Peter Kellner
Labour leaders rated

Ellen Halliday
Our frozen future

Alan Johnson
I would steal a Renoir

Prospect

APRIL 2026 • £8.99

THIS GILDED AGE

The extreme wealth and unaccountable power of America's new elite

by
David Aaronovitch



PHIL TINLINE
The old idea that could save the Democrats

HENRY MORRIS
Exclusive dispatch from a Reform away day

OLESYA KHROMEYCHUK
A night at the theatre in Kyiv

Ben Ansell I'm a zombie liberal / *Imaan Irfan* Modi's Bollywood / *Emily Bootle* Who'd be a girl now? / *Vitali Vitaliev* The joy of ketchup / *Kate Maltby* Stoppard can save the West End / *Obituary* Saif Gaddafi

9 771359 502095 46

PROSPECTMAGAZINE.CO.UK

PROSPECTMAGAZINE.CO.UK

Boost your savings with Chase today

4.5% AER variable

Reach your savings goals sooner with a **2.25% AER** boost, fixed for 12 months, on top of our standard saver variable rate.

Date night

Garden makeover

Winter escape

Wardrobe refresh

Ski trip

Emergency pot

CHASE

Join Chase and save with our boosted rate today

Offer may be withdrawn at any time. 18+, UK residents. Chase current account required – eligibility applies. Available to new customers joining from 29 December 2025 for your first 31 days. 4.41% gross. Interest paid monthly. Information correct as of 19 February 2026. T&Cs apply: www.chase.co.uk/saver-boosted. AER is short for Annual Equivalent Rate and shows the interest rate for a year, taking into account any interest payments made to you during the year. Gross is the rate used to calculate your monthly interest payments where no tax is deducted. Chase is a trading name of J.P. Morgan Europe Limited. 25 Bank Street, London E14 5JP.

FSCS PROTECTED

Prospect

2 Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9AA
publishing@prospectmagazine.co.uk
editorial@prospectmagazine.co.uk
Website prospectmagazine.co.uk
Advertising 020 3372 2934
Editorial 020 7255 1344
Subscriptions 0330 333 0173

EDITORIAL
Editor Philip Collins
Deputy editor Ellen Halliday
Creative director Mike Turner
Senior editor Alona Ferber
Managing editor Peter Williams
Books & culture editor Peter Hoskin
Head of digital audience Ben Clark
Assistant audience editor Kathryn Schoon
Production & associate editor David McAllister
Assistant editors Sarah Collins, Imaan Irfan
Contributing editors Andrew Adonis, Matthew d'Ancona, Tom Clark, Isabel Hilton
Production assistant Emeline Forton

PUBLISHING
CEO Mark Beard
Head of partnerships & advertising Wendy Miller
Strategic partnerships manager Jon Cutts
Head of digital Chris Tilbury
Head of engagement Jo Murray
Head of marketing Tom Bath
Marketing executive Lucy Kavanagh
Senior finance manager Adwoa Bannerman
Management accountant Anna Garnek

EDITORIAL BOARD
Wolfgang Blau, Clive Cowdery, Annette Dittert, Mary Fitzgerald, Karin von Hippel, Will Hutton, Henry Porter, Jane Shaw, David Willetts

FOR SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION
Prospect Subscriptions
Rockwood House, 9-17 Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, RH16 3TW
Tel 0330 333 0173
Email customerhelp@subscription.prospectmagazine.co.uk

The views represented in this magazine are not necessarily those of Prospect Publishing Ltd, the publisher. Best endeavours have been taken in all cases to represent faithfully the views of all contributors and interviewees. Prospect Publishing Ltd accepts no responsibility for errors, omissions or the consequences thereof.

NEWSTRADE DISTRIBUTION
Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT
Tel 0207 429 4000

EDITORIAL CALENDAR

May:	1st April
June:	6th May
July:	10th June

The magazine is owned and supported by the Resolution Group, as part of its not-for-profit, public interest activities.

Editorial

The bodies in the pool

In *The Great Gatsby*, the most evocative account of the excesses of capitalism in the Jazz Age, F Scott Fitzgerald dramatised disaster with the image of a body floating in a swimming pool. The victim of the pursuit of fame and glamour was Jay Gatsby himself, the parvenu whose money had briefly bought him a place in a high society devoted to ostentatious display. But in our own age of excess, it is not the hosts of the parties who are the tragic figures. It is the victims who barely even counted as guests: the girls trafficked to men for sex.

It is important to insist on this point, as the scandal which began with the egregious sex offender Jeffrey Epstein continues to ramify across the elites in the United States, the UK and elsewhere. A true reckoning must come through the justice system and that requires a prosecutable offence for which an individual can be indicted. In Britain, home to the most high-profile arrests yet following the release of the latest tranche of Epstein files by the US Department of Justice, that offence looks as though it may be misconduct in public office.

Both Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, the former duke of York, and Peter Mandelson, the former cabinet minister and British ambassador to the US, have been arrested and questioned under suspicion of this crime. Newly released emails indicate that Mountbatten-Windsor shared confidential information with Epstein while serving as trade envoy. Mandelson's arrest, meanwhile, followed emails appearing to show that he, at the time business secretary in Gordon Brown's government, had forwarded market-sensitive information, also to Epstein. Both have denied wrongdoing.

Misconduct in public office is a serious allegation carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The high threshold of evidence required makes it notoriously difficult to prove, however. To secure a conviction, the prosecution has to show beyond reasonable doubt that the defendant was acting as a public officer; that their act was deliberate rather than merely negligent; that the wrongdoing was criminal rather than just a breach of professional propriety; and that there is no reasonable mitigation.

The law derives in large part from a 1783 judgement against Charles Bembridge, a government accountant who was convicted of knowingly cooking the books. Since then, the common law precedent has been used, but rarely—on 72 occasions, according to research by the Law Commission, mostly against prison and police officers. Indeed, the law is due to lapse. In 2020, the Law Commission suggested it be recast, because it "lacks clarity and precision" (at one point the offence was being used to pursue journalists accused of paying public officials for stories). Keir Starmer's government is now enacting that plan, meaning that the cases of Mountbatten-Windsor and Mandelson, if they ever get that far, may well be the last ever brought under this law. There may be a parallel process to remove Mountbatten-Windsor from the legal line of succession of the British monarchy and, if he is found guilty, that would be appropriate.

Neither instance, though, should be allowed to detract from the central point of the Epstein affair, which is the perpetration of systematic abuse of women and girls. There is an echo here, in the use of misconduct in public office to question Andrew, of sending Al Capone down for tax evasion. (It should be said that there has been no suspicion Mandelson engaged in the abuse.) Indeed, it will be difficult to win prosecutions on cases of sexual abuse from many years ago. Very probably, the victims of Epstein and his associates will never see justice for those crimes. All the more reason, then, as the legal process winds down another path, that those people are honoured and remembered. ♦

Very probably, the victims of Epstein will never see justice. All the more reason to honour them

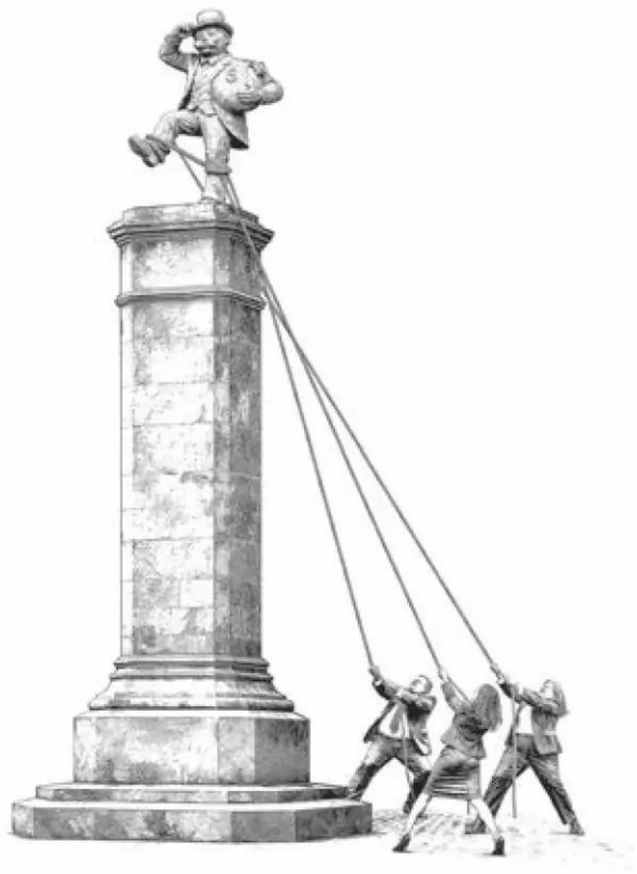
In this issue

FEATURES

16 **The new gilded age**
Today's tech barons, together with the Trump administration, are resurrecting the era of American excess, grotesque inequality and vast carelessness
David Aaronovitch



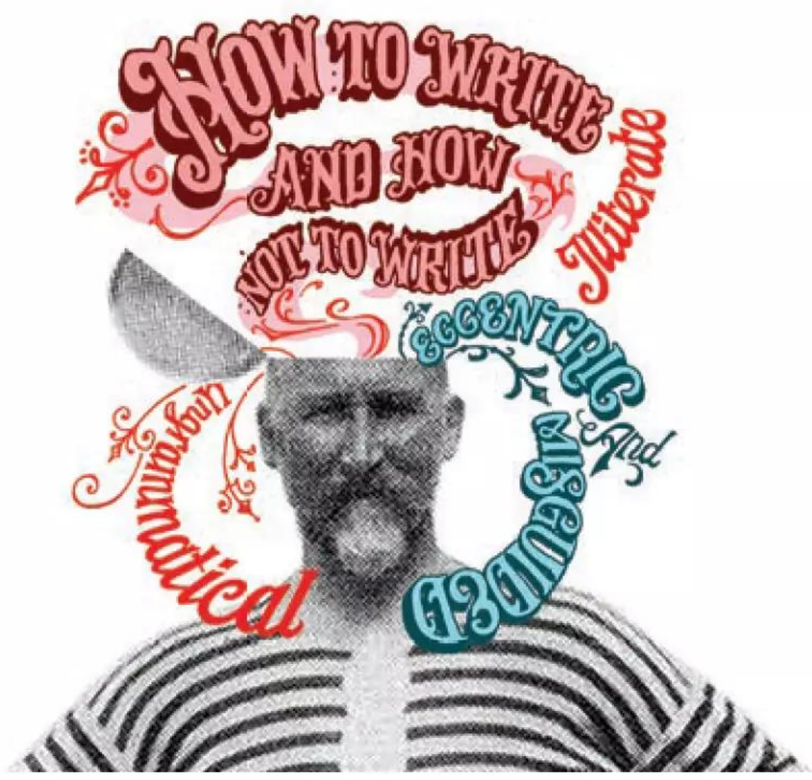
25 **Return of the trustbusters**
A new antitrust movement has won support across the US political divide, drawing on a rich history of monopoly breaking
Phil Tinline



30 **An open letter to Labour's next prime minister**
There are lessons to be learned from Labour leaders past —and I've met every one since Harold Wilson
Peter Kellner

38 **Deep freeze**
Climate change is threatening to destroy the AMOC—the ocean current that keeps northern Europe warm. If it did so, the effects would be devastating
Ellen Halliday

42 **Fowl play**
With a bestselling guide published a century ago, Henry Watson Fowler aimed to fix the English language
Oliver Kamm



REGULARS

01 **Editorial**

05 **Letters** *plus* **Stephen Collins**

86 **Crossword & Bobby Seagull's Brain Teaser**

88 **Hinterland**
Alan Johnson

ARGUMENTS

08 **The rise (and rise again) of zombie liberalism**
Ben Ansell

09 **Philosopher-at-large: The age of acceleration**
Sasha Mudd

10 **Escaping the tech hype cycle**
Ethan Zuckerman

12 **A fly on the wall at Reform's away day**
Henry Morris

14 **Diary**
Olesya Khromeychuk

PEOPLE

47 **Juliet Mitchell**
Her work defined feminism for a generation. Now in her eighties, the psychoanalyst proves she's still ahead of the curve
Alona Ferber



plus **Maggie Aderin, Park Chan-wook & Zandra Rhodes**

THE CULTURE

54 **21st-century girl**
Have market forces freed or trapped young women?
Emily Bootle

59 **Facing the music**
What two books get right about how music happens—and what they get wrong
Philip Clark

62 **A right good scandal**
Can corporate misdeeds still change politics for the better?
Richard Roberts

65 **Revelation through repetition**
Solvej Balle does it again
Matthew Janney

68 **Books in brief**

70 **Film: The Modi cinematic universe**
Imaan Irfan

72 **Art: After Ovid**
David McAllister

73 **Stage: From Arcadia to Transylvania**
Kate Maltby

74 **Film: The return of Robert Vas**
Sukhdev Sandhu

75 **Classical notes: A trip to Dowland**
Ian Bostridge

LIVES

77 *Sarah Collins, Alice Garnett, Alice Goodman, Sheila Hancock, Tilly Lawless, Kiran Sidhu, Vitali Vitaliev*

83 **Obituary: Saif al-Islam Gaddafi**
Mary Fitzgerald

PODCASTS

→ **Peter Geoghegan** on the Epstein files, power and impunity

→ **Clare Melford** on the war against digital disinformation

→ **Marty Baron** on the *Washington Post*'s "death spiral"

→ At **prospectmagazine.co.uk** or wherever you get your podcasts

ONLINE

→ **The death of the Firm**
DAT Green

→ **Why must parents fight to get support for children with additional needs?**
Ruth Patrick

→ **The Church of England is still treating gay people as second-class citizens**
Alan Rusbridger

FOLLOW PROSPECT

→ *Bluesky* @prospectmagazine.co.uk
X @prospect_uk
Facebook prospectmagazineuk
Instagram @prospect_magazine
TikTok @prospectmagazine



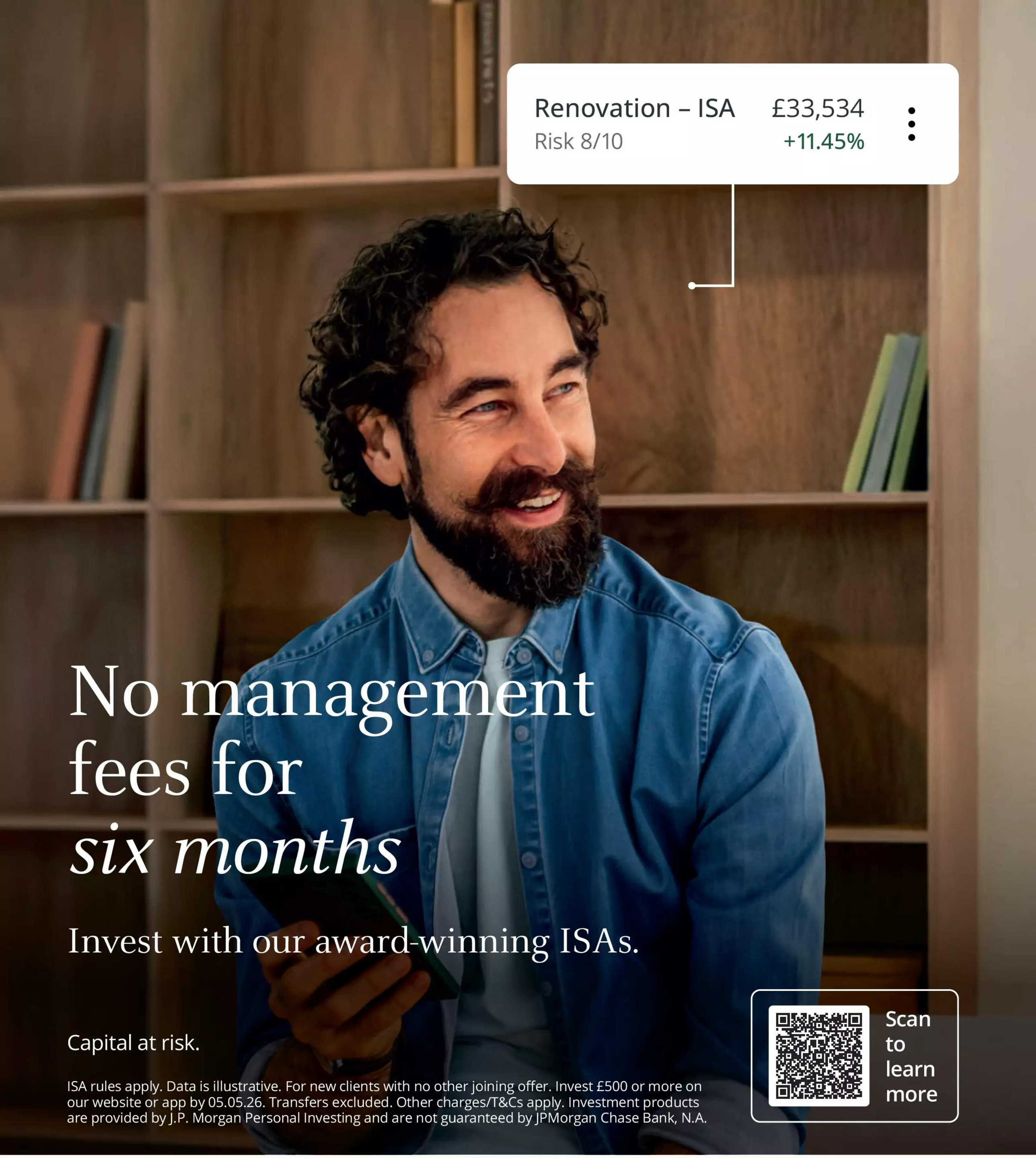
Cover illustration by Gibson Kochanek, images via Alamy

Regulated by IMPRESS:
The Independent Monitor for the Press CIC

IMPRESS: **impressorg.com/complaints**
T: 020 3325 4288 **E:** complaints@impressorg.com

To make a complaint about material published by *Prospect*, follow the guidance at **prospectmagazine.co.uk/complaints**

impress publish with integrity | regulated member



No management fees for *six months*

Invest with our award-winning ISAs.

Capital at risk.

ISA rules apply. Data is illustrative. For new clients with no other joining offer. Invest £500 or more on our website or app by 05.05.26. Transfers excluded. Other charges/T&Cs apply. Investment products are provided by J.P. Morgan Personal Investing and are not guaranteed by JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A.

Scan to learn more

J.P.Morgan
PERSONAL INVESTING

Invest with *clarity*

Letters

How to revive the big two

Philip Collins ("The end of the party", March) is part of a tradition of claiming that the two-party system is coming to an end, dating from at least the 1980s. Undoubtedly the trend looks more visible now but this does not make it irreversible. In 2017 the combined vote of the two main parties was 82.3 per cent, a major rebound after years of decline and higher than in the watershed elections of 1979 and 1997. This was particularly notable in that the major political dispute, over Brexit, did not map neatly onto party divisions. Thomas Piketty's analysis in *Capital and Ideology* suggests that Labour's relative success in 2017 was due to a return to its roots, particularly a partial revival of the alliance between the poor and the highly educated.

The subsequent collapse of Labour support was caused not by extraneous social factors but by the people running the party deciding to alienate large sections of their voter base ("shaking off the fleas"). The collapse of the Tories had perhaps more complex reasons, but the common factor was that the leadership put control over the party ahead of winning elections.

So far as Labour is concerned there seems no obvious reason why this process should not be reversed. The main policy of new contenders on the left seems to be to resemble old Labour, and if the party itself adopted the same strategy it would likely have a built-in advantage. The evidence suggests that traditional social democratic ideas still have considerable appeal, with the mayoral result in New York a striking example. Undoubtedly, there are problems in marketing left-wing polices but it may be that the difficulties lie more on the supply side than the demand side.

Rory O'Kelly, *Beckenham*



It appears the main two political parties are a spent force. An increasingly cynical electorate thinks this is less because they have run out of ideas than that they are bereft of genuine passion and commitment. The general feeling today seems to be that there are far too many lacklustre career politicians. In many cases, scandals have been politicians' undoing.

Another factor surely is the internet and social media, which have made the electorate far more—if not fully—politically informed. Engagement with (the more rational elements of) social media has given the public the confidence to challenge and debate opposing viewpoints. Before social media, what readily-accessible public forum existed for debating politics? Today, no British politician escapes public scrutiny. Their every word and action is now the subject of widespread analysis and critique.

It is unlikely we will go back to the old political order—at least until an alternative has been given a chance. Reform is leading in every poll, but not primarily because it has anything truly new to offer. It will need to absorb a few more seasoned Tory defectors to convince that it is more than just a tinpot anti-immigration party: even voters who want Britain's borders strengthened might be reluctant to elect an outfit that has no solutions to a failing economy, crime, or threats from Russia and China (or Donald Trump, should he somehow secure a third term).

Yet the only way back for Labour and the Conservatives is likely to be after a Reform government crashes and burns, having proved incapable of converting its soapbox appeal and back-of-a-fag-packet policies into mainstream governance.

It may be time for both the Reds and the Blues to own their many failings and not worry too much about a Reform victory. They know that running a country isn't remotely easy, and will be especially difficult for a relatively nascent party that appears to have only one policy.

Stefan Badham, *Portsmouth*

Bread and butter politics

Regarding Ben Ansell's article ("How culture wars hurt the economy", March), in what sense is the economy "boring"? Granted, "traditional bread and butter of politics: taxes, spending, economic policy" are boring to most people. But that is not the only way to frame the main economic issues.

What most people care about is their ability to make ends meet—especially economic security, as Ansell says—and to have something left over for enjoyment. This is especially true of those in financial hardship, which is a large proportion of the population. Even many affluent people agree, for the selfish reason of wanting to live in a decent society.

Why not give priority to achieving economic security for all? As I write in my open access book *Evaluating Economic Success*, a good economy is one where its outcomes satisfy everyone's basic needs, as far as possible—such things as livelihoods and housing of decent quality and security, and access to childcare, healthcare and social care.

This is the criterion of an economy's success, which is widely supported across the political spectrum, and should be the focus of our public debate on the economy.

Michael Joffe, *Imperial College London*

Letters

The plot against bullies

Sasha Mudd is always deeply insightful and eloquent. Her column on American soft power ("Trump's plot against America", March), however, stands out as the very best of the many pieces I've read on recent international moves made by the White House. It deserves admiration and commendation, even if its message will depress every good-hearted reader.
Brad Hooker, *via email*

The problem with Andrew Adonis's recent analysis ("Rupture? What rupture?" *Prospect* online, January) of Mark Carney's speech on the collapse of the "old world order", and of Donald Trump's recent behaviour around Greenland ("On thin ice", March), is that he doesn't recognise that when evil people threaten you repeatedly and make their objectives obvious, sooner or later they are going to act. His argument seems to be that they haven't acted yet, so don't worry.

If you encounter a huge, very aggressive man who is waving his fist in your direction, reassuring yourself by recognising that he hasn't already hit you doesn't really work.

The UK needs to take an urgent look at how to protect its long-term strategic interests. It cannot afford to be reactive. The United States as we knew it is never coming back, Russia will continue to be a gangster state and China will only respect strength. India, meanwhile, will over the coming decades also achieve greater power and influence. Let's not wait to act until we're punched in the face.
Wayne Gwilym, *via email*

The invasion of Venezuela and kidnapping of its leader was and is about oil, more oil and even more oil. Greenland's sovereignty is threatened by what is blatant US foreign-policy immorality and criminality. Trump's idea of creating peace is to tell one side that: "You're not holding any cards." The man's a goof. Yet, many still admire him as some sort of genius that resists and challenges the Deep State. Since both Trump administrations have kowtow(ed) to Big Fossil Fuel, mostly via the loosening of environmental protections, he, far from trying to "drain the swamp", wallows in it.
Frank Sterle Jr, *White Rock, British Columbia, Canada*

God vs Harold Macmillan

Peter Burden suggests that Christianity "needs to reform its perception and understanding of what is God" (Letters, March). But this proposal misunderstands both the origins and the coherence of classical Christian theism.

The Christian doctrine of God did not arise from primitive anthropomorphism later fossilised into dogma. It emerged through centuries of philosophical refinement that conceived of God not as a magnified human being, but as *ipsum esse subsistens* (being or existence itself). The claim that God is personal is simply equivalent to the scientist saying that ultimate reality is comprehensible. As Albert Einstein put it: "The eternal mystery of the universe is its comprehensibility."

Mr Burden's suggested alternatives—Spinoza's impersonal substance and Jung's interior archetype—are reductionistic and do not have the same explanatory power. As for Burden's conjecture that the traditionally held view of God is "a humanoid... a little like Harold Macmillan", my response is simply that if some lapse into childish images, that is a failure on the part of the subject, not a disclosure of what Christian doctrine actually teaches.

Regarding the suggestion that Christian doctrine rests on "conflicting and unreliable reportage", this no longer reflects the state of serious historical scholarship. Over the past half-century, sustained work on oral culture, memory and textual transmission in antiquity has shown that the gospels belong to a highly controlled environment of eyewitness testimony. They appear within living memory of the events they describe, display extensive overlap of structure and material, and are densely populated with named individuals, specific locations and socially embedded testimony. All these features are strongly associated with eyewitness-based historiography rather than mythic invention.

Finally, to define faith as "no more than the capacity and readiness to believe the unbelievable" is a caricature of how Christianity has understood the relationship between faith and reason. Christian thought has always distinguished between what reason can prove and what reason can recognise as meaningful when disclosed. Faith is not

Feminists against progress: an apology

The article "Feminists Against Progress", published on 28th January 2026 online and in the March 2026 issue of *Prospect*, included a quotation falsely attributed to Louise Perry and her book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*. Because of this error, the article did not meet *Prospect*'s editorial standards and has been removed. We regret this error and would like to apologise to Louise Perry and to *Prospect* readers.

An article was published in the March 2026 issue of *Prospect*, "Feminists Against Progress", that focused predominantly on our work. We wrote to the editors to raise a number of concerns about the piece, including selective quoting, inaccuracies, and what felt to us like ad hominem attacks. The gravest of the inaccuracies was the presence of a quote, attributed to Louise Perry's book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, which appeared nowhere in that book or anywhere else. Following an investigation, the editors of *Prospect* have taken the article down.

The fast pace of contemporary publishing, and perverse incentives of the online attention economy, make it challenging in the extreme to sustain a commitment to factual reporting. *Prospect*'s integrity on this front is rare and commendable. We would like to thank the editors for their responsiveness in addressing this matter.
Louise Perry & Mary Harrington, *via email*

belief against reason, but trust that goes beyond what reason alone can reach.
Revd Simon Jones, *Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria*

Do we need to know what Peter Burden looks like to know what he thinks? The concept of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—reveals God to be not merely personal, but supra-personal: the famously irascible Harold Macmillan would not even have got an audition for the part. The existence of personality and consciousness within the universe derive from this nature of God, not the other way round.

It follows that God, who is love, is also purposeful as expressed in his creation. It is from him (not it) that his creatures in turn derive their freedom to create and love—a vision of God at least as rational as that to be found in the writings of Spinoza, Jung or anyone else. With their foundation in the Hebrew Scriptures, the multi-layered gospel narratives, along with the epistles and the rest of the New Testament, become the vehicle which over millennia have borne an explicitly Christian understanding of God and his offer of salvation to humankind—grounded in history and experienced by many millions of people.
Mike McCabe, *Chinley, Derbyshire*

Why the arts matter

I don't know about Hinterland (March), but I am convinced that a society that doesn't educate its members in the arts, especially music, is heading for trouble. It will create brutalised, insensitive people. Half of people's potential will go to waste. Music is often an outlet for children who are less academic, as is sport.

These strengths should be capitalised on, not ignored by governments who see brainpower as the only worthwhile attribute to develop, especially when funding is tight. Look at what the Arts Council did to English National Opera— an organisation reaching out to schools and the young—under the previous government. A healthy society needs citizens with a rounded education, whose individual talents have been nurtured to give them fulfilment and self-esteem. A society that abandons that duty is storing up problems for down the line.
Derek Brundish, *via email*

ILLUSTRATION BY REBECCA SUTHERLAND

IN FACT

Sixty one per cent of Britons think London is an unsafe place to live, but only 34 per cent of Londoners agree.
YouGov, 12th January 2026



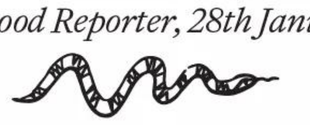
In the past couple of years China has deployed as many wind farms and solar panels as the rest of the world combined.
Science Friday, 28th January 2026



With 41 medals, including 18 gold, Norway achieved the highest ever medal tally by any nation at a single Winter Olympics.
Life in Norway, 22nd February 2026



The biggest streaming show of 2025 was children's programme *Bluey*, which saw 45.2bn minutes of viewing on Disney+.
The Hollywood Reporter, 28th January 2026



Snakes' and other reptiles' ability to fast may be because they lack the genes that produce ghrelin—a hormone that regulates appetite.
Science, 2nd February 2026



France remains the world's most visited country after welcoming 102m tourists in 2025. Spain was second, with 96.8m visitors.
EuroNews, 20th February 2026

STEPHEN COLLINS



Arguments

Ben Ansell

The rise (and rise again) of zombie liberalism



Slowly, from freshly shovelled graves, they wake, arms stretched out, eyes rolled back. How could this be? Had they not been killed? And yet on they march, forming new thinktanks, writing scathing op-eds, refusing to die. They are the liberals—the most feared of the political undead.

An endless stream of obituaries for liberalism have been published this past decade. Any two-bit pundit can wax lyrical about the demerits of this political philosophy, whose proponents believe in individual rights, civil liberties, democracy and, traditionally at least, free markets. Too individualistic, too technocratic, too sneering, too woke, it is, in a word, unfashionable.

Attacks have come from the left, particularly the resurgent Blue Labour movement, as well as the right, inspired by the democracy-sceptical views of technologists such as Curtis Yarvin. Attacks have even come from so-called self-hating liberals, who blamed "woke" for the fall of Kamala Harris.

And if anything exemplified the first 18 months of Keir Starmer's government, it was a double-barrelled offensive against liberalism. Social liberals, hoping for release after a decade of Brexit-inflected jingoism, were instead appalled by a rhetorical and policy attack on people who have legally moved to the UK. Economic liberals—in the free-market sense—found a Number 10 suspicious of business and the European single market.

Yet, still they rise. That's the thing about zombies: they're not really dead. In fact, the defenestration of one of liberalism's most powerful detractors, Starmer's former adviser Morgan McSweeney, has led to a veritable glasnost on social liberalism. The prime minister's aggressive response to Manchester United chairman Jim Ratcliffe's foray into far-right rhetoric is just the first example. A softening with Europe appears on the horizon.

Zombie liberalism is stirring again in more obvious places, too. The Lib Dems may be stalling in the polls, but their council byelection successes continue apace and they have more MPs in Westminster than they have had for a century. Zack Polanski's Greens have surged on an unapologetic defence of social liberalism, though I suppose no one would mistake them for free marketeers.

Even among the Conservatives, whose relationship with liberalism has often been, as they say, "complicated", a wave of the undead has been disinterred. The campaign group Prosper, led by former West Midlands mayor Andy Street and former Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson, was recently founded to press for a more moderate—dare one say, liberal—approach to Tory politics. The zombie bona fides of Prosper can be seen in the fact that among 70 supporters named on the group's website, 67 have titles starting with the word "former". Truly, the dead have risen.

It is the emergence of the defiantly illiberal Reform UK that has woken the undead. The many victories of social liberalism over the past half-century—gay rights, gender equality, anti-racism—have inspired enemies. In my own analysis of British Election Study data, I find Reform voters on average believe white people are more discriminated against than ethnic minorities and that gays, lesbians and transgender people actually receive positive discrimination. And despite occasional Thatcherite moments, Reform supporters are no great fans of free markets. Indeed, Reform has a Trumpian view of trade, finance and industry. That is, it's all fine so long as you can paint it in red, white and blue.

Reform was the political success story of 2025. There are plenty of illiberals in the UK. Pollsters often point to the top-left quadrant of the political compass, people who are economically statist and socially conservative, as the winning combination. Certainly, that's what people say they want.

This is exactly the cohort that Starmer aimed at under the infamous McSweeney strategy. And look where it got him. Similarly, Boris Johnson tried that mix with levelling up and Brexit. After winning him an election it proved an impossible approach to governing. Try as they might, the post-liberal survivors of the zombie apocalypse can barely eke out a political living. They turn on each other. To paraphrase Tolstoy, all liberals are the same, but all post-liberal tribes are different. Except in that, to date, other



In this section

Resisting tech hype *by Ethan Zuckerman* **10**

Exclusive dispatch from Reform's away day *by Henry Morris* **12**

Russia's cultural crusade against Ukraine *by Olesya Khromeychuk* **14**

than the indefatigable Nigel Farage, none has lasted long.

The truth is that zombie liberalism never dies, despite shovels to the head and shots through the heart, because there is something inevitable about liberalism. Markets always creep in, because they come from individuals trying to sneak around the rules and strictures of the state. And despite the best efforts of conservatives, the desires of individuals to live life how and where they want seems to win out over conformity. As fans of the *28 Days Later* series know, it just takes one drop of zombie blood to start a zombie takeover.

So yes, liberalism is unfashionable. Who, after all, would support the zombies? The politically popular thing to do is denounce liberalism, talk about nation, flag and family, or solidarity and class consciousness. I'm sure there's some votes in that. There are most definitely newspaper columns.

And yet, it's liberalism that has given people what they want—the freedom to live and work how and where they want, to love whom they want. It marches on inexorably and unthinkingly, with a zombie's sense of self-reflection. An unstoppable virus, perhaps, but one that keeps spreading, despite what people tell pollsters. Empty-headed and heartless, perhaps, but when in office, zombie governments seem to win elections. So as for me (and yes reader, I'm one of *them*), I'll be cheering on the zombies. ◆

Sasha Mudd

Philosopher-at-large: The age of acceleration



I have a problem. It embarrasses me, professionally, to admit it—but here goes: these days, I can't seem to finish a book.

That's an exaggeration, of course. Some books I do finish. When I read to my daughters, we almost always make it to the end. Stopping out of boredom or disappointment would be freakish and rare. And if I'm reviewing a philosophical text or teaching a book to my students, I finish. Professional duty still compels.

But when it comes to reading for pleasure—which I do a lot of—finishing has become the exception rather than the rule. I live among fragments. Seven or eight books teeter on my nightstand at any given time. I'm more than halfway through Naomi Klein's *Doppelganger*, some way into Lea Ypi's *Indignity*, partway through *Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here* by Jonathan Blitzer. At the same time, I'm rereading John Williams's campus novel *Stoner* and James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*.

Only a few years ago, it was just the reverse. Finishing was the rule and stopping the exception. I look back now with pained nostalgia on that prelapsarian age. I had no idea how good things were.

The problem is not just that I'm raising three kids, working full-time and bone-tired in a way that feels structural rather than temporary. The problem is that I have come to read the same way I use the internet:

How I read now resembles how I use the internet: a million tabs open, terrified of missing something good

with a million tabs open, terrified of missing something good, or of closing an interesting window too soon.

More than a century ago, the German sociologist Georg Simmel argued that modern urban life overwhelms us with stimuli—too many impressions arriving too quickly. To survive, the psyche becomes defensive. We skim. We detach. We flatten our responses. This is not laziness or moral failure; it is adaptation. Depth becomes costly—dangerous, even—when everything demands attention all at once.

Our digital lives have, of course, only intensified this problem. Online, meaning arrives in rapid bursts. The moment boredom threatens, something else appears: a headline, an outrage, a joke, a warning. The abundance is staggering, and social media propels us through it at breakneck speed, cultivating anxious, insatiable habits of attention along the way. There is always more to see, more to react to, more to keep up with. The present swells with choppy, unending urgency. Meanwhile, the past fades and the future presses in.

Hartmut Rosa, a contemporary German sociologist, calls this condition *acceleration*. The problem, he argues, is not simply distraction or a lack of discipline, but the erosion of stable relations to the world. When meaning itself becomes provisional—interruptible, replaceable, always on the verge of being

Arguments

outdated—nothing can hold us long enough to matter deeply.

And so we move restlessly from one thing to the next. Paradoxically, in trying to catch everything we miss what matters most: an entire quality of experience, a depth of being that shallow attention flatly rules out.

Reading a book asks something radically different of us. It requires trust. You don't know where you're going, or even whether the journey will be worth your time. You don't know what the "point" will be, if indeed good literature has a point. You commit anyway. You allow yourself to be led through another person's consciousness towards a destination that remains indistinct. Only patience and faith make this possible.

This is not an efficient use of attention, just the opposite. There is no dopamine hit, no hot take, no quick sense of having got what you came for. On the internet, the whole point is to move on. With good books, the point—if there is one—is to stay.

That staying matters. It's how literature works its slow magic, showing you what the world looks like from someone else's perspective. Empathy is a fashionable word, but genuinely inhabiting another consciousness is nothing short of a miracle, a genuine adventure. Reading a good book invites exactly that. It is fundamentally at odds with a culture that celebrates speed, productivity and optimisation.

I think longingly about how I used to read, especially as an undergraduate, before the internet. I relished *War and Peace* with the brash confidence of someone who believes time is endless; I spent happy weeks inside the world of *Middlemarch*, as though there were nowhere better to be.

Lately, I suspect I could only find my way back to this kind of reading by doing something radical. Not a new app. Not a changed setting. But a rupture. Leave the internet, perhaps. Move off grid. Abandon most of the trappings of modern life, with its fearsome technological tide that pulls us forever into the shallows.

I am not optimistic about my chances.

There is, of course, no shortage of books that diagnose this very problem. Many offer solutions. They counsel slowness, presence, the art of doing nothing. They preach the gospel of digital minimalism. I own several of these titles. They gaze at me from the stack that teeters, half-read, on my nightstand. Problem is, I'll never finish them. ◆



Ethan Zuckerman

Escaping the tech hype cycle



For a few months in 2001, the business world couldn't stop talking about inventor Dean Kamen's secret project, codenamed "Ginger". Kamen had received the National Medal of Technology from US president Bill Clinton in 2000 for his groundbreaking work on medical devices, including the first portable insulin pumps and dialysis machines, and the technorati were sure Ginger would be used by everyone.

After getting a preview, Steve Jobs said Ginger would be "as big a deal as the PC". John Doerr, whose venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins had backed Amazon, declared it might be bigger than the internet, and put in $38m—at the time Kleiner's largest investment in any company. The Ginger hype was such that *South Park* dedicated an episode to mocking it.

After all that, the big secret turned out to be the Segway: the admittedly cool scooter-like device that allows individuals to travel intermediate distances at up to 12mph. The technical achievement—outsourcing to an array of sensors, motors and machine intelligence the human ability to balance while standing up—might well have justified the $100m Kamen marshalled into its development, but Segways haven't transformed lives, other than those of local entrepreneurs who use them to conduct city-centre tours.

The same can't be said, of course, of machine learning, the technology behind the software that both stabilises the Segway and powers AI chatbots. It is transforming virtually every industry, but comes with relentless noise. With some warning of a disastrous bubble in AI stocks, and machine intelligence pioneer Yann LeCun warning that companies like OpenAI are marching into a dead end, we need a better way to assess the visions hyped by AI pioneers.

Meta is possibly the best example of a company trying to shape reality. In 2021, Mark Zuckerberg was so excited about the Metaverse, a virtual fantasyland where crude, legless avatars mingled, that he rebranded his company after it. Meta's logo resembles a VR headset, a technology that Zuckerberg promised would transform first the internet and then all society.

You are almost certainly

not reading this column on your Meta headset: with all the company's marketing muscle, it sold only 20m headsets worldwide between 2021 and 2023. Early this year, in a "pivot to AI", Meta closed three VR game studios and laid off 1,000 employees focused on virtual reality. It's possible Meta rebranded at a bad time, just as Covid lockdowns ended and people were desperate to interact in person. But it's also possible that the Metaverse is as dumb an idea now as it was in 1995—when the first internet companies discovered that VR would be a niche business at best.

But at least overhyping VR didn't hurt anyone, unless your VR headset gave you nausea. You can't say the same of cryptocurrency. The steep transaction costs quickly made it clear that digital money was not going to provide a decentralised micropayment system. Rebranded as "digital gold", crypto was then sold by acolytes as an asset that, like a precious metal, would retain its value when banking systems inevitably collapsed.

Frustratingly for cryptosceptics like me, some currencies have kept their value, though not without stomach-churning volatility. But millions of other projects have collapsed in value, proven to be scams or otherwise financially ruined their investors.

Crypto has generated a whole ecosystem of ways to lose money to grifters—NFTs, memecoins—and novel ways to enable illicit financial transactions or bribery. Donald Trump's family has shown how these phenomena go together. The *New York Times* estimates that the Trumps have netted more than $850m in various cryptocurrency deals, often with businesses that wish to curry favour with the US government.

Like the Segway and the Metaverse, cryptocurrencies generally function as intended. But they have not transformed society, or certainly not for the better. Many of today's AI visions—cars without human drivers, companies run by a single human commanding an army of robots and AI agents—are precisely the kind we should be sceptical of: futures desirable to technologists and investors, but perhaps not to society more broadly.

Tech hype relies on "technodeterminism"—the idea that a technology, once conceived of and sufficiently developed, will spread throughout society due to the efficiencies it creates. While this is a reductionist theory, it's not without merit: innovations like rail, flight and the internet have all had a hand in major societal transformations, displacing existing institutions and practices. Even apparently small advances—like container shipping—can thoroughly disrupt major systems such as global manufacturing and trade.

Technodeterminism is also deeply appealing to the technorati. It tells them when they back a new product they are not merely solving a problem and making a buck: they are working to better society. But its greatest trick is creating a sense or narrative of inevitability: it leads us to think a certain future is coming, whether we like it or not.

