

The Observer  
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# 새로운 the new review 리뷰



## K-EVERYTHING

*Tim Adams on the rise and rise of Korean culture*

# Agenda

The finest writing every Sunday for arts, science, politics and ideas



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## The big picture

Photographer Greg Turner's tender portraits of Ivan explore the pair's overlapping personal struggles

Greg Turner first met Ivan on Horsham High Street in 2017. Turner was taking pictures of passersby and Ivan stopped to ask him about them. Something about Ivan intrigued Turner. "He gave the impression of being homeless," he suggests, "but also he clearly looked after himself." Turner took Ivan's picture and over the year or two that followed the pair would see each other quite often and Turner got to fill in some of Ivan's story: he lived alone – dividing his time between a flat outside town and in a caravan on a scrap of land he had bought – and suffered from a form of psychosis that meant he was plagued by voices in his head. But he was also relentlessly positive, a friendly face to many in the town.

At the beginning of lockdown, Turner's marriage had just broken down and he found himself visiting and photographing Ivan more often. "I realised what I was doing in my portraits of Ivan was channelling memories of the vulnerabilities of my own difficult childhood into Ivan's life as a vulnerable adult," Turner says.

The set-ups of the photographs and captions started to merge their histories – particularly their shared issues with religion – to ask questions about mental health and human connection. Turner calls his pictures "The Divided Self". He half-imagines the series might go on until both he and Ivan "are pensioners sitting on a bench somewhere".

"Place is important to Ivan," Turner says. "The picture with Foggy [the sheep] is typical. When he got his caravan he bought four sheep to live on the land. When he was away he asked some neighbouring travellers to look after the sheep on the understanding that they would keep them away from the ram. They clearly failed. There are now about 12 sheep on Ivan's land." The picture comes with a quote from the book of Isaiah: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." **Tim Adams**

gregoryjohnturner.com



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## Feedback

Last week, Stewart Lee wrote about the raw sewage currently polluting our seas – a fitting symbol, as he sees it, of our freedom from the tyranny of EU red tape. Here are some of your responses online:

In France, we are considering banning UK fish and shellfish on the grounds that we prefer our food not to taste of merde. **PerePeinard**

Scotland has 90% of the UK's fresh water and it is not full of shit, unlike England. This is an English problem, not a "UK" problem. You wouldn't

know this though by the way the media reports it. **Aunty\_DeDee**

It might not be as bad as England but pollution incidents in Scotland have risen steadily in recent years. I'm old enough to remember the boat MV Gardyloo dumping raw sewage into the Firth of Forth in 1998. I once paddled a canoe through one of the shit slicks. Yuck. **Caledon35**

Bonfire of the red tape, they promise us. The sort of red tape that tries to ensure we don't eat or drink harmful additives, industrial chemicals. That

hazardous waste is disposed of properly, that we don't live adjacent to odious emissions from factory sites. That rivers and coastal waters are fit to swim in. The small things we expect in a civilised country. Deregulation will set us free, you say? **spoksbrain**

That's going to be a whole morning wasted looking on Wikipedia to see if anything he wrote is true. Because I hope at least some of it is. That's all I have left now. Looking for morsels of truth in the embittered ramblings of a woke comedian. **eastcheam**



*Ivan, who suffers from psychosis, at his caravan with one of his sheep, from Greg Turner's series *The Divided Self*.*

© Gregory John Turner

## ON MY RADAR

RHIAN TEASDALE, WET LEG



Isle of Wight musician Rhian Teasdale formed indie rock duo Wet Leg with Hester Chambers in 2019. The band released two singles in 2021, Chaise Longue and Wet Dream, which became instant hits thanks to their witty lyrics and sense of fun. Wet Leg's self-titled debut album was released in April and is shortlisted for the Mercury prize, which is announced on Thursday. Wet Leg tour the UK and Ireland from 13–27 November. **Kathryn Bromwich**

## Music video

Howl by Katy J Pearson

Katy J Pearson is a really amazing indie folk artist I've been following for years. This video is beautifully shot. It starts off with her telling a ghost story with a torch right up to her face – there's something charming about music videos when they can incorporate the miming of the song into the story. I kept seeing stills of it pop up on my social media: Katy J as a vampire, covered in blood and wearing this white gown. I finally watched it and was not disappointed.

## TV

Peep Show

It's my favourite TV show. I find it comforting even though it's so bleak. Everyone says that they're a Mark or a Jeremy, especially in domestic situations: in my household I am definitely a Jeremy – I'm the weird musician who comes in and can't really look after themselves. We watch it on the tour bus if we can get the TV working. We always find ourselves getting into trouble because we'll come out with quotes from it and if you haven't watched it, it will seem a bit odd.



## Gig

Mitski, Glastonbury

This was at the Park stage, just after dusk, and she was clashing with Paul McCartney so her set turned out to be really intimate. Her performance was so inspiring. She tells a story with her body – I hadn't seen anyone do anything like that before. Sometimes when you're watching live music you can miss some of the lyrics, but she was putting her whole self into all the words, so you really felt them.

## Fashion

Renli Su

Renli Su dressed us for Glastonbury, Hester and me, and I really like them because their collections seem to always be inspired by stories – of real people, but also from myths, poems or ballets – but based on women who have gone against the grain. The clothes are all quite traditionally feminine. In the little blurbs about the designs it says: "This collection is based on a magician who was as good as Houdini, but her story was forgotten." I enjoy the juxtaposition.

## App

BeReal

It's social media but you only get a notification on your phone once a day, saying: "It's time to post your BeReal." You have two minutes to post – it takes pictures from your front and back cameras, so you see the person's face and what they're looking at. I have about 10 friends on there and it's nice, especially being away on tour, to know what they're up to. It's mainly my housemates in the paddling pool or people at their laptops looking quite hot. The point is you don't get the chance to curate it. It just feels really wholesome.

## Snack

Takis

Takis are my new favourite crisps. The first time I had one was when [producer] Dan Carey went to the shop when we were recording and came back with a packet. They're rolled up tortilla chips and I swear to God on one crisp there is all the seasoning from a whole normal packet of crisps – they're so spicy and rich and definitely above your recommended salt intake. They're probably really bad for you but I can't stop eating them.



# How will history recall the reign of Bad King Boris?

## Stewart Lee



**B**oris Johnson's "victory tour" is the insane peacock parade of a monster of a man who has ruined everything, trolling the entire country, rubbing the noses of those whose lives he has destroyed in the filth he has wall-spaffed into their faces. The French would have strewn burning tyres and broken baguettes all over the motorways by now, God bless them, and set fire to hayricks in the middle of rural roundabouts, while choking back successions of small sour drinks and making inscrutable obscene gestures at press corps helicopters. Instead, Brexit Britons sit around, tutting and shrugging into their milky tea as they dunk the soggy digestives of their impotence, like eunuchs in a penis factory. I hate us. We don't deserve rock'n'roll.

Johnson's grand tour ought to feel like King Lear's last route march around Britain, in the enduring tragedy of the same name, but it doesn't, quite. Shakespeare depicted the mad monarch tramping from one now unwelcoming former supporter to another, his presence nothing more than an inconvenient embarrassment. But Johnson's valedictory progress, as I write this on Wednesday, seems to be a success. In Dorset, he boasted of his broadband. In Barrow-in-Furness, he surveyed a submarine. It is not known if, in Islington, he posed proudly by the sofa upon which he had spaffed into a pole-dancing data analyst, who was then awarded tens of thousands of pounds of public money, when his wife was away serving the British justice system. Doubtless his indefatigable supporters would have loved to have seen the stained cushions anyway. Funny Boris!

It's a shame Lear didn't have the Brexit-boosting, offshore-billionaire-owned British press to back his bullshit, their eyes on a bigger prize. King Lear may have divided the country in two and turned it against itself, encouraged rivals to squabble at the expense of national unity, alienated even his own favoured daughter, and set in motion a chain of events that led to an old man's eyes being thumbed out of their bloody sockets like a "vile jelly", but like World King Boris, maybe King Lear "got all the big calls right".

The fact is that Johnson, something of a vile jelly himself if the truth be told, is a massive psychopathic bastard. And if you support him, or voted for him, you

must be either evil or ignorant. Either way, thou art a boil, a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle in my corrupted blood; you are a knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking knave, a whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue... you are not worth the dust that the rude wind blows in your face. And you smell as well, probably. So it's no wonder no one wants to kiss you and they've all got printed T-shirts saying so.

Once more unto the breach. Johnson lied about giving EU savings to the NHS; he lied about Turkish access to the EU; he refused to give details about his trip to the former KGB agent's son's villa; he lied about lockdown parties; he lied – to the Queen – about the need to prorogue parliament; he justified Putin's incursion into Crimea; he jeopardised the Good Friday agreement; he presided over the Brexit-driven collapse of Britain's ability to contribute to the cultural and intellectual conversations of the wider world and over the worst recession of all the advanced economies. Do we have to go on?

**T**he problem is, I finally feel defeated. I was in Edinburgh last month. There was a bin strike. On Monday, I drove three black bags of three people's glass and paper recycling back to London to pulp it there, like a conscientious cap-doffing peasant, while incoming Liz Truss reconfirmed the Tories' commitment to fossil fuels as Pakistan literally drowns in a climate chaos deluge. What's the point? I am trapped on a dying island ringed by a shadow of human shit and Brexiters took away my right to escape it.

Meanwhile, the energy bills crisis is barrelling down the bowling-alley gutter of the blasted heath of Brexit Britain, the tripling costs making the closure of hundreds of thousands of businesses and the abandonment of their staff inevitable. Some commentators suggest low-income families will see the deaths of their youngest and oldest members as a result of fuel costs, threatening levels of poverty unseen for decades, energy policy as envisioned by the King of Sparta. Shakespeare describes a similar scene in *King Lear*.

"Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these?"

In the lines above, exposed to the elements as he makes his pathetic progress, King Lear observes the sufferings of the people with a compassion entirely absent from the heart of King Boris, who refused to take any practical action on the imminent household energy crisis during his interregnum, choosing instead to simply use it to shat the bed for his successor in the most selfish, psychotic way possible. Liz Truss opens the door of Downing Street into a cloud of bluebottles and gags.

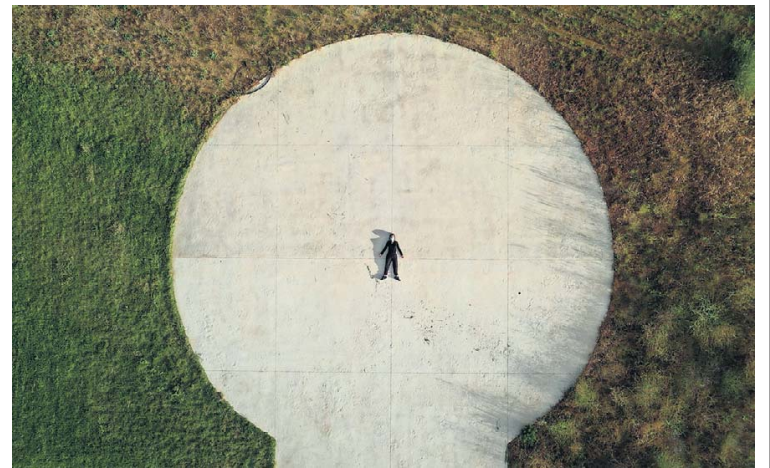
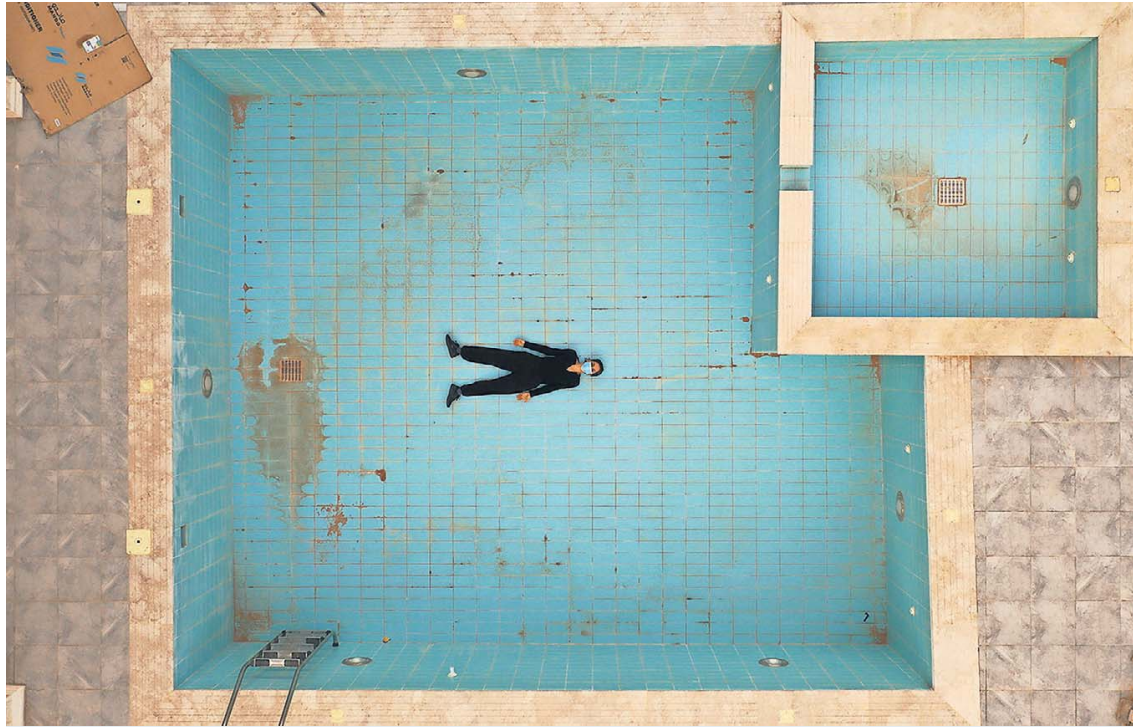
But what was it all for? For now, the rightwing press continues to celebrate Johnson's corruption, while the gelded BBC is too toothless to confront it. But in the end, the last historian left standing, supposing any historians survive the Tories' scorched-earth approach to arts and humanities, will document as a matter of simple record the evil, selfish, criminal career of the disgusting Boris Johnson. "Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither."

*Snowflake* is on BBC Two and BBC iPlayer at 22:30 tonight, followed by *Tornado* next Sunday. Dates for the Basic Lee tour are at [stewartlee.co.uk](http://stewartlee.co.uk)

Illustration  
by  
David  
Foldvari

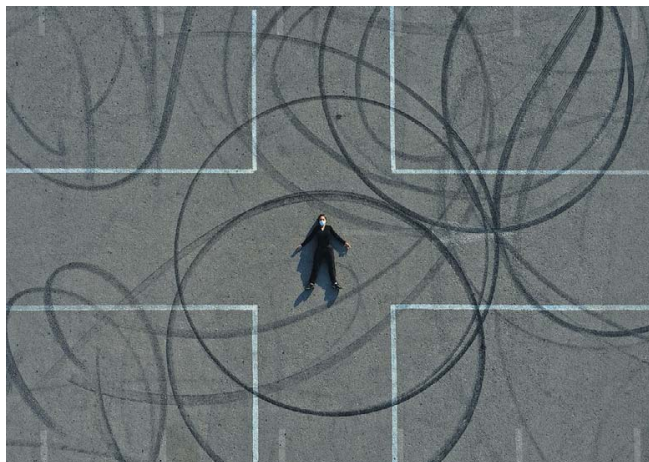


**If you support him, or voted for him, you must be either evil or ignorant**



# The grid

*A Beirut photographer's search for meaning amid the debris of her shattered country*

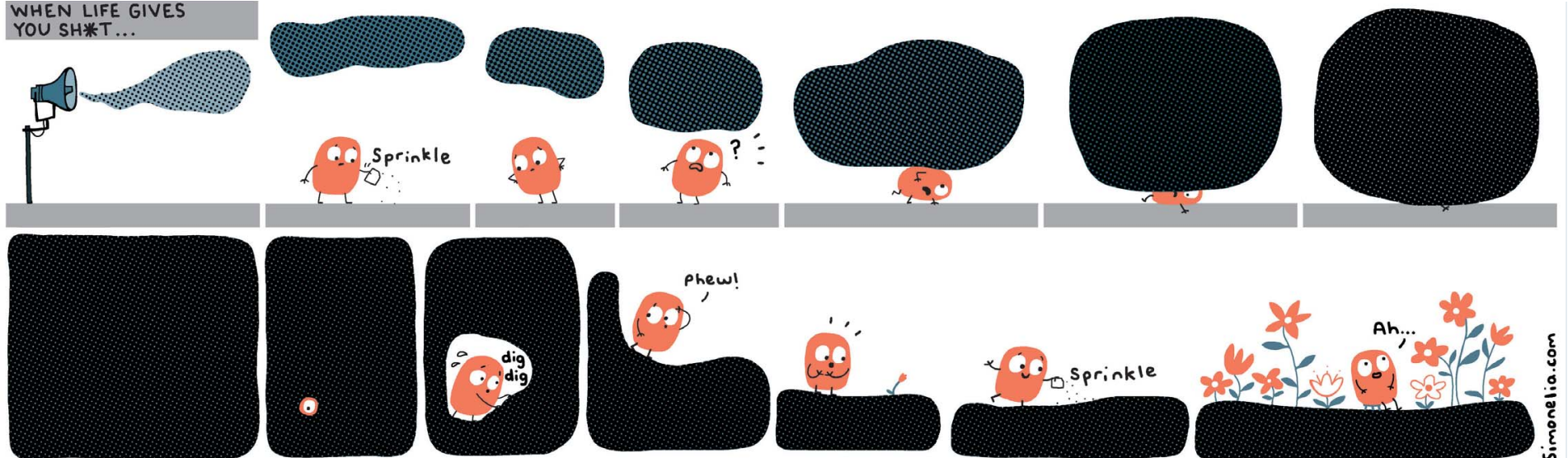


“The only thing that felt safe was the earth,” says Lebanese photographer Rima Maroun, who responded to the crises that battered her homeland in 2020 – first Covid, then the catastrophic explosion in Beirut port – by taking aerial portraits of herself tiny and spreadeagled on the ground. At first, the only signs in the images of what’s going on are her surgical mask and the absence of other people. Then, in August, comes the wreckage – Maroun was 10 minutes’ drive from the port when the explosion happened. “When I opened my eyes, everything around me was destroyed,” she says. Her photographs, taken with the help of a drone operator, were an attempt to find meaning amid the debris.

**Killian Fox**  
[instagram.com/rimamaroun/](https://www.instagram.com/rimamaroun/)

## The Simone Lia cartoon

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU SH\*T...



*'I have a lot of adrenaline at the moment': Callum Scott Howells.*  
Portrait  
by Richard Davenport

Actor Callum Scott Howells, 23, grew up in the Rhondda valley and trained at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama. After singing in the youth choir Only Boys Aloud, his screen breakthrough came in 2021 playing Colin Morris-Jones in the hit drama *It's a Sin*, which became Channel 4's most streamed show. He takes over as Emcee in the Olivier-winning West End production of *Cabaret* next month.

**You're currently in rehearsals for *Cabaret*. How is it going?**

I had costume fittings this morning, then went into rehearsals, minced around for a bit and now I'm on my lunchbreak. It's most playful thing I've ever done. I loved the film when I was a child but also remember being scared. You know, Joel Grey's Emcee with his painted face and the whole dark vibe. Then I rewatched it in lockdown. Now here I am.

**It's a very different role from Colin in *It's a Sin*, isn't it?**

I'm excited about flipping that on its head. I have a lot of adrenaline at the moment. In some ways, the role is there to shock and meddle with the audience. To entertain them but also subvert their expectations. It

feels weirdly relevant today. Earlier on, we were discussing the Emcee's parallels with Dominic Cummings, which is ridiculous, but that's the thing with this play, it provokes all sorts of mad ideas.

**Your *It's a Sin* colleague Omari Douglas was in *Cabaret* last year, playing Cliff. Did you ask him for advice?**

We've spoken a lot – not so much about our roles, more about the historical backdrop. Between the wars was a fascinating period for Germany, with the transition from the Weimar republic to Hitler's rise to power. Me and Omari don't normally talk about such deep things, trust me. It's usually just pop culture and reality TV!

**You were still at drama school when you read the *It's a Sin* scripts. Did they resonate?**

So much. I was at the end of my second year when my agent said: "Russell T Davies is looking for a young Welsh character in his new series." When I read Colin, I really connected with him. Not just that he's Welsh but that he's queer and on this journey. I worried I wasn't ready but thought: "I've got to do this." I gave it some welly and got the part.

**How nervous were you, walking on to the set for the first time?**

It was terrifying. I have a vivid memory of my first day being the scene where Colin's in the Two Brewers [a Clapham gay pub], sitting in the corner, shaken up by seeing all these men kissing. I was red in the face from raw nerves and didn't have to do any acting. When I watch it back, I'm like: "Crikey, that's real. There's no pretending, that's just me being fucking petrified."

**Neil Patrick Harris's character, the tailor Henry, was Colin's mentor in the show. Was your relationship similar off-screen?**

Definitely. I learned so much from Neil. Not just in terms of acting but how to conduct myself and manage my time. He'd never heard a South Wales valleys accent before. He couldn't get over the way I said "beautiful". He also played Emcee on Broadway, so when he was over here filming *Doctor Who* recently, we had dinner and discussed the role. It was brilliant to nibble on his ear about it. My nerves just dissipated.

**Was it daunting to play Colin's decline?**

I was very aware that it was based on real stories, on people that

*On my first day I was red in the face from raw nerves and I didn't have to do any acting*

Russell knew, so it needed to be accurate. Particularly the seizures, dementia and when he loses his dignity in front of his mother – I wanted to make sure that was told truthfully and felt visceral. There was no room for airs and graces – I just had to go there.

**How did it feel making millions of people cry?**

It was strange. When the show came out, the world was shut down. The first time that lockdown lifted, I was walking through Soho and three separate people came up in quick succession to talk about it. One of them even called me Colin! While we were making *It's a Sin*, we felt like a family and the show belonged to us. But when it aired, it became everyone's. There's real beauty in that. Last weekend, I saw a whole gang wearing "La!" T-shirts. It's entered mainstream culture.

**Didn't you get a call from Elton John?**

I'll never forget answering the phone and a voice saying: "Hi Callum, this is Elton." I was like: "Oh my gosh, what the fuck?" We went over to his house for dinner last Christmas. Having ruddy cottage pie with Elton John and David Furnish. How mad is that?

**What's the legacy of *It's a Sin*?**

For me, it's the way it drove an increase in people getting tested for HIV. Charities like the Terrence Higgins Trust and the George House Trust do incredible work, year in, year out. To be just a small cog in helping them achieve their targets is an incredible feat for any TV show.

**How do you remember the Only Boys Aloud choir?**

We entered *Britain's Got Talent* and got to the final but lost to Pudsey the dog, which is fair enough. We also sang for Harry and Meghan at Cardiff council, which was wild.

**Next up, you're in the Netflix film *The Beautiful Game*. What can you tell us?**

It's written by Frank Cottrell Boyce and it's about the Homeless World Cup, an annual football tournament where homeless people represent their country. Bill Nighy plays the team's coach and he's the don.

**Any other genres you'd like to try?**

I'm open to anything. I love comedy and political drama. I was a big fan of the original *House of Cards*. I just love being part of powerful stories. I say all this, but my career could come crashing down after *Cabaret*. For now, strap in and hold on tight!

**Interview by Michael Hogan**

*Tickets for Cabaret at the Playhouse theatre, London are available at kitkat.club. Callum Scott Howells will play the Emcee 3 October–28 January*

Q AND A

## Callum Scott Howells

Actor, 23

*The Welsh actor on breaking hearts in *It's a Sin*, losing to a dog in Britain's Got Talent and having dinner with Elton John*



# KOREA CALLING



In recent years South Korea has transformed its national identity. From music to movies, technology to food, its culture is in the ascendancy across the world. *Tim Adams* visits Seoul in search of the origins of hallyu – the Korean wave – and to discover where it is heading next





Seoul, the South Korean capital, at night. Getty Images/EyeEm

Last week, I was standing in a huge dance studio – one of 12 – near the top of a funky new office tower just north of the Han River in the South Korean capital, Seoul. The building is home to a company called SM Entertainment, which has strong claims to have invented one of the most potent cultural movements of the 21st century, the phenomenon of Korean pop music – K-pop.

Each generation creates hit factories in its own image. The “SM Culture Universe” was originally the vision of a Korean pop entrepreneur called Lee Soo-man who, after a brief career as a singer and DJ, studied computer engineering in the States in the 1980s. He returned to Seoul “with the dream of globalising Korean music”.

In the dance studio, his nephew Chris Lee, now the chief executive, is talking me through all the ways in which this dream came true. To begin with, K-pop idols conquered Asian charts; lately, after the extraordinary success of K-poppers BTS (the biggest-selling band in the world for the past two years, managed by rival conglomerate Hybe), they have been expanding their reach to all corners of the globe. New members of boy bands and girl bands – aged 11 upwards – are recruited by SM each year on long contracts and this building becomes their virtual home. It is designed as an inside-out place, with every room a stage set for press conferences, fan chats and livestreams; one floor is an “artist’s house”, a place where “idols” can chill or do some cooking (while their fans scream outside); another is a “song camp” where songwriters from across the world are flown in on rotation to create a global sound.

“One of the things we tell [new talent],” Lee says of this operation, “is that they are representing our country. If you were on an Olympic team you would have to be trained and we see no difference. If they want to be the best in the world, it takes a lot of work. They get media training. They study languages so that they can communicate with many different audiences. We teach them how to have good personalities.”

One of the most successful products of that system is Taeyoung, who joins our conversation. Taeyoung is the leader of a group called NCT 127 (NCT stands for “neo-cultural technology”, 127 is Seoul’s line of longitude). NCT’s last album, *Sticker*, reached No 3 on the US Billboard chart. Like all boy band and girl band members, Taeyoung has the bone structure and flawless complexion of an avatar and a kind of androgynous vulnerability. He was, he explains, spotted for his looks by SM talent agents on the street in Seoul a decade ago. “Taeyoung didn’t dance well at the time,” Lee says. “He didn’t rap at all. He is now the best dancer, a great rapper. He has lived in this building, in that practice room.”

Taeyoung is 27, though he could be 17. As the leader of NCT 127, his responsibilities are onerous. K-pop bands are all about accessibility. Taeyoung is in near-permanent contact with NCT 127’s fan

community, partly through a “digital metaverse”, a kind of gamers’ dreamscape in which fans can meet virtual versions of their idols. (Two years ago, SM launched a new girl band, Aespa, in which there are four real members and four avatar members, each with detailed backstories and virtual lives.) That desire for ubiquity is not just online. “NCT 127 are one of the biggest boy bands in the world,” Lee says. “But physically there are nine of them and they are in Korea. They cannot be everywhere in the world all the time.” As a result, there are now NCTs in China and plans to roll out versions elsewhere in the world.

The boy band as franchise? “Not a franchise, a cultural brand.”

Even before the pandemic, SM was creating online concerts for its groups involving virtual reality and holograms. The current aim is “a 2.0 version of an online concert”. One recent live show featuring a roster of SM acts had an interactive livestreaming audience across the globe of 56 million.

Parents, Lee says, can be sure that their kids are in safe hands. “We don’t sing about sex or drugs or clubs. We don’t sell bad dreams but good dreams.” That spirit apparently engages K-pop fan armies not so much to lust after their idols but to protect them. There have been high-profile cases of K-pop stars taking their own lives after being targeted by online abuse. Fans of BTS and NCT not only organise 24-hour vigils and legal action against critics and trolls online but also seek to do charitable works in their idols’ names. BTS last year addressed the UN on climate change. K-pop appeals, lucratively, to that generation less interested in rebellion than in policing kindness and inclusion.

Before I leave, Lee puts up on a screen a photograph of where it all started. The picture comes from the *Shanghai Evening Post* in 2000. The original SM Entertainment boyband, H.O.T., had just held their first concert in Beijing and the newspaper headline coins the idea of *hallyu* – “the Korean wave”. “There is something very interesting in this photograph,” Lee says and zooms in on members of the Chinese crowd who have the Korean

Continued on page 10 >>>



FROM TOP  
Rapper Psy of 2012’s *Gangnam Style*.

*The Moon Jar Dress* by Minju Kim, from the forthcoming V&A show, *Hallyu! The Korean Wave*.

T1 esports star Lee Sang-hyeok AKA Faker, Riot Games/Getty Images

Park Eun-bin, star of hit TV series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*.



»» Continued from page 9

flag sewn on their backpacks. “There is only one reason for that flag: because they feel, perhaps for the first time, that Korea is cool.”

**T**he collective results of that Korean coolness, which has flourished across the world over the past decade or more – not only in pop but also in film and video games and TV and fashion and food – will be celebrated in a major exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London at the end of this month called *Hallyu! The Korean Wave*. My visit to the K-pop factory was part of a fast tour through Seoul – following the city’s principle of *ppalli-ppalli* (hurry-hurry) – to get a feel for where that Korean wave started and a sense of where it is likely to break next.

In the book that accompanies the V&A’s *Hallyu!* exhibition, SM’s Lee Soo-man claims that the Korean entertainment industry has created a new paradigm for cultural export. In the past he suggests, effective “soft power” – notably, the cultural exports of Britain and the US – followed on from economic empire building. The Korean model, by contrast, was “culture first, economics second”: export the idea of “Korean cool” and watch Samsung and LG, Hyundai and Kia reap the benefits.

Ever since Elvis, it has been understood that there is no more ardent love than that of teenagers for pop idols. One of the masterstrokes of the government of Korea was to recognise that such love might be weaponised, a force for national good. This project was given greater urgency by South Korea’s fragile geopolitics. During my brief *hallyu* tour, I spent a day up at the border with the north, inside the demilitarised zone, looking through binoculars across the rewired no man’s land at North Koreans going about their business in distant mountain villages.

It is across this border that the bluntest expression of *hallyu* takes place. For decades, the rival nations have bombarded each other with loudspeaker propaganda. From the north, songs eulogising Kim Jong-un are periodically amplified. From the south, in recent years, the dominant beat has been K-pop – BTS, NCT and Girls’ Generation – blasted through vast speakers.

According to some North Korean defectors, the pop barrage is successful. Despite the ban on all outside media, K-pop tracks seem to have become seductive earworms in Pyongyang. Their softly subversive lyrics have been described as “cultural Trojan horses”, alongside addictive South Korean soap operas smuggled across on CDs and hard drives. “In the north, dramas and films are all about making sacrifices for the leader,” the defector Lee Je-song noted. “But across the border, shockingly, characters are seen to make sacrifices for love.” Some commentators compare the effect of samizdat and the Velvet



**ABOVE LEFT**  
A mural celebrating RM, lead singer of K-pop band BTS, in his hometown of Goyang.  
AFP/Getty Images

**ABOVE**  
Jeon Jong-seo in Lee Chang-dong’s film *Burning*.  
Allstar

**LEFT**  
*Table-Turning* by Korean artist Hejum Bă, part of the inaugural Frieze Seoul, which ends today.

**RIGHT**  
A Pink Soldier from *Squid Game*.



Underground in helping to bring down the iron curtain. There is some evidence that it is having an effect, not least in chilling reports of mass executions of party officials caught with CDs imported from the south.

