Genius crossword 457

EL SERENO

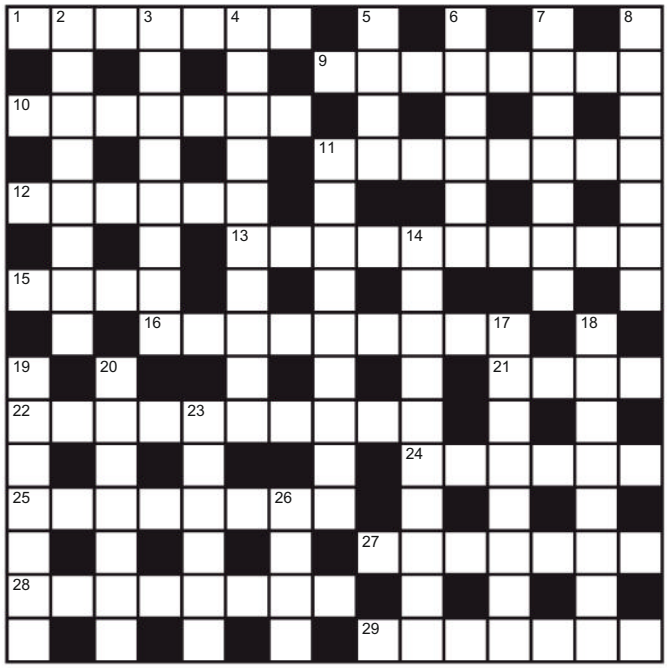
*Clues marked * have something that links them. This is the answer to 12 Across, which you should write in.*

Across

1 PM has gone mad – about to resign (7)
9 Height of talent with student in place of power (8)
10 Arrogance seen in Tory constituency, reportedly (7)
11 Son in failing action on women's panel (8)
12 See preamble (6)
13 Strangely about right with a stern-faced singer (10)
15 Place of army officer after evicting tenant (4)
16 Almost finish novel, then complete block (9)
21 There's no value initially in rough fit (4)
22 New local inn introducing Geordie dish (10)
24 Noise coming from queen interrupting marine mammal (6)
25 *Station on live line (8)
27 Searched around area, tormented (7)
28 Rebound from company acquired by wealthy alien(8)
29 Giant insect covering a couple of metres (7)

Down

2 Country eggs on king during rising troubles (8)
3 Fawning nations caught out over America (8)
4 Work on English giant convenience store product (6,4)
5 Request sees enjoyment cut by half (4)
6 *Contend Queen once raised one on 12 (6)
7 Work to support criminal court appearance (7)
8 Bernstein perhaps after change of heart finds something to wear (7)
11 The majority of ladies must accept predicaments can be healthy (9)
14 *Spoilt kid is on the loo - a place on 12 (10)
17 Wood producing a blaze in chimney (8)
18 *Shoot a nuisance (8)
19 What might produce a calf, in the main? (7)
20 Son missing preparation for beach, that's clear (7)
23 Plough wealth into flipping north-east? Ridiculous (6)
26 Seeing heartless Venetian rulers is enough (4)



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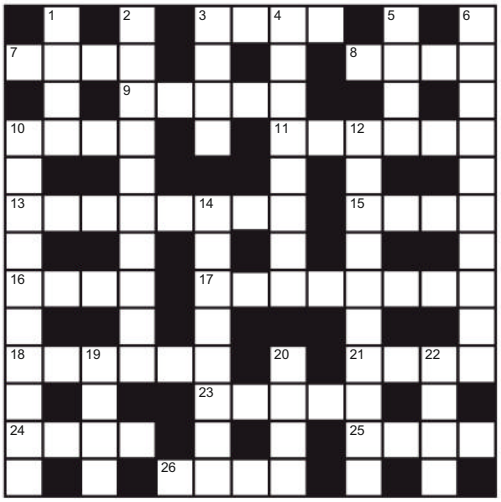
Moron crossword 457