In 1995, consulting firm the Gartner Group introduced the "Hype Cycle of Emerging Technologies", a compelling and simple graph that highlights a predictable pattern: when a new technology first appears, expectations are massively inflated; this is followed by a period of disillusionment and then finally a "plateau of productivity", as the technology in

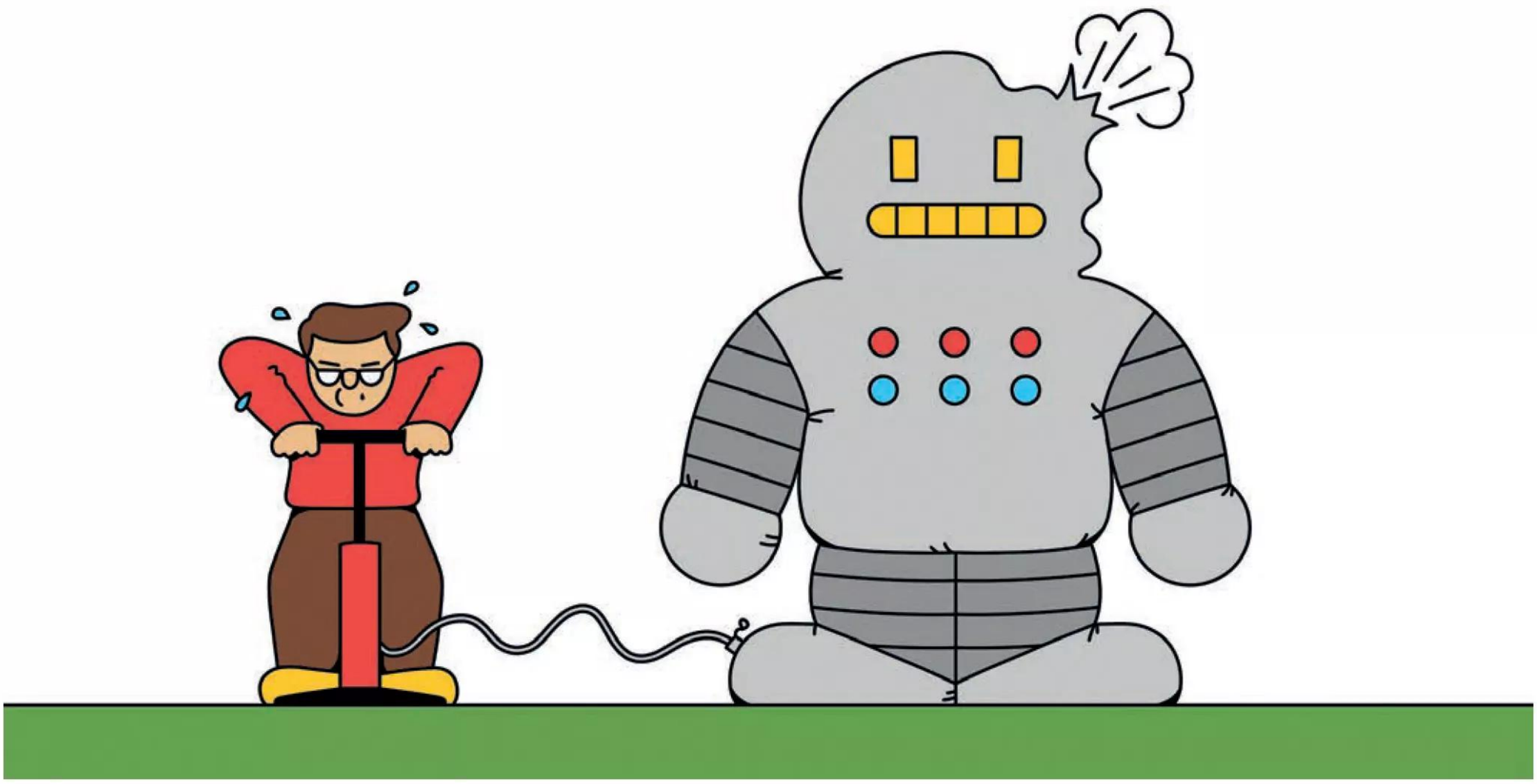


ILLUSTRATION BY VINCENT KILBRIDE

Arguments

question finds its true place in the market and public life. A version of the graph is released annually that places technologies in the news at precise locations on the graph's curve.

The 2024 graph—the most recent one available for free—warns "generative AI" is entering the trough of disillusionment, but should reach the plateau in two to five years, while autonomous agents are still climbing the peak of inflated expectations.

On the one hand, the graph warns us that even the most transformative technologies tend to be overhyped at first. But it's easy to misread it as telling us all tech will eventually be adopted. Tech companies love this interpretation: their failures aren't evidence of poorly conceived or badly implemented products—they just haven't reached their plateau of productivity yet.

The Gartner graph is helpful only if we remember that while many technologies transform societies, not all do. The Segway can cover ground quickly, but many people (myself included) find it counterintuitive and scary to use. That barrier to adoption, combined with cost, weight and the challenges of the built environment, have made it a niche product useful for a few applications, such as policing airport terminals and other stair-free environments.

Even trickier than designing vehicles that can negotiate stairs is the task of winning social acceptance. People truly hated the idea of their lives being recorded by users of Google Glass, the smart glasses that allowed wearers to add a data display layer to the world they moved through. While the tech was deeply impressive, public reaction to being put under surveillance made wearing Google Glass deeply uncool.

Meta, a company that's perhaps one of the least sensitive to what users will tolerate, is now peddling new smart glasses using frames from Ray-Ban. The next few years will show whether fashion trumps social embarrassment.

It's no mystery why John Doerr would hype the Segway: he had money riding on it and, if he were right, he would be considered a seer and shaper of futures. The firm he worked for was thoroughly insulated, too. Venture capital is based on the idea that most investments fail, but the great successes outweigh the costs of the failures. This also means that, at the very top, there are often few consequences for getting predictions wrong.

As consumers and as a wider society, we need to grow wise to the hype cycle of failing technologies. We need prophets who aren't motivated by profits, nor afraid to say that while some tech will move through the stages of hype and disappointment into everyday use, lots of others will simply die on the vine. And still more we may, as a society, choose to kill off. ♦

People truly hated the idea of their lives being recorded by users of smart glasses

Henry Morris

Inside Reform's away day



It's mid-morning at Hadrian's Wall and the Romans have already lost again.

Not to the Picts this time, or to the weather, or even to the slow grind of history. But to Lee Anderson. "Now this is what a proper border looks like," he says, gesturing to waist-high masonry that has been successfully penetrated by sheep since the middle of the 5th century.

Anderson is with a minibus full of people who at some point in the last six months have all said "after long consideration" into a microphone. Danny Kruger, Robert Jenrick, Nadhim Zahawi, Nadine Dorries, Jake Berry, Suella Braverman and Jonathan Gullis stand around him in a loose semi-circle, dressed for cameras rather than Northumberland in February. Andrea Jenkyns and Ann Widdecombe flank the would-be centurion like a pair of time-expired legionaries. (Nigel Farage is sadly unable to attend due to a busy cameo schedule.)

"Right," announces the shadow minister for patriotism. "Today is an opportunity for us to get to know our new colleagues, and to learn how to trust each other." Glances are exchanged. "First, we're all going to introduce ourselves and then we will symbolically cross the wall. This side is where you were. And on the other side, is where you are now."

"England?" asks Jenkyns.

"It's Scotland on that side," corrects Braverman.

"No, it's not," says Kruger.

"Shut up. I'll go first," says Anderson. "I'm Lee Anderson, I say what people think. And I'm not apologising for it."

He scales the 1,900-year-old stonework with all the agility of a 53-year-old Madrí drinker in an ill-fitting Asda suit, drops down onto the other side and shouts: "And I want my country back."

There's a ripple of applause.

"Nadhim, you go next," calls Anderson, lanyard whipping across his face in the stiff Hexham breeze.

"Stop!" shouts Braverman, concerned. "Isn't this an irregular border crossing?"

"It's not a border," reiterates Kruger.

Zahawi steps forward, pleased to take centre stage. He talks suavely about outcomes, how politics should work for people. He uses the word "reset".

"You didn't let Boris reset," snarls Dorries, "when you resigned the day after he made you chancellor."

"That was a matter of conscience," replies Zahawi.

"You betrayed him."

"Nadine, you put Carrie's cat in a microwave," Jenkyns interjects.

"Dog," replies Dorries. "And it was an air fryer."

Matt Goodwin is writing everything down.

Jenrick has been recording a short video with a man from a startup PR agency that really wants to make a name for itself. "I'm here today learning about borders, heritage and patriotism."

"Robert, there'll be plenty of time for shameless self-promotion later," shouts Anderson as Zahawi's phone rings. "Right, if your phone's ringing, you're not going to be getting the most out of it."

"Sorry, Lee, it's my accountant," says Zahawi. "Hector, talk to me... Well, that depends how you define residency?"

Anderson takes a breath. "Who's next?"

Nobody volunteers, but through a combination of elaborate eye contact avoidance and a poor sense of his own personal dimensions, Gullis ends up in the middle.

"Gullis. Go."

Gullis shouts "I'M JONATHAN GULLIS." He runs, loses footing in the ditch designed precisely for that purpose and collides, temple first, with the wall. It is a fitting tribute to Hadrian's vision.

Lunchtime. The head of HR, Widdecombe, has placed a buffet of sandwiches, sausage rolls and crisps on the flatbed of Anderson's Ford Ranger. The delegates loiter.



© ALAMY

"This is where the bonding happens," says Anderson, clapping his hands together.

Berry pokes at a foil tray of sausage rolls. "Are these halal?" he asks.

Zahawi is pacing past. "No, I understand... of course not *that* entity..." He covers his phone with his hand, "No, they're pork."

Reassured by something he hasn't understood, Berry nods. Dorries is holding court in a folding chair.

"The problem is loyalty. People don't understand loyalty anymore." She bites a sausage roll. "This is cold."

"Interesting," notes Goodwin, scribbling furiously.

Soon it is already mid-afternoon. Following a collaboration-fostering knot exercise that culminates in Kruger losing a shoe, it is time for the trust fall.

"Right," barks Anderson. "This is about knowing that your Reform colleagues have got your back. Climb on to the wall, Nadine. You're going to stand still, cross your arms and fall backwards. On three."

"I only trust *myself*," she announces, leaning back dramatically on two.

"No! Nadine, you've...." begins the facilitator, whose nearest relevant experience is moderating the Ashfield Patriots Against Pronouns Facebook group.

Jenrick keeps his arms folded. Zahawi stays on his phone. Jenkyns is spitting at a provocative hogget. Braverman, still at the back, is ready to explain why she always knew the whole thing was a bad idea. Unlike the hydrocarbons drilled by Reform's donors, Dorries's body obeys the laws of physics perfectly, misses everyone and lands mostly on Widdecombe.

During the ensuing melee, a Honda Jazz drives into the car park and proceeds to brake suddenly across two disabled bays. "Stop here, mam." Darren Grimes's eager pink head protrudes from the passenger window. "Guys, when were you going to tell me that this was happening? You know I only live around the corner."

Goodwin underlines something three times. ◆

Arguments

Olesya Khromeychuk

Diary: Kyiv's theatre of war



I was lucky to get the last ticket for a show at one of Kyiv's best-known theatres. My seat was in the back, next to the mixing desk. The technician looked a little squashed: the row I was in seemed to have been added to meet demand. Much of Ukrainian theatre plays to full houses these days.

With temperatures of -15°C outside and constant blackouts, courtesy of Russia's relentless bombardment of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, I hesitated before surrendering my coat. "I think you should keep your scarf," said the woman in the cloakroom, clearly more experienced in Ukrainian wartime winters than I was.

The play tackled questions that preoccupy women the world over: the female body, gender-based violence, the struggle for equality. The all-female cast, the staging, even the audience, made up largely of young women, could easily be imagined in London, Paris or New York. Yet several things made the experience unmistakably Ukrainian.

Before the performance began, a recorded voice calmly explained what to do in the event of an air raid alert. Such alerts are frequent across the country and, in Kyiv, can sound several times a day and throughout most nights. Ukrainian theatregoers are as accustomed to these pre-show instructions as audiences elsewhere are used to being asked to switch their phones to silent.

The next reminder came through the play itself, which was titled *Misiachni* (Period). Based on verbatim testimonies, it brought together different experiences of womanhood, all bearing the mark of the war. One woman discovered she was pregnant at the same time as learning that her husband was missing in action. Another posted revealing photographs on social media to raise money for army equipment. Whether the stories touched on death, harassment and sexual violence, or birth, intimacy and pleasure, they also spoke of war. The playwright, Alina Sarnatska, is herself a veteran of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The play drew on the work of feminist authors including Rebecca Solnit, Virginie Despentes and Solomiia Pavlychko. That, too, was a reminder that this show was not in London, Paris or New York. In those cities, most theatregoers would have heard of the first two names; Pavlychko, a Ukrainian literary scholar, philosopher and feminist theorist, is unlikely to feature in a script not written by a Ukrainian. And that is a pity because, like many thinkers from the "margins" of old empires, her writing brings freshness to familiar debates.

This points to a broader problem. Although Russia's latest wave of imperial violence against the people and culture of Ukraine is failing, my country's cultural heritage remains largely unknown beyond its borders. That is true not only of the classics, but also of work produced despite the war, and, in many cases, because of it.

Embracing an unfamiliar culture demands curiosity, skill and funding. Yet how many western universities teach Ukrainian, offering readers the chance to encounter its literature in the original? How many publishers take on the unprofitable task of translating a text few yet recognise? And how many theatres risk programming an unknown company from a country that, for many, appears on the cultural map only because of the war?

The problem is reinforced by a self-fulfilling prophecy: what is staged, published and promoted is what is conventionally regarded as "great culture". The result is that Russian cultural products remain firmly entrenched on western stages, in bookshops and in the collective imagination. In the fifth year of Russia's full-scale war, and the 13th since it began its aggression against Ukraine, on any given day in London I can choose between opera, ballet and theatre based on Russian literature, or Russian music played in major concert halls. Yet if I were to ask my fellow Londoners to name a single cultural figure of Ukrainian origin, how many could do so?

Since 2022, Russia has killed at least 262 Ukrainian culture makers. Every time I cite this figure, I check the dedicated website that documents these deaths, and each time the number has increased.

"The purges and centuries of unimaginable pressure are why you don't often hear about great Ukrainian literature, theatre and art," wrote the Ukrainian author Victoria Amelina in spring 2022. "When you look at the map of Europe, you see Dante here and Shakespeare [there], but only a vast gap where Ukrainian culture should have been to make Europe whole and safe." In July 2023, Amelina was killed by a Russian missile strike on a restaurant. She is one of the names on that database.

Culture is about security. For Russia—and other authoritarian states—it can serve as a weapon of war. For Ukrainians—and others standing up to neo-imperial aggression—it is a tool of resistance. And for those of us who are not yet caught up in conflict, the safety and integrity of our societies depend to a large extent on whether we allow cultural erasure to persist.

The show I saw in Kyiv ended with a well-deserved standing ovation. The actors paused the applause to remind the audience to stop by a collection box for the Armed Forces of Ukraine on their way out. That evening, the performance was not interrupted by an air raid. ♦

Olesya Khromeychuk *is a historian, writer and director of the Ukrainian Institute London*

Make May **Purple**



Help **Make May Purple** support stroke survivors like Vicki.

Every day in May, another 240 people will face the life-changing impact of a stroke.

At just 20 years old, Vicki's life took a devastating turn. Full of energy, optimism and a passion for animals, she was pursuing her dream career with horses when a stroke changed everything.

Sharing her experiences has been a big part of moving forward in her stroke recovery journey. In April 2025, Vicki and her best friend Sarah successfully tackled a half marathon in aid of the Stroke Association, raising a whopping **£2,290 for the charity**.

Vicki says '**The Stroke Association's Stroke Support Helpline was such a huge support for me and my family**. When I was panicking or worried, there was always someone to reassure us or signpost at the other end of the phone. They made me and my family feel like we were supported and not alone.'

Feeling inspired?

This Stroke Awareness Month, let's **Make May Purple.** Start your fundraiser today and together we can help more people find strength through support.

Visit **stroke.org.uk/SAM**

Scan for more information

Stroke Association

Finding **strength** through **support**

© Stroke Association 2026
Stroke Association is registered as a charity in England and Wales (No 211015) and in Scotland (SC037789).
Also registered in the Isle of Man (No. 945) and Jersey (No. 221), and operating as a charity in Northern Ireland.



© GIBSONKOCHANEK

COVER STORY

THE NEW GILDED AGE

The world is once again run by men with immense wealth, writes **David Aaronovitch.** *We should be frightened of their unaccountable power*

The final days of June last year were a wonderful time for vicarious lovers of bling. On the 22nd, the third season of Julian Fellowes's lavish TV series, *The Gilded Age*, dropped on HBO. Just days later, viewers could enjoy what they were allowed to see of the wedding of Amazon tycoon Jeff Bezos to Lauren Sánchez—an affair which occupied a large slice of central Venice, commandeering just about all the smart hotels and prebooking all the water taxis.

For those who don't know, *The Gilded Age* is a fictionalised representation of New York high society in the era of the "robber barons". Its menfolk are disguised versions of the industrial moguls of the late 19th century and its women are their fabulously dressed wives and daughters—though there's the occasional butler and secretary to leaven the glitz. A reviewer for the *Guardian* wrote that: "To watch it is to sink into a comfortable fugue and think mostly about the hats."

The first series had contained a plot line taken from history. In 1883 Alva Vanderbilt, the wife of the railroad magnate William, threw a costume ball, ostensibly for her six-year-old daughter Consuelo, but in fact to announce her flamboyant entry into best society.

A contemporary report in the daily *New York World* estimated that the whole shebang had cost $240,000—including $11,000 on flowers, $65,000 on champagne and refreshments, $4,000 on hairdressers and $156,000 on costumes—the equivalent in today's money of $7m. The next day's *New York Times* told how the Vanderbilts' home on Fifth Avenue "was like a garden in a tropical forest. The walls were nowhere to be seen, but in their place an impenetrable thicket of fern above fern and palm above palm, while from the branches of the palms hung a profusion of lovely orchids, displaying a rich variety of colour and almost endless variation of fantastic forms".

Mrs Vanderbilt herself had been dressed as a "Venetian princess" (an anachronism, since Venice didn't have princesses at that time), in blue satin embroidered with gold and wearing a cap on which sat a miniature peacock made up of coloured jewels. Other guests came as Marie Antoinette, Joan of Arc and the goddess Diana (a cheaper option, one would have thought, unless furnished with a bow of actual burning gold).

In the real Venice in 2025, the island of San Giorgio Maggiore was sequestered for the Bezos-Sánchez ceremony, Matteo Bocelli sang for the couple and, over several days, themed parties (including a Gatsby party) were thrown for guests including the inevitable Oprah Winfrey and Leonardo DiCaprio, various Kardashians, Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner (briefly spared from the job of bringing peace to Gaza) and the longevity guru Peter Attia, who popped up the other week in those notorious files, swapping lewd emails with Jeffrey Epstein. "Pussy is, indeed, low carb. Still awaiting results on gluten content, though," he wrote. (Attia has since apologised for these comments, saying he "regret[s] putting myself in a position where emails, some of them embarrassing, tasteless, and indefensible, are now public".)

During the three-day party period, Sánchez reportedly wore 27 different outfits, from gowns through to a cocktail dress decorated with 175,000 crystals. Shades here, too, of the conspicuous consumption of the Gilded Age in which Mrs Vanderbilt's great rival, Mrs Astor, was once described as a "walking chandelier".

Sitting off the lagoon somewhere was the Bezos yacht, Koru. Though, as was pointed out to the journalist Evan Osnos by a yacht vendor, Koru isn't a yacht, it isn't a superyacht, it isn't even a megayacht, it's a 126-metre-long gigayacht. Alongside it would have been the world's largest "shadow yacht", Abeona, which boasts a helipad from which Sánchez, a trained pilot, likes to fly her helicopter.

The Gilded Age tycoons also liked to travel in sequestered style. In 1910 the coke and steel baron Henry Clay Frick bought a private railway carriage and decked it out for the modern equivalent of $3.1m, so that he could travel between his various residences and resorts. Like Bezos (who is believed to own a very expensive Picasso), Frick was an art lover who amassed a stupendous art collection including three Vermeers, a Bellini, a couple of Rembrandts and a Turner.

There was no way in which the Melania film could do anything but lose money. But profit was never the point

No one for their own sake needs a 126-metre yacht, a party costing $7m, Ivanka Trump at their nuptials, their own railroad carriage or a peacock headdress. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*, published in 1899, the economist Thorstein Veblen analysed the "conspicuous consumption" of the Gilded Age as being entirely concerned with status. Some subsequent economists argued that Veblen's interpretation had applied to the specific age in which it was published, not any subsequent era. But they never met Jeff Bezos.

Like the tech bros of 21st-century America, the magnates of the Gilded Age were both heroes and villains to their contemporaries. As the historian Charles Morris wrote, they "tapped into the national predilection for speed, the obsession with 'moving ahead', the tolerance for experimentalism, to create one of history's purest laboratories of creative destruction". To many of their compatriots, they represented the spirit of the nation.

Men like Frick, Andrew Carnegie, John D Rockefeller, Jay Gould and JP Morgan made prodigious money for themselves and created prodigious wealth for their country. In the years between the Civil War and the end of 19th century, national wealth had grown sixfold. The United States had become the world's greatest producer of steel and coal, wheat and cotton, surpassing the empires of Britain and Germany. Productivity had been raised by 250 per cent and the average working day reduced from 11 hours to nine-and-a-half—thanks to the work of labour unions rather than the moguls. Railroads crisscrossed the country.

The US innovated. But if life expectancy rose for the average American, so too did inequality. By the time Alva Vanderbilt put on her peacock cap, the richest 10 per cent owned more than 70 per

cent of the nation's property, but the poorest 40 per cent of the population owned none.

For middle-class Americans, experiencing the abundance that came with the industrial production of goods once made by hand and therefore far more expensive, the "robber barons" were heroes of the age. And they were barons in scale, writes the historian Jill Lepore: "There were big businesses: big banks, big railroads, Big Oil. US Steel, the first billion-dollar corporation, was formed in 1901 by consolidating more than two hundred companies in the iron and steel businesses."

Some see the second Gilded Age as having belonged to the financiers and moneymen of the era of globalisation, those whose hubris led to the crash of 2008 and their discrediting. But there's a better argument, I think, for believing that we're in it now and that it is the great US tech companies and their bosses who are a much nearer match for the Rockefellers and the Fricks.

Growth in the US, like most growth around the world, is much lower now, but it is powered by the "magnificent seven" tech companies—Amazon, Meta, Alphabet (formerly Google), Microsoft, Apple, Nvidia, Tesla—which have had the capital accumulation to invest hundreds of billions in the digital revolution. In the first half of 2025, over 90 per cent of US GDP growth was accounted for by investment in AI data centres and related technology. And some of their great leaders are the planet's richest men.

Like their Gilded Age predecessors, the tech magnates are not great believers in the virtues of competition. If they can squeeze it out or else buy it up, for the most part, they will. In the late 19th century, the big industrial companies acquired their competitors and then did deals with the other big companies. (see Phil Tinline, p25). "What a blessing it was," said Rockefeller, "that the idea of cooperation, with railroads, with telegraph lines, with steel companies, with oil companies, came in and prevailed."

Few tech bros spell it out as clearly as Palantir's Peter Thiel. In a book from 2014, written with venture capitalist Blake Masters, Thiel argued that successful capitalism required monopoly. Only a monopoly, which "owns its market, so it can set its own prices", he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, could avoid the waste of time and resources brought on by dealing with competitors. Then its leaders could "finance the ambitious research projects that firms locked in competition can't dream of" and usher in the next technological revolution.



No baci for Bezos: Venetians protested against the decadence and excess of the Amazon founder's wedding in their city

© AP PHOTO/ANTONIO CALANNI

Wealth is power, of course; but politics is more power. In 1892 the steel baron Andrew Carnegie and his colleague Henry Frick faced a strike at the steelworks in the town of Homestead, Pennsylvania. The issue was pay and part of the workforce was unionised.

When the works were successfully picketed, Frick employed 300 men from the Pinkerton detective agency, armed with Winchester rifles, to sail up the Monongahela river on a barge, take possession of the works and break the strike. Strikers, some armed, defeated the agents, though ten of them died in the process. The detectives withdrew and Frick then enlisted the help of the state's governor. He sent 8,000 armed state militiamen who accomplished in short order what the private detectives had failed to do. Lesson? For all your wealth, make sure the politicians are onside.

Forty years later, Franklin D Roosevelt, in the midst of a depression and campaigning for a second term in office, used a speech to look back at that period when, "privileged princes of these new economic dynasties, thirsting for power, reached out for control over government itself…" Meanwhile, "Throughout the nation, opportunity was limited by monopoly. Individual initiative was crushed in the cogs of a great machine. The field open for free business was more and more restricted. Private enterprise, indeed, became too private. It became privileged enterprise, not free enterprise."

In January last year, in the privileged front rows at Donald Trump's indoor inauguration, sat the titans of tech: Bezos of Amazon and the space company Blue Origin, Elon Musk of Tesla, X and SpaceX, Mark Zuckerberg of Meta, Tim Cook of Apple and Sunder Pichai of Google/Alphabet. All except Musk's firms had donated to the cost of the celebrations.

The arrangement marked the victory of transactionalism over service, just as it had in the Gilded Age—a victory that the tech bros had apparently prepared for. Bezos bought the *Washington Post* in 2013, insisting that he would provide the investment to allow the newspaper to flourish as a strong independent media platform. But in 2024, with a Trump victory looking likely, Bezos personally pulled the *Post*'s editorial endorsement of Trump's Democratic opponent, Kamala Harris.

Weeks after the election, in an interview, Bezos said he had discovered a Trump who was "calmer" than in 2016 and who had "grown a lot". An accommodation had been reached. Bezos had already agreed that Amazon should pay $40m for the rights to a "documentary" about 20 days in the life of Melania Trump. She is rumoured to have received $28m personally, while $35m was earmarked for publicity.

There was no earthly way in which the Melania film—a vacuous blingfest from which nothing could be learned about the First Lady from above the ankles—could do anything but lose money. It was as cold as marble and as impenetrable. But that was never the point. The film was directed by Brett Ratner, who was accused of sexual misconduct in 2017 (allegations he has always denied) and who, on the day *Melania* was released, popped up in the Epstein files in a photo where he and Jeffrey sit draped around two much younger women, whose faces have been redacted.



Business and technology leaders, including Mark Zuckerberg, joined the Trumps for dinner at the White House in September 2025

Shortly after, he told Fox News that he never had a personal relationship with Epstein, and that one of the women he is pictured with was his fiancée at the time.

By agreeing to the documentary, Bezos had done the necessary. Meanwhile, days before the inauguration it was seemingly Mark Zuckerberg's turn to kiss the ring. The independent factcheckers that Meta had been using to combat disinformation on its platforms were being fired. Suddenly Zuckerberg found he agreed with Trump and other Republicans that the factcheckers had been "politically biased".

The relationship between Elon Musk and Trump had become far more direct. In the 2024 election cycle, Musk donated around $290m, mostly through his own fundraising "super PAC", to support Trump. Then he poured more than $20m into an unsuccessful campaign to prevent a Democrat being elected to the Wisconsin supreme court. After falling out with Trump over the Doge costcutting fiasco, Musk said he would end his political donations, only to ramp them up again at the end of 2025. Today, he's spending once more—including a donation of $10m to back a Republican in November's Kentucky Senate race.

Peter Thiel, who supported Trump as far back as 2016, put his money into the campaign to get his protégé JD Vance elected to the Senate in 2022, and then was instrumental in persuading Trump to nominate Vance as his running mate. As of today, Vance is favourite to succeed Trump as the Republican presidential candidate in 2028.

All four of these tycoons benefit from large government contracts. In this White House—which is run by a man whose family have, since his re-election, apparently acquired around $2bn in personal gifts, deals, legal settlements and crypto, according to the Center for American Progress thinktank— government helps fund their most cherished and expensive products. In April 2025, for example, Palantir signed a contract to help the ICE agency to create a platform to track the movement of migrants in real time. Thiel has also won a $795m contract to provide the Department of Defense (sorry, Department of War) with AI software. Bezos's Blue Origin also has contracts with the federal government.

Then there's the tax. For most of the last decade, Amazon has posted huge profits while paying little tax. In 2022, as the US looked to fund a post-Covid-19 programme, the Biden administration imposed a new minimum corporate tax of 15 per cent. This was reversed in the first few months of last year, with companies now being able to offset tax against investment in one year, rather than spread out over several. This had the effect of reducing Amazon's corporate tax bill for 2025 from $9bn to $1.2bn (Amazon argues that over time this will even out). On income, Amazon's pretax profit in the US rose by 44 per cent, while its federal and state income tax fell by more than half. Alphabet saw its pretax domestic profit rise by 33 per cent while its income tax liability declined by 37 per cent.

Since Trump's re-election, his family have apparently acquired around $2bn in personal gifts, deals and more

The companies, of course, argue that this is all a huge incentive to invest more in the coming generation of tech. In the current year, Amazon plans $200bn of capital investment in AI and robotics, but also announced that it was laying off 16,000 existing employees.

The recently late Tom Lehrer took his songs out of copyright because he didn't feel he needed the money. One of my favourites is "The Old Dope Peddler", part of which runs:

> It's the old dope peddler
> Doing well by doing good
> He gives the kids free samples
> Because he knows full well
> That today's young innocent faces
> Will be tomorrow's clientele

The tycoons of the first Gilded Age claimed that life was better for almost everyone thanks to their labours. Carnegie summed it up in his 1889 essay *The Gospel of Wealth*: "Today... the poor enjoy what the rich could not before afford. What were the luxuries have become the necessaries of life. The laborer has now more comforts than the farmer had a few generations ago. The farmer has more luxuries than the landlord had and is more richly clad and better housed. The landlord has books and pictures rarer and appointments more artistic than the King could then obtain."

Back in the noughties, the motto at the top of every Google masthead was "Don't be evil". The idea conveyed was that of my old school motto "Rather of Use Than Fame"—the company was about public utility, not about profit or growth. If the public benefited from what it did, then those things would follow.

Tech innovators have certainly included genuinely socially concerned people in their ranks. Sebastian Mallaby's new book about DeepMind's British founder, Demis Hassabis, *The Infinity Machine*, tells readers that Hassabis, "unlike his rivals", aims not for "wealth and power but scientific enlightenment".

But DeepMind was bought by Google in 2014, and by 2018, the Google motto had been dropped. It is hard to see in Tesla's handling of whistleblowers, Amazon's treatment of its warehouse staff, Thiel's contract with ICE and just about everyone's relentless algorithmic imperialism, a concern by these companies or their bosses for other human beings.

At the end of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator says of the wealthy characters, the Buchanans, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money... and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

In the 1880s, Henry Frick and some friends founded a hunting and fishing club in the hills, 20 miles above the steel town of Johnstown in Pennsylvania. Near the club was a lake created by a nearby earth dam–the largest such dam in the world. Despite warnings, the club neglected repairs to the dam and even lowered it by almost a metre.

In May 1889, after heavy rains, the dam gave way. The result was a flood in which more than 2,200 people were killed in and around Johnstown. The plutocrats responsible paid out substantial sums in flood relief and reconstruction and acted

© ALAMY

to hush up their part in the disaster. None of them ever spoke in public about it and their carelessness went unpunished.

The plutocrats of the modern era haven't been so careless or culpable, but their actions have had major social consequences. When Jeff Bezos bought the *Washington Post* in 2013, like most newspapers in the days before online subscription models, it had been losing money. He told *Post* legend Bob Woodward that he had "finally concluded that I could provide runway—financial runway—because I don't think you can keep shrinking the business. You can be profitable and shrinking. And that's a survival strategy, but it ultimately leads to irrelevance, at best. And, at worst, it leads to extinction".

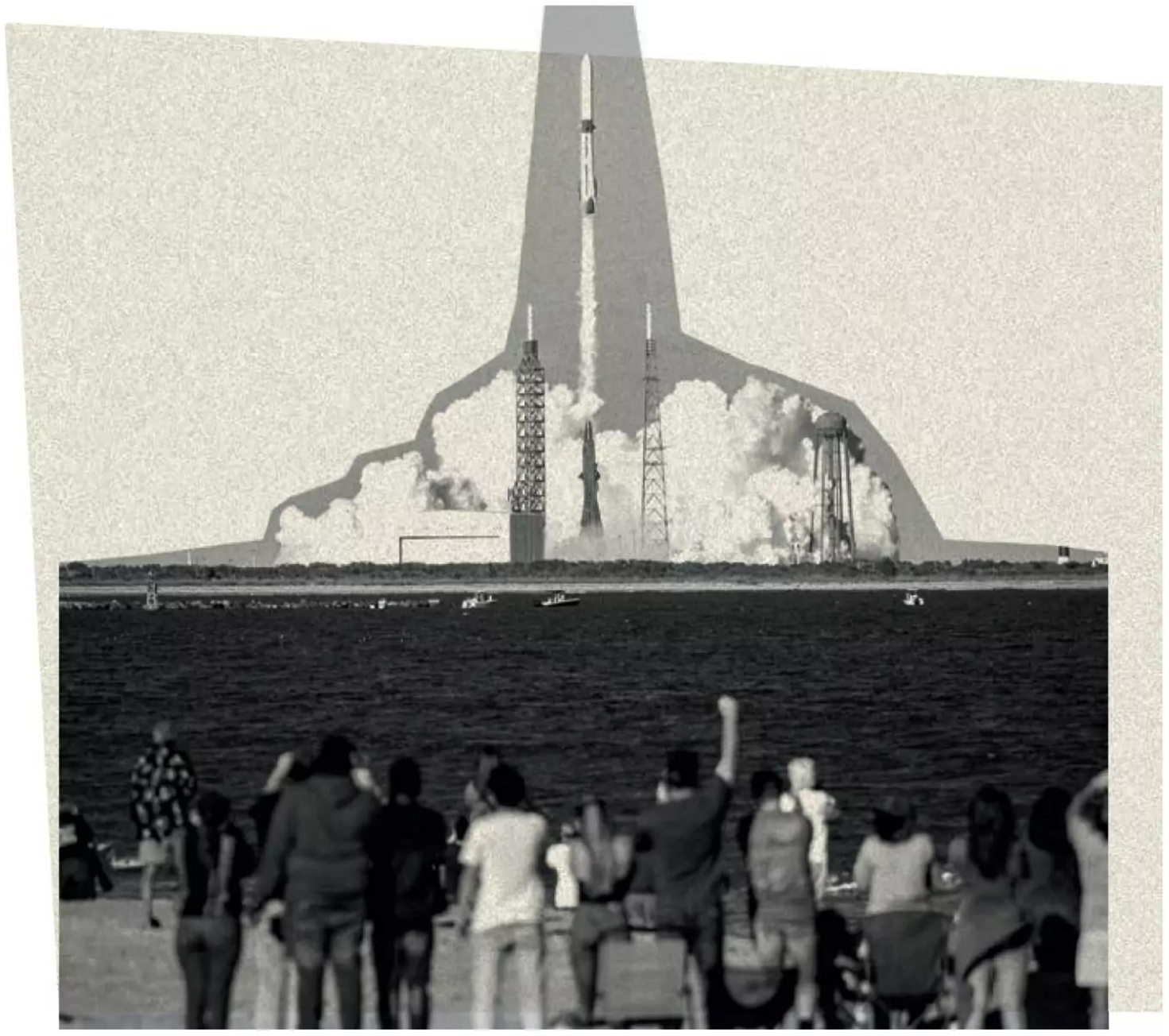
He was as good as his word. Until, that is, the *Post* began to get in the way of other business. In February 2025 came Bezos's second big intervention in the editorial process when he decreed that "every day" the paper would write "in support and defence of two pillars: personal liberties and free markets... viewpoints opposing those pillars will be left to be published by others". Given that what constituted defence and support might be a matter of opinion, this felt to some like a clear guide towards excluding "progressive" views.

The *Post* lost an estimated 200,000 subscribers when the Harris endorsement was shelved. By the time the Bezos-funded *Melania* was premiered in January, the paper was losing $100m a year and swingeing cuts were announced to its budget: out went the books section, the sports section and over half the foreign correspondents, including the one in Kyiv. All told, just under half the paper's editorial staff were fired. In Bezos's words, it was a survival strategy but one which looks likely to "lead to extinction". It was, said former *Post* editor Marty Baron, a "case study in near-instant, self-inflicted brand destruction". David Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker* magazine, pointed out the effect on communities of binning sports coverage. Sports, he said, are a glue that hold people together.

Yet, as we know, Bezos could have funded a far softer process for the *Post*, had he wished. Thirteen years into his ownership, how much does he really care about the paper and those working for it?

In mid-February, Mark Zuckerberg was in court to defend Meta against the charge that his company had tried to attract young users, resulting in them being damaged by inappropriate content. Meta had already put in place a bar to under-13s accessing platforms and maintains that it has taken action to protect children, but a 2019 email showed Zuckerberg questioning these "unenforced" restrictions. In court, Zuckerberg said that Meta had got better at identifying underage users since then, and expressed regret that it had taken the company so long to do so. He also claimed that some had lied about their ages. But again, one cannot help but ask: how much does he really care about the consequences, for some users, of his firm's practices?

But for apparent carelessness no tech bro can match Musk. In late 2022, he purchased one of the world's leading platforms for information exchange, renamed it X and furnished it with an algorithm that apparently privileges his own posts and those of people he favours; on it, he personally promotes divisive and sometimes incendiary material. He doesn't seem to worry in any way about the accuracy of that material. And in January 2026 action was taken in Europe and elsewhere against his Grok AI platform, which was being used to create sexualised images based on real people, including children. Somewhat belatedly, Musk had the practice banned.



© ALAMY

Blue Origin's New Glenn rocket, which has launched Nasa satellites towards Mars, is key to US plans for another moon landing

However, even the man who has everything doesn't have *everything*. He still wakes in the middle of the night, knowing he'll die. He may be able to look down from his private jet and see humanity as Harry Lime saw it from the Ferris wheel in Vienna, as just so many ants, but he was once himself an ant. For the most part denied the consolation of a belief in the afterlife, the tycoon of either Gilded Age has some notion of his human precarity.

Some ultrarich people have had themselves frozen after death in the hope of full resurrection. Some, like Peter Thiel, have invested in properties in New Zealand, an Anglophone country that combines gentleness and huge distance from centres of insurrection or atomic war, as an apparent hedge against the apoc-

alypse. Musk has also fathered an estimated 14 children by four different mothers in an effort to tackle what he sees as "underpopulation"—and perhaps to ensure his eternality.

Musk and Bezos have both invested in space exploration, in Musk's case planning to set up whole new Elonian civilisations on other planets. It speaks to a combination of monstrous ego and crushing anxiety.

There has always been much to be anxious about. In 1883, five months after Alva Vanderbilt had drowned her guests Marie Antoinette and Diana in champagne, a Massachusetts textile worker called Thomas O'Donnell gave testimony before the US Senate Committee on Education and Labor regarding conditions for working people.

"There are so many men in the city to work, and whoever has a boy can have work, and whoever has no boy stands no chance," O'Donnell told the senators. "That is what leaves me in poor circumstances. Our children, of course, are very often sickly from one cause or another, on account of not having sufficient clothes, or shoes, or food, or something... My wife never did work in a mill, and that leaves me to provide for the whole family. I have two children.

"And another thing that helped to keep me down: a year ago this month I buried the oldest boy we had, and that brings things very expensive on a poor man. For instance, it will cost there, to bury a body, about $100..."

Q. How much money have you had within three months?

A. I have had about $16 inside of three months.

Q. Is that all you have had within the last three months to live on?

A. Yes, $16."

Andrew Carnegie recognised the dangers. In "The Gospel of Wealth" he wrote: "The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship."

True, unparalleled wealth had been created for the country, but the price to be paid in social cohesion was great, Carnegie allowed. "We assemble thousands of operatives in the factory, in the mine, and in the counting-house, of whom the employer can know little or nothing, and to whom he is little better than a myth. All intercourse between them is at an end. Rigid castes are formed, and, as usual, mutual ignorance breeds mutual distrust. Each caste is without sympathy with the other, and ready to credit anything disparaging in regard to it... Human society loses homogeneity."

Three years later, during the Homestead strike, Henry Frick was nearly killed when an anarchist, Alexander Berkman, forced his way into the magnate's Pittsburgh office, shooting him twice in the neck and stabbing him several times. Carnegie's fears were being realised.

Suddenly, pictures of Luigi Mangione, who has been charged with the murder of United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson, come to mind. For his 2025 book on the super-rich, *The Have and Have-Yachts*, Evan Osnos spoke to the founder of LinkedIn, Reid Hoffman, about the possibility of a backlash against Silicon Valley if AI leads to job losses. "I've heard this thing from a bunch of people," said Hoffman, "Is the country going to turn against the wealthy? Is it going to turn against technological innovation? Is it going to turn into civil disorder?" As Osnos pointed out, in the years since 1990 the number of billionaires in the US had increased from 66 to more than 800, while the median hourly wage had risen by just 20 per cent.

For Henry Ford, at the height of his fortune after the First World War, the spectre that kept him awake at night was communism and, behind communism, the Jews. He spent a lot of money trying to convince Americans of a Judaic plot. For Peter Thiel, on the other hand, writing in 2009, what disturbed his slumbers was the realisation that capitalism and liberal democracy were antagonists. In fact, he wrote, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." Feminised democracy was antagonistic to the Ayn Randian superhero of the tech revolution. In that battle, Thiel was for freedom.

In the first Gilded Age, much of the anger around wage cutting was deflected away from tycoons and onto immigrants

Andrew Carnegie's answer to the threat to social cohesion posed by his own success was massive philanthropy. He gave away around 90 per cent of his own fortune and built more than 2,500 libraries all over the world. "The man who dies thus rich," he wrote, "dies disgraced." Of today's billionaires, Bill Gates—who previously knew Epstein, something he has said he regrets—has given away up to 40 per cent of his wealth, and the investor Warren Buffett has pledged 99 per cent. Bezos has promised to give away most of his fortune too. The others, not so much. Their money is for space, or AI, or gigayachts, or getting the right people elected.

Then there's distraction. In the first Gilded Age, much of the anger around wage cutting was deflected away from the tycoons and onto immigrants, in particular the Chinese. In 1879, after virulent populist campaigns, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was finally signed into law in 1882, banning all Chinese immigration for 10 years.

For the past two years, Thiel—the political philosopher among the tech bros—has been giving a series of lectures warning of the coming of the antichrist, whose interests turn out to be embodied in supranational institutions like the EU, which might seek through regulation to hold back the march of technological progress.

Thiel's ideas appear to have come, at least in part, from two different sources. One is the 20th-century German jurist Carl Schmitt, whose cardinal concept was that "the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy". Once you have discerned this, any action taken to help a friend or thwart an enemy becomes morally justifiable. This led Schmitt to justify Hitler's extrajudicial murders during the Night of the Long Knives in 1934. In its most acute form, it is a specific repudiation of the rule of law over political leaders.

The second was a French literary scholar-turned-"theological anthropologist" called René Girard, who taught Thiel



© ALAMY

Little Saint James (pictured) and Great Saint James, the Caribbean islands owned by Epstein until his death in 2019, have since been sold for $60m

at Stanford in the early 1980s. Girard was a Catholic convert and pessimist who believed human beings were animated by "mimesis"— an Ancient Greek term interpreted by Girard as the desire to have what the other possessed. Given this deplorable characteristic, the only way in which societies can cohere is by creating a "scapegoat" for everyone to blame and cast out.

In our moment, it isn't hard to see who the scapegoat is: Thiel recently delivered a series of lectures in Cambridge at the invitation of the theologian James Orr, recently appointed policy adviser to the anti-immigration party Reform UK. Over on X, Elon Musk predicts civil war in Europe as a result of immigration, and attempts to boost the prospects of far-right parties such as the Alternative for Germany and far-right activists like Tommy Robinson. Here, the Monaco-based tax exile Jim Ratcliffe talks of Britain being "colonised".

You could argue that we hardly need distraction, when we are so adept at distracting ourselves. The Epstein scandal tells us a lot about the networking and loose morality of a section of the elite. Even if the files don't yet show other powerful men participating in his pre-2008 sexual abuse of girls and young women, they certainly indicate both that many had knowledge of and connived in his exploitation of young women, and that they were utterly indifferent to those women as people.

The sexual element in the case of Epstein provides an easily comprehended focus for our dislike of wealthy elites. It's repulsive, but if it's the structure of unaccountable power that we're worried about, Epstein barely touches that. Our own lives and our children's futures are being shaped by decisions made and bartered by stratospherically rich and powerful men, who these days think nothing of flattering, some might even say bribing, their way to contracts and favourable regulation. The simultaneous release of the Melania film and the Epstein files reduced the movie to a footnote and foregrounded the sexual abuse, but it's the former that tells us more about the true nature of the elite of the Second Gilded Age.

The robber barons of the first Gilded Age were reined in, eventually. The Pendleton Act, preventing the effective selling of public offices to political cronies, was passed in 1883, the same year as Alva's peacock cap graced her preposterous party. Over the next 40 years, a series of regulatory acts came into effect in the US. The unaccountable power of the plutocrats was to some degree curbed.

