

THIS WEEK

This is the sports issue of the *TLS* and regular readers may be reasonably disquieted at the prospect of descent into running, jumping, kicking, throwing and other pursuits deemed in one way or another to be sporting.

Never fear. We begin with mountaineering and the “multiple modernities” which Peter H. Hansen sees in the acts of those claiming to see and climb mountains for the first time. The first man to “discover” Mont Blanc was an Englishman who visited Savoy’s glaciers in 1741 and published a pictorial pamphlet. Next we turn to cricket, a peak of human endeavour which the English can more easily claim to have discovered although, as Stephen Fay notes, the Indians like to see it first within the most ancient paths of their own Hindu culture. Indians certainly own the game now, he concludes, reviewing two books on high-speed matches, gambling, corruption and the only place where the passions of rich and poor ever meet.



Football will be back in Britain soon and the TV screens are already aflicker with the prices of Croatians and Brazilians trafficked between London, Paris and Rome. Toby Lichtig considers *Red or Dead*, a novel by the “unflinching” David Peace (pictured) about how Liverpool Football Club rose from lowly “second division” origins to become “one of the greatest teams of the past half century”. Its central character is a manager who once said that football was “more important” than life or death. Lichtig finds little to be said in support of Peace’s “cut-and-paste prose” and much that is appropriately predictable.

Who was the first to have a Jockey Club? If Maryland had one in 1743, “why did it take at least another seven years before the founding of a British one?” Donald W. Nichol poses the sporting question and discovers the reassuring answer that the institution which set the rules for horse racing has an English history stretching further back than once was thought. In the 1720s, and maybe as early as 1709, “the Jockey Club” was already doing what it does best, providing a home for a man who has “gambled away his trousers”.

PS

CONTENTS

SOCIAL STUDIES	3	Adam Thorpe	Peter H. Hansen The Summits of Modern Man – Mountaineering after the Enlightenment
SPORT	5	Stephen Fay	James Astill The Great Tamasha – Cricket, corruption and the turbulent rise of modern India. Ed Hawkins Bookie Gambler Fixer Spy – A journey into the heart of cricket’s underworld
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR	6		Octavio Paz’s poetry, Savonarola biographies, Madeleines, etc
RELIGION	7	Peter Marshall	Brian P. Levack The Devil Within – Possession and exorcism in the Christian West
LITERARY CRITICISM & LITERATURE	8	Patricia Craig Zinovy Zinik George Steiner	Heather Ingman Irish Women’s Fiction – From Edgeworth to Enright Serena Vitale Shklovsky – Witness to an era; Translated by Jamie Richards. Viktor Shklovsky Bowstring – On the dissimilarity of the similar; Translated by Shushan Avagyan. A Hunt for Optimism; Translated by Shushan Avagyan Vittorio Hösle The Philosophical Dialogue – A poetics and a hermeneutics; Translated by Steven Rendall
HISTORY	12	Ari Kelman James M. Murphy	Walter Johnson River of Dark Dreams – Slavery and empire in the Cotton Kingdom Michael Burleigh Small Wars, Far Away Places – The genesis of the modern world: 1945–65
COMMENTARY	14	Donald W. Nichol Charles Boyle Then and Now	Lost trousers – Wives and gamblers in the history of the Jockey Club Freelance TLS October 17, 1912 – Joy in the hills
ARTS	17	Heather Wiebe Paul Muldoon	Benjamin Britten Sinfonia Da Requiem. Witold Lutosławski Cello Concerto. Thomas Adès Totentanz. David Matthews A Vision of the Sea. Sergei Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 2 in C Minor. Carl Nielsen Symphony No 4, ‘Inextinguishable’ (BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall and Radio 3) The Lone Ranger (Various cinemas)
FICTION	19	Toby Lichtig Keith Hopper Anjali Joseph Rosalind Dineen Lucian Robinson Jaya Aninda Chatterjee	David Peace Red or Dead Desmond Hogan The Ikon Maker. The House of Mourning and Other Stories. A Farewell to Prague Rachel Joyce Perfect Sam Lipsyte The Fun Parts Colin McAdam A Beautiful Truth Jonathan Dee A Thousand Pardons
NATURAL HISTORY	22	Jeremy Mynott	Edward H. Burt and William E. Davis Alexander Wilson – The Scot who founded American ornithology
BIOGRAPHY	23	Nancy Campbell	Philip Trevelyan Julian Trevelyan – Picture language
THEATRE	24	Philip French	David Luhrssen Mamoulian – Life on stage and screen. Joseph Horowitz ‘On My Way’ – The untold story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin, and ‘Porgy and Bess’
PHILOSOPHY	25	Jonathan Rée David Owens	Stanisław Lem Summa Technologiae; Translated by Joanna Zylinska Paul Katsafanas Agency and the Foundations of Ethics – Nietzschean constitutivism
IN BRIEF	26		Wyatt Bonikowski Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination – The death drive in post-World War I British fiction, etc
ART HISTORY	28	Bruce Boucher	Daniel Savoy Venice from the Water – Architecture and myth in an early modern city. Antonio Foscari Tumult and Order – Malcontenta, 1924–1939
POEM	28	William Wootten	Reveille
SOCIAL STUDIES	30	Fran Bigman	Kelly Oliver Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down – Images of pregnancy in Hollywood films
	31		This week’s contributors, Crossword
NB	32	J. C.	A re-presentation, Power to the pubis, Unoriginality