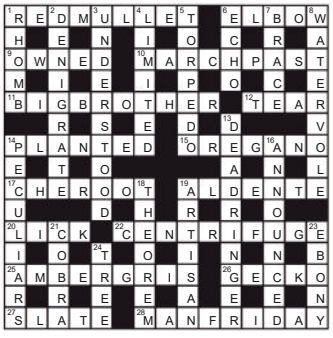
Across

3 Chef (4)
7 Catch; coat hanger (4)
8 Scottish lake (4)
9 Baking agent (5)
10 Droops, slumps (4)
11 Light wind (6)
13 The lender's oppo! (8)
15 Inevitable ruin; fate (4)
16 Posterior; steak (4)
17 Plant scientist (8)
18 Animal enclosure (US) (6)
21 Saga, heroic poem (4)
23 Gather, draw a conclusion (that) (5)
24 School test (4)
25 Way out (4)
26 Unsightly (4)

Down

1 Roman cloak (4)
2 Tall building (10)
3 Wheedle, gently persuade (4)
4 Sudden flare-up (8)
5 Nod off (4)
6 Might place (anag) (10)
10 Took away, deducted (10)
12 Exposed to risk (10)
14 Fluctuating unsteadily (8)
19 Wander (4)
20 Dodgy, doubtful (4)
22 Flower; part of eye (4)

Genius 455 solution



Winner: Diana Anderson, Sidmouth, Devon

Runners-up: Mrs M James, Rustington, West Sussex; Ian Noblett, London E17

Moron 455 answers: Across: 1 Creak, 4 Heaters (Cricketers), 8 Nut, 9 Yet, 10 House, 11 Iraqi, 12 Oddment, 15 Note, 17 Malign, 19 Loathe, 22 Lain, 24 Dog days, 26 Alarm, 28 Fibre, 30 UFO, 31 Gas, 32 Radiate, 33 Loose. **Down**: 1 Confirm, 2 Extra, 3 Key ring, 4 Hotpot, 5 Aphid, 6 Emu, 7 Sweat, 13 Deli, 14 Eat, 16 Only, 18 Lag, 20 On a roll, 21 En masse, 23 Assume, 24 Defer, 25 Arena, 27 Aggro, 29 Bad.

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RANTS AND RAVES FROM THE INTREPID DUVET LADY

ACROSS THE AGE DIVIDE

After 15 years of vehemently resisting, I have finally been dragged, kicking and screaming, into the world of social media and original content creation, as a means of advertising my Southdown bedding.

The idea is to meet regularly with the content creators, shoot about 2 hours of footage which they edit down into short reels for tri-weekly posting on the main social media platforms.

I drove to our first venue, British Wool's South Molton depot, thinking I really would prefer to be at the dentist, enduring root canal treatment.

Well, I need not have worried. Jodie and Emily proved to be utterly delightful. Both young enough to be my granddaughters, they astonished me. Tech savvy, entrepreneurial, professional and intensely creative, they just ran with the brief; the first, really impressive results being WhatsApp-ed to me 36 hours later.

I admit I felt my age and not just a tad inadequate. That was until Jodie said, 'this was easy. It's because you are so relaxed in front of the camera, things just flowed.'

And that was proof positive that I have reached that wonderful state of aged being when I no longer care a jot about what others think about me. Two decades ago, I would have frozen in front of the lens, worrying if it was catching my good side or if my makeup was wilting. Now? Meh – I am who I am and am very okay with it.

I have so often watched this transformation, especially in women, and admired the fact that they were growing more comfortable with themselves as they aged; relishing their liberation from confining social inhibitions. And now I know what it feels like.

So, in future, I am going to feature regularly on Facebook and Instagram, having a rant about whatever I feel deserves a rant. But, as ever, unable to take myself too seriously, I will ensure that Jodie occasionally uploads some of my numerous and outrageous bloopers and blasphemies that define my Oldie state of mind.

In celebration of growing old disgracefully, I extend a special offer this month: a full 20% OFF ANY OF OUR BEDDING PRODUCTS until November 15th with coupon code outrageous.

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southdownduvets

'Sorry, partner – I've got absolutely nothing for you,' said North as he laid down his dummy. He wasn't far out – but he wasn't quite right.

See if you can make use of the dummy to make your four hearts. You ruff West's top diamond lead and lay down the ace of hearts, West discarding (a diamond).