Now the question raised for us, particularly in Europe, is how to establish some accountability so that the activities of the US tech plutocrats suit our notions of how societies should function, not those of Elon Musk, Peter Thiel or Jeff Bezos. That battle is just beginning.We cannot afford that "comfortable fugue". ◆

David Aaronovitch *is a journalist, author and broadcaster*

CAPITALISM

RETURN OF THE TRUSTBUSTERS

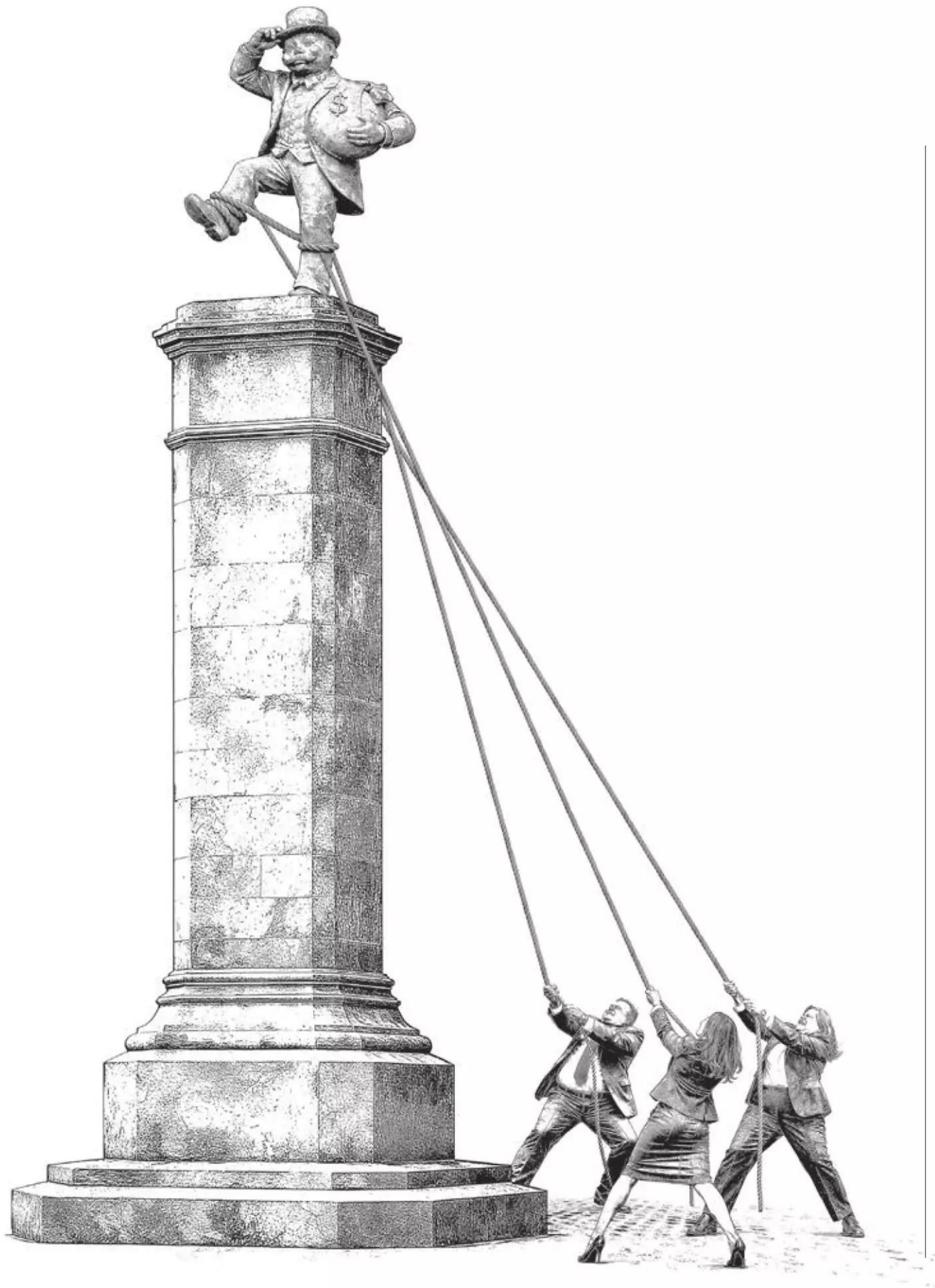


ILLUSTRATION BY GREGORI SAAVEDRA

A century ago, Americans broke up the empires of industrial robber barons. Now, anti-monopolists want to do the same again—this time, to tech

by
PHIL TINLINE

Donald Trump is flailing, and no wonder. He was not elected to shoot nurses or raise healthcare costs for ordinary Americans while cutting taxes for billionaires. Yet the Democratic party's elderly, well-heeled high command seems unable to land a blow. They have no idea what to do, because they have no ideas—no alternative to Trump's basic populist charm.

Trump twice rode to the presidency partly by preying on Americans' sense of economic discontent and general disempowerment. Appealing to racists was not enough on its own. As research by the Progressive Policy Institute after the 2024 election identified, working-class voters did not necessarily think Trump

was a saviour with all the answers. But, faced with a political mainstream that "can't or won't fix things", it seemed worth rolling the dice on a leader who was ready to "shake things up".

That's one reason Zohran Mamdani's unlikely election as mayor of New York City has generated such excitement. Here is a way of doing politics which starts from that same recognition that many ordinary Americans feel thoroughly exploited—but without inviting them to blame migrants. And it's why two of his new appointments caught the eye: former Federal Trade Commission (FTC) chair Lina Khan, hired as co-chair of his transition team, and Samuel Levine, now commissioner of the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection in the city. Between them they embody a very American movement that's as much a challenge to establishment Democrats as it is to Republicans.

The anti-monopolists—sometimes known as the New Brandeisians, after former Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis—contend that the country's basic problem is the concentration of private power. That across many sectors of the American economy, a few businesses dominate the market, pushing prices up and wages down, stifling innovation and squashing or buying smaller businesses (and politicians) that stand in their way. They want to use the power of the federal government to rein in how big corporations exploit this power and, if need be, to break them up.

It's a curious movement, at once egalitarian and pro-free market, with supporters on both sides of the aisle. It's deeply rooted in American ideals, yet it's the sworn foe of economic orthodoxy, which it argues has been leading the country down a disastrous path for decades. Under Joe Biden, amid rising concern about concentration in general and the rising power of Big Tech in particular, this movement achieved a startling prominence—and provoked ferocious opposition. It may yet offer the Democrats the big new idea with broad appeal they need to galvanise mass support, seize the political initiative from Trump and—who knows?—perhaps even save America.

The movement's founding father is a punchy former business journalist from Miami named Barry Lynn, who prides himself on getting up the noses of the orthodoxy's pooh-bahs. In 1999, he was covering the brave new world of globalisation when an earthquake struck Taiwan. "Within a couple of days," he told me, "all these factories in California and Texas and China and Japan and Germany shut down." They were all reliant, it turned out, on a single Taiwanese semiconductor.



© ALAMY

Lina Khan speaks at the US Capitol as chair of the Federal Trade Commission in June 2023

This, Lynn remembers, "was like a window opening". The earthquake exposed the shaky foundations of a dominant way of thinking. Globalisation's great boast was that it maximised efficiency. But corporations were being allowed to push this to the point of destruction, crashing through old government guardrails, growing as big and as powerful as they liked.

Lynn began to excavate the roots of this ideology in the economic arguments of the 1970s and in particular the work of one prominent conservative legal scholar. Robert Bork came to prominence during Watergate, when he proved himself willing to do Richard Nixon's bidding and fire a special prosecutor after his more squeamish colleagues refused. His next contribution cast an even longer shadow. In 1978, shortly after leaving government, Bork published an influential book on business law which argued that what really mattered in competition policy was short-term effects on consumer prices.

This thinking came to dominate under Ronald Reagan, unleashing a carnival of corporate mergers. By the 2000s, as the long boom continued, it seemed common sense. But Lynn thought that it was nothing of the kind: "Our whole society," he says, had "embraced an ideology that blinded us to the concentration of power." And Bork's ideas had overthrown a very different approach, which had shaped America for much of the 20th century.

Brandeis ended up on the Supreme Court, but was born the son of an immigrant grain merchant in 1856, in Louisville, Kentucky. Louisville embodied America's decentralised economy—the kind of place where people like the elder Mr Brandeis could thrive. But Louis entered legal practice in the Gilded Age, as "robber barons" like the banking and railroad tycoon JP Morgan and the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie were hard at work concentrating economic power in ways the United States had never seen, corralling smaller firms into huge "trusts". They grew powerful enough to coerce governments.

Brandeis joined the burgeoning "antitrust" movement, which fought for decades to redress the balance. This triggered a series of titanic battles between public and private power. The "trustbuster", President Theodore Roosevelt, summoned the guts to block the untouchable JP Morgan from consolidating the western railroads. It took two full trials and a 5-4 Supreme Court ruling, but Roosevelt won—showing that the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act, widely thought to be toothless, could bite.

Meanwhile, the fearless investigative journalist Ida Tarbell faced down threats in order to expose the oil baron John D Rockefeller, the man who had ruined her father. The "Mephistopheles of Cleveland" had flouted laws and strongarmed smaller businesses to sell up to his huge trust, Standard Oil, on pain of being crushed by ferocious price wars if they refused. Tarbell's reports outraged the nation and gave Roosevelt an opening to take on Standard Oil. Investigations, revelations and, finally, federal and state lawsuits followed. At trial, the government called 444 witnesses. The battle took years, but finally in 1911, the Supreme Court approved the breakup of Rockefeller's vast, impregnable trust into more than 30 smaller companies, affirming that the purpose of the Sherman Act was to stop concentrated corporate power instigating a new form of slavery.

Brandeis, making his name as the "people's attorney", took on JP Morgan's New Haven Railroad. For this, he was widely mocked—until it turned out that the trust was cutting corners, causing people to be killed. An investigation revealed that it was also committing fraud. When the Justice Department threatened an antitrust suit, the New Haven broke itself up. In the presidential race of 1912, Brandeis shaped Woodrow Wilson's call to break up monopolies, part of his winning platform. He was too controversial to appoint to cabinet, but played a key role in the creation of the FTC. This was charged with enforcing toughened-up antitrust laws, like the 1914 Clayton Act, which was designed both to stop huge mergers and stamp out the price discrimination used by big companies to favour each other and squeeze out their smaller rivals. And so, from the 1930s to the 1970s, tough anti-monopoly enforcement would play its part in the rise of everyday Americans to once unimaginable prosperity.

It was this interventionist model of antitrust that Bork worked so hard to overturn in the 1970s, abandoning the idea of restraining private power, because to do so stopped businesses maximising their efficiency. And it's that old Brandeisian stance towards private power and democracy that, by overturning Borkism, the New Brandeisians have been striving to recover.

The catalyst was the 2008 crash. Wall Street banks, bloated by mergers, were taking ever-greater risks while regulators looked on—until, at last, the banks generated their very own earthquake. Huge bailouts rescued those deemed "too big to fail", but not millions of homeowners at risk of foreclosure. As a young Democratic Congressional staffer, Matt Stoller took phone calls from desperate constituents—and started asking why, in response to a crash caused by a concentration of wealth and power, America's politicians were "pushing even more wealth and power into the hands of the same people that caused it". He came across Lynn's 2010 book *Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction*. Meanwhile, Khan started working with Lynn on market consolidation at the New America Foundation thinktank.

Jonathan Kanter was an established lawyer who'd grown up among small businesspeople in Queens—he's still "a big believer in the American dream", he tells me. But by 2008, he had watched it recede out of too many people's reach. He was disillusioned with the unrestrained rise of Big Tech and the way the legal world's conception of antitrust had become a "very insular bubble built on assumptions about economic models", with little relation to reality. He started talking to Stoller, then Lynn and Khan.

Initially, Kanter remembers, this was a movement with so few members that "you could count them on two hands". When they buttonholed people in Washington about monopoly, "there was a lot of eyerolling... in polite company, it was improper to suggest that that system was broken". Once they "got out of that bubble", however, "it was not a hard sell". From there, the group's rise was remarkably swift.

By 2008, Kanter had watched the American dream recede out of too many people's reach

Under Obama, the tech companies—still seen as the bringers of a bright new future—were largely allowed to buy up their challengers, as Facebook did with Instagram in 2012, then WhatsApp in 2014. But from 2016, Silicon Valley's sunny image began to change. Senator Elizabeth Warren, who had come to prominence attacking the finance sector over the crash, was looking to broaden her campaign. Lynn was invited to meet her, and took Kanter and Khan.

That led to Warren denouncing the grip of giant corporations on everything from drugstores and groceries to beef production, squeezing the life out of the small-business middle class. During the presidential election campaign, even Trump made similar arguments. A few days after his first inauguration in 2017, Khan—by now at Yale Law School—published an incendiary essay called "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox", which contended that Bork's whole approach was obsolete. Amazon's low prices were not a signal that competition was working, she wrote. They were a means of establishing dominance.

That March, at a conference at the University of Chicago, the antitrust establishment came up against the anti-monopolists for the first time; it marked, Stoller remembers, "the breakdown of the consensus". When the EU fined Google $2.7bn for abuse of its market dominance, that breakdown burst into public view. Lynn lauded the ruling on New America's website, which outraged one of the thinktank's donors, Eric Schmidt, who was also executive chairman of Google's parent company. Amid the ensuing row, for reasons that were contested, Lynn was fired—and he and his team, Stoller among them, set up a new institute.

In 2019 Stoller published *Goliath: The 100-Year War Between Monopoly Power and Democracy*, which had as its hero Wright Patman—a forgotten Congressman who once sought to impeach the interwar oligarch Andrew Mellon. By this time, a House subcommittee had launched an investigation, summoned the new Mellons of Silicon

Valley and started drafting new antitrust laws that might have broken up their companies. Big Tech launched an onslaught of lobbying and the bills fell. By then, however, Biden had won the 2020 election. The anti-monopolists' decade-long war on the orthodoxy seemed on the verge of a breakthrough.

Stoller assumed that under Biden, "the old guard would still be running things", though the anti-monopolists would perhaps "be heard a little bit". He did not expect Khan to be appointed to chair the FTC, nor Kanter to lead the Department of Justice's Antitrust Division. Legal scholar Tim Wu, an advocate of breaking up Facebook, became special assistant to the president for technology and competition policy.

In July 2021, Biden signed a broad executive order, cowritten by Wu, pushing federal agencies to tackle anti-competitive practices, saying "capitalism without competition" was "exploitation". The US Chambers of Commerce complained that this was the "politicization of antitrust enforcement". Which is a bit like complaining about the politicisation of government.

Kanter acted fast, assuming he only had one term to break the old orthodoxy. "We were taking an aircraft carrier," he says, "and trying to turn it around at the speed of a Ferrari." Accordingly, his method was not to wait for new laws but to enforce long-neglected old ones, underlining the anti-monopolists' goal of restoring the original antitrust tradition. His division set about enforcing the Clayton Act's century-old curbs on companies having directors on each other's boards, and secured a conviction in a criminal monopoly case using a section of the Sherman Act which had gone unenforced for 45 years. Filing a suit against Apple in 2024 (for making it difficult for users to switch from iPhones to competitors' smartphones), he invoked the justice department's work breaking up Standard Oil 12 decades earlier—a precedent he says he had "front of mind". His division blocked merger after merger, to the point where fewer were proposed. While all this met resistance, Kanter tells me that many in business privately agreed with his approach on the grounds that, "unless you're the monopolist, you don't like the monopolist".

His biggest test, however, was taking on Google, twice. He inherited a case which sprang from the House antitrust subcommittee's investigations, alleging the firm had monopolised the search engine and search advertising markets. As it finally headed to trial in 2023, Kanter reportedly encouraged government lawyers to emphasise that Google's scale was in itself a form of market power—an argument similar to Khan's critique of Amazon. The judge ruled that Google had indeed acted illegally; Kanter hailed this as only the second major win of its kind in half a century. Google is appealing. However, his team's call for Google to be compelled to sell its Chrome search engine was rejected.

Kanter launched a second case, challenging Google's advertising market practices. Like the first, he says, it "could and should have been brought ten years earlier". The government won again, though the ruling on remedies was another disappointment and again, Google is appealing. Nonetheless, Kanter says, it was "absolutely essential to demonstrate that these kinds of cases can be brought and they can be won, and that the decision in the past not to bring them was wrong."

Kanter's division worked closely with Khan's, revamping the guidelines on merger decisions, which had been left unchanged since 1982—two years before Mark Zuckerberg was born. Khan's FTC filed its own big, controversial cases against Big Tech. The most spectacular alleged that Facebook's purchases of Instagram and WhatsApp were anticompetitive. But when it finally came to trial last November, the judge ruled in Meta's favour. Khan's critics attribute this to unconvincing legal theory; her defenders say the case was started years too late and dragged on too long. Her FTC also tried to block acquisitions by both Meta and Microsoft, and lost both times.

Khan was attacked relentlessly. But this is in the nature of challenging an orthodoxy

Khan was attacked relentlessly throughout her time at the FTC. The *Wall Street Journal* had a go roughly once a fortnight. But this is in the nature of challenging an orthodoxy, and she insisted it was necessary to bring "hard cases" and risk defeat; over-caution "can lead to stagnation". A more activist approach deterred dubious mergers; even defeat could bring pressure to update the law. She sued Amazon for monopoly behaviour—albeit not in terms as radical as those of her student critique—with more success. The FTC secured $2.5bn in civil penalties and customer refunds and an order to make the terms of enrolment in Amazon Prime clear, and to cease making cancellation unnecessarily difficult. (Amazon neither admitted nor denied the allegations, and insists it followed the law.) In a statement reflecting on her tenure, she highlighted other wins: stopping manipulative practices towards consumers and workers, clamping down on illegal use of customer data and blocking mergers—not least one between two of America's biggest supermarkets.

The anti-monopolists' goal is undoubtedly to achieve lasting change—but how much of their Biden-era labour has survived the return of Trump? The president made more anti-monopolistic noise in his 2016 campaign than in 2024, but there was some hope that his administration would maintain the changes introduced in between.

David Dayen, a journalist who has been reporting on antitrust issues for many years, suggests there are a few people in the new administration who "are interested in a more aggressive, more populist push against private power", but concludes that such notions have been "swamped by big money". Kanter's successor, Gail Slater, who some hoped would continue the anti-monopolist turn as head of the FTC, has now gone. Before the 2024 election, future vice president JD Vance praised



© ALAMY

Jonathan Kanter appears before the US Senate during a hearing about his nomination as assistant attorney general, in 2021

Khan—but in office, he has backed her Big Tech foes.

When the FTC's case against Meta was defeated, there were relieved predictions that the anti-monopolist wave was ebbing. But the current FTC is appealing the Meta case, and Kanter claims there has been an underlying "tectonic shift": Trump's apparatchiks, he observes, "certainly don't sound like Bork, or at least not all of them".

But the most solid sign of a long-term change is that Kanter and Khan's merger guidelines are still operating, particularly at state level, where there remains serious appetite for the fight. The California Justice Department filed a case against Amazon a year before the federal authority; like Kanter and Kahn, the head of its antitrust division reportedly wants to enforce the antitrust laws as they were written. According to Dayen, the attorneys general of Minnesota and Colorado have indicated that they are ready to challenge a takeover of Warner Brothers Discovery, whether it is Netflix or Paramount that wins the fight to buy it.

Private litigators are pursuing more antitrust cases, drawing on the new guidelines and other precedents set under Biden. The Trump-appointed FTC dropped Khan's last-minute suit against Pepsi and Walmart over alleged price-fixing—but a class action has now been launched, making similar claims. Catherine Simonsen, an attorney who worked for Khan's FTC in its final year, has set up a new firm in Los Angeles aiming to help cities, counties and states stop problematic mergers, and to bring class actions under the Robinson-Patman Act, which outlaws anticompetitive price discrimination by chain stores against small shops, with the aim of driving long-term change. She detects signs that Khan and Kanter's work is influencing a similar turn among some of her fellow antitrust lawyers.

It may be that the anti-monopolists' critics are right, and they have fallen as swiftly as they rose. The rival big idea circulating among Democrats is "abundance", as spearheaded by the bestselling book of that name by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. This argues that progressives have become so keen on stopping abusive power that they've turned the state into a huge obstacle to business and to building anything new—notably, homes. In this context, the anti-monopoly movement looks like just another demand for regulation, another rant against business. One of its advocates, the journalist Matthew Yglesias, wrote recently that "corporate power" was a meaningless concept because it "doesn't add up to anything measurable".

Dayen suggests the advocates of abundance are furnishing mainstream Democrats with a comfortable new agenda that ignores the US's glaring power imbalance—and "doesn't involve them going after billionaires". Matt Stoller suggests Trump's aggressive use of state power has allowed Wall Street to insinuate that government needs to be constrained, whispering that if Democrats allow corporate America to run things, they will never have the problem of Trump-like economic chaos again.

Yet the two sides have much in common. Provided that it isn't done to appease corporate donors, the idea of scrapping outdated regulations could be dovetailed with anti-monopolism. It was one of Mamdani's campaign promises. Similarly, abundance advocates support the tech boom—and in his recent book *The Age of Extraction*, Tim Wu argues that it was anti-monopolism which laid the ground for that. Conversely, Marc Dunkelman's *Why Nothing Works* is a key abundance text—but it's not a simplistic attack on the anti-monopoly tradition. Rather, it calls for progressives to work to reconcile their contradictory instincts.

Breaking an orthodoxy is a long-term project, and history suggests anti-monopolism's juddering pattern of advances and reversals is part of the process. In the 1920s, the original antitrust movement appeared to be ebbing away, but it rode the tide of popular anger at the Depression back to power, where it stayed for 40 years. This precedent also underlines the idea that anti-monopolism and abundance need not clash, provided they're both focused on improving the lives of ordinary Americans. In the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt's administration built extensive infrastructure, transforming rural America without being thwarted by regulation, at the same time carrying antitrust interventions to new heights.

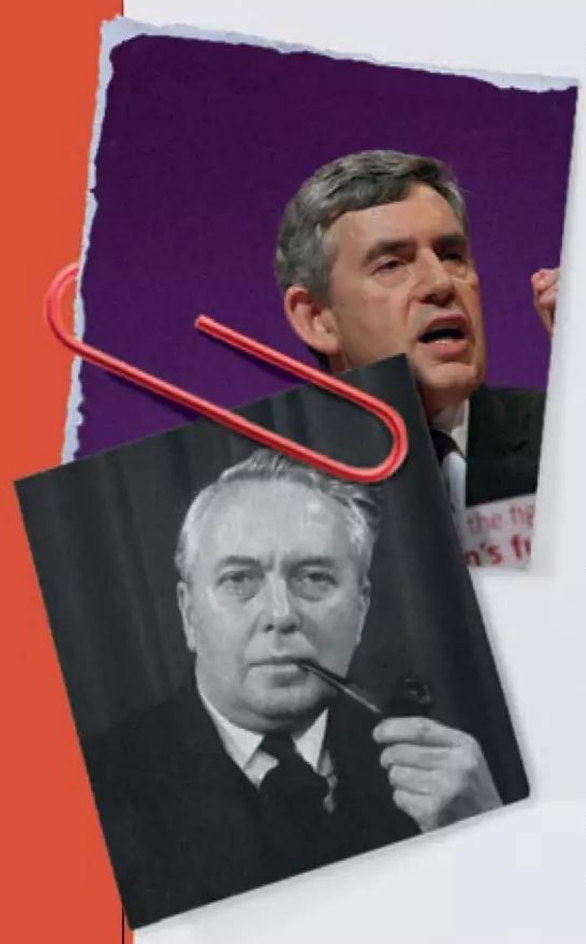
Either way, Stoller argues that "the biggest victory of the Bork consensus" was to say that fighting the giant forces of technology, globalisation and big business was like "fighting God". He argues that the new anti-monopolists have shown that democratic politics is not quite so powerless—which "was always the goal". The question is whether, having broken the psychological hold of the old orthodoxy, they can gain the support of enough fed-up, ground-down Americans to win power for long enough to build a new one. ◆

Phil Tinline *is the author of "Ghosts of Iron Mountain: The Hoax that Duped America and its Sinister Legacy" (Bloomsbury)*

UK POLITICS

An open letter to Labour's next prime minister

penned by Peter Kellner



Dear comrade,

If you are reading this before you have reached the top of the greasy pole—good. Successful prime ministers depend on the preparations they make before they arrive at Number 10, not just the decisions they take afterwards.

It will be crucial to learn from Keir Starmer's mistakes. Listing them is the easy bit. The crisis that has engulfed him deserves an explanation. How did he end up disliked by so many voters and alienating so many of his own MPs?

Labour's own history supplies some revealing answers. In more than half a century of reporting and analysing British politics, I have met every Labour leader since Harold Wilson. My relationships have been extensive with some of them, more fragmentary with others.

Each had his own ways. John Smith loved irreverent gossip; Gordon Brown eschewed frivolity. Michael Foot enjoyed "a small treble whisky" before dinner. Neil Kinnock wasn't keen on having to wear his "uniform"—dark suit, plain white shirt and sober tie.

More seriously, there was the evening when James Callaghan told me how his feud with Roy Jenkins had saved Wilson in the late 1960s. Callaghan said he wanted to mount a challenge to Wilson's leadership, but held back solely because he feared that the job would go to Jenkins. Among other things, this episode illustrates Labour's history of inertia. The Conservatives have deposed three leaders in the past seven years. Labour has deposed none since the Second World War with the debatable exception of Tony Blair, who actually agreed to bow out ahead of time. Could deadlock between Starmer's rivals keep his premiership on life support?



I didn't always have the friendliest encounters with Labour leaders. From 1980 to 1982, Jeremy Corbyn and I clashed most months at local party meetings in Hornsey and Wood Green. Corbyn (then a trade union official) and I were both members. I thought then, and have thought ever since, that he should never have been a member of the party, let alone its leader. He should have belonged to a party that wanted to overthrow the capitalist system, not one that sought to improve it. His expulsion came 40 years too late.

I did, however, see more eye-to-eye with Corbyn's predecessors. In 1983, I travelled with Neil Kinnock to Strasbourg, where he launched his modernisation of the party by telling Labour's MEPs that he would no longer back withdrawal from the common market. A decade later, good wine lubricated my long talks with Blair, then a member of the shadow cabinet, as he began to define the project that became New Labour.



During the 2015 election campaign, I briefed Ed Miliband on YouGov's latest polls. Our final polling (like almost everyone else's) showed Labour and the Conservatives neck-and-neck. I told him that Labour might have enough MPs in a hung parliament to take him to Downing Street. Sorry, Ed.

The conversation that surprised me most was with Callaghan, towards the end of his life. At the time, he was the only person to have held all four of the great offices of state—chancellor of the Exchequer and home and foreign secretary, as well as prime minister. I asked him which achievement had given him his greatest satisfaction. "Cat's eyes," he told me. As a junior transport minister in the late 1940s, he ordered these small reflectors to be installed in roads throughout Britain. They enabled drivers at night, especially in fog, to see the course of the road ahead, and saved countless lives.

Yes, the records of Labour's leaders vary, from the triumphant to the catastrophic. Together they fill a rich catalogue of lessons that Starmer should have heeded. Here are five he hasn't. Perhaps you, Labour's next prime minister, will.

1. Plan how to be PM, not just how to become PM

In 1997, Labour did more than run an outstandingly successful election campaign. Before polling day, Blair himself had been closely involved in plans for Labour's first term. Alastair Campbell drew up a communications grid for Labour's first 100 days, to plan media activity ahead of time. Patricia Hewitt, who had been Neil Kinnock's press secretary and would later become a cabinet minister, organised a programme of induction courses for shadow ministers at Oxford's Templeton College. It covered the realities of life in government and how to implement, not just announce, their policies.



All this meant that Blair's first weeks, indeed days, achieved much. They included the independence of the Bank of England; referendums to set up Scotland's parliament and the Welsh assembly; the establishment of the Department for International Development; signing up to the European Union's Social Chapter, which guaranteed workers' rights including a 48-hour limit to the working week; and the unveiling of plans for a minimum wage, literacy and numeracy hours in state schools, a human rights act. Most dramatically, Brown, the new chancellor, gave the Bank of England the power to set interest rates, having said nothing about this before election day.

There were hiccups of course. Tax credits, the centrepiece of Labour's commitment to welfare reform, proved to be more complex to operate than expected. Their rollout was not completed until 2003. More generally, new ministers took time to adjust to the culture of Whitehall. In the runup to the 2024 election, Starmer had the opportunity to learn from both the strengths and shortcomings of the Blair government's preparations for and first steps in government. Hewitt's offer to reprise the Oxford induction courses was turned down. There was no first-100-days grid, and no systematic attempt to prepare new ministers for the tasks of either implementing manifesto commitments or dealing with civil servants.



It's not that no work was done. Teams of party staff prepared detailed policy briefings for each shadow cabinet minister. The problem was that this was never integrated into the work of Starmer's own team in parliament.

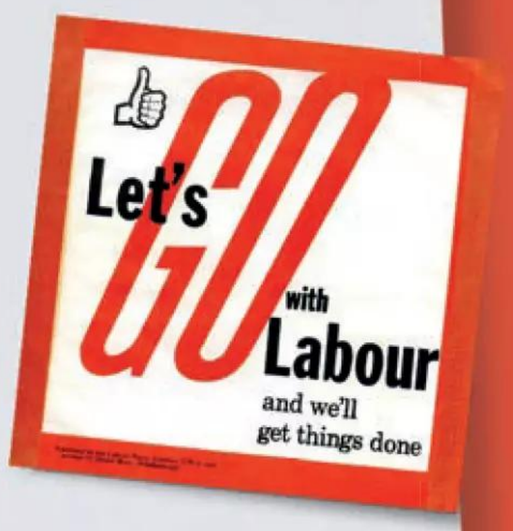
We now know the result: chaotic infighting in Downing Street and a succession of policy announcements that unravelled quickly—such as changes to the winter fuel allowance, increases to employers' national insurance, and botched welfare reform.

Social care has had a different fate. Labour's election manifesto promised to "create a National Care Service". It did not say when, what it would cost or how it would be funded. Labour had a policy without a plan, something as useful as a car without an engine. Only now, belatedly, has Louise Casey been set the task of coming up with that plan and reporting before the *next* election.

As Starmer's successor, you will not have had the luxury of leading the party in opposition. This makes it all the more vital to decide now on two or three things that you will do in your first 100 days, and to do the planning now in order to get them right first time. Do hit the ground running, but don't stumble.

2. Don't delay the tough decisions

In 1964, Labour returned to office after 13 years in opposition. The fledgling government's weak financial inheritance posed a stark choice: devalue the pound or take other tough decisions to defend sterling. On their first evening in office, Harold Wilson, the new prime minister, and James Callaghan, his chancellor, ruled out devaluation. The Labour government of Clement Attlee had devalued the pound in 1949, and Wilson did not want to be saddled with the reputation of leading the devaluation party.



Instead, Callaghan imposed a 15 per cent import surcharge and raised income, national insurance, petrol duty and company taxation. These, together with a loan from foreign central banks, allowed the government to weather the immediate storm. But less than two years later, sterling again came under attack. More crisis measures were imposed, though again no devaluation. In November 1967, Wilson and Callaghan finally bowed to the inevitable, devaluing the pound by 14 per cent. Two years and seven months later, Labour was voted out of office.

Like Wilson, Starmer inherited an economy in trouble. Like Wilson, he resisted the most obvious measure: broad-based tax rises this time, rather than devaluation. Raising tax rates would have meant breaking an election promise. Like Wilson and Callaghan, Starmer and Rachel Reeves set out a range of other measures. Yet again, a new Labour government's initial decision has landed it in trouble later on.



One of Labour's might-have-beens is also relevant here. In 1992, Kinnock planned an audacious move had he won the general election that year. The UK was then in the EU's exchange rate mechanism (ERM). The pound's value was fixed. Unknown to John Smith, then shadow chancellor, Kinnock planned with John Eatwell, his economic adviser, to seek a 12 per cent devaluation of the pound within the ERM and reduce the UK's main interest rate from 10 to 6 per cent if Labour proved victorious at the polls. Eatwell privately consulted Paris and Berlin to make sure they were not caught by surprise. Meanwhile, Kinnock knew that Smith would not like this plan; a dispute, and possible resignation, ahead of election day would have been disastrous. Had Labour won, Kinnock would then have had the power to act, however. Either Smith would have agreed, or he would have been replaced by Gordon Brown.

The rights and wrongs of that—politically and economically—are open to debate. The point here is that the UK was hampered by an overvalued pound and high interest rates, and Kinnock was prepared to act immediately.

As soon as you become prime minister, you should seize the initiative and do something bold—maybe on the UK's relations with Europe, or taxation, or funding a big increase in defence spending. It will be your moment of maximum power.



3. Honour Labour's past

After Attlee's government fell in 1951, pride in its achievements persisted—the National Health Service, national insurance and so on. The Wilson and Callaghan governments provoked more mixed memories. Yet the Sixties and Seventies were decades when Labour enacted important social reforms on gender and race equality, abortion, gay rights and the death penalty. These remain an enduring testament to progressive values.

The Blair/Brown years have received far less credit. Since 2010, Ed Miliband, Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer have been reluctant to proclaim the successes of New Labour, which include a sharp reduction in child poverty, the virtual elimination of rough sleeping, dramatically reduced hospital waiting times and the commitment to increase overseas aid. The legacy of the Iraq war and internal party arguments about Blair's support for globalisation and economic liberalism loom over their achievements. Miliband defeated his Blairite-brother David by offering a tilt to the left. Corbyn went further. In one notable BBC interview with Andrew Marr in 2018, Corbyn declined to acknowledge any benefits of market capitalism.

Having become leader and expelled Corbyn from his party, Starmer had an opportunity to put that right and to laud Labour's successes from 1997 to 2010. He recoiled from doing so. For example, the Sure Start programme was immensely popular in providing support for families with young children, especially in deprived areas. Wound down during the Conservative years, it has now been restored. Instead of reviving the Sure Start brand, the current government calls it "Best Start".

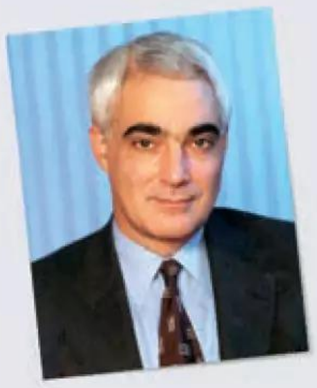
Pride in Labour's past seems not to have been part of Starmer's armoury. It should be part of yours. Which leads to the fourth lesson for your premiership.



4. Admit your mistakes

Wilson never recovered from what he told the public on 19th November 1967. In a TV and radio broadcast that evening, after sterling's value had been cut by 14 per cent against other currencies, he said, "It does not mean that the pound here in Britain, in your pocket or purse or in your bank, has been devalued." Voters felt he was trying to fool them.

In 2000, Blair acted differently when the state pension was raised by only 75p per week—the amount needed to offset the unusually small inflation rate at the time. The backlash was fierce. In his memoirs, he recalled: "I decided at the 2000 party conference to apologise and eat a portion of humble pie. We had some blowback from Gordon and Alistair Darling [Chief Secretary to the Treasury] who felt it dangerous to admit we were wrong; but I felt it was worth it. Anyway, we were wrong!"



In this regard, Starmer has followed Wilson rather than Blair. Time and again, he and Reeves have insisted they were keeping their election promise not to raise tax rates. As with Wilson, theirs was a narrow truth that, to voters, concealed a larger lie about taxes rising.

Perhaps Starmer's most bizarre claim was the explanation he gave for restoring winter fuel payments last May for pensioners on below average incomes. Reeves had previously scrapped the benefit for all but the poorest. Starmer's reason for the partial U-turn was that the original cuts had offended too many voters and upset too many Labour MPs, but he told parliament

that his change of heart had nothing to do with that. It was simply because the economy was picking up. "That is why we want to ensure that more pensioners are eligible for winter fuel payments as we go forward," he said on 21st May 2025.

According to YouGov polling in February, just 22 per cent of voters now regard Starmer as trustworthy.

Better to admit mistakes and suffer embarrassment. Voters want a prime minister they can trust. Once acquired, a reputation for dishonesty is almost impossible to shake off.

5. Present a coherent vision of the UK's future



In 1963, Wilson told Labour's annual party conference: "We are restating our socialism in terms of the scientific revolution," to be forged in "the white heat of this revolution". Less well remembered was his intention to copy "the ruthless application of scientific techniques in Soviet industry". Like many in the west at that time, Wilson was unaware that the Soviet system was hopelessly inefficient. But at least Wilson's speech repositioned Labour as a modernising party of the future; he won four of the five general elections he fought as leader.

Kinnock deserves more credit than he generally gets for persuading the left to accept the market system. In careful stages, he led Labour away from its lingering socialist dreams. In 1995, Blair built on Kinnock's work, persuading the party to ditch its constitutional commitment to traditional common-ownership socialism. In government, Blair and Brown developed a version of social democracy in which an active state would both encourage market-led growth and achieve social justice. Not every party activist was happy but, for the first time, Labour won three clear majorities in a row.

They were lucky, of course. Steady growth, globalisation and the peace dividend—reductions in defence spending as a share of GDP after the end of the Cold War—made New Labour's ambitions affordable. Starmer has none of those advantages. Given these circumstances, his record is revealing. During Starmer's campaign to become Labour leader, he proposed "common ownership of rail, mail, energy and water"; higher taxes for the top 5 per cent of earners; and the abolition of tuition fees, Universal Credit and the House of Lords.

His pitch ignored one the great lessons from the Foot and Corbyn eras: an avowedly left-wing leader has yet to become prime minister. In any case, Starmer didn't mean it. He simply said what was necessary to become party leader (just as he worked out how to win the 2024 election, not what to do if he won). Once he became leader, he dropped all those commitments without any apparent anguish or embarrassment. The result is a void. Beyond warm words, Starmer failed to define an alternative vision for the centre-left.

You need to put that right. Times are tough. That is all the more reason to tell a clear story and set out a distinctive project for progressive politics over the next decade.



This applies above all to the UK's relations with Europe and the wider world. Before becoming party leader, when Starmer was Labour's spokesman on Brexit, he stood up to Corbyn, most notably at the party conference in 2018, when he backed a second referendum that might enable the UK to remain in the EU after all.

After becoming leader—and since the UK left the EU—Starmer has rowed back. Labour's 2024 manifesto promised to "make Brexit work". There would be "no return to the single market, the customs union or freedom of movement". Since the election, his government has sent mixed messages.



He wants pro-Europeans to think that he would go as far as possible to remove trade barriers, while reassuring pro-Brexit voters that he is still on their side.

A more fundamental issue is at stake, however. The debate labelled "Europe" is really about the UK's identity and place in the world. In his speech last month to the Munich Security Conference, Starmer made a strong case for greater cooperation in trade and defence. He said "the status quo is not fit for purpose" and offered specific ways to change it. He described the pieces of a jigsaw, but not the picture they comprised when put together.

On his flight to Beijing in January, Starmer was asked about the speech that had electrified the World Economic Forum in Davos. Mark Carney, Canada's prime minister, spoke of "a rupture in the world order" and called for "the middle powers" to stand up to the United States, Russia and China. Starmer's response? "I'm a pragmatist, a British pragmatist applying common sense."

Pragmatism is a technique, not a strategy. You will come to office at a time when the UK's role in Europe and beyond is raising large questions. These deserve suitably large answers.



That the UK needs new leadership is clear. Starmer's allies say that he is still the best option Labour has. Their argument is that he has had to struggle with a grim economic inheritance *and* the turmoil of Donald Trump's second term *and* the impact of the Ukraine war on Europe's security. Mistakes have been made, but he has climbed a steep learning curve; he has three years to put things right and deserves the chance to do so.

This is not a trivial argument. It deserves to be taken seriously. However, Labour's own history of successes and failures contains clear lessons for anyone aspiring to lead the party effectively. Starmer has shown little interest in learning them. For instance, nobody familiar with Labour's progressive traditions and fights for equality would have drafted a speech warning that this country was fast becoming "an island of strangers". Any senior Labour politician aware of those traditions would have instantly deleted or refused to say those words.

When Starmer does go, you will need to reconnect with Labour's past and its core values. The challenges will be huge. I cannot guarantee success, merely wish you...

Good luck!

Peter Kellner *is former president of YouGov and a political analyst and commentator*

SECURING WATER FOR THE FUTURE

The opening roundtable in Prospect's Resilience Series sought water supply solutions, from rethinking investment priorities to rebuilding relationships and attracting new talent to the industry

How can the UK secure reliable, sustainable water supplies under growing climate and population pressures? That was the question at the heart of a recent *Prospect* roundtable put together in collaboration with Southern Water.

The event—part of a new series bringing together policymakers, industry leaders and experts to explore what Britain can do to strengthen its resilience in the face of today's most urgent challenges—was convened less than 24 hours after the government had published its white paper with a promise to deliver a "once-in-a-generation plan to transform the water system for good". To put that goal into sharp relief, without urgent action England faces an estimated five-billion-litres-a-day shortfall of public water supplies by 2055.

So what is required of the industry, its investors, policymakers and wider society? During a wide-ranging discussion, participants were asked to consider both supply-side measures—introducing new infrastructure including reservoirs, pipelines, desalination and recycling—and demand-side measures such as leakage reduction, smart metering and effecting behavioural change.

On the supply side there is much that might be done, and the government has secured £104bn of private investment for infrastructure. For a sector where around 60 per cent of water mains were built before 1981, and 13 per cent are over 100 years old, the money is welcome. But how should it be spent? One commentator urged the industry to show "bravery" when investing the money, rather than the "risk aversion" that sometimes characterises public infrastructure projects. Another encouraged greater "creativity". That means re-examining customer consumption and need and subsequently devising novel solutions based on both. She noted, for example, that the UK is "really, really bad at capturing rain water. If we got better at that we would have many more options to address water security."

Any initiative must incorporate planning for climate change

From a business-user perspective, creativity might mean coming up with bespoke site-based solutions. Consider that just 1 per cent of businesses in England account for 15 per cent of all water use. As one participant—a specialist in national preparedness—pointed out, the UK is one of very few countries in the world that allows data centres to connect to the public drinking water supply. As a result, there is little incentive for those businesses to innovate away from a water-based cooling solution, or to use other sources of water.

Any supply-side initiative must incorporate planning for climate change, urged another contributor, before making a strong plea for minimum water efficiency standards for products. Elsewhere, there was a plea for realism to sit alongside the calls for creativity and bravery. Honest conversations are needed about supply timescales and costs, this industry insider argued. Expectations must be managed. Another said there needs to be more transparency about how, in times of stress, water should be distributed. Despite public perceptions of water as

"an infinite resource on our rainy island", too little consideration is given to a "hierarchy of demand".

On getting the balance right between supply and demand, most participants recommended taking an agile approach. How much policymakers should push a supply- or demand-side lever changes over time, by customer type and by region, too. For example, there are communities where the majority of households are unmetered which, in turn, makes it difficult to encourage changes in behaviour. Multiple voices around the table urged flexibility. "The demand- and supply-side balance is not static," noted one participant.

Other issues emerged during the discussions, not least the need for the water industry to recruit and retain the right people with the right skills. In anticipation of a talent deficit, participants identified three areas of concern. First, the number of highly experienced scientists, engineers and other skilled professionals entering the final years of their careers. An estimated 16 per cent of the water industry workforce (13,700 people) are forecast to retire by 2030. The result? A substantive loss of institutional knowledge. Second, there is a growing trend for those trained within the industry, from graduate level upwards, to move to other sectors early or midway through their careers. Third, there are would-be employees put off from joining in the first place because of negative external perceptions of the industry.

A Westminster voice present called for "more noise" to raise the profile of the problem. He observed how those in other industries were making their feelings known. "I've not once heard anybody talk to me about the water industry and its skills shortage."

Towards the end of the conversation, attention turned to a central pillar of the government's water white paper—the introduction of a single regulator for the industry, a body that can take an integrated view of both economic and environmental performance. The move was broadly welcomed by those in attendance. One noted that the status quo—Ofwat, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and the water environment functions of the Environment Agency—may have been designed to inject "creative tension" into the supervision process, but over time that purpose has "ebbed away". It has left, he said, "different regulators becoming quite entrenched in their respective positions and as a result you end up with a lot of dysfunction."

