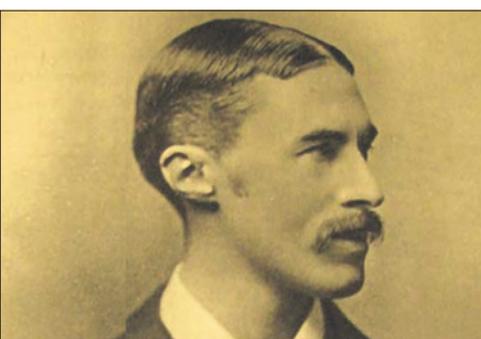


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THIS WEEK

The novels of Sir Walter Scott have not survived as well as their names, their imagery and their myths. Few Waverley novels are in paperback print and, as John Sutherland describes this week, the man whose bestsellers saturated the public like no writer before or since is remembered most of all at street corners – in pubs, stations and road signs. The ubiquitous tartan of the clans was “arguably one of his finer works of fiction”. The *Ivanhoe* thesis of “the Norman yoke” on bent British shoulders lives on strongly in the European debates of today. Even the Anders Breivik trial in Oslo is more comprehensible to those who know their *Ivanhoe*, argues Sutherland, judging Ann Rigney’s *The Afterlives of Walter Scott* to be both “thoughtful and thought-provoking”.

Scott made himself rich by writing – before lending too much money to his publisher, a warning well learnt by bestselling successors. The French poet and novelist Raymond Roussel was rich enough to spend a lifetime writing and publishing books that were mostly unsold. But, as Peter Read writes, the author of *Impressions d’Afrique* had powerful and influential advocates, including Apollinaire, Dalí and Cocteau. Read’s review is of four new books, including two new translations of the *Impressions*, by Mark Polizzotti and Mark Ford, both of them highly praised. The author himself suggested that readers might like to read the second half first.



One of many mysteries about the poet and classicist A. E. Housman (above) was his devotion to a 4,000-line Latin poem on astrology and astronomy by an otherwise unknown poet called Manilius. Housman, even though he had painstakingly edited the poem in five volumes between 1903 and 1930, told one friend not to waste his time on it. When he praised it to another friend, it was hard to judge whether he was being serious. But Manilius has become more fashionable in recent years, as shown in a new set of essays reviewed this week by David J. Butterfield. The poet had a “conflicted world view”, argues one contributor. The poem itself has its genuinely golden moments.

PS

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Sofka Zinovieff

THE HOUSE ON PARADISE STREET
320pp. Short Books. Paperback, £12.99.
978 1 90759 569 1

The mythical figure of Antigone haunts Sofka Zinovieff's visceral debut novel – which is set during and after the Greek Civil War – most obviously through the figure of its protagonist, Antigone Perifianis. This Antigone knows the dangers for an individual who challenges brutal authority, and there is “undeniably a tragic grandeur in Antigone's appearance”. As in the myth, she would rather die than leave her deceased brother unburied. In fact, she goes to prison. Sixty years later, we find her returning from exile to her family home in Athens to attend the funeral of her only son, Nikitas, who was born in prison, and whom she has not seen since she abandoned him as a toddler.

“What could bring someone to abandon her young child and leave her country for ever?”, wonders Maud, Nikitas's English widow, and this is the novel's central question, too. Maud, who lives on the far-from-idyllic Paradise Street, starts to investigate her dead husband's traumatic past. The revelation of an acrimonious family feud provides some explanation for Nikitas's “deeply painful” experience of maternal rejection and how it led to his breakdown in adulthood. Zinovieff's is an unflinching story of how the Civil War sundered even the closest bonds, with long-lasting consequences. Depicting a violent world, morally and ideologically skewed, the pages of the novel are filled with horrific images of those who watched their loved ones die in ransacked villages, from the Nazi occupation, through the years of the military junta.

Under these circumstances, looking back itself becomes a dangerous occupation: “Nikitas used to say that, like Orpheus, you look back at your peril. The old or dead objects of your desire will not come back – Eurydice was never really going to make it out of Hades”. Yet Nikitas had to do just that. To what extent is it possible to escape brutal history? “How were these unspeakable and unexpressed burdens passed on?”

The first-person narrative switches between Maud and Antigone, who are not sufficiently distinct, dissipating some of the potential emotional engagement, but this is a timely and thought-provoking novel nonetheless, about the lasting psychological trauma and devastation wreaked by warfare and the pain passed down through the generations.

