

Special feature: Israeli occupation – 50 years on

TLS

Jenny Hendrix **Women and their memoirs**
Dinah Birch **A homely Victorian threesome**
Sam Leith **Deciphering Will Self**
Tom Holland **What does the fox say?**

JUNE 2 2017 No. 5957 ■ www.the-tls.co.uk

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

UK £3.50 USA \$6.99



In defence of film-making
Martin Scorsese

and a judge”) who, after being educated in the United States, has returned to Haiti with his wife, Nadia. Johel harbours political ambitions and Terry becomes his impromptu bodyguard, even though “Truth be told, Terry hated Haiti. Later, he’d laugh about how much he hated it. At the time, not a whole lot of ha-ha-ha. Last place he ever wanted to be in his whole life was Haiti. The number of times Terry had fantasized about one day living in Haiti was precisely zip”. He falls in love with Nadia, however, and their indiscreet affair plays out in the close-knit community.

The plot focuses on Johel’s idealistic campaign against the incumbent, corrupt *sénateur* Maxim Bayard. All the elements of a political thriller – the intrigue, the campaigning, the stump speeches – are handled well by Berlinski, but this novel is more than merely a thriller; the narrator’s anecdotal approach, no doubt influenced by the pace of life in Haiti, gives the book a meandering, multifaceted nature. “Terry White!” he exclaims at one point, “Who would believe such a name if it wasn’t his? No novelist would dare choose such a name in the context of Haiti.” That context – Haiti’s colonial history, its poverty – is kept in the reader’s mind throughout the book, as Berlinski skips between reportage and fiction. Even Maxim’s presumed status as Johel’s pernicious enemy is undermined when, in one of the many narrative detours, it becomes clear that Maxim’s family were slaughtered by the Tonton Macoute and he lived in exile to escape President François Duvalier.

Sometimes Berlinski loses his lightness of touch by packing scenes with a surfeit of detail and when disquisitions on Haiti become over-explanatory. The best episodes are those in which the commentary on Haiti’s circumstances feels off the cuff and captures real life. In one, an overloaded boat sinks and the narrator helps escort people from the ocean into the *salle d’urgence*. “I was looking for that person who in Haiti does not exist – the man in charge”, he says.

FRANK BRINKLEY

Religion

Judith S. McKenzie and Francis Watson
THE GARIMA GOSPELS

Early illuminated gospel books from Ethiopia
284pp. University of Exeter Press. £49.95.
978 0 9954946 0 2

Christianity was probably established in Ethiopia in the fourth century. The Scriptures were thereafter translated into Ge’ez, now the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Two of the so-called Abba Garima codices are the earliest surviving Ethiopian gospel books; significantly, they were translated from Greek. Their name derives from the abbey in the former Kingdom of Aksum, in northern Ethiopia, where they were probably written and illustrated and where they are still housed. It is only recently that the manuscripts have been photographed, and their pages better collated.

The Garima Gospels will revolutionize the history of this version of the Bible, by arguing for a date as early as c.330–650 for two of the codices. (Most Ethiopian manuscripts are comparatively recent, typically dating from the fifteenth century onwards.) If the editors’ conclusions are correct – and they base their

judgements on radiocarbon testing, as well as on art history and textual criticism – the implications would be momentous.

Judith McKenzie from Oxford and her collaborators have written the first two parts of the book (chapters 1–6); these concentrate on the manuscripts’ art work: the portraits of the four evangelists (likely to be the earliest such illustrations in any biblical manuscript) and other decorative matter, including flora, fauna and architectural features, provide clues to the date and provenance of the codices, as well as showing many fascinating parallels in other Christian countries, such as Armenia.

In Part III (chapters 7–10), Francis Watson from Durham concentrates on the ubiquitous “canon tables” attributed to Eusebius (whose portrait prefaces these tables in one of the Garima manuscripts). Watson argues that these numbered charts, here transcribed within stylized and decorated columns and prefacing the Gospel texts, were designed to demonstrate parallels between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In the event, the Ethiopian scribes’ lists in all three Garima codices were chaotic and disorderly, with many a wrong numbering.

The meticulous scholarship in evidence throughout *The Garima Gospels* is worthy of the series in which it appears (Manar Al-Athar Monographs no. 3.) This lavishly illustrated volume, with its 268 colour pictures and fifty-two full-page plates, may also serve as a handsome coffee table book.

J. K. ELLIOTT

Natural History

Simon Cooper
THE OTTERS’ TALE
288pp. William Collins. £16.99.
978 0 00 818971 6

The Wallop Brook is a chalk stream, a tributary of the River Test in Hampshire, arguably the home to the best-known trout fishery in the world. Aquifers deep in the chalk are its principal source, wellsprings of crystal clear water that confer their gin clarity on streams that lose their transparency only when land runoff washes silt into the flow. For naturalists like Simon Cooper, such wild aquaria offer incomparable opportunities for observing the lives of their inhabitants, including the crayfish, bullheads, trout, salmon and grayling which, given the decreasing abundance of their preferred prey the largely nocturnal eel, are the principal wild food of chalk stream otters. Cooper lives in and works from a partially restored mill beside which he maintains a rainbow trout fishery stocked from rearing channels nearby. Not surprisingly, the stocked fish are highly attractive to otters which compete with the paying anglers as predators of the plump and relatively guileless reared rainbows. Many a fishery owner would have seen the otters as an undesirable threat to his livelihood. Cooper, however, willingly exchanged the loss of some of his fish for the opportunity to follow the fate of otter families at first hand.