The restoration of faith in the industry was another theme that ran through the conversation. "Building back trust with the public is absolutely critical," said one participant. It's critical, not least, for two of the issues already explored—encouraging talent into the industry and inspiring behavioural change needed to meet the new realities of supply. The relationship between government and the industry needs to be bolstered, too, as does the relationship between the industry and its investors. All require a concerted effort to engage, or to re-engage.

Take consumer engagement, for example. As one contributor argued, it is time to move away from "a leaflet with the bill" or a consultation meeting in a "drafty town hall that my retired dad might attend but no one in their 20s would ever consider". Instead, the industry should think about applying "a dose of humour" to its messaging in the spirit of Denver's "Use only what you need" and Sydney's "Turn it off, Bob" advertising campaigns.

Meanwhile, others made a robust case for an industry as it exists, one that has a good working relationship with those it serves. An industry voice described a "silent majority of customers who appreciate the challenges we face and the value of service that they get." Another participant added that the "water industry has become dehumanised" to the extent that it's only when people see what those who work within it are prepared to do—going out at four in the morning to get water running again or to address a pollution issue—that they appreciate what's involved. ◆

This conversation took place under the Chatham House Rule

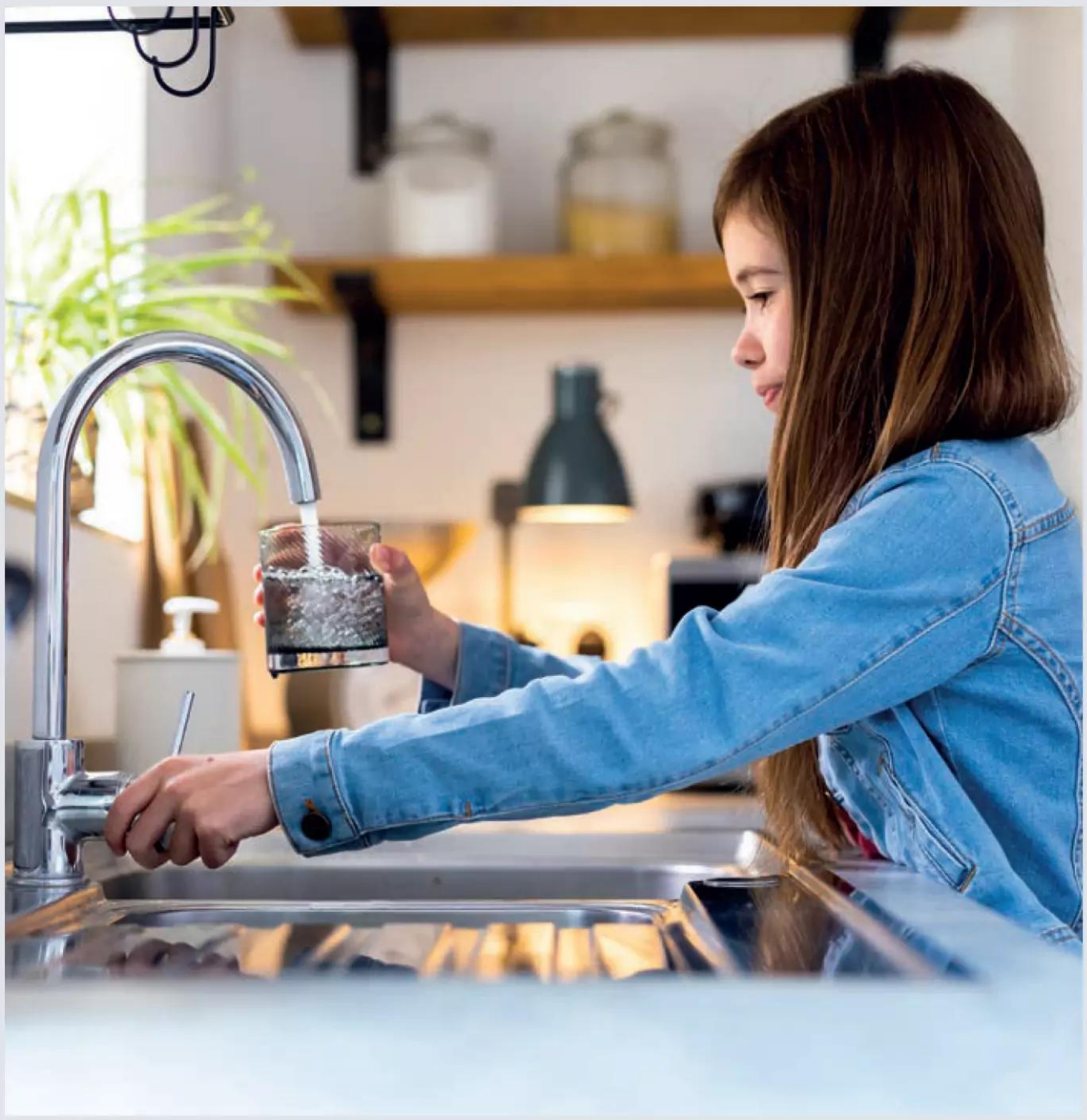


IMAGE COURTESY SOUTHERN WATER

WATER for LIFE
from Southern Water

CLIMATE



A man cycles on the Thames during the winter of 1962 to 1963

© ALAMY

DEEP FREEZE

The ocean current that keeps northern Europe warm is in danger of collapsing, writes **Ellen Halliday.** *But compared with threats of war and disease, it is given relatively little attention*

Just before Christmas, a bitter wind blew in. Ice and snow descended, first in Scotland and then, on Boxing Day, across the rest of the UK. Before it could melt or the new year arrive, a second blizzard left fresh snowdrifts six metres deep. They wouldn't thaw until March. It was the winter of 1962 and 1963, and it was the bitterest in 200 years.

Films from the time capture something of an idyll: boys flying off toboggans, a man riding a bike on the Thames, milkmen on skis delivering their bottles. Two commuters in Leicestershire ice-skate to work wearing bowler hats, and on the Lake of Menteith in Scotland, almost 2,000 curlers skite about during the great curling bonspiel.

But the cold, as it settled across the country, was unforgiving. Two hundred main roads were soon impassable. In the Pennines, Cornwall and the Highlands, routes would remain shut for almost two months. "Now it's Siberia!" the papers exclaimed. Villages and towns such as Weymouth and Tavistock were cut off. The sea froze: at Dover and Eastbourne,

the ice stretched out towards France. "It looked like we were going to be joined with Europe, whether De Gaulle liked it or not," said a BBC reporter.

In the span of human record, such winters are exceptionally rare, and anthropogenic climate change has made them ever less likely. In the years since the "Big Freeze" of 1963, average global temperatures have increased by more than a degree, rising from close to the pre-industrial baseline, an average against which increases are measured. As a result, winters in the UK tend to be warmer, wetter and wracked by more dramatic storms. Summers are hotter too: 2022, 2023 and 2025 were the warmest years on record.

When we think about a future shaped by climate change, many of us imagine more of the same: hot summers and warm, wet and stormy winters. In simple terms, those whose job it is to prepare us for the future have been planning for such a world. But that is not the whole story. Scientists are warning with increasing urgency that global heating could soon tip us into a very different future, one in which temperatures would rise around the world and the summers would be hotter than ever before. But the winters? In the UK, winters would be much worse than the Big Freeze.

Out in the deep Atlantic, a great current drags warm water north from the tropics, through the Caribbean and along the coast of the United States, before swinging out into the middle of the ocean. Near Greenland and Iceland, the water in this current cools. Fresh water evaporates into the atmosphere, leaving energy behind as heat—the equivalent of around 50 times the total energy use of humanity. The water still borne along by the current is saltier and denser—and so it sinks thousands of metres into the depths. The current then turns back south, towards the tropics, where it will warm again.

This is the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, known as the AMOC. It is the primary reason why the northern hemisphere is on average 1.4°C warmer than the south, and why the Earth is hottest not at the equator, but 10° north of it. It is why the UK and northern Europe have relatively mild climates; why, although they share latitudes, Glasgow is warmer than Moscow, Paris milder than Vancouver and Reykjavík less frozen than Greenland's capital, Nuuk.

Since 1961, scientists have known that the AMOC is one of the Earth's climate "tipping points", meaning it could swing from one state into another from which it is extremely difficult to return. Palaeoclimate data suggests that it has tipped before, during the last ice age, with dramatic effects on the global climate—and now scientists are warning that man-made climate change is the likely cause of it weakening over the past 100 years, and may cause it to tip again.

An AMOC shutdown happens in "quite a few of the standard global warming scenarios" captured in reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), according to Stefan Rahmstorf, a physicist and oceanographer at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research who has studied the AMOC for 35 years. Together with other researchers, he calculated the approximate risk of AMOC collapse from a range of climate models. In a scenario of high global emissions, leading to warming of 3.6°C or more, the chance of the AMOC crossing a tipping point is 70 per cent, they found. If global temperatures rose 1.8°C by the end of this century—a level we are likely to exceed—there would still be a 25 per cent chance that the AMOC shuts down entirely by 2100, cooling the northern hemisphere.

According to analysis by the independent Climate Action Tracker, based on the current policies in place globally to tackle the climate crisis, the Earth will experience 2.6°C of warming—an intermediate emissions scenario. Projected warming of close to that—2.7°C—gives a 37 per cent chance of the AMOC crossing a tipping point: more than one-in-three.

Palaeoclimate data suggests that the AMOC has tipped before, with dramatic effects on the global climate

Until five years ago, "we considered an AMOC shutdown a low-probability but high-impact risk," Rahmstorf told a panel convened at last year's UN climate conference in Brazil, COP30. Most thought there would be a "less than 10 per cent" probability of it happening. Even before then, it was "too big to ignore. But now the probabilities look much higher," he said.

One key indicator that the AMOC is already weakening is the "cold blob". While temperatures have been rising everywhere else on Earth since the 19th century, the cold blob, an area of the north Atlantic, is the one place on the planet that has for decades been cooling. This—as well as the fact that water is warming off the coast of the eastern United States—suggests that the AMOC is already bringing less heat into the area than it was before.

There is also a chance that the figures Rahmstorf cites are an underestimate, as scientific models he used to calculate these risks don't take the melting of the Greenland ice sheet—which is releasing cold freshwater into the north Atlantic and disrupting the AMOC's flow—sufficiently into account. He warns that the tipping point "is actually quite close in the future, in the next decade, or two or three".

Not all scientists are comfortable with making predictions. Laura Jackson, a research scientist at the Met Office who specialises in global ocean circulations, is one who urges against "trying to put percentages on these things... I don't think it's a very useful thing to do because it's so uncertain," she tells me.

And yet, while Jackson thinks there is only a "small chance" of AMOC collapse, she also cites "a number of studies recently where they have shown that there's a possibility that the AMOC could cross the tipping point before 2100". And she wholeheartedly agrees with Rahmstorf on perhaps the most important point: "If it did happen, the impacts would be large... We don't want to ignore the fact that it could happen," she says. "Because if it did, we'd be in great trouble."

AMOC collapse would create conditions "like nothing we've ever seen before", Tim Lenton, founding director of the Global Systems Institute and chair in Climate Change and Earth System Science at the University of Exeter, said in a briefing in Westminster last

November. The UK would be one of the nations to be hardest hit, but the consequences would be global.

According to Lenton, in one model based on a collapse happening at a global warming level of 2°C, the North Sea would be covered in ice by February each winter. London would be frozen for three months, with temperatures as low as -20°C. Edinburgh would endure five-and-a-half months of ice, with temperatures down to -30°C. Water would run short because too little would fall during the winter to last the most populated areas through the summer. Food production would be severely affected in the UK. Across the world, the area in which the staple crops of wheat and maize could be grown would be reduced roughly by half. Global rain patterns would move south, drying and killing the Amazon and changing where monsoons fall across Asia, South America and west Africa. Sea levels may rise, exacerbating coastal erosion and storm surges. "We'd have to expect the kind of extreme weather events that we've never known before," says Rahmstorf.

The UK is not prepared for such a future. The country's housing stock is already the worst in Europe, ill-equipped for extreme temperatures. Railways would grind to a halt, as they did in 1963 when trains disappeared into snowdrifts and lines were buried under avalanches for days. Power grids would struggle; there would be blackouts. Hospitals would feel the strain: the number of excess human deaths in England and Wales in 1963 was more than 80,000.

None of this would happen overnight; scientists estimate that the AMOC could take 50 to 100 years to wind down, though some effects would be felt sooner. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned now," says Jackson. "It doesn't mean it's not important to know if you're crossing a tipping point and might not be able to get back."

Because of this concern, the Met Office has been busily researching how changes to the AMOC might impact the UK. "And thinking not just what the temperature changes or the rain changes would be, but how that might affect droughts, energy—all that downstream impact," says Jackson. "Obviously all these things have knock-on effects on ecosystems, on economies."

Some of this work is government funded, as is an £81m project at the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (Aria) focused on developing an "early warning system" for climate tipping points and, specifically, for one section of the AMOC called the subpolar gyre. Numerous other international projects are doing related work.

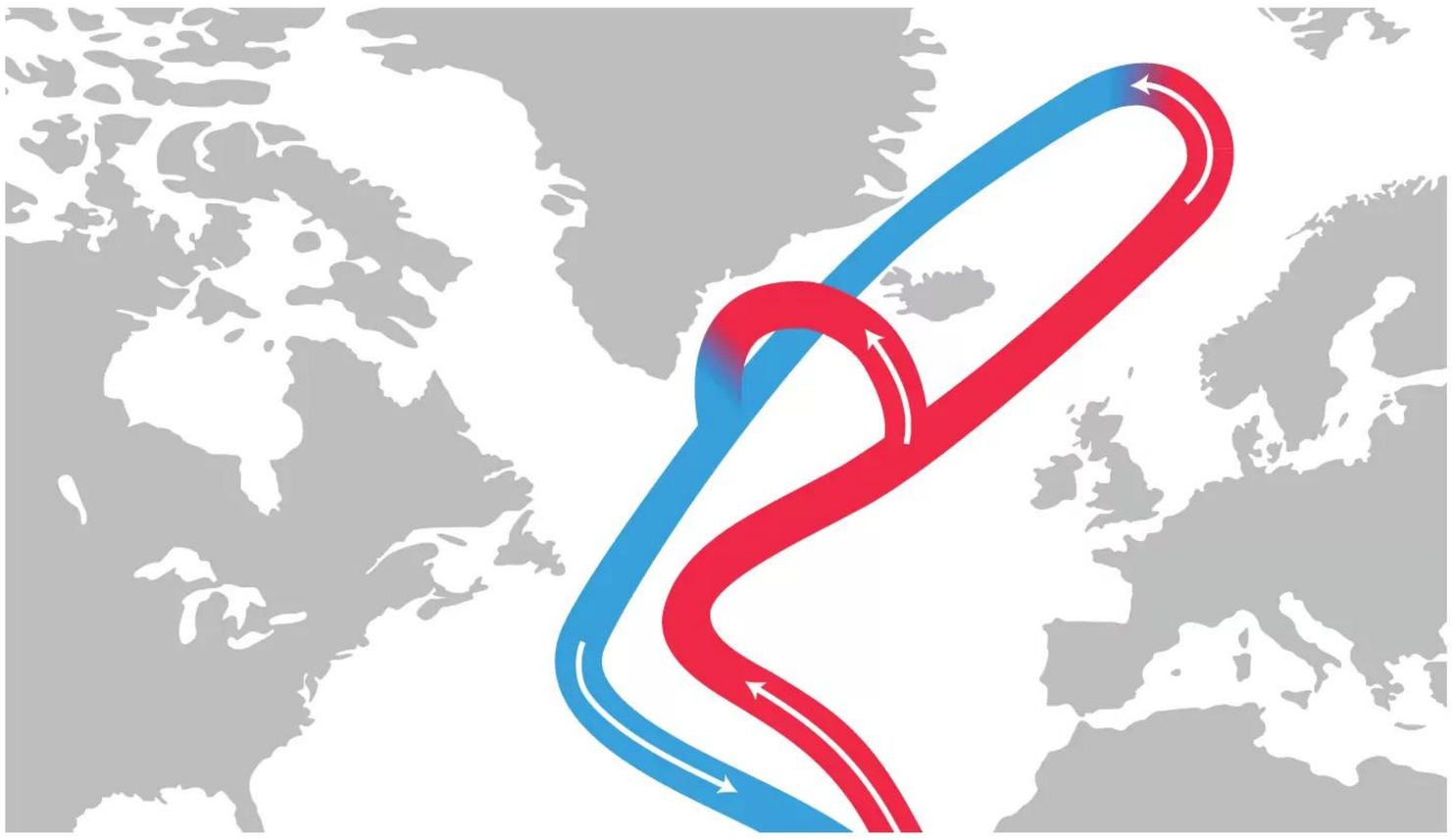
Yet the AMOC hardly appears on the UK government's radar. It does not feature on the latest official National Risk Register—where terrorism, cyberattacks and threats from states such as Russia are covered in detail—or in its chronic risks analysis, both released by the powerful Cabinet Office, at the heart of government. Responsibility for this existential threat is fragmented across departments of lower priority, which aren't generally responsible for security concerns: the Department for Energy and Net Zero, which has responsibility for reducing emissions, the only way to avoid AMOC collapse; the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), tasked with protecting against the impacts of climate change. "If pandemic threat assessment and preparedness was as fragmented... we would be scandalised," says Laurie Laybourn, director of the Strategic Climate Risks Initiative, a thinktank that focuses on dangerous climate risks.

It is Defra which publishes the government's national adaptation programme every five years, following regular assessments from the independent Climate Change Committee (CCC) into the risks of climate change to the UK. There's no mention of the AMOC there yet, either.

One reason for its absence may be that "the science is too new," an expert at the National Audit Office says—scientific findings that demonstrated a higher risk of AMOC collapse were published just last year. Many people interviewed for this piece tell me they hope that the AMOC will be taken into account in the next iteration of the government's climate change risk assessment, in 2027, and its national adaptation programme, in 2028.

But it is not just the risks of AMOC shutdown that are being overlooked—the climate crisis more generally is overshadowed in conversations about national security. This is rooted in what Laybourn calls the "original sin of how we assess climate change".

For as long as states have existed, governments have been familiar with the dangers of war and disease, but the threat of climate change is much newer. As understanding grew through the end of the 20th and into the 21st century, governments "turned to the scientific community" to help make sense of the problem. This was "absolutely the right thing to do", says Laybourn, but it led to a culture clash. Scientists "don't want to say something is going to happen unless they're totally sure". That is the right approach within science—but governments need to think differently.



Schematic of the AMOC
Red shows near-surface flow and blue shows return flow at depth

SOURCE: METOFFICE.GOV.UK

Scientists might be cautious in stating the severity of a danger, but policymakers should take the opposite approach, "because it doesn't matter if you predict 9/11 or 7/7 or Pearl Harbor, and then it doesn't come true. What matters is if you fail to predict it, fail to admit that it was a possibility, and then it did actually happen and no preparation was made," says Laybourn.

Since the first COP in Berlin in 1995, and even since the UK's Climate Change Act of 2008, we have learned that the ramifications of climate change will get worse, but not always in a linear fashion. We know about the threat of AMOC collapse and tipping points, and about the domino effects of climate change, such as how droughts or floods can harm health and the economy, for instance.

Governance may need to catch up with what we know—and with how other risks are assessed, too. When governments think about terror attacks or threats from hostile states, they prepare for the worst possible scenarios, Laybourn explains: "If you're building a nuclear power plant, you build it not to withstand just the average conditions. You build it to withstand, in the UK, a one-in-every-10,000-year event, although the nuclear power plant probably lasts 30 years." Why can't the same thinking be applied to the AMOC?

During last year's COP in Brazil, Iceland became the first nation to label the AMOC a national security issue. "For us the future of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation is not an abstract scientific question," Jóhann Páll Jóhannsson, the country's minister for environment, energy and climate, said at the time. "The ocean shapes our climate, our energy systems, our food security, our infrastructure and our way of life, and when that system shows signs of stress, it is our duty to pay attention... and act before it is too late."

The move has enabled Iceland "to bring together all the relevant ministries and institutions, not only those responsible for environment or climate issues, but also civil protection, energy, transport, food security and foreign affairs," Jóhannsson tells me. This will ensure the issue "is addressed with the seriousness it warrants". This year Iceland will publish its first national adaptation plan, with a disaster preparedness policy to be completed in 2028. It seems likely that the AMOC will be included.

Nothing suggests that we could prepare fully for AMOC shutdown. There is a single path away from this future

Other nations are taking notice, too, notably the Nordic states, after scientists wrote to the Nordic council of ministers. Ireland's adaptation plan specifically notes the risks to the country from tipping points, including changes to the AMOC. Across Europe, including at the EU level and in France and Germany, AMOC-related risks are also increasingly under discussion. Meanwhile, the European Space Agency has signalled plans to monitor AMOC-related changes.

No such approach exists yet in Britain—though officials and experts from Iceland and the UK's government-funded Aria programme on climate tipping points have "exchanged views on monitoring and early-warning approaches", Jóhannsson says.

There are signs of growing awareness about the AMOC in Whitehall. Tim Lenton recalls how one civil servant he briefed about AMOC collapse "was quite upset... their point was basically these adaptation actions we're taking will be worthless in this scenario".

In any case, to date those actions have been "inadequate", according to the CCC. Adaptation planning is "piecemeal and disjointed" and "progress is either too slow, has stalled, or is heading in the wrong direction," the independent committee has found. A Defra spokesperson said the department recognises "how important it is to prepare the country to adapt to climate change", stressing that the government is "now investing a record £10.5 billion to protect 900,000 properties [from flooding], as well as the largest investment in nature-friendly farming in this country's history". But if the UK is to be better prepared for the future—whether the AMOC tips or not—this work would have to accelerate.

There is some good news for that despairing civil servant, which is that many adaptation initiatives that would be useful in a world where the AMOC doesn't tip "are even more functional with the AMOC tipping point," says Lenton. Protections against rising seas, for instance, may be needed sooner if AMOC shutdown does occur. And "there are lots of things you can do around nature and resilience of ecosystems that work for either eventuality". Reservoirs might be another of the "no regrets" options—water security will be tested whether the AMOC collapses or not.

Still, nothing suggests that we could prepare fully for a world in which the AMOC does shut down. There is a single path that leads away from the future warned of by Lenton, Rahmstorf and others, and it is the path away from fossil fuels. Global warming has already reached 1.4°C, and every rising fraction of a degree beyond that accelerates the threat of the AMOC tipping. Currently, just a third of the emissions reductions needed to hit the UK's 2030 targets are covered by what the CCC calls "credible" plans. Meanwhile, progress towards these goals is being actively challenged: Reform's Richard Tice has said he would, if elected, "get rid of the madness of... net stupid zero".

What is madness, in fact, is any decision to ignore the risk of AMOC collapse. Despite the uncertainty about *when* exactly it could occur—sending the northern hemisphere into a future shaped by extreme heat, extreme cold and extreme weather—the science is clear about *why* it occurs, and how to stop it. "We've got to do everything in our power to limit the amount of time we spend over 1.5°C, and the amount of temperature we go over 1.5°C... that requires a radical acceleration of action towards zero emissions," says Lenton.

For now, though, we must live in uncertainty about the future. We must live with the understanding that our lives as we know them depend on a great current continuing its journey through the deep ocean. And we must hope that its journey will not end. For if it does, Britain will face many a winter where the snow piles higher and the ice stretches further than was even imagined in the winter of 1963. ♦

Ellen Halliday *is deputy editor*

LANGUAGE

FOWL PLAY

In his bestselling guide to the English language, published 100 years ago, Henry Watson Fowler decreed that his way was the right way

by
OLIVER KAMM

There's no telling what will make a nonfiction bestseller. Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* and the late Erich von Däniken's junk archaeology about "ancient astronauts" both seem implausible candidates for sales in the millions, yet attained them. Perhaps even less likely a commercial blockbuster is a book of more than 700 pages, with close type and double columns, about English grammar and words.

This is *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* by Henry Watson Fowler. Published on 22nd April 1926 and selling 60,000 copies in its first year, it swiftly became not just a revered reference work but an institution, known to devotees simply as "Fowler". Introducing a reissue of the first edition in 2010, the linguist David Crystal wrote: "No book had more influence on twentieth-century attitudes to the English language in Britain."

The centenary is an apt moment to review the book's merits and reputation, and to advance a modestly revisionist case. There is much to admire in Fowler. He was a stylish writer who knew grammar. He has a notable place in modern British social and cultural history. He is not and never was an oracle on language and its use, however—and he shouldn't be treated as such. After 100 years, it's time to close the book on Fowler.

Many of Fowler's pronouncements were eccentric and misguided, and have been perversely kept alive by popular usage manuals. He worked independently of modern linguistic scholarship and there is often no basis to his judgements other than personal taste. Further editions of Fowler (the fourth, edited by Jeremy Butterfield, appeared in 2015) replicate his flaws, introduce new ones or give sound advice while going to tortuous lengths to link it to the man himself.

Fowler was born in 1858 and enjoyed a privileged education at Rugby School and Balliol College, Oxford. Early promise was not fulfilled, however. He left Oxford with a second-class degree and a muted character reference, enough to secure a job as a schoolteacher in classics and English. He taught (after a brief spell at Fettes College in Edinburgh) for 17 years at Sedbergh School in Yorkshire. He left on a point of principle, being unable in conscience to prepare pupils for confirmation in the Church of England.

Thereafter, Fowler made a living as a freelance writer, on top of an annuity from his father's estate. His chance came when he collaborated with his brother, Francis, on a series of classical translations published by the Clarendon Press, an imprint of Oxford University Press. The brothers Fowler, fascinated by what they regarded as solecisms of English usage, wrote *The King's English* (1906) and compiled the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1911). These proved popular.

Despite being well over recruitment age, the brothers enlisted in the First World War as part of the British Expeditionary Force in France. To their chagrin, their duties were menial rather than military, and they returned to England after a year. Francis died in 1918 of tuberculosis, contracted during wartime service. Henry continued alone with the linguistic enterprise they'd embarked upon, which came to fruition in the famous dictionary. Movingly, the dedication is to the memory of Francis, "who shared with me the planning of this book, but did not live to share the writing... He had a nimbler wit, a better sense of proportion, and a more open mind than his twelve-year older partner."

The book is pedagogical, offering instruction and correction. That's a weighty reason, though far from the sole one, for its success. Many people, out of diffidence and genuine curiosity, seek guidance on their use of language. Fowler met that demand.

In *The King's English*, the brothers set out at length the principles of how to write, and more specifically how not to write. It was, as they described it in a letter to their publisher, "a sort of composition manual... for journalists and amateur writers". In word choice, they urged the merits of being "direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid". Their approach to syntax was to set out a series of alleged solecisms from newspaper articles, with their own corrections. Some of these, such as errors of subject-verb agreement (for instance: "An immense amount of confusion and indifference prevail in these days", from the *Daily Telegraph*), were surely due merely to tight newspaper deadlines.

If *The King's English* was the preliminary sketch, the *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* was the completed canvas, its alphabetised entries ranging from

the indefinite article "a" to "zeugma". Fowler is firmly prescriptivist and sometimes unyielding. Take his entry on "unique", a word often termed by sticklers an absolute adjective, namely one that isn't gradable. Fowler is with them. He insists that "uniqueness is a matter of yes or no only; no unique thing is more or less unique than another unique thing...". Hence, according to Fowler, it is illiterate to use the term as a synonym for exceptional or rare, and "it is nonsense to call anything more, most, very, somewhat, rather, or comparatively unique".

So much for Charlotte Brontë, who in *Villette* gives to her narrator, Lucy Snowe, the words: "'A very unique child,' thought I, as I viewed her sleeping countenance by the fitful moonlight..."

This happens a lot in Fowler's treatment of words individually and in combination. He proffers apparently authoritative judgements with neither argument nor evidence, while terming alternative usage illiterate. On occasion, he even invents a supposedly crucial distinction out of whole cloth. Witness his claim that a differentiation has developed, and "is now complete", between "masterful" (meaning imperious or commanding or strong-willed) and "masterly" (skilful or expert or practised). Fowler has made this up, however. Evidently believing that such a distinction ought to exist, he falsely asserts that it does. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* discreetly observes in its own entry on "masterful", the word's use in the sense of skilful "has been criticized in usage guides, apparently starting with H. W. Fowler".

From Fowler, and him alone, this piece of disinformation insinuated itself into the genre of usage manuals. I cite, almost at random, *Grammar and Style* (1993) by the philosopher Michael Dummett: "Masterful, which means 'dominating', is often used erroneously for masterly, in the sense of 'worthy of the master of a skill'."

Yet here we come to an oddity. Elsewhere in Fowler, especially in the mini-essays that punctuate his text, his analysis is often subtle and sensitive rather than censorious. He is good at identifying what makes some writing stilted and artificial. His critique of "elegant variation" (a felicitous term of his own devising, denoting the use of jarring synonyms in order to introduce variety) is acute and still highly relevant. A genuine example I recall is a *Le Monde* journalist's reference to "fermented grape juice" for fear of repeating "wine". (Yes, this was in French, but the point still applies.)

Fowler is justly scathing about what he terms fetishes—namely "current literary rules [that are] widely misapplied or unduly revered". Among these are the notions that it is wrong to split an infinitive, end a sentence with a preposition or use "different to" rather than "different from". And, in contrast to the general tenor of prescriptivist writers, he observes (in his entry on "that" as a relative pronoun): "What grammarians say should be has perhaps less influence on what shall be than even the more modest of them realize; usage evolves itself little disturbed by their likes and dislikes."

Here Fowler expresses an essential truth. It's not just that language changes (though of course it does); rather, what is "correct" is an empirical question. It doesn't matter if you dislike the use of "disinterested" to mean bored rather than impartial, or whether you insist on "try to" rather than "try and" or deplore the prepositional phrase (used by Shakespeare among many others) "between you and I". These usages are so common that they can't be regarded as errors: they are part of the lexis and grammar of present-day Standard English.

This doesn't mean grammar lacks rules or that lexicography lacks definitions. Moreover, it's always open to us to try and change usage. A benign example of conscious linguistic reform is the way that ineradicably sexist terms, such as "he" as a supposedly generic (or epicene) pronoun, have largely disappeared in edited prose over just a generation or two. But it's a matter of fact, not opinion, whether a construction is grammatical or a definition is accurate. These facts may sometimes have fuzzy boundaries, but they are derived from observed regularities of usage, not the edicts of style gurus.

The besetting flaw of Fowler is that he enunciates the principle of the custom of usage while frequently ignoring it in practice. As Crystal writes in the 2010 edition: "The problem in reading Fowler is that one never knows which way he is going to vote. Is he going to allow a usage

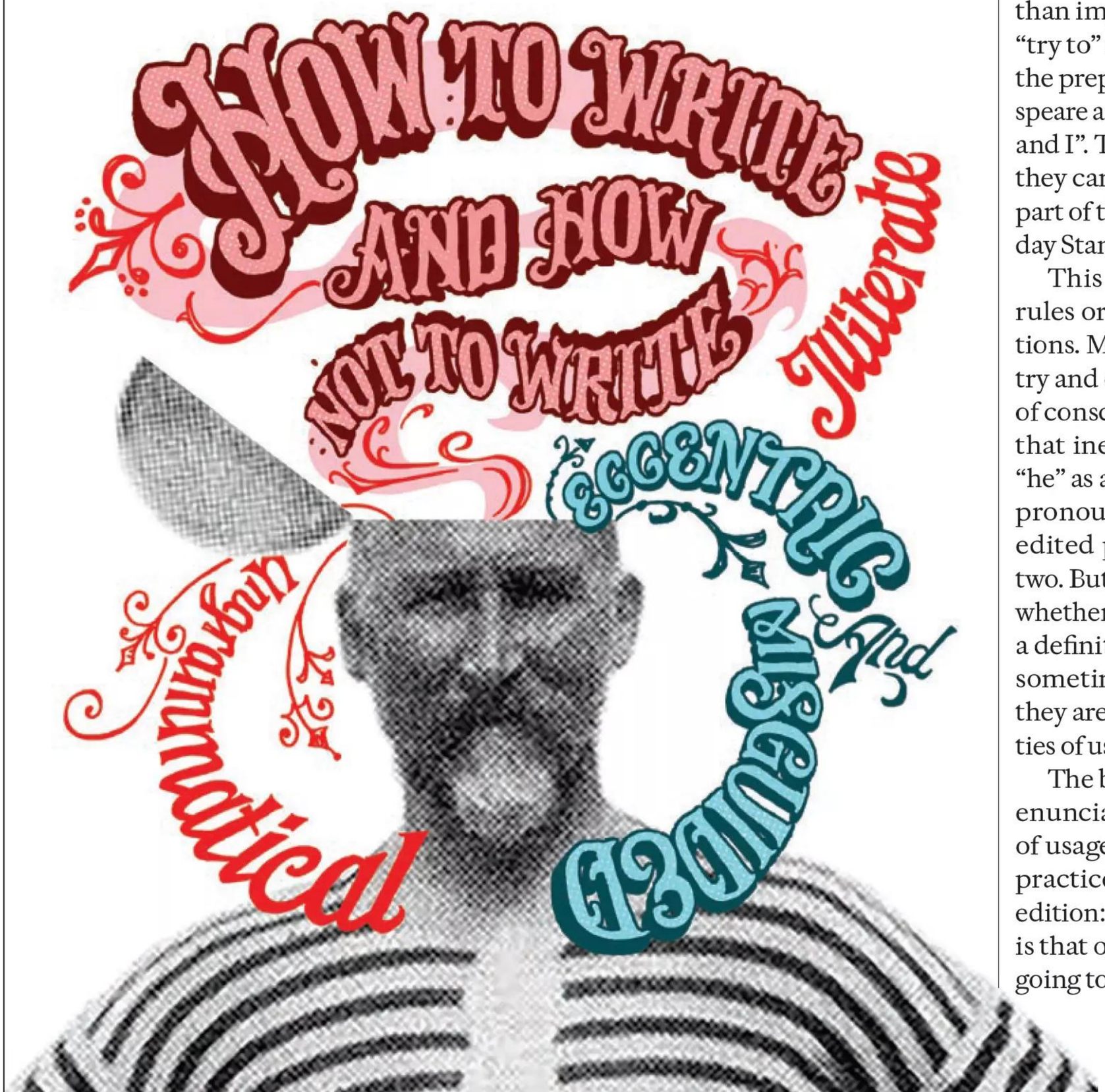


ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY SMITH

because it is widespread, or is he going to condemn it for the same reason?"

This isn't a problem only for modern readers. Contemporaries too were misled by grammatical analyses in Fowler that don't hold up. In an entry on "like", for instance, Fowler quotes Charles Darwin: "Unfortunately few have observed like you have done." Then Fowler immediately remarks: "Every illiterate person uses this construction daily; it is the established way of putting the thing among all who have not been taught to avoid it..."

So Fowler acknowledges that this construction, which he terms a "conjunctional use", is part of English usage and that people avoid it only if they've been instructed to; and then he condemns it anyway. In reality, modern scholars of syntax would treat "like" in this construction as a preposition taking a tensed subordinate clause as complement; it's informal, but there's nothing grammatically wrong with it. A famous example was a tobacco advertising slogan of the 1960s: "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." Grammar pedants insisted it should be "... as a cigarette should". A guide to English that condemns the usage of a great mass of native speakers as illiterate is not going to be accurate.

Perhaps the weirdest of all Fowler's caprices is his objection to what he terms "fused participles". This means that he regards a clause like "women having the vote reduces men's political power" as ungrammatical. (The example is Fowler's own, reflecting both the politics of a bygone era when universal female suffrage had yet to be achieved, and an instinctive misogyny that sadly crops up elsewhere in the book.) And his denunciation of this linguistic "corruption" is extreme. He insists that, to be grammatical, it must be "*women's* having...".

It's perfectly reasonable to dislike some usages and constructions, but they are still part of the language

In English we have a lot of words that end in *-ing*, which can be used in various ways. I lack space to go into Fowler's case here, but essentially he's distinguishing between a gerund and a present participle. This distinction exists in Latin but not in English, where you can mark the subject either for plain case ("*women* having...") or genitive case ("*women's* having"). Both are grammatical, though the genitive is a bit more formal.

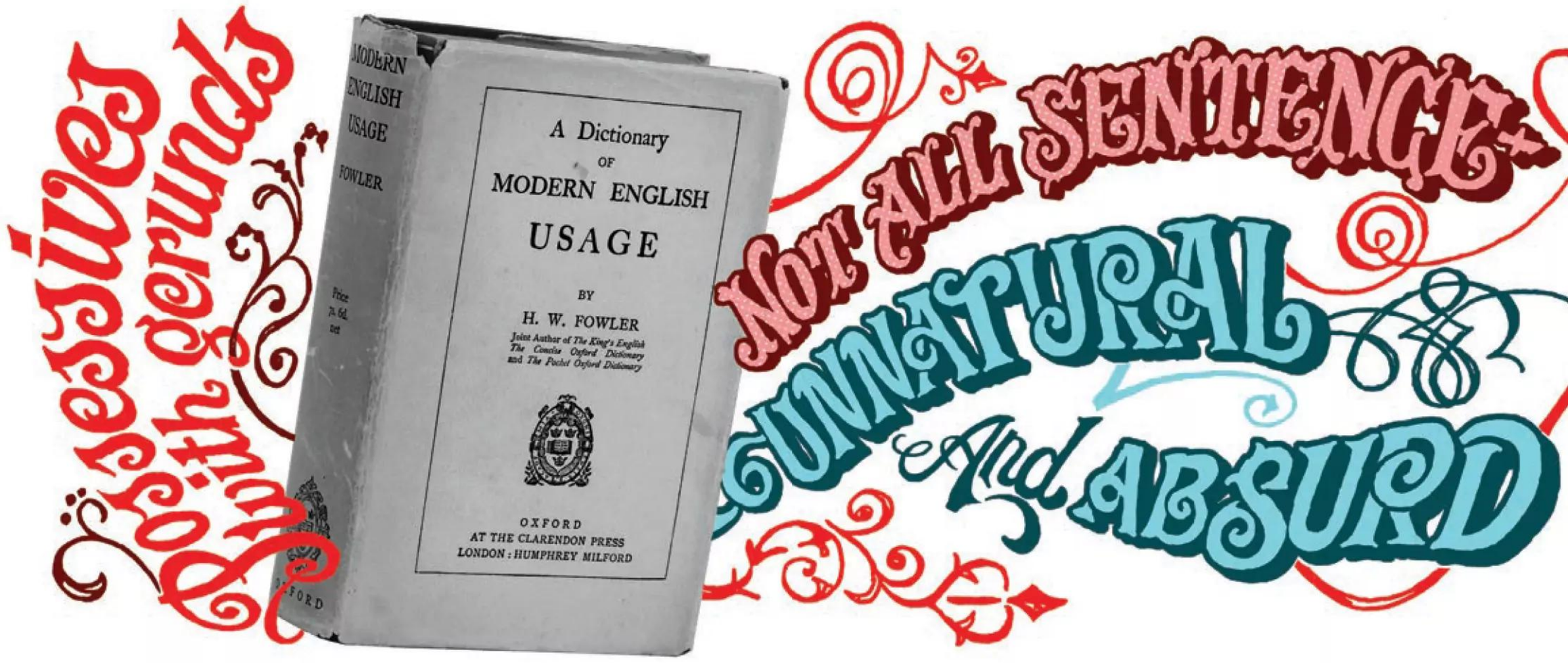
You could happily ignore Fowler's specious reasoning on "possessives with gerunds" but for its adoption by many usage guides since, including the style guide of the *New York Times*. This is bizarre, because if you adhere consistently to Fowler's rule you're bound to end up writing execrable English. Genuine examples he gives of supposed correctness include "will result in many's having to go into lodgings" or "to deny the possibility of anything's happening". According to Fowler, these absurd circumlocutions are mandatory if you're to avoid the (purely imaginary) error he's identified.

There is nothing wrong in principle with linguistic prescriptivism. As Randolph Quirk, a pioneering scholar of English language at University College London, noted in the 1980s: "What is certain is that very many people indeed feel uneasy about their own usage and the usage around them. University professors of English receive a steady stream of serious inquiries on these matters from people in all walks of life... These are real issues for real people. And rightly so."

There are a handful of excellent books that will provide serious answers to these enquiries. My picks would be *The Sense of Style* by Steven Pinker; *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M Williams and Joseph Bizup; and Merriam-Webster's *Dictionary of English Usage*. The crucial advantage for these authors is that they know the facts of English grammar and lexicography, and ensure their guidance is consistent with these. Few other style manuals consistently meet this prerequisite of usefulness, and Fowler is not among them.

Fowler was lightly revised by Ernest Gowers for a second edition published in 1965. Gowers was a civil servant and author of *The Complete*

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY SMITH



Plain Words (1954), a celebrated work on writing clear prose. He did a good job of stripping away stuff in Fowler that was outdated and prolix while retaining the essence and ethos of the book. His edition was well received by Fowler's admirers; a third edition, edited by Robert Burchfield and published in 1996, was by contrast widely excoriated. Burchfield, formerly chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, had in effect written a new book while retaining the talismanic name of Fowler. It had opinions on usage but was far more of a descriptive work than the original Fowler or Gowers's revision.

You'd have thought readers would welcome a dispassionate account of the state of the language. But that won't work with the particular constituency that, from my experience, is most likely to read commentaries on English usage. These are people who hold strong views on the "incorrectness" of certain constructions and wish to find them confirmed. Burchfield rarely offered that, however, and was in that respect more attuned to the way scholarly linguists work.

Even so, the third edition of Fowler is unsatisfactory. Burchfield was a lexicographer whose technical knowledge of grammar—there's no polite way of saying this—wasn't up to the job. An example is his long entry on the benighted controversy over prepositions ending a sentence. Burchfield correctly says it's a myth that a preposition at the end of a sentence (a sentence-terminal preposition) is ungrammatical, yet he bungles the analysis. The construction at issue is what's called a "stranded preposition". A preposition is said to be stranded if it doesn't immediately precede its complement. Not all stranded prepositions come at the end of a clause or sentence ("who were you out *with* last night?") and not all sentence-terminal prepositions are stranded ("this bed hasn't been slept *in*").

Both these types of construction are grammatical in English, but they differ. In the second example I've given, traditional grammars would classify "in" not as a preposition but as an adverb, precisely because it lacks a complement. That analysis is mistaken—it's still a preposition—but the relevant point is that the spurious objection to stranded prepositions has never been levelled at such constructions. Not understanding that the distinction is crucial, Burchfield cites this second type of construction anyway among his examples of prepositions at the end of a sentence, even though no one has ever claimed it is incorrect. Here's one, which Burchfield has taken from the *Times Educational Supplement*: "They must be entirely reliable and convinced of the commitment they are taking on."

Thus Burchfield's third edition of Fowler, well-intentioned but blundering, limped on till it was superseded by Butterfield's fourth. This volume (marketed as "Fowler's for the 21st century") is a better book: a serviceable and informative guide to usage. Butterfield is notably more permissive than Burchfield on such disputes as "disinterested" being used to mean uninterested and "anticipate" for expect. But Fowler, this is not; and there should be no titular fifth edition. That's not a criticism of Fowler the historical figure. It's rather a plea that publishers and pundits cease invoking the name of a guru whose knowledge was extensive, yet whose advice was of highly variable quality.

For the moment, Fowler's reputation seems secure. Simon Heffer, the historian and Conservative peer, expressed a common judgement when writing some years ago of the Fowler brothers' work: "Those who wished to aspire to the highest levels of English bought these books and learned from them. Those who did not continued in their acts of verbal butchery, usually unaware, and certainly unabashed." This undoubtedly encapsulates the philosophy of Fowlerism. Heffer applauds it; I think it corrosive.