The sense that *hallyu* can penetrate the most closed of societies perhaps emboldened Korean creators to believe there was no territory their work could not invade. In her book *The Birth of Korean Cool* (subtitled *How One Country Is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture*), the Korean-American journalist Euny Hong quotes Korea’s influential cultural critic Lee Moon-won about the audacity of that enterprise: “Very few countries have ever attempted to sell their pop culture to the United States.” For about a decade, when K-pop and K-dramas were ascendant across Asia, that ambition was stubbornly resisted. The unlikely detonator of the Korean wave in the English-speaking world was Gangnam Style, the 2012 track by the Seoul-based rapper Psy that became the first YouTube video to be viewed a billion times. Gangnam Style – a high-octane dig at the pretensions of Seoul’s newly minted and plastic surgery-obsessed elite – vocalised an easy and irreverent spirit at odds with received ideas of the earnestness of Korean culture. It offered dramatic evidence that the west’s complacent sense of a monopoly on irony and nuance might be under serious threat.

The global success of Psy’s rap could be traced back to the dramatic rises and falls in fortune that have characterised Korean history (the

peninsula has been invaded and colonised many times, without ever encroaching on its neighbours). After the Korean war, South Korea was ranked among the poorest nations in the world. With a mixture of authoritarian repression and collective will, the “hermit kingdom” had by the late 1990s turned that around to look like a tech and manufacturing success story. That rise came to an abrupt end with an economic crash in 1997, when the Korean government was forced to ask the IMF for an emergency loan of \$57bn. The day of that request is still known as the Day of National Humility. In order to pay off the debt there were many collective sacrifices (including a drive for gold that saw tens of thousands of ordinary Koreans donate wedding rings to the national cause).

The Seoul government still faced serious harm to Korea’s credibility as a place to do business. Former president Kim Dae-jung decided that what was needed was a massive exercise in nation rebranding. According to ministers quoted in Hong’s book: “Kim marvelled how much revenue the United States brought in from films and the UK from stage musicals. He decided to use those two countries as benchmarks for creating a pop culture industry in Korea.”

After the IMF crisis, the president threw money at a new cultural content office, supported by a multibillion-dollar public-private investment fund to promote Korean creative industries and individuals. The effort was galvanised by a

flood of cultural imports from Japan (if one thing unites Koreans, it is a long memory about brutal Japanese imperial rule). The drive to eclipse J-pop and J-movies with home-grown culture became a national obsession. Koreans couldn’t stop singing. The launch in 2009 of *Superstar K*, Korea’s version of *Britain’s Got Talent*, saw more than 700,000 people apply to audition. By the fourth season in 2012 that number had passed 2 million.

**T**he other strand of the Korean government’s rebranding programme was a commitment to a digital future. Broadband was delivered to nearly all Korean households by 2010. One outcome of that early adoption of technology is that the Korean wave tends to blur distinctions between real and virtual worlds. Just as K-pop stars exist both on concert stages and in an imagined metaverse, so esports merge real-world competition and online gaming. During my time in Seoul, I visited the futuristic HQ of T1, the “Manchester United of esports”, in Gangnam. As with K-pop, T1 recruits and nurtures teenage stars for its all-conquering League of Legends team. Semi-nocturnal players (the meal schedule at the T1 complex is always one step behind – breakfast is at lunchtime, dinner is in the early hours) are encouraged to interact with armies of fans online, before and after stadium-filling livestreamed matches. Faker – real name Lee

Sang-hyeok – the star of the T1 (who looks a little more like Harry Potter than Cristiano Ronaldo), reportedly recently turned down a \$20m salary to join a rival team.

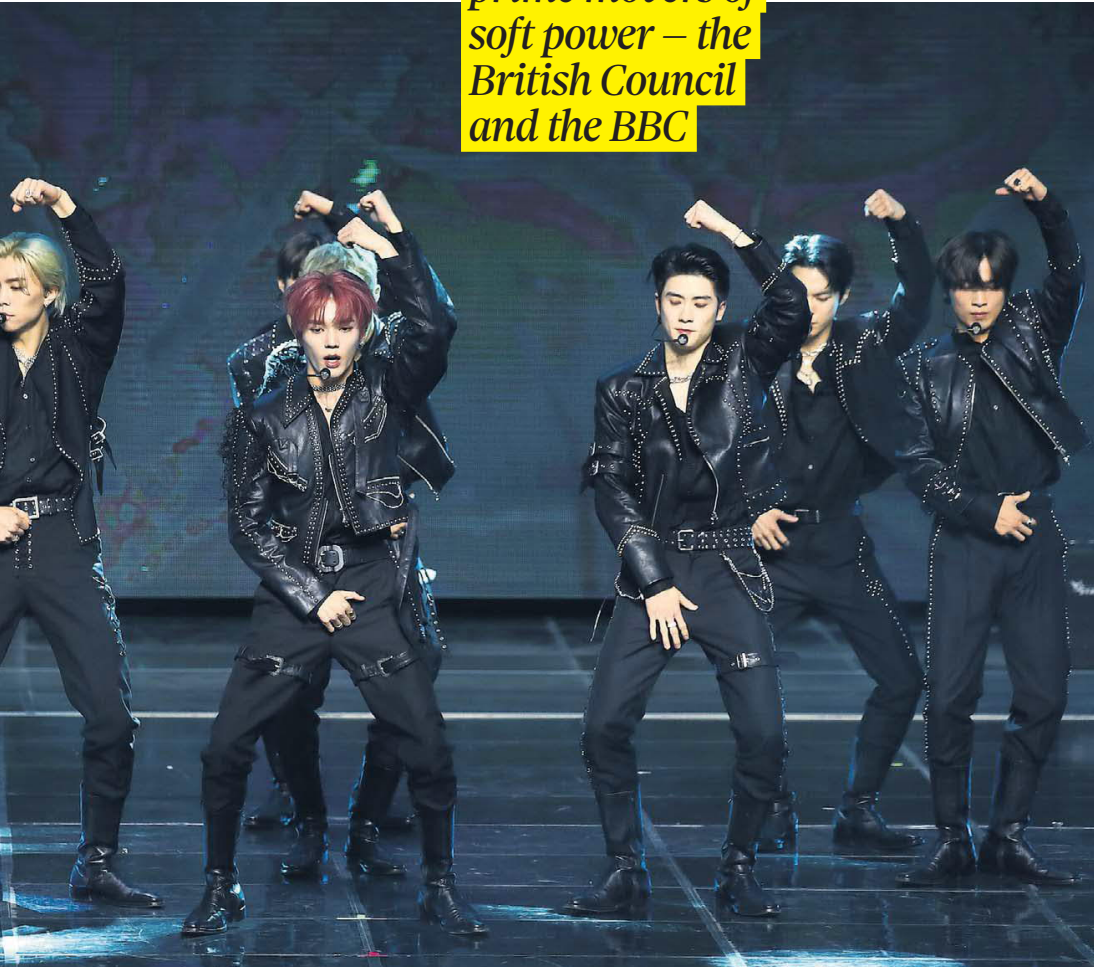
For all that virtual interactivity, there is, too, a powerfully traditional sense about much Korean culture. One night in Seoul I had dinner with 84-year-old Shim Young-soon, who is the something like a cross between Delia Smith and Elizabeth David in Korean cuisine. She appeared in her daughter’s restaurant wearing stiff Korean silks. Shim has evangelised Korean cooking for 50 years and watched it grow from being the poor relation of world cuisine to an antioxidant-rich, Michelin-star turn.

Kimchi is at the heart of that revolution. The spiced cabbage dish holds a unique place in Korean hearts partly because of the collective memory of *kimjang*, the communal autumn ritual of massaging vats full of cabbage leaves with red pepper, salt, garlic, ginger and anchovy paste. It was kimchi – fizzing and fermenting in clay pots underground – that got Korea through the harshest winters of its war-torn history.

Shim has travelled through Korean regions collecting dozens of different recipes for kimchi with records dating back to the 15th century. She puts her own health, mental and physical, down to her adherence to the subtle checks and balances of Korean cuisine. Those beliefs in kimchi’s health-giving properties went properly global, along with K-pop, during Covid. In between brief lectures on the importance of



“  
Korea was imitating the prime movers of soft power – the British Council and the BBC



**LEFT**  
NCT 127, led by Taeyoung, centre, perform in Seoul earlier this year.  
Getty Images

**BELOW**  
84-year-old Shim Young-soon, queen of Korean cuisine.



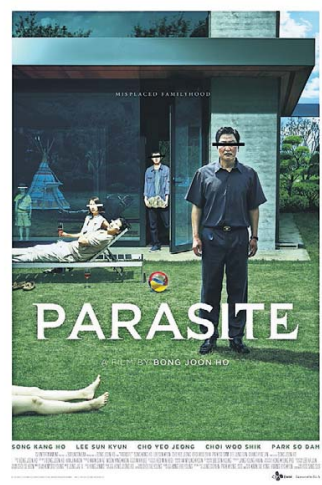
food preparation within a fertile marriage, Shim gave me a long and impassioned argument about the inferiority of Chinese and Japanese versions of the dish. At one point in a fabulous meal, she had a brief coughing fit. She put that down to her daughter's introduction of an "alien" piece of parmesan crisp to an otherwise "true" Korean dish of grilled ribs.

If Korean food wants to celebrate the native authenticity of its origins, however, most of the rest of its culture is exuberantly hybrid. This weekend, the first Seoul Frieze art

fair is taking place, cementing the city's reputation as south-east Asia's art capital. Next month in London, there is a festival of crossover K-pop and K-classical. Ten years ago, the critic Lee Moon-won was suggesting that "Koreans are not good at creativity". But just as the tiger economies had imported and copied and eclipsed western manufacturing excellence by the end of the last century, Korean artists have brought home and transformed western ideas of cool.

Nowhere has that effort been more successful than in film. While

Hollywood repeats bloated Marvel franchises, Korean film-makers have learned that 1970s Hollywood trick of making thoughtful, auteur-led films go mainstream. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* was a groundbreaking Oscar winner of best picture – not for any kind of worthiness but for its brilliant contemporary storytelling, the sharp and resonant things it had to say about inequality and class and poverty and excess – subjects about which mainstream American film is mostly silent. The Netflix blockbuster *Squid Game*, too, gave



comedies of Hong Sang-soo (**Right Now, Wrong Then**), the wild genre stylings of Kim Jee-woon (especially in his lush espionage saga **The Age of Shadows**) and, of course, the diverse oeuvre of Park Chan-wook, from brutal manga-inspired actioner **Oldboy** to his coolly erotic Sarah Waters remix **The Handmaiden**.

**Michael Hogan on TV**  
Korean drama went stratospheric during lockdown, thanks to viral hit **Squid Game**, but the nation's TV industry has long been on an

universe alter egos. The boys favour all-caps names like **EXO** and **NCT**; **TXT** have taken the genre more pop-punk and emo of late.

But there's more to Korean music than pop on steroids. The superlative ambient producer **Park Jiha** combines western minimalism with traditional Korean instruments. The duo **Dalum** are even more minimal, trading lines on the gayageum and the geomungo, the spaces as important as the notes.

**Guy Lodge on film**  
**Parasite**'s historic best picture Oscar brought modern Korean cinema into the mainstream, but Bong Joon-ho's wily class-war thriller is no isolated highlight. New converts should also seek out the richly philosophical work of Lee Chang-dong (peaking with the masterful Murakami adaptation **Burning**), the playful, time-collapsing

a whole new tone of voice to its playful, compulsive, brutal take on late-stage capitalism. *Squid Game* was the first non-English Netflix show to top global viewing charts, breaking all previous records for the platform (in its first month, it clocked up 1.65bn hours of viewing compared with what was then the previous best, the first season of *Bridgerton*, with 625m hours).

**T**he success of *Squid Game* opens up scope for more Korean exports. While I was in Seoul, a very different Korean drama, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, was a surprise fixture at the top of Netflix's global ratings charts, above the much-hyped adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is a courtroom series featuring an autistic junior barrister with case-cracking powers of recall. It proves an appetite for Korean kookiness as well as high-concept violence. The star of that show, Park Eun-bin, started out as a child actress on Korean television 27 years ago. She told me how gratifying it was to now be reaching a global audience. She said: "It's fantastic that we can now share a lot more elements of Korea with the world." There was a confidence that nothing needed to be modified to find those viewers, even in the west. "What works here works outside as well."

Bang Jinah is director of the Korean Culture and Information Service. In her 13 years in that department, she has seen the Korean wave move from a ripple to a deluge. "About 10 years ago, we noticed the big shift," she said. "Before that, most of the coverage of Korea in the foreign press was about national defence. And now it is all about culture – K-pop, K-classical, K-movies. There has in this time also been a threefold increase in the number of articles."

I mentioned to her an interesting metric, the annual Good Country Index, which attempts to quantify how effective countries are in selling positive ideas of themselves. Last year, Korea was at No 6 in its list of global cultural influence (Britain was at No 23).

Bang smiled. What they were doing in her department, she suggested, was really trying to emulate the effectiveness of the British Council and the BBC, those prime movers of soft power. She was surprised when I mentioned how the current British government seemed intent on starving that success story, undermining the BBC, slashing the budget of the "woke" British Council, shutting down university creative and design courses. "Why?" she asked. "Search me," I replied. But then I guess that's the thing about waves: for every one that advances, there are always plenty of others in retreat.

*Hallyu! The Korean Wave is at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, from 24 September-25 June 2023. K-Music 2022 runs from 5 October-24 November at various London venues*

## Our critics on where to start with K-culture

### Kitty Empire on music

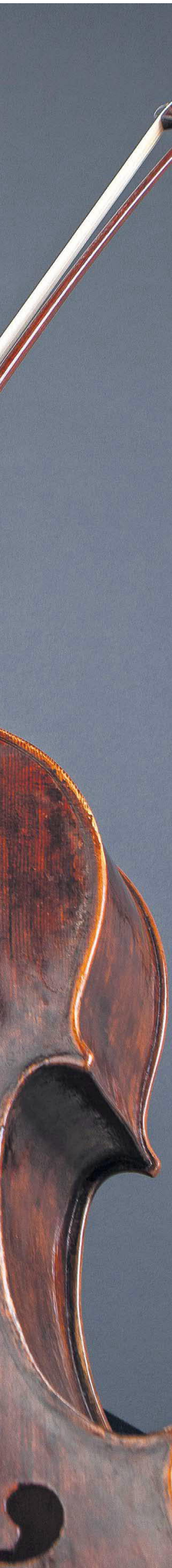
You might have mimed riding a pony, Gangnam Style, in 2012. But some argue that **Psy**'s K-pop gateway drug was a novelty record and not a true expression of the precision-tooled, gendered group phenomenon that is K-Pop. Sonically, K-pop beats western pop at its own game, taking the busier, upbeat end of US R&B and supercharging it, stuffing each track with multiple melodies and pre-choruses and at times a sprinkling of Korean tradition: TikTok was made for K-Pop, and it turns out Korean is a terrific language to rap in.

Beyond established stars like **BTS**, **BlackPink** and upstarts **Monsta X**, the K-Pop universe is vast and deep. New-ish girl group **Loona** ram dozens of meme-worthy snippets together while **Aespa**'s 2020 hit **Black Mamba** introduced a band with parallel

‘There were  
times when  
I played in the  
bathroom’

*Ahead of his appearance  
at the Last Night of  
the Proms, the cellist  
Sheku Kanneh-Mason chats  
to **Fiona Maddocks** about  
growing up in a house  
full of musicians and  
his love of Rachmaninov,  
Tupac and Arsenal FC*





**T**he cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason, 23, is the third of seven siblings – Isata, Braimah, Konya, Jeneba, Aminata, Mariatu, aged 26 to 13 years – all musicians who regularly perform together. He grew up in Nottingham and won BBC Young Musician 2016,

which catapulted him to worldwide fame and an invitation to perform at the wedding of Prince Harry to Meghan Markle in 2018, watched by an estimated two billion people. He has featured on the cover of *GQ* magazine, won two Classical Brit awards and in 2020 was awarded an MBE. His recording of Elgar's Cello Concerto with Simon Rattle and the London Symphony Orchestra (2020) made history as Kanneh-Mason became the first cellist to reach the UK Official Albums Chart Top 10.

He has just been appointed the first Menuhin Visiting Professor of Performance Mentoring at London's Royal Academy of Music, where he was a student. His new solo album, *Song*, is out this Friday. On Saturday he will play Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's version of the traditional spiritual *Deep River* (also recorded by his sister Isata on her solo piano album *Summertime*) at the Last Night of the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall, London.

**You're talking to me from a phone in Australia. What's happening?**

I'm here with the family. We've just done a tour of seven cities, playing all kinds of ensembles – duets, trios, quartets, all of us. It's been really fun, especially because these days we're quite scattered, so it's been a rare chance to be all together. There've been no monumental fallouts, I'm glad to say!

**You sound as if you're in a hurricane.**  
I'm walking along in Melbourne and it's pretty cold. We've just been to the Botanic Gardens and now we're heading for the airport to go home. I've hung back from the family... they're in front.

**Would they like to join in?**  
No! You'd get too many conflicting opinions!

**How do you feel about the Last Night and all the flag waving?**

Growing up in Nottingham I watched and listened on TV and radio but I didn't go to a Prom until I was 18, which is also when I first played in them – and have done every year since. But I've never been to the Last Night so to be honest I've no idea what to expect. I'm all for having a big party to mark the end of the season. The flag waving depends where it's coming from: if it's from being proud of the British music scene, that's great, but if it's something more sinister...

**When you won BBC Young Musician in 2016, the question asked, tacitly or aloud, was why only one Black state-school educated pupil had ever got this far in the competition.**

**How do you deal with the burden of responsibility this places on you?**  
If I can be someone people look up to, that's wonderful. I love to play to and talk with young people as much as I can. But speaking about diversity is everyone's responsibility, not just that of people like me. White artists need to talk about it too. I agree it's not easy. That's the challenge. Everyone has to find a way to discuss these issues openly. And it's about education too.

**Your own success, and that of your siblings, has meant you're also expected to have all the answers about how to get music education into schools. But there isn't one solution is there?**

There isn't. One thing is very clear. Music must be valued as a core subject. People always try to justify it because of its transferable skills. But we don't say a child should do maths because it helps with English, or science because it helps with geography. They're respected in their own right. Music is amazing. It's challenging, creative, empathetic. It's a way to access the brain in completely different ways.

“

*If I can be someone to look up to, that's wonderful. But diversity is everyone's responsibility*

## Portrait by Antonio Olmos

**I've read your mother's book [*House of Music* by Kadiatu Kanneh-Mason], and I've watched the TV documentary [BBC One's *Imagine... This House Is Full of Music*]. I still can't understand how seven of you could all practise at the same time under one roof without it being a terrible racket or civil war breaking out.**

There was a time when I played in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet – with the lid down! – but that was in part because the acoustics were so great! But it also helped, a bit like being at music college, hearing all the different practice sounds coming from different rooms.

**Bathroom aside, where's your favourite venue?**

I love performing at Nottingham's Royal Concert Hall. It's a fabulous acoustic and it's my home city. I also love the Peckham multistorey car park [Bold Tendencies]. I've played there a lot and you always feel the audience there is ready to receive any kind of music.

**Your sister Jeneba is playing there the same night you're playing at the Last Night...**

Yes, I wish I could hear her. My family are having to split up – some at the Albert Hall and some hearing Jeneba and the Philharmonia in Peckham.

**Two of your sisters, Isata and Jeneba, are both virtuoso pianists. How might a listener differentiate between their playing?**

I play duos a lot with my older sister, Isata, so I know her playing very well. She has amazing flexibility, as if the music could be shaped in any direction. I feel I can do anything and she will respond. I haven't yet played as much with Jeneba. She has a wonderful control of colour and voices; she's a very sensitive player, and draws you into her inner world.

**Do you get stage fright?**

Not fright as such. But I take the role of performer very seriously and feel a pressure in myself to communicate everything I can about the pieces I play. I don't have a ritual about performance days. I like to be around people. I need to have slept well and to have eaten. Then around 15 minutes before the concert starts, I have to be alone and get myself

prepared. The important thing is to have the confidence to be yourself, and then you can communicate to audiences. I hope I can share that when I mentor at the Royal Academy of Music.

**What do you listen to when you're not practising?**

Everything: jazz, folk, Indian classical music, Bob Marley, reggae, hip-hop, rap – especially Tupac Shakur. I listen on journeys or when I'm cooking. I've got a record player.

**Vinyl?**

Yes, I love vinyl.

**Do any of these different kinds of music surface in your new album, *Song*?**

It's a mix of stuff, some of my own compositions, arrangements, improvisation, a pop-style song I wrote with a friend. I'm open to playing all kinds of music, and collaborating. The title is about the lyrical power of the cello.

**If someone wants to get into classical music, what do you suggest?**

Rachmaninov's Sonata for Cello and Piano, one of my favourite pieces ever. In fact anything by Rachmaninov.

**What was the last live event you went to?**

Last night. A small Ethiopian bar for Jeneba's birthday. Roots reggae. It was cool. We were all there – except my youngest sister, Mariatu.

**Could you imagine having chosen any other career apart from music?**

Nothing came close. I was really into maths and physics at school, and I loved – still love – football. I'm a massive Arsenal fan, but I love playing too. It's inspiring to play a competitive sport, and to have the social element too, whereas in music you spend a lot of time working on your own. There shouldn't be a competitive element in the practice room!

**Don't you worry about injury when you play football?**

I suppose there is a risk for any performer. But no more than walking downstairs or chopping vegetables...

*Sheku Kanneh-Mason performs at the Last Night of the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall, London, on Saturday, 7.15pm, which will be live on Radio 3 and BBC Two/BBC One. His new album, *Song*, is out on Decca on Friday*

# SISTERS OF THE REVOLUTION

A new photobook recalls the crucial but often overlooked role played by women in the Black Panthers. The photographer Stephen Shames and co-author and former member Ericka Huggins talk to **Sean O'Hagan**



RIGHT  
At the black Free Huey rally in Provo Park in Oakland, later re-named Martin Luther King, Jr Civic Center Park, 1971.

Stephen Shames had just turned 20 when he visited the headquarters of the Black Panther party in Oakland, California, and showed some of his recent photographs to Bobby Seale, co-founder and main spokesman for the organisation. Though Shames was still finding his way as a photographer, Seale liked what he saw and decided to use some of the pictures in the Black Panther newspaper. So it was that a young white guy from Cambridge, Massachusetts became the official chronicler of the Black Panthers from 1967 to 1973, documenting at close hand their community programmes, protests, rallies, arrests and funerals.

"The Panthers were never a black nationalist organisation," says Shames, now 74. "They formed alliances with many black writers and activists and their whole legal

team was white. They were not out to get white people, as the American government insisted. They were a revolutionary organisation who worked with anybody they felt was sincerely trying to change the system to benefit poor people and create a more just society."

Since that time, Shames has published two photobooks about that struggle – *The Black Panthers* (2006) and *Power to the People: the World of the Black Panthers* (2016) – as well as several other titles that attest to a life of activism and deep engagement with his subjects. Next month, he will complete his trilogy on that era with a book that, as he puts it, is "long overdue". Co-authored with former Black Panther Ericka Huggins, who is now a writer and educator, *Comrade Sisters: Women of the Black Panther Party* is a dynamic visual and oral testament to the crucial role played by women in a revolutionary group

whose figureheads, with a few exceptions, were men.

In her foreword to the book, the activist and author Angela Davis points out that 66% of the membership of the Black Panthers was female. She writes: "Because the media tended to focus on what could be easily sensationalised ... There has been a tendency to forget that the organising work that truly made the Black Panther Party relevant to a new era of struggle for liberation was largely carried out by women."

The book is a powerful record of an intense period of grassroots activism and political engagement, a counter-narrative to the one propagated by J Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, who called the Panthers "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country". Like the Black Panther men, the women members tended to look both stylish and dramatic, often sporting afros and at times the

ABOVE  
*Kathleen Cleaver, communications secretary and the first female member of the Party's central committee, with Black Panthers from Los Angeles at the Free Huey rally in West Oakland, 28 July 1968.*

black leather jackets and berets that were the Panther uniform. "Most young people are photogenic," says Shames, "but the Panthers were charismatic. It was something to do with the pride they instilled in their people. Rather than treating them as a problem as the government did, they gave them a sense of faith and pride and I really think that shines through in the photographs."

Shames's extraordinary access allowed him to capture fly-on-the-wall shots of young women at protest rallies, but also carrying out the on-the-ground organising of various Black Panther community initiatives, including the Free Breakfast for Children Program, the People's Free Ambulance Service and the People's Free Medical Clinics, which offered medical care, including sickle-cell anaemia testing. Though the series is punctuated by images of well-known female members – Kathleen

Photographs by  
Stephen Shames



Cleaver (law professor and former communications secretary for the party), Elaine Brown (prison activist, writer and former chair of the party), and the late Afeni Shakur (political activist and mother of rapper Tupac Shakur) – most of the testimonies come from ordinary black women whose youthful engagement with the Black Panthers remains the most empowering moment of their lives.

Carol Henry, who joined the Oakland chapter of the Panthers, recalls: “I joined the BPP when I was 20 years old. I lived in a part of town where the Free Breakfast for School Children Program ran. We got up at 3am; it was a real mission, but it was beautiful. We gave those children a full breakfast every day. Cooking that breakfast was the most memorable part, because everybody got up so early and everybody worked together.”

Another woman, Barbara Easley-

Cox, who was in the Philadelphia chapter, remembers: “Love is what tied me to the party; it exemplified how I understood love. And that is: you have to love people, to serve them. I was so loved. So blessed on this earth because of my sisters, all of us, who came into the party. It’s lacking today, when I look out on this landscape in America.”

As co-author, Ericka Huggins wrote the introductory essay and tracked down, as she puts it, “the women who were there and whose individual testimonies we could use to evoke how extraordinary that time was for many of us”. Huggins’s own moment of political awakening was seismic. Aged 18, and studying education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, she picked up a copy of the radical leftist magazine *Ramparts* and saw a photograph of a young black man strapped to a hospital gurney with a bullet wound in his stomach. Next to

him, a policeman stood grinning at the camera. On reading the accompanying report, she found out that the young man was Huey P Newton, a co-founder of the party, who had authored the party’s 10-point manifesto with Seale in 1966. “I studied the picture for some time,” she recalled years later, “I didn’t have tears for it, I was so appalled.”

The following day, she left a note for her friend and fellow student John Huggins that read: “I am going to California if I have to walk. I am going to find Huey Newton and work in his defence. Are you coming?”

The pair subsequently drove across the country to Los Angeles, where they joined the local Black Panther chapter, which then comprised around 20 members. They were married soon afterwards and initially worked at whatever task was necessary: answering phones, selling newspapers, writing letters to politicians and talking

TOP  
Sickle-cell anaemia testing during Bobby Seale’s campaign for mayor of Oakland, 1973.

ABOVE  
Gloria Abernethy sells the Black Panther newspaper. Tamara Lacey holds a sickle-cell anaemia poster, Oakland, 1973.

to potential donors. Not long after their arrival in California, they attended the funeral of 17-year-old Bobby Hutton, who had been killed in disputed circumstances during a shoot-out between the Panthers and the Oakland police. “The person waiting in line next to me to pay his respects was Marlon Brando,” says Huggins. “He looked as heartbroken as I felt.”

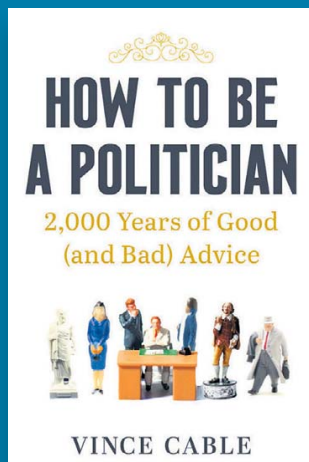
The killing was an augury. In January 1969, her husband, who had become a leader of the Los Angeles Black Panthers, was assassinated on the campus of UCLA by alleged members of a black nationalist group, the US Organization. The killing was thought by many in the black community to be linked to the Cointelpro programme that was being conducted clandestinely and illegally by the FBI against the Black Panthers. In December that

# Politics and society season

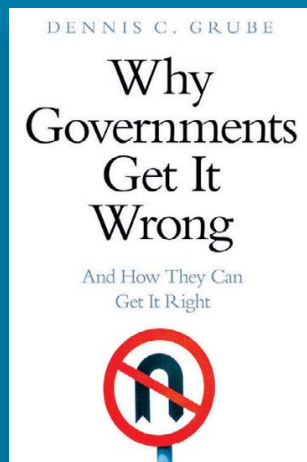


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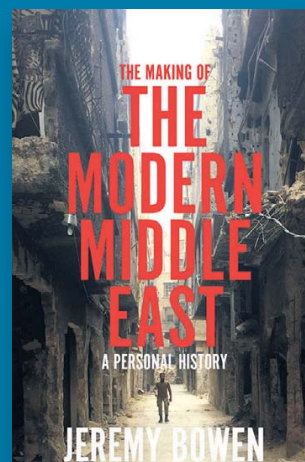
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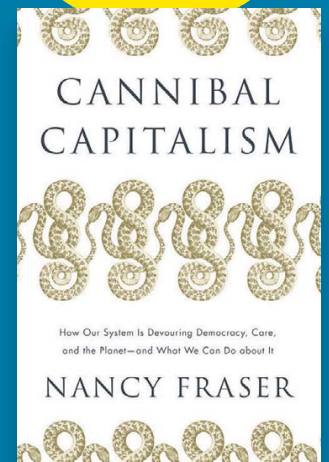
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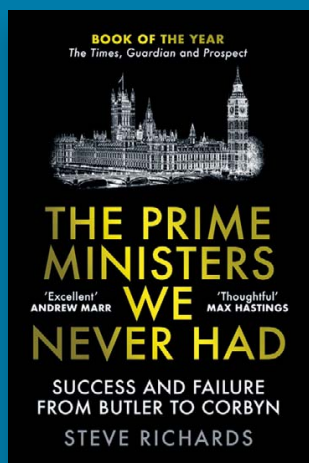
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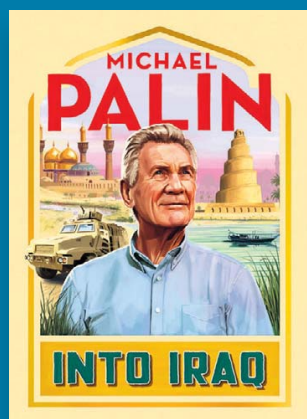
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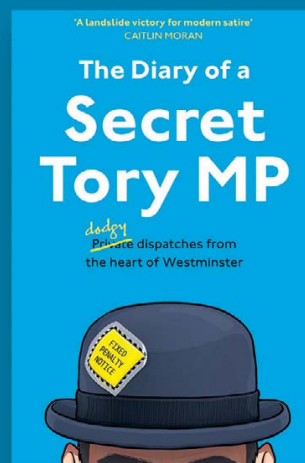
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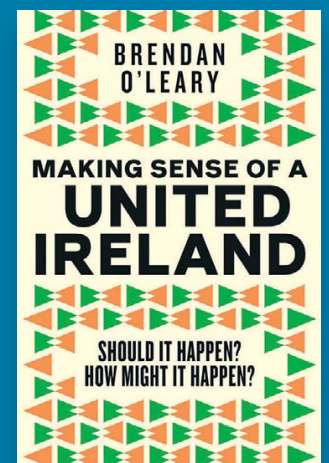
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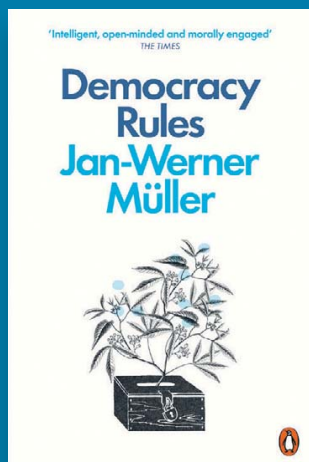
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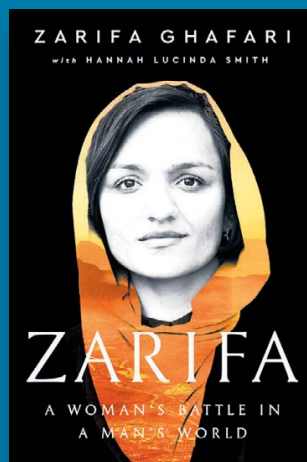
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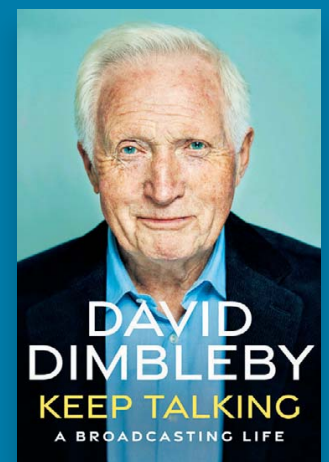
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“  
Whatever harm the  
government did us,  
we kept stepping out  
and stepping up

LEFT  
Ericka Huggins  
at the Black  
Community  
Survival  
Conference, 1972.