ANITA SETHI

Stuart Nadler

THE BOOK OF LIFE
256pp. Picador. £12.99.
978 1 447 20242 4

Fiction is meant to illuminate, to explode, to refresh. I don't think there's any consecutive moral philosophy in [it]”, John Cheever once told a *Paris Review* interviewer. His friend John Updike and their contemporary James Salter, too, have adhered to this principle, their tales pivoting on moments of ambivalence in the blue hour of morality, their narrators withholding judgment of errant or recidivist characters, treating them instead with comic brio or intimacy.

The disconsolate middle-aged New England men in Stuart Nadler's debut short story collection, *The Book of Life*, have Updikean and Salteresque set ups. A concupiscent businessman's affair with his partner's daughter reveals, in turn, the partner's dalliance with his wife. A woman's open marriage causes her “respectably lonely” husband and aggrieved son to bond. An artist and his ex-girlfriend regret the breakdown of their relationship over his cheating and her scheming. Yet *The Book of Life* does not probe the moral ambiguity in these scenarios – the crucible of Nadler's stories – deeply enough. Characters and narrators regard virtue and vice as absolutes. An adulterer is portrayed unequivocally, as “not the sort of man to do such a thing. This was something he knew, unquestionably, deep in his heart”; while extramarital affairs are reduced to cases of “misdirected boredom or simple lust”.

Many of the female characters are caricatures – myopic, feckless, or wan. A wife “wasn't the sort of woman who'd become angry at his infidelity”, but “the sort of woman who'd crumple and dissolve and shut down”. An artist's philistine girlfriend compares his abstractions to “the art her kindergarten students made when they were angry”, while her friend “is the sort of woman who . . . pretends to love men but who never misses an opportunity to insult them.” While Updike's spare, candid prose betokens a sincere affection for and forgiveness toward his characters, and Salter's affective luminosity is contained in epigrammatic but vatic sentences, Nadler's style is a hybrid of these two, but without their capacious empathy for moral vagaries, and he seems reluctant to examine the depths of fractured psyches.

Nadler's keen sensitivity to perpetuating intergenerational continuities, and to the breakdown of Judaism and marriage as moral compasses, give him a distinctive place in contemporary American fiction, one shared only by Nathan Englander. Yet the characters in *The Book of Life* are ephemeral, their revelations superficial or unambiguous.

JAYA ANINDA CHATTERJEE

Christopher Burns

A DIVISION OF THE LIGHT
279pp. Quercus. £16.99.
978 0 85738 635 9

Alice Fell falls in the street as two thieves run off with her handbag. Gregory Pharoah, a successful photographer, witnesses the incident. He photographs it, fall and escape, before going to Alice's aid. On meeting her, Gregory finds Alice enigmatic and alluring, and wants to photograph her more. Soon afterwards he goes abroad to photograph a girl who has visions of the Virgin Mary. Unlike Alice, Gregory does not believe in signs or the supernatural. He has a casual sexual encounter with the journalist covering the story, whom he privately scorns for her half-belief in the little girl's visions. Since the death of his wife, Ruth, whose slow decline he photographed obsessively, Gregory's life has been driven by his craft, and meaningless sexual conquests. (It is implied, although not explicitly stated, that this was not the case while Ruth was alive.)

On his return, Gregory receives a postcard from Alice, convincing him that she wants to

sit for him. Alice's vanity and ambition make her seduction by Gregory's lens inevitable. She strips for his camera, if not for him: each assumes that a sexual affair will follow, each confident that it will be on his or her own terms. During the photoshoots, it is unclear who is more strenuously manipulating whom.

Gregory's daughter Cassie dislikes Alice from the first, and indeed Alice is opportunistic, pinpointing Gregory as a possible candidate for the role of the lover who will, she is convinced, unlock her “special” potential, in which she has great faith. Shortly after her sessions with Gregory begin, Alice breaks up with her live-in boyfriend Thomas, a failed archaeologist who inspires intense irritation in her. She leaves, characteristically, without a backward glance. A chain of events is set in motion, which, although well signposted, succeeds in being surprising. It is unusual to see characters in such a clear, unrelenting light, with no airbrushing, and the casual cruelty of human relationships is artfully and unflinchingly depicted. Alice, Gregory and Thomas all have tendencies towards petulance – “I always deserve more” Alice tells Gregory's daughter – all are selfish and at least the two men are lonely, but the strong sense that all three are looking for something lends a gravitational pull towards the story's dramatic climax. The stark writing is powerful, its simplicity belied by the strangeness of the plot's twists and the characters' abhorrent yet sometimes recognizable thoughts and words. And despite the novel's clear glare, there lingers a suggestion that we should not trust everything; we, like the characters, may be subject to tricks of the light.