The way native speakers use their own language is a body of evidence comprising a vast corpus of complex syntactic regularities and semantic consistencies. It's perfectly reasonable to dislike some usages and constructions, but they are still part of the language: they're not instances of butchery, philistinism or even mere decline. Writerly advice may be valuable to the extent it recognises, rather than stigmatises, these facts of language. And the body of facts will change over the course of a century. For all his insight, flexibility and sensitivity, Fowler made the irremediable error of identifying correct English usage precisely with the way he himself spoke and wrote. ◆

Oliver Kamm *is a journalist and writer*



Travel Insurance for Over 50s

- ✓ 24/7 English speaking emergency helpline
- ✓ Unlimited medical cover available[1]
- ✓ Covered 27 million+ travellers
- ✓ Trusted for 25 years



20% OFF[2]
BASE PRICES
CODE: IAG20

MAY 2025 Which? Best Buy TRAVEL INSURANCE

JUNE 2024 Which? Best Buy TRAVEL INSURANCE

FEBRUARY 2024 Which? Best Buy TRAVEL INSURANCE

Trustpilot Rated Excellent

defaqto ★★★★★ Travel Insurance 2011-2026 EXPERT RATED

INSUREANDGO
Go without the doubt

Call our UK Call Centre FREE
0800 249 4514
InsureandGo.com

^ InsureandGo Gold and Black achieved Which? Best buy. InsureandGo Gold and Black has been 5 Star rated by Defaqto. [1] Unlimited emergency medical expenses available on Black policies. [2] Discount applies to base premium of policies only and expires at 23:59 on 31/05/25. See website T&Cs for more details.

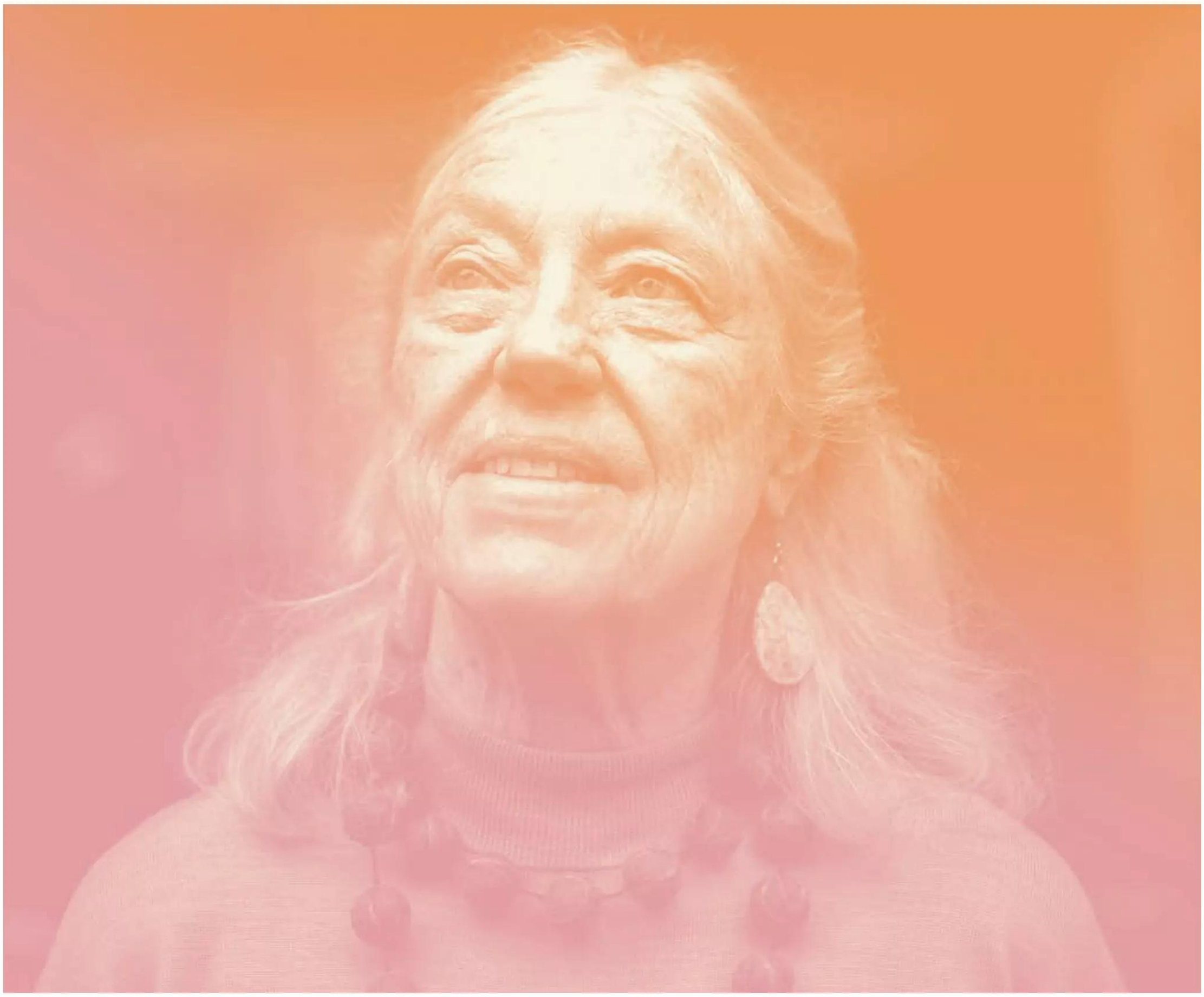
PEOPLE

In this section

Maggie Aderin *reaches for the stars* **51**

Park Chan-wook *directs a killing spree* **52**

Zandra Rhodes *thinks pink* **53**



© ALEJANDRO OLIVERAS

SECOND WAVE SEER

In feminism and in psychoanalysis, **Juliet Mitchell** *has always been ahead of the curve. She still sees things others miss*

by **ALONA FERBER**

In 1966, an essay far ahead of its time appeared in the pages of the *New Left Review (NLR)*. "Women: The Longest Revolution" was an analysis of how women are produced as a class. Its author, Juliet Mitchell, then a lecturer in English at Leeds University, was one of the people behind the new socialism that was emerging at the time as a reaction against Marxist orthodoxies. With the Women's Liberation Movement still nascent in Britain, her *New Left* colleagues weren't convinced that "women" was a topic worthy of an essay. Mitchell, who was married to

PEOPLE

Perry Anderson when he became editor of the *NLR* in 1962, has written about the editorial board meeting in which she, the only woman around the table, pitched her idea. "I was told emphatically that it was not a subject."

Drawing on Louis Althusser's structural Marxism, Mitchell would argue that the position of women was produced by a "complex unity" of "structures"—"Production, Reproduction, Sex and Socialization of children". The concept of "complex unity" applied to women was cutting edge, and arguably prefigured what is now commonly known as intersectionality. As Mitchell wrote back then, "The four elements of women's condition cannot merely be considered each in isolation. They form a structure of specific interrelation." This wasn't identitarian as such, but Mitchell saw that you couldn't fully understand women's oppression without noticing the knotty, interdependent layers that created and comprised it.

Despite the initial incredulity of her New Left peers, "Women: The Longest Revolution" soon found its audience in the burgeoning feminist movement. The essay "was widely translated and pirated with my happy connivance", Mitchell has written. In 1971, it would become a book, *Woman's Estate*, written in only six weeks "in the huge excitement about feminism" (the title was adapted from a William Blake poem). Last year, just over a half-century later, it was reissued by Verso with a new preface by Mitchell, now in her eighties.

This work was only the very start of a decades-long career. The coming years would take Mitchell from lecturing in English at Leeds University and being at the centre of the New Left, to becoming one of the most influential thinkers of second-wave feminism and psychoanalysis (she trained as a psychoanalyst in the 1970s—more on that later). And just as she started, Mitchell would continue to be pioneering: to see the things that others missed.



© R. BRIGDEN/EXPRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Mitchell, pictured here in 1973, challenged feminist peers on Freud before training as a psychoanalyst

I met Mitchell twice in 2025: first, on a spring day at Jesus College, Cambridge, where the professor emeritus and founder director of the university's Centre for Gender Studies has an office; second, in the autumn, at the house she used to share with her third husband, the social anthropologist John Rankine Goody, who died a decade ago.

Back in April, the woman who approached me in a sunlit college quad wore long red flower-shaped earrings (her favourite jewellery, alongside rings; she could "take or leave" bracelets and brooches) and a navy sun hat. She had smiling blue eyes and shoulder-length white hair, and she moved with the help of two walking sticks.

"There's something very nice about old age, which people don't realise," she told me later over coffee, reflecting on the physical indignities of being elderly, "which is that you could pop off any moment and you don't need to bother, in a sense."

Mitchell was born in 1940 in New Zealand, moving to England with her mother in 1944. She studied English at Oxford, then taught at Leeds and at Reading. Growing up in the 1950s, "the big change" on the left "was people leaving the Communist party. That was huge." In the 1960s, she became active in socialist and feminist politics.

The 85-year-old still thinks of herself as a socialist and a feminist—and has by no means retired. The night before we met, her day ended at 9.45pm; she had met online with a psychology group she established when she joined the college in the late 1990s. At a long, dark wooden

table in the faculty dining room, over celeriac chowder and salmon, Mitchell told me about her latest project: a book on Louise Bourgeois—her life in analysis and what made her so exceptional. The French-American artist—known globally for her nine-metre-high sculptures of spiders, among other works—spent years under intensive analysis and made 1,000 pages of notes on her therapy.

Mitchell thinks carefully before she speaks, and when she does it's often quiet. Every once in a while, she laughs with self-deprecation. "There's no question that she was exceptional. There's no question she was extraordinary," she says of her subject. "Bourgeois was brave enough to be mad and to live with her madness."

The two were due to meet, though Bourgeois died, aged 98 in 2010, just before they could. Still, Mitchell's memories are littered with fantasy dinner party participants of the highest calibre. With *Ms Magazine* founder Gloria Steinem she recalls (in the new preface to *Woman's Estate*) "tap-dancing with excitement… in celebration of the founding of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966". She was also "very friendly" with Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, the 1963 book considered one of the sparks for the Second Wave, the period of feminist activism that lasted until the 1980s and focused on women's legal, social and economic rights. She still wears a coat she bought with Friedan when the pair sneaked out of a meeting to go shopping in New York. She refers to Judith Butler, a former visiting professor at the Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies, as Judy (the world-famous philosopher wrote a highly complimentary cover blurb for the new edition of *Woman's Estate*).

In the early 1960s, Mitchell met Simone de Beauvoir, author of another foundational feminist text, *The Second Sex* (1949), along with the philosopher's then lover, the film director Claude Lanzmann. She got to know de Beauvoir "quite well". The pair marched together in Paris against the criminalisation of abortion, she recalls, with placards reading: "We've had abortions, please imprison us."

What was de Beauvoir like? "Very open minded, very honest, very integrated, very courageous." They argued "very strongly"—and often about psychoanalysis. But, de Beauvoir noted in her autobiography, Mitchell convinced her to think differently about Freud. "When all is said and done," observes Mitchell now, "she says I changed her mind."

Indeed, it was with her contrarian arguments on Freud that Mitchell would gain even greater notoriety as a feminist voice. The father of psychoanalysis was pilloried at the time. As Mitchell put it in a 2004 interview published in the journal *October*, he was seen as "the arch-patriarch". "He was a bad face on the calendar, and they put the dart through his eye," she tells me.

But Mitchell wanted to know more, so she read Freud. "Wait a minute," she remembers thinking. "This is a different thing altogether." His ideas were "terribly useful for understanding the position of women, not something that you want to reject". Of course, Freud could and would be critiqued, but "rather than abuse him, we have to use him". When Mitchell's second book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, was published in 1974 (it, too, has now been reissued by Verso, in January this year), there was "shock" in the United States and objection from her friends.

> *"I've begun to think that perhaps everything I do is because of something missing in what I've just done*

Even earlier, however, Mitchell noticed how feminism overlooked the ways in which oppression operates within us. *Woman's Estate* had a chapter on psychoanalysis. The "role and nature" of the family needed to be understood "from within", she wrote.

In that 2004 interview, Mitchell reflected on how she makes up for gaps in her own thinking. "I've begun to think that perhaps everything I do is because of something missing in what I've just done," she said. "After 'The Longest Revolution', I felt I hadn't considered how sexual difference was internalised so that, even when we didn't think about it, it is always there. With that problem in mind I started reading psychoanalysis and concluded *Woman's Estate* with a discussion of psychoanalysis and ideology, then eventually wrote *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. After the book, I felt I needed access to the material on which the theory was built, and I trained as a clinical psychoanalyst."

In this field, Mitchell would also break new ground—with her work on siblings. She argued that psychoanalysis had focused on the "vertical" axis of parent-child relationships to the exclusion of "horizontal" sibling relationships, and these were just as important. "It was there, and we weren't seeing it," she tells me. "So when I started to see it, I started to find it there, everywhere. No, not everywhere. But I found a history of it."

She explains part of the central sibling trauma: "The older child has been attacked by the presence of the new one. And sometimes the new one will be the one who wants to get rid of the old one." The elder sibling, meanwhile, thinks their "very existence" is under threat. Mitchell first wrote about these complex dynamics—of jealousy, of the fear of being replaced—in her history of hysteria, *Mad Men and Medusas*, published in 2000. Three years later, she followed it up with *Siblings: Sex and Violence*. In her 2023 book, *Fratriarchy: The Sibling Trauma and the Law of the Mother*, she showed how the positions of women—

PEOPLE

and indeed feminism—were key to understanding sibling trauma and how its effects extrapolate across society.

After lunch, Mitchell, showed me around her office, pointing out the shelf bearing research material on Bourgeois. Here, she also recalled how her innovation in psychoanalysis struck her like an epiphany. She was holidaying in France with her husband, they were writing together, and "I was sitting there looking at the sea and looking at the sunshine, and suddenly siblings dropped from the sky into my head. It came to me."

When we meet again, some months later, Mitchell's dark-blue plastic earrings were stark against her white hair, which brushed the shoulders of her grey-and-white striped turtleneck. We sat upstairs, in a room lined with books and filled with sunlight. Mitchell's brother, the artist Gregory Mitchell, had recently died. His paintings lined the stairs up to the second floor. They were also arranged against a window, facing out, so that passersby on the common outside could see them. "I like to think lying down," Mitchell said, and lay back on her sofa. Her long-time agent and friend, Candida Lacey, sat with us (later, as we discussed siblings, Mitchell encouraged Lacey to tell me about the time her elder brother tried to swap her younger brother for a puppy in Hong Kong).

Despite her years, Mitchell was as industrious as ever, and still very much occupied with Bourgeois. "My working day is working," she told me, "and if I'm not working, I'm not happy." Also, for fun, she was in the process of reading "the whole of Iris Murdoch".

The Bourgeois project had hit something of a snag since we last met. A friend and colleague of Mitchell's, Marie-Laure Bernadac, has written a biography of the artist, published in January, which draws from the same material—the artist's notes on the psychoanalysis she underwent regularly from 1952 to 1985. "I thought, wait a minute. I've got to show that I'm different. So, in a sense, I'm rewriting my own book on Louise Bourgeois."

Mitchell grows animated when she talks about Bourgeois. She clearly feels an affinity with the artist—and not just because, as she realised recently, the pair must have overlapped in New York's Central Park in the 1980s, "when [Bourgeois] was actually talking about her own feminism there and showing her own sculptures". When it comes to their attitudes towards fame, "I think she had the same reaction that I had," says Mitchell. "Both of us didn't particularly love being well known. I used the privacy of psychoanalysis to stop the well-known-ness of me in left-wing circles and feminism." (Judith Butler, on the other hand, "is particularly good at being famous" because they aren't "flaunting their fame in any way".)

I want to ask Mitchell about this moment in feminism, and the idea that feminism around the world is lost, perhaps even emptied of meaning. "The history of feminism is also the history of antifeminism," she responds, "and that's much more interesting than global feminism."

Seeing feminism as global is "crude" in any case, she adds. "It's differentiated everywhere." She notes that in Afghanistan, where the Taliban has rolled back women's rights to naught, feminists are risking their lives: "They're being slaughtered, and they're now divided into people who are frightened and people who are standing out. And that's a real and important tension, because those who are frightened are quite reasonably frightened." She notes, too, the brave women fighting for their rights in Iran.

When she says that she is "much more interested in the concept of bisexuality in feminism", I wonder whether she is referring to the big split in British feminism—certainly the one that takes up the most oxygen in the press—which some characterise as the trans versus women's rights debate. She isn't.

"I'm talking about something more interesting than gender and sex," she says. What Mitchell means is that, even with the most fluid approach to gender (a term she thinks is more "generic" than it is useful), people are still ultimately defined by binaries.

In this, she stands in opposition to the academic Jacqueline Rose, an old friend whose work has also focused on feminism and psychoanalysis, who has argued that we are at last overcoming the man-woman binary. But "if one does go across the binary, are you not thinking in a binary way?" Mitchell asks. This question comes from the fact that society is delineated by binary prohibitions; you can or you cannot do certain things, whether that's building a house in a particular area or committing a murder. "And it's prohibitions you must look at, not allowances," insists Mitchell. The idea of gender, she says, is more about allowance than prohibition, whereas it is the latter that "makes human culture". That's where her interest lies.

More than 50 years after the publication of *Woman's Estate*, is the position of women better or worse? "It's both. It was a such a high moment at the end of the 1960s, it was such an alive moment for women... and it was connected with the concept of the end of capitalism. Now we don't have that high, though many of us do have more choices, of course, and many of us don't. And misogyny is still rife."

Feminism has officially been through two more waves since the 1960s. Mitchell says she is "stuck" with the second, with ideas about "personalising the political" and the need to think more about oppression. Still, "rather than going backwards with it", she hopes she is "going forwards". And it is by focusing on "the details of the present world" that she might spot what peers have missed. It is "the minutiae... the relationships between people... that tell you so much about the bigger things".

And so Mitchell will keep thinking. She will read all of Iris Murdoch. She will write her book on Louise Bourgeois. She will go on seeing the things that others don't. ◆

Alona Ferber *is senior editor*

And now: *Maggie Aderin, Park Chan-wook & Zandra Rhodes* →



© ALAMY

STAR STRUCK

Astronomer **Maggie Aderin** *discusses feeling like the odd-one-out—and why science needs diversity*

by **FRANKLIN NELSON**

Before I can properly say hello to Maggie Aderin, she wants to apologise: the space scientist is about to take delivery of a new shed, so our interview might be interrupted.

In the end we are not disturbed. But the prospect of such a domestic event seems somehow too terrestrial for a person the British public has come to know for her deep knowledge of the universe beyond Earth and her eagerness to share it, both as an author and as a presenter of *The Sky at Night*.

While the BBC TV programme trains a lens on matters trillions of miles away, Aderin's latest book looks in the opposite direction. *Starchild: My Life Under the Night Sky*, published this February, recounts its author's journey to scientific success in the face of obstacles such as shuttling between the homes of her divorced parents and enrolling in 13 different schools, as well as more intangible challenges like prejudice.

Writing an autobiography was "never something I thought I'd be doing" and "far harder than I ever thought it would be", Aderin tells me. "Some of the times I was looking back on were quite emotionally challenging for me to revisit... Fundamentally I was loved and nurtured, but mine was an unusual childhood, and I hadn't realised quite how unusual."

Aderin, 57, is used to feeling atypical: the sole black woman on her physics course at Imperial College London in the 1980s, she says she has often been the odd-one-out in the "very white and male-dominated" world of space research. Yet her perspective on race and diversity has changed over time.

"Sometimes the onus is on the person who is 'the other' to try and fit in, and I think I've been doing that much of my life," says Aderin, who received a damehood in 2024 for services to science education and diversity.

Institutions need people of colour, she says, to combat groupthink. "When [minorities] are 'the other' in the room, we shouldn't feel on the back foot," she says. "We should feel positive because we are making a powerful contribution... it's something that's needed."

Aderin, who worked on the Nasa-led James Webb Space Telescope, has in recent months met US colleagues who have been on the sharp end of cuts made to research funding since Donald Trump returned to the White House last year.

Those reductions have been accompanied by a rollback of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in the public and private sectors. "Science needs diversity, and if we're reining back on that, science suffers as a result," Aderin adds.

Aderin does not wish to discuss individual politicians but says she "find[s] it sort of terrifying. Progress had been made, but it sometimes feels like two steps forward, eight steps back." She pauses. "I'll be glad when this [presidential] term is over, I'll put it that way."

The answer to pressures on science, she suggests, is increased collaboration. "Nations need to unite and balance the push in one direction... Individually we have little impact, but when we work collectively that's when things really happen. I'd like to see more of that collective mitigation."

One of the latest organisations to team up with Aderin is the Royal Institution, whose purpose since 1799 has been scientific education and research. In December, she became its 200th Christmas lecturer—a gig she calls "one of the highlights of my life". Featuring vivid demonstrations of magnification and a mini-rocket launch, Aderin's three talks on the solar system captured her warm and unique approach to science communication, which has seen her speak to about 660,000 people in the past two decades.

All that work has left her "knackered", Aderin jokes, while reminding her of the "resilience" that comes from persisting as a scientist in the face of failure. "The probability of me being here at this point in time was quite low," she says, "but somehow it all came together. I find that always surprising." ◆

PEOPLE

SWINGING THE AXE

In **Park Chan-wook***'s latest film, a laid-off worker goes on a killing spree. The director explains why*

by **PETER HOSKIN**



I'd been told before interviewing Park Chan-wook that, although he speaks good English, he prefers to use a translator—because he wants to make sure that his answers are "precise". After speaking to him, I can confirm: "precise" really is the word. Precise in his responses. Precise in the fold of the blazer across his lap. Precise in the arrangement of glasses on the hotel table between us.

This precision is unlikely to surprise anyone who has seen Park's work. Over the past quarter of a century, through films such as *Oldboy* (2003), *Thirst* (2009) and *The Handmaiden* (2016), the South Korean critic-turned-director has developed an aptitude for bringing exacting control—of camerawork, dialogue and editing—to crazy situations. "I put in a lot of thoughts and calculations leading up to a shoot and beyond," he admits, dressed in dark monochrome that perfectly matches the clothing of the translator next to him.

But if this makes the 62-year-old sound like a desiccated calculating machine, he is not. His bearing, at least during our conversation, is intelligent but not intense. He laughs and smiles freely. He finishes his observations about his own method by adding, "But I think my attitude towards the bigger picture of any project can't really be put into words... I think it comes from the heart."

Again, this is evident from Park's work—perhaps especially his latest, *No Other Choice*, which was South Korea's official submission for the Best International Feature Film award at this year's Oscars. It tells the story of a paper factory worker, Yoo Man-su (Lee Byung-hun), who loses his job and decides to murder everyone who stands between him and another role. And while the subject matter is as black as Park's patent shoes, it's also his most comedic film so far. Consider it a *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) for the age of economic precarity.

Park has known something of this precariousness while making *No Other Choice*. He first read the book on which it is based, Donald E Westlake's *The Ax* (1997), decades ago and immediately wanted to adapt it into a movie. "I even thought to myself," he says, "if I were a really good writer, this is what I would have written. It almost felt like my own story."

He then started talking publicly about the adaptation around the time of what is, to date, his only English-language feature, *Stoker*, in 2013 (though he has since directed two English-language television series, *The Little Drummer Girl* [2018] and *The Sympathizer* [2024]). There was a general assumption that, with *Stoker* done and Park feted by the likes of Quentin Tarantino, Hollywood would happily bankroll his latest endeavour.

Except it didn't. And it is now 13 years later. When I ask Park what happened, it is the only time a note of exasperation enters his voice. "That's a question that should be asked of the studio executives who make these decisions," he says. "But if I could make an assumption... I think it's because they couldn't imagine the comedy of the film from reading the script."

He ended up, of course, making *No Other Choice* in his home country, though you feel that the wounds have not fully healed. In the film, Man-su is laid off by a delegation of US businessmen; they're the ones who trigger his killing spree.

That's not where Park's own spree ends, however. There is an even worse economic scourge in *No Other Choice* than those Americans—namely, artificial intelligence. "It's very difficult to predict how it will continue to influence us," says Park, "which is why I took a more sci-fi, futuristic approach when I introduce AI near the end of the film." His vision, in that sequence, is of huge robotic machines cutting down trees to be supplied to unpeopled paper factories. The axe, it turns out, is coming for us all—with prejudice and precision. ◆



© ALAMY

LIFE IN TECHNICOLOUR

As a new exhibition opens in Bath, **Zandra Rhodes** *looks back at her career*

by **FRANKLIN NELSON**

A shocking pink bob and bright blue eyeshadow form my first glimpse of Zandra Rhodes. Seated in her design studio in South London, Rhodes has just got back from Bath, where she has been viewing the work of her assistants and curator Rosemary Harden.

"Zandra Rhodes: A Life in Print", which opened at the Holburne Museum in January, presents 34 vintage mannequins dressed in some of the fashion designer's most recognisable screen-printed garments. Dating from the 1960s through to the end of the last century, the pieces chart key moments in her career, as well as wider shifts in the history of style. And Rhodes—who fielded queries from her team while she took part in a recent workshop in Jaipur, India (fittingly, the "pink city")—is satisfied with the effort.

"I've been so lucky with some of the people I've worked with... it all came back to me when I saw them," she tells me of the garments. Designed for figures such as Queen frontman Freddie Mercury and Diana, princess of Wales, the range includes the button flower coat worn by Joanna Lumley as Patsy Stone in *Absolutely Fabulous*.

The exhibition, which closes in May, is "exciting", says Rhodes. "You realise just how much colour passed through my life... it's very uplifting. I hope people will come away feeling very happy, thinking that fashion can be joyfulness."

Rhodes, 85, has been a byword for colour ever since she founded her eponymous fashion house in 1969, applying her studies in textiles at the Royal College of Art to the realm of clothes. While she no longer manufactures garments, a vivid approach to working and living is as important as ever, even if, in Rhodes's eyes, the world has grown duller over time.

"When I look back, I can remember that one would drift down the King's Road [in Chelsea] in a floaty chiffon kaftan and probably a colourful headscarf," she says. "Now, you'd be looking down the King's Road and thinking, 'Is there a colour anywhere?' But it's got to change again: we can't have only grey or all white."

"The only constant in fashion is change," adds Rhodes, whose mother taught dressmaking. "I happened to have my first flowering when there were floaty kaftans... Then everything went a little more ethnic, and then punk came along and [French fashion designer] Thierry Mugler with the shoulders."

It was a change of scene that gave Rhodes her big break—more specifically, travelling from London to the United States in the early 1970s. Brits were wary of buying clothes made by a textile designer, but Americans took her "at face value as a dress designer", she recalls.

Rhodes, who received a damehood in 2014, is hopeful that "world travel keeps people coming here and that we're not just a little island off of the edge of Europe".

"We've got wonderful designers but they've got to get access outside," she insists, calling Brexit "the most stupid thing that could have happened".

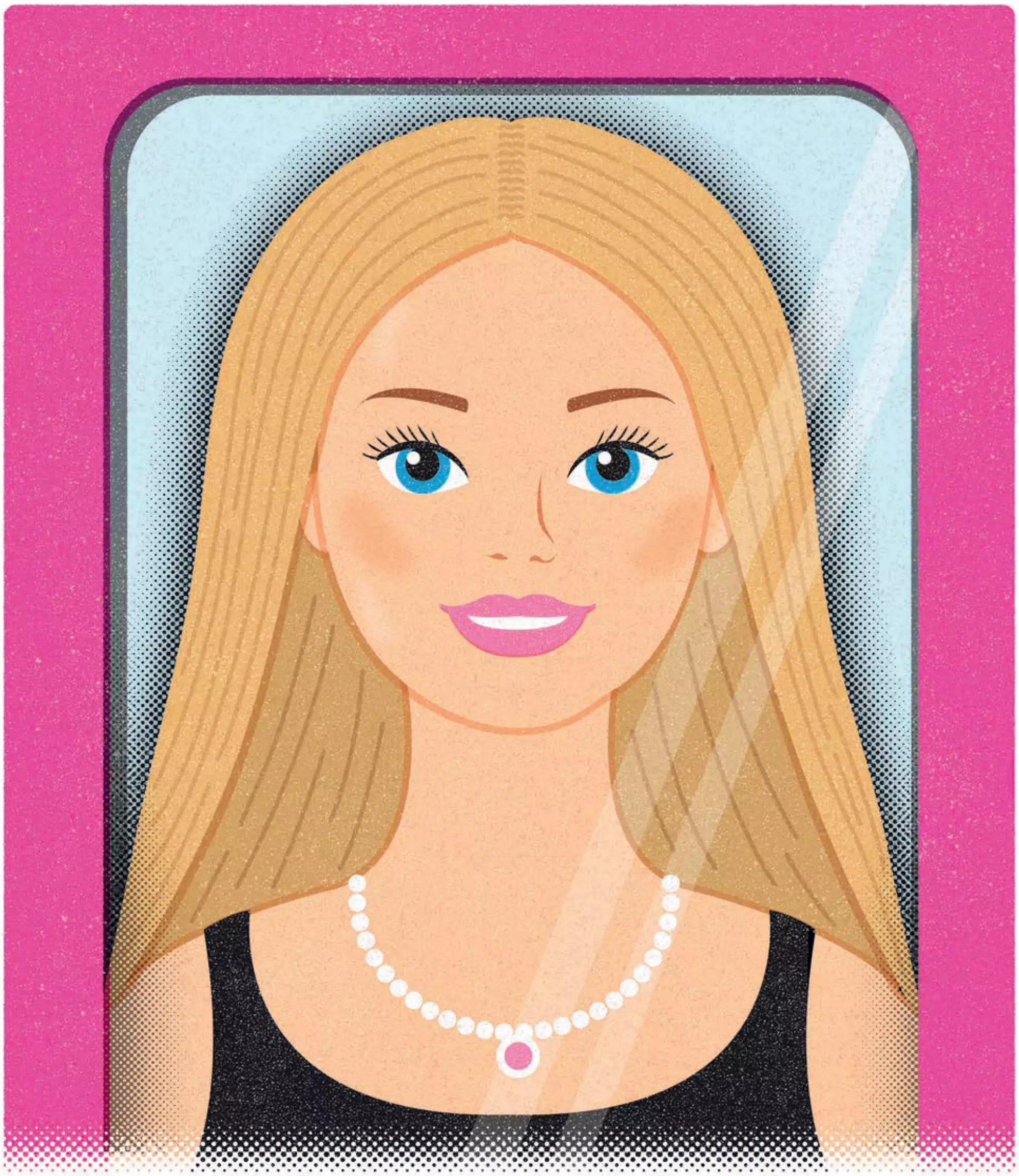
"It's not helped our youth... I was extremely lucky, because there was a lot more movement between the continent and America [in the early stages of my career]."

For Rhodes, the recent arrival of new talent to top roles in the fashion industry—witness Jonathan Anderson at Dior—is evidence that "the old order changes... maybe people are trying to look for new blood that will take us in a new direction". But though design remains important, she says it is the people wearing the pieces "who make them feel wonderful".

Beyond Bath, Rhodes is planning two exhibitions in the US and devoting more time to her foundation, but she has no intention of embracing a monochrome life.

"Colour makes me feel good... I find if I wear black, I blend into the background," she observes. "I think if I went grey, I'd feel like a little old lady, so I'd much rather stay as a little pink person." ◆

THE CULTURE



ILLUATRATIONS BY ADAM HOWLING

In this section

Two ways of seeing classical music *by Philip Clark* 59

The Modification of Bollywood *by Imaan Irfan* 70

What is art without Ovid? *by David McAllister* 72

Books

21st-century girls

Have market forces freed or trapped young women? Two new books provide different answers

by **EMILY BOOTLE**

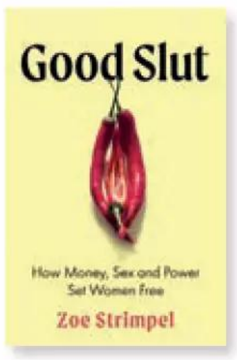
Who'd be a woman in 2026? Fillers, Ozempic, motherhood, non-motherhood, the 5 to 9 after your 9 to 5, "hair botox", splitting bills, Hinge, protecting your peace, emotional labour, body positivity, body neutrality, Retinol, egg-freezing, working it out on the remix... The digital age can feel like a minefield of questions, decisions and pressures, trivial and significant, personal and political. Meanwhile, men seem to lather up cheerfully with their £2.99 all-in-one face, hair, beard and body wash before toddling off to start wars.

Yet even with the most cynical mindset regarding, say, the extent to which the Kardashians have caused women to despise their own bodies and spend all their hardwon unequal income on correcting them, might we see what can so easily look like dystopia in a different light? Because, as a woman myself, I can speak to the fact that, often, what's difficult is less the pressure to be a certain way and more the pressure to choose what way to be. Is that boundless choice not what our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers have been striving for all along?

Two new books have very different perspectives on the same landscape. One is *Girls®* by Freya India, a gen Zer exhausted by the relentless demands made by social media of young women and determined to show the world its traps and snares lest another generation wastes their lives—and money—on an endless, pointless performance of girlhood that leads to detachment, depression and disassociation. The other, *Good Slut*, is by Zoe Strimpel. Born in 1982, she is both resolute in her assertion that "this is the best time to be a woman in the history of the West" and highly perturbed by the attempts of the "new feminist right" to row back on the advances of the sexual revolution. Each book touches on familiar contemporary and feminist themes—career, sex, bodies, self, money—but at the heart of both are age-old, universal questions about the meaning of choice and freedom.



Girls®: Gen Z and the Commodification of Everything
by Freya India
(Swift Press, £20)



Good Slut: How Money, Sex and Power Set Women Free
by Zoe Strimpel
(Constable, £22)

India's *Girls®* certainly paints a grim picture of what it was like to grow up as social media became a fixture of mainstream culture. By the time she was in her early teens, she and her peers were being rated for their looks by boys online. They would check Snapchat every morning at school for new filters that smoothed their skin and warped their features, to the point that editing pictures of themselves—which they felt obliged to post consistently—became so routine that the unedited versions disgusted them.

"Sometimes I would accidentally hit the *undo* button, see the real me flash up, and feel repulsed," India writes. "My face and body were unbearable, in ways I had never even noticed before but now could not unsee." By 2021, India says, 85 per cent of girls had altered photos of themselves online—hardly surprising when they were being pushed videos by TikTokers explaining how to stop using your facial muscles so as not to get wrinkles, or the Instagram "FIX ME" filter that gave you plastic surgery in all the areas it deemed necessary.

Seemingly in opposition to this overly sanitised, airbrushed, unreal world, there was also something altogether too real for young minds: porn. India writes that "many of us watched violent porn before we even had a first kiss, before even holding hands with a boy".

The result of all this—which, delivered in a stream of statistics and matter-of-fact first-person commentary, enough to freak out even the most hardened digiphile—is a feeling of being trapped and sealed off from real-world connection, from spontaneity and community, from the things that enduringly matter. India is less concerned with offering alternatives than laying out quite how impactful digital culture has been on her generation; she hints at, rather than specifies, her enthusiasm for marriage over "hook-up culture"—

THE CULTURE

but a loose ideological alliance with the likes of Strimpel's apparent arch-nemesis Louise Perry, a strong voice of the "new right feminists", is detectable through her lamenting the high prevalence of divorce (and India has appeared multiple times on Perry's podcast *Maiden Mother Matriarch*).

In stark contrast, *Good Slut* is a strident argument against the idea that things are currently bad for women, as well as an impassioned critique of the people who perpetuate that idea. Victimhood, Strimpel argues, is a vicious cycle. She is pro-promiscuity, pro-divorce, pro-girlbossery, pro-single motherhood, pro-money, pro-Tinder, pro-having it all. "Pro-choice", obviously—but universally pro-*options*. "In being allowed to act on their desires, needs and curiosity—'individualistic' or not, 'selfish' or not, 'healthy' or not, 'natural' or not, culturally produced by capitalistic greed and so-called vested interests or not—women have real space in which to be full human beings; they are motivated, capable, ambitious and independent," she writes. But "already women are deciding it's either not liberty at all, but capitalist patriarchy, or that we've had too much and all that freedom is bad for us."

Perhaps we, the generations who have never known life without the contraceptive pill or no-fault divorce, take it all for granted. Yet Strimpel is also lucky, on the individual level which she so privileges, to be able to exercise these freedoms, not to feel enslaved by the very forces of capitalism and the free market which she identifies as facilitating them in the first place. India is not blind to the "empowerment" that her generation has inherited, it just doesn't feel as though they are truly empowered, since they spent most of their childhoods comparing pictures of themselves to other girls on a tiny screen. "How has a generation of girls and young women given more power and opportunities than ever before ended up so fragile and risk-averse?" she asks. "And how is it possible that a generation of women promised the freedom to be whoever we want, with more ways to express ourselves than any before, is falling apart?"

Perhaps we, the generations who have never known life without the contraceptive pill or no-fault divorce, take it all for granted

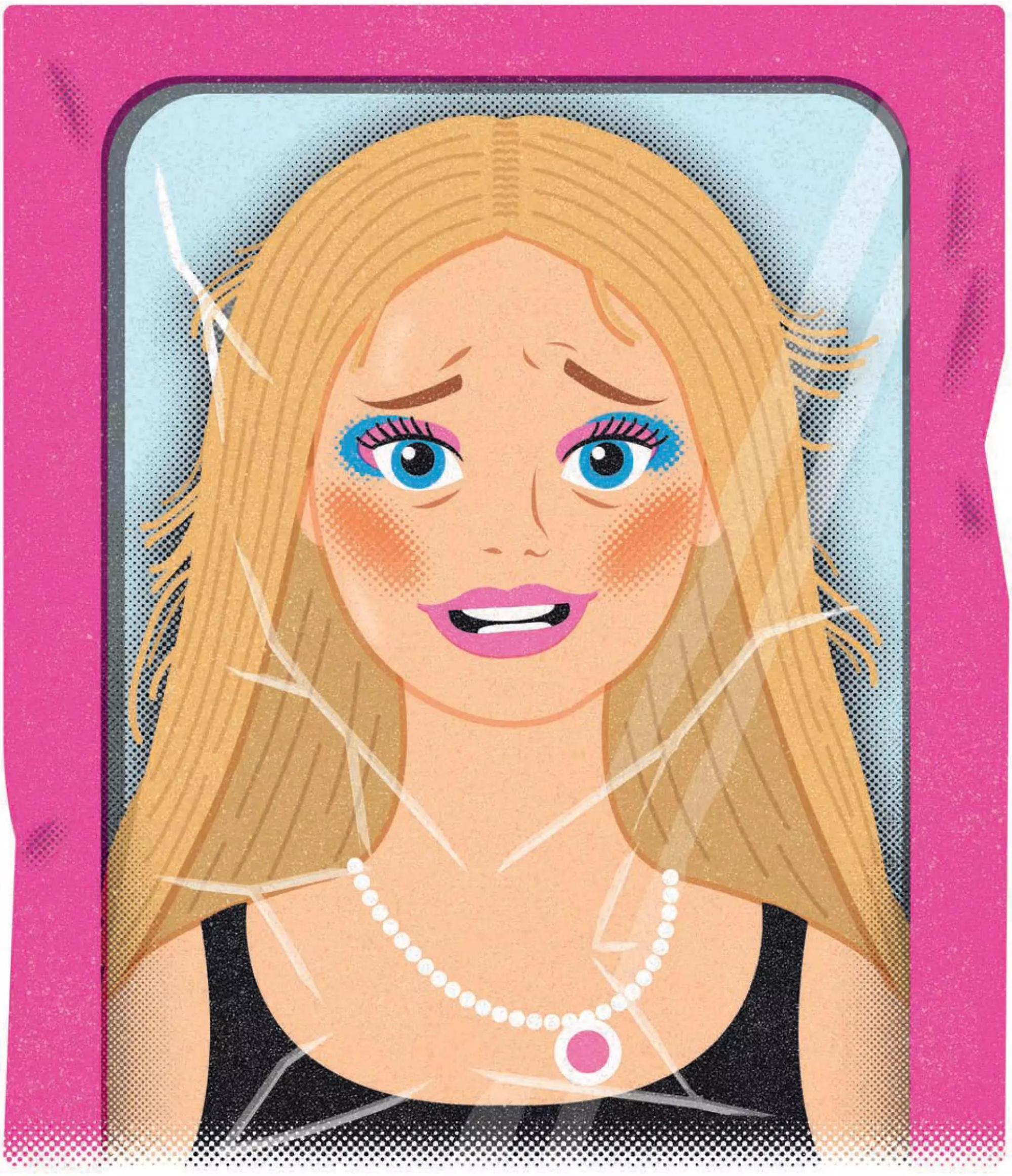
Well, she thinks she has the answer: "Every experience of girlhood is intruded upon by the market," says India. But "Freer markets, freer women" is Strimpel's blunt assertion of why neoliberalism and its individualistic ethic does not deserve its status as a scapegoat for all ills. Freedom begets freedom; the more women feel sexually free, she argues, the more likely they are to bring that sense of freedom to the workplace, the economy and "other domains of ambition". Women's ability to be part of the market, by this account, is perhaps the most crucial advancement of the feminist cause that there has ever been. It means women are no longer relegated to the home or the family unit; they can survive alone. In the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, Strimpel observes, "professional horizons were severely limited and this entrenched their powerlessness, boredom, subservience and misery." India, perhaps predictably, laments that she and her peers wasted a childhood on the "all-consuming" feeling that they must, at all costs, "become a girlboss".

Yet, more broadly, India is not talking about finding success in whatever field they choose, but primarily about women—and girls—marketing *themselves*. Social media has made us into products as well as customers, creating a bizarre and new exchange of value. The experience of being active on social media somehow compresses the sense of being an entrepreneur, consumer and object into one disorientating cloud of ambition, narcissism and perfectionism, which blends with others' clouds and ends up with whole weatherfronts of demand and specificity. In which context, the answer to her question is clear: "the freedom to be whoever we want" is compromised when we are treating ourselves as a commodity to be consumed in a market which undeniably has existing preferences—and not just a marriage market or a career market, but an *everything* market. A market for the whole plethora of human diversity and experience, in which you must single yourself out as uniquely worthy of investment. Sure, we're free in that we could technically go in any direction—but when there are so many criteria at once, we pay the price of overwhelm. It is quicker, easier and more immediately rewarding simply to go along with what market forces demand.

The effect—as anyone who has been on Instagram or seen recent developments in celebrity plastic surgery will observe—is that many young women and girls end up becoming clones of each other, which, I'm sure Strimpel would agree, is not very liberal at all. India is right that self-realisation online, no matter how innocuous its intent, leads inevitably to advertisers shoving certain products, mental health diagnoses and "aesthetics" in your face (a 2020 report suggested that teenagers scrolling through Instagram would see an advert every 10 seconds). You become more of that thing to the point that, eventually, you become categorisable as a neatly boiled-down type—this is, in turn, both an easier persona for brands to advertise to and an easier product for you to sell to others. We are, she says, "on a conveyor belt headed for some final, standardised product", a common version of which is visible for all to see via what the *New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino described back in 2019 as "Instagram face".

Strimpel is resolutely optimistic about online consumerism: "Browsing, choosing, rejecting or buying stuff is one exercise of private fantasy, offering a feeling of mental freedom, the ability to range freely away from the oppressive watchfulness of certain gender regimes" (though she does admit that "for young women

REVIEWS



THE CULTURE

in particular, social media has amplified negative force fields, from glamourising eating disorders [to] promoting underachievement"; that Instagram reels and TikToks make us "slide down into a solipsistic rabbit hole that blots out real-world offers and opportunities"). But is the "feeling of mental freedom" the same as actual freedom, if women and girls are encouraged to pour their souls into the databases of tech companies, only to be fed back a prepackaged identity?