Dealer South Both Vunerable

	North ♠ 1032 ♥ 432 ♦ 754 ♣ 7632	
West ♠ Q986 ♥ - ♦ AKQ9632 ♣ J8		East ♠ 75 ♥ Q1098 ♦ J108 ♣ Q1095
	South ♠ AKJ4 ♥ AKJ765 ♦ - ♣ AK4	

The bidding

South	West	North	East
2♣ (1)	4♦ (2)	Pass	Pass
4♥	Pass		

(1) The strongest opener in bridge, showing 23 or more points (or an upgrade for shape), unrelated to clubs.
(2) Putting on the pressure, and doubtless wishing South were sitting opposite, not at 90 degrees.

If you continue trumps out of hand, followed by spades, you will need the queen to fall doubleton (or singleton).

Instead, and this is the key play, advance the knave of spades. The defender with the queen (here, West) can choose his poison.

If West wins the queen of spades, you can ruff his (say) diamond return then cross to the promoted ten of spades (HUGE card) to finesse the knave of hearts.

You lose just one spade, one heart and, later, one club. Game made.

Say West ducks the knave of spades – probably stronger defence.

You now lead out the ace-king of spades. East ruffs and exits with a diamond, but you ruff, and ruff the fourth spade.

East overruffs, but you can ruff his diamond return, cash the king of hearts, drawing his queen, and concede only a club at the end.

Game made – this time losing two trumps and a club – but no spades.

ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 323 you were invited to write a poem called *Back to School*. The challenge drew a large entry. For Julie Wigley it was 'Back to school five decades later./ Task – exam invigilator.' Jane Stubbs looked forward to the new term: 'Pack away the summer frocks./ I'm for a gymslip and woolly socks.' Bob Morrow's school was a school of whales. Pauline Watson's narrator was a horse being schooled for dressage. David Bailey sent a school report for Sappho, written in sapphic stanzas. I like defined metres, so I was grateful.

Commiserations to them and to Stefan Badham, Veronica Colin, Con Connell, Sue Smalley, D A Prince, Sheila Gray, Bill Webster, Erika Fairhead, Mike Douse and Martin Elster, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *The Chambers Dictionary* going to Peter Hollindale.

My Year 8 mates have visited, between them,
The Maldives, Turkey, Center Parcs and Rhyl.
Me? Boots, the ice-cream van and Sainsbury's,
Because both Mum and Dad were really ill.
So I learned to give the Afterthought her bottle,
Change her nappies, take her out to play.
I cooked pizza, but then things that were not pizza,
And even checked out Delia one great day.
I washed and ironed and shopped and raked and mowed,
And something curious happened to me because,
Dizzy with newness and necessity,
I came to know for certain who I was.
They're well now, and school's back. I'll take it easy
With women's suffrage, linear equation,
Digestive systems, French and slavery:
The things essential for my education.
Peter Hollindale

The train creates a rhythm on the track,
An ostinato hammering my brow;
My suitcase, named and numbered, on the rack
Contains the sum of my possessions now.
Green fields with cattle grazing by the stream
Are flashing by; I put my life on hold
Preparing for a cold, loveless regime,
A sentence with no chance to be paroled.
My thoughts return to days spent by the sea,
The summer games, the secrets we would find,
Throwing sticks for Benjy, home for tea,
The fun, the laughs – I cast them from my mind.
The train reduces speed towards the station;
With sinking heart, I've reached my destination.
Sylvia Fairley

I'm anxious and worried, I didn't sleep well.
There's a panic inside me I'm struggling to quell.
The butterflies fluttering down in my tummy
Are now flapping wildly. I just want my mummy!
I don't want to be here. Though heading my way
Are Mira and Malik, so maybe I'll stay...
They're waving and smiling, bursting with news.
They admire my new haircut, my bag, my smart shoes.
We file into school. The butterflies quiver.
I'm hot and I'm cold. I've got goosebumps. I shiver.
I stand at my desk. I smile and I say,
'Good morning, Class 4! How are you today?'
Jacqueline Shirtliff

Ringworm caps and Start-Rite shoes,
Ready for the two-by-twos,
The square on the hypotenuse –
Dividers, pencils and protractors,
Inkwells where the nib must practise,
A hair tweak for your malefactors –
Teachers wearing dowdy gowns,
A stone is always fourteen pounds,
The library is out of bounds –
Conjugation and declension,
Playground milk, too foul to mention,
Shallow grazes smeared with gentian –
Corridors and well-worn stairs,
The squeak and scrape of schoolroom chairs,
And mumbling dark, archaic prayers.
Bill Greenwell

COMPETITION No 325 Some people behave on the train as though they're at home. A poem please called *On the Train*, in any sense. Maximum 16 lines. We cannot accept any entries by post, I'm afraid, but do send them by email (comps@theoldie.co.uk – don't forget to include your own postal address), marked 'Competition No 325', by Thursday 16th October.