ABOVE  
At the Panthers’  
Free Breakfast  
for Children  
Program, St  
Augustine’s  
church, West  
Oakland, 1972.

BELOW  
Panthers’ sons  
and daughters  
march in front  
of the Black  
Panther office on  
Shattuck Avenue,  
Berkeley, 1971.

ALL IMAGES ©  
STEPHEN SHAMES



»» Continued from page 15

year, Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed in an FBI-orchestrated raid on Hampton’s apartment.

Widowed with a three-week old daughter, Huggins moved to her husband’s home town of New Haven, Connecticut and, alongside Kathleen Cleaver and Elaine Brown, organised a branch of the Black Panther party there. In 1969, she was arrested alongside Bobby Seale, and charged with murder, kidnapping and conspiracy, but after a lengthy trial, the charges were dismissed in May 1971.

“The word ‘conspiracy’ was used a lot at the time,” she says now, calmly. “We spent time in jail for a murder we did not commit or have anything to do with. The system, then as now, was punitive. We were punished before we even entered the courtroom and their aim was to keep us in prison for ever...”

Did her time in prison dent the sense of optimism and empowerment she had experienced when she joined the Black Panthers? “My optimism was dented by my husband being killed,” she replies, “and by not being able to see my daughter except for a single hour every Saturday. But I chose not to let it break my spirit. When I was in solitary and grieving, I taught myself to meditate in a way that brought me into a deeper focus, so that when I went to court I could be really present. It’s a practice I have kept to this day.”

Huggins insists that her experience was not exceptional and that it “helped me help the women I contacted to tell their stories, because it’s hard sometimes to go back”. Alongside Shames’s powerful images, those stories evoke a time in which young black women experienced a moment of life-changing personal empowerment and collective possibility.



ABOVE  
Earlene Coleman  
prepares food  
bags as part of  
the Panther Free  
Food Program,  
March 1972.

LEFT  
Women with  
bags of food  
at the People’s  
Free Food  
Program, one  
of the Panthers’  
survival  
programmes,  
Palo Alto,  
California, 1972.

“These are not war stories,” says Huggins, who spent 14 years as a Black Panther, making her the longest-serving woman in their history. “They are stories of service to humanity. The reason they are so striking, touching and inspiring is because you can sense how beautiful and alive the women were in that moment. Every function of the government that could do harm to us did so, but we kept stepping out and stepping up, because we were giving our communities what had never been given.

“I think all the women in the book realise that, because they can remember how great they felt back then, what they learned, and what was indelibly imprinted on their minds and in their hearts. The book is our legacy.”

*Comrade Sisters: Women of the Black Panther Party* by Stephen Shames and Ericka Huggins is published by ACC Art Books next month

# Step this way and escape the apocalypse

When *Douglas Rushkoff* was flown to the US desert to talk about the future of technology with five billionaires, it soon became clear that they had other ideas. As this extract from his new book shows, what these super-rich 'preppers' wanted was the means to survive the collapsing world they'd helped to create – and to leave the rest of us behind

**A**s a humanist who writes about the impact of digital technology on our lives, I am often mistaken for a futurist. The people most interested in hiring me for my opinions about technology are usually less concerned with building tools that help people live better lives in the present than they are in identifying the Next Big Thing through which to dominate them in the future. I don't usually respond to their inquiries. Why help these guys ruin what's left of the internet, much less civilisation?

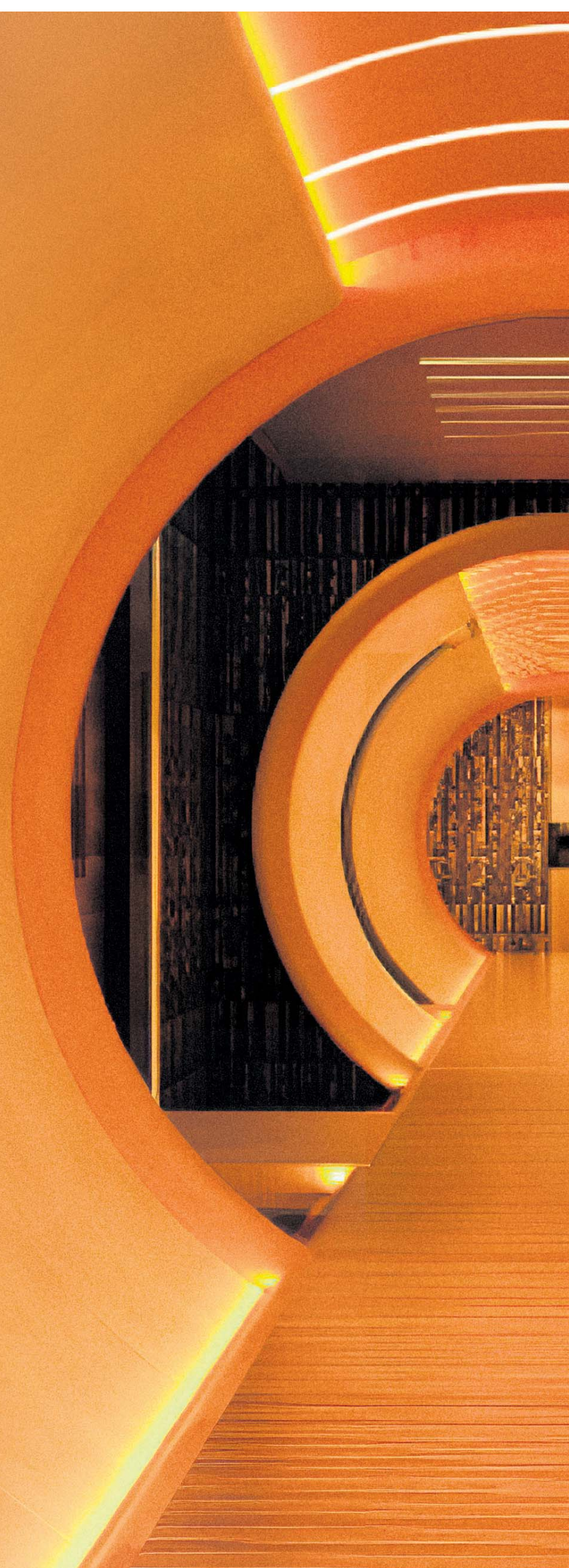
Still, sometimes a combination of morbid curiosity and cold hard cash is enough to get me on a stage in front of the tech elite, where I try to talk some sense into them about how their businesses are affecting our lives out here in the real world. That's how I found myself accepting an invitation to address a group mysteriously described as "ultra-wealthy stakeholders", out in the middle of the desert.

A limo was waiting for me at the airport. As the sun began to dip over the horizon, I realised I had been in the car for three hours. What sort of wealthy hedge-fund types would drive this far from the airport for a conference? Then I saw it. On a parallel path next to the highway, as if racing against us, a small jet was

coming in for a landing on a private airfield. Of course.

The next morning, two men in matching Patagonia fleeces came for me in a golf cart and conveyed me through rocks and underbrush to a meeting hall. They left me to drink coffee and prepare in what I figured was serving as my green room. But instead of me being wired with a microphone or taken to a stage, my audience was brought in to me. They sat around the table and introduced themselves: five super-wealthy guys – yes, all men – from the upper echelon of the tech investing and hedge-fund world. At least two of them were billionaires. After a bit of small talk, I realised they had no interest in the speech I had prepared about the future of technology. They had come to ask questions.

They started out innocuously and predictably enough. Bitcoin or ethereum? Virtual reality or augmented reality? Who will get quantum computing first, China or Google? Eventually, they edged into their real topic of concern: New Zealand or Alaska? Which region would be less affected by the coming climate crisis? It only got worse from there. Which was the greater threat: global warming or biological warfare? How long should one plan to be able to survive with no outside help? Should a shelter have its own air supply? What was the likelihood of groundwater



contamination? Finally, the CEO of a brokerage house explained that he had nearly completed building his own underground bunker system, and asked: "How do I maintain authority over my security force after the event?" The event. That was their euphemism for the environmental collapse, social unrest, nuclear explosion, solar storm, unstoppable virus, or malicious computer hack that takes everything down.

This single question occupied us for the rest of the hour. They knew armed guards would be required to protect their compounds from raiders as well as angry mobs. One had already secured a dozen Navy Seals to make their way to his compound if he gave them the right cue. But how would he pay the guards once even his crypto was worthless? What would stop the guards from eventually choosing their own leader?

The billionaires considered using special combination locks on the food supply that only they knew. Or making guards wear disciplinary collars of some kind in return for their survival. Or maybe building robots to serve as guards and workers – if that technology could be developed "in time".

I tried to reason with them. I made pro-social arguments for partnership and solidarity as the best approaches to our collective, long-term challenges. The way to get your guards to exhibit loyalty in the future was to treat them like friends right now, I explained. Don't just invest in ammo and electric fences, invest in people and relationships. They rolled their eyes at what must have sounded to them like hippy philosophy.

This was probably the wealthiest, most powerful group I had ever encountered. Yet here they were, asking a Marxist media theorist for advice on where and how to configure their doomsday bunkers. That's when it hit me: at least as far as these gentlemen were concerned, this *was* a talk about the future of technology.

Taking their cue from Tesla founder Elon Musk colonising Mars, Palantir's Peter Thiel reversing the ageing process, or artificial intelligence developers Sam Altman and Ray Kurzweil uploading their minds into supercomputers, they were preparing for a digital future that had less to do with making the world a better place than it did with transcending the human condition altogether. Their extreme wealth and privilege served only to make them obsessed with insulating themselves from the very real and present danger of climate change,

rising sea levels, mass migrations, global pandemics, nativist panic and resource depletion. For them, the future of technology is about only one thing: escape from the rest of us.

These people once showered the world with madly optimistic business plans for how technology might benefit human society. Now they've reduced technological progress to a video game that one of them wins by finding the escape hatch. Will it be Jeff Bezos migrating to space, Thiel to his New Zealand compound, or Mark Zuckerberg to his virtual metaverse? And these catastrophising billionaires are the presumptive *winners* of the digital economy – the supposed champions of the survival-of-the-fittest business landscape that's fuelling most of this speculation to begin with.

**W**hat I came to realise was that these men are actually the losers. The billionaires who called me out to the desert to evaluate their bunker strategies are not the victors of the economic game so much as the victims of its perversely limited rules. More than anything, they have succumbed to a mindset where "winning" means earning enough money to insulate themselves from the damage they are creating by earning money in that way. It's as if they want to build a car that goes fast enough to escape from its own exhaust.

Yet this Silicon Valley escapism – let's call it The Mindset – encourages its adherents to believe that the winners can somehow leave the rest of us behind. Never before have our society's most powerful players assumed that the primary impact of their own conquests would be to render the world itself unliveable for everyone else. Nor have they ever before had the technologies through which to programme their sensibilities into the very fabric of our society. The landscape is alive with algorithms and intelligences actively encouraging these selfish and isolationist outlooks. Those sociopathic enough to embrace them are rewarded with cash and control over the rest of us. It's a self-reinforcing feedback loop. This is new.

Amplified by digital technologies and the unprecedented wealth disparity they afford, The Mindset allows for the easy externalisation of harm to others, and inspires a corresponding longing for

Vivos's  
'inspiration'  
underground  
corridor.  
Terravivos.com

Continued on page 20 >>>

»» Continued from page 19

transcendence and separation from the people and places that have been abused.

Instead of just lording over us for ever, however, the billionaires at the top of these virtual pyramids actively seek the endgame. In fact, like the plot of a Marvel blockbuster, the very structure of *The Mindset* requires an endgame. Everything must resolve to a one or a zero, a winner or loser, the saved or the damned. Actual, imminent catastrophes from the climate emergency to mass migrations support the mythology, offering these would-be superheroes the opportunity to play out the finale in their own lifetimes. For *The Mindset* also includes a faith-based Silicon Valley certainty that they can develop a technology that will somehow break the laws of physics, economics and morality to offer them something even better than a way of saving the world: a means of escape from the apocalypse of their own making.

**B**y the time I boarded my return flight to New York, my mind was reeling with the implications of *The Mindset*. What were its main tenets? Who were its true believers? What, if anything, could we do to resist it? Before I had even landed, I posted an article about my strange encounter – to surprising effect.

Almost immediately, I began receiving inquiries from businesses catering to the billionaire prepper, all hoping I would make some introductions on their behalf to the five men I had written about. I heard from a real estate agent who specialises in disaster-proof listings, a company taking reservations for its third underground dwellings project, and a security firm offering various forms of “risk management”.

But the message that got my attention came from a former president of the American chamber of commerce in Latvia. JC Cole had witnessed the fall of the Soviet empire, as well as what it took to rebuild a working society almost from scratch. He had also served as landlord for the American and European Union embassies, and learned a whole lot about security systems and evacuation plans. “You certainly stirred up a bees’ nest,” he began his first email to me. “It’s quite accurate – the wealthy hiding in their bunkers will have a problem with their security teams... I believe you are correct with your advice to ‘treat those people really well, right now’, but also the concept may be expanded and I believe there is a better system that would give much better results.”

He felt certain that the “event” – a grey swan, or predictable catastrophe triggered by our enemies, Mother Nature, or just by accident – was inevitable. He had done a Swot analysis – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats – and concluded that preparing for



**LEFT**  
Vivos hopes to fit its former US military bunkers with features such as swimming pools and gyms.  
Terravivos.com

**BELOW**  
The lounge in the Oppidum bunker.



**RIGHT**  
Section of the Oppidum, an ‘ultra-luxury’ underground bunker in the Czech Republic.  
Oppidum Bunkers



**ABOVE**  
A luxury steel bunker under construction at the Rising S Co facility in Murchison, Texas. Several Silicon Valley entrepreneurs have purchased bunkers from the company and located them in New Zealand.  
Getty Images



calamity required us to take the very same measures as trying to prevent one. “By coincidence,” he explained, “I am setting up a series of safe haven farms in the NYC area. These are designed to best handle an ‘event’ and also benefit society as semi-organic farms. Both within three hours’ drive from the city – close enough to get there when it happens.”

Here was a prepper with security clearance, field experience and food sustainability expertise. He believed the best way to cope with the impending disaster was to change the way we treat one another, the economy, and the planet right now – while also developing a network of secret, totally self-sufficient residential farm communities for millionaires, guarded by Navy Seals armed to the teeth.

JC is currently developing two farms as part of his safe haven project. Farm one, outside Princeton, is his show model and “works well as long as the thin blue line is working”. The second one, somewhere in the Poconos, has to remain a secret. “The fewer people

“  
*It’s as if they want to build a car that goes fast enough to escape from its own exhaust*”

who know the locations, the better,” he explained, along with a link to the *Twilight Zone* episode in which panicked neighbours break into a family’s bomb shelter during a nuclear scare. “The primary value of safe haven is operational security, nicknamed OpSec by the military. If/when the supply chain breaks, the people will have no food delivered. Covid-19 gave us the wake-up call as people started fighting over toilet paper. When it comes to a shortage of food it will be vicious. That is why those intelligent enough to invest have to be stealthy.”

JC invited me down to New Jersey to see the real thing. “Wear boots,” he said. “The ground is still wet.” Then he asked: “Do you shoot?”

**T**he farm itself was serving as an equestrian centre and tactical training facility in addition to raising goats and chickens. JC showed me how to hold and shoot a Glock at a series of outdoor targets shaped like bad

guys, while he grumbled about the way Senator Dianne Feinstein had limited the number of rounds one could legally fit in a magazine for the handgun. JC knew his stuff. I asked him about various combat scenarios. “The only way to protect your family is with a group,” he said. That was really the whole point of his project – to gather a team capable of sheltering in place for a year or more, while also defending itself from those who hadn’t prepared. JC was also hoping to train young farmers in sustainable agriculture, and to secure at least one doctor and dentist for each location.

On the way back to the main building, JC showed me the “layered security” protocols he had learned designing embassy properties: a fence, no trespassing signs, guard dogs, surveillance cameras... all disincentives to prevent a violent confrontation. He paused for a minute as he stared down the drive. “Honestly, I am less concerned about gangs with guns than the woman at the end of the driveway holding a baby and asking for food.”



a palette of topsoil or a row of crops goes wrong, it can simply be pulled and replaced. The hermetically sealed apocalypse “grow room” doesn’t allow for such do-overs.

Just the *known* unknowns are enough to dash any reasonable hope of survival. But this doesn’t seem to stop wealthy preppers from trying. The *New York Times* reported that real estate agents specialising in private islands were overwhelmed with inquiries during the Covid-19 pandemic. Prospective clients were even asking about whether there was enough land to do some agriculture in addition to installing a helicopter landing pad. But while a private island may be a good place to wait out a temporary plague, turning it into a self-sufficient, defensible ocean fortress is harder than it sounds. Small islands are utterly dependent on air and sea deliveries for basic staples. Solar panels and water filtration equipment need to be replaced and serviced at regular intervals. The billionaires who reside in such locales are more, not less, dependent on complex supply chains than those of us embedded in industrial civilisation.

Surely the billionaires who brought me out for advice on their exit strategies were aware of these limitations. Could it have all been some sort of game? Five men sitting around a poker table, each wagering his escape plan was best?

But if they were in it just for fun, they wouldn’t have called for me. They would have flown out the author of a zombie apocalypse comic book. If they wanted to test their bunker plans, they’d have hired a security expert from Blackwater or the Pentagon. They seemed to want something more. Their language went far beyond questions of disaster preparedness and verged on politics and philosophy: words such as individuality, sovereignty, governance and autonomy.

That’s because it wasn’t their actual bunker strategies I had been brought out to evaluate so much as the philosophy and mathematics they were using to justify their commitment to escape. They were working out what I’ve come to call the insulation equation: could they earn enough money to insulate themselves from the reality they were creating by earning money in this way? Was there any valid justification for striving to be so successful that they could simply leave the rest of us behind – apocalypse or not?

Or was this really their intention all along? Maybe the apocalypse is less something they’re trying to escape than an excuse to realise *The Mindset*’s true goal: to rise above mere mortals and execute the ultimate exit strategy.

*This is an edited extract from Survival of the Richest by Douglas Rushkoff, published by Scribe (£20). To order a copy for £17.40 go to guardianbookshop.com or call 020-3176 3837*

He paused, and sighed, “I don’t want to be in that moral dilemma.”

That’s why JC’s real passion wasn’t just to build a few isolated, militarised retreat facilities for millionaires, but to prototype locally owned sustainable farms that can be modelled by others and ultimately help restore regional food security in America. The “just-in-time” delivery system preferred by agricultural conglomerates renders most of the nation vulnerable to a crisis as minor as a power outage or transportation shutdown. Meanwhile, the centralisation of the agricultural industry has left most farms utterly dependent on the same long supply chains as urban consumers. “Most egg farmers can’t even raise chickens,” JC explained as he showed me his henhouses. “They buy chicks. I’ve got roosters.”

JC is no hippy environmentalist but his business model is based in the same communitarian spirit I tried to convey to the billionaires: the way to keep the hungry hordes from storming the gates is by getting them food security now. So for \$3m,

investors not only get a maximum security compound in which to ride out the coming plague, solar storm, or electric grid collapse. They also get a stake in a potentially profitable network of local farm franchises that could reduce the probability of a catastrophic event in the first place. His business would do its best to ensure there are as few hungry children at the gate as possible when the time comes to lock down.

So far, JC Cole has been unable to convince anyone to invest in American Heritage Farms. That doesn’t mean no one is investing in such schemes. It’s just that the ones that attract more attention and cash don’t generally have these cooperative components. They’re more for people who want to go it alone. Most billionaire preppers don’t want to have to learn to get along with a community of farmers or, worse, spend their winnings funding a national food resilience programme. The mindset that requires safe havens is less concerned with preventing moral dilemmas than simply keeping them out of sight.

Many of those seriously seeking a safe haven simply hire one of several prepper construction companies to bury a prefab steel-lined bunker somewhere on one of their existing properties. Rising S Company in Texas builds and installs bunkers and tornado shelters for as little as \$40,000 for an 8ft by 12ft emergency hideout all the way up to the \$8.3m luxury series “Aristocrat”, complete with pool and bowling lane. The enterprise originally catered to families seeking temporary storm shelters, before it went into the long-term apocalypse business. The company logo, complete with three crucifixes, suggests their services are geared more toward Christian evangelist preppers in red-state America than billionaire tech bros playing out sci-fi scenarios.

There’s something much more whimsical about the facilities in which most of the billionaires – or, more accurately, aspiring billionaires – actually invest. A company called Vivos is selling luxury underground apartments in converted cold war munitions

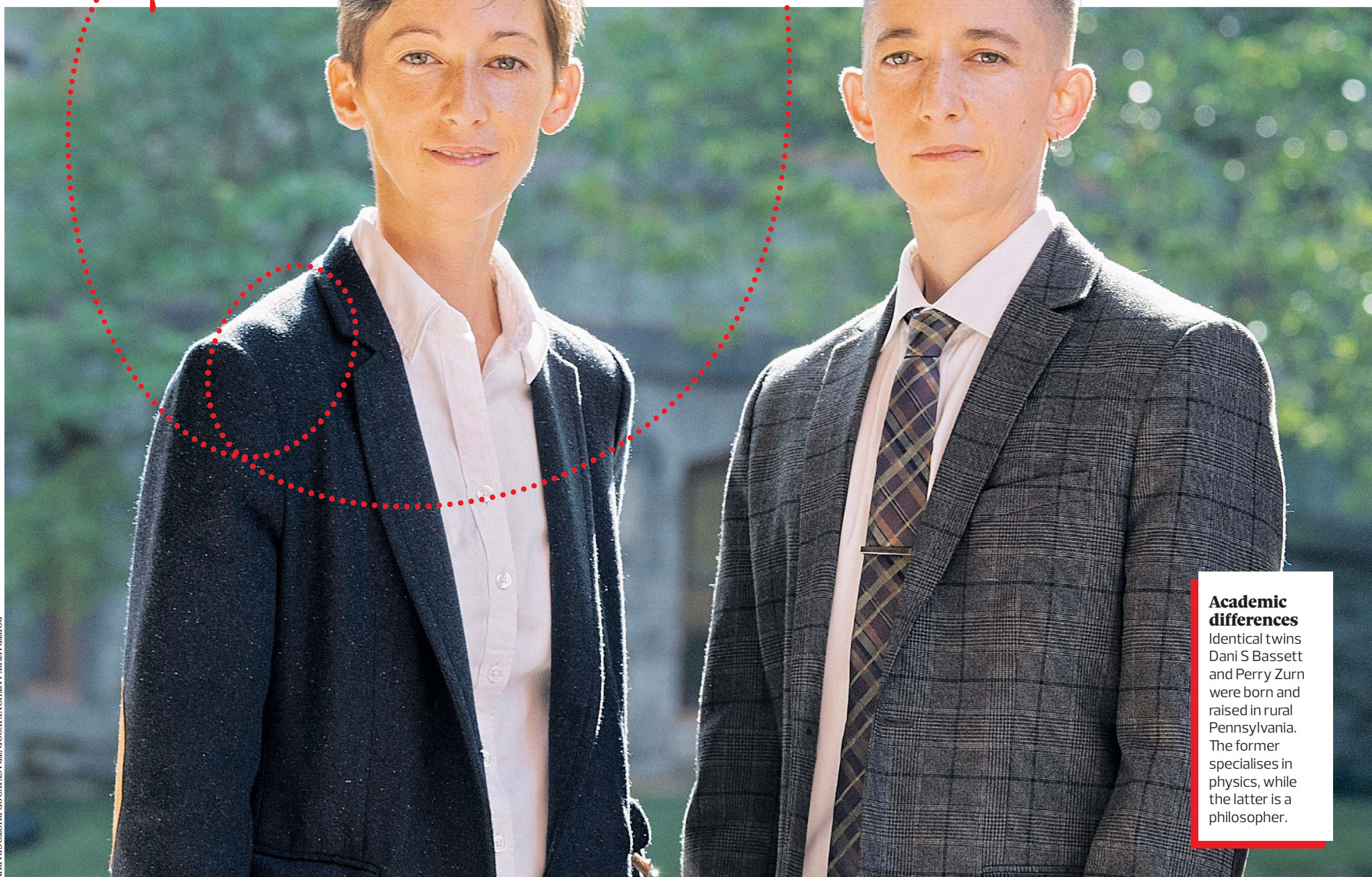
storage facilities, missile silos, and other fortified locations around the world. Like miniature Club Med resorts, they offer private suites for individuals or families, and larger common areas with pools, games, movies and dining. Ultra-elite shelters such as the Oppidum in the Czech Republic claim to cater to the billionaire class, and pay more attention to the long-term psychological health of residents. They provide imitation of natural light, such as a pool with a simulated sunlit garden area, a wine vault, and other amenities to make the wealthy feel at home.

On closer analysis, however, the probability of a fortified bunker actually protecting its occupants from the reality of, well, reality, is very slim. For one, the closed ecosystems of underground facilities are preposterously brittle. For example, an indoor, sealed hydroponic garden is vulnerable to contamination. Vertical farms with moisture sensors and computer-controlled irrigation systems look great in business plans and on the rooftops of Bay Area startups; when



# Science Tech

Ideas, analysis,  
gadgets and  
beyond



PORTRAIT BY ANTHONY WOOD/TRACY WOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

## Academic differences

Identical twins Dani S Bassett and Perry Zurn were born and raised in rural Pennsylvania. The former specialises in physics, while the latter is a philosopher.

## Hunters, dancers and the learning game

*Twin academics Dani S Bassett and Perry Zurn forged idiosyncratic paths to success in different fields – and have now combined their knowledge in a study of human curiosity. Amelia Tait reports*

**I**n the early 17th century, there was a room in a house in Copenhagen bursting with hundreds of objects: bones and shells and taxidermised birds, not to mention weapons and rocks and a stuffed polar bear cub hanging from the ceiling. This was the Museum Wormianum, collected and curated by the Danish physician and philosopher Olaus Wormius, or Ole Worm to most. Four hundred years later, this quintessential cabinet of curiosities still inspires philosophy professor Perry Zurn and bioengineering professor Dani S Bassett, identical twins. What provoked Worm to collect? Which electrical signals were firing in his brain? How would the Enlightenment eccentric have behaved given access to Wikipedia?

These are questions asked in Zurn and Bassett's latest work, *Curious Minds: The Power of Connection*, in which they investigate the

neurological, historical, philosophical, and linguistic foundations of curiosity. What exactly is curiosity? Where does it come from and how does it work? In a manuscript peppered with questions, the academics explore everything from Plutarch to Google algorithms, to argue that curiosity is networked. "It works by linking ideas, facts, perceptions, sensations and data points together," they write in the book, "Yet it also works within human grids of friendship, society and culture."

Arguably it all started with their grandmother, a modern Ole Worm. Bassett describes her as an "ultra-collector" – she had a basement and crawlspace full of antique paraphernalia such as chairs, books, crystal glasses, silverware, paintings and buttons. "I viscerally remember Dani and I crawling in there on our hands and knees and getting lost in these mazes upon mazes of old things," Zurn

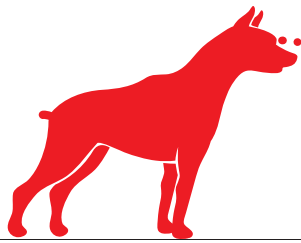
says – once, Bassett burst into tears when they realised they couldn't remember how to get out. The twins say this unofficial cabinet of curiosities influenced their young minds. "Time and history becomes so real when you see something that's really, really, really old when you're four," Zurn says.

Neither Zurn nor Bassett are technically historians, but you wouldn't know it from reading their book. The former researches political philosophy at American University in Washington DC while the latter is a professor of physics, astronomy, engineering, neurology and psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Still, *Curious Minds* is full of historical tidbits, such as the Roman essayist Plutarch's antidotes to the "disease" of curiosity (leave your letters unopened, don't have sex with your wife, walk away from intriguing sounds in the distance!)

In fact, the book is outlandishly multidisciplinary – where else could you read about the motivation circuit of the brain 25 pages before diving into the work of the Japanese poet Naoki Higashida? Just like the twins' interest in Ole Worm, the book's multidisciplinary approach was informed by their childhoods.

"We were home-schooled in a way that provided a lot of flexibility in what we could learn," Zurn says – the twins grew up with nine siblings in the Pennsylvania countryside, and had "an immense amount of freedom" with their reading; they also did a lot of hands-on learning outdoors. "And yet at the same time," Bassett adds, "There was a tight constraint on who we could be socially and how far that learning could go."

The twins' parents believed that men should go to college and have careers while women should instead get married and "serve and obey" their husbands. Bassett and Zurn



were assigned female at birth – the twins now use they/them and he/him pronouns respectively.

“School was just really my heartbeat. And I knew from as far back as I can remember that this had to be a part of my life,” Zurn says. “I remember being incredibly frustrated and disappointed when we came up against this expectation that we not continue on into academics.”

**T**hankfully, the seeds that had been sown couldn't be uprooted: the twins' home schooling made them curious about everything, and as they pursued academia, they became curious about curiosity itself. “It wasn't clear at the beginning of our careers that we would even ever have a chance to write a book together because our areas were so wildly different,” Bassett says – but then, as postgraduates, Zurn was studying the philosophy of curiosity while Bassett was working on the neuroscience of learning. “And so that's when we started talking. That talking led to seven years of doing research together,” Bassett says. “This book is a culmination of that.”

How exactly do philosophy and neuroscience complement each other? It all starts with the book's first, and most deceptively simple question: what is curiosity? “Several investigators in science have underscored that perhaps the field isn't even ready to define curiosity and how it's different from other cognitive processes,” says Bassett. The ambiguity in the neuroscience literature motivated Bassett to turn to philosophy, “where there are really rich historical definitions and styles and subtypes that we can then put back into neuroscience and ask: ‘Can we see these in the brain?’”

Yet whether discussing neuroscience or philosophy, *Curious Minds* reiterates the idea that curiosity is networked – “Knowledge is a network, and curiosity is the growth principle of that network,” the twins write in the book's introduction. “To be curious is to connect ideas and people and to build knowledge together,” Zurn explains. But are he and his twin particularly keen on this theory precisely because they're twins, connected by and since birth?

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” Zurn says. “It's fascinating that we have two independent bodies and two independent minds, yet at the same time, we've constantly crafted our knowledge of our worlds together.” He adds that this didn't drive the twins to their networked idea of curiosity, “but the more we've developed that connective theory of curiosity, the more it resonates.”