As well as those feminists pushing for the traditional bonds and structures of family and motherhood, Strimpel rebuts those on the left who lament that nobody can be free until everyone is free; that the system is rigged against us; that capitalism benefits nobody but those at the very top. She is right that some feminists may take for granted how much capitalism has given us, but, *a posteriori*, it is difficult to argue that the digital climate in which women currently operate does not reinforce historically patriarchal standards. Strimpel references John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, in which he observes that women split themselves between being surveyor and surveyed, understanding the way in which men will see them and adjusting their behaviour accordingly.

On my own social media, where there is a constant stream of women blowdrying their hair, applying makeup and parading their bodies for review, I struggle to see how this is not still true—and not still troubling. I also find it difficult to understand how spending hard-earned cash, and valuable time, on products and rituals to make ourselves more palatable and visually pleasing to men is "an exercise of private fantasy". Is it not evidence that women are still under enormous pressure to change themselves, whether that is directly for the benefit of men or to increase our value in the more nebulous and febrile digital market?

Compared to domestic abuse and access to safe abortion, this is superficial stuff, of course, and many of the themes may look from the outside like the trivial, circular concerns of the terminally online. But, as India points out, it also means girls are "harming themselves, starving themselves and killing themselves" when they cannot meet the required standards.

One modern trend of which neither author approves is the "tradwife": women who surrender themselves to domestic servitude, cooking, cleaning and looking pretty for their husbands. While India objects on a conceptual level, not digging in beyond using the label to demonstrate both the pervasiveness and fickleness of online trends, Strimpel rejects it ideologically; it is so obviously regressive that we needn't even explain why ("Read: sex doll," she writes). What is interesting is how the tradwife embodies a new reality for women in which they can create a kind of independence through the act of performing their own womanhood. Because tradwives, as we know them from Instagram, aren't simply *being* tradwives—they are posting about it and, if they have large followings, monetising it. Being an influencer, or even having a medium-sized social media presence, is a way of commodifying the self; often it is specifically a commodification of the state of being a girl or a woman (just look at the language of the online trends: girl math, girl dinner, clean girl, hot girl). That the version of womanhood that tradwives choose to perform is itself regressive feels almost incidental when you consider that they are doing it in the first place: their identities, lives and choices are put deliberately centre stage, their breadwinning husbands relegated to the background.

Throughout history, women have not been able to opt out of the demands placed on them without risk of exile, financial ruin or being burned at the stake. Our ability to function as individuals with dreams, preferences and individual habits, to be able to indulge our sexual and intellectual curiosity, shouldn't be taken for granted.

It's difficult to understand how spending hard-earned cash on products to make ourselves more palatable to men is 'an exercise of private fantasy'

And yet: how can we ignore the fact that the same forces that have given rise to such autonomy have also enabled a world in which one in six teenagers claims to be on TikTok or YouTube "almost constantly", and where a generation is growing up disconnected and nihilistic? I'm not sure it is possible to interpret girls' ability to self-realise online as free choice when we know that social media is deliberately, chemically addictive, and when those same girls are often also intensely insecure and vulnerable. I'm not sure that what look like freedoms—hookups, selfies, professional ambition—always feel like them when the pressure to do them right, in front of a watchful audience, feels almost crushing.

It's easy to see why a generation of young women is seeking meaning and connection in old institutions. It is not only marriage that interests gen Z; there has also been an upwards trend in organised religion among the young, too. But Strimpel is right to be wary of regression. It's all too easy to look back misty-eyed, without taking into account why we fought so hard to be able to opt out of those exact institutions.

We have to hope there is a middle ground between the current climate of hyperindividualism and the subservient housewives of the 1950s; I certainly intend to live a life in which I keep both my screentime and unhealthy people-pleasing at a minimum, while still enjoying the benefits of both communal bonds and the conveniences afforded us by consumer capitalism. I think most of us are still figuring out precisely what that looks like. In the meantime, perhaps we women could stage small rebellions. I might just pop to Boots tomorrow and choose the £2.99 all-in-one. ◆

Emily Bootle *is a commissioning editor for culture at the i paper*

REVIEWS



© ARTIUM

Books

The great discordance

Two new books approach music in very different ways. In one, it's a strictly bounded realm. In the other, there's glorious spillover

by **PHILIP CLARK**

Had Robin Holloway published *Music's Odyssey*—described by its author as "an invitation to the glorious long voyage of Western classical music"—30 years ago, he might well have got away with it. By day, Holloway is a composer and emeritus professor of music at Cambridge university, no less, and you wonder how someone preoccupied with the fabric of music and sound, and for so many years, came to write a book this constricted in its purview, opinions paraded as truths, with prose so admiring of its own cleverness. Holloway has spent his working life interacting with young people, but somehow the memo that ideas of classical music are evolving has passed him by. The dust in these pages is suffocating.

Elizabeth Alker, best known as a BBC Radio 3 presenter, is of an age where, in a parallel universe, she could have been a Holloway student. In fact, she's a Leeds English graduate but, as she reveals in her own new book, *Everything We Do Is Music*, her parents studied music at Huddersfield university. Clearly, she feels very much at home at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, where, in the course of researching the book, she attended a performance of *Primordial/Lift* by the American composer Pauline Oliveros, whose work with electronics and non-standard tunings has proved an inspiration to many, including Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon and tape-loop electronic composer William Basinski.

You won't read about Oliveros in *Music's Odyssey*. In a book of more than 1,000 pages, in fact, Holloway finds space for only three female composers, one of whom—Hildegard of Bingen—is wearily dismissed as "a psychedelic bore". Nor over those same pages will you find any mention of black composers of the magnitude of Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk or Anthony Braxton among those B-listers—from Frederick Delius to Colin Matthews—whom Holloway does showcase. Writing music history must never, of course, be reduced to box-ticking and quotas, but such omissions are symptomatic of limitations that fatally undermine the book, with Holloway's neat sub-

THE CULTURE

headings and potted composer biographies feeling like reheated lecture notes.

It soon becomes apparent that—truthfully—even Holloway himself isn't up for the journey upon which he expects everyone else to embark. His own work as a composer expresses itself around an enthusiasm for 19th-century romanticism: Schumann, Schubert and Wagner, in particular. His compositional dialogues with the past favour harmonic prolixity, tonal allusion and references layered like pasta sheets in a lasagna: music history as material to be reshaped. But Holloway, as writer, states that his own story "really starts with JS Bach"; no shame there, except he's expecting his readers to wade through a hundred or so pages of oddly dutiful writing about Renaissance (and earlier) music that too often he wishes were something else. The music of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina—the absolute guv'nor when it came to defining polyphony during the Renaissance—is diminished in Holloway's estimation for "what it does *not* do, or does not *care* to".

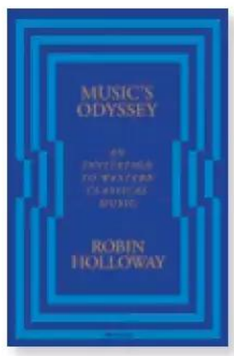
Which is a point of view, I suppose, but not what I hear. Hectoring dismissals of the Dutch Renaissance figure Jacob Obrecht (a "Lego-composer") and the Franco-Flemish polyphony of Orlando di Lasso ("the sense of a production line") arrive with a smartarse smirk.

Having come through the 19th century, Holloway's consideration of how composition fragmented during the 20th century—which takes very nearly half the book—rarely rises above the prosaic, and has a control freak's requirement for music to conform to the values they believe in, no matter a composer's own mindset or cultural background. John Cage has been taken down by far more informed people than Holloway, whose critique offers nothing new or wise. His assertion that *4'33"* was Cage dealing with "silence" is an alarming schoolboy error—the piece was an invitation to put a frame around already existent sounds—while Holloway is simply wrong to claim it as a "joke" and that Cage was "trying it on". What could it be about the California-born Cage, whose father was a wacky inventor and who moved to New York, a city where sound pervades every pore, that made him think of music differently to the entrance requirements to read music at Cambridge? That's what we really need to know, although Holloway doesn't even seem to realise it's a question.

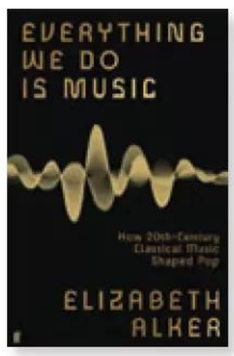
Holloway's disdain for minimalism comes as no surprise, but the terms with which he haughtily dismisses a whole movement of composition—throwing "its bargain-basement bridge over the abyss" and "a hostile reaction to the perceived over-complexity, artificiality, elitism, tyranny, ugliness, non-appeal, of the ascendent avant-garde"—reveals another deadening flaw. These were commonly held views three decades ago, when Holloway's assessment would have raised few hackles. But in 2026? Recent books, typified by Kerry O'Brien and William Robin's *On Minimalism*, tell a far more nuanced story. Even Pierre Boulez, the bogeyman of modern composition, programmed Steve Reich's 1970 *Phase Patterns* during his tenure as music director of the New York Philharmonic; the group he founded, the Ensemble intercontemporain, has subsequently recorded Reich and John Adams. And on it goes.

It reads as though Holloway's reference points ossified around the turn of the last century. His peculiarly mean-spirited takedown of Michael Tippett, particularly his later music, fails to grapple with the music's visionary magic, or push understanding further than regurgitating a critical consensus that has persisted since the 1980s. Then you look at his bibliography and realise he hasn't engaged with Oliver Soden's major new Tippett biography, published in 2019. Even Holloway's adoption, and acceptance, of the term "classical music" tells us that he isn't prepared to countenance the possibility that the phrase itself is very much up for discussion these days; even if you disagree that it should be, pretending that it's not being talked about can be nobody's idea of good enough.

Classical tradition ought to be a springboard for exploration, whereas Holloway's assumption seems to be that only classical music people have a right to take a view on classical music as they define it, which is not how music operates. Had Holloway kept his ear to the ground, for instance, he'd have realised that writing about minimalism without mentioning figures such as Julius Eastman, Laurie Spiegel and Arthur Russell—who have all enjoyed a revival of interest over the past decade—is to tell an incomplete history, one dictated solely by the victors. Eastman was black and gay and could be found either singing Baroque oratorios with the New York Philharmonic or playing disco sets. He didn't fit then into purist definitions of minimalism; now he queries the neat historical categories Holloway tries to draw.



Music's Odyssey: An Invitation to Western Classical Music
by Robin Holloway
(Allen Lane, £45)



Everything We Do Is Music: How 20th-Century Classical Music Shaped Pop
by Elizabeth Alker
(Faber, £20)

Questions following on from that—about why only white manuscript composers get to have a "classical music"—flow through Alker's book in various forms. It concerns itself precisely with the rockers, jazzers, noise merchants and electronic wizards who borrowed, sometimes without realising it, from classical tradition. In that sense, it acts as a useful corrective to Holloway, although it is let down by Alker's tendency to trip over descriptions of compositional technique.

The basic premise of *Everything We Do Is Music*, though—that a healthy interchange of ideas between classical and pop has enriched both traditions—is an idea well worth exploring. Alker understands, unlike Holloway, that sound

REVIEWS

enjoys freedom of movement beyond any artificial boundaries placed around it. We read about Paul McCartney, in the early days of the Beatles, buying an LP of Karlheinz Stockhausen's pioneering 1956 work *Gesang der Jünglinge* and learning how manipulating tape could make sound move in mysterious ways. We read, also, of how he took lessons in the random dispersal of material from Cage's music and from the cut-up technique of William S Burroughs's novel *Nova Express*—and elsewhere.

A fabulous photo from 1966 shows McCartney sitting front-row, looking like an overenthusiastic schoolboy, attending a lecture led by the leading Italian composer Luciano Berio—but then I stumbled over Alker's description of McCartney watching, later that same year, the "communist and free improviser Cornelius Cardew play[ing] the prepared piano at the Royal College of Art". Lying deep in the mythology of British free improvisation is indeed the story that, one night, McCartney came to hear the free improvisation group AMM play one of their regular gigs at the RCA. Cardew was certainly around AMM at the time, but was known more as a composer and was as likely to have been playing cello (and wasn't yet a communist).

Alker's book is packed with such factual guesstimates and gaffes. Erik Satie's *Vexations* was not "840 variations on a one-minute theme", it was a single theme repeated 840 times, while the technique Olivier Messiaen evolved—a rarefication of Schoenbergian 12-tone thinking—for his 1949 piano work *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* was a very limited experiment and not, as Alker implies, the technique that sustained him in perpetuity.

Mispresenting Satie's *Vexations* has the unfortunate effect that her ensuing discussion of John Cale—arriving in New York from Wales and performing in his near-namesake John Cage's 19-hour performance of *Vexations*, in 1963—is built on wobbly foundations. Satie's looping of the same music over and over helped embed into Cale's consciousness a fresh sense of musical pacing. By the time he founded the Velvet Underground with



© KEYSTONE PRESS

No boundaries: Karlheinz Stockhausen was a pioneer of electronic music as well as an orchestral composer. Previous page: "Violin and Newspaper" (1917) by Juan Gris

Lou Reed, this presented as an obsession with drones, which he sustained on his trusty amplified viola. In New York, Cale had also encountered the famously irascible, egomaniacal composer La Monte Young, fresh from California, whose drone-based pieces quivered and hovered like the colours in a Rothko, held in place by his intricate rethinking of how music might be tuned. A highlight of Alker's book is the interview she managed to score with Young over Zoom, informative and hilarious by turns, ending with him proclaiming his own genius: "You can't have power around me unless I give it to you, because... very few people know as much about music as me."

Also well described is the lineage between Jean-Michel Jarre's ambient electronic soundscapes and the earlier *musique concrète* of Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaeffer, music assembled from sounds recorded in the environment. Similarly, Alker makes the fair point that Pauline Oliveros was already dealing with ideas now considered "Cageian" before Cage.

But a final section—tracing the degrees of separation between Steve Reich, The Orb's house classic "Little Fluffy Clouds" and Brian Eno— navigates the book towards a disappointingly downbeat finale. Reich gives Alker a version of the same interview he's been giving to every journalist (me included) for the past few decades; his mantra "good music is good music" is platitudinous at best.

At this point, Alker lashes out at Boulez. This is not, one suspects, because she's spent hours in fevered-brow analysis of his *Le Marteau sans maître* or *Pli selon pli* and realised this music is not for her—which would be utterly fair enough—but simply because that's how the consensus of current music journalism shakes out these days: post-1945 European composition destroyed everything, then Reich, Adams and their ilk rode to the rescue. Which is a disappointingly generic place for this book to end up. Nobody seems to realise that Reich has become exactly the sort of ideologue—going around telling people the music they shouldn't write—that once he accused Boulez of being. Anyone who thinks that all postwar composition, including Stockhausen, György Ligeti and Luigi Nono, sounds uniformly the same, and displeasingly so, needs their ears testing.

Indeed, as people involved in music we all must test our ears constantly, far and wide outside our comfort zone, rooting our engagement in hard and concentrated listening, never merely following the pack by landing the same critical strokes. Holloway, writing about Charles Ives, lacks the purview to place him within the wider context of Jelly Roll Morton or Charles Mingus, where he becomes less of a historical outlier; Alker lacks the killer independence of thought that underlies all genuinely great music writing. Both are a problem, but where Holloway's book is clunky dialup writing for the AI age, Alker at least plugs herself into something current. ◆

Philip Clark *writes about classical music, jazz and rock*

THE CULTURE



© ASSOCIATED PRESS

Books

A right good scandal

Corporate misdeeds can change politics for the better, argue two academics. But is that still the case?

by RICHARD ROBERTS

REVIEWS

At the start of June 2013, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) appeared to be dead in the water. It was almost 18 months since the then European commissioner for justice, Viviane Reding, had originally presented the draft GDPR bill to the European Parliament. During that time, Facebook, Amazon, Google and friends had lobbied relentlessly to hold up, defang or (preferably) kill GDPR. There was no way privacy campaigners could match the resources deployed by big tech. On 2nd June that year, Jan Philipp Albrecht, the bill's rapporteur in the European Parliament, told *Le Monde*, despairingly, that more than 3,000 amendments had been submitted—80 per cent of which originated from outside the EU, "primarily from Silicon Valley giants".

Four days later, the first stories about the Edward Snowden leaks appeared in the *Guardian* and *Washington Post*. The United States' National Security Agency, the world learned, had been accessing ordinary people's data and big tech firms were entirely complicit. Suddenly, GDPR was back from the dead. Reding leapt into action, promoting it as Europe's answer to the scandal Snowden had revealed. The following March, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly to pass the GDPR—just 10 MEPs voted against it—and the European Council finally approved it in June 2015. The version of GDPR that came into effect in May 2018 did not contain everything that privacy campaigners had hoped for, but it was a far sight better than what had seemed possible on the eve of the Snowden leaks.

For political scientists Pepper Culpepper and Taeku Lee, this story is emblematic of the way that corporate scandals can trigger positive change. Most of the time, public opinion is no match for corporate lobbying. But scandals can cause "latent opinion" to harden into outrage, making it too embarrassing, at least temporarily, for the lobbyists' pet legislators to stand in the way of action. "Corporate scandals are one of the few forces capable of upsetting the comfortable capture of government by large corporations," they write in *Billionaire Backlash*. Scandals "open a window of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs"—people like Reding—to get laws passed that, in normal times, would never see the light of day.

Culpepper and Lee first spotted this dynamic at play when studying the passage of the Dodd-Frank Act, the US package of financial regulation designed to prevent a repeat of the 2008 crash. Believe it or not, the financial crisis itself was not enough to make a robust regulatory response inevitable. In April 2010, the draft bill was stuck in the Senate, where Republicans were using the filibuster to try to extract concessions to weaken Dodd-Frank. Then, on 27th April, the Democratic senator Carl Levin, chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, orchestrated a piece of political theatre that broke the deadlock. He led a marathon 11-hour interrogation of Goldman Sachs executives, in which he confronted them with excerpts from internal emails that made it clear the bank had knowingly screwed its own clients in the runup to the 2008 crash. Addressing Goldman's then chief financial officer, David Viniar, Levin asked, "When you heard that your employees, in these emails, said, 'God, what a shitty deal,' 'God, what a piece of crap'—when you hear your own employees or read about those in the emails, do you feel anything?" Viniar's response: "I think that's very unfortunate to have on email."

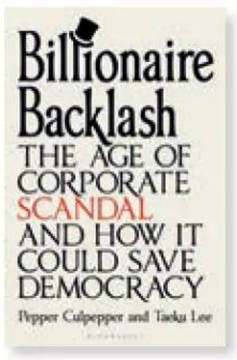
Levin's intervention worked. Almost overnight, the filibuster collapsed, and within three months Dodd-Frank was on the statute books. "What is interesting about the collapse of the filibuster in April 2010, and the subsequent passage of the Dodd-Frank law," observe Culpepper and Lee, "is that no-one in Congress changed their minds on the substance of Dodd-Frank... What changed was the *political cost* to Republicans of opposing the bill." There are limits to even the most brazen politicians' ability to brazen it out.

Unfortunately, not all corporate scandals have this kind of salutary effect. In 2015, *Inside Climate News* revealed that scientists working for ExxonMobil had developed sophisticated models as far back as the late 1970s showing that global warming was real and that burning fossil fuels was a major contributing factor. The company's senior management was briefed at the time, yet Exxon subsequently spent decades sowing doubt about the certainty of climate science. Exxon knowingly misled the public, just as Goldman knowingly misled its clients. But the #ExxonKnew scandal "sank without leaving a visible trace on American climate policy".

Why the discrepancy in outcomes? Culpepper and Lee put it down to the fact that financial regulation was a "hard" issue for most Americans in 2010, whereas by 2015, climate had become an "easy" issue. "Hard issues require cognitive work for voters to puzzle through conflicting considerations about how the choices before them relate to their own personal interests." On the eve of the Levin hearings, most voters didn't know enough about the details of Dodd-Frank to have a strong opinion for or against. Crucially, they *knew* they didn't know enough. This made them open to persuasion. By the time the story about Exxon's decades of duplicity broke, on the other hand, most Americans had long since made up their minds about the desirability of tackling climate change.

In 2023, Culpepper and Lee surveyed 36,000 people from four countries—the UK, France, Germany and the US—about their views on climate change. What they found is that "Americans are not exceptional in what they *think* about climate change and the environment. But they are exceptional in how *certain* they are that they understand the issue well enough to have an opinion about it." When public opinion is as calcified as it is in the US on climate, scandals lose their capacity to provoke change.

Climate policy is not the only issue where the transformative potential of a



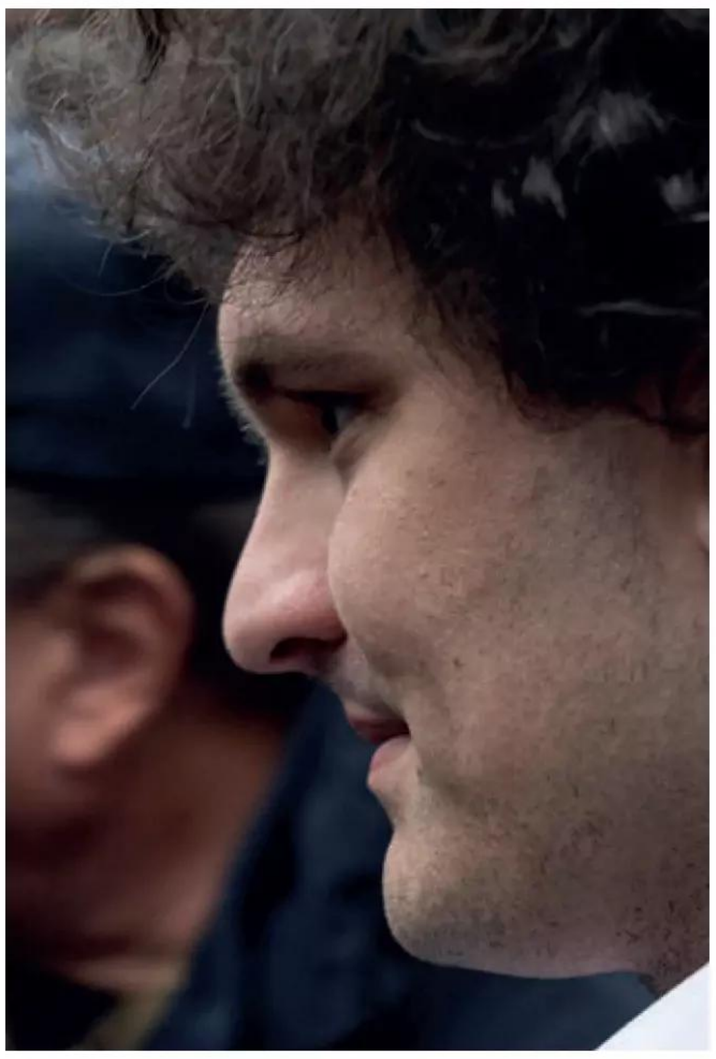
Billionaire Backlash: The Age of Corporate Scandal and How it Could Save Democracy
by Pepper Culpepper & Taeku Lee (Bloomsbury, £20)

THE CULTURE

good corporate scandal has been defused by extreme polarisation, disinformation and a fragmented media environment. Cryptocurrency regulation is another case in point. FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried's fall from grace in 2022 could have been the spark for action to make the crypto world less of a Wild West, Culpepper and Lee suggest. But Americans never arrived at a shared interpretation of the scandal. Republicans and Democrats both interpreted events "through the lens of a pre-existing, well-formed set of beliefs". Despite the trickiness of the subject matter, they fell back on old certainties.

Crudely, Republicans' individualist worldview—coupled with the fact that Bankman-Fried was a prominent donor to the Democrats—led them to conclude that he was a bad apple. Democrats, meanwhile, blamed a rotten system for enabling him. In a survey conducted shortly after the scandal broke, 31 per cent of Democrats agreed that lack of sufficient regulation caused the crisis; only 14 per cent of Republicans agreed. Partisan media exacerbated this divide: among Democrats who first heard about the FTX scandal via a left-leaning source such as *MSNBC*, the proportion blaming lack of regulation was 42 per cent; for Republicans who got their news from a right-wing source such as *Fox News*, the proportion dropped to 12 per cent.

At this point, it is worth contemplating a question that Culpepper and Lee fail to address: what if the phenomenon they are describing—the ability of a corporate scandal to catalyse unified public outrage and a widely shared view of what needs to happen next—is, in fact, already a historical artefact? Their argument that *corporate* scandals matter is itself based on the observation that *political* scandals have largely lost the power "to create shared understandings in public opinion". In the US, the causal link between political scandals and political consequences was broken somewhere in the quarter century between Watergate and the Monica Lewinsky affair. Not coincidentally, in between these two events, the Federal Communications Commission repealed the so-called "Fairness Doctrine", which had required broadcasters to give adequate airtime to different viewpoints on controversial issues, ushering in an era of extreme partisanship in news media.



Disgraced: Sam Bankman-Fried during his trial for crypto crimes. Previous page: the collapse of Enron in the early 2000s came after one of the great corporate scandals

Have corporate scandals now also been rendered harmless to those in power? It is notable that the most compelling examples given by Culpepper and Lee in support of their thesis are all at least 10 years' old. In the intervening decade, the forces undermining the capacity of societies to arrive at a shared interpretation of any event—media fragmentation, entrenched partisan identities, deliberate disinformation—have become stronger. "With democratic publics ever more siloed in the information to which they are exposed," Culpepper and Lee admit in the book's final chapter, "[billionaires] can now sow immediate doubt about the scandals that once would have reined them in."

The authors have a decidedly technocratic proposal for dealing with this: "Require major networks and news websites to develop their own classification scheme for news outlets themselves, including a 'deliberate distortions of the truth' scheme." An independent regulator would then assess news sites according to this scheme, giving them a monthly grade for truthfulness, which they would be required to post prominently on their homepage. This proposal forms part of what the authors label a "good populist" agenda (though "technocratic centrist tinkering" would be more accurate).

Along with their truthfulness ratings for news sites, Culpepper and Lee's other flagship policy proposal is enhanced disclosure requirements for large private companies. They would like the awarding of vast government contracts to Elon Musk's SpaceX to be made conditional on the company opening its books to public scrutiny. In other words, they would like SpaceX to be subject to the same financial reporting requirements as its publicly listed rivals Boeing and Lockheed Martin. Fair enough, but calling this a "populist" demand is surely a stretch.

To be fair, Culpepper and Lee acknowledge that, as "two professors from elite universities" (Culpepper is based at Oxford, Lee at Harvard), it is not for them to dictate the content of a "good populist" policy programme. But, even if offered tentatively, their ideas about what "good" looks like reveal a blind faith that the problems of plutocracy can be solved through better regulation. That faith permeates every story in the book. They are adamant that interventions like Dodd-Frank and GDPR have made the world a safer, better place.

Sure, regulatory breakthroughs are often followed by "periods in which governments move back in a deregulatory direction"—a strikingly anodyne allusion to the men who love chainsaws—but they are optimistic the pendulum will swing back when the next scandal breaks. That assumes we are still capable of arriving at a shared interpretation of events, though—alas, an increasingly shaky proposition. ◆

Richard Roberts *is head of research at the sustainability thinktank Volans*

© PACIFIC PRESS MEDIA PRODUCTION CORP

Books

Revelation through repetition

The protagonist of Solvej Balle's 'On the Calculation of Volume' is living the same day again and again. Has she got it all figured out?

by **MATTHEW JANNEY**

There was a night as a boy when I couldn't sleep ahead of a football match, too wired by thoughts of the sporting heroics I might achieve—or fall short of—the next day. While tossing and turning in my bed, I began thinking about my teammates already asleep in theirs. And if we experience sleep as a mere passing blip—as soon as we enter its tunnel, we are seemingly shot out the other side—could it be that they were in fact already waking up to tomorrow while I was still stuck in today? Were they already feeling the static from their long, red football socks, flattening their pillow-ruffled hair with water from the bathroom sink, and shoving soggy cereal in their mouths? Could it be that we were existing in two different temporal dimensions, entirely out of sync?

In Solvej Balle's near-addictive septology *On the Calculation of Volume*—the first three volumes of which have been published in English over the past year, with the fourth due in April—a version of my childhood thought experiment is taken to delightful, delirious ends. Tara Selter, an antiquarian bookseller living in the fictional town of Clairon-sous-Bois in northern France, is reliving 18th November again and again, while everyone else—her partner Thomas, friends Marie and Philip—lives it as though for the first time. We know this because Tara is writing a diary—at the start of book one, she has lived 121 iterations of the same day; by the end of book three, 1,892 have passed, and we aren't even halfway. "There is too much November in the air," she writes, with characteristic calmness, echoing that mournful lyric by Czesław Miłosz, "There is too much world."

Over the course of the first three books—six have already been released in Denmark, and Balle is at work on the seventh—Tara describes her 18th Novembers in conversational prose whose outward lightness conceals a hidden density; Deborah Levy would be a good Anglophone comparison. She flits with ease between the high and the low. A paragraph beginning, "I had heated up the potatoes in the oven," soon morphs into a discussion of the "demarcation line" between the two time zones in which she now finds herself; shifts captured in smooth translations by Barbara J Haveland (books one and two) and Sophia Hersi Smith and Jennifer Russell (book three). There is a magnetic monotony to her prose and it feels remarkably intimate, not only because of the diary form but because Tara is, for now, alone in this looping universe; we are the only people who are, in some way, there with her, who *get it*.

Many of Tara's entries are dedicated to trying to decipher the intricate logic of her new existence. Though time has glitched, it still leaves fingerprints of its passing: her hair and nails grow; a burn on her hand heals; an ankle injury swells up and down; some purchases stay while others vanish; chocolate turns grey. But there are cracks and inconsistencies—what belongs in her world versus her former world is hard to grasp. After making eggs with Thomas one day, two are missing from the carton but the shells are no longer in the bin. How to make sense of this paradox?

Tara seems more curious about her situation than disturbed by it, and this is her strength as a narrator—she settles in to the unsettledness, she "plucks" at the world around her, she puts names to inexplicable phenomena, almost taking pleasure in this "zone of indecisiveness". There are no opportunistic attempts to play the



On the Calculation of Volume (I-III)
by Solvej Balle, tr Barbara J Haveland, Sophia Hersi Smith & Jennifer Russell (Faber)

THE CULTURE

lottery or have affairs with her new unsolicited superpower. She is enquiring, observant, meaning-seeking, as if she can finally look into how things work, now that everything has stopped working.

While time loops in art are nothing new, neither are they all that common. I immediately think of Bill Murray being repeatedly slapped in the 1993 film *Groundhog Day* as the form's trademark, though there are earlier examples: Philip K Dick's 1964 sci-fi novel *Martian Time-Slip* and Richard A Lupoff's 1973 short story "12:01 PM". Nietzsche, never far from a philosophical hoo-ha, wrote about "Eternal Return" in his 1882 book *The Gay Science*. But Balle maintains in interviews that her inspiration was James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which takes place on 16th June 1904, and that the idea came to her in 1987, six years prior to the Hollywood version.

Before *On the Calculation of Volume*, only Balle's short story collection *According to the Law* had been translated into English. In 2006, weary with the best-seller-obsessed publishing world of Copenhagen, she moved to Ærø, a small island of about 6,000 inhabitants. It is here, ironically, and not her country's capital, where she found commercial success with *On the Calculation of Volume*: the first three volumes earned her the 2022 Nordic Council Literature Prize, while volume one was shortlisted for the Man Booker International prize in 2025. Septologies, however, are a crowded market in the Nordics; in neighbouring Norway, Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, while Jon Fosse—another septologist—won the Nobel prize for literature in 2023. Though Balle is well known in Denmark's literary circles, Danish friends tell me she is not a household name—and, it seems, has little desire to be.

Balle's prose, however, is relatable and readable even with its heady, conceptual core. *On the Calculation of Volume* does not take place in abstraction: its location is rainy northern France, not some planet in outer space; its protagonist a bookseller who deals in dusty old encyclopaedias, not some mad scientist experimenting with time. And by tinkering with the laws of reality, Balle somehow brings us closer to it.

"We behave as if nothing has happened," Tara writes, "take the strangeness of it all for granted and get dizzy if life shows itself as it truly is; improbable, unpredictable, remarkable." She is not writing about her world here, but ours, the one she used to inhabit before she slipped through time. Suddenly our days, weeks, months, years seem like little human fictions, mere stories we wrap around ourselves to provide a semblance of coherence against an incoherent world. Reading the book, I found myself asking—yes, again and again—who is actually the one stuck here? Who is the one cut off from how things really are?

So how did this all happen, Tara keeps wondering, as do we. How did she fall through, into, out of time? She pores over events from the original 18th November—Paris, meetings, hotel, work trip—in the hope of finding an explanation. But nothing significant took place. Business as usual. On the morning of what should have been the 19th, she initially dismisses seeing yesterday's newspapers at breakfast as no big deal. Perhaps today's editions haven't been delivered yet, she thinks. But it's when she sees someone drop a slice of bread again, hesitate and swap it for a croissant that the nightmare of her situation dawns on her. She is suddenly like Major Kovalyov from Gogol's "The Nose", waking to discover his face is missing a rather central feature. Or like Gregor Samsa transforming into a giant insect in *The Metamorphosis*. She experiences a moment of truly Kafkaesque horror.

Through her protagonist, Balle projects a vision of freedom that is hopeful; a way to find pockets of resistance against something beyond our control

This moment of dislocation is the collection's centre of energy, its big bang. Tara's story then becomes a straightforward Odysseus-like tale of finding one's way home. But how? What was straightforward is now totally bent out of shape. Tara can't seem to find the secret door, the hidden code. She struggles to accept there is no neat explanatory pattern; Beckett's "You're on Earth. There's no cure for that!" would fall on deaf ears. What Tara experiences is something like grief; she is suspended in a circular melancholia that won't resolve into mourning.

Against this alienation, intimacy becomes a most precious currency. At first, Tara spends considerable time bringing Thomas into her world. Each morning, she has to explain the inexplicable. He understands. Then forgets the next day. She explains again. He understands, forgets. And so on. It is the book's most moving sequence, the sadness of his forgetting sharpened by her remembering. But, Tara writes, "I remember those as the happiest days. Ever. I felt loved."

Only by being so far apart can Tara and Thomas develop this closeness, Balle implies. It reminds me of Rainer Maria Rilke's conception of how we get intimacy wrong—"a merging of two people is an impossibility"—and how to get it right: "once the realisation is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvellous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them." This is the work's great achievement (and why authors break the laws of reality in literature): to reveal our own world back to us in a way we couldn't see before.

The subtext of *On the Calculation of Volume*—a work about being stuck—is freedom. What actually constitutes freedom? Does it have to mean the opposite of stuckness? It seems Balle's

REVIEWS



© TT NEWS AGENCY

Solvej Balle on Ærø, the small Danish island she calls home

answer to this is a resounding *no*. Though Tara can't move through time, she moves freely through space. In book two, craving the shape of seasons, she stages the passing of a year by travelling to different parts of Europe: she finds winter snow in Scandinavia, spring lambs in Cornwall, summer heat in the south of France, autumnal winds in Germany. "If I want seasons," she realises, "I will have to build them myself." She makes new homes for herself, physically and intellectually. Her survival tool is reinvention—and it sparks motion.

She is also free to write, the very act of which is an enactment of freedom. "There may be healing in sentences," writes Tara. Through her protagonist, Balle projects a vision of freedom that is hopeful; a way to find pockets of resistance against something beyond our control.

Don't we all want to find our way home, be understood, discern the hidden mechanics that propel our life forward? By reducing the gap between Tara's situation and our own, Balle gives the book a mirror-like lucidity. As Tara recounts with eagle-eyed detail the same vignettes she sees day after day—fans heading to a football match in Germany, Thomas tending to his vegetable patch—somehow she seems freer than us all; the only soul who is awake in a world of sleepwalkers. They are the ones who are stuck, not her.

"When I started out, I had the feeling that I was writing a love story," said Balle in an interview. Reading that, I thought about Roland Barthes's magnificent sentence: "The very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new." How do we keep on saying "I love you," Barthes asks, without suffocating its meaning through repetition? This is precisely Tara's challenge: to give the same day inflections that will be forever new, to transform repetition into renewal. And it's one she takes on with grace. Love doesn't offer a panacea, but understanding her predicament as an act, a marriage of the familiar and the new—just like love—might help.

This applies to Balle, the author, too. How can she sustain the energy across the seven books, and not just give Tara, but the reader, inflections of newness? At times, Balle's diversions or digressions—when Tara's bag is stolen, long meditations on the Romans, passages that describe observation after observation without much point—appear flat, arbitrary attempts to push the narrative forward. She also ends each volume with a minor cliffhanger; this feels unnecessary, a little defensive even, given there are so many other strengths to the works that would keep us reading. At the end of book three, however, there are hints that the story will take a more political turn, which would add a compelling new dimension.

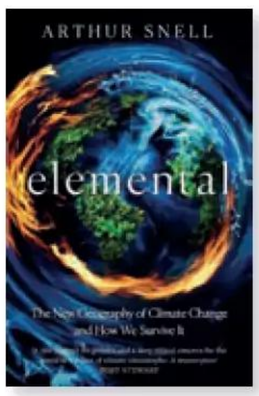
So, what next? Will Tara find a way out? Will her nightmare resolve itself? Perhaps we, like Tara, should resist looking for the hidden code, the answer to the riddle. Tara's line, "I cannot get out, but I can find ways in," is a better guiding post; less resistance, more acceptance. And that seems important wisdom for us all, powerless as we are to the greater forces that orchestrate our life. ◆

Matthew Janney *is a journalist specialising in eastern Europe*

THE CULTURE

Books in brief

Elemental: The New Geography of Climate Change and How We Survive It
by Arthur Snell (Wildfire, £25)



In this account of the ways in which a changing climate will affect political regimes, Arthur Snell, a former diplomat turned "geopolitical affairs consultant", makes a compelling case that "climate change changes everything". Geography has always been a key determinant in global affairs, but now "the climate crisis means that *some* aspects of geography are changing in real time, rather than geological time".

Perhaps most importantly, it is changing where in the world we can reliably grow food. In the Sahel, increasingly frequent and severe droughts and floods have already decimated agricultural productivity. As a result, the region, home to 350m people, has become "ungovernable": six countries experienced military coups within a two-and-a-half-year period in the early 2020s. Imagine what might happen as agricultural yields in India, China and Brazil decline.

The destabilising effect of climate change is also felt in regions that are becoming more hospitable—or, as in the case of the frozen north, navigable. Donald Trump may claim in public that climate change is a "hoax", but his desire for Greenland (and, for that matter, Canada) suggests that at least some of his advisers believe the scientists when they say the Arctic is melting. His counterpart in the Kremlin certainly does: as the polar ice disappears, a new "Great Game" is underway at the top of the planet and, right now, Russia is in the box seat.

Snell argues that climate change may also be a stabilising factor in some—albeit rare—instances. For example, *if* China refrains from invading Taiwan, it will be because of worsening food insecurity. Its reliance on imports makes its leaders nervous about a potential naval blockade.

Which nations will rise, and which will fall, in our climate change-affected future remains uncertain, but *Elemental* is essential reading for anyone interested in these questions.
Richard Roberts

Light and Thread
by Han Kang, tr Maya West, e yaewon & Paige Aniyah Morris (Hamish Hamilton, £12.99)



Han Kang, the Korean novelist, was the first writer born in the 1970s to win the Nobel Prize in literature. Han now has readers all over the world, but her friends still describe her as introverted, shy and given to keeping where she lives a secret. It's no surprise, then, that her writing is both mysterious and appealing.

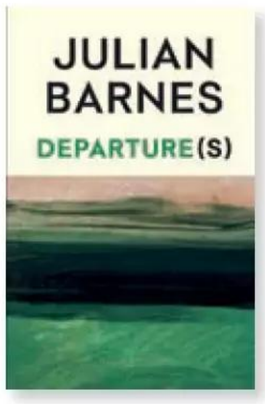
The day before the Nobel presentation, Han was struck down by one of her terrible recurring migraines. She spent the day in bed, thinking about what she was going to say to the assembled dignitaries.

When the moment came, she touched on her five novels, of which *The Vegetarian* is the most famous and *Human Acts*—about the Gwanju uprising of 1980—for many the most moving. But it was her description of finding a small box of her first poems written in pencil that shed the brightest light on the roots of her creativity.

Han's new book, *Light and Thread*, which begins with her Nobel lecture, goes a great deal further than disclosing what she told the dignitaries who were invited to Stockholm in December 2024. Gathering together essays on a 20-year-old overcoat or the small teacup she used while writing her last book, *We Do Not Part*, and which she donated to the Nobel museum—as well as poems and photographs, some going back nearly two decades—Han explores not just what makes her write, but what drives her over and over to return to writing.

Writing, for Han, is like gardening. Or love. "It is the gold thread connecting between our hearts," she wrote in one of her childhood poems. As soon as she finishes one book, she starts another. "Because that's the only way to be connected again." *Light and Thread* shows how writing helps Han make sense of the world; more than that, it's what makes her human.
Fiammetta Rocco

Departure(s)
by Julian Barnes (Jonathan Cape, £18.99)



Julian Barnes has an announcement to make. A few pages into his diverting remarks on the follies and tragedies of memory, he tells us emphatically, "this will be my last book". The departure(s) of his title are thus his disappearance as a writer, preliminary to his disappearance as a person. He has cancer of the blood which will be his companion unto death, and this will be his last word.

At which point, this being Julian Barnes, it all gets a lot more complicated. Just before I finished the book, its wrapping fell off and it was only then that I saw the hardback cover bore the following endorsement from Philip Larkin: "A mesmeric original." Larkin was referring to *Flaubert's Parrot*, but the point stands for the whole oeuvre, of which this may be the parting shot. Barnes quotes Larkin's "Poetry of Departure" admiringly; this is his Novel of Departure(s).

Only it isn't quite a novel. It's "one of those hybrid things" which Barnes's female

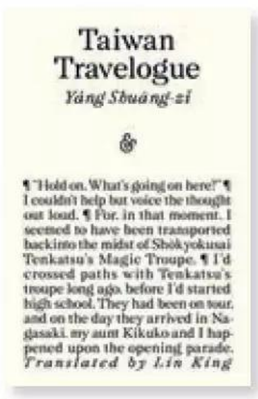
REVIEWS

lead Jean admonishes him for. Barnes himself, or "Barnes", is the direct interlocutor of Stephen and Jean, the subject of the story in the middle of this meditation on memory. Larkin once said that the English novel had a beginning, a muddle and an end. The story of Stephen and Jean is the tale of two people who start out in life together and then try to rekindle their romance. A beginning and an end—but no middle.

Slight as they are, you will root for Stephen and Jean. And you will root for the author, too. As he says in response to Jean's criticism of his love of the hybrid form: "don't think I don't know what I'm doing". Maybe he means it when he says this will be his last book. But maybe that is to confuse author with narrator. And maybe he will just forget.

Philip Collins

Taiwan Travelogue
by Yáng Shuāng-zǐ, tr Lin King
(And Other Stories, £14.99)



If, after reading the first few pages of *Taiwan Travelogue*, you mistake it for a genuine memoir written in the 19th century, you'd be forgiven. To all appearances, the book would seem to be a newly unearthed literary gem from Japanese colonial Taiwan, the first-person account slotted in between not

Chizuko is introduced to Taiwan's diverse array of foods in long, torturously mouthwatering passages

one but *four* sets of translator's notes. In actuality, though, this is Yáng Shuāng-zǐ's erudite, multidimensional and timely debut novel, first published in Mandarin in 2020 and now deftly translated by Lin King.