Wild times in England's breadbasket

PATRICK BARKHAM

It was the evening of a heatwave and the land looked parched.

Hot air blew across desolate, tawny fields. Combines roared in the distance, cutting the last sunburnt wheat. I was taking a walk with my son, Ted, in rolling South Lincolnshire. This was not fenland but it's still the breadbasket of England. Big farming holds sway.

We set out from Boothby Lodge Farm, a bleak trio of grain barns which rattled in the wind. There was no one around. The villages were neat and quiet. Few people work, walk or visit this land. It's mostly left to large machines.

Four years ago, when I first strolled here, this 1,525-acre farm looked much like any other: a remote-controlled business – no farmer living in the farmhouse – growing beans and wheat.

That year, it was bought by Nattergal, a new company seeking to farm nature. Conventional farming ceased. Since then, the fields have been left to turn wild.

Fortified by a bag of Flamin' Hot Doritos, an unusual choice at 31°C, Ted and I crossed the road and headed west on a farm track into the West Glen valley. Hawthorn and blackthorn in the hedgerows looked like exhausted shoppers laden with produce: reddening haws and purpling sloes.

The heavy clay soil had dried into cracked slabs of concrete. It felt as if the earth could swallow us up.

Ted spotted the strange weed first – a pair of antlers rising from the prairieland, looking just like the teasel heads. The fallow deer watched, ears turning like radar in the sultry air. Eventually, it bounced away through the bleached gold grass.

The end of the world would surely feel like this: hot, empty and colonised by weeds. The field, a once tidy monoculture of wheat, was now a similarly hued mix of the thugs most despised by farmers: thistles, ragwort and dock.

Most provocative was the thistledown. I'd never seen such quantities, at such scale. It lay like snow on rutted ground. It drifted on the wind. The thistledown isn't popular with some locals but, looking closely, the airborne down was not actually carrying seeds. And I'd trade that for toxic pesticides any day.

GARY WING

It would be fair to say this is the ugly duckling stage of rewilding. But hawthorn, blackthorn and baby oaks are all germinating here too, hidden by the thistlescape. In two decades, ecologists expect this to be nightingale-filled wood pasture. Flying insects have already moved in, with an abundance of butterflies probably not enjoyed in these parts for eight decades.

We turned south on the public footpath by West Glen. The miserable drainage ditch of a river had been 'rewiggled' by a digger. A fencing machine was erecting posts that will create England's largest beaver enclosure. The wetland-creating herbivores will be returned this winter.

We took the path uphill, along the edge of Ingoldsby Wood, its trees now marching into the fields beyond at tree pace.

The official walk continued in a loop of public footpaths back to Boothby Farm but we went off-piste, into a field of chest-high thistles.

'No, thank you, to "Adventures with Dad",' said Ted, despairing at my route, as thistles slashed our short-trousered legs.

But there was something glorious about our being here, alone, in a vast landscape utterly unlike anything else in southern Britain. The fields glowed pink as the sun set. A green woodpecker cackled. Mauve chicory flowers shone in the fields.

This may be a projection but it seemed as if the land was resting, breathing a huge sigh of relief. And when we humans rest, other species race into the space we've vacated, far more mercurial and entrepreneurial than the best of us.

Boothby Lodge Farm, What3Words: weeded.rural.mistaking. Circular walk via public footpaths through and around the farm. Tours can also be booked at www.nattergal.com/boothby-wildland

Cosying up by Charlotte Metcalf

As the afternoons darken and we think ahead to chilly winter evenings, we might start reassessing how we keep warm. Radiators can prove recalcitrant as we frantically search for that elusive key to bleed them with.

This could be the time to invest in any one of the numerous ingenious heating solutions out there. Nowadays you can even buy a decorative panel that's an infrared heater – and for small spaces there are plenty of small, neat portable heaters on the market.

Otherwise, Etsy, Instagram and similar platforms provide inspiration for throws and blankets, to drape over the arms of chairs and sofas, that enhance rather than detract from your furniture. Today's blankets come in every warm material from alpaca and merino to fur and fleece.