A glimpse from his office window first drew the otters to his attention. He was able to watch their fishing behaviour and the relationships between mothers and young at close quarters. Fascinated by what he saw, he was soon making detailed observations of otters not just at the mill but from the banksides of both his home brook and the Test itself. He was to discover that the lives of male and female otters

are very different, that apparently affectionate bonds between mothers and young are vital in honing the fishing skills of their offspring which are essential to their long-term survival and reproduction. However, he also found that adults of both sexes can exhibit a ruthlessness towards their young and to one another which is shocking to all but an evolutionary biologist. He summarizes his observations by telling the detailed story of a mother and her young and the male otter with which they occasionally interact. He does so with the charm of a Kenneth Grahame but with the scientific rigour of modern behavioural science. It is the best popular account of the lives of otters written so far.

RICHARD SHELTON

Social Studies

Jessa Crispin
WHY I AM NOT A FEMINIST
A feminist manifesto
240pp. Melville House. £12.99 (US \$24.95).
978 1 61219 601 5

Why I Am not a Feminist: A feminist manifesto by Jessa Crispin is an energetic, uneven, sprawling challenge to fashionable, capitalist, well-groomed contemporary liberal feminism. Crispin argues against the mainstreaming and commercialization of feminism, the dilution of its message and the requirement that feminism be sold to the masses the way every product is: by a conventionally pretty, young white woman who assures consumers of “my approachability, my reasonable nature . . . my love of men and my sexual availability . . . [letting them know that] I am harmless, I am toothless, you can fuck me”. This “Universal Feminism”, as Crispin calls it – a sugary, easy-to-digest mulch – does not challenge and confront men or women, does not break down social structures and “does not require changing the way you dress, think, behave”.

There is much to cheer on in the first half of the book, which longs for “full-on revolution” and radical overthrow. No traction will be gained, Crispin argues, by politely accommodating contemporary feminists who beg men for leniency and good treatment or fetishize self-empowerment and self-care. Feminism has always had knottier roots than that, and was never a mass movement, despite its impact. It was, instead, “a fringe group . . . of activists and radicals and weirdos who forced society to move toward them . . . a small number of radical, heavily invested women who did the hard work of dragging women’s position forward”.

Why I Am not a Feminist is critical of the brutality and inequality of contemporary capitalism, through which women’s achievements are judged. You are said to be a powerful and empowered woman if you succeed according to male, capitalist values: gaining fame and money, being conventionally attractive and “using that” for personal gain, fighting ruthlessly in a “brand new world of struggle, despair and uncertainty”. Where Crispin’s argument unravels, however, is when its refreshing blaze of zeal and indignation, frustration and witty choler do not result, in the second half, in specific or deeply thought-out steers towards a more meaningful, more radical feminist future. When lifestyle feminism vanishes in a vapid haze, in favour of the next trend; when online activ-

ism and Twitter indignation exhaust themselves; when women and men who care about a more just future rediscover the great feminists of the 1970s . . . what then? Crispin’s portrait of the current era of greed, power and inequality is both appalling and true. But I would love to see her turning her great energies on imagining a changed future.

BIDISHA

Children’s Books

Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin
THE STORY CURE
An A–Z of books to keep kids happy,
healthy and wise
356pp. Canongate. £17.99.
978 1 78211 527 4

In *The Story Cure: An A–Z of books to keep kids happy, healthy and wise*, Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin write that librarians, booksellers and teachers are “bibliotherapists in disguise” whose reading recommendations can “cure” problems with literature. “The right novel at the right time in your life can help you see things differently”, they say. Their book is a compendium of childhood “ailments” listed in alphabetical order, with suggested works of literature – ranging from picture books to young adult and classic fiction – that address the issue. Is your child a know-it-all? Do you know a child who has experienced a death in the family or a divorce? What about a child who won’t eat vegetables, detests bathing, or who picks his nose in public? Consult the letter “O”, for example, and you’ll find an entry for “Obsessions”, which consists of seventeen lists of best books on a variety of topics ranging from ballet, martial arts, mysteries, and even “horsey books”.

This book seems targeted at literary-minded parents and grandparents, but it only scratches the surface of children’s literature. Librarians have greater resources at their fingertips for researching books than what *The Story Cure* offers. Most entries include lengthy summaries of only one or two books. Sometimes entries omitted what I thought was the best book on a certain topic (why, I wondered, on “poo and pee, fascination with”, did they leave out the ever-popular *Everyone Poops*, 1977?). I would have forgone the lengthy summaries in favour of more choices. In addition, the book is unnecessarily preachy. Under the topic “alone”, for instance, the authors write: “Many adults never learn to enjoy being alone . . . Use [these books] to introduce solitude as a positive concept, and you’ll give a child a key to contentment in life”. If you’re reading this book, you probably already believe this, but there is nothing as annoying as bookish piety.

Perhaps a book that tries to cast such a wide net, recommending books for every childhood ailment, will inevitably offend some in its errors of omission, under- or misrepresentation. Why did the authors recommend only books about fidgeting for kids with ADHD? Why the long entry for “being overtired”, and a cursory entry for “abuse”? I found myself spending more time disagreeing with the author’s classification system and narrow definitions. With sophisticated internet search options, it’s probably best that we leave ideas for literary “cures” to digital catalogues, whose search terms are more forgiving, inclusive and exhaustive.

JULIE HAKIM AZZAM