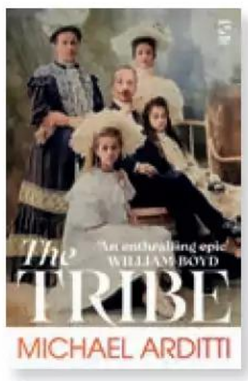
Reminiscent of Catherine Lacey's *Biography of X*—another brilliant work of faux non-fiction—by way of Rick Stein, it centres on famed Japanese writer and self-professed "glutton" Aoyama Chizuko, who sails to Taiwan in 1938 for a book tour, determined to eat her way around the country. Thanks to her "cherubic" but enigmatic interpreter Ō Chizuru, she is introduced to the island's diverse array of foods, which she logs—and thus preserves—in long, torturously mouthwatering passages.

But Aoyama-san—though a vocal opponent of Japan's colonial "Southern Expansion" policy—remains comically oblivious to how demanding, ignorant and entitled she is. Because of her "mainlander" status, an awkwardness festers in her relationship with Chizuru, whom she is falling for.

Painstaking historical research by Shuāng-zǐ results in a novel that is stunningly intricate. Minor details, from "patriotic bento" to decommissioned bridges, are pieced together to tell a nuanced, moving story of a region that continues to be torn apart by colonial forces, the oncoming war a harbinger of more change for its cultures and customs. It's a thoughtful, impressive and ultimately hopeful read—but make sure you have snacks to hand.

Miriam Balanescu

The Tribe
by Michael Arditti
(Salt Publishing, £12.99)



When the new Holocaust Museum of Greece opens later this year in Thessaloniki, which was once one of the only cities in Europe where Jews were the majority, it would do well to stock copies of Michael Arditti's ambitious new novel about a family of wealthy Sephardic Jews.

The Tribe opens in June 1911, when Greece's second largest city was still part of the Ottoman Empire. It follows the exploits of the Carrache family, whose ancestors left Spain for what was then called Salonica after their expulsion in 1492, taking in six decades of tumultuous history that sees the fictional family scattered across the globe.

We meet Jacob Carrache on the festooned streets of Salonica, waiting for the Sultan's arrival. "He had every reason to be contented with his lot. At fifty, he was in his prime, with a lovely wife and five healthy children. The Carrache businesses were thriving," Arditti writes, from a third-person perspective that shifts, chapter to chapter, between various family members. (The family tree at the start of the book will prove invaluable.) In this first section, all five children—Leon, Esther, Irène, Ruben, and Bella—get a turn shifting the story forward, as well as Jacob's wife, Mathilde, and his social climbing, tobacco factory manager, Mercado.

We get adolescent rebellion, parental matchmaking and the stirrings of a nascent Sapphic relationship, nimbly headed off by Jacob's machinations, but the opening 150 or so pages of this hefty read are but an appetiser before the narrative meat. By 1913, shortly after the Greeks invade, the Carraches are on the move again, this time to Paris, where part two starts in September 1939. The war years will not be kind, as the novel's closing third, set in the early 1960s, make clear.

Arditti is a skilled and knowledgeable storyteller, and this is a fascinating, if slightly wooden, tale. With so many family stories to impart, and quite so much history to get through, there is an excess of exposition. Which luckily doesn't entirely detract from an epic reading experience.

Susie Mesure

THE CULTURE

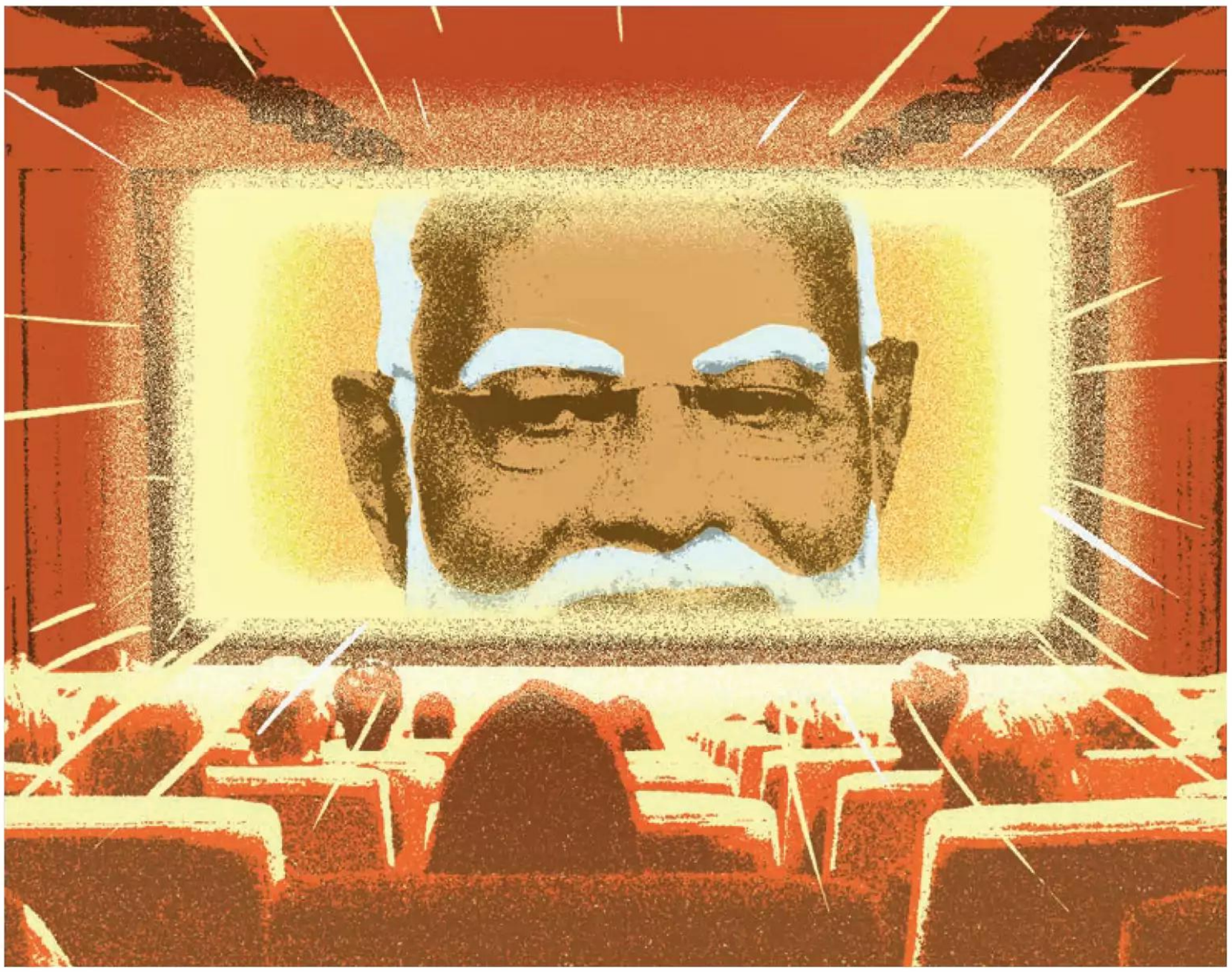


ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID MCALLISTER. SOURCE: ALAMY

Film

The Modi cinematic universe

India's Hindu nationalist leader is shaping Bollywood to his own, divisive ends

by **IMAAN IRFAN**

In the darkness of the Indian cinema, reality falls away. Enter a world in which beautiful heroines sing in chiffon saris on alpine landscapes without getting cold. In which floppy-haired heroes perform physics-defying stunts and dance atop moving trains. And in which love, of course, always conquers all.

It is hard to overestimate the vastness of Bollywood—India's Hindi-language film industry, based in the bustling heart of Mumbai. India churns out more films annually than both the US and China, serving a population of 1.45bn people and reaching global audiences from Nigeria to Russia.

But what, precisely, is now being served up? Something noticeably different since the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister in 2014 and the concurrent rise of his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As India's politics has shifted rightwards, the film industry has moved with it.

Unlike the relationship between Hollywood and Donald Trump, some of Modi's most vocal supporters include high-profile actors and filmmakers. The prime minister frequently appears alongside Bollywood's finest and makes cameos at celebrity weddings (including Priyanka Chopra and Nick Jonas's big fat Indian wedding in 2018). A growing contingent of actors-turned-BJP politicians have even made their way to parliament, including action star Sunny Deol and actresses Kangana Ranaut and Kirron Kher.

The "saffronisation" of the country—named after BJP's official colours—is taking place on screen, too. Bollywood has a history of sumptuous period films set in India's Mughal era, from *Humayun* (1945) to *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) to *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008). But since 2014, as it has become clear that films made in the same vein are now politically and economically straitjacketed, the old portrayals of cultured Mughal rulers have been replaced by new ones of bestial, flesh-eating brutes with thick beards and dark, kohl-rimmed eyes.

The 2025 historical epic *Chhaava* is a case in point. It portrayed a daring Hindu king with superhuman strength (and the ability to break a CGI lion's jaw with his bare hands) facing off against a monstrous Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb ("Wherever you see saffron, stain it red with blood"). Following the film's release, right-wing groups called to destroy the real-world Aurangzeb's tomb, leading to riots in Nagpur last March. In 2022's *Samrat Prithviraj*, meanwhile, another lionslaying Hindu king—whose consort Princess Sanyogita is played by former Miss World winner Manushi Chhillar—turns history on its head by killing his Muslim counterpart, Muhammad Ghori.

Nor is this rewriting of history reserved for period films. For a leader who refuses to engage with critical journalists, cinema is perfect for broadcasting Hindutva narratives to unwitting audiences. And so there is a subgenre of hagi-

ographical biopics of far-right figures—including *Ajey* (2025), about the extremist monk-turned-BJP leader Yogi Adityanath, and another about Modi himself, which drew criticism (and a temporary ban from the Election Commission of India) for its original planned release date on the day polls opened for the 2019 general election. Its opening transparently declared: "THE INTENT OF THIS FILM IS TO INSPIRE PATRIOTISM, NATIONALISM AND REVERENCE FOR OUR GREAT NATION ESPECIALLY AMONGST THE YOUTH AND ALSO PEOPLE AT LARGE."

Even more troubling—says Shakuntala Banaji, a professor of media, culture and social change at the London School of Economics who specialises in studying authoritarian uses of media—has been the "swing into very vicious forms of propaganda". Take *The Kerala Story* (2022), which billed itself as a true account of 32,000 girls from Kerala who were groomed into joining Isis—and was premised on the idea of "love jihad", a far-right conspiracy theory that is used to target interfaith couples in India. When journalists criticised the film for exaggerating the number of radicalised women, the figure on posters was reduced to just three. Still, the BJP leveraged the film in its campaign for the Karnataka assembly election, and it won the National Film Award (selected by a panel appointed by the government).

Or *The Kashmir Files*, released in the same year, which portrayed the exodus of Hindu Pandits from Kashmir and Muslim militant groups in the 1990s. This featured gratuitous (and fictionalised) episodes of violence—including a scene in which a widow is forced to eat rice soaked in her husband's blood. Videos circulated on social media of moviegoers shouting, "Shoot the traitors!" BJP leaders organised special screenings and Modi personally met its creators.

Both films were endorsed by the prime minister and granted tax-free status in several exclusively BJP-ruled states.

In the moral universe of these films, argues Banaji, "the core theme is that violence and extreme violence are completely acceptable norms for individuals and groups who happen to be Hindu to use against [Muslims]... there's always an excuse built in, in terms of the historical imagining of those films, about why one might need to use [violence] against insidious, vicious and usually completely inhuman or subhuman Muslim groups and characters."

"If [filmmakers] push against an exclusionary idea of India's Hindu nation," she says, "you begin to see that you either have to be producing within the indie sector, or you are gradually pushed out, or you are the target of a lot of hate."

The most striking example of this is the case of India's Muslim actors. The "Khans of Bollywood"—Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan and Salman Khan (no relation to each other)—are among the most wealthy and recognisable celebrities in the world, but they also occupy a precarious position.

Two years after Modi's election, when Aamir Khan mentioned a "growing sense of disquiet" in the country and confessed that his Hindu wife had broached the prospect of having to move abroad, the subsequent backlash saw him being dropped from contracts, including as the face of the government's "Incredible India" tourism campaign.

A few days later, the "king of Bollywood", Shah Rukh Khan—worth £1.3bn and sometimes described as the biggest actor in the world—came under fire for suggesting India had become more religiously hostile ("I think we should be a little more tolerant"). BJP leaders compared his language to that of terrorists, and he was forced to retract. Separately, his son was detained without bail for a month by narcotics police, despite a lack of evidence. "If they could do this to the king," observed Samanth Subramanian in the *New Yorker*, "imagine what they could do to us".

Actors, like everyone else, have had to adapt to this new India. But they tread a fine line between self-preservation and complicity. Shah Rukh Khan visited a senior BJP figure to ensure the smooth release of *Raees* (2017), assuring him that his Pakistani costar, Mahira Khan, would not be promoting the film in India. Around the same time, Aamir Khan attended his first award ceremony in 16 years, to be honoured by Mohan Bhagwat, the head of the Hindu supremacist paramilitary group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Actors have had to adapt to Modi's India. But they tread a fine line between self-preservation and complicity

It is impossible to understand Modi's India without understanding the RSS, which was founded in 1925 as an echo of European fascist parties and now has some 6m active members. The group's disciples have included Gandhi's assassin and many BJP politicians—up to Modi himself. Its primary aim is to establish a Hindu Rashtra, a theocratic or semi-theocratic state, with minority faiths inevitably relegated to second-class status, or worse.

On 7th and 8th February this year, the group held centenary celebrations in Mumbai and rolled out the saffron carpet for Bollywood's brightest stars. And it wasn't just the usual suspects, Modi's vocal allies in the film industry, who attended. Directors, actors and composers who had never attended an RSS event were present, too. Ten years ago, this would have been unthinkable.

Even Salman Khan made an appearance, permitting himself to smile at a line in Bhagwat's speech acknowledging Khan's influence: "What Salman Khan wears, college students do the same... Why do they do it? Because he is wearing it. Why is he wearing it? They don't know."

In those words was a clue to why all the actors were invited in the first place. After all, the country's far-right leaders don't just see themselves as the custodians of Indian culture—but also its shapers. And by merging the blind devotion of nationalist politics with the blind devotion of Bollywood fandom, what can stop them? ◆

THE CULTURE

Art

After Ovid

The Roman poet said that nothing stops changing. That's certainly true of art's relationship with him

by **DAVID MCALLISTER**



© ALAMY

In 1604, the painter Karel van Mander called it the "Bible for artists"; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an epic retelling of the mythical contortions and tussles between mortals and the gods, has proven endlessly inspiring for centuries. It is to this 2,000-year lineage that the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is paying tribute in its newest exhibition, in partnership with the Borghese in Rome.

Logistically, this is an impressive show: among those featured are such renowned but eclectic artists as Caravaggio, Titian, Tintoretto, Magritte, Noguchi, Louise Bourgeois and more; in all, there are 80 works from 50 museums across Europe and the US, including the National Gallery, the Met and the Louvre. The very realisation of this collaboration perhaps speaks to the persuasiveness of the curators' argument: that Ovid's work is not only influential but intrinsic to the western canon. Given the range the show promises, it's hard not to agree.

Despite this, what's quickly apparent is how the content of Ovid's work—never mind what it represents—brings unique curatorial challenges. Fundamentally, the *Metamorphoses* is a work about change: from the human to the animal, from the ethereal to the material. Yet how do you pick up on the constants across a body of disparate works if, by definition, what you're trying to capture is that which is *not* constant?

In the oldest works, the links to Ovid need no explanation. In one section dedicated to the story of Arachne, turned into a spider on losing a weaving contest to the god Minerva, we find Luca Giordano's evocative depiction from 1695. As though dropping all mortal pretences, Minerva abandons her weaving materials on the ground to lurch forward on a cloud, gilded by a tempestuous sky. Arachne raises her hands in horror—already her fingers have transformed into the sinewy tendrils of a cobweb.

Elsewhere, however, the link requires much more work. Next to Giordano's painting are a pair of Bourgeois's famous spider sculptures. Iconic on their own terms, but were they really made with Arachne in mind? The best the wall text offers is that Bourgeois's mother wove tapestries like the myth's protagonists—which is reaching, somewhat.

Indeed, the more contemporary the works—especially those by artists still alive and with a thing to say about their intent—the more apparent this reaching becomes. In *Spawn* (2019) by Juul Kraijer, three large screens show a woman's face covered in snakes. The woman remains placid, even as the snakes come close to sticking their tongues in her eye. We're stopped short of saying this *is* Medusa; rather, it is only its "associations" with the myth that are immediate. Of another work by Kraijer, a photograph of a swan's neck entwined by a woman's arm, we are told outright that this does not refer to any episode of the *Metamorphoses*—only that it "readily evokes" Leda and her seduction by Jupiter.

As we go through the exhibition, we realise that, for all the fantastical transformations that define the *Metamorphoses*, what Ovid really offers is less an observation on change than its consolation: "All things are changing; nothing dies. The spirit wanders, comes now here, now there, and occupies whatever frame it pleases." Two works depicting Leda and the Swan are copies after Da Vinci and Michelangelo; the essence of the originals, long since lost, have prevailed through the work of admirers. Nearby is a section dedicated to Pygmalion: in a painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme from 1890, we see the artist in his studio madly embracing the sculpture he has fallen in love with, as the statue's body turns in a gentle gradient from cold marble to flesh and blood. The western canon, too, might be best understood through this myth: a thing of our own creation, kept alive by the love of those who experience it.

Judging by the hesitancy to connect the more recent works to the *Metamorphoses*, the question that arises is whether artists today are falling out of love with the canon. In Book II, Ovid recounts the tale of Jupiter disguising himself as a bull to get close to Europa, who—"little knowing on whose back she was resting"—is ridden off across the waters to Crete. In *The Abduction of Europa* (1643) by Jacob Jordaens, we encounter a resplendent scene right before the decisive moment. Europa, already sat unsuspectingly atop Jupiter the white bull, is being doted on by friends in a forest. Nearby Mercury is herding cattle. Behind Europa are a merry band of bathers. We know what is about to happen next, but when we look at this picture all we can think about are those friends, seemingly so integral to her life, that Europa will be forced to leave behind.

Perhaps the most haunting lesson from Ovid is that we may not be the ones to choose what remains amid the process of constant change; that nothing is permanently central to the story. Could the same now be said, increasingly, of Ovid himself? ◆

Metamorphoses *is on display at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, until 25th May. It then travels to the Galleria Borghese, Rome, from 22nd June*

CRITICS



© DANIEL BOUD

Stage

From Arcadia to Transylvania

Theatre faces a fork in the road. Which direction will it choose?

by **KATE MALTBY**

When Tom Stoppard died in November, he left behind over 30 stage plays. But it was to *Arcadia*, his story of a Regency-era girl genius, that the obituarists most frequently returned.

In Thomasina Coverly, a teenager who anticipates Mandelbrot's discoveries in fractal geometry by 150 years, the playwright created the perfect vessel for his virtuoso ability to get theatre audiences thinking about maths and science. Shortly after Stoppard's death, a surgeon named Michael Baum achieved viral fame by writing to the *Times* to declare that a performance of *Arcadia* in 1993 had inspired him to discover a new form of chemotherapy, saving "many lives".

Yet *Arcadia* is no cold work of science education. One narrative traces Thomasina's forays into the world of desire and poetry, while in a second timeline a pair of academics compete to understand her disappearance from history. ("We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind," says one character of humanity's hapless attempts at documenting the past.) The result is as much a showcase for Tom Stoppard, chronicler of history and the human heart.

So it is a relief to find that the Old Vic's new production, directed by Carrie Cracknell, is a fitting tribute. It is also a heartening reminder of the power of old school, text-based, intellectual drama, in a West End landscape threatening to abandon it.

Which is not to say that this *Arcadia* is perfect. The 19th century feels fresher here than the 1990s. The former timeline has the advantage of rising star Isis Hainsworth portraying Thomasina with an earnest naiveté that allows us to believe she can sketch the curves of the galaxy but can't tell if she's being lied to about the meaning of the phrase "carnal embrace". She's well-matched by Seamus Dillane as her tutor Septimus, who wears his sparky dialogue lightly, ably carrying much of the narrative responsibility for situating us in the literary coterie of the 1810s. Above them, two overlapping ellipses from set designer Alex Eales keep our minds nicely on the beauty of planetary geometry.

In the 1990s, the jostling of academics Hannah and Benedict echoes the rivalries that Septimus maintains, including with an off-stage Lord Byron. But post-#MeToo, there's a darker element to Benedict's pestering, and Cracknell allows Leila Farzad's Hannah sharper retorts than in previous productions—and a fiercer act of defensive violence.

At other moments, Farzad's performance can feel workmanlike (as my companion muttered: "it takes more than putting a pair of oversized glasses on a beautiful actress to make her an academic"). As Valentine, heir to the Coverly estate and to Thomasina's numeracy skills, Angus Cooper struggles with making Stoppard's exegeses on statistics palatable for an audience with digital-era attention spans. But the always-good Prasanna Puwanarajah is there to keep things biting as Benedict.

Arcadia is that rare thing: an ensemble work of live theatre that doesn't underestimate its audience. Over at the Noël Coward Theatre, the other big theatrical opening of the month offers a glimpse of what we have to lose if theatre continues down the opposite path.

Dracula is the latest from Kip Williams, the Australian director—or, rather, video instillation artist—whose formula consists of placing a celebrity actor in front of a live-feed camera, training them to memorise a camp literary classic and adding split screens or Instagram filters to create the impression that multiple characters are live on screen at once.

Sarah Snook won a Tony for her work in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In Cynthia Erivo there is no doubt that Williams has another bona fide dramatic performer, long loved by stage critics before Hollywood found her. But her job here is reduced to audiobook narrator, reciting chunks of text while our eyes stay fixed on the huge screen that dominates the stage. Most of the time, Erivo's bird-like body is barely lit, hidden behind furniture, or turned away from us in the darkness.

There are interesting ideas here. Erivo displays a chameleon-like range of accents and gives Dracula the Igbo accent of her own heritage. The scholar Stephen Arata famously proposed that Dracula's Eastern European accents in Stoker's novel reflected the era's fears of "reverse colonisation"; Erivo's version occupies much the same space in the contemporary racist imagination and carries enough glamorous appeal to be no subaltern.

But even Erivo struggles under the weight of reciting a text for 110 minutes—hence headlines about her use of an autocue. How I longed for her to be given some castmates to share the burden. But one-woman shows—even with technical fireworks—are cheaper to stage than ensemble dramas. Which means that in theatre's post-Covid, budget-strapped era, they are here to stay. ◆

THE CULTURE

Film

This fragmentary life

The Hungarian filmmaker Robert Vas, who settled in England, is largely forgotten today. He shouldn't be

by **SUKHDEV SANDHU**



Who, today, remembers Robert Vas? His *Refuge England* (1959), a partly autobiographical account of a Hungarian migrant trying to make sense of London—its confusing streets and dizzying profusion of signs—is a marvel of Free Cinema. But he's far less heralded than other figures in that briefly flaring movement; the likes of Lindsay Anderson or Karel Reisz or Tony Richardson. In just two decades, he made over 30 expansive and deeply humanistic films, on topics ranging from Laurel and Hardy to Solzhenitsyn, the Katyn forest massacre to the trial and death of Jesus. Almost none have been commercially released.

Born in 1931, Vas grew up in a Nazi-controlled ghetto in Budapest. Ninety per cent of Hungarian Jews ended up in Auschwitz, and he himself witnessed inmates being executed and dumped into the Danube. Later, his mother committed suicide, while his father fled alone to Australia. During his military service, he became an army projectionist, screening revolutionary Soviet films to thousands of soldiers in a huge open-air cinema. He ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Then, after the failure of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, he escaped with his wife and child over the border to Austria, eventually landing up in England.

Following stints as a cleaner, Vas found a berth at the British Film Institute (BFI) where, when he wasn't cataloguing magazines, he watched as many movies as he could. He also penned articles for *Sight and Sound*, tracking trends in arthouse and international cinema, championing directors such as Humphrey Jennings (the topic of one of his films) for his ability, in his wartime features, to conjure up a "sea of moods, connections, contrasts, episodes" in place of one-dimensional propaganda. No wonder that, writing about Godard, he argued, "Movies are a world of fragments, so why pretend smoothness?" This, after all, was an exile who believed "My life has been broken like a piece of film".

Vas's films are often about the brittleness of things. Landscapes—both local and national—that seem to be forever can be destroyed. By money, politicians. *Master Singers* (1965), narrated by Ewan MacColl, is set in Senghenydd, in a Welsh valley of "5,000 people, 14 chapels, seven rugby teams". The choirs here are made up not just of miners, but of newsagents and bus conductors. Their proud, sonorous voices evoke the solidarity of trade unions, of shared terraces. Keening, too—for nearby lay Universal Colliery where, in 1913, a gas explosion killed 439 men, the most grievous industrial accident in British history. Vas thought that song was a form of survival; now, in 2026, his film is a time capsule, enshrining on celluloid mining communities that no longer exist.

The Vanishing Street (1962), supported by both the *Jewish Chronicle* and the BFI Experimental Film Fund, is a vivid portrait of the dying days of the Jewish East End. Here is a Whitechapel shtetl—street markets and garments stalls, sewing factories and kosher butchers. Here, often in close-up, are faces—those of cantors, bargain-hunting grannies, owners of shops going out of business. So much chatter and song. Diasporic drama. Thickness of life. But high-rise developments are sprouting up. Indians and Pakistanis are out and about. Vas captures a world that was on the brink of disappearance, that would have rekindled in him memories of his own lost home.

Belonging (1967), also set in east London, is to my mind one of the finest artist films ever made in Britain. It's a triptych devoted to three distinctive figures—up-and-coming painter Johnny Martin, prole poet Johnnie Quarrell who works at a lathe factory and septuagenarian Polish-born Yiddish poet Avram Stencl. Each pounds the streets daily. Each channels the spirit of the place. Vas shows us peeling shop exteriors, darkened alleyways, gaslit corners. He lets us hear its clanging riverside machinery, echoic early-morning silence. He intuits—and allows us to glean—how history feeds their sometimes-dark visions.

In *The Frontier* (1964), meditative and essayistic, Vas returns to the Austro-Hungarian border and looks at and across the barbed wire there. He peers at fields being harvested, watches other tourists watching, ponders on how he came to love Hungary by being forced to live abroad. It's a film about the Iron Curtain that could be about any country, in the present as much as in the past, that's been partitioned or walled off.

Vas died, most likely of an accidental overdose, aged just 47. His liberal use of archival footage makes copyright clearance expensive. Still, it beggars belief that the BBC, which commissioned his body of work, hasn't digitised or made it more accessible. Three cheers, then, for Birkbeck College which, on 27th March, is hosting "Robert Vas In Context", a day-long symposium devoted to this great filmmaker. ♦

Classical notes

A trip to Dowland

by **IAN BOSTRIDGE**



My coming month is devoted to lute song, one of the glories of the English renaissance—and, more particularly, to the work of John Dowland. This year marks the 400th anniversary of his death: born in 1563, a year before Shakespeare, he died 10 years after him in 1626. I've often roped Dowland into a Shakespeare recital (mostly composed of songs by the likes of Benjamin Britten, Gerald Finzi or Erich Wolfgang Korngold) by starting the whole thing with his greatest song, with piano rather than the original lute accompaniment. "In Darknesse Let Mee Dwell" works very well on another instrument, and I remember the first time I did it this way: on the stage at Carnegie Hall, the cavernous auditorium in darknesse, and the song immediately followed by my pianist, Thomas Adès, playing his own "explosion" of the song, "Darknesse Visible". As Adès writes, "No notes have been added; indeed, some have been removed. Patterns latent in the original have been isolated and regrouped, with the aim of illuminating the song from within, as if during the course of a performance." Since his revival in the 20th century, Dowland has been an inspiration as well as a reminder that, long before Elgar or Britten, English composers could be part of the continental mainstream. And it's not just the songs. His set of pieces for viol consort, *Lachrimae*, based on the song "Flow My Tears", is a masterpiece of the genre.

Dowland was a European figure not only because he travelled to Italy and France and bathed in their influence, not only because the debt was repaid and his music was studied abroad, but also because he spent the best part of his career at the Danish court. Most of his great music was published, in England, during his Danish years between 1598 and 1612. Coming out of Denmark, published in 1612, "In Darknesse Let Mee Dwell" seems to carry a Shakespearian weight of melancholy, "hellish jarring sounds" straight out of Elsinore:

> Thus wedded to my woes, and bedded to my tomb,
> O let me living die, till death, till death do come.

Hamlet was written about a dozen years before.

Dowland's motto, equally compounded of self-mocking and self-promotion, was "Sempre Dowland, sempre dolens", and irony came easily to him: a galliard published in the *Lachrimae* collection is named for Captain Digorie Piper, a notorious Cornish pirate who preyed on Danish ships. The galliard was usually a vigorous dance: "the Queen is so well as I assure you," a privy counsellor tells us of the fifty-something Elizabeth I, "six or seven galliards in a morning, besides music and singing, is her ordinary exercise." Here it becomes a doleful lament. Piper was executed in 1589.

Dowland's role at the Danish court set me thinking about musicians and the realms of power. Unusually well paid at 500 daler per annum, Dowland was a trusted courtier; and, no doubt, with Anne of Denmark as James I's consort back in London, English musicians were at a Danish premium.

In the latter days of Elizabeth I, Dowland's position had been much more perilous. His stay in France in the 1580s made a Catholic of him, and in Italy in the mid 1590s, a time of intense anti-Catholic persecution in England, Dowland fell in with some likely Jesuit-inspired conspirators whose treasonous talk clearly freaked him out. He wrote a very long and confused letter to Elizabeth's secretary of state, Robert Cecil, and hotfooted it back home via Protestant Nuremberg. Historians dispute exactly what was going on here—was Dowland actually an agent provocateur, a spy, an informer? Was he even really a Catholic, as he took a degree at Oxford, something forbidden to those who embraced Catholicism? He certainly felt that his reputation as an "obstinate papist" had prevented him from getting a job at Elizabeth's court. Hence to Denmark.

Was he an agent provocateur, a spy, an informer? Was he even really a Catholic?

Anyway, being a lutenist can clearly be a dangerous job. Readers and viewers of Hilary Mantel's Tudor saga, *Wolf Hall*, will remember the fate of Mark Smeaton. He was a twentysomething lute player and singer in the household of Anne Boleyn, drawn into the tragedy of her downfall. It was his racked confession of adultery with the queen that initiated the whole horrible saga and he was mercifully beheaded rather than hanged, drawn and quartered—a nice reward for his cooperation. "A rotten twig upon so high a tree," wrote the poet Thomas Wyatt, snobbily shaken by the idea that the queen might have consorted with such a lowly lutenist.

The other famous dispatched theorbist (a theorbo is the long-necked bass lute, difficult to get into a taxi) was David Rizzio, whose musical talents and charm made him private secretary to Mary, Queen of Scots. Her husband, Lord Darnley, notoriously burst into one of their private evening sessions and had him brutally murdered. The unlikely story was that he had slept with the queen; even more unlikely was the rumour that she was pregnant by him, which would have made him father of James I, Anne of Denmark's husband and Dowland's final employer.

I'll be singing Dowland in London, Seville and Paris with the viol consort Fretwork and the lutenist Liz Kenny, who first showed me, 40 years ago, how you get a theorbo into a London cab. ◆



Travel Insurance

Cover for medical conditions and no age limits

- 24 /7 medical emergency assistance
- Experts in cover for medical conditions
- Cover for cruise holidays

Excellent Trustpilot

defaqto 2025 EXPERT RATED

Special Offer

20% OFF* Base Premium

Save on single-trip and annual cover

Quote: **PRE63**

Call us FREE for an instant quote **0808 175 3931**

Or visit us at

goodtogoinsurance.com

Authorised & Regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority - No. 471641. Terms and conditions apply. 5-star Defaqto rating applies to Platinum policies and Premium Cruise single trip policies only. *Discount applies to base premium only. Discount valid until 31/08/2026.

Lives



Long life

After the break

by Sheila Hancock

I have, of late, been enjoying the adverts on television rather more than the programmes. I watch the news peeping through my fingers, my mouth agape with shock and disbelief, whereas several of the adverts have me smiling.

I have become a devoted fan of some of the actors playing the roles in the little dramas that are meant to persuade me to spend money. In that objective, I'm afraid most of them fail, as I often can't fathom out what product they are advertising. That girl in a flowing cloak running over the roof of a dangerous-looking building, for instance, or Tilda Swinton doing some beautiful contortions—I am never quite sure why. She makes me much too frightened to purchase whatever she is selling. I think it is perfume, but it doesn't seem to make her very happy. Yet the advert is a work of art, and I enjoy watching it.

My favourite has made me chuckle over numerous viewings, but only yesterday did my daughter tell me that it was actually encouraging me to use eBay. The actor playing the lead gives a superlative, understated performance that would win her a Bafta in a comedy series. She and a young man are packing up their belongings, I assume in preparation for moving in together. The guy holds up terrible vases and ugly toasters, which the girl regards with restrained distaste, condemning them, I now realise, to be sold on eBay. Like the best television acting, it is all in her eyes, appalled, disbelieving, resolved, concluding with her staring malevolently at his pretty, fluffy dog. That tiny sequence tells a story of dawning incompatibility that would probably take four episodes in a drama. I do not know the two actors, but I hope that they are proud of their work. I'm sure it is not where they hoped their careers would go, but if you need to earn some money doing a commercial, it is best that people are not cringing with embarrassment while watching it.

For instance, one group of needy actors are paying their rent by happily dancing while harmonising a song about finding a cure for various unattractive stomach problems, ending with bending over and pointing at their bottoms as they sing gaily the word "diarrhoea". Not exactly the Sondheim musical of their dreams. But they do it with professional gusto. As do the two women in another advert discussing their delight about their new incontinence knickers.

When ITV first started, a new career became possible for people in the industry: doing adverts. I had been appearing in tatty theatre for several years with an actor I lost touch with when I began to get small parts in television and in the West End. Out of the blue, I was invited by this actor to a party at his place. He had disappeared from the theatre scene, and I felt I must support him. I took a nice bottle of wine, which was rejected by the butler who opened the door of my friend's luxurious Chelsea house. He was making a fortune recording numerous voice-overs—a great deal more than I was, slogging away at eight performances a week in the theatre.

I was engaged for one advert sometime in the 1950s. God knows how I got it, because I turned up for the filming in my customary attire, a shaggy Afghan coat and khaki combat trousers. The makeup and costume people blanched. They took some time to transform me into a sweet, caring housewife taking some healing Lucozade to my ailing son. I had to pause outside a door, smiling at the bottle of Lucozade on a tray, before bringing it to my son in bed—a singularly horrid child from the Italia Conti dance school. The stylists did their best with a summer frock and pinny—yes, in those days housewives wore pinafores—curled hair and a pretty pink lipstick. I did my best to smile at the bottle, open the door without dropping the tray and disguise my hatred of the child in the bed. In fact, all my friends said I didn't succeed. The result, they suggested, was an advert that managed to suggest Lucozade was good for poisoning children.

Suffice it to say, I have never, in the 70 years I have spent in the profession, been offered any more adverts. I could many times have done with the money and would willingly have sold my soul to advertise some awful product. Or, I may have been lucky enough to be miscast in something like the 2025 Waitrose Christmas ad. It told the story of a delightful relationship developing between a not wildly handsome man and

A group of needy actors are paying their rent by bending over and pointing at their bottoms as they sing gaily the word 'diarrhoea'

Lives

a very beautiful woman. Keira Knightley and Joe Wilkinson gave delightful performances, and the focal subject of the advert took a backseat to an unusually touching little love story.

I'm sure the advert helped Waitrose to sell more food, and watching it's tenderness did me a lot of good in these ugly times. ♦



Rural life

Tin Man mystery

by Kiran Sidhu

On the green in the next village along from mine, a replica of the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz* stands proudly, watching the traffic go by. Although I have always relished seeing him, I have also often wondered how he got there, as this rural Welsh village has no connection to the story.

Imagine my alarm, then, when it was announced a few weeks ago on the village community Facebook page that the Tin Man had been stolen. The nuts and bolts that rooted him to the land had been tampered with, and there was no sign of our empty-chested friend.

A slew of messages followed from disgruntled residents demanding his return: "own up—who has him?!" said one. Others lamented how the village was poorer for his disappearance. One resident shared an AI image of the Tin Man half-buried on a landfill site; it disturbed everyone. As with all small joys, you only know what you've got when it's gone.

It transpires that the Tin Man held real significance for the village—most of the residents said that he made them smile. There is some irony about how much we loved this character who was famed for not having a heart. The eccentric sight of him standing on the green was a welcome lift from the mundanity of everyday life.

In the weeks the Tin Man was missing, I became consumed by the mystery—not only the question of how he disappeared but why he had been erected in the first place. Why had the artist chosen the Tin Man over the Scarecrow or the Lion? What were they trying to say with this empty kettle without a heart? The community Facebook page has asked everyone to stay vigilant; to check if our elusive friend is being sold on marketplace or eBay.

Two weeks ago, the first of these mysteries was solved when the Tin Man reappeared on the green. No one saw the moment of his return; it had happened in the middle of the night. Somebody claimed the creator had taken the statue away for restoration. On hearing the good news, I drove down to the village to see him with my own eyes. And there he was, shinier and more resplendent than ever.

Everyone in the local area—not just people in the village where the statue resides—breathed a collective sigh of relief. "Thank God," they commented; "Hooray!" One woman said the village hadn't felt the same since the disappearance, while another said her smile was back. There's no doubt the village is happier now.

I have not, however, been able to solve the second mystery: who is the creator of this statue? I have asked around—there are theories, but no one can tell me with certainty.

The Tin Man's recent escapades have surprised, distressed and delighted the people of the village in equal measure. For me, it has had the curious effect of reminding me of my deepest grief. Although our hearts flutter when we're in love or feel excited, I think we only really feel our hearts when they break. I have never been so aware of the location of my heart than in the period after my mother died—my heart hurt so much that I wished I didn't have one.

As the wizard said to the Tin Man when he offered him a ticking heart: "Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable." The statue's disappearance may only have been brief, but in that short space of time the Tin Man reminded us all what it means to be human and have a heart. ♦



Clerical life

My dog's collar

by Alice Goodman

My lurcher, Stig, now in his 14th year, looks intently at me from the beat-up leather armchair by the window in my study. I got that chair thinking that visitors would sit in it while I sat at my desk. The dogs thought differently. Dogs, in my experience, are selectively obedient. The first dog to sit in that chair was my bull-cross lurcher, Felix, brindle and white and curvaceous. When he got down, Gigi the ginger saluki cross would take his place, and Pansy, the scruffy Jack Russell, would hop up beside her. They were a team. Later, after Felix died and Gigi pined, Hansel, named after the character in *Zoolander*, not the boy in the fairy tale, arrived and made that chair his favourite.

That was 14 years ago, the year I came to this parish, and the year Stig joined us. Stig has a noble lineage: lurcher to lurcher for eight generations. His mother was trainer Jim Greenwood's great bitch Tig; his grandmother was Buffy, who was probably the best little black-and-white lurcher ever pupped. Buffy and Tig did displays at country shows where they would be sent to find an egg in Jim's bag on one side of the ring and carry it in their mouths over jumps, delivering it to Jim unbroken. Then they'd go back to fetch the frying pan. Here at the rectory, Gigi performed similar feats in secret. She'd get the egg

box from the back of the kitchen counter, eat one, and then cache the rest unbroken behind the sofa cushions. We learned to check before we sat down.

Dogs have jobs. They herd sheep, guard flocks, search for the lost, the injured and the dead. They comfort the old, the sick and those who have no words. They guide those who cannot see and alert those who cannot hear. They sniff out contraband and disease, as well as the wounded deer my wire-haired dachshund's littermates track through the heather. They serve in the armed forces and the police. They have hunted with humans for tens of thousands of years, and they still do. Some hunt lions; some, like one of mine, hunt mice.

When I go upstairs, Ezio, the ninja cat, is behind the curtain on the landing. He sticks out a paw to pat my face, and we play a brief game of "now you see me, now you don't". I love the cats and the cats love me but, upon reflection, they don't understand me as well as the dogs do. Cats understand their people just as much as they need to, and they're happy for us to remain, to some degree, mysterious, just as they remain, to some degree, mysterious to us. With dogs, it's different. Understanding people is their vocation. It's the bedrock beneath all the hunting, herding, guarding, guiding, alerting and rescuing. There's no "now you see me, now you don't". With my dogs, I know myself to be seen. They read my expressions and every gesture and mannerism, from the moment I turn over to get up in the morning. They rejoice with me when I'm happy, commiserate with me when I'm sad and press close to me when I'm ill or in pain. Nobody but God knows me and sees me as my dogs do. They know me better than I know myself.

I used to think that what I loved about dogs, as a species, was their quality of unconditional love and emotional intelligence. But cats have that too. When my husband woke with a shout from a nightmare, there would always be one cat who stayed beside him, purring, to bring him into the waking world. And when Geoffrey died, that cat would not leave him until the undertaker's men came to carry his body away. No, cats love their people deeply and intelligently. They just don't make a study of them in the way that dogs do.

With that kind of attention and understanding, I'm quite content to live with dogs who are imperfectly obedient, who dig holes in the garden and bark at squirrels, and run off-lead as Minnie, my first lurcher, did. Minnie wore a bell on her collar, stamped with a phrase from Compline, "the apple of an eye". When she returned across the fields at 30 miles an hour, it produced a Doppler effect. She stole bait and sandwiches from fishermen, happily joined other people's picnics by the river and pounced on lovers in the long grass. The lovers would sit up and see me in my collar trying to look like an unconcerned passerby. As much as Stig taught every hound who followed him to behave, Minnie taught them mischief.

Here in the parishes, we welcome well-behaved dogs into church. Not mine though. They won't settle. I think perhaps, they're members of the Society of Friends and have no truck with steeple-houses. ◆



Young life

Saving our local

by Alice Garnett

A couple of months ago, my mum added me to a WhatsApp group chat called "The Thorn Tree Exiles". "Uh oh," I thought. Had there been a big brawl leading to the permanent expulsion of my mother, her neighbours or her neighbours' neighbours from the pub? Or worse, were the rumours about the Thorn Tree closing its doors true? My heart sank.

The Thorn Tree is a pub in Matlock (my hometown) known for its stunning views over the Derwent valley and excellent local ales. Conveniently, it is just a short stumble from the house I grew up in. I cannot say for sure when it opened, but it was in full swing when my parents moved to the town in 1999. The "exiles" group chat started when the Thorn Tree was temporarily closed last year, and while the pub's doors have reopened for now, its future looks uncertain.

I have always had affection for the Thorn Tree. The pub's garden often emitted a hum of merriment, generating a warm soundscape for my childhood and adolescence. Clinking glasses, belly laughs and the excited whispers of shared secrets lulled me to sleep over summer nights.

My first proper pet—a tabby cat called Stripes—was an escapee from the inn, where she had presumably been employed as Chief Mouse Killer. When the landlords adopted a chocolate Labrador, Stripes voted with her paws and moved out. My parents did try to reconcile Stripes with her original home, but she was so stubborn that they caved. My six-year-old self was absolutely thrilled.

As a young adult, the Thorn Tree became an easy place to go for a drink with my mum or friends who also lived perched on the hillside—none of us could be arsed with the climb back from the pubs in town. Since university, it's been our go-to for whenever I'm back from London and in dire need of a cheap pint from somewhere friendly.

In fact, while I was at home for Christmas last year, I spent a couple of evenings sitting in one of the two front-rooms, socialising with my mum's friends and admiring the community that has rallied around the Thorn Tree. We did the pub quiz one night, and the current stand-in landlady topped us all up with free wine, as a thank you for our patronage. I felt cheeky accepting the Sauvignon blanc, but I guess I've been a diehard fan of the Thorn Tree since before I could legally enjoy a pint.