For oldies who still believe the best way to keep warm is to don more clothing, the range of knitwear on offer this season is second to none.

Whether you're after chunky cable knit or sleek cashmere, there are hundreds of suppliers offering elegant warmth at reasonable prices.

Music

Home & Garden

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VIRGINIA IRONSIDE

I panic over panic attacks

Q I suffer terribly with panic attacks. They seem to have got worse since I've got older – I'm now 81 – and now really dominate my life. I have tried everything. Tranquillisers helped to start with, but eventually turned me into a zombie.

I tried acupuncture – rubbish – and I went on a meditation course but that had no effect at all. I went to special breathing classes but again nothing happened.

I try pretending the panic isn't there, but then it gets even worse ... it's like trying to stop up a broken dam. True, I had a very stressful childhood – my mother killed herself in front of me when I was seven – but since then I've been known for coping brilliantly. But that was a long time ago.

I know you've suffered with anxiety too, so do you have any tips on how to banish it? I remember very occasional lovely, happy days when I was young, but all that's a thing of the past.
Sheila V, by email

A One of the reasons you're feeling the anxiety so acutely is presumably that you have more time to feel frightful.

Anxiety can be partly diluted by the sufferer's keeping incredibly busy – hence your reputation as a coper. As your skin has become thinner, so has your resistance to anxiety.

The only thing I've found that helps a tiny bit is trying not to resist it – because anxiety will always win. Remember that it's part of you. So accept it. Instead of trying to banish it, say to yourself, sympathetically, 'No wonder you're anxious! It's really understandable given your history.' It's a counterintuitive approach and can, on occasion, be very helpful.

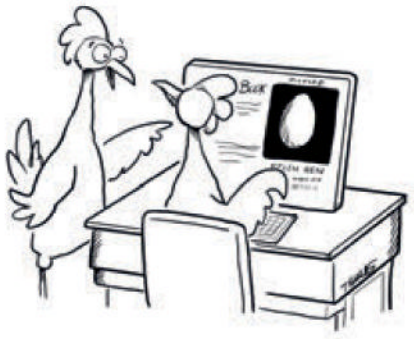
Wedding blues

Q My great friend from school is getting married next month and I'm going to be best man. We had a great evening reminiscing recently, so I was able to get a lot of stories for my speech, but it turns out there's a big problem with his widowed mother.

She is a very well-meaning woman, but my friend is worried to death that she will ruin the day somehow by taking a joke badly in one of the speeches or just generally making the day about her in some way. How can I help prevent this?
Alan, by email

A First, I'd ensure that all the speeches are thoroughly checked before they're delivered. It might be worth everyone's shoehorning in a complimentary and appreciative reference to her, in every speech.

If she wants to be the centre of attention, then why not keep her there? You can do this at least some of the time, with some of you, so that she never feels left out and is always attended to.



'Don't you think it's about time you updated your profile picture?'

Enlist the help of her relations and friends so that she always has someone paying court to her. And don't ply her with drink. Make sure the photographer is briefed to include her in as many pictures as possible. If she's a widow, she'll be upset that she's 'losing' her son – and that his father isn't there to share in the joy. She'll almost certainly find it all not only joyful but super-emotional.

And don't make this a self-fulfilling prophecy. Try to imagine that she behaves impeccably and everything runs smoothly. It's more likely to work that way.

I hope you all have a wonderful day – and how nice you sound, taking so much trouble to make it a lovely occasion for everyone. A best man indeed.

Don't say, 'I love you'

Recently a reader wrote to me about how everyone was saying 'I love you' to one another these days. And I replied that we Brits didn't tend to go in for that sort of thing until quite recently.

Peter H of Hastings has now written, 'I rather respect that – not everything we feel has to be declared, and actions speak louder than words. The repeated "love you"s we all exchange nowadays rapidly devalue with overuse.

'I was reminded of an old chum of mine who died a few years ago. Just before his death, his daughter flew from the States, where she now lives, to visit him at his bedside.

"I love you, Dad," she whispered, probably hoping for a heartfelt response.

'All she got in in reply was "Ditto!" The memory still makes me smile.'

Please email me your problems at problempage@theoldie.co.uk; I will answer every email – and let me know if you'd like your dilemma to be confidential.

The Oldie

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