So, how exactly do twins in different fields (not to mention different cities) write a book

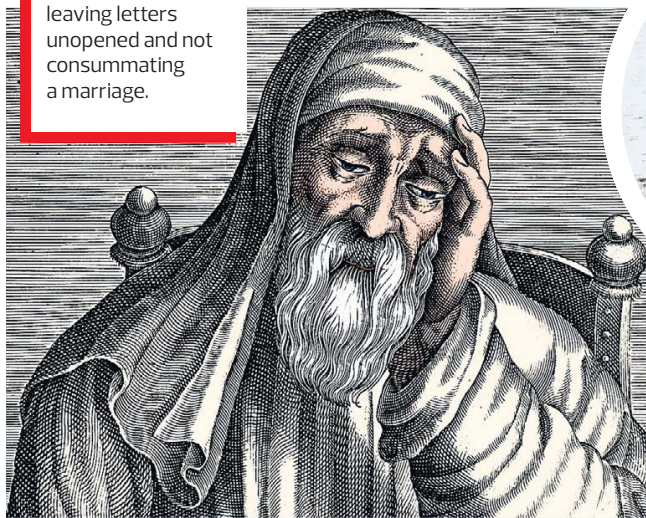
### Interested in everything

A 1655 engraving published by Elsevier of Amsterdam of the collection of curios – or Wormianum, as he called it – assembled by the Danish physican and natural historian Ole Worm.



### Ask no questions...

In ancient times curiosity was viewed with suspicion. The essayist and philosopher Plutarch considered curiosity a disease and advocated leaving letters unopened and not consummating a marriage.



together? *Curious Minds* took six years, and Zurn and Bassett wrote it at different times, usually whenever one of them was on leave. “The number of emails I have from Dani saying: ‘Look at this quote from this book’ and ‘Look at this article’ is just a landslide,” Zurn laughs. The twins surprised their editors when they said they wanted to include hand-drawn diagrams to illustrate the theories in the book – they wanted the reader to feel as though they were sitting in a coffee shop with them, chatting and watching them sketch out ideas on to napkins.

“The editors initially thought it was a little bit strange,” Bassett says – but when shown examples, they became excited about the idea. One drawing in the book features two smiling faces looking at a screen labelled “Wikipedia”, the backs of their heads are missing and replaced with a series of connected lines and dots, to visualise how different people connect different pieces of knowledge. Do you, for example, surf tightly related pages when clicking through the online encyclopaedia, or find yourself somehow leaping from “Cream cracker” to “List of entertainment affected by the September 11 attacks”?

Depending on how you answer,



“*The twins' parents believed that men should go to college and have careers while women should get married instead*

### Holistic approach

The botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer faced early criticism of her work, which attempts to weave together modern practice and Native American knowledge. She is a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation.

and search more and dig deeper.” Zurn concurs – at different points in our lives, even in our days, we can embody these different archetypes.

**O**K, sure, fine – but here's a question you might suddenly be curious about: what's the point? What does understanding the archetypes of curiosity actually do for us – how can this knowledge be applied? As interdisciplinary scholars, Bassett and Zurn both argue that education should be “de-disciplined”, meaning learners should be encouraged to drift between fields. The twins question how curriculums are decided and canons of knowledge are crafted, and reference the 20th-century education reformer Abraham Flexner, who advocated “the usefulness of useless knowledge”. Flexner questioned narrow approaches that forced academics to answer utilitarian questions, rather than sail into unknown waters.

“It's just so important to be open about how the mind can move,” Bassett says. *Curious Minds* also keenly explores whose curiosity is encouraged and whose is policed – the twins examine marginalisation, power and privilege throughout the book. One compelling passage notes that not everyone is celebrated for having the same qualities as Leonardo da Vinci, who went “about his days compulsively note-taking and sketching” and flitted between maths, science, technology and art.

“The capacity to think across and beyond established frames of knowledge can be heavily disparaged, depending on who you are and where your curiosity takes you,” the twins write, before citing the work of the indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, the disability theorist Alison Kafer, the feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, and the Native American philosopher Shay Welch, all of whom experienced being shot down by academic advisers early in their careers.

“Now cornerstones of their subfields, fields, or founders of new fields, these women, following the beck and call of their curiosities, rooted in themselves and their communities, were nevertheless told ‘no,’” the twins write. “Thankfully, they didn't listen.”

Zurn and Bassett didn't listen either – they escaped the narrow constraints of expectation and embarked on a meandering, half-decade expedition through the science and philosophy of curiosity. “It's less, ‘here are all the answers,’” Zurn says of the book, “but rather an invitation to the reader to come along on the journey with us.”

*Curious Minds: The Power of Connection* by Perry Zurn & Dani S Bassett is published by MIT Press (£22.50). To order a copy for £19.12 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020 3176 3837. Delivery charges may apply

# Is video killing the podcast star?

Video podcasting is booming, giving creators access to new audiences. But some say blurring the boundary between audio and video risks ruining what people love about podcasts, writes **Laurie Clarke**

**'S**ecret group of geniuses KILL for fun'. In a recent video podcast on his true crime YouTube channel MrBallen, John Allen tells the story of a mysterious poisoning involving Mensa that took place in rural Florida. The video of Allen, wearing his signature blue plaid shirt and backwards cap, speaking insistently into the camera, has garnered close to four million views.

MrBallen is an example of the blurring of the lines between podcasts and YouTube. The YouTube channel launched in 2020 and counts six million subscribers. The podcast – available on the likes of Spotify and Apple – followed in February, and is already attracting up to seven million monthly downloads. This overlap between video content and audio podcasts is changing user habits and pitting video giant YouTube against audio-native Spotify.

Allen is not the only one bridging the divide; YouTube stars like Logan

Paul and h3h3 have also branched out into podcasts. It's going in the other direction too: some of Spotify's star podcasters like Joe Rogan and Call Her Daddy's Alex Cooper already post video podcasts to the platform, and it's slowly rolling out the ability to upload video podcasts to more creators.

A study by market research firm Cumulus published in May found YouTube is already the most popular platform for podcasts. It won the market without really trying; now, it's getting serious. The company has launched a dedicated beta podcast landing page, hired a podcast executive to lead its efforts in the medium and offered popular podcasters and podcast networks grants of up to \$300,000 to create video versions of their shows, according to Bloomberg.

It's a sign of growing competition in the space that's bad news for Spotify, the music streaming platform that has invested about \$1bn in podcasting in recent years.

Much like the tendency of distantly related crustaceans to keep evolving into crabs, sooner or later platforms have a tendency to start cannibalising each other's core features. This time, a medium is caught in the crossfire – raising the question of what differentiates a video podcast from the vlogs that YouTube first popularised.

For now, most video podcasts feature the hosts in the studio recording the audio – a genre of podcasts with a clear counterpart in TV talkshows. But there are types of podcasts where a move to video could shift the experience more fundamentally.



QCode is a podcast company best known for its narrative fiction shows featuring Hollywood talent, high production values and immersive sound design, a number of which have been optioned for television and film adaptations.

In response to the video podcast trend, QCode's chief strategy officer, Steve Wilson, says the company is thinking about what kind of video elements could enhance the experience. But he cautions that for fictional podcasts, using your imagination can be part of the appeal. "It makes our podcasts a little bit closer to something like reading a great book, where you're encouraged to see the characters in the way that you envision them," he says.

If it was made today, the 2014 hit podcast *Serial*, an investigative

analysis of the murder of a teenage girl, probably wouldn't take the form a video podcast. But if it was made in 10 years' time? "Maybe," says Steve Jones, content director at podcast company Crowd Network. "That's the way the industry is going." But this leads back into the swamp of semantics: if *Serial* was a video podcast, wouldn't that just be a documentary?

Some believe an over liberal use of the term "podcast" is to blame for any confusion. "With the rise of the podcast, there's more content that is positioning itself as a podcast," says Wilson. In the pre-podcast age, a content creator might have made an educational video about the first world war. "Now, someone's going to call that a [video] podcast, whereas five years ago it was just a

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The social media algorithms push the content far better than the podcast apps

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Content providers: is it a podcast or a video? Joe Marler (far left) and (left) MrBallen. Crowd Network; YouTube

video on the war – or a vlog,” he says.

But video podcasting could open up a new horizon for creators. Allen says fans tell him they prefer to watch his content. “This [medium] allows them to see my very real emotions come out as I take them through the story that we’ve spent countless hours preparing,” he says.

At Crowd Network, the motive behind video podcasts first came from a desire to offer audiences a “little bit extra”, says Jones. “But increasingly we’ve found that it is a whole new audience and actually there isn’t that much of a crossover.”

Joe Marler, an English professional rugby union player and the host of *The Joe Marler Show*, says this is true for his podcast, which took the leap into video this summer. The fact that video is more shareable than audio means users are more likely to stumble over segments on social media. “I don’t know the science behind it; I just know that the algorithms push the content far better than the podcast apps,” says Marler. As a result, the audience members watching the podcast tend to be younger.

Marler says that although his new studio cost about four or five times more than his audio studio, he’s not trying to monetise video content separately – it’s more about promoting his show across visual channels. This is true for most podcasters, given that it’s harder to monetise YouTube than podcast content, although Jake Warren, CEO and founder of podcast company Message Heard, says that splitting audiences across different mediums is commercially risky. On Spotify, creators will also be able to monetise their videos in the same way as their audio podcasts, via subscriptions.

It’s not just YouTube; TikTok’s bite-size content is also encouraging the trend for video podcasts. Crowd Network is launching a show with a TikTok star this autumn and Jones says they made the decision not to release a 45-minute edit of the podcast, because the company isn’t sure there’s an audience for it. They may be proved wrong, but Jones says they’re planning to focus on sharing clips on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube Shorts (where videos must be a minute or less in length). A medium typified by the languid pace of Rogan’s three-hour interviews is about to get a lot snappier.

Among industry players, the Spotify v YouTube rivalry is hailed as another sign that podcasting is the hottest thing in media. But some worry that a pivot to video might mean sacrificing the soul of the industry. Warren stresses that “audio is a special and distinct medium in its own right”, while videography is an entirely different craft. “I hope we don’t forget the power of audio, just to try to game an algorithm.”

The networker

## John Naughton



### Google’s image-scanning illustrates how tech firms can act as judge and jury

**H**ere’s a hypothetical scenario. You’re the parent of a toddler, a little boy. His penis has become swollen because of an infection and it’s hurting him. You phone the GP’s surgery and eventually get through to the practice’s nurse. The nurse suggests you take a photograph of the affected area and email it so that she can consult one of the doctors.

So you get out your Samsung phone, take a couple of pictures and send them off. A short time later, the nurse phones to say that the GP has prescribed some antibiotics that you can pick up from the surgery’s pharmacy. You drive there, pick them up and in a few hours the swelling starts to reduce and your lad is perking up. Panic over.

Two days later, you find a message from Google on your phone. Your account has been disabled because of “harmful content” that was “a severe violation of Google’s policies and might be illegal”. You click on the “learn more” link and find a list of possible reasons including “child sexual abuse and exploitation”. Suddenly, the penny drops: Google thinks that the photographs you sent constituted child abuse!

Never mind – there’s a form you can fill out explaining the circumstances and requesting that Google rescind its decision. At which point you discover that you no longer have Gmail, but fortunately you have an older email account that still works, so you use that. Now, though, you no longer have access to your diary, address book and all those work documents you kept on Google Docs. Nor can you access any photograph or video you’ve ever taken with your phone, because they all reside on Google’s cloud servers – to which your device had thoughtfully (and automatically) uploaded them.

Shortly afterwards, you receive Google’s response: the company will not reinstate your account. No explanation is provided. Two days later, there’s a knock on the door. Outside are two police officers, one male, one female. They’re here because you’re suspected of holding and passing on illegal images.

Nightmarish, eh? But at least it’s hypothetical. Except that it isn’t: it’s an adaptation for a British context of what happened to “Mark”, a father in San Francisco, as vividly recounted recently in the *New York Times* by the



Google has refused to reinstate the account of ‘Mark’, a father living in San Francisco who sent images of his son to a doctor. Jeff Chiu/AP; David Davis Photoproductions RF/Alamy

### What I’m reading

#### John Naughton’s recommendations

##### Too big a picture?

There’s an interesting critique by Ian Hesketh in the digital magazine *Aeon* of how Yuval Noah Harari and co squeeze human history into a tale for everyone, titled *What Big History Misses*.

##### 1-2-3, gone...

*The Passing of Passwords* is a nice obituary for the password by the digital identity guru David GW Birch on his *Substack*.

##### A warning

Gary Marcus has written an elegant critique of what’s wrong with Google’s new robot project on his *Substack*.

formidable tech journalist Kashmir Hill. And, as of the time of writing this column, Mark still hasn’t got his Google account back. It being the US, of course, he has the option of suing Google – just as he has the option of digging his garden with a teaspoon.

The background to this is that the tech platforms have, thankfully, become much more assiduous at scanning their servers for child abuse images. But because of the unimaginable numbers of images held on these platforms, scanning and detection has to be done by machine-learning systems, aided by other tools (such as the cryptographic labelling of illegal images, which makes them instantly detectable worldwide).

All of which is great. The trouble with automated detection systems, though, is that they invariably throw up a proportion of “false positives” – images that flag a warning but are in fact innocuous and legal. Often this is because machines are terrible at understanding context, something that, at the moment, only humans can do. In researching her report, Hill saw the photos that Mark had taken of his son. “The decision to flag them was understandable,” she writes.

“They are explicit photos of a child’s genitalia. But the context matters: they were taken by a parent worried about a sick child.”

Accordingly, most of the platforms employ

people to review problematic images in their contexts and determine whether they warrant further action. The interesting thing about the San Francisco case is that the images were reviewed by a human, who decided they were innocent, as did the police, to whom the images were also referred. And yet, despite this, Google stood by its decision to suspend his account and rejected his appeal. It can do this because it owns the platform and anyone who uses it has clicked on an agreement to accept its terms and conditions. In that respect, it’s no different from Facebook/Meta, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and the rest.

This arrangement works well as long as users are happy with the services and the way they are provided. But the moment a user decides that they have been mistreated or abused by the platform, then they fall into a legal black hole. If you’re an app developer who feels that you’re being gouged by Apple’s 30% levy as the price for selling in that marketplace, you have two choices: pay up or shut up. Likewise, if you’ve been selling profitably on Amazon’s Marketplace and suddenly discover that the platform is now selling a cheaper comparable product under its own label, well... tough. Sure, you can complain or appeal, but in the end the platform is judge, jury and executioner. Democracies wouldn’t tolerate this in any other area of life. Why then are tech platforms an exception? Isn’t it time they weren’t?



# Critics

## Venice film festival 2022



LEFT  
Luca  
Guadagnino,  
director of  
competition  
entry *Bones and  
All*, arriving at  
the festival by  
water taxi.  
Getty Images



LEFT Taylor  
Russell and  
Timothée  
Chalamet in  
*Bones and All*.

BELOW  
Noemie Merlant,  
Sophie Kauer,  
Nina Hoss, Cate  
Blanchett and  
Todd Field at the  
Venice premiere  
of *Tár*. MGM;  
Reuters

'Wilful  
weirdness':  
Bodil Jørgensen  
in Lars von  
Trier's TV series  
*The Kingdom*:  
Exodus.  
Christian  
Geisnaes/  
Zentropa



## Cannibals get the juices flowing

Jonathan  
Romney



As this year's Venice film festival kicks off, *Call Me By Your Name* director Luca Guadagnino serves up some fine fresh meat, Cate Blanchett dazzles in a musical tour de force, and *Call My Agent!*'s Laure Calamy has surprises in store

Venice has a reputation as the easy A-list festival – the one that comes as a gentle package of calm and Campari by contrast with the agitation of Cannes. Well, the calm may yet settle upon us, but it'll take a day or two for the stress to wear off. During the lockdown years, Venice managed to subsist in very sturdy form by introducing a ticketing system partly designed to maintain social distancing and it pretty much worked fine. Last Sunday morning, though, a new online ticket system raised public and press hackles by putting delegates through a baffling e-labyrinth of queues and dead ends for more than five hours. Once people actually arrived in the city, greeted by a Wednesday morning downpour, followed by a blast of blistering sun, we all felt we'd been put through a special circle of Dante's hell reserved for jaded cinephiles.

Just as well, then, that the festival got off to a juicy start. It kicked off with writer-director Noah Baumbach, whose *Marriage Story* was one of Venice's most popular hits in recent years. His

competition opener, *White Noise*, however, isn't nearly as gratifying. Adapted from Don DeLillo's 1985 novel, it's set in a fictional university town. Adam Driver plays a lecturer in Hitler studies who takes shelter with his wife (Greta Gerwig) and kids after a chemical calamity sends their community into a chaotic evacuation. Don Cheadle plays a fellow academic, the resident dispenser of enigmatic cultural aperçus and a specialist in the meaning of the great American car crash. This is a wordy, enigmatic and visually stylised number, with Driver delivering his non-sequitur one-liners with wry aplomb, and there's a definite tang of Robert Altman to the frenetic stylisation, but it's never entirely clear quite what the film is for. It's pitched as a period piece, a post-postmodernist take on the glacial irony of DeLillo's style, but its manic ironies are an awkward translation of the chilly detachment of the original. Still, if you're of the 1980s generation that looked to Devo videos for philosophical statements on consumerist

alienation, you may get a nostalgic frisson.

Luca Guadagnino has been a Venice favourite ever since making a splash here with 2009's *I Am Love*, starring Tilda Swinton. His competition entry *Bones and All* is his first US-set venture, and it's one of his best. *Call Me By Your Name* and his TV series *We Are Who We Are* showed Guadagnino to be a dab hand at portraying anguished youth – but not nearly as anguished as the teenage heroine of his new film. Taylor Russell plays Maren, whose father leaves her to her own devices after finding he can no longer handle her cannibalism. Setting out alone, Maren finds herself encountering other "eaters" – first, an older man played by Mark Rylance (one of the creepiest, most unsettling performances you'll have seen in a while), then a moody young loner played by Timothée Chalamet. That the film is visually understated only makes it more disturbing – yes, there's gore, but far worse is hearing about what eaters do. It's a curiously beautiful film too: a

“  
Yes, there's gore in *Bones and All*, but far worse is hearing about what the 'eaters' do



**Pop**  
Margo Cilker  
live in London,  
page 34



**LEFT**  
Noah Baumbach,  
director of  
Don DeLillo  
adaptation  
White Noise,  
with Greta  
Gerwig, the  
film's star and  
his partner.

**BELOW**  
Laure Calamy  
in *The Origin  
of Evil*.  
Alessandra  
Benedetti/  
Corbis; Getty  
Images



## Coming attractions

**Blonde**  
One of the most hotly debated of all forthcoming films, this has Australian director Andrew Dominik telling the Marilyn Monroe story, as recounted in the novel by Joyce Carol Oates. Ana de Armas plays Marilyn in a film that's reputedly sexually candid and guaranteed to be even more controversial after its premiere on Thursday.



**Don't Worry Darling**  
Actor turned director Olivia Wilde follows her much-liked *Booksmart* with the story of a couple living in an ideal community that might not be so ideal after all. Florence Pugh stars alongside the increasingly credible Harry Styles (above, with Pugh), guaranteeing red carpet fever later in the week.

**Saint Omer**  
Acclaimed French documentarist Alice Diop plays in official competition with her first feature. It's co-scripted with Goncourt-winning novelist Marie NDiaye (*Three Strong Women*), promising considerable dramatic clout, and stars actor and artist Kayije Kagame as a writer following the trial of a young woman (Guslagie Malanda) accused of killing her child.

**Dead for a Dollar**  
Hollywood genre veteran Walter Hill (*The Driver, Southern Comfort*) is here to receive a lifetime achievement award, but will also be presenting his latest film. Hill once said all his films are really westerns, but here's the actual thing. It stars Christoph Waltz, Willem Dafoe and *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel*'s Rachel Brosnahan. **JR**

Adam Driver on  
the red carpet for  
*White Noise*.



romantic road movie that crosses a strangely desolate America, and young lead Russell mixes innocence and feral toughness to compelling effect.

Equally daring in its own way is *Tár*, a singularly strange offering from US writer-director Todd Field – and it's unlikely that the competition will feature anything more unashamedly highbrow. Not that *Tár* is any sort of outre art film – at heart it's a very watchable and involving melodrama – but it's unusually ambitious and remarkably serious in its engagement with classical music. Cate Blanchett gives an absolute tour de force performance as Lydia Tár, a composer, pianist and conductor whose achievements make Simon Rattle and all that crowd look like a bunch of bar-band hacks. Set mainly in Berlin, it follows Tár preparing a performance of Mahler's Fifth while leading a home life with her partner (Nina Hoss) and young stepdaughter, attending to orchestra politics and taking a less than entirely professional interest in a new young female cellist.

The dialogue is somewhat technical in its references, and you may very well get most out of it if you happen to know what's meant by "very Punkt Contrapunkt" (I didn't), but that shouldn't spoil it for anyone else. Blanchett gives a complex and altogether

commanding performance that's possibly her best ever – and that features her playing the piano and conducting for real. Perhaps *Tár*'s ideal viewer is a *New Yorker*-subscribing Radio 3 listener, but it's a bold, thoughtful adult drama that sustains itself over a very stylish 158 minutes.

As for fun and games, we've also had Lars von Trier getting away from the increasingly morbid bombast of his recent features and letting his hair down by offering a belated third season of his pioneering 1990s miniseries *The Kingdom*. Set once again in a Copenhagen hospital where dark forces are on the rise, this third season, entitled *Exodus*, cheerfully recaptures the wilful weirdness of the original, judging by the two episodes I caught. It has running gags about Danish-Swedish enmity, a sleepwalking elderly woman as a metaphysical Miss Marple, and a very well-known Hollywood star dropping in to play a satanic emissary who manifests as an owl. There's also a meta-level, with characters complaining that the hospital's reputation has been ruined by the original series and "that blundering fool Trier". Fool or not, it's nice to see the antichrist just being a cheeky monkey for a change.

Even more fun, however, is French thriller *The Origin of Evil*. Written and directed by Sébastien Marnier, who made a great, creepy classroom thriller called *School's Out*, it stars Laure Calamy (currently to be seen on screen in sex-worker drama *Her Way*) as a woman who works in a canning factory and who makes a surprise call on a very wealthy family in their luxury villa. They're as dysfunctional as they are spoiled, and initially give her the cold shoulder, but soon she's drawn into the proverbial web of intrigue, stitched from a succession of ingenious twists.

Calamy offers a few surprises for anyone who only knows her as goofy Noémie in *Call My Agent!*, while the family members (including veteran Jacques Weber as a very old-school patriarch and a witty, malicious Dominique Blanc as his wife) are superb. Marnier's film manages to be cruelly funny, while evoking the spirit of that master of the French thriller Claude Chabrol, with hints of Patricia Highsmith and Ruth Rendell. It offered a touch of class as a first-day festival highlight – like prosecco with a strychnine twist. With some heavyweight titles coming up in the next few days, in and out of competition, something light but acidic is just what you want to prime the palate.

## Film of the week

On the road  
to redemption  
in MoroccoMark  
Kermode**The Forgiven**

(117 mins, 18) Directed by John Michael McDonagh; starring Ralph Fiennes, Jessica Chastain, Ismael Kanater

Ralph Fiennes and Jessica Chastain play a couple en route to a weekend of debauchery in the desert in this brooding morality tale from John Michael McDonagh

Beneath the garishly brittle portrait of ghastly westerners lording it up in Morocco, there's a low-key, brooding quality to this accomplished if somewhat inert screen adaptation of Lawrence Osborne's 2012 bestseller. Written and directed by John Michael McDonagh, whose screen CV includes *The Guard* (2011), *Calvary* (2014) and *War on Everyone* (2016), it's an anxiously moralist tale of crime and punishment, revenge and resolution, played out against a broad-strokes, culture-clash backdrop that brings a tang of spiteful satire to the deeper discussions of good and evil.

"It's a long way to go for a party, but then they're more your friends than mine." So says David (Ralph Fiennes), a British doctor with a blemished record whom we first meet aboard a boat to "l'Afrique" with his wife, Jo (Jessica Chastain, who co-starred with Fiennes in his 2011 *Coriolanus*). She's an unproductive children's author who has fallen from favour with her young readers – an audience she detests. He is a "highly functioning alcoholic", a phrase he likens to a double negative, as if one cancels out the other.

They're off to the *ksour* ("it means castle") of Richard (a louche Matt Smith) and Dally (Caleb Landry Jones, all pouting petulance) – a debauched party villa restored by the "little Moroccans" to whom the owners patronisingly profess



Ralph Fiennes with Jessica Chastain as Jo, who 'combines regality with a twinge of the unhinged', in *The Forgiven*. Photograph by Nick Wall

“  
Fiennes brings a touch of Leonard Rossiter's Reggie Perrin to his portrayal of David

to owe so much. But while driving drunk through the desert during a marital squabble, David hits and kills a young boy whose broken body is brought to the party. The boy's name is Driss, but no one knows that – yet. For now, he is just "a nobody from a village far away"; someone whose death can be swept under the carpet as an unfortunate accident. David and Jo's callous hosts seem to agree, reassuring their guests that all will be well with the authorities as long as they seem "overwhelmingly contrite", something David agrees he can muster if "it's absolutely necessary".

Of course, Driss is not "nobody". He has a father, Abdellah (Ismael Kanater), who arrives at the villa and announces that "the Englishman

must pay" by accompanying him back to his remote village to bury his son. David initially bristles, fearing extortion or murder ("they might be fucking Isis"). Eventually he agrees to go, leaving Jo (who is pointedly reading André Gide's *The Immoralist*) to fall into a casual dalliance with Christopher Abbott's American financial analyst Tom, while her husband heads off towards either retribution or redemption.

There's little subtle about the way *The Forgiven* lays out its thematic stall, from the blood that stains David's driving gloves to the overloud use of the phrase "these people", which peppers the dialogue. Yet despite running the

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## And the rest

Wendy Ide



### Fall

(107 mins, 15) Directed by Scott Mann; starring Grace Caroline Currey, Virginia Gardner, Jeffrey Dean Morgan

Even if you don't suffer from vertigo, there are moments in Scott Mann's thriller *Fall* – the single-handed selfie snapped while dangling from a rusty grating 2,000 feet in the sky, for example – that are almost unwatchable. But for those of us who are such babies about heights that we need to steel ourselves just to climb the ladder to the loft, this is the kind of button-pushing ordeal of a movie that makes your eyeballs sweat with anxiety.

The story is simple: two female friends in search of adventure and streaming clicks climb to the top of the disused B67 TV tower in the Mojave desert, but then find themselves stuck, with no phone reception and a pair of feisty vultures eyeing them with obvious interest. The trip is framed as a catharsis; a means for Becky (Grace Caroline Currey), recently widowed after a climbing accident, to confront and conquer her fears. But frankly, those fears – of scaling a shuddering structure that is groaning with metal fatigue and ominous rattling rivets – seem perfectly reasonable and healthy.

Mann is clearly having a lot of fun backing up the visual triggers (shots of slipping fingertips clinging to rungs) with a rich aural palette of tortured iron creaks and cracks. Even so, and even with a nicely macabre third-act twist, there is quite a lot of running time to fill with two young women stranded in the sky. But while the pace falters a little – there are only so many ways you can almost fall off a tower, after all – the tension is unrelenting.

### Three Thousand Years of Longing

(108 mins, 15) Directed by George Miller; starring Tilda Swinton, Idris Elba, Pia Thunderbolt

For his vivid world-building on the *Mad Max* series; for the bracingly subversive spin he brought to *Babe: Pig in the City*; even, at a push, for *Happy Feet*, George Miller has earned the right to indulge himself with a colossal, extravagantly ugly folly of a movie. But just because he has paid his dues, it doesn't necessarily mean that audiences will share the director's enthusiasm for the tale of Alithea (Tilda Swinton), an academic who unleashes a djinn, or genie (Idris Elba, with elf ears), from a bottle and then vacillates, for what seems like a sizeable chunk of the 3,000 years in question, about whether or not to make a wish.



Don't look down... Grace Caroline Currey and Virginia Gardner, top, in *Fall*; 'brisk civility' between Idris Elba and Tilda Swinton in *Three Thousand Years of Longing*; Brazilian farmer Martins in *The Territory*: 'a must watch'. Signature Entertainment; MGM; Amazon Land Documentary

On paper it's a romantic fantasy – the djinn regales Alithea with tales of his three millennia (including three separate instances of getting trapped in various vessels) – but there's something rather sterile and bloodless in the film's approach, with its synthetic and soul-sappingly clean-looking CGI. Plus there's the palpable lack of chemistry between the leads: a kind of brisk civility rather than the ache of eternal longing the title promises.

### The Territory

(85 mins, 12A) Directed by Alex Pritz

Brazil in the turbulent months just before and after the election of the populist president Jair Bolsonaro: violence seems closer to the surface of society than ever before. Against this backdrop, the struggle depicted in Alex Pritz's compelling and essential documentary – that of the Indigenous Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau people against the settlers who are attempting to occupy and farm their land – gains an added urgency.

Lives, literally, are at stake. More than that, as young tribal leader Bitaté points out, the very future of the planet is affected by the deforestation of the Amazon. The film follows the tech-savvy Bitaté, who uses drones and social media to shore up support for the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau. Fighting alongside him is activist Neidinha, whose campaign to protect the forest and its people places her own family in danger. The picture also gives a voice to Martins, a browbeaten farmer who believes, like so many in Brazil, in his right to claim a piece of land to support his family. A must watch.

### It Snows in Benidorm

(117 mins, 15) Directed by Isabel Coixet; starring Timothy Spall, Sarita Choudhury, Carmen Machi

A Manchester bank worker unceremoniously dumped into

early retirement, Peter (Timothy Spall) decides to embark on a long-postponed visit to his brother in Spain. When he arrives in Benidorm, however, his sibling is missing. Bumbling Peter, an amateur meteorologist with the rather wearisome habit of viewing life through a series of unwieldy weather metaphors, is flummoxed.

Director Isabel Coixet is overly fond of contrasting scenes of beery carnage in streets of Benidorm with shots of Peter's doleful, deflated balloon of a face. Things improve somewhat when he meets his brother's work associate Alex (Sarita Choudhury), a mysterious beauty who will serve as a guide on his quest for the truth, a search that seems to move on a glacial timescale. The always impressive Spall elevates this low-key mood piece a little, but even his skill as an actor can't save the stultifying pacing.

### Wildhood

(108 mins, 15) Directed by Bretten Hannam; starring Phillip Lewitski, Joshua Odjick, Michael Greyeyes

A teenage boy and his younger brother flee their abusive father and set out across Canada to locate the mother they never knew and, until recently, believed to be dead. It's a twofold voyage of discovery for Lincoln (Phillip Lewitski). He is exploring the Indigenous heritage that is his mother's legacy. At the same time there is a gay sexual awakening, courtesy of a smouldering, handsome Mi'kmaq boy Pasmay (Joshua Odjick).

Writer and director Bretten Hannam favours a languid, homoerotic, Malickian atmosphere, with montages of tussling teens in fields of long grass and chiselled cheekbones artfully lit in the magic-hour glow. It's striking, certainly, but teasingly elusive when it comes to story resolution.

risk of privileging its unlovable white characters, their stories are not the most gripping element of the drama. Look at the scene in which Abdallah and David discuss westerners' pricey obsession with fossils, particularly those that resemble a demon falling from the sky; it is Kanater, rather than Fiennes, who dominates the screen, his expression vacillating nimbly being grief, rage, threat and despair. Similarly, the character of driver and translator Anouar (Saïd Taghmaoui) is infinitely more developed than the gaggle of uppity American, French or British caricatures with which he is surrounded.