EIMEAR NOLAN

Torsten Krol

THE SECRET BOOK OF SACRED THINGS
293pp. Corvus. Paperback, £12.99.
978 1 84354 579 8

Set in a post-apocalyptic world where an asteroid has flung the Earth off its former axis, Torsten Krol's *The Secret Book of Sacred Things* concerns Rory, an adolescent member of a Sapphic, moon-worshipping cult, the Sisters of Selene, and her agonizing ascent into maturity against the backdrop of the annihilation of her religion.

The sisterhood to which Rory belongs sprung from a belief that the asteroid that obliterated our modern world was a punishment, sent by the moon goddess Selene, for the violent excesses of men. Despite being the author of this punishment, Selene chose to bear the brunt of the impact by placing herself between Earth and the asteroid, thus saving pockets of human society from extinction and causing considerable damage to the moon herself.

The Sisters of Selene portray religion as a conspiracy theory conjured out of the circumstances of our natural world and structured into dogma. Certainly the moon-worshipping cult of the women is less repugnant than the sun-worshipping equivalent of the men who eventually overthrow it, but the essential point exposed by our young narrator is that they, and by extension all theisms, are equal glimpses of the same untruth.

The impression remaining after we witness Rory survive the rise and fall of both these similar, but diverging, systems of belief is one

of the transient and circumstantial nature of religion and its development. It is a point rendered appropriately by a narrative voice that is making its own journey from childhood to maturity, superstition to emancipation.

The story is told in Rory's voice: “I will dedicate these pages to Selene. This way I know that what I do will be a good thing, as all things done in the name of our lady are”. From this logical fallacy Krol conjures the specter of 2000 years of religious conflict and persecution with a chilling and engrossing simplicity.

SERENA GOSDEL-HOOD

P. A. O'Reilly

THE FINE COLOUR OF RUST
247pp. Blue Door. £12.99.
978 0 00 745639 0

In the tradition of Patrick White and Elizabeth Jolley, P. A. O'Reilly's second novel, *The Fine Colour of Rust*, concerns a lonely character struggling in Australia's isolating landscape and becoming enmeshed in a provincial drama. Living in the fictional town of Gunapan, Loretta Boskovic, the single mother of Jake and Melissa, dreams of another life. A self-described “old scrag” with “legs like pistons” and a “turkey neck”, she trudges on with everyday tasks while waiting – in the absence of her “bastard” husband Tony – for an elusive “Harley Man or Beamer Man” with eyes like George Clooney. When the local council threatens to close the town's primary school, however, she sets up the “Save Our School Committee”.

We get to know Gunapan's other residents: Helen, a single woman suspicious of men, yet lusting for one rich enough to drive an Audi; Leonora, an entrepreneurial witch who practises “Freeing Your Inner Goddess”. Hector the “Speed Butcher”, who works in the abattoir and holds a record for cutting meat. All are conveyed in spare, stilted prose. Merv Bull the mechanic, Loretta's potential love interest, is ultimately rejected in terms Helen would understand: because he only “drives a Bedford”. Even Loretta's neighbour Norm Stevens, the “local junk man” and amateur sculptor, on whose fate the story hinges, is portrayed as having little interior life beyond assembling fragments of rusted machinery.

Unfortunately, the novels' premiss of a small-town hero battling against corrupt government and faceless bureaucracy becomes mired by gaudy depictions of native wildlife: “Kangaroos thumping along their tracks; rutting koalas sending out bellows you'd never imagine their cute little bodies could produce”; all among “wilted gum trees” where “pink-and-grey galahs explode into the sky” and “kookaburras are going crazy laughing”.

And there is also an insidious bigotry here. Loretta's voice, intended as comic, has an underlying racism which the author does little to diffuse. When a family of Bosnian refugees move to Gunapan, Loretta refers to them as the “Bosnia Herzabobble people” and the “one from Bosnia Hergesobbler. The foreigners”; the family's grandmother is “a first cousin of Methuselah”. Although there is an attempt at empathy when Loretta asks Mersiha, the Bosnian mother, to join the committee, the attempt is as shallow and self-centred as her romantic aspirations.

NATHAN DUNNE