Inside the madness factory

There is nothing accidental about Sam Lipsyte's writing. The reader moves through his inventive and daring plots laughing or wincing on cue. His style – at once economical and expansive, seemingly unpolished and wildly funny – has slowly won him a following, from his first collection of short stories, *Venus Drive* (2000) to *The Subject of Steve* (unfortunately published in the United States on September 11, 2001), *Home Land* (2004) and the social comedy *The Ask* (2010). In *The Fun Parts*, Lipsyte's new collection of short stories, he shows himself to be perfectly in control of, and apparently unintimidated by, his own brilliance.

Lipsyte's writing has often contained semi-state of the nation addresses, or rants, that have drawn comparisons with an early Martin Amis. But here, in response to the possibility that "the world is not a decent place to live", Lipsyte turns his attention to the state of the mind. In the standout story, "Denier", we are told that what drove Mandy's mother to suicide was not the structure and cruelty of American society, but "her mind, a madness factory full of blast furnaces and smokestacks. Mandy's mind had erected one, too, but Mandy would discover a way to raze it".

Mandy is in the Narcotics Anonymous programme and teaches a cardio ballet class at the Jewish community centre. Her father is a silent Holocaust survivor. As a child "Mandy decided she wouldn't read anything else about the era of her father's agony. If he judged her not good enough to hear his story, so be it. She'd await other, more generous, catastrophes". That "generous catastrophe" centres on Craig, her ex-boyfriend, and her

ROZALIND DINEEN

Sam Lipsyte

THE FUN PARTS

229pp. Granta Books. Paperback, £12.99.

978 1 84708 803 1

US: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$24.

978 0 374 29890 6



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understanding of their shared crack addiction: "A good terror-run begins at home". An ex-Holocaust denier tattooed with Nazi symbols subsequently tries to get her into bed, and, beginning with this man, Mandy resolves to start saving people. The story ends with her delirious euphoria at the idea.

Lipsyte returns to this structure of "epiphany" several times. Drug addiction, violence, new babies, teenagers, suicide, artificial intel-

ligence and money also recur in the collection. His accuracy of phrasing can be tender: one upset child "bobs in some communion with the spirits of okay". In "This Appointment Occurs in the Past" (a story that plots a re-enactment of Pushkin's "The Feud"), the narrator, in bed with his ex-mother-in-law, describes her as "an old beauty with hair the colour of metallic marmalade". At other times Lipsyte's exact phrasing has an excruciating effect. In "Deniers", the bad poet, Tovah, tells Mandy she is writing a poem cycle about her. What follows is a brief, crisp and devastating exposé of the writer's ego, and a rare focus on what it is like to be the subject of another's creative writing.

It is when Lipsyte's plots twist unexpectedly into fantasy that his style really shines. In "The Republic of Empathy", several male voices in turn describe their overlapping stories, only for an over-sexed conversation between a drone and its base to take over. The drone kills one of the men, while he dreams. The reader is left wondering what has just happened, and must return, in a rewarding rereading, to find the intended effect. "Peasley" begins with a quotation from F. Scott Fitzgerald's notebook of ideas: "The man who killed the idea of tanks in England – his after life". The story presents this afterlife: the man sips tea in his parlour "somewhere in England" at the age of 125. But the things that typify him, and a nation, are cast as irrelevant. Once again the machines are taking over: the man is mown down by the gardener on a mechanized lawnmower, "the blades beneath the mower's carriage whirling like, that's it, scythes".

Antic dispositions

JAYA ANINDA CHATTERJEE

Jonathan Dee

A THOUSAND PARDONS

224pp. Corsair. £16.99.

978 1 849 01737 4

US: Random House. \$26. 978 0 8129 9321 9

Jonathan Dee's sixth novel, *A Thousand Pardons*, betrays a significant literary debt to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) in its plot and dramatis personae. Both novels feature career-driven, middle-aged husbands and fathers – one a lawyer, the other an environmentalist. Budding disaffection with their homemaking wives, ennui and extramarital affairs chip away at the scaffolding of both marriages. Daughters, unhinged by the separation of their disconsolate fathers and harried mothers, artfully mediate or give their parents pause for thought. In the end the parents reunite.