Having excelled in McDonagh's brother Martin's jet-black comedy *In Bruges*, Fiennes brings a touch of Leonard Rossiter's Reggie Perrin to his portrayal of David, seeming to press his chin down on to his chest while simultaneously turning his nose up at the world. As for Chastain, she combines regality with a twinge of the unhinged (remember her Lady Macbeth-like turn in *A Most Violent Year*?), empathy and emptiness doing battle behind her ever-changing sunglasses.

Cinematographer Larry Smith juxtaposes bright widescreen vistas with the increasingly dark tone of the material, a contrast highlighted as David's metaphysical journey is intercut with snorting revelries back at the villa. Meanwhile, Lorne Balfé's sparsely used music leaves plenty of open spaces for the drama to breathe, as if inviting the audience to fill in the blanks with an internal accompaniment (tragic? Comedic? Ironic?) of their own choosing.

# Classical

## In praise of raised voices

Jamie Barton and Allan Clayton lead a dream *Gerontius* in a week of choral epics at the Proms. Elsewhere, deep listening and silence...

**Fiona Maddocks**



**Prom 59: The Dream of Gerontius**

**Prom 57: Bach's Mass in B minor**

**Prom 55: Nathan Laube organ recital**

Royal Albert Hall, London SW7

**Tangram: Our Silence Is Your Silence**

LSO St Luke's, London EC1

Swathed in enough gold lamé to lighten anyone's darkness, the star American mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton turns out to be the kind of supernatural being a newly dead soul might hope to meet as they enter purgatory. This place of expiation features heavily in Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900), settings of texts by Cardinal John Henry Newman, which was given a properly out-of-this-world performance at the Proms on Wednesday. The massed forces of Manchester's Hallé Choir and the London Philharmonic Choir, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Edward Gardner, had perfected every awkward detail of this long, exacting work. The British tenor Allan Clayton sang *Gerontius*, the dying man of the title who finds eternity. British bass



'Glowing power': mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Edward Gardner, in *The Dream of Gerontius*.

BELOW  
John Butt directs the OAE in Bach's Mass in B minor.

Photographs by Chris Christodoulou/BBC

James Platt was Priest/Angel of the Agony, comforter and inspiration. Barton sang the Angel.

First performed in Birmingham town hall, *Gerontius* has always provoked extreme reactions, initially to its Roman Catholicism in a mostly Anglican country, now because its religiosity, with all the resonance of that word, is too much for some. The work falls into two uneven halves, the first a deathbed scene, the second a world of angels and mawkish demons. By resisting exaggeration or rhetoric, Gardner and his forces untied Elgar's ambitious soundscape and made a consoling, exciting unity.

Clayton, voice molten, every word audible, musically indestructible, created a sense of wide-eyed anxiety that yielded to peace (after being obligingly borne aloft on a choir of heavenly LPO brass, crashing cymbal and big drum). Barton's Angel, sung with glowing power, had both gravity and humanity. The two choirs, trained by Neville Creed (London Philharmonic) and Matthew Hamilton (Hallé), were expertly drilled, supple and mighty. "I've written it out of my insidest inside," Elgar wrote to a friend. These performers let the "insidest" out in their brilliant account.

In this week of choral epics, on bank holiday Monday an attentive Proms crowd filled the hall for Bach's *Mass in B minor*, performed by the Choir and Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, directed from the harpsichord by John Butt. Enigmatic in purpose and off the scale in size for liturgical use, this celestial masterpiece poses many questions, of which how many performers and how fast should it go are only the most straightforward. Butt, a leading Bach scholar and interpreter, has the wisdom to address them, though the answers can never be absolute,

“

*'I've written it out of my insidest inside,' Elgar wrote to a friend*

especially in a venue such as the Albert Hall, where good decisions can turn into experiments that don't quite work.

With the choir to one side of the orchestra, balance was an issue throughout. Woodwind were mostly doubled, creating mellow sonic colouring, especially from the solo flute of Lisa Beznosiuk, but leaving the strings pale in comparison. Of the vocal soloists, all good singers, only the countertenor Iestyn Davies projected with the strength required. The work's spirituality, as well as its astonishing harmonic drama, pivots around the ever-darkening Crucifixus. These usually expert performers, in a different space, might well have drawn the most secular listener into the mass's mysteries, human or divine. Here, the performance remained cool, and distant. We can note these oddities yet still revel in



the chance to hear Bach's majestic work. Otherwise we may as well stick to Spotify.

The American organist **Nathan Laube** encountered his own problems in his Sunday morning solo Prom on the Albert Hall's "Voice of Jupiter" organ (all 9,999 pipes), when a faulty key got stuck at the end of César Franck's *Grande pièce symphonique*. Laube handled it with calm good humour until it was fixed, then performed one of Charles-Valentin Alkan's ferocious Grands préludes (No 10: Scherzando). In this recital of 19th-century virtuoso works, Laube's own transcription of Franz Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor was the crown. From hushed and delicate to earth-shatteringly noisy, Laube bewitched us for nearly 40 minutes. A full orchestra could scarcely match the decibels that roared from this mighty instrument.

In contrast, Tangram's **Our Silence Is Your Silence**, later the same day, asked us to embrace quietude. This new music collective, celebrating but not limited to Chinese cultures, has just been announced associate artist of the London Symphony Orchestra. Combining live video with music, the 75-minute programme ran without a break, opening with the whispered repetitions of *A Dust in Time* (2020) by Huang Ruo, and interspersed with *Silent Songs* by the Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov, sung by the soprano Inna Husieva. Reylon Yount (AKA Mantawoman) did their own take on John Cage's '4'33'', which involved some canine-like grunts from under the yangqin (a hammered dulcimer). In a programme note, Yount quoted Cage's view of life, in which the composer said: "Get yourself out of whatever cage you find yourself in." We rattle the bars and try.

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## Art

## Blueprints for a dream

Laura  
Cumming

Léon Wuidar

White Cube Mason's Yard, London  
SW1; from Wednesday to 8 October

*Secret passages, bunkers, dead ends... memories of his wartime childhood are suggested by the Belgian artist Léon Wuidar's exquisite geometric abstraction from the 1960s to 80s*

Léon Wuidar is a strange and captivating painter, famous in his native Belgium yet still barely known here. His art is generally described as a form of geometric abstraction, but the description seems entirely inadequate. His paintings are slow, meticulous, exquisitely conceived in their balance of shapes and colours against the rectangle of each canvas, but they all carry a depth of memory and emotion, and often a quizzical humour that turns them into something closer to stories.

Born in Liège in 1938, Wuidar worked for many years as a professor of drawing before he allowed himself to paint full-time from the age of 60. His earliest works seem to carry childhood recollections of the second world war.

A stunning painting called *Efflorescence*, from 1964, shows what appear to be harvest fields by moonlight: a series of pale grey stems in a radiant gloaming. It only occurred to me, looking closely at the very fine striations of his brushmarks, that the light might be artificial and perhaps even sinister, something closer to the magnesium flash of an explosion.

*Victoire*, from the following year, is an array of squares and triangles in ethereal greys, dotted here and there with a darker crescent or disc. There are hints of architecture – a tiny arcade, the sense of a city square from above – so that the pale triangles seem evocative of searchlights. But the painting irresistibly reads as a face with a downturned moustache-cum-smile as well, an ambiguity that gives it the air of tragicomic satire.

The small painting next to it evokes a triangular array of medals, except that the discs are all in ash-greys and browns, as if these posthumous tokens of courage were themselves deceased. Below

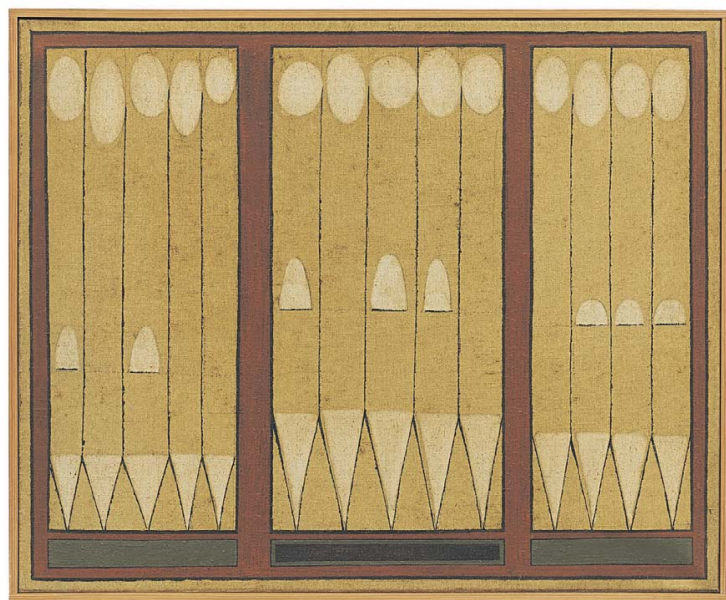


**ABOVE** 'Everything about the composition, and the colours stands outside time': *Les images quotidiennes*, 24 sept 69, 1969 by Léon Wuidar.

**TOP RIGHT** *Pli (Fold)*, 14 decembre 1980.

**BELOW** *Un morceau de musique*, 1962: 'hints of organ pipes, theatre boxes and orchestra stalls'.

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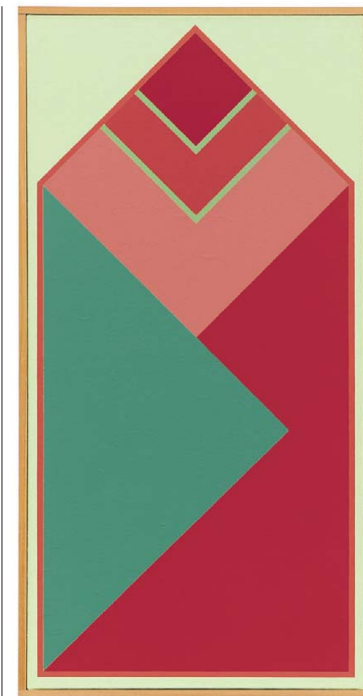
them, however, is a single dot that turns the whole image into a subtle exclamation mark.

Wuidar works with painstaking care on inexpensive canvases, the weave of which sometimes shows through. He makes his own simple wooden frames. There are overtones of 1920s Belgian surrealism, of Max Ernst and Magritte. The earliest painting at the White Cube, from 1962, conflates hints of organ pipes, theatre boxes and orchestra stalls all in one exquisitely condensed sheaf of uprights and horizontals in

sepia, chestnut and burnt umber. *Un morceau de musique* is the piquant title of this little low-toned song.

In the mid 60s, Wuidar switched to a painting style "free of any realism", as he put it, "but without denying myself the occasional allusion to the visible world". This is humorous understatement. For it is the back and forth between abstraction and figuration that defines his whole output. A small painting called *Vanité* sets up a concatenation of geometric forms in silver-blue and grey that hints at the mirror reflections on a dressing table, as well as the shadows all around it in a bedroom. *Les images quotidiennes*, 24 Sept 69 evokes easels and canvases, windows and curtains, studio light and streetlight, playing with the heavy black outlines you might see later in a Patrick Caulfield. Everything about the composition, and the colours – neutral to black with a triangle of sharp cobalt – stands outside time, so that it might be Liège in 1969 or right here and now today.

In Belgium, Wuidar has long been associated with the brutalist architecture of his native city, and in particular the work of his longtime friend, the leading Belgian architect Charles Vandenhove. He made works for Vandenhove's university hospital in Liège, along with Daniel Buren and Sol LeWitt. Wuidar has lived for decades in a house designed by Vandenhove, and there



“*The back and forth between abstraction and figuration defines Wuidar's whole output*

is no question that an architectural vein runs through his work.

A secret passage, a bunker, a side view into a dead end, the place in a house where a person might hide: there are visible, if extremely oblique allusions to all in this show. Yet you could never place them, so to speak, in any actual building or location. They are more like clues, or maps, or something akin to blueprints for dreams of places in Wuidar's head.

The most recent works here, from the 80s, do away with titles altogether in favour of dates. Perhaps they function as a kind of visual diary for the artist. These paintings are astringently geometric, with their hard-edged panels of acid colour. The metaphorical connections with our world appear somewhat lost.

But even with a purely rectilinear composition, Wuidar can play a delicate game with lines and outlines, playing them off against colour and shape. In one long, narrow canvas he varies the width of a line against the volume of colour it encloses to make the eye perceive seams of bright gold out of nothing more than hues of green and pink. A line of light, a triangle of salmon, a couple of chevrons of darker pinks and greens, and you start to see something like the back of a silk tie, with its two-tone origami. The shape of the painting becomes pleasingly significant. And sure enough, the title is *Fold*.

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## Theatre

## What stories we tell ourselves

A play of post-Trump politics finds complex characters lost in ego and addiction, while Terry Gilliam and Leah Hausman's take on Sondheim is just a bit too much

Susannah Clapp



**The Narcissist**  
Minerva, Chichester;  
until 24 September

**Into the Woods**  
Theatre Royal Bath; until Saturday

What a zinging evening at Chichester. Christopher Shinn's new play *The Narcissist*, set in 2017, centres on a former American presidential adviser who announces that in a digitally transfixed, utterly individualistic age, voters engage with politics as they do with dating apps: they use them as distractions, beginning with arousal and ending in disappointment. His own marriage is on the rocks; he is hesitantly bisexual, bereft – and vulnerable.

Originally planned for 2020, Josh Seymour's production swoops adroitly from shrewd argument to intimate dialogue and jittery sputter: two characters are addicted to opiates and everyone is fighting addiction to their screens. Jasmine Swan's design glimmers with the drama's possibilities:

quietly opulent, with reflective walls and floor (so good for seeing yourself everywhere). Characters are first seen aloft in separate booths, outlined in neon, made for declamation and isolation.

Cynicism and hope come from the least predictable mouths. The claim to be described by the title swivels between characters. Shinn braces his audience to expect the would-be presidential candidate to reveal herself as a monster of self-regard: "People like narcissists as leaders – haven't you noticed?" Yet, elegantly played by Claire Skinner, she remains inscrutably calm and goody-two-shoes. A young man (Simon Lennon) destroyed by addiction is accused of having always selfishly disappeared into himself. As his spiky girlfriend, Jenny Walser is a whirl of angular egotism.

Everyone – friend, colleague, mother, brother, potential lover – makes claims on the adviser, their demands ingeniously overlapping; you might think that he is not entranced by himself. Think again: with a fine coolness, Harry Lloyd shows that his apparent bending to other egos is a version of narcissism. And then prepare to reconsider again: empathy may unexpectedly break through.

People really change in the course of *The Narcissist* – not as common in plays as you might think. Politics and personality are unstably bound together. In an evening of finely controlled performances, Stuart Thompson is outstanding as the would-be boyfriend: earnestly proclaiming his socialist credentials, quietly preening as he tucks a curl behind an ear.

The time for *Into the Woods* has come. Not, evidently, at the Old Vic, where some Neanderthal

'Swoops adroitly from shrewd argument to intimate dialogue': Claire Skinner and Harry Lloyd in *The Narcissist*. Johan Persson



Lauren Conroy as Little Red Riding Hood in *Into the Woods*: 'an impressively fierce debut.' Photograph by Marc Brenner

harrumphing by Terry Gilliam, who co-directs with Leah Hausman, led to the production being destaged. But in Bath, and the outside world, this is the ideal moment, with points of view shifting everywhere and news getting ever bleaker, to be looking at the tales we tell our children, tales that shape our expectations.

In 1986, James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim mashed

together a variety of fairy stories to make a new prickly thicket. The result is not tidy and compared with some reworkings of folklore – Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* appeared seven years earlier – is sometimes overblunt. But it is exhilarating. The first half skids merrily, comically around; Red Riding Hood (Lauren Conroy makes an impressively fierce debut) meets Jack of the beanstalk; princes ogle each other as they eulogise their "agonee". The second half is translated into wider dismay and disaster, which now looks cosmic. Happy endings come unstuck: years being locked in a tower have caught up with Rapunzel, who has

“People really change in the course of *The Narcissist* – not as common in plays as you might think

lost her mind. Cinderella's prince commits adultery: "I'm meant to be Charming, not Sincere." Jack's giant reappears, seen here as a massive toddler's foot, in lacy ankle sock, stamping on foes and dreams.

That Monty Python-style foot is one of the most effective strokes in a visually noisy production (designed by Jon Bausor) in which everything is larkily underlined: Rapunzel's tower is made of bean cans. There are beguiling touches: a charming cow who might have clobbered in from a pantomime; woodland creatures with wide-eyed masks and sophisticated limbs; a lovely flutter of bird stick-puppets.

When the Ugliers hack at their heels to get into the prince's slipper, blood runs down the stage. As Cinderella, Audrey Brisson tumbles across the stage, landing (mostly upside down) as light as thistledown. Rhashaan Stone is the warm heart of the action as an innocent baker. Nicola Hughes is a blasting witch. Trouble is there is just too much of everything.

Sidling around the action with undertaker's topper and unctuous drawl is Julian Bleach: Old Father Time and everyone's unburied dad. It is impossible not to be reminded of the similar figure he cut – and slashed – in one of the most original shows of the past 25 years, *Shockheaded Peter*, which, like this, was set in a toy theatre. The aesthetic there was harsher and more complicated. Sondheim deserves similar, less fussy illumination. They say he is not hummable, but rhythms and lyrics – hitting a core while sounding skewwhiff – tick away long term in your blood.

## Theatre

**The Steamie**  
Dundee Rep; until Saturday

The world of *The Steamie* is long gone. Public laundries, where women came to wash their own – or other people's – dirty laundry, had already almost disappeared by 1987, the year this play-with-songs was first presented by the left-wing company Wildcat Stage Productions. Set in the 1950s, it's a couthie evocation of shared experiences and that spirit

of communality that seemed to have been left behind when people moved away from their inner-city tenements and out to the housing schemes. To audiences in community venues across Glasgow in the 80s, it was almost as much a nostalgia piece as it is for us today. Yet if the details of the situation seem distant, at its core are shared experiences – of hardship and of loneliness – that feel sharply current.

It's New Year's Eve. In separate stalls, at big, ceramic sinks, Magrit, Doreen and Dolly are doing their family washing while Mrs



'Strong talents': Jo Freer, Suzanne Magowan and Tinashe Warikandwa in *The Steamie*.

Culfeathers (addressed formally on account of her age) struggles to finish the doctor's wife's laundry before 9pm – closing time. As the women work, they talk and sing, sharing news ("What did he die of?" "Lack of breath!"), gossip (sometimes vicious), dreams (of a washing machine; of a man for once sober; of meeting great-grandchildren, far away in England).

Tony Roper's dialect-strong text and David Anderson's popular-music-inspired songs peg the action securely to a line connecting reality and fantasy. Kenny Miller's set, with its

soaring classical facade of Corinthian columns pressing down on the scuzzy stalls of the steamie below, is an elegant visual metaphor.

Becky Hope-Palmer's direction, slightly cartoon-inflected, keeps the sentimental side of the story from oversudding, making good use of the strong talents of Jo Freer (Dolly), Irene Macdougall (first among equals as Mrs C), Suzanne Magowan (Magrit), Tinashe Warikandwa (Doreen) and Ewan Donald (the steamie's manager). This play of times past still speaks to our present.

Clare Brennan

# Music

## Classical picks

On CD, on air and online



• The Gloria from Haydn's **Theresienmesse** (Mass in B flat, Hob XXII:12, 1799),

with its exuberant choral writing, rushing string figures, trumpets and drums, is music to raise any spirits, is just one of the splendours of this expressive work. A new recording from the **Handel and Haydn Society**, conducted by **Harry Christophers** (Coro), with soloists Mary Bevan, Catherine Wyn-Rogers, Jeremy Budd and Sumner Thompson, has all the vigour and risk you need from a live recording. Based in Boston, Massachusetts, "H+H", now associated with historically informed performances, was founded in 1815 and gave the US premieres of major choral works such as Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *The Creation*.

As artistic director since 2008 and now conductor laureate, Harry Christophers – best known as director of his elite British choral group the Sixteen – has made more than a dozen albums with H+H. The other work here is Haydn's **London Symphony, No 103 "Drum Roll"**, its second-movement double variations and horn-calls finale a display of the composer's ingenuity, played with wit and grace.



• Listening to operas in languages we may not speak is standard practice. One sung in Welsh

is no different. In a remarkable achievement, overcoming hurdles on the way, **2117/Hedd Wyn** (Welsh National Opera/Tŷ Cerdd) – with music by Stephen McNeff and libretto by Gruff Rhys (*Super Furry Animals*) – has been recorded by the multiple forces of WNO's youth opera, *Only Boys Aloud* and *Only Boys Aloud Academi 2017*, WNO orchestra and a strong lineup of eight soloists.

The title refers to the Welsh pastoral poet Ellis Humphrey Evans, known by his bardic name, Hedd Wyn. He was killed on the first day of the battle of Passchendaele in 1917, aged 30. In the plot, past present and future overlap (hence the 2117 in the title). Communities are destroyed by a nuclear disaster. The Welsh language itself is threatened with extinction. The piece romps along, full of changing moods and orchestral colour. McNeff's lyrical gifts find affecting outlet, especially in the great choral set pieces and the harp-dominated ending.

• **The Voice of the Vibraphone** is a three-part series presented by vibes player Corey Mwamba, exploring the underappreciated charms of the instrument since its early beginnings in the 1920s. It starts tonight on Radio 3, 11pm/BBC Sounds. **Fiona Maddocks**

## Artist of the week

'Seductive tales so redolent of place':  
**Margo Cilker at the Old Blue Last.** Photograph  
by Sophia Evans/the Observer



# Of all the juke joints...

*In a tiny pub gig, the extraordinary US singer-songwriter Margo Cilker makes country and western her newly minted own*

### Kitty Empire



#### Margo Cilker

*The Old Blue Last, London EC2*

There are roughly 150 people in the upstairs room of this east London pub, gently poaching in their own body heat. Really, though, everyone here is miles away – transported to a small town in New Mexico, or to Bilbao in the rain, or to the expanses of the Pacific north-west by an extraordinary American singer-songwriter whose talents tower in inverse proportion to the size of this bijou venue.

Just when it seemed like every country and western byway had been exhausted, strip-mined for all its hardship and romance by everyone from Hank "Ramblin' Man" Williams onwards, this young US troubadour has pulled off the

unlikely trick of remaking that dusty, worn trope anew. "If you asked me, babe, I would tell you what I wanted," Margo Cilker sings on *Bilbao Precipitation*. "It's just an open road and I the only soul upon it."

Every single one of Cilker's songs sounds like a time-worn standard, built around her limpid vocals and her fluent acoustic guitar playing. You can pretty much sing along to any of them on first hearing. Her sound is fleshed out by a band tonight: drums, upright bass and an electric guitarist, Max Crawford, whose succinct but eloquent solos only add to Cilker's vivid storytelling. Her songs, she says, are pit stops at "all the little juke joints along life's way". It's patter straight out of central casting, but delivered with a knowing smile.

Born in the San Francisco Bay area, transplanted to Oregon via North Carolina and a spell in the Basque country, Cilker creates tunes

that embrace the road, then resist it, then embrace it all over again. "Now I fight the urge to ramble/ With every three-egg breakfast scramble," she confides on *Broken Arm* in Oregon, "and I marvel at hot water as it leaves the tap."

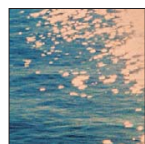
Despite a deep knowledge of the canon, Cilker isn't a product of Nashville; when pressed, she has called herself "a folk singer in the west". With a series of criminally little-known EPs under her belt, Cilker sat out the pandemic on a ranch in eastern Oregon, playing her songs to cowhands and veterinarians. She finally released her debut album, *Pohorylle*, in 2021 – a flawless gem of a record that provided instant succour and the promise of more expansive times to come.

Tonight, her delivery recalls many forebears – Emmylou Harris, Gillian Welch, the early Hurray for the Riff Raff. She quotes Creedence Clearwater Revival, covers Caroline

## Hot tracks



**Not the Twos**  
*Haha*  
Debut song Paradise was sampled by Kendrick Lamar – this has similar Gnarls Barkley vibes.



**Arctic Monkeys**  
*There'd Better Be a Mirrorball*  
Alex Turner selects crooner mode on this bitter-sweet taste of the Monkeys' forthcoming LP.



**Elton John and Britney Spears**  
*Hold Me Closer*  
After six years' silence, shame there isn't more Britney on this cheerful disco cut-up of Tiny Dancer.

## “ Her delivery recalls Emmylou Harris, Gillian Welch, the early Hurray for the Riff Raff

Spence and Tift Merritt and nods to Little Feat. But Cilker's world-building is emphatically her own, her perfectly formed song stories in thrall to the itinerant musician's calling, to whatever wisdom lies round the next bend.

Each uprooting brings with it a cocktail of anticipation and regret. “If I love it, then I leave it,” Cilker muses. On Chester's, a song named after a bar, Cilker raises an eyebrow at domesticity. “I've made my bed on the side of the road,” she relays, “seen my good friends get married and then feel alone.”

In among these seductive tales so redolent of place – of California dogwoods, of chilli for breakfast and canyons strung with barbed wire – are stories of people: Kevin Johnson, a sort of southern everyman, or Cilker's own partner, who stands before her “untrimmed”, in his “work boots worn thin”. Everyone else Cilker knows, it seems, has “gone crazy or died”.

*Pohorylle*, her album's title, feels like another exquisite place name – like Tehachapi, California, which lends its syllables to one of Cilker's bouncier numbers. (“Will you think of me on your way back to Tehachapi?” Cilker wonders amiably of an errant lover.)

In fact, Gerta Pohorylle is the real name of the photojournalist Gerda Taro, who died documenting the Spanish civil war. Taro worked alongside her partner, Endre Friedmann, jointly under the now famous pseudonym Robert Capa; Taro's part in the work of “Robert Capa” remains niche knowledge.

More stories of underappreciated women hide within these easy-going songs. “Heard a woman go on record/ Sayin' there's one night that wrecked her,” Cilker sings, “when a young man closed his hand across her mouth.” Cilker has said that she was watching the 2018 Senate confirmation hearings around the time she wrote Broken Arm in Oregon; you suspect the woman in question might be Christine Blasey Ford, who accused US supreme court justice Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault. There is so much going on in Cilker's simple songs – odes to wine, to men and women, to song, in which her granular specifics thrum with the power of universals.



## Albums



**Sudan Archives**  
*Natural Brown Prom Queen*  
(Stones Throw)

Eighteen tracks long and hellbent on swerving lanes, Sudan Archives' second album proper is one of those records that invites you to get comfortable in its dizzying headspace. Drawing from a wide array of sources – hip-hop, R&B, west African traditions, club beats, up-to-date digitals, analogue handclaps, looped strings – it all hangs together as a portrait of an artist keen to emphasise her range and primacy. Or, as Sudan Archives puts it on OMG Britt, a straight-up trap track: “They gonna have a fit when they hear this shit!”

Born in Cincinnati but relocated to LA, Brittney Parks is a post-genre operative whose skillset seems to expand with each release. *Natural Brown Prom Queen* brings her closer to the mainstream, thanks to takes on R&B that range from the canonical – Ciara, Freakalizer – to the more restless: Home Maker, or ChevyS10, a booty call where Parks deploys an angelic falsetto, a quote from Tracy Chapman's Fast Car and an on-trend disco denouement. Parks's earworms don't hurt either. As woozy and restless as these multipart productions are, she packs in plenty of sticky stuff: melodies, hooks, insistent figures. On the glorious title track, she chafes against colourism up against a Middle Eastern string loop that doesn't quit. **Kitty Empire**



2020 chart-topper *Weird!*'s kooky cosplay for a simple image showing a crestfallen Yungblud. Thankfully, it's all a pose, with the oversized, Billy Idol-esque opener The Funeral featuring slurred lines such as: “I've got a fucked up soul and an STD.”

That single careens into Tissues, built around a sample of the Cure's Close to Me for extra goth points, with its skyscraping, lovelorn chorus an album highlight. Breezy, big-chorused guitar pop suits Harrison's elastic vocals, even when his lyrics let him down, as on the 1975-aping, toxic masculinity diatribe I Cry 2 (“It's alright mate, I cry too”). Sweet Heroine lazily links love with addiction, while the 90-second Die for a Night aims for metaphysical poetry but ends in a shrug of “I don't know what I'm talking about”.

Yungblud's on safer ground with Cruel Kids, bolting big, bratty melodies on to all-caps anthems for teenage outsiders. This may be billed as his serious opus, but clearly growing up is boring. **Michael Cragg**

**Oliver Sim**  
*Hideous Bastard*  
(Young)

“Been living with HIV since 17/ Am I hideous?” Even in today's pop climate, where disclosure of mental and physical ailments is almost demanded, the xx singer Oliver Sim's directness on *Hideous* is devastating. Partly because we expect xx members to be taciturn, vague, less explicit, but also due to a rawness in his singing, a strength and fragility he has rarely hinted at before. Nothing else on his solo debut is as powerful – Sim isn't always the most compelling presence in the xx, and so it proves here. Yet with genius bandmate Jamie xx producing an entire album for the first time since 2017, *Hideous Bastard* is always an intriguing listen.

Sim is gently overcoming his natural reticence, and you feel the weight, on Fruit, of his first use of

male pronouns to describe a lover. Yet, apart from a goosebump-raising falsetto from Jimmy Somerville, there are no other voices except samples and Sim himself. Even in the ingenious vocal hall of mirrors on GMT, you slightly miss Romy's harmonies and their chilly caress. Sim has said this record is inspired by horror films... well, this adds welcome colour to the xx cinematic universe, but it's no blockbuster. **Damien Morris**

**Jackie Oates**  
*Gracious Wings*  
(Needle Pin)

The artwork of folk singer and fiddle player Jackie Oates's eighth album depicts the harpy from Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* saga who resides in the land of death, listening to the stories of the deceased; what ancient Greece termed a “psychopomp”. Pullman's creation chimes with Oates's current studies at an Oxford hospice to become a music psychotherapist, singing to the terminally ill. Having lost her father a few years back, Oates is now facing her mother's dementia. This inspires one strand of *Gracious Wings*, notably on a touching cover of Tom Waits's Time, though mortality is never far off in traditional folk song, as attested by versions of maritime ballad The Ship in Distress and the grieving Lament to the Moon.

The album captures a variety of moods, however. Robin Tells of Winter is sparse and forlorn as a January dawn, while Tammy Toddles celebrates childhood innocence and La Llorona, a duet with Megan Henwood, addresses pregnancy. As ever, Oates's vocals are light but mellifluous and she remains an expressive fiddler, given classy support from bassist John Parker and accordion player John Spiers, among others. An affecting compendium from one of folk's brightest talents. **Neil Spencer**

**Yungblud**  
*Yungblud*  
(Locomotion/Geffen)

On the surface, this third album from Doncaster's cartoonish pop-punk upstart Dominic Harrison, AKA Yungblud, suggests a moody makeover. Firstly, it's self-titled – artist shorthand for the “real me” – while the cover art swaps

## One to watch

**Telenova**

*The Australian trio, who have been compared to Portishead, specialise in free-flowing electronic pop and intense grooves*

Melbourne has been a hotbed of genre-spanning musical talent in recent years. The city's largely independent music scene has produced international success stories from the likes of jazz-fusionists Hiatus Kaiyote to punk newcomers Amyl and the Sniffers. Now, trio Telenova – comprised of ex-members of Melbourne groups Miami Horror and Slum Sociable – add their names to this roster with hook-laden pop numbers that reference everything from trip-hop to doo-wop.