Post-pandemic, independent pubs and venues have been shutting their doors across the country. According to an August 2025 report by the *Independent*, 2,283 pubs have permanently closed

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARA NICOLL

Lives

across England and Wales since 2020. And it's not as though these pubs were repurposed to serve communities in other ways; most were gutted and turned into residential homes or offices.

The Thorn Tree is but one of many pubs that risks being put out to pasture. Beyond the statistics, the precarious fate of the Thorn Tree has served as a reminder of how crucial pubs often are to the communities they serve. Almost every evening my phone buzzes with notifications from "The Thorn Tree Exiles" group chat. Besides the occasional update on who may or may not buy "the Tree", most of the comms begin with someone posing the question, "Pub?", followed by everyone giving updates on their whereabouts.

This is not to say that my mum and all her friends are major boozehounds (though they have drunk the Thorn Tree dry a couple of times). But her group of friends do show a commitment to their local pub that my peers relish in theory but fail to put into practice.

You want pubs, bars, and venues to stop closing? Go to them. Drink in them. Spend the money you would have used to make that Asos purchase on a couple of pints instead. I say this to myself as much as to my friends. I know that going out in London isn't always easy; my friends are scattered across postcodes—and don't get me started on the price of pints. But if we want to keep our local pubs open for those all-important, memory-making evenings, then we need to get off our sofas and onto hard wooden seats at sticky tables.

Yes, we might have to strain our voices over the din of other people. Yes, we might haemorrhage £20 or even £50 on travel, drinks and bar snacks. But we'll come away with a renewed sense of closeness with our friends, and with fresh gossip to take home to our housemates.

Currently still operating under temporary management, I really hope that the Thorn Tree will keep its doors open for years to come. Like it or not, the pub, not the sofa, is where the real magic happens. ◆

My first proper pet—a tabby cat called Stripes—was an escapee from the inn, where she had presumably been employed as Chief Mouse Killer



Mindful life

Compassion fashion

by Sarah Collins

My best present this Christmas was a long, green, waterproof coat with a fluffy, white inner lining, which is more like a portable duvet than an item of clothing. It is so exceptionally snug that it attracts comments from members of the public, like a dog or a baby. When I put it on, I see myself as an entirely new person: a hardy, outdoorsy type who goes for cold water swims before work.

I took the duvet-coat with me to my suburban Midlands hometown in the midst of a recent mental health "relapse". I loathe the word relapse, as the "lapse" part suggests that you have carelessly misplaced your sanity like loose change down the back of the sofa. To me, relapse actually feels more like losing a particularly arduous game of tug-of-war, where my sanity is pulled through my fingers, regardless of how hard I try to cling on.

During my latest bout of madness, my usual, tried-and-tested "sanity first" plan—for which I work through a series of helpful activities like mindfulness and exercise—has been undermined by a despondent mood. So, for the first time in years, I have had to complement my trusty techniques with a new approach advocated by my latest therapist. This one focuses on "self-compassion", and is based on the idea that those of us with a clinical tendency for self-beating need to find a kinder way of relating to ourselves.

As a woman who has never denied herself a single treat—and has a bad habit of responding to her low moods by buying Freddos from the newsagents and eating them in bed watching *Downtown Abbey*—I wasn't sure that I needed any encouragement to let myself off the hook. Surely what I needed from my new therapist was the opposite: discipline, structure, tough love? A firm reminder to live by my values, rather than my most self-indulgent whims?

Like any good, depressed person, I mulled and ruminated and stewed over this dilemma during a crisis weekend at my parents' house. I had half-heartedly written out my usual list of "sanity-saving" activities, which included "go for a walk every day". The relentless winter weather made this instruction particularly difficult to follow. From the chair I was camping out on, I could see the duvet coat waiting for me patiently on the radiator.

When I thought about the logistics of taking a walk, I felt intimidated by the amount of effort required to change out of my pajamas. It would be cold and unappealing to unwrap myself from the blanket I was cowering under and go upstairs to change. I looked again at the duvet coat. What if I just put it on over my pajamas and walked out the door? This felt like a much more manageable course of action, and I found the tiny spurt of motivation I needed to do it.

Before I knew it, I was in the local park. Even though the weather was grey and rainy, I enjoyed the satisfying slosh of the

raindrops hitting the surface of the park's tiny stream. Dogs with cheerful-looking owners bounded towards me and, when the wind died down, I could hear the faintest beginnings of birdsong. For the first time in days, I could just about make out the world that existed beyond the edges of my own misery.

I began to think that self-compassion might be the mental equivalent of putting on a huge duvet-coat before walking in the rain. Without the coat's comforting invitation, I would not have had the gumption to get outside at all. Like my duvet-coat, scientists have found that self-kindness can form a protective psychological layer, helping people to face their challenges and respond proactively to them. Self-criticism has the opposite effect, increasing people's depressive symptoms and sometimes undermining their ability to meet their goals over the long-term.

Giving myself kind, gentle words of encouragement—instead of good British chastisement—feels so foreign it is almost embarrassing. But if I learn to do it, maybe I'll eventually become a disciplined cold water swimmer worthy of the coat. ◆



Second life

The little things

by Vitali Vitaliev

Call me a pedant, but I have always believed in the importance of the little things. Small can sometimes not only be beautiful (*pace* EF Schumacher) but also significant, proud and even groundbreaking.

Occasionally, however, small everyday objects do let us down: sticky tape doesn't stick, seal or peel; plastic packets do not open; and tin openers simply refuse to work!

In the 36 years of my second life (in the west), I have spent hundreds of pounds on tin openers. I have tried "heavy-duty", "automatic", "voice-activated", "cordless", "tin-touch", "electric", "smart" and other "cutting edge" variants. I have so far discovered only one that actually opens tins with ease, and without inflicting life-changing injuries on myself or the family members who have had the misfortune to be around during the process.

That magical tin opener (made in China, no doubt) was purchased in a Morrisons supermarket more than 10 years ago and cost me... 38 pence. Technologically, it is very simple, even primitive: a cog-wheel-shaped blade and a handle, resembling a small bow-tie or a butterfly (its other brand name was "Butterfly Can-Opener"). It opens tins quickly and smoothly—almost without effort. I've been using it successfully nearly every day since then. Yet, whenever I cannot find it in the kitchen drawer and am forced to try out one of its more expensive and sophisticated counterparts—"Magic Cut", "Perfect Grip" or "Smooth Edge", received as gifts from some unimaginative friends and distant relatives—the result is always the same. The tin, unlike my fingers and thumb, remains stubbornly uncut!

But occasionally we get the small things right. Here's some British-made proof: a new-look nine-gram tomato ketchup packet, ingeniously monikered "Ketchup!" (with an exclamation mark!). To me, it was the biggest design and technology breakthrough of recent years. Why? Simply because I was able to open it with ease, without either breaking my fingernail or, worse, splashing all nine grams of the sticky red substance over my shirt (it is amazing how much mess some miserable nine grams of red goo can create!)

Here's the story.

My wife and I were sitting in a cafe overlooking the ever-so-beautiful Rutland Water. It was hot. I was hungry and—uncharacteristically—ordered myself a Lincolnshire sausage roll, intrigued more by the word "Lincolnshire" than by "sausage" or "roll". My inquisitive writer's mind simply could not rest until I found out what the difference between a Lincolnshire and, say, Bedfordshire sausage roll was, and how they both differed from, say, an Australian Four'n Twenty-brand pie, which I often had for lunch while working for the *Age* newspaper in Melbourne. I was also reminded of a phrase I used during my first life in the Soviet Union to express how much I valued the small things: "Freedom of sausage comes first, freedom of speech follows." It was prompted by the permanent shortages of sausages (rhyme unintended) and most other basic meats in the USSR. On the surface of it, "sausages" and other processed "meats" sound like little nothings compared to all the joys of free expression. But try and remove the former from all the shops—and you will be amazed at how many hungry individuals would be prepared to shut up in exchange for a quick intake of some fatty protein.

During my first life in the Soviet Union, I used a phrase to express how much I valued the small things: 'Freedom of sausage comes first, freedom of speech follows'

To cut a long sausage short, at Rutland Water I was about to sink my teeth (or rather my Hungarian-made implants) into the roll, when I thought that it might be nice to balance that generally unwholesome product with something healthier, like ketchup. That, as I knew only too well, involved the challenge of either squeezing the red tomato sauce out of a stubbornly un-squeezable glass bottle (luckily, the cafe had none of those on display), or out of a no-less-stubbornly unopenable plastic packet.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARA NICOLL

Lives

You can easily visualise my unexpected delight when one of the mentioned packets gave in easily, with a soft submissive rustle, at the corner, and I was able to squeeze all nine grams of ketchup onto the uncomplaining to-be-devoured sausage roll. Not quite ready to believe in my extraordinary luck, I tried another packet and yet another, and each of them opened with the same beautiful ease. Soon, my poor sausage roll came to resemble a miniature bloody crime scene, left behind by some tiny and untidy fork-sized homicidal maniac.

That seemingly insignificant occurrence greatly improved my mood. I can even say that it made my day. And the (tasty) Lincolnshire sausage roll had little to do with it. I was relieved to realise that the country that produces the world's best vacuum cleaners and nuclear submarines is capable, after all, of engineering a reliable and easy-to-open ketchup packet. For there's nothing that stresses people out more than little everyday irritations. Glory to the anonymous, yet ingeniously inventive, ketchup-packet makers and breakers! Hooray! ◆



Sex life

Moonwalker

by Tilly Lawless

Growing up in the countryside, I was accustomed to doing things by moonlight. When one of my horses had an eye infection, it was by the light of the full moon that I treated her, as it was too difficult to hold a torch, her halter and the eye drops at the same time. I still remember walking down the bitumen road, across the creek and into her paddock, and how bright the landscape was—how easy it was to find her dark hide against the Kikuyu grass. The frosty grass crunched beneath my feet and the stars took up the whole sky. I could see all the casuarina trees along the riverbank, not just shapes but individual fronds. I always walked home from parties by moonlight too; I was drunk and alone for three kilometres of dirt road—but had more than enough illumination to navigate the potholes and save my ankles. When the moon waned, it was more difficult and I had to trust the feeling beneath my feet to guide me. Sometimes, in the pitch-dark nights, I would open my flip phone to make sure I wasn't at the very edge of the road, where it dropped off into the valley, with no barriers to mark or stop the fall.

When I first moved to Sydney as a 19-year-old I thought there was something wrong with the sky at night. It never got fully black and the clouds were a strange orange colour. I kept asking people about it, asking if there was a storm coming, and no one could answer me, until I realised that the sky always looks like that above a big city because of the light pollution. When I bring friends back to my hometown, they always comment on either the darkness or brightness of the night, depending on where the moon is in her cycle. The former is obviously better for stargazing, with whole galaxies opening up above you. But I prefer the latter, when the world opens up around you, and whole vistas are as clear as they are in the daytime but just in a different colour scheme—much like the night-time scenes in the 1964 Japanese film *Onibaba*. You can see how farm workers used to be able to harvest by the full moon, and how it was perfect for a rendezvous and imperfect for a robbery. I think of Tess of the D'Urbervilles being taken advantage of by moonlight, and Bill Sikes waiting for the cover of darkness to use Oliver Twist to burgle a house.

Perhaps because of this country upbringing, my relationship to the moon is more pragmatic and less romantic than it is for other people. A high school friend recently told me that he still had a letter I wrote to him when I was 16, and he commented that I said that I was writing by the light of the moon, which I often did after my parents had gone to bed; turning on a lamp would have woken them up, but, fortunately, the moonlight fell directly through my window and onto my pillow. To my friend—living in suburbia with streetlamps—that was a magical, whimsical line. To me, it was pure practicality. Another friend told me a guy she was involved with had written to her from prison, and she insisted that I read the letter (which had been uploaded to a digital medium) as she said it was so "romantic". In it, he complains about being mistreated by the screws and how they mess with his food and turn his cell light off, so he is writing to her by the light of the moon coming in his window. I couldn't see any romance in this, simply deprivation and making do.

When I first moved to Sydney as a 19-year-old I thought there was something wrong with the sky at night. It never got fully black and the clouds were a strange orange colour

Although we are unable to properly experience the moon's incredible strength in the city, she still looms large in people's imaginations, supposedly dictating not only the tide but our moods. The word "lunatic" stems from the idea that the moon causes insanity, and in-house sex workers also believe that the full moon brings out the most bizarre clients. Watching the 1985 film *After Hours* the other day, which is set in New York, I noticed one of the characters saying it "must be a full moon out there" when they spotted the protagonist's unusual behaviour. This shows that the mythology around the moon's power still very much exists, even when she is blotted out from visibility by a city's smog and silhouettes. ◆



© DARIO LOPEZ-MILLS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Obituary

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi

1972–2026

The last time most Libyans saw Saif al-Islam Gaddafi alive was in 2021. Muammar Gaddafi's son, who for some time had been considered his heir apparent, had not been seen for years before, to the extent that some diplomats talked of the need for proof that he was alive. Perhaps as a result, many Libyans refused to believe that the man who appeared in highly stylised photographs accompanying a *New York Times* feature that July—his first interview in a decade—was really the late dictator's son.

Soon after that, in November, a clip went viral of Saif al-Islam registering to stand in imminent presidential elections. There was no mistaking him in this footage, and yet Libyans were struck by his physical transformation. Saif al-Islam's once babyfaced features were hollowed, and he had grown a greying beard. He wore a Bedouin-style mustard coloured turban and robe. He seemed keen to cultivate an image of himself as desert mystic, an effect rather undermined by his agitated manner as he brusquely signed the candidacy papers.

Those elections—which would have been Libya's first ever presidential ballot—never took place, and Saif al-Islam is now dead, shot by masked assailants who burst into his residence in Zintan, a conservative town perched amid the Nafusa mountains, on 3rd February this year. Photographs circulating on Libyan social media appeared to show his bloodied corpse swaddled in blankets in the back of a pickup truck.

Libyan authorities have launched an investigation but few in the country believe the perpetrators will ever be found, let alone brought to justice. Everyone has a theory regarding who may have been behind the killing, and there are many who might have had reason to want Saif al-Islam dead, or at least out of the picture—from rivals within Libya's bitterly divided politics to those who continue to nurse deep grievances over his father's idiosyncratic and often brutal 42-year dictatorship. The details of his killing indicate it was well planned.

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's life was truly one of three acts—or, as one Libyan quipped

Lives

to me, "three very different Saifs". Born to his father's second wife in 1972, he was the eldest of their seven children. His parents gave him a distinctive first name which translates as Sword of Islam. He studied architecture in Libya's capital, Tripoli, and obtained an MBA in Vienna before undertaking a doctorate at the London School of Economics; he was awarded the PhD in 2009, though his thesis was later dogged by allegations of plagiarism. The Saif al-Islam who Libyans saw during this period was a jetsetting playboy who hung out with models and was often photographed with his pet tigers.

Returning to Libya in 2009, he sought to present himself as a suave and worldly reformer of the Jamahiriya, a neologism his father had coined to describe the state he had built after taking power following a military coup in 1969. Many inside and outside Libya were persuaded by Saif al-Islam's talk of opening up and modernising the oil-rich country. And then came 2011.

A very different Saif al-Islam emerged as protests against his father's regime, inspired by the peaceful ousting of autocrats in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt, quickly evolved into an armed uprising. Just days after the first demonstrations, he delivered a chilling televised address where he wagged his finger menacingly and warned the protesters that "rivers of blood" would run through Libya. After the UN Security Council mandated a Nato-led intervention that tipped the war in favour of the rebels, Saif al-Islam swapped his designer suits for military fatigues and gave defiant speeches at rallies surrounded by gun-toting loyalists. I spent months on the ground during the uprising and repeatedly heard Libyans, the younger generation in particular, express their shock at how the man they thought would deliver a new Libya had turned against them, and so violently too. In London, Howard Davies resigned as LSE director over the institution's links with Saif al-Islam, including a donation of £1.5m from a charity he founded that bore the family name.

Before the year was out, Saif al-Islam's father had been killed by rebels in his hometown of Sirte and three of his brothers were dead. Saif al-Islam was captured as he tried to escape to Niger. Photographs showed him with bandaged fingers; his right thumb and forefinger were missing, an injury he claimed was inflicted during a Nato bombardment the month before. In 2021, he told the same story to *New York Times* journalist Robert F Worth. The rebels who seized him were from Zintan, which is around 150km southwest of Tripoli. He would spend the next 15 years there, his status evolving from detention to incrementally more relaxed forms of house arrest until, in February, the gunmen came for him.

For the Zintani militiamen holding him, Saif al-Islam was a useful bargaining chip in the turbulent power plays of post-Gaddafi Libya. "He's the goose that lays the golden eggs," a politician from Zintan once told me. Although he was indicted in 2011 by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, the Libyans refused to hand him over and insisted instead on putting him on trial at home. The next time Libyans saw Saif al-Islam in the media, he was wearing a blue jumpsuit and sitting in a cage in Zintan as he was tried by video link. He was sentenced to death in absentia in 2015, but that was later commuted following the passing of a disputed amnesty law.

In 2014, Libya's troubled transition descended into a civil conflict that ebbed and flowed for six years until a ceasefire between former Gaddafi-era general Khalifa Haftar and his Tripoli-based opponents. Haftar, who has done more to spoil post-Gaddafi Libya than most, wanted to install himself as the country's military ruler. Those ambitions—which to Haftar's critics were reminiscent of Gaddafi—were the main driver of the 2014-20 war. Throughout that time, as diplomats and policymakers struggled to find a resolution, many regularly asked if Saif al-Islam might hold the key, though the suggestion often raised eyebrows. Some Libyans questioned his psychological state after everything he had experienced since 2011. Russia, however, embraced the idea even as it was also supporting Haftar. It was an open secret that Saif al-Islam had Russian interlocutors, some of them connected to the Wagner mercenary group. Moscow-linked propaganda campaigns on Libyan social media pushed him as the saviour of a broken country. Others around Saif al-Islam sought to portray him as a quasi-messianic figure, someone who had accurately predicted in 2011 the chaos that followed his father's fall.

Since 2021, Libya has been divided between two poles: the internationally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU) headed by prime minister Abdulhamid Dabaiba in Tripoli, and the octogenarian Haftar and his sons, whose stronghold is in eastern Libya. Both Dabaiba and Haftar wanted to run in the presidential elections scheduled for December 2021. Polling at the time showed Dabaiba and Saif al-Islam were the frontrunners; Haftar, who tried to overthrow the Tripoli government in 2019, was trailing behind. While Dabaiba's appeal lay in his folksy populism and willingness to dispense state largesse in the form of grants—including to newly married couples—Saif al-Islam's was more complicated. After years of civil conflict, he had become a cipher for a particular kind of nostalgia for pre-2011 Libya that was often laced with a creeping regret over what had transpired since.

Apart from the former regime's true believers, Libyans who had supported the 2011 insurrection also considered voting for him. "I know former rebels, friends of mine, who fought against Gaddafi that year, who would have voted for Saif in 2021," Mohammed Alnaas, a Libyan novelist in his early thirties, tells me. "That was a massive change." Many diplomats believed that, had the presidential elections not been postponed, Gaddafi's son would have won.

Saif al-Islam's often surreal *New York Times* interview from that year did not dent his popularity. A source close to Saif al-Islam told me that his Russian interlocutors had advised him against it, arguing that his first public appearance in a decade should be with an Arab media outlet. It was a classic Saif move, one Libyan offi-





© ABACA PRESS / ALAMY

The transformation of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, from the early 2000s to his capture in 2011

cial observed. "He took the Libyan people for granted and saw no real need to engage with them. It's the *New York Times* readership he wanted to impress and convince."

Worth reported that a laughing Saif al-Islam told him: "I've been away from the Libyan people for 10 years... You need to come back slowly, slowly. Like a striptease. You need to play with their minds a little."

In recent years, the so-called "Greens"—supporters of the Gaddafi regime ranging from the ideologically committed apparatchiks who formed the backbone of his system to grassroots sympathisers scattered inside and outside Libya—have become more assertive. Some have formed political parties. Haftar integrated many from Gaddafi's feared security and intelligence services into his forces. In Tripoli, Dabaiba, whose own family was close to the regime, has appointed figures who were part of the status quo before 2011 to key positions. The UN mission in Libya brought several "Greens" into its dialogue processes in the spirit of reconciliation.

But the fractured "Greens" have never formed a cohesive current, and not everyone within it supported Saif al-Islam and his presidential ambitions. Some from Gaddafi's old guard still believe that his tentative reform efforts sowed the seeds of the 2011 uprising. As the "Greens" gradually entered the machinery of the post-Gaddafi state, a key question was whether they would prove conciliatory or vengeful if they reached a critical mass or triumphed in elections. In 2021, I asked a contact who met Saif al-Islam some months before he registered as an electoral candidate which category Gaddafi's erstwhile heir belonged to. "Definitely more vengeful," he replied.

With the death of Saif al-Islam, many wonder how former regime supporters who already felt less than conciliatory towards the post-Gaddafi order might channel their grief and anger over his killing. Saif al-Islam's lawyer claimed that Haftar's forces would not allow his burial in Sirte, the coastal town where his father was born and died, and which they now control. Instead, he was interred in Bani Walid, another bastion of the former regime, a couple of hours drive southeast of Tripoli. Photographs of the funeral showed thousands of mourners. At the graveside, there were vows that his death would not be in vain.

Saif al-Islam's assassination further flattens Libya's political landscape between the House of Dabaiba and the House of Haftar. To the dismay of Libyans who still dream of elections, which were promised in 2021, the view in Washington and some European capitals is that the best chance of stability amounts to a carve-up of the country's oil wealth between the two camps. Just days before the gunmen stormed Saif al-Islam's home, Donald Trump's adviser Massad Boulos convened, along with French officials, a meeting between Haftar's son Saddam and Dabaiba's powerful relative, Ibrahim Dabaiba, in Paris. Boulos confirmed the talks almost a week later, saying they were aimed at achieving national unity and long-term stability in line with what he described as Trump's broader peace agenda. Boulos, who has visited Libya twice since Trump's inauguration last year, wants US companies to tap into the nation's vast oil reserves, calculated to be Africa's largest.

Saif al-Islam is survived by his mother, Safia, his brothers Saadi and Hannibal (who was released last year after spending a decade in detention in Lebanon) and his sister Aisha, plus a half-brother, Muhammad, from his father's first marriage. These remaining family members all reside outside Libya, and it is hard to imagine any of them taking Saif al-Islam's place as a symbol of the Gaddafi era, someone around whom loyalists and nostalgics could rally. What is more likely is that, with Saif al-Islam gone, the Gaddafi name recedes further from the Libyan imagination and the "Green" networks fragment even further.

Fifty-seven years after Muammar Gaddafi came to power as a young coupist, the murder in a small mountain town of the son who dreamed of succeeding him appears to be the epilogue of the Gaddafi family's long hold on Libya. ◆

Mary Fitzgerald *is a researcher and policy analyst*

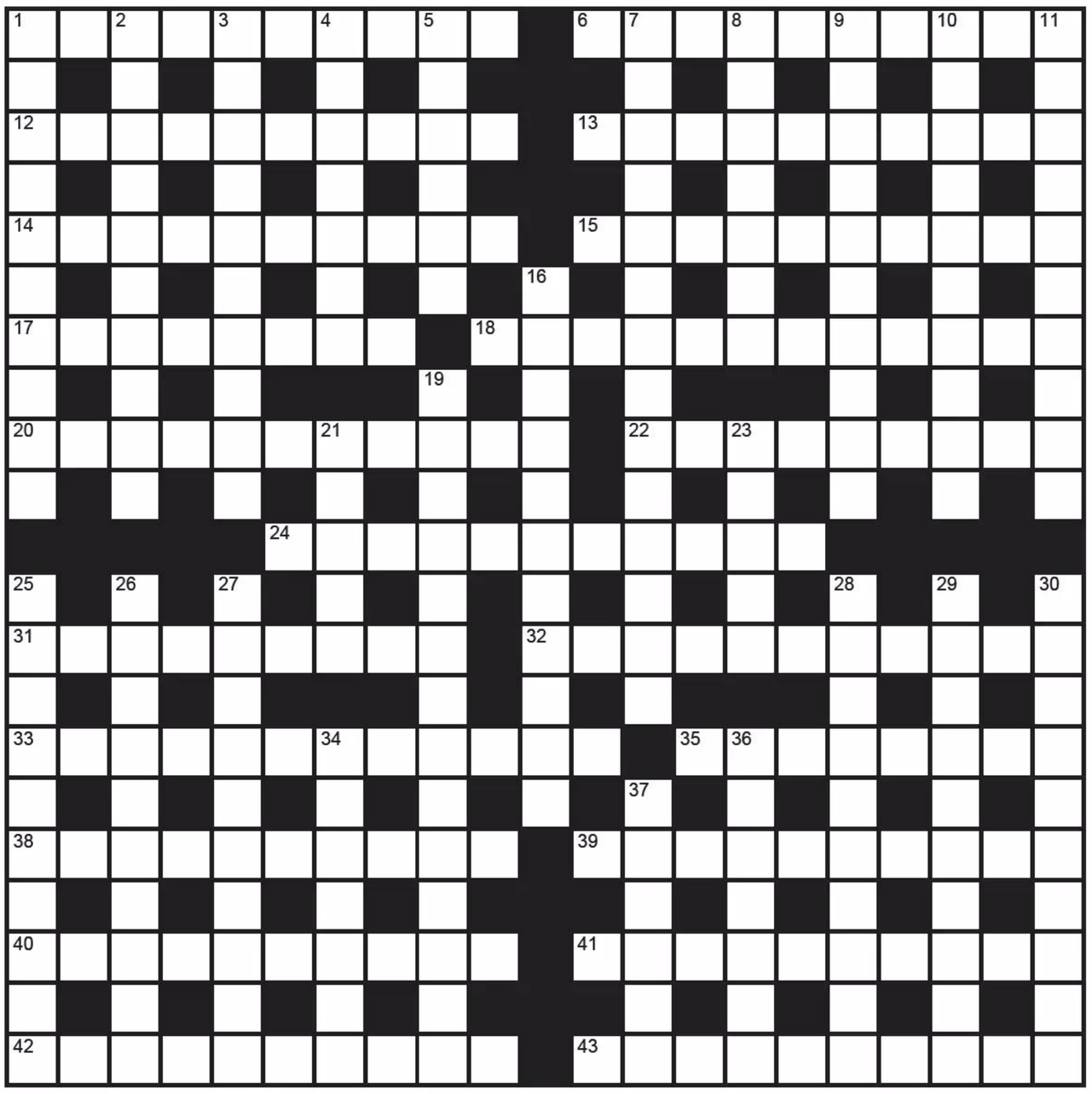
The Generalist by Didymus

Across

1 Public and elaborate eulogies (10)
6 In Ancient Greece, banishes by popular vote (10)
12 Obsolete term for followers of James Hutton (10)
13 ... ... crop, also known as benne, a key ingredient in tahini (6,4)
14 Town in Telford and Wrekin unitary authority (10)
15 In card playing, having the same face value, but of a different suit (3,2,1,4)
17 ... Radebe, South African dancer and choreographer who, with partner John Whaite, was runner-up in the 2021 series of *Strictly Come Dancing* (8)
18 Collection of more than 700 morality tales which include "The Fox and the Grapes", "Belling the Cat" and "The Stag and His Reflection" (6,6)
20 Provençal dish of tomatoes, aubergines and peppers, fried in oil and then stewed (11)
22 Anticipate (9)
24 Tidal channel overlooked by the National Trust property, Plas Newydd (5,6)
31 Light-hearted and chummy goodbye (6-3)
32 Stage design and arrangement of actors for a theatrical or film production (4,2,5)
33 In the USA, a traditional name for Santa Claus (5,7)
35 An orange studded with cloves to scent the air (8)
38 Montagna Grande and Rocca di Novara are the two highest points of this Sicilian mountain range (10)
39 Unesco World Heritage city in Lower Saxony on the river Innerste (10)
40 Shirley Williams, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Roy Jenkins who founded the SDP (4,2,4)
41 Soldiers working for the United Nations peace-keeping force (4,6)
42 The nine-line stanza invented for *The Faerie Queene* with the rhyme scheme A B A B B C B C C (10)
43 Roger ..., the English conductor famed for his historically informed performances of baroque, classical and romantic music (10)

Down

1 Beinn an Oir, Beinn Shiantaidh and Beinn a' Chaolais (4,2,4)
2 The capital city of Mauritania (10)
3 Seed of the genus Arachis (10)
4 Surrey commuter town where Margot Fonteyn and Rev David Sheppard were born (7)
5 The *Master* ..., the express train between Sheffield and London St Pancras (6)
7 Where the Major Oak and Greendale Oak grow (8,6)
8 Sets forth logically (7)
9 Primitive fish believed to be extinct until 1938 when one was caught off the east coast of South Africa (10)
10 Pursuit or study in which one has expert knowledge (10)



11 Potato wedges, raita and garlic bread, eg (4,6)
16 1834 novel by Captain Marryat about a young British midshipman during the Napoleonic wars (5,6)
19 The Garden of Skye: the location of Ardvasar, Isle Ornsay and Tarskavaig (5,9)
21 Run through all available supplies (3,2)
23 River which can be followed by berry, grave, stone and wine (5)
25 Where Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is believed to have been composed (5,5)
26 Eau ..., hot water in Bordeaux (10)
27 Teaching areas (10)
28 Virtuoso Polish-born US violinist of the 20th century who said that he played "music that solves all human problems: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven" (5,5)
29 Village in the Gwynant Valley, where Prince Llewelyn the Great's faithful hound is buried (10)
30 US investigating lawyer in novels by Erle Stanley Gardner who was portrayed by Raymond Burr on TV (5,5)
34 The microscopic wheel animalcule (7)
36 Aberdeenshire village near to the ruined 13th-century Cistercian abbey bearing part of its name (3,4)
37 Metal ornamentation made by engraving and filling up the lines with a black compound of sulphur and silver (6)

How to enter

Send your solution to answer@prospect-magazine.co.uk or Crossword, Prospect 2 Queen Anne's Gate, SW1H 9AA

Include your email and postal address. Entries must be received by 20th March. Winners announced in our May 2026 issue



The winner receives a copy of "Part of the Story: Writings from Half a Century" by Margaret Busby (Hamish Hamilton)

Download a PDF of these pages at prospectmagazine.co.uk

Last month's crossword solutions

Across: 1 Schipperke, 6 Slimbridge, 12 Haweswater, 13 Striplings, 15 *Episodes*, 16 Old Pretender, 18 Blakeney Point, 20 Cadenza, 21 Rogart, 22 Bluegrass State, 25 *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 29 Speaker's Corner, 30 Crenel, 33 Aitches, 35 Lower mordents, 36 *La Campanella*, 38 Attitude, 40 Nanosecond, 41 Russ Conway, 42 Ancestress, 43 Bludgeoned.

Down: 1 Schoenberg, 2 Hawaiian Goose, 3 Pistoleer, 4 Etagères, 5 Kiel, 7 Lit up, 8 Maiden Castle, 9 Roller disco, 10 Dunedin, 11 Easyreader, 14 Blaise Metreweli, 17 Apolitical, 19 Three Bears, 23 Allen and Unwin, 24 Morris dancer, 26 Wykehamists, 27 Escallonia, 28 Plas Newydd, 31 *Ruddigore*, 32 Contused, 34 Technic, 37 Ennis, 39 Burl.

Last month's winner

Andy Grieve



Bobby Seagull's Brain Teaser

You read a curiously edited version of Anton Chekhov's play featuring Irina Arkadina and her son Konstantin Treplev. As Arkadina stands beside Japan's national flower in bloom, Konstantin hears the buzz of queen, drone and worker insects. While three dark domestic felines cross his path, he complains that two tiny inner-ear bones—the anvil and stirrup—are ringing, though not the third. To console him, Arkadina serves a moist English sponge dessert with vanilla ice cream and a particular type of caramelised sugar sauce. While he is eating, a bird of the thieving type eyes his shiny spoon.

What connects this unusual tale?

Last month's solution

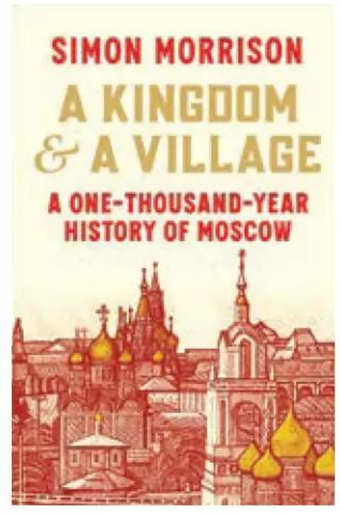
The clues hint at the houses, symbols and setting of the show "Game of Thrones": Roger Bannister, Lannister; Tony Stark, Stark; Charles Martel, Martell; a chair made of iron, the Iron Throne; exiting west to Diana Ross; Westeros

Last month's winner

Jonathan Hamston

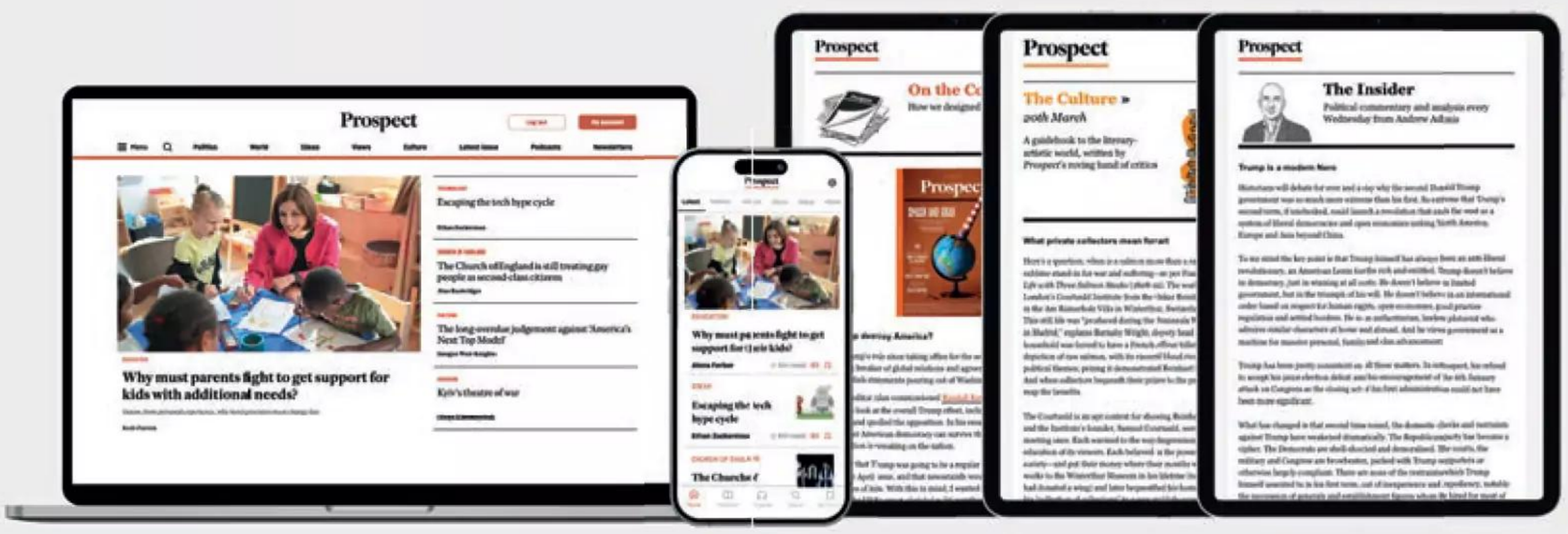
How to enter

Email your answer to answer@prospectmagazine.co.uk using the subject heading "Brain Teaser"



The winner receives a copy of "A Kingdom and a Village: A One-thousand-year history of Moscow" by Simon Morrison (Bodley Head)

Are you missing out on your *Prospect* subscription benefits?



Website

All magazine articles and new digital-only content, updated daily, plus the full 30-year *Prospect* archive

App

Featuring all of our journalism and podcasts, plus audio versions of the articles

Newsletters

Check your inbox for *The Insider, The Culture, Weekend Read, On the Cover* and *Editor's Letter*

Get the most out of your subscription by checking out our app or logging in at **prospectmagazine.co.uk**

Scan the code to download the app now

Hinterland

Alan Johnson

writer & former politician

What's the last book you read? Would you recommend it?
I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith. Highly recommended.

Which book, film, album, painting or other cultural work should everyone experience at least once?
The CMAT album *Crazymad, for Me*. Particularly her duet with John Grant.

Do you cry in movies? If so, what was the last movie that made you cry?
I last blubbed away watching the Beatles film *Get Back*.

What's television's funniest moment?
The rogue zoo elephant in the *Blue Peter* studio.

What series are you watching at the moment?
The Night Manager.

Which authors whom you discovered as a young man are still with you?
George Orwell, PG Wodehouse, Dickens and Hardy.

Do you regret taking a wrong turn into politics when you could have been a pop star?
There's still time.

Who was your idol growing up?
Paul McCartney.

Who's your cultural hero?
I have two cultural idols, McCartney and Thomas Hardy.



I'm thinking of writing a book about them provisionally titled "Hey Jude the Obscure".

Do you follow any sports?
Football in general, QPR in particular.

You have a long association with Hull, the city of poetry. Tell us about you and Philip Larkin.
Many of Larkin's poems are set in what was my Hull constituency (eg "The Large Cool Store", "Friday Night at the Royal Station Hotel", "Broadcast"). We never met, and I suspect we wouldn't have got on, but his poetry has been a constant source of delight ever since I read "I Remember, I Remember" in my twenties.

What cultural work or artist is overrated?
The Rolling Stones.

What cultural work or artist is underrated?
The Canadian singer Ron Sexsmith.

What's your favourite room in any gallery or museum?
The coffee shop.

What would you like to get into if you had the time?
Galleries and museums.

What's the first gig you ever went to? And the most recent?
I saw Lonnie Donegan at the Chiswick Empire in 1958. Looking forward to seeing Elvis Costello in Newcastle.

If you could steal any artwork and get away with it, what would it be?
Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881). I wish it were small enough to slip into an overcoat pocket.

What art form passes you by?
Ballet.

Who is the greatest artistic genius of all time?
The Beatles.

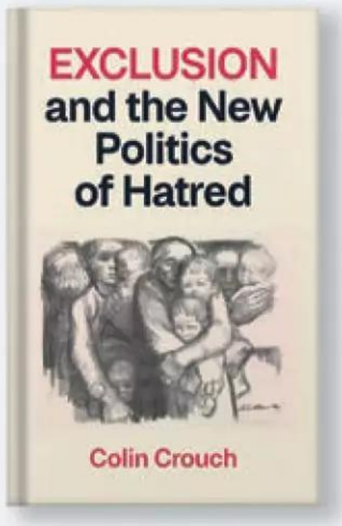
Suggest an alternative national anthem.
Anything would be better than the current dirge. I'd plump for "Jerusalem", but would be equally happy with "Yellow Submarine". ♦

Alan Johnson's *"Harold Wilson: Twentieth Century Man" (Swift Press) is out now in paperback*

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL REA

independent thinking from polity

Exclusion and the New Politics of Hatred



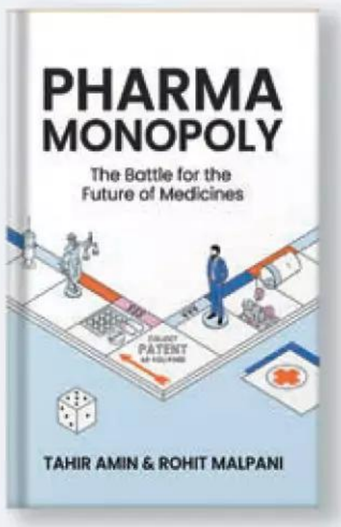
Colin Crouch

Why struggles over inclusion and exclusion have become the heart of contemporary politics.

HB: 978-1-5095-7322-6 | March 2026 | £20.00

Pharma Monopoly

The Battle for the Future of Medicines



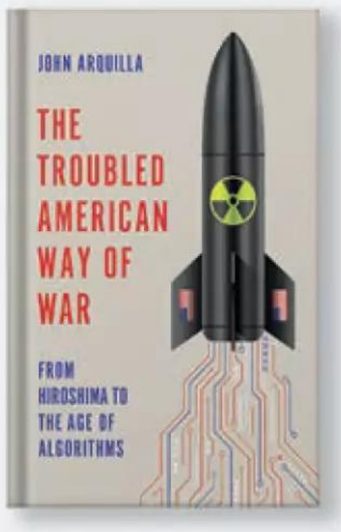
Tahir Amin & Rohit Malpani

How governments and NGOs joined Big Pharma to build a patent system that starves innovation.

HB: 978-1-5095-5832-2 | March 2026 | £25.00

The Troubled American Way of War

From Hiroshima to the Age of Algorithms



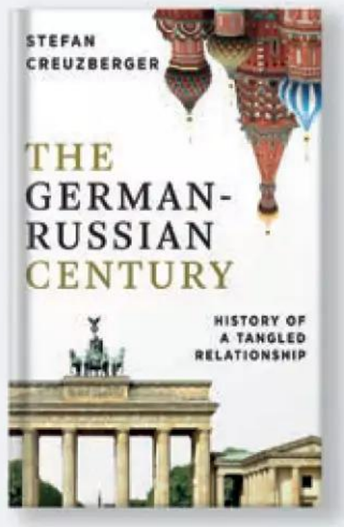
John Arquilla

A trenchant and surprising account of why the world's most powerful country struggles at war.

HB: 978-1-5095-6090-5 | April 2026 | £25.00

The German-Russian Century

History of a Tangled Relationship



Stefan Creuzberger

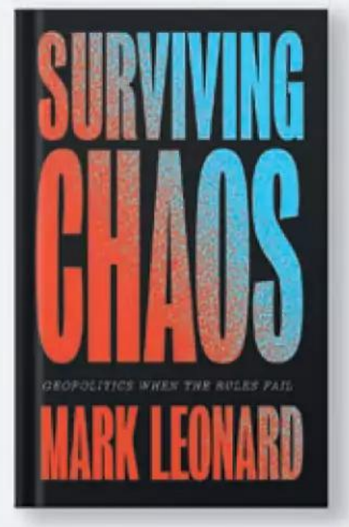
Translated by Elizabeth Janik

A magisterial history of the turbulent relationship between Germany and Russia - two countries that have shaped the modern world.

HB: 978-1-5095-6571-9 | March 2026 | £30.00

Surviving Chaos

Geopolitics When the Rules Fail



Mark Leonard

In a world of disorder, Europe must learn to surf the chaos to survive.

HB: 978-1-5095-7522-0 | April 2026 | £20.00

@politybooks

Learn more about these and other titles at **politybooks.com**

Aberdeen Asia Focus

managed by Aberdeen



Discover hidden gems in fast growing Asian markets

Tax efficient investing

Asia's fast-growing, demand-driven economies can offer investors a degree of insulation from international trade tensions and global shocks. Aberdeen Asia Focus invests in high-quality, smaller companies often overlooked by mainstream Asia funds.

Our portfolio is almost entirely distinct from typical Asia indices, making **Aberdeen Asia Focus** a compelling option for investors seeking long-term growth opportunities with both diversification and resilience.

So, why not join us as we seek to discover Asia's next generation of market leaders?

Please remember, the value of shares and the income from them can go down as well as up and you may get back less than the amount invested.

Tax treatment depends on the individual circumstances of each investor and may be subject to change in the future.

Eligible for Individual Savings Accounts (ISAs) and Self-Invested Personal Pensions (SIPPs).

Invest via leading platforms.

aberdeen

Find out more asia-focus.co.uk

Issued by abrdn Fund Managers Limited, registered in England and Wales (740118) at 280 Bishopsgate, London, EC2M 4AG.
Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority in the UK.