Dee would appear to have the makings of a satisfying novel: one in which – in the hands of Franzen, or James Salter, or John Cheever – subtle changes in affect, vocal inflections, strained silences, physical details might have signalled the unmaking and remaking of marital bonds. Not so in *A Thousand Pardons*, where the serrated edges of Helen and Ben Armstead's grief temper the reader's sympathy. The novel opens with Helen lamenting her evenings in couples' therapy because "to do nothing was to find it acceptable that you were in a marriage where you hardly spoke to or touched each other, where your husband was so depressed he was like the walking dead and yet the solipsism of his depression only made you feel cheated and angry". Ben, too, is frustrated, rambling, "have you ever been so bored by yourself that you are literally terrified? . . . When every day begins I know that I have lived it before, I have lived the day to come already". Incapable of discerning or expressing the subtleties of his emotions, he writes them off as "an existential crisis". The Armsteads' unqualified, uninflected and combative opinions, and the frenetic monologues into which they are compressed, render the novel far less moving than the detailed accretion and gradual unveiling of feeling would have done.

The novel's rushed pace and emotional volatility persist as Ben engages in a disastrous affair with an intern and endures time in rehabilitation and prison. His wife and their daughter Sara relocate so that Helen can pursue a career in public relations, helping damaged individuals and companies to mend their reputations. The frayed mother-daughter relationship and the disruptive reappearance of a high school friend of Helen's contribute to the novel's antic tenor. Only Ben's sincere yet halting communications with Sara – a clandestine meeting in which he gives her a small Christmas gift she can hide from her mother, his daily emails from prison, and his phlegmatic, non-judgemental manner when she shares her troubles with him – rescue the narrative from its brazen displays of emotion.

Leopards of the mind

LUCIAN ROBINSON

Colin McAdam

A BEAUTIFUL TRUTH

292pp. Granta Books. £15.99.

978 1 84708 895 6

Colin McAdam's audacious third novel, *A Beautiful Truth*, is an unsettling attempt to explore the relationship between humans and their simian antecedents. The novel's premiss is relatively conventional: "Judy and Walter Walt Ribke lived on twelve up-and-down acres, open to whatever God gave them . . . Judy was younger than Walt . . . and five years had passed since they removed a cyst from her womb that was larger than a melon". The Ribkes are a prosperous, happily married couple living in Vermont in the early 1970s, but Judy's operation has left her infertile. They contemplate adoption but it's too complicated. Everything changes in 1972 when Walt reads "Conversations with a Chimp" (the well-known *Life* magazine profile of the human-raised chimpanzee Lucy) and decides to buy a chimpanzee from a circus clown for \$6,000.

The opening chapters are mostly narrated in a deadpan, free indirect style, allowing McAdam to establish a sense of collusion between the reader and the Ribkes. We implicitly understand Walt's desire to adopt a chimpanzee, and believe in Judy's philosophical reaction when Walt tells her

about it: "It was night but she felt the warm breath of the sun through her dress and thought life isn't what you see it's what you think".

The Ribkes call the chimpanzee Looee, and their early years with him are paradisaical. But the inevitable intrusion of jeopardy is the only predictable component in McAdam's innovative structure. Subtly placed portents continually surface; the narrator reminds us, through conspiratorial, first-person plural signposts, that the Ribkes' idyll is doomed: "There are leopards in the memory of every ape, leopards we've never seen".

If the book were simply the story of the Ribkes and Looee, *A Beautiful Truth* would still be a remarkable achievement. But the narrative's radical other half, which unfolds in loosely alternate chapters and focuses

on a group of chimpanzees in a Florida research institute, invoking their perspective, lends the novel a rare depth. These passages swing lithely from childish patois – "Fifi rests on Podo's lap but it irks him. He flicks her off and she arphles and fleps and goes elsewhere to eat her peaches" – to prose reminiscent of a late-career Samuel Beckett: "He knows the answer for When is Then and Where is There and What is That, and What is that, it's a coin. But there is no answer for Why, neither in the World nor in the Hard nor in the dreams". This may sound like a tiresome combination, but McAdam's prose is so consistent that it binds into a luminous, flashing reverie of primate existence.

McAdam's acknowledgements attest to serious secondary reading – Frans de Waal and Sue Savage-Rumbaugh are both cited – but his depiction of simian life's limitations turns research into rhapsodic lamentation: "The chimps float and fly and are not who they are, and the one thing they do not dream . . . is of a peaceful jungle that simply never existed, neither in the jungle nor here. This plastic Africa is all there ever was and all there ever will be".