After releasing their debut EP, *Tranquillize*, in 2021, the group earned comparisons to Portishead for vocalist Angeline Armstrong's husky delivery and bandmates

Edward Quinn and Joshua Moriarty's head-nodding, sludgy grooves. On their latest EP, *Stained Glass Love*, they alter their sound to encompass the singalong, Amy Winehouse-esque fanfares of Haunted, the euphoric driving rhythms of the title track and the 2000s indie-pop of Why Do I Keep You?

Armstrong describes the EP, written between lockdowns in Melbourne, as “a shedding of the skin”. It's an apt description: with each release, Telenova transform, adapting past influences to produce imaginative sounds that reflect the free-flowing music scene in which they are made. **Ammar Kalia**

*Stained Glass Love* is out now

# Television

## Meet you in Middle-earth

Amazon's mega-budget Tolkien prequel requires an A-level in orc studies; Adrian Dunbar sings; Aidan Turner broods; and David Dimbleby asks some difficult questions of the BBC

Barbara  
Ellen



**The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power** Amazon Prime  
**Ridley** ITV

**The Suspect** ITV

**Days That Shook the BBC With David Dimbleby** BBC Two

How much are you into elf ears? I'm not prying into kinks – just reeling from the reported cost of Amazon Prime's **The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power**. According to which report you read, it's anything from \$465m to \$715m for the first eight-part run of a rumoured five. Either figure makes it the most expensive TV series ever. Why? How? Obviously, there's "interest" – the trailer had 257m views in the first 24 hours – but for that money, live hobbits should be jumping out of the screen.

Developed by JD Payne and Patrick McKay, and drawing on JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and appendices, *The Rings of Power* is set during Middle-earth's Second Age, predating Peter Jackson's film series by thousands of years. In the opening double episode, the main thread concerns a younger Galadriel (Morfydd Clark) hunting orcs and the titular lord, Sauron, to avenge her murdered brother. To explain her quest, she drones on (and on) like a sanctimonious folk singer to fellow elf Elrond (Robert Aramayo). Alongside elves and orcs there are humans, healers and hobbit-like harfoots, Lenny Henry among them in voluminous silver whiskers.

This being fantasy, even

in Lindon, capital of the high elves, everyone is garbed like a medieval fever dream. And... everyone... talks... really... slowly. Quasi-religious themes pulse throughout: clambering up an icy mountain, Galadriel resembles a superannuated Joan of Arc. There are olde worlde maps: Valinor, Eregion et al. I soon become dependent on the hyper-expository voiceover: you need an A-level in orc studies to follow what's going on.

Just as I'm wearying of resentful humans, mollifying harfoots and elitist elves (it's like Middle-earth Brexit), everything revs up (spoiler alert): romance, scheming, orc aggro. Galadriel spurns eternal life, plunging into dark oceans to pursue her mission. Elrond travels to the realm of the dwarves, Khazad-dûm, ruled by a shady king (Peter Mullan). A lanky, straggly bearded, Catweazle-like figure dubbed the Stranger (Daniel Weyman) is discovered sprawled in a spitting, fiery pit. Could this be proto-Gandalf?

In the big autumn fantasy-off, Netflix's *Game of Thrones* prequel, *House of the Dragon*, is the better show. While *The Rings of Power* is erratically impressive – a visually lush, Tolkien-completist nerd heaven – too often it feels stilted, dated and a mite dull. With six episodes to go, this could change, but it's difficult to see where all the money went.

Hold me, I'm frightened: Adrian Dunbar is singing. In the new four-part ITV series **Ridley**, created by Paul Matthew Thompson (*Vera*) and Jonathan Fisher, Dunbar (Superintendent Ted Hastings in *Line of Duty*) plays the eponymous troubled, forcibly retired detective who's recovering from a breakdown (wife and daughter slain in an arson attack meant for him). Dragged back in by a former protegee (Bronagh Waugh) to look into the murder of a farmer, Ridley finds it's linked to an old child abduction case.

He also co-owns a jazz club (so common in isolated northern farming communities) and ends up crooning through a rendition of Richard Hawley's *Coles Corner*. Dunbar (who has a real-life musical side hustle) has a decent set of pipes, but I'm not sure this "Singing Detective without the psoriasis?" motif works. It gives the series the ambience of a Pennines-themed vanity project, and *Ridley* is already struggling. Despite a strong cast (including Elizabeth Berrington), the first of the standalone stories

'Like a medieval fever dream': Benjamin Walker, Morfydd Clark and Robert Aramayo in *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*. Amazon Prime



“  
Just as I'm wearying of resentful humans, mollifying harfoots and elitist elves, everything revs up

is bogged down with clichés, predictable twists and dialogue so clumpy it falls to the floor in clods: "You can't solve them all, Ridley." Dunbar isn't irrevocably welded to Ted Hastings (see his striking turn in Channel 5's *Blood*), but the notes fall flat here.

I've never seen Aidan Turner as Poldark, so I wasn't pining for him strutting in 18th-century britches in the new five-part thriller **The Suspect**, based on Michael Robotham's novel.

Turner plays extravagantly bearded clinical psychologist Joe O'Loughlin, who has recently been diagnosed with early onset Parkinson's by his medic friend (Adam James). After heroically rescuing a suicidal cancer patient from a window ledge, O'Loughlin assists two detectives (Shaun Parkes and Anjali Mohindra) in a murder case in which the victim helped stab herself 21 times. However, he's behaving strangely: the police catch him sneaking another look at the corpse; he fails to mention that one of his patients (Bobby Schofield) is obsessed with number 21, and so on.

In many ways, *The Suspect* is preposterous: the type of thriller littered with

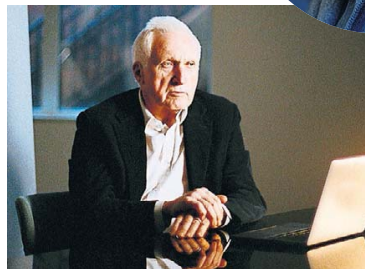
shots of big buildings to reinforce how thrillingly modern it all is. From watching just the opener, I'm certain I've spotted the killer. Even Turner's beard becomes distracting, making him resemble a brooding Chris Bonington. That said, the show is pacy, nicely cast (Parkes's oddball detective; *Fleabag*'s Sian Clifford waffling around as one of O'Loughlin's colleagues), and there's enough invention and disruption to keep things spicy.

At the start of Daniel Bogado's three-part BBC Two docuseries **Days That Shook the BBC With David Dimbleby**, our host, moodily lit from the side, tells it straight: "I'm not here to speak for the BBC." Even though he and his family are tantamount to BBC fixtures and fittings, the erstwhile *Question Time* presenter states sternly: "My conclusions are my own."

Future episodes will deal with everything from Iraq to the cancelled *Newsnight* on Jimmy Savile to race and sexism. The first is a dissection of rifts with government (such as Margaret Thatcher over Northern Ireland). And with royalty, after Martin Bashir's notorious 1995 *Panorama* interview with Princess Diana (Dimbleby calls the way it was acquired "underhand, devious, obnoxious"). When Emily Maitlis (recently defected to Global radio) pops up to discuss her 2019 interview with Prince Andrew about Jeffrey Epstein, it's an intriguing companion piece to her and Dimbleby's recent spat over her claims about government interference at the BBC.

The series is interesting, wide-ranging and far from toothless, though clearly Dimbleby is still Beeb to his core. While others touted as the face of the BBC come and go, Dimbleby is more like the cement.

Clockwise from right: Aidan Turner, 'a brooding Chris Bonington' in *The Suspect*; Bronagh Waugh and Adrian Dunbar in *Ridley*; David Dimbleby looks back at *Days That Shook the BBC*.  
ITV; BBC



# Audio

## Podcasts & radio

### Hear it here first

*Emily Maitlis and Jon Sopel's new podcast faces off against the new hosts of their old one in a momentous week for current affairs*

**Miranda Sawyer**



**The News Agents** *Global*  
**Americast** *BBC Sounds*

**The News Agents**, the much-trumpeted daily news podcast from LBC's owners Global, landed (slightly late) on to Global Player on Tuesday after a couple of sort-of episodes. These consisted of teasers plus a full recording of Emily Maitlis's much-reported MacTaggart lecture, complete with breathless introduction from Maitlis, Jon Sopel and Lewis Goodall. All three co-host *The News Agents*, though it's clear from the start who the stars are. The show's opening sting – its theme tune – boasts 60s spy-type music, a clip from Maitlis's interview with Prince Andrew, a couple of others from Sopel's questioning of Trump and nothing at all for Goodall. Still, Maitlis has decided to call him Luigi, so perhaps that's some comfort.

In fact, she gives nicknames to everyone who turns up on the show. I'm not sure why, though I imagine it's an indicator as to how casual and free both she and Sopel ("Sopes") are feeling now that they're independent podcasters, as opposed to BBC presenters. We've known about their discomfort with

BBC balance restrictions for months, of course, and the headlines around Maitlis's MacTaggart lecture merely emphasise this. But, you know... haven't they moved on? Stop dissing the ex, what about the new show?

Well, I've heard two episodes, and the second was far better than the first. Tuesday's – the official launch – was, to use the technical parlance, all over the place. The tone was established by much early jokiness and chat, which, though jolly, didn't quite introduce the presenters properly. Then some blah about listeners choosing the day's topic: Trump keeping top secret documents at Mar-a-Lago. Really? An offbeat choice, given that this is a daily news programme based in the UK and, if you look around, there's everything from sewage, strikes, fuel shortages, cost of living and a new PM to chew over. Plus, though the interviews were lively enough, they were with a bizarre choice of people, and oddly ordered. A talk with Trump's short-lived communications bod Anthony Scaramucci started in the middle of the programme, before being deserted for a chat with a politician and returned to later. Yes, there were jokes about his nickname. It's the Mooch. I know you were wondering.

Wednesday's show centred on the problems that the new prime minister will encounter when they start their job tomorrow. This was a far better programme, the interview with the former cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell (nickname: God) interesting and revealing, and the tone less grating. It was hard to avoid the suspicion that the previous, Trump-based episode was just a spoiler for Maitlis and Sopel's old show, **Americast**, which relaunched with a new presenting team last week.

*The News Agents' Emily Maitlis and Jon 'Sopes' Sopel.*  
Suki Dhanda/the Observer



A quick explainer: until they left the BBC in February, Maitlis and Sopel both had high-profile "proper" BBC reporting jobs – Maitlis as host of *Newsnight*, Sopel as North America editor. But they were also co-hosts, with Anthony Zurcher, of the successful BBC podcast *Americast* (produced by the talented Dino Sofos, who came with them when they left for Global). At the beginning of the week, *Americast's* new hosts were announced: Zurcher was to be joined by Justin Webb from the *Today* programme, Sarah Smith, the new BBC North America editor, and – a great choice this – Marianna Spring, the BBC's excellent disinformation and social media correspondent. The relaunch date? Last Wednesday.

Anyway. As suspected, *Americast's* first show with its new hosts was about... Trump keeping top secret documents at Mar-a-Lago. Hey ho. Such are the trials of an audio reviewer. The episode came out several hours later than promised, and you could imagine producers frantically editing out one guest (perhaps the Mooch?) and replacing them with another. Whoever got the chop, the main interviewee, lawyer and ex-FBI agent Asha Rangappa, was far better than any of *The*

*News Agents'* guests on the subject. Focused, clear and not led by political agenda or ego, he dealt with all questions, including one raised on both programmes: would the FBI hold back on prosecuting Trump for fear of provoking his supporters into riots? No, she said, because otherwise "the Justice Department would no longer be able to say that no one is above the law". Spring's contribution, towards the end of the show, was innovative: she's creating specifically designed online user profiles in order to research how certain types of US voters are targeted by social media ads. This promises to be very interesting.

The whole pace of *Americast* was far swifter than that of *The News Agents*, which I prefer: the setup clearer and the tone warm enough, though I could have done without the weather discussion. Presumably this was to establish where each presenter was: Smith and Zurcher in different parts of the US, Spring in Paris (ha!) and Webb in London. They're all working, is the hint, and we'll get them and their insider knowledge when they have the time. A point made, perhaps, to highlight what *The News Agents* is lacking: Maitlis and Sopel's old jobs, with all the access they provided. If they're not working BBC reporters, how will they get the scoops?

Aside from all these opening-episode tit-for-tat shenanigans, both programmes are good and will almost certainly get better. *Americast* will motor on like the Rolls-Royce it is; *The News Agents*, though, needs to settle into a less breathless rhythm if it's to do any damage to the gold standard of the *New York Times's The Daily* and the *Guardian's Today in Focus*. Both of these daily podcasts provide much neater, better-produced, more in-depth examinations of specific news topics, plus an extra at the end. *The News Agents* needs to tone down the jokes and daft nicknames and concentrate.

## WATCH LIST

*Barbara Ellen's best of the rest*

### University Challenge at 60

(BBC Two)  
As Amol Rajan takes over the chair from Jeremy Paxman, this documentary looks at 60 years of the quiz show, from Bamber Gascoigne onwards. Will underprepared students quake in quite the same way again?

### The Capture

(BBC One)  
In the second series of Ben Chanan's surveillance techno-thriller, software freakery and espionage are only the start of it. Holliday Grainger and Ben Miles star, with Paapa Essiedu joining the cast.

### Married at First Sight UK

(E4)  
Another batch of couples lunge for the elusive happy ever after on the returning addictive reality show that (deliciously) shames all those who watch it, even more than those who appear on it. Sorry, not sorry.



Science Weekly

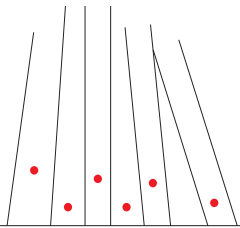
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# Books

## Memoir

# There's nothing very funny about fame

In his often moving second memoir, Lenny Henry reflects on his unlikely journey from seaside summer seasons to award-winning elder statesman of TV – and why he feels he failed his mother. By *Rhik Samadder*

**Rising to the Surface**  
**Lenny Henry**  
 Faber, £16.99, pp336

Lenny Henry has always received more than his fair share of criticism, from racists, whose opinion can be discounted, but also from liberal activist types decrying the regressive buffoonery of his early work and comedy fans who simply find him unfunny. In his uneven second autobiography, following *Who Am I, Again?* which covered his early life up to 1980, Henry accepts most of this judgment.

"I failed upwards," he writes in a startling epilogue, citing the Beckett fragment on creative futility. He acknowledges that it took more than 10 years for him to become halfway decent, and that he received more than his fair share of opportunities because of early television fame. "I couldn't really sing or dance. I'd forget the middle bits of jokes. I'd fall over or knock props over (in front of Princess Anne!)," he writes. As one of our most successful comedians, it's sobering how little he has felt it. "I

kept going, because what was the alternative?"

It's easy to forget he became a household name at just 16, after a breakthrough performance on *New Faces* in 1975. His early gigs were in the now vanished world of variety shows and seaside summer seasons; soon, he was working alongside the rising stars of a new generation. As a working-class youth from Dudley with Jamaican heritage, Henry was never fully adopted by either the working men's club circuit or the middle-class alternative scene. The

book's early sections are its most engaging: his struggle to find his niche doubling as an account of the landmark shift in comedy itself in the 80s, as acts such as Alexei Sayle, Ben Elton and French and Saunders moved the genre's goalposts.

He spends much of what follows trying to understand his early promise and what he has to offer. "Potential, like the artistic muse, must be wooed diligently, gracefully and persistently," he writes. He describes himself as lacking the audience control of David Copperfield, the acting skills of Tracey Ullman, his co-stars in early sketch show *Three of a Kind*, or the improvisational brilliance of Felix Dexter, with whom he worked in the 90s. Yet, commercially, he outstrips them all. After co-presenting *Tiswas*, Henry lands his own show on the BBC, tours internationally, co-founds Comic Relief with Richard Curtis, and stars in his own Disney movie (after Eddie Murphy walks away). It's a fascinating reversal of trajectory: many artists find a voice, then spend years trying



to make the world take notice.

The latter experience is a disaster: Henry is put on the "Disney diet", the company's nutritionist allowing him to have "air, rice cakes... and a glass of wine once a week". He spends miserable months away from his family, and a wife who has put her own ambitions on hold, to make a film he knows isn't funny. Most of this account of life at the top is wilfully downbeat. When they come, the showbiz anecdotes are brief and un-glitzy, such as seeing Spike Lee's back at the Cannes film festival, or being heckled by Van Morrison at a New York gig.

There is, perhaps understandably, little of his relationship with ex-wife Dawn French. He makes mostly passing references to bad choices, when personal life loses out to showbusiness, and there is no mention of his stint at the Priory following a tabloid scandal. But where he is forthcoming he is nothing if not honest and self-castigating; about his yo-yoing weight and abiding feelings of inadequacy.

As in his first book, there remains a sense that this journey is one of atonement. As an adolescent, Henry was a performer on *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, an "everlasting shame" that has seared itself into his psyche. His broadest characters were criticised by the black community for pandering to stereotypes. The burden of representation now seems unjust. For much of the 80s, he was the only black person on television, "apart from Trevor McDonald and



## This week



**Lionel Shriver**  
Rachel Cooke defends a bracing collection of journalism by the controversial writer



**Ian McEwan**  
The writer charts a life from the playground to old age in his new book, *Lessons*.  
By Anthony Cummins



**Orlando Figes**  
The historian on his latest book about Russia, Gorbachev's death and his teenage love of Émile Zola



**LEFT** Lenny Henry in 1995. Above: with Tracey Ullman and David Copperfield in *Three of a Kind* in 1983. George Bodnar/Comic Relief/Getty; Getty

**TOP RIGHT** With various celebrities, among them his ex-wife Dawn French (far left), on *Red Nose Day* in 1991. Comic Relief



Floella Benjamin, neither of whom was a standup comedian”.

Slowly, Henry edges away from “yelling and gurning”, is dissuaded from the music career he hankers after and coached into a naturalistic acting style. He has endless energy, a producer's eye for talented collaborators, and uses his fame to create a more progressive future. No one should have to rise against the odds. He hires diverse crews, runs competitions to find new writers, sets up a production company to tell stories that never get past the old gatekeepers. He may not be cited as an influence by young performers, but he paved the way for many.

Elsewhere, interviews with colleagues such as Ullman and filmmaker Andy Harries are transcribed for a few pages. This feels half-baked. The jokey tone comes off as an unnecessary attempt to soften the pain, of which there is much. The most moving passages concern the declining health of Henry's mother, Winifred, whom he adores. When he was a child, she would beat him hard and often, with belt buckles and cooking pots to the face. When he raises this with her, she says she did it to harden him to the setbacks of the adult world. When he confesses that he is struggling to spin the plates of his fame, she orders him to shut his mouth.

To date, Henry has won the prestigious TV award the Golden Rose of Montreux, helped raise more than a billion pounds for good causes, diversified his industry and grown into a beloved elder statesman of television. Yet what shall it profit a man? The book's lasting impression is a sad one: the dutiful son unable to forgive himself for being too busy to take his mother on a final trip to Jamaica.

“I let the work take over. Silly sod,” he says, closing the chapter on his most prolific years with the realisation that no achievement can ever be enough or life path free of regret. By this account, success is no laughing matter.

Rhik Samadder is the author of *I Never Said I Loved You* (Headline). To order *Rising to the Surface* for £17.40 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

## Fiction

# Women of substance

Writer and classicist Natalie Haynes's rollicking fourth novel, a reframing of the myth of Perseus and Medusa, questions our perception of the monsters and the heroes, writes Alex Preston

### Stone Blind: Medusa's Story Natalie Haynes

Pan Macmillian, £18.99, pp384

Natalie Haynes began *Pandora's Jar* (2020), her excellent nonfiction collection of essays about women in Greek myth, with the image of herself as a child, sitting on the sofa with her brother watching *Clash of the Titans*. Although that film inspired Haynes to study Classics, she never thought to question the presentation of Medusa. “She wasn't a character,” she wrote, “she was just a monster... It would be years before I came across any other version of Medusa's story, anything that told me how she became a monster, or why.”

This childhood memory appears to have inspired Haynes's fourth novel, *Stone Blind*, which reframes the familiar myth of Perseus and Medusa as the story of an innocent girl corrupted and destroyed by an unforgiving world. We first meet Medusa as a baby abandoned on the Gorgon Shore of Libya: a rocky, unpeopled place. She is cared for by her sisters, Sthenno and Euryale. At first, it is unclear if Medusa is truly related to these terrifying creatures “with their tusks and their snaking

manes of hair”. Medusa has wings, it's true, and serpentine hair, but otherwise she looks human. What's more, the child is mortal, unlike her sisters. We begin to perceive her as the sisters perceive her: they “hoped once again that they had kept her from feeling what they knew to be true: that she was a freak whose birth had horrified both parents”. Here we find the book in a nutshell – ideas of what is monstrous are culturally conditioned, predicated on fear of the unknown. As the sisters learn to love Medusa, they no longer find her monstrous. Unfortunately, Poseidon also catches sight of her, and, just after her 16th birthday, he engineers a meeting whose conclusion is as horrifying as it is inevitable.

The book's chapters thread between the worlds of gods, monsters and men. The power of the novel lies in the way that, like Ovid, it weaves disparate tales together to create a coherent patchwork. We have the twin stories of Medusa and Perseus, but we also have Hera and Hephaestus; the war of the gods and the giants; Poseidon and Amphitrite; immersions into the worlds of nereids and monsters.

Early on, we are told the story of the conception of Athena. Here, as elsewhere, Haynes is brilliant on the brutality of male violence, unshackling it from the euphemism that has couched countless rapes and sexual assaults in woolly abstraction. Metis, the sea nymph who was Zeus's first wife, is terrified when her former husband comes back to rape her; the second time she silently submits: “She knew what was coming and she knew she could not evade him. The only thing left to her was to hope that her

daughter... would survive.”

As with Madeline Miller or Mary Renault, the great pleasure in reading Haynes's novels is the sense of participating in a continuum of storytelling. In previous novels, she took on the myths of Oedipus and Antigone (in 2017's *The Children of Jocasta*) and the Trojan war (in the Women's prize-shortlisted *A Thousand Ships* from 2019). In each she has reshaped familiar stories and placed women at their heart. Crucially, as she sets out in *Pandora's Jar*, this is not an innovation but an act of restitution: women were prominent in the original tales but have been relegated to the sidelines by centuries of patriarchal retelling.

Haynes began her career as a broadcaster and comedian – her *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics* series on the BBC, now in its eighth series, is a total delight. This background is evident in the rollicking narrative voice that energises *Stone Blind*. It is a voice that feels at once biting (post) modern and filled with old wisdom. Increasingly, the narrator interjects and comments on the action as the clash between Perseus and Medusa nears. “The idea that Perseus is a hero is one I have taken exception to since – I can't even tell you how long it is. As long as I've known his name.” By the end of the novel, you'll agree – and the Gorgon's head will take on a new and powerful resonance as a symbol of the way stories can be warped by time. *Stone Blind* acts as a brilliant and compellingly readable corrective.

To order *Stone Blind* for £16.52 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837



*The Head of Medusa* by Peter Paul Rubens, 1618. Getty

## Film and music

## Poetic licence to kill

*A study of Bond and the Beatles works best as a series of lively nuggets but its thesis that the two represent love and death in a fight for the nation's cultural soul is a tad fanciful, writes Matthew Reisz*

**Love and Let Die: Bond, the Beatles and the British Psyche**  
**John Higgs**

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £20, pp528

It is a curious fact that the Beatles' debut single, Love Me Do, and the first James Bond film, *Dr No*, were both released on 5 October 1962. No one could have predicted that we would still be thrilled by the band's music six decades later, or that the film franchise would still be going strong. John Higgs, however, had the intriguing idea of exploring their creation, development and afterlives in parallel.

Though he inevitably covers some well-trodden territory, much of the detail is poignant and entertaining. In the early days of

Beatlemania, Ringo Starr's house was surrounded by fans 24 hours a day. His mother, Elsie, politely offered them sandwiches – which they took away, uneaten, as souvenirs. A friend admitted it was “awkward, particularly as the toilet was still in the yard”. The rulers of the Soviet Union, anxious about the rise of western youth culture, made strenuous efforts to discredit the Beatles. One article depicted them as monkeys and called them “Dung Beatles”, while a propaganda film,

*Ringo Starr with his mum, Elsie, and stepfather, Harry, in their new house in Liverpool, March 1964. Alamy*



reports Higgs, bizarrely “intercut unflattering photographs of [the band] together with images of the Ku Klux Klan, ecstatic pop fans dancing, burning crosses and images of rural poverty from the American south”.

When American censors objected to the name of the character Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger*, they were reassured by pictures of the actor Honor Blackman at the UK premiere with Prince Philip. When the Australian model George Lazenby was auditioning for the part of Bond in the late 1960s, the producers sent sex workers to his hotel room to check that he wasn't gay.

*Love and Let Die* works well as a collection of pacy stories, though it is a pity Higgs has a weakness for grandiose flourishes. There were “truths in [the] screaming” of the girls at early Beatles concerts, he writes, “that many religions have yet to grasp”. He also offers us a bold overarching thesis, based on Freud's idea of the conflict between Eros and Thanatos, that “while the Beatles represent love, James Bond represents death. What makes Bond different from other spies is that he has a licence to kill.”

It is clearly true that Bond (inset) and the Beatles embody different attitudes to class, privilege, violence, masculinity and Englishness. But Higgs wants to go much further and claim that they are engaged in a kind of permanent “struggle for the soul of [British] culture”.

“When we cheer on Bond, and fantasise about living his life,” he argues, we “unconsciously find ourselves supporting the powers that be ... The spell was massively weakened, however, by the arrival of the Beatles.” Once the Beatles had broken up, the Bond of the early 70s “continued to insist that he and the British establishment were the best in the world. And now ... there was nothing of equal stature to contradict him.”

None of this is very plausible. There has been a vast amount

of pushback against the sexual politics of Bond's world that has not needed to evoke the Beatles as a counterweight. And many people clearly enjoy the films for the suits, stunts, hedonism and exotic locations, and the “sophistication” of a hero who can't resist telling bar staff how to make the best martini, without buying into their values. Higgs himself cites the interesting case of 007 (Shanty Town), a 1967 song by Desmond Dekker, the voice of the new post-independence Jamaica, which offered “a strange mix of topical political reportage and Bond fandom”. It is safe to assume that he had no time for what the book describes as “post-imperial fantasies of British exceptionalism”.

It no doubt makes a kind of sense to say that “the Beatles represent love”, though love is hardly an unusual topic for songs, but what about Higgs's notion that the Bond films are “about selling people death”? It is true that women tend to die after sleeping with 007, that some of the films feature terrifying stunts and that the producers have a knack for tapping into current fears. Yet much of the franchise treats violence in a cartoonish style far less visceral and disturbing than in the average TV cop show. Higgs himself mentions the scene in *Diamonds Are Forever* featuring “an almost uncountable number of police cars smashing into each other – often followed by a shot of their unharmed drivers exiting the cars and throwing their hats to the ground in frustration ... people usually survive car accidents in the James Bond universe”.

Higgs is a lively writer and has assembled many intriguing nuggets from six decades of popular culture. It remains unconvincing that the eternal battle between Eros and Thanatos provides the key to them all.

To order *Love and Let Die* for £19.14 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

## Fiction

## Haunted by lost lands

**Woman of Light**  
**Kali Fajardo-Anstine**  
Corsair, £16.99, pp336

Kali Fajardo-Anstine's debut novel is set in 1930s Denver, Colorado, a teeming city built on the exploits of white colonial settlers and the erasure of Indigenous American lands, histories and societies. Its heroine is Luz Lopez, who must struggle to survive despite a traumatic past, a dangerous present and an unknown future.

Fajardo-Anstine describes Denver with a pleasing solidity, its shops, bars and carnivals and small bands of enemies and allies carrying a detailed everyday heft. She offers

a fascinatingly rich setting that depicts American western self-mythologisation in the making, when the victors of history are secure enough that the murals in the local courthouse “depicted covered wagons, miners panning for gold, an abundance of white men coming to the land”.

The prose weakens when reaching for a certain classic register. There are unnecessary *Reader's Digest* novel-like chapter headings: *The Body Snatchers of Bakersfield, California*; *The Sleepy Prophet and the Child from Nowhere*. The same happens with attempts at overly poetic writing, as when describing “the room, its uneasiness,



a bleach-like sadness”, or a woman who “had a dazed look, as if she'd walked into her own birthday party expecting a wake”.

There is no need for such try-hard phrases, as the raw stuff of Fajardo-

**Kali Fajardo-Anstine:**  
**'muscular writing'**

Anstine's world is so fascinating. When it isn't straining for similes and metaphors, the writing becomes easy and muscular: “the city had pace, a feeling”, a character feels “as if the land was family” while “rail yards and coal smelters coughed exhaust, their soot raining into the South Platte river”.

Fajardo-Anstine is brilliant at evoking the everyday resilience of people carrying centuries of history in their souls in a charged present day that offers advancement and change alongside violence and insult. Luz, her family and friends fight to survive in a teeming, multiracial but divided city,

haunted by their lost, colonised, stolen and occupied lands, wary of white people whose currency was “marked with blood”, betrayal and exploitation. There is a truly shocking scene of a Ku Klux Klan rally of men, women and children, “their painted hoods bobbing along the horizon”. By the time it winds down, *Woman of Light* achieves something very satisfying as a soapy, immersive saga – a feat of old-school storytelling.

**Bidisha Mamata**

To order *Woman of Light* for £14.78 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837



## In brief by Alexander Larman

### Reminders of the Day Shaun Bythell

Profile, £16.99, pp377

The latest instalment of the diaries of misanthropic but witty Wigtown bookseller Shaun Bythell does not deviate too far from the template established by earlier entries. Bythell's shop still struggles to remain profitable, his customers bewilder him with their strange requests while the shop's staff may be the most eccentric of all. Yet what comes through strongly is his obvious love of books and affection for those who spend their lives buying them or giving him material for his next volume.

### A Street Shaken by Light James Buchan

Mountain Leopard Press, £16.99, pp271

Writers who create a six-book historical series revolving around a fictionalised historical character can hardly be accused of lacking ambition. Judging by this thrilling first instalment in the William Neilson chronicles, Buchan is equal to such a task, as he follows a young adventurer who swashbuckles, romances and intrigues his way through 18th-century Paris, India and Scotland. The next instalment is eagerly awaited.

### The Prime Ministers We Never Had

Steve Richards  
Atlantic, £9.99, pp314,  
(paperback)

What would Britain be like today if we'd had Michael Portillo, Barbara Castle or Jeremy Corbyn as our prime ministers? Over the course of political journalist Steve Richards's fascinating series of potted biographies of some of the most prominent politicians who never made it to No 10, he considers afresh the leaders who could have been transformative – and those who may have been disastrous. Whatever your political stance, Richards's admirably even-handed account will make you think again about the might-have-beens of politics.

To order *Reminders of the Day* or *A Street Shaken by Light* for £14.78, or *The Prime Ministers We Never Had* for £9.29 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-376 3837



*Lessons covers eight decades in the life of a twice-married pianist. Allan Cash Picture Library/Alamy*

**BELOW Ian McEwan:** 'Depicts not only characters but their times'. Lydia Goldblatt/*Guardian*

## Fiction

# This boy's life

*Ian McEwan's attempt to capture a man's existence in its entirety through decades of personal and global change lacks the drama of his greatest books.*

By **Anthony Cummins**

### Lessons Ian McEwan

Jonathan Cape, £20, pp496

The jokes began in March 2020: what would come first, a vaccine or Ian McEwan's pandemic novel? His reputation for topical fiction, hardly an obvious destination when he first broke out in the 1970s with grisly tales of incest, bestiality and paedophilia, owes everything to *Saturday* (2005), which mullied the pros and cons of invading Iraq through the eyes of a bouillabaisse-simmering neurosurgeon in London: a strenuous yoking of spheres that spoke of nothing so much as the pressure McEwan felt to catch the moment, especially since the book's acknowledgments made clear he'd been shadowing a brain doctor long before the events the book portrayed.

Signs that McEwan was wearing his mantle more lightly – with a counterfactual history of modern Britain told as a love triangle involving a robot (*Machines Like Me*) and a Brexit-era satire about an insectoid PM (*The Cockroach*), not to mention a novel written from the point of view of a foetus (*Nutshell*) – are dispelled by the arrival of his longest novel yet. *Lessons* covers

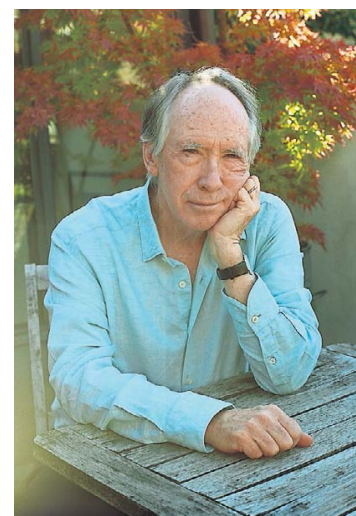
eight decades in the life of Roland, a twice-married tearoom pianist at "a second-rank London hotel". From his postwar military childhood in Libya (not the only detail he shares with his author) through the Thatcher years, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of Blair, 9/11, Brexit and, yes, Covid; from schoolboy masturbation to arthritic widowhood; from the hard yards of childcare to the pang of the empty nest, the everyday milestones of Roland's life tick by to the inescapable rhythm of the headlines: "How could he complain... when his son [Lawrence] was not at risk from smallpox or polio, or from snipers hidden in the hills above Sarajevo?"

It opens in May 1986, when Lawrence is a baby and Roland, 37, is busy sealing up his London home in the wake of the news from Chernobyl, which stirs unwelcome memories of how, at 14, the Cuban missile crisis led him into the bed of his sinister piano teacher, Miriam – a terror right out of McEwan's early tales and in whose presence the book snaps to life. The psychosexual crisis she provokes – the novel's radioactive core – puts much-needed heat under an otherwise scrappy soup that rather whiffs of possibly autobiographical projects abandoned and repurposed; like McEwan, Roland is sent to boarding school in Suffolk by a violent army father and learns of his older brother only in adulthood – matters of record, which McEwan has spoken of before, plundered right down to the wording of the advert by which that child was given up for adoption as a baby.

But instead of becoming a writer, Roland is a failed poet who, when, the book opens, has just been ditched by his wife, Alissa, soon to be a

world-famous novelist who achieves publication only at the cost of abandoning her child to start afresh in her native Germany, where her father was on the fringe of the anti-Nazi White Rose movement, a thread that inspires much musing about Roland's "fortune... to have been born in 1948 in placid Hampshire, not Ukraine or Poland in 1928".

That's McEwan's fortune, too, but you can't help feel that for him, at least as a writer, it comes tinged with regret that his work somehow lacks moral seriousness as a result. The notion seems to be at the heart of his urge to depict not only characters but their times, to comic effect; when Roland muses on the "violently irrational" western response to 9/11, just as he's planning to turn up on Miriam's doorstep some 40 years after they last met, he thinks the consequences of bombing Baghdad "could be hell. So too could meeting Miriam". Not even Lawrence's decision to drop sixth-form maths goes without global commentary; when Roland tells him not to, Lawrence says he "wasn't even the best at school. Ah Ting was always ahead. She didn't even try." "China rising," his father



thinks. "Nothing could prevent it."

As in *Saturday*, the desire for geopolitical profundity generates some ludicrously symbolic violence. Roland, emotionally tied to Germany and named (we infer) after a farmer who came to his father's aid in Dunkirk, stands as a kind of one-man European Union: of course there's a climactic hiking scene in which a key architect of Brexit pushes him off a precipice. And the multigenerational storyline couldn't function without a series of convenient run-ins to oil the cogs, above all when Roland re-encounters his ex-wife in freshly unified Berlin. Overall, though, *Lessons* made me long for the more melodramatic turns of McEwan's other books. No agonisingly drawn-out dismemberment (*The Innocent*); no pivotally gloopy money shot (*On Chesil Beach*); instead, with eight pages left, and the reader on tenterhooks as to how McEwan will play his hand, we're told of how lockdown taught Roland "that he did not mind a little housework".

Only the Miriam episodes offer the tension of sustained dialogue rather than the arm's-length synopsis in which the rest of the novel unfolds. Yes, she ruins Roland's future relationships with women, but it's something we're told, never shown: Alissa walks out leaving only a note; Roland's second wife – a barely there cipher praised for her organisational skills – breaks off their initial engagement exactly the same way. Why not let some crockery fly?

Maybe the Mogadon prose is a stroke of psychologically incisive genius – a way to evoke the haunted stasis of Roland's emotional life – but it's a hell of a gamble with our patience. The weirdest thing is, if you do find yourself enjoying it, McEwan seems to end up saying you're a bit of a mug. Roland, in lockdown, pores over his notebooks since 1986, when *Lessons* begins, only to find them "a grand mass of detail" lacking the "logic", "tension" and "vital gleam of intelligence" he so admires in Alissa's wartime epic *The Journey*, with its "far superior" scene-setting.

Why spend pages summarising a better novel we can't actually read? McEwan once said his temperament wasn't icy enough to write fiction about his ex-wife, Penny Allen, a healer who absconded with his son in defiance of a legal ruling; then he published 2014's courtroom drama *The Children Act*, after which she harangued him at a literary festival. *Lessons* shows us a divorcee learning, among other things, to live with an ex-spouse's celebrity ("In 45 languages she took up space in the minds of several million people"). Sure, he scours each new release for references to himself – vexed when he finds none and vexed too when, at last, he does – but ultimately he swallows his annoyance with good grace (no book talk heckler, he) and understands above all that, in fiction, the only important thing is how good it is, not whose feelings it hurts. Maybe that innocuous-looking title has more teeth than it seems.

To order *Lessons* for £17 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

## Essays

# Into battle with a culture warrior

You may disagree with Lionel Shriver's bracing journalism, but her right to spark disquiet goes to the heart of the freedom of expression issue, writes [Rachel Cooke](#)

**Abominations: Selected Essays from a Career of Courting Self Destruction**  
**Lionel Shriver**  
Borough Press,  
£20, pp304

Of all the many hundreds of people I've interviewed down the years, only a handful have ever liked to refer to themselves in the third person, a habit I usually take as a sign of borderline insanity. About Lionel Shriver, however, I see no current cause for alarm. OK, so she does call herself Shriver in the introduction to her latest book ("Shriver supported Brexit," she writes, at the beginning of a sizeable list of the crimes she has committed in the eyes of the progressive and the pious). But her sanity, it seems to me, is not (or not yet) in doubt. Offer her a glass of fizzing, liberal-left Kool-Aid and her response will be to run, at speed, to the nearest tap in search of a generous gallon of cold water.

In *Abominations*, a collection mostly of her journalism, Shriver splashes this icy water all over and it's very bracing; as I read, I thought of those scientists who tell us that a daily cold shower can help to boost the human immune system. It feels ever more vital to me – a matter of simple good health – that people try sometimes to read writers with whom they disagree (though I don't

always disagree with her); to do so is akin to filling the lungs with oxygen. It's not only that we can't know what we really think unless we've something to push against; it should be possible, just occasionally, for us to change our minds. Almost nothing worries me more about our present culture than the fact that the words "I was wrong" are now almost entirely absent from public discourse.

Among the subjects Shriver tackles in *Abominations* are free speech, identity politics and the language of gender ideology, though if this sounds hard going – another culture wars slog – the mix is leavened with pieces about her addiction to exercise, what it feels like to break up with a friend and a droll skit on all the things she didn't do during the first lockdown (learn Russian, read Proust, take a virtual tour of the British Museum). Nevertheless, a good place to begin might be with her 2016 speech to the Brisbane Writers festival in which she spoke – rightly, in my view – against the notion of cultural appropriation (novelists, she said, must be free to inhabit characters unlike themselves and to relate experiences alien from their own). As you may recall, not only did someone walk out; afterwards, the festival, which had signed off on the subject of Shriver's address long before she arrived in Australia, panicked and, with utmost cowardice, organised a

Lionel Shriver; 'Her sanity is not (or not yet) in doubt'. Phil Fisk/*Observer*



## History

## Do have another slice of cake, Herr Ribbentrop

**Coffee With Hitler: The British Amateurs Who Tried to Civilise the Nazis**  
**Charles Spicer**  
Oneworld, £20, pp400

When Hitler rose to power in the early 1930s, public reaction in Britain was not that of unalloyed horror. Instead, it lay somewhere between disinterest, snobbish, if inaccurate, contempt ("the man's a house painter!"), and, in some circles, quiet satisfaction that a vigorous reformer had shaken up his country in an

apparently effective and forward-looking fashion. The evils of the Nazi regime were obvious to anyone with either a social conscience or a knowledge of history, but it was more convenient either to ignore them, or, in the case of a group of well-meaning but misguided society figures, to attempt to mitigate them by means of the so-called Anglo-German Fellowship.

In this fascinating and deeply researched debut historical biography by businessman turned historian Charles Spicer, the leading

lights of the Fellowship paint an unimpressive picture. They consisted of "a leftwing, pacifist Welsh political secretary, a conservative, butterfly-collecting Old Etonian businessman and a pioneering Great War fighter ace". They were better known as David Lloyd George, Ernest Tennant and the Duke of Hamilton, and they combined high social standing with an unfortunate tendency to pursue freelance diplomacy unchecked either by government intervention or common sense. As Spicer writes, "they infiltrated the Nazi high command deeper than any of their countrymen to pass back better intelligence to both their government and its domestic critics".

Unfortunately, this infiltration was not a one-way street. While many, even most, of the British members of



Hitler in Bavaria in 1936. Getty/the Print Collector/Heritage Images

the Anglo-German Fellowship were Germanophiles rather than Nazi sympathisers, there was a fine line between cultural appreciation of the country's literature and art and the more ambiguous ideas expressed by such shadowy figures as the

historian TP Conwell-Evans, a man jocularly described by Lloyd George as "my Nazi" and a leading member of the Fellowship.

Over cosy dinners and cocktail receptions, the likes of Tennant and Hamilton believed that they could act

## Merely to ask questions – in some circles – is now thought to be a grievous thing

“right of reply” event.

To read this speech now is unnerving. As she notes elsewhere, her words are mild, her tone almost jokey; at the time, no one would have cared about the sole audience member – yes, there was only one – who could not tolerate her heinous references to sombreros and dialects had a newspaper not picked up this woman’s indignant blog the next day. And yet, were Shriver to make the same speech today, the furor would be 10 times as bad, a cycle that would begin with a baying mob on Twitter and end with the Society of Authors issuing yet another of its feeble “please play nicely, children” statements. From mere folly to utter derangement in a mere six years. Well done, everyone!

According to Shriver, there have been three attempts so far to cancel her, of which this was the first (the second, and potentially most deleterious, occurred in 2018 when she ridiculed the language of diversity as it appeared in a questionnaire sent by Penguin Random House to its authors). The failure of such campaigns involves a certain satisfaction for both sides, I think. If Shriver is glad still to be in business – like anyone, she has bills to pay – her critics are able to regard the existence of a book such as *Abominations* as proof that cancel culture, supposedly an invention of the right, doesn’t really exist.

But it’s not as simple as this, of course. Even if there are currently no forces actively moving against her at her publisher, I find it hard to imagine Shriver being invited, in 2022, to several of the festivals that commissioned pieces in this book. Whatever the reading public may feel, the organisers just don’t like her any more, whether or not they care to admit it.

Even five years ago I would have mocked the idea that a writer in a country such as Britain could be considered “brave”; save your tears for those living under totalitarian regimes, I would have said, waving my PEN membership. No longer. Merely to ask questions – in some circles, about some subjects – is now thought to be a grievous, violent thing, a situation even the attempted murder of Salman Rushdie has, it’s already obvious, done nothing to change. I want to be clear. While I reserve the right, as Shriver does, not to use the term *cis* to describe myself, I disagree with her when it comes to immigration, Brexit and (to a degree) the bulldozing of statues. But I do like to read her on these subjects, and not only because – ha! – she confirms me in my own rightness. In rooms everywhere – at publishers and newspapers, at our national broadcaster and in meetings where literary prizes are judged – a certain silence has fallen. If people such as her don’t make noise – and the rest of us don’t defend their right to do so – we’re going to end up in the kind of barbarous intellectual prison where bad jokes about sombreros are positively to be longed for.

To order *Abominations* for £17.40 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

as a moderating influence between the British government and the German high command, but their continued presence at these events gave such figures as Himmler and Ribbentrop, the eventual German ambassador to Britain, a reassuring picture of the potential opposition they faced. After all, many leading figures in British society were pro-German in the 30s. Rothermere’s *Daily Mail* published articles praising Hitler and editorials declaring “Hurrah for the Blackshirts!” This was accentuated by the accession of Edward VIII, a man who was described approvingly by Ribbentrop as “a kind of English National Socialist”. For a moment, it seemed as if amicable relations would persist between the two countries, thanks in part to the work of the Fellowship.

Spicer describes his intentions in writing *Coffee With Hitler* as being explicitly about those who sought to “civilise” rather than “appease” the Nazis. The book works well as a companion to Tim Bouverie’s fine *Appeasing Hitler*, focusing less on the well-known events and figures of the era and more on the gentlemanly amateur diplomats of the day. Both appeasers and civilisers overrated their own abilities and underestimated the evils to which they – largely unwittingly – played handmaiden. This engaging book offers a warning from history that remains terrifyingly relevant today.

**Alexander Larman**

To order *Coffee With Hitler* for £17.40 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

## Fiction

# The hitman and her

Richard Osman’s band of ageing sleuths swing into action again, with laugh-out-loud results, writes **Alison Flood**

### The Bullet That Missed

**Richard Osman**

Viking, £20, pp432

The Thursday Murder Club – Elizabeth, Joyce, Ron and Ibrahim – is back. This time round, Richard Osman’s “four harmless pensioners” are investigating the case of Bethany Waites, a television reporter who was looking into a huge VAT fraud when her car was driven off a cliff in the middle of the night and whose body was never found.

Joyce lures Bethany’s former colleague, South East Tonight presenter Mike Waghorn (“I play squash, I moisturise and nature takes care of the rest”) to a meeting with the club. They want to pick his brains about Bethany’s last few days. Before he knows it, Mike and his makeup artist, Pauline, are drawn into a mystery that will range from the wilds of Staffordshire to the Sussex coast, taking in money launderers, bitcoin (Joyce is particularly fascinated by this one) and a former KGB hitman (a very pleasant chap and a former lover of Elizabeth’s, it turns out).

Elizabeth, Osman’s retired spy, has other problems to deal with. Not only is her beloved Stephen slipping deeper into the clutches of dementia, but she’s kidnapped and charged with carrying out a hit herself. As ever, she takes it in her stride. “Things have been too quiet recently. A retired optometrist crashed his moped into a tree, and there has been a row about milk bottles, but that was about it for excitement. The simple life is all well and good, but, in this moment, with a murder to investigate, and threatening texts arriving daily, Elizabeth realises she has missed trouble.”

This is the third outing for Osman’s retirees. Its predecessors, *The Thursday Murder Club* and *The Man Who Died Twice*, sold millions of copies around the world. Any publisher would be keen for Osman to press on with the series after such record-breaking success – *The Man Who Died Twice* sold an astonishing 114,202 hardbacks in the UK in its first three days last year. And it is easy to be cynical about Osman’s success as an author – he was, after all, the well-known co-host of the hugely popular *Pointless* TV quiz when his debut came out and his publisher will have thrown enough money behind the novel to guarantee it a place in the book charts.

But that cynicism can only go so far, because once you read Osman’s funny, warm-hearted novels, it is hard not to be charmed by the eccentricities and the resourcefulness of his creations. Whether it’s the careful set-up of a lengthy joke about Joyce and the

police training college in Hendon (doesn’t sound promising, I know, but it works) or the deadpan way in which Osman has his TV presenter Mike boast of how “they made me go on an impartiality class in Thanet”, or Joyce’s secret knock, which “sort of matches the rhythm of the moonpig.com advert”, humour is gently threaded through every element of *The Bullet That Missed*. Writing genuinely funny prose is not at all easy; it is rare that I find a book that has me actually laughing out loud, but I snickered so much reading this one that it was remarked upon by my family. And we haven’t even got to Joyce’s description of Stop the Clock, a joyfully mad gameshow that she and Elizabeth go to watch being filmed. “And they put this on television?” writes the former *Pointless* presenter with, one can only assume, a certain glee.

It is not all laughs – Osman doesn’t milk it for pathos, but Elizabeth’s battle with Stephen’s developing dementia is heart-wrenching. “Can I ask you something, as a pal... Am I alright,



**Richard Osman:** ‘Doesn’t milk it for pathos’. David Vintiner/*Observer New Review*

Once you read his novels, it’s hard not to be charmed

do you suppose?... Something is muddled somewhere. Something isn’t straight,” Stephen says to his friend and chess buddy Bogdan.

So if you pick up *The Bullet That Missed* expecting a dark crime novel, gruesome deaths and buckets of jeopardy, you will be disappointed. But you would also be a bit silly, because that’s not what these books set out to be. Their impetus doesn’t come from solving the crime or escaping from danger – it comes from enjoying the Thursday Murder Club (and especially Joyce, who is obviously the best of them) deal with everything that’s thrown in their path with panache and aplomb, be it cryptocurrencies or hitmen. “Age,” as Mike Waghorn says, “is nothing but a number.”

To order *The Bullet That Missed* for £17 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

## Crime and thrillers of the month

Super nanny  
or nightmare?

A grieving woman's childhood carer reappears, a ticking noise spells trouble, and Vera Stanhope is back in a friends reunited tale.

By Alison Flood

Sue Keller, whose mother died when she was a child, is drifting through life in New York after the recent death of her father. She's avoiding human contact as much as possible, until she bumps into Anneliese, who tells her she used to be Sue's live-in nanny. At first, Sue doesn't recognise her, but then the memories come flooding back and she finds herself desperate to cling on to this woman who represents a part of her vanished childhood. But there may be more to Anneliese than Sue remembers: why did her father never mention this beloved nanny? What happened to her after she left the Kellers' home? And where is the line between love and obsession? *Nanny Dearest* (Quercus, £9.99) is American writer Flora Collins's first novel, and it's one to race through,

the sense of looming dread growing exponentially as the truth about both Sue and Anneliese starts to seep out. If, like me, you were joyfully terrified by *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (starring Rebecca De Mornay) in the 1990s, then this is the thriller for you.

Italian author Elena Varvello's *Can You Hear Me?* was the story of a small community in northern Italy riven by some very dark crimes. Varvello's *Just a Boy* (Two Roads, £16.99), translated by Alex Valente, tells of another tiny Italian community, Cave, where terrible things have also happened. The boy at its heart is 17, and much loved by his parents and his two sisters. They can't quite believe it when rumours start to spread that he has been breaking into his neighbours' homes and stealing things. But then he commits an attack that will change everything, for himself and his family, for the rest of their lives. His crime spreads its tentacles throughout the novel, but Varvello is more interested in exploring its fallout – how his mother has never been able to move on, driven to despair by her son's actions; how his father has struggled to survive; what it's done to his older sisters. Pietro,



the father, finds a notebook filled with his daughter's handwriting, her brother's name scrawled repeatedly on the page. "The weight of that name – the enormous rock around his neck – pulled him to the floor, his back against the bed and his hands pressed to his mouth." Varvello's boy of the title is never named, but his presence is all-encompassing – although it is only towards the end that we start to see the world through his anguished eyes in this darkly eloquent and moving novel.

We are post-Covid in Simon Mayo's *Tick Tock* (Doubleday,



Flora Collins explores the 'line between love and obsession'. Below: Brenda Blethyn as Vera. Alamy; ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

£14.99), but the world is in the grip of another pandemic. At first, it seems innocuous – just a ticking noise in your ear, which those around you can also hear. It's not painful, not at first, but it spreads, and it spreads – and then people start dying. Mayo focuses on a London secondary school, where head of English Kit Chaplin's daughter Rose first calls the ticking to his attention. Fortunately, Kit's partner, Lilly, is a brilliant vaccinologist and she starts investigating the origins of this mysterious plague. While I have no desire to read thrillers in which Covid plays a major role, watching a fictional illness spread across the

world is surprisingly gripping and intriguing. Mayo spools out his many twists and turns skilfully, as the hospitals overflow and things get worse and worse for poor Kit and Rose. A slice of scary, escapist fun.

What a pleasure to be back in the hands of Ann Cleeves and (for me at least) her greatest creation, DCI Vera Stanhope. *The Rising Tide* (Macmillan, £20) is the 10th outing for the scruffy and ingenious middle-aged detective brought so memorably to life by Brenda Blethyn. This book is about a group of friends, who spent a weekend on Holy Island 50 years ago. One of them, Isobel, died that weekend, rushing off after a row and attempting to drive over the causeway while the tide was rushing in ("Her vehicle had been swept from the causeway in the high tide of the equinox, tossed from the road like a toy by the wind and the waves").

The pals still return to the island every five years to remember her, but when one of them is found hanged, the detective is called in to investigate. She is as delightfully Vera-ish as ever ("she wasn't good at small talk, unless it was about murder"), and it is a joy to watch a writer as skilful as Cleeves lay out her version of a locked room mystery. As ever, Cleeves goes deeper, examining the precarious nature of life and what it is to age and face your own mortality. I'm still absolutely reeling from the ending.

To order any of these books for a special price go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

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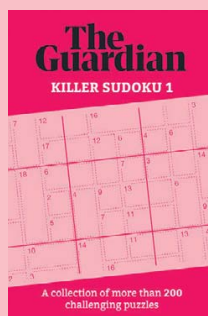
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## Journalism

### An angel of the south

**Too Much of Life: Complete Chronicles**

Clarice Lispector (translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson)

Penguin Classics, £20, pp752

From the age of seven, Clarice Lispector declared in a 1967 column for the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*, she knew she was born to write. And write Lispector did. In a life foreshortened by illness – she died at the age of 56 – she wrote with impatient, impassioned energy, winning early fame for her short stories and novels. But it was her chronicles – columns published between 1967 and her death in 1977, and now translated into English for the first time – that made the Brazilian a household name.

Lispector was a successful journalist, but not a conventional one. *Too Much of Life* works in continuity with the writer's fiction – stylistically and otherwise. Like her posthumous masterpiece, *The Hour of the Star*, her columns straddle realism, memoir, philosophy and politics, each dependent upon – and obscuring – the other.

An account of helping an older

woman to safety during torrential rain spins from reportage to fantasy. When the traveller calls her an angel, she takes the compliment as fact. Over the course of a taxi ride, relations between the two turn sour and Lispector divests herself of angelic characteristics: "swishing my invisible tail", she makes her exit, "careful to leave my folded wings behind on the seat".

Those familiar with her writing will find old obsessions here: tragedy, religion, death, the pleasure of living and, after a 1967 fire leaves her scarred for life, the pain of defeat. *Too Much of Life* reveals Lispector's engagement with politics and literature – reading Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa for the first time in one column, supporting student protesters in the next.

For those unfamiliar with her, this book opens a door into her challenging and rewarding work. The result is, like Lispector herself, witty, mystical, surreal and profound: a treasure to return to again and again. **Madoc Cairns**

To order *Too Much of Life* for £17.40 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837

# Orlando Figes

## 'Gorbachev was a very sharp and likable person'

The award-winning historian talks to [Killian Fox](#) about Putin's cult of personality, why he loves Turgenev, and giving up on novels after 20 pages

Orlando Figes is a historian and the author of 10 books on Russian and European history, including the multi-award-winning *A People's Tragedy*, about the Russian Revolution – named one of the “100 most influential books since the war” by the TLS. Born in London in 1959, Figes studied and lectured at Cambridge and later became professor of history at Birkbeck – a position from which he recently retired. His latest book is *The Story of Russia*, which condenses 1,000 years of history into a tightly written, illuminating 300-odd pages.

**You've written extensively about Russian history in previous books. What new perspective did you want to offer here?**

I was aware of the growing disconnect between how we [in the west] see Russian history and the way the Russians see their history – particularly the way in which the Putin regime has propagandised a version that is increasingly imperial. I felt it was important to talk about the ideas of Russia's history because, we now see, they were being weaponised to justify and sustain this war [with Ukraine]. I wanted to give the western reader a sense of the sacred power of the tsar, Russia's special mission in the world, and so on..

**Do you think that throughout its history, Russia has been more reliant on myths than other countries – Britain, for example?**

We all have our national myths, Britain probably more than many, but I think the role of myths in Russia is particularly important. As [cultural historian] Michael Cherniavsky put it, the harder life becomes, the more the Russians seek salvation in myths transcending everyday realities. That's an idea developed by the church and the state over many centuries.

**Can Putin's grip on Russia be explained by looking back at past Russian rulers?**

I think it can. Putin has consciously built a cult around his personality in a way that is similar to Stalin – this brooding autocrat with responsibility for the whole country on his shoulders. Likewise, I



The books  
interview

*Nicholas II, in the first Russian census, put his occupation as 'owner of Russia'*

think he's built his regime very consciously on the monarchical principle of authority. As Stalin said, the Russians need a tsar. This also relates to Russian statecraft and conceptions of authority, which are not just monarchical but sacralised. The power of the tsar comes from Byzantium, from the conception of the tsar as one side of a sacred power. And in Russia that is complicated further by the patrimonial tradition – namely that the tsar rules Russia like it's his personal household. Nicholas II, in the first Russian census of 1897, put his occupation as “owner of Russia”.

**Do you anticipate the war dragging on for years?**

I do. I'm no military expert, but my sense from reading military experts is that the Russians don't have the resources to go on indefinitely, so they're likely to defend what they've taken so far. But then it becomes an economic war, and Putin will be banking on the west eventually caving in, because of political instability caused by the cost of living crisis. I think it's absolutely critical that the Ukrainians, who are really fighting this war for us as much as for themselves, are given the munitions they require to get to a point where they can negotiate from a position of relative strength, because the only way to end the war is diplomacy.

**Mikhail Gorbachev died last week. What are your thoughts on his place in history?**

In Russia, the perception of him – for a long time now manipulated and shaped by the Putin ideologists – is that he was a terrible leader, because he brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union. The number of people in Russia who see him as a bringer of liberty is small, the intelligentsia, basically. I think the most important thing about Gorbachev, in terms of his legacy, is that he oversaw the peaceful dismantling of the Communist system. It's not that he brought it about – he accelerated it, but it would have happened anyway. I met him on two occasions. We had a little frisson of disagreement over one or two things, but he was a very sharp and likable person.

**What have you been reading lately?**

The last book I finished was *M: Son of the Century* by Antonio Scurati, which is a sort of historical novel-cum-biography of Mussolini. It's multi-vocal, focusing not just on Mussolini but [socialist leader Giacomo] Matteotti and various other fascist leaders. I've always been interested in history writing that is able to communicate something of the experience and the chaos of history by relinquishing that narrator's position of supremacy.

**Do you read much fiction?**

I do, though I don't pick up the latest hyped first novel by X, so I'm a little slow off the mark. I'm a big Philip Roth fan, as most men of my age probably are. I'm 62 now, and when you get to my age you begin

*Orlando Figes photographed at home in the Barbican, London, by Sophia Evans for Observer New Review, August 2022.*

to think: I've only got so many years left. So I'm bit more selective, and I have no hesitation giving up a book if it doesn't grab me in the first 20 pages.

**Is there a Russian author who you return to most often?**

Of all of them, probably Turgenev, because I just identify with and like the man so much, despite his vanity and his weaknesses. As a writer he is sublime. And his biography, his worldview, I find very sympathetic. He's the most cosmopolitan of all the Russian writers, the most European in his syntax and style, and the least ideological, in a tradition that does tend to be quite ideological.

**What kind of reader were you as a child?**

I was a precocious reader, but I don't say that in a way to praise myself. Quite the contrary; it's to say what a fool I was reading these things before I was really old enough to appreciate them. So I did read a lot of Russian literature when I was 13-14. But the writer that really hooked me as a teenager was Émile Zola. *L'Assommoir* was the book that got me interested in history. It's very rude in many ways – there are hundreds of swear words in it, and a lot of chamber pots, and unseemly behaviour. But that was all part of its historical fascination for me.

*The Story of Russia is published by Bloomsbury (£25). To order a copy for £21.75 go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 020-3176 3837*

# Puzzles

## Guess the painting by Laura Cumming



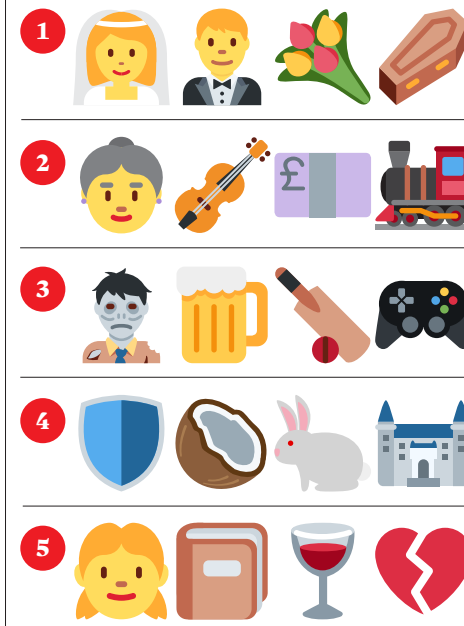
**This week's question:**  
Who painted this view (above)?  
Answer next Sunday.

Last week's detail showed the front legs of *Whistlejacket*, painted by George Stubbs around 1762. No artist has ever portrayed horses with quite such originality. Each has its own profound character. Whistlejacket, a chestnut Arab, appears riderless and proud, rising up in an elegant levade. He turns to the viewer with a look of fierce independence. He might have belonged to the second Marquess of Rockingham, future Whig prime minister, but he stands alone in his thoroughbred beauty. The whole composition repeats the point, singling him out against an expanse of nothing but glowing space.



## Emoji comedies

Guess the British comedy films from the emoji symbols. Answers on page 47



Set by Killian Fox

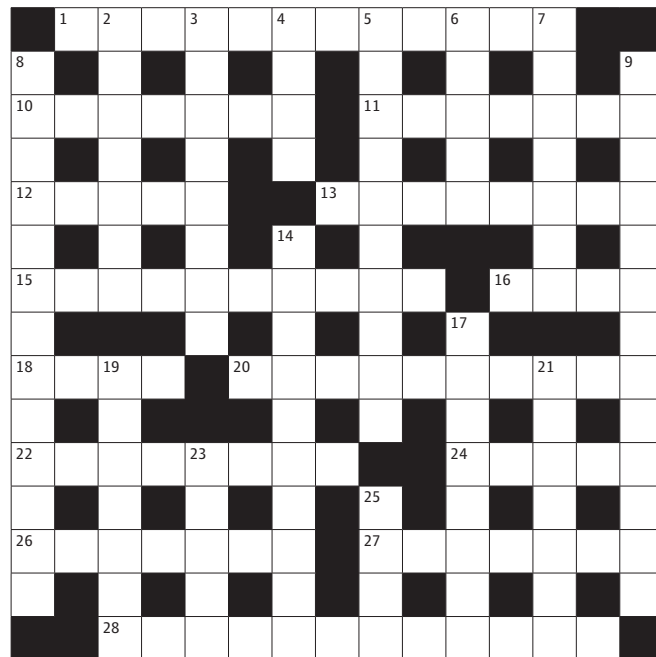
## Everyman crossword No.3,960

### Across

- 1 Consolidates, unusually low (12)
- 10 Batty, naked, one in France getting sun acclimatizes (7)
- 11 Pooh's friend Rabbit's beginning to intervene and provoke (7)
- 12 Considerable part of molecular genetics (5)
- 13 Dependent sweetheart suppressing fury (6-2)
- 15 A pair such as the solver and a sheep? (10)
- 16 Natural element, odourless and noble, primarily? (4)
- 18 Temperature dropped in important medicine bottle (4)
- 20 Enormous pleasure boat navy's left in condition of poor visibility (10)
- 22 Adore old resort, fabulous place (2,6)
- 24 Say earl is retreating seeing military blockade (5)
- 26 Stinking king, endeavouring to abandon son (7)
- 27 Rise above horse chestnut, we're told (7)
- 28 Needleworkers with southeastern American accents (12)

### Down

- 2 Caretaker in Bury on WhatsApp? (7)
- 3 Right-wing politician to invite scorn (8)
- 4 Meddlesome Everyman too bumptious and fussy in the end (4)
- 5 New Age, tortuous, time wasted: intolerable! (10)
- 6 Copying what a microwave might produce (5)
- 7 Agitated, enraged swordsman's



call (2,5)

- 8 Everyone getting trim in sports: is anyone listening? (5,4,4)
- 9 What could be sharp, ensuring reshaping? (7,6)
- 14 According to Spooner, Holmes' creator pleads for simple culinary fare (6,4)
- 17 Fussy dustiness: no university objects (8)
- 19 Lecture that might be a little flat (7)
- 21 Carry out – take out, officially (7)
- 23 Self-portrait 'accidentally' includes healthy foodstuff (5)
- 25 Cliff and Mark left following injury (4)

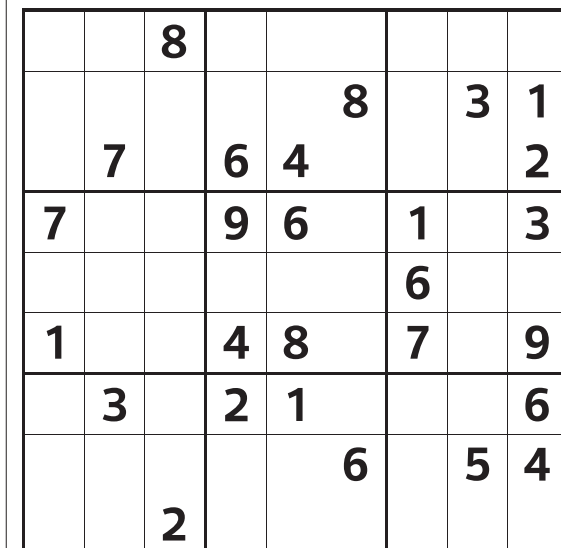
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Post code \_\_\_\_\_

**£15 book tokens for the first five correct solutions opened.**  
Solutions postmarked not later than Saturday night to:  
The Observer PO Box 17566, Birmingham, B33 3EZ or fax 0121 742 1313.  
No enclosures please other than name and address. Results on Sunday week.

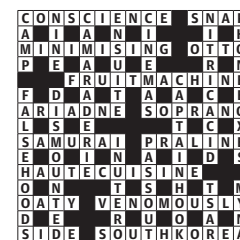
## Sudoku classic



Fill in the blank cells using the numbers 1 to 9.

Each number must appear just once in every row, column and 3x3 box.

### SOLUTION No. 3,959

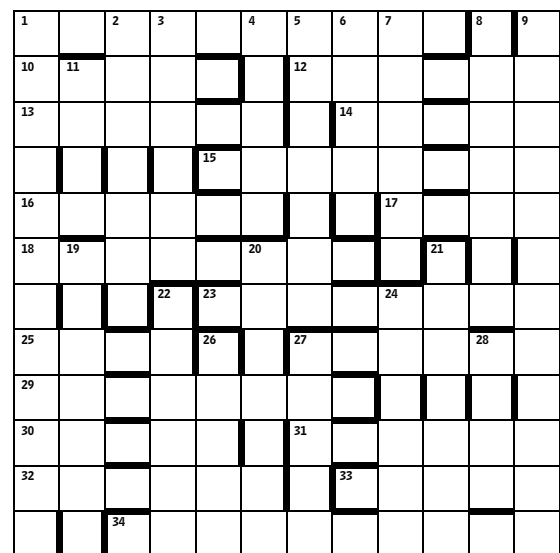


**Everyman No. 3,958 winners**  
Louise Parkinson, Wallasey, Wirral  
Michael Crapper, Whitchurch, Shropshire  
Jane Bradford, Leyburn, North Yorkshire  
Mark Waters, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire  
Richard Bundy, Salford, Greater Manchester

SUDOKU SOLUTIONS

8	1	3	7	5	9	6	4	2	9	7	6	8
4	4	2	9	6	8	7	1	1	7	6	6	7
9	7	6	4	1	4	5	8	8	8	8	6	3
6	2	7	8	5	8	9	1	9	6	8	7	2
5	4	9	1	7	8	6	8	8	8	8	2	2
3	8	1	2	9	6	4	5	7	2	3	7	1
2	8	9	4	3	7	1	7	1	9	7	6	8
1	4	5	3	4	9	6	8	7	2	2	7	1
7	4	6	5	1	8	2	8	2	8	4	5	8

Azed No. 2,621 Plain - Competition Puzzle



Across

- Cook leg with spray misguidedly? It's not a real herb (10)
- What Israelis will spend in marketplace of old (5)
- Waste dump, upper surface on fire (6)
- Everyone stays for personality, objectively? (6)
- Gardener's first novel bud (5)
- Tot, anger boiling, well aimed (8, 2 words)
- Former charge: bring it to a close before end of audience (6)
- Fellow with little English cheated (4)
- Stable placed in grassy field, as is deliberate (8)
- Slogan relative with love inserted in part of threadwork (8, 2 words)
- One such (though not born abroad!) (4)
- Hurdy-gurdy played live by the French (6)
- What'll demonstrate such attainment? By its sound, a musical group will, briefly (8)
- Fish (various), those originating in island group? (5)
- Flower to occupy position in flag (6)
- Coarse (6)
- Group of stars to perform touring Carmen? (5)
- Member of fourth estate cultivating some prawns (10)

Down

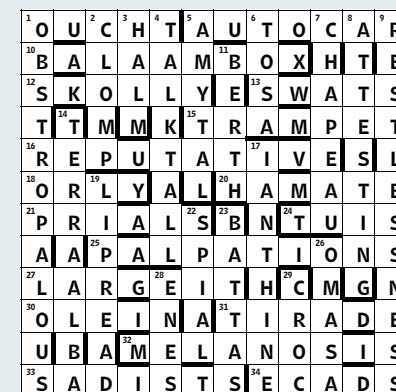
- Damn scarabee is represented in this allegorical series (12, 2 words)
- Girl holds on, notice, concerning reproduction (7)
- Abstract price adjusted before start of sale (6)
- Major flow of water in Scots gully (5)
- Children given lift, school period ending early - it's smashing for wee ones (7)
- Bit of wood on old rocker (5)
- Mash pureed? R. Blanc's sidetracked (6)
- Chaps captivated came across love token (7)
- Government minister perhaps resents a post being reshuffled (12)
- Don't stop silly name being applied to saccharin (4)
- Spacier spreads revealing heath-like plant (7)
- Martinet's giving student hostel a going-over with head around (7)
- Predatory beast on top of its victim in compound? (7)
- Scottish snob unfashionable in his taste (6)
- Bantu woman's one 'eld in 'igh esteem (6)
- Wherein crew moves around and is opening drink (5)
- Lowers 50% of sail in vessel (5)
- Non-pro RAF rank I'll be in (4)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Post code \_\_\_\_\_

Azed No. 2,618 solution & notes



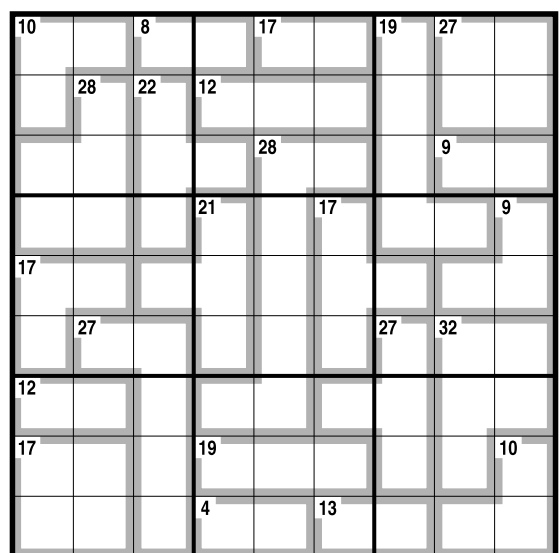
**Across** 10, BA + ambo in tax; 12, KO l in sly; 18, (Po)orly; 27, anag. less l in lit; 33, st in sad is.

**Down** 1, anag. + opal + O US; 3, ha(t) + LM; 4, anag. less i.e.; 5, yt in a mat; 11, i.e. (num) ber th(ree); 22, spi(t)al; 26, as a mo (rev.); 29, croc(k).

**Azed No. 2,618 winners**  
Mrs D Selvidge, Vale, Guernsey  
Mr RJ Green, Llangynidr, Crickhowell, Powys  
Mike Phillips, Cheadle Hulme, Cheshire

**Rules and requests**  
Send correct solution (one only) and clue to replace definition asterisked (on separate sheet also bearing name and address, securely attached) to Azed No. 2,621, PO Box 518, Oxford, OX2 6WX. Entries should be received by Monday week at the latest. Please add a brief explanation of your clue (one entry only). Emailed entries from overseas will be accepted, addressed to jcrowther2000@hotmail.com £35, £30, £25 prizes and Azed bookplates for the three clues judged best. The Azed slip, containing details of successful competition entries and Azed's comments, is available on subscription at £16 a year. Cheques, payable to the Azed Slip, should be sent to The Azed Slip, Coombe Farm, Awhbridge, Romsey SO51 0HN. To receive a sample slip, please send an sae to this address.

Killer by Godefridus



Normal Sudoku rules apply, except the numbers in the cells contained within grey lines add up to the figures in the corner. No number can be repeated within each shape formed by the grey lines.

Chess by Jonathan Speelman

**Diagram 1**  
**Levon Aronian v Leinier Dominguez (to play)**

With the rise of chess computer engines, moves are sometimes flagged up that are way beyond our human compass. Here the silicon brotherhood quickly find an extraordinary idea that wins for Black. It would be amazing if a person found it in a normal game and inconceivable that they would in a blitz game as here. Can you try to find the idea and maybe the main line if White replies with a rook move? (see the end)

The world champion Magnus Carlsen has been busier than ever since his announcement in July that he won't be defending his title. At the time, he was playing in the Zagreb leg of the Grand Chess tour. This was followed by leading Norway in the Olympiad, where he had a good result but the team was below par, and the FTX Crypto Cup in Miami. This rapidplay was hosted online by chess24, with the players in the same room but using their own screens. After a very close battle between Carlsen and the young Indian star Rameshbabu Pragnanandhaa, "Pragg" beat Carlsen in the blitz play-off in the final round but Carlsen had just enough of a cushion to finish first, ahead of Pragg and Alireza Firouzja.

The action then moved to St Louis, Missouri, for the final two events in this year's Grand Chess tour. Carlsen is a wild card in the final contest, the 10 player all-play-all Sinquefeld Cup, which was preceded in St Louis

by a 10-player rapidplay and blitz tournament.

Like the other quick tour events in Bucharest and Zagreb, this comprised three days of rapidplay followed by two of blitz, with the rapidplay games scoring double. This is an intense schedule and fortunes can vary wildly between days. The rapidplay was won by Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Alireza Firouzja both on 5.5/9, with Hikaru Nakamura last on 3.5/9. But when they switched to blitz, Nakamura was imperious on the first day with 7.5/9, ahead of Firouzja 7. On the second day of blitz, Firouzja made a massive 8/9, finishing miles clear with 26/36, ahead of MV-L and Fabiano Caruana 19.

My favourite Caro Kann (1 e4 c6) has been taking a battering recently so I very much enjoyed this game.

**Leinier Dominguez v Alireza Firouzja**  
Saint Louis Rapidplay 2022  
Caro Kann Advance Variation

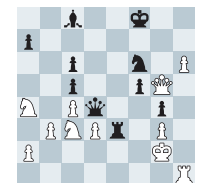
- 1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 e5 Bf5 4 Nf3 e6 5 Be2 Ne7 6 c3 h6 7 0-0 Nd7 8 Nbd2 a5 To induce a4 so that the knight is somewhat unstable on b3.  
9 a4 Bh7 10 Nb3 Qb6 11 Ne1 Nf5 12 Bd3 Be7 13 Nd2 13 Qc2 would threaten 14 g4 but 13...Bg6 is a decent reply.  
13...g5 Gaining some space.  
14 h3 Nh4 15 Bxh7 Rxd7 16 Ndf3 Ng6

**Diagram 2**  
17 Nc2?! In fact, engines still like White's position after 17 Nd3 but this looks like a lot of fun to play as Black, especially after Nc2 which is too far from e5.

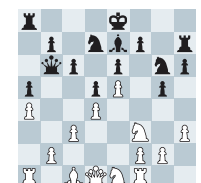
- 17...Qa6 18 Nfe1? Enabling Black to advance. Instead 18 b3 say was decent.  
18...h5! 19 g3 g4 20 h4 If 20 hxg4? hxg4 21 Qxg4 Rh1+ 22 Kxh1 Qxf1+ wins.  
20...f6! 21 exf6 Nxf6 22 Bg5?! Ne4 23 Bxe7 Rxe7 24 Nd3 0-0-0 25 Re1 e5! 26 dxe5 Rf8

**Diagram 3**  
27 Rxe4?! Desperation. 27 e6 Rxe6 28 Rxe4 Rxe4 29 Nc5 Qe2 30 Nxe4 Qxe4 was slightly less bad but still horrible with the knight about to go to e5.  
27...dxe4 28 Nc5 Qc4 29 Qd6 Qf7 30 Rf1 Nxe5 31 Ne3 Qf6 32 Qd1 The exchange down and with a vile position, White decided to resign.

- In diagram 1 it ended 29...Qe5? 20...Nh7 would have been OK.  
30 Qf4! Qxf4 31 gxf4 Kg8 32 Nxc5 Now White is clearly better and after Black's next move it was winning.  
32...Be6? 33 Nd1 Re2+ 34 Kf1 Rd2 35 Ke1 White is winning material so Black resigned. Going back to diagram 1, the winning move was the wonderful:  
29...Nh5!! attacking g3. White can try:  
a) 30 Rxe5 Rxe3+! 31 Kxg3 Qg1+ 32 Kf4 Qf2+ 33 Ke5 Qd4 checkmate.  
b) 30 Qxh5 Qxd3 There's no check and after say 31 Rd1 Rxe3+ 32 Kh2 (or 32 Kf2 Qf3+ 33 Ke1 Qe3+ 34 Ne2 Rg1#) 32...Rh3+ 33 Qxh3 Qxh3+ it's easily winning.  
c) 30 h7 Rxe3+ 31 Kf1 Qxd3+ 32 Ne2 (or 32 Kf2 Rf3+ 33 Ke1 Rxe3+ 34 Kf2 Qd2+ 35 Kg1 Re1 mate) 32...Qd1+ 33 Kf2 Rf3+ and mates.  
d) 30 Qxe3 Qxe3 is also hopeless.



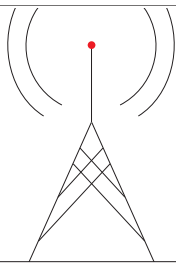
1 Levon Aronian v Leinier Dominguez (to play)



2 Leinier Dominguez (to play) v Alireza Firouzja



3 Leinier Dominguez (to play) v Alireza Firouzja



# Television

By Hollie Richardson

Films by  
Jonathan Romney

## The week's highlights

### Today

#### Pick of the Day How To With John Wilson

BBC Two, 9.35pm & 10.05pm

Season one of the documentarian's clever life tutorials, told through deadpan narration over covertly filmed footage of New Yorkers, finally arrives on UK screens. In the first of tonight's double bill, Wilson shares his observations on how to make small talk, and ends up making an unlikely, but touching, friendship with a Monster energy drink-swiggling student during spring break. In the second episode, Wilson looks into how to put up scaffolding, inspired by the 300 miles of it in the city.



#### Ridley

ITV, 8pm

DI Carol Farman (Bronagh Waugh) calls in not-really-retired Alex Ridley (Adrian Dunbar) to help with another case. This time, a young woman's body has been found on the bleak Pennine moors. It's a moody murder drama to enjoyably while away a couple of hours – and yes, Dunbar sings us out with another jazz warbler.

#### The Capture

BBC One, 9pm

Is Rachel (Holliday Grainger) planning to expose "correction" after all? And is she looking to recruit Isaac (Paapa Essiedu) as her willing accomplice? Don't be so sure of anything just yet. The second season of the surveillance series continues to take a car chase of ridiculous U-turns (literally), and it's damn good fun. **HR**

#### Film

##### The Incredibles

(Brad Bird, 2004)

BBC One, 3.50pm

One of the pillars on which the Pixar legend was built, this is also the superhero movie to end them all (although, perhaps alas, it didn't). It shows that even costumed crusaders sometimes get older and paunchier, find day jobs and start families – although they never know when they'll end up back in Lycra. The Parrs (voiced by Holly Hunter and Craig T Nelson), and kids Violet and Dash, are the family that fight together, while writer-director Brad Bird voices costumière Edna Mode, essentially 007's Q with an Anna Wintour bob. Wittier, more inventive and undeniably more human than most live-action comics blockbusters, and one of cinema's great tone poems in the colour red – a thing of joy. **JR**

### Monday

#### Pick of the Day Ladhood

BBC Three, 10pm & 10.25pm

The final series of Liam Williams's brilliant autobiographical comedy opens with painfully relatable scenes for any socially mobile millennial who has moved to London in search of opportunity. When his mum asks why he still lives in a city he can't afford, Liam ponders the conundrum. The show continues to run its two parallel timelines, as he recalls the moment his teenage dreams of moving in with his friends were ruined by being invited to apply to Oxbridge.



#### Channel 4 News: Britain's New Prime Minister

Channel 4, 7pm

During the race to be the new Conservative leader, we've seen Liz Truss struggle to find her way out of a conference room, while Rishi Sunak couldn't quite work out how to use a bank card to pay for his petrol. Anyway, one of them will be named prime minister tonight in this 90-minute news special.

#### House of the Dragon

Sky Atlantic, 9pm

As was the case in *Game of Thrones*, this prequel has a clever habit of abruptly interrupting fantastically scripted dialogue-heavy episodes with eye-watering blockbuster action. While gutsy Rhaenrya deals with her best friend Alicent now being her stepmother, Daemon and Corlys are feeling the pinch of the ongoing war with the Crabfeeder. **HR**

#### Film

##### King Creole

(Michael Curtiz, 1958)

Sky Cinema Greats, 9.20am, 2.15am

As Baz Luhrmann's recent biopic ruefully noted, Elvis's Hollywood career hardly did justice to the King's big screen potential – blame it on the machinations of Colonel Tom – but there are a handful of films that stand out as exceptions. Foremost are 1957's *Jailhouse Rock*, and this one, his fourth. Based on a Harold Robbins novel, and helmed by the director of *Casablanca* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, no less, it's a New Orleans drama starring Presley as a 19-year-old high schooler trying to support his family and getting involved with gangsters. Dolores Hart and Carolyn Jones (later TV's Morticia Addams) are the romantic interest, Walter Matthau a clubland heavy, Crawfish and Trouble among the songs. **JR**

### Tuesday

#### Pick of the Day First Dates Hotel

Channel 4, 9pm

It takes guts to embark on a televised trip to Italy and stay in a singles hotel, ready to meet new people in the search for love. So it must be a kick in the teeth when Gareth realises his first date is with a woman he's already matched with on a dating app back in the UK. Will they take it past a right-swipe this time? Also staying in one of Fred Sirieix's Mediterranean boudoirs tonight: retired taxidermist Sandy, who hasn't been on a first date in 39 years and is paired up with a dog lover. **HR**



#### Irma Vep

Sky Atlantic, 9pm

The machine grinds on with unstoppable glamour in this very funny episode of Olivier Assayas's showbiz satire. Gottfried is absent due to an autoerotic asphyxiation incident, director René's almighty tantrum leads to an unwelcome new face on set, and only Mira (Alicia Vikander) can maintain a modicum of professionalism. **Ellen E Jones**

#### Rosie Jones's Trip Hazard

Channel 4, 10pm

*Friday Night Dinner's* Tom Rosenthal looks scared when he joins Jones in Bradford for tonight's episode – and who can blame him? The trouble-seeking comedian gets him to take part in a rap battle and a ballroom competition, shoves Yorkshire's biggest naan down his throat, and gives him an unwanted haircut. **HR**

#### Film

##### Eastern Promises

(David Cronenberg, 2007)

BBC Two, 11.15pm

Around the turn of the century, David Cronenberg veered away from the body horror that had long been his trademark – although his films were often no less nightmarish. Scripted by *Peaky Blinders* creator Steven Knight, this London-set gangland drama stars Naomi Watts as a midwife who comes into contact with a Russian ganglord (Armin Mueller-Stahl) and his hired heavy (Viggo Mortensen). Things get brutal, not least in the set piece of a steam-laden bathhouse showdown where a naked Mortensen sports a full set of Russian prison tattoos. Not nearly as steely as the director's previous Mortensen collaboration *A History of Violence*, but a controlled, compelling deviation in the chilly Cronenberg oeuvre. **JR**

### Wednesday

#### Pick of the Day Brassic

Sky Max, 10pm

Joe Gilgun and Danny Brocklehurst's lively comedy-drama returns to never-a-dull-moment Hawley for a fourth season. Vinnie (Gilgun) is moping around after Erin (Michelle Keegan) and her son Tyler's (Jude Riordan) abrupt departure, but he soon kicks into action when he learns where they are. Cue an eventful road trip to Wales with the rest of the gang ("The last thing I want to do is run around the Welsh countryside looking for a fucking orange nymphomaniac!")



#### Nadiya's Everyday Baking

BBC Two, 8.30pm

Coffee cake that's easy enough to bake every day sounds dangerous. But if the nation's favourite cook, Nadiya Hussain, is advising it – who are we to argue? Also on her afternoon tea menu-with-a-twist: colourful meringue lollipops with gooey white chocolate, and "funky chunky" cheesecake bars. **HR**

#### The Great

Channel 4, 11:05pm

Season two of the razor-sharp period comedy about Catherine the Great (Elle Fanning) has doubled down on scandalous scheming in the Russian court. But things crank up to a whole new level when the heavily pregnant empress is visited by her poised but poisonous mother Joanna (a perfectly cast Gillian Anderson). **Graeme Virtue**

#### Film

##### Eighth Grade

(Bo Burnham, 2018)

BBC Three, 10.20pm

You'll know writer-director Bo Burnham as the equivocal "nice guy" in *Promising Young Woman* and as the star of his lockdown TV one-man special *Inside*. Here's the feature directing debut by the US standup, a California comedy about Kayla, a pre-high-school student (Elsie Fisher), who attempts to deal with her anxiety by posting motivational videos. Josh Hamilton plays her single dad, who tries to figure her out while supporting her through assorted teen traumas. Touching, witty, zeitgeisty – but with a wise ironic distance – it's one of the best of the recent cycle of Instagram-era comedies, with British composer Anna Meredith contributing an idiosyncratic score that's about as un-Hollywood as they come. **JR**



## Thursday

### Pick of the Day Stuck

BBC Two, 10pm & 10.15pm

Created and written by Dylan Moran, here's a new five-part comedy-drama delivered in punchy 15-minute episodes (a TV trend that seems to be catching on). Dan (Moran) and Carla (the brilliant Morgana Robinson) are a couple with terrific chemistry, but – with Dan's recent redundancy, Carla's questions about what the future holds and an age gap that is becoming more apparent – they are at a crossroads. In tonight's double bill, job-searching Dan grows jealous of a waiter at his local cafe.



### All That Glitters: Britain's Next Jewellery Star

BBC Two, 9pm

The six contestants hoping to shine like a diamond are asked to reinvent the classic pearl necklace for the bestseller task tonight. For the bespoke challenge, they must create a charm bracelet. One definite winner: judge Shaun Leane with his wonderful "Del Boy on the Riviera" outfit. **HR**

### Mercury Prize 2022 With Free Now: Album of the Year

BBC Four, 9pm

Lauren Laverne hosts this year's (rather cumbersome) titled, but thank you, sponsors) Mercury prize – also broadcast on BBC 6 Music. Confirmed performers include the dream team of Jessie Buckley and Bernard Butler, the marvellous Wet Leg, and sublime Scottish pianist Fergus McCreadie. **Ali Catterall**

### Film Bacurau

(Kleber Mendonça Filho, Juliano Dornelles, 2019)  
Film4, 1.20am

Kleber Mendonça Filho, who gave new Brazilian cinema a smartly urban flavour in *Neighboring Sounds* and *Aquarius*, takes a different direction here, teaming up with long-time collaborator Dornelles. It's set in Brazil's Pernambuco region, where the remote village of Bacurau runs to its own rhythm. Then a party of "safari" killers arrive, out for human blood and led by a reliably menacing Udo Kier. The shift in tone is jarring after an opening section that gives us a rich evocation of an eccentric community, with a flavour of tropical Kusturica. *Bacurau* feels more like a pilot for a rambling TV miniseries, but it depicts a dream of Brazil that would give Bolsonaro apoplexy. A boisterously engaging watch. **JR**

## Friday

### Pick of the Day Munich Games

Sky Atlantic, 9pm & 10pm

This month marks 50 years since the Palestinian terrorist group Black September killed 12 people at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. In this multi-language thriller, a friendly football match between an Israeli and a German team is planned to commemorate the attack. However, this prompts another threat of terrorism. Enter: Mossad agent Oren Simon (Yousef "Joe" Sweid) who teams up with no-nonsense German police officer Maria Koehler (Seyneb Saleh).



### Hobby Man

Channel 4, 8pm

In his last attempt to find a hobby this season, Alex Brooker invites Andi Oliver to Yorkshire. They show a surprising amount of enthusiasm at York's National Rail Museum, then head over to the Yorkshire Gliding Club near Thirsk – where Oliver declares: "That was one of the best things I've ever done!" Brooker, however, isn't so keen.

### Mortimer & Whitehouse: Gone Fishing

BBC Two, 9pm

The rod squad – Paul Whitehouse and Bob Mortimer – return for a fifth season. In tonight's opener, they travel to the River Exe in Devon in search of the grilse, known as the "summer silver", and try a spot of shore fishing. Then, it's time to rustle up a vegan feast and play a game of cricket. **HR**

### Film True History of the Kelly Gang

(Justin Kurzel, 2019)  
Film4, 11.20pm

An Australian legend is brought vividly and bloodily to life in this somewhat overlooked gem from the director of true crime stories *Snowtown* and the recent *Nitram*. Adapted from Peter Carey's novel, the film is a mythical quasi-biography of Ned Kelly, the 19th-century bandit legendary for his use of steel armour. It begins with Ned (played in adult life by George MacKay) raised in the outback by his mother Ellen (the superb Effie Davis, downright terrifying), before being adopted by her ruthless bushranger boyfriend (Russell Crowe). Then he runs up against an English lawman, played with serpentine ambivalence by Nicholas Hoult. A wild work of operatic intensity, with hallucinatory camerawork by Ari Wegner. **JR**

## Saturday

### Pick of the Day The Last Night of the Proms

BBC Two, 7.10pm

Katie Derham presents the first half of the final night, with Dalia Stasevska conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra in music by Verdi, Coleridge-Taylor, Wagner, Grieg and Sibelius. Viewers are also treated to the premiere of a new work by rising star James B Wilson, which was commissioned to mark the BBC's centenary. Turn over to BBC One at 9pm for the concluding half, and catch a celebration of TV theme tunes and a special turn by choirmaster Gareth Malone.



### Griff's Canadian Adventure

Channel 4, 9pm

On the penultimate leg of his adventure, journeying from the east to the west of Canada, Griff Rhys Jones gets lost in the prairies and vast sprawling plains of the incredible Saskatchewan and Alberta provinces. Along the way, he discovers ancient buffalo herds, dinosaur fossils and acres of cultivated farmland.

### Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?

ITV, 9.30pm

Now in its 34th series, the classic quiz show shows no signs of losing its appeal. And there's a new twist. The contestants who could make it into the hot seat are the winners of *Millionaire's* new sister show, *Fastest Finger First*, which has been running on weekdays. Only Jeremy Clarkson and 15 questions stand in the way of that cash prize. **HR**

### Film Little Women

(Greta Gerwig, 2019)  
E4, 6.20pm

Following her success with *Lady Bird*, writer-director Gerwig takes on a beloved American classic in a very modern adaptation that is true to Louisa May Alcott while jubilantly setting its own terms. A superb cast includes Florence Pugh's mercurial (and very Henry Jamesian) Amy; Saoirse Ronan's literary Jo, providing a self-reflexive angle on the story's writerly aspects; Meryl Streep, tut-tutting grandly but benignly as Aunt March; Laura Dern's socially conscious Marmee; and Timothée Chalamet as a fractionally too slappable Laurie, the boy next door. Crackling with life, magnificently designed and shot, the film does honour to the book as a manifesto of self-determination and seizing the day. Classy and hugely enjoyable. **JR**

## Radio By Stephanie Billen

### Picks of the Week

A young woman's comfortable southern upbringing fails to prepare her for life in an industrial town in *North and South* (Sunday, Radio 4, 3pm), Lin Goghlan's absorbing three-part adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's 1854 novel. As relevant as ever with its analysis of strained industrial relations, this gritty drama also boasts a satisfying love story. An accomplished cast includes Patsy Ferran as the well-meaning Margaret opposite James Cartwright (Harrison in *The Archers*) as the "not quite a gentleman" mill owner, John Thornton.

*The Past is a Foreign Country* (Monday, Radio 4, 8pm) finds Peter Curran revisiting Northern Ireland having left over 30 years ago. As well as considering his own relationship with the place and how he has treated it as a "favourite fossil" to be displayed then put back in its drawer, Curran talks to those who stayed including a drag queen, a peace negotiator and the Undertones' Michael Bradley. He also talks to his childhood friend, the Belfast satirist Jake O'Kane, recalling the moment they heard a voice in the school corridor saying: "Curran, it's about time you did your bit for the armed struggle..."

*Prom 67* (Tuesday, Radio 3, 7.30pm and Friday, BBC Four, 8pm) features the Proms premiere of Wynton Marsalis's Violin Concerto, composed in collaboration with the Scottish violinist Nicola Benedetti, who performs here with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Thomas Søndergård. The work reflects the music of both their homelands with elements of Celtic and American folk as well as jazz, blues and classical. An exciting programme also features music from Thomas Adès's *Powder Her Face*, Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Bernstein's *West Side Story*.

*Assignment* (Thursday, World Service, 9.05am) discovers how with no prospect of going home, maximum security prisoners at the Allan B Polunsky Unit in Livingstone, Texas, are gaining comfort from The Tank, a prison radio station run almost entirely by the men themselves. A moving programme hears from inmates including Death Row's

John Henry Ramirez who opened up to listeners about the mistakes

he has made. The Tank also broadcasts music and inspirational messages. As one presenter promises simply: "I will make your situation my situation and I will help you through that."

Nicola Benedetti:  
roots music. Joe  
Maher/DEC/Getty  
for Livewire Pictures















