

# Ticket

THE IRISH TIMES culture magazine



The big giveaway is the tea-drinking. Almost none of my characters drink tea, because I don't drink tea

and I despise tea-drinkers  
Marian Keyes on her AI imposter



## CULTURE

**AI'll be back** Twelve non-human trailblazers from the worlds of fiction, film and theatre

## MUSIC

**Computer killed the radio star** AI is coming for the music industry. Composer Jennifer Walshe is at the forefront

## BOOKS

**Restless Europeans** The taste for spice that fed the hunger for conquest

Reviews *The Language of War* by Oleksandr Mykhed; *Bright I Burn* by Molly Aitken

Saturday, June 15, 2024

[irishtimes.com/culture](https://irishtimes.com/culture)

# ART AND THE MACHINE

HOW AI IS CHANGING THE  
CULTURE OF CREATIVITY

# The Guide



Johnny Marr. Right: Dylan Moran. Below: Susan O'Neill and Mick Flannery; Katia and Marielle Labèque; P!nk. Photographs: C Brandon/Redferns; Susie Conroy

## EVENT OF THE WEEK

### Sea Sessions

Friday-Sunday, June 21st-23rd, Bundoran, Co Donegal, €149.95/€69.95, seasessions.com  
Sun, sea, surf, music. It sounds like California rather than Bundoran, but, as long as the weather is good, Sea Sessions delivers in every category. Part of the appeal of this unique festival are its sporting activities, from morning yoga and "swimrise" on the beach to

knockout five-a-side soccer, tag rugby and beach volleyball. (All beach events are lifeguarded.) Many people are also here for the music, of course, so pack your flip-flops, sun cream, bucket hat and good vibes for the likes of Johnny Marr, Cian Ducrot, Jazzy, Don Letts, DJ Kelly-Anne Byrne, Elaine Mai & Maykay, Bricknasty and loads more.

TONY CLAYTON-LEA

## FESTIVAL

### Beyond the Pale

Friday-Sunday, June 21st-23rd, Glendalough Estate, Co Wicklow, 1pm, €249/€99, itsbeyondthepale.ie

It's nigh on impossible to beat the location of the Beyond the Pale festival: Glendalough Estate is lush. Factor in a triple line-up of music, arts and food and (if the sun agrees to pop out, even now and again) you have a feast for the senses. International music acts performing across the weekend include Jungle, Jessie Ware, Orbital, Courtney Barnett, Romy and Richie Hawtin. Irish acts to catch include Ailbhe Reddy, Daithí, Mathman, Gilla Band, Rachael Lavelle and Lemoncello.

## GIGS

### P!nk

Thursday and Friday, June 20th and 21st, Aviva Stadium, Dublin, 4pm, €89.90, ticketmaster.ie

Alecia Beth Moore has won more awards than you might realise and sold far more records than you can imagine (more than 60 million albums and 75 million singles), yet P!nk – she adopted her nickname during her troubled teenage years – wears her successes lightly. Her stage shows are triumphs in blending her many hit songs with Cirque du Soleil-style touches (she trained as a competitive gymnast as a child), while her boldness and emotional



rawness have been highly influential for a generation of female songwriters. Special guests include Rag'n'Bone Man, Gayle and DJ KidCutUp.

### Mick Flannery and Susan O'Neill

Friday, June 21st, Live at the Marquee, Cork, 6pm, €45, ticketmaster.ie  
Is this one of the best pairings of Irish songwriters and singers in recent times? Mick Flannery is headlining, so his home county will get to hear tracks from albums such as *White Lies*, *I Own You* and his most recent, *Goodtime Charlie*. Susan O'Neill will be presenting tracks from her forthcoming album, *Now in a Minute*, as well as teaming up with Flannery to perform songs from *In the Game*, their critically acclaimed fictional break-up album from 2021.



## COMEDY

### Dylan Moran: A Work in Progress Wander

Tuesday, June 18th, Station House Hotel, Clifden, Co Galway, 7pm, €23; Wednesday, June 19th, Mall Theatre, Tuam, Co Galway, 8pm, €25; Thursday, June 20th, Róisín Dubh, Galway, 8pm, €25 (sold out); all tickets roisindubh.net

Dylan Moran, uncompromising, acerbic and very much his own comedian, is less than a week into an extensive nationwide tour that concludes in August – that's more than two months of schlepping to 25 venues and generally living the life of his former days as an aspiring stand-up comic. Moran is anything but, of course, so these "work in progress" shows promise to be revelatory, exploratory and very funny.



BOOK IT THIS WEEK

- Garrison Keillor, Liberty Theatre, Dublin, October 15th, ticketmaster.ie
- Max Richter, NCH, Dublin, October 30th and 31st, nch.ie
- Bambie Thug, Academy, Dublin, October 31st, ticketmaster.ie
- Snow Patrol, 3Arena, Dublin, February 25th, ticketmaster.ie



## VISUAL ART

### Caoimhín Gaffney: All at Once Collapsing Together

Until Sunday, July 28th, Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, [butlergallery.ie](http://butlergallery.ie)

When a particular sound from our ecosystem disappears, what are the consequences for us and the environment? How crucial to our sense of self are organic sensory experiences? In a new solo exhibition, the film-maker, writer and artist Caoimhín Gaffney envisions our relationship to the natural world through images, text and film that consider its transient and frail state.

## STAGE

### The Sugar Wife

Until Saturday, July 20th, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 7.30pm, €40/€30/€22, [abbeytheatre.ie](http://abbeytheatre.ie)

In Dublin in 1850, abolitionist campaigner Hannah Tewkle and her businessman husband, Samuel, are prosperous Quakers who aim to live life modestly. The arrival into their home of a freed slave who is visiting Ireland on an anti-slavery lecture tour upends the Tewkleys' principled attitudes towards affluence, marriage and charitable ethics. Annabelle Comyn directs Siobhán Cullen, Siofra Ní Éilí, Peter Gaynor, Chris Walley and Tierra Porter in Elizabeth Kuti's prize-winning play.

### Katia and Marielle Labèque

Saturday, June 15th, NCH, Dublin, 8pm, €45/€37.50/€29.50, [nch.ie](http://nch.ie)

Katia and Marielle Labèque are no strangers to equilibrium in their music, a fact that this concert should showcase to sublime effect. Several years ago the sisters conceived instrumental suites for two pianos taken from Philip Glass's opera *Les Enfants Terribles* (based on the work of Jean Cocteau). That project's success encouraged them to ask Glass and Michael Riesman, his music director, to employ the same approach with *Orphée* and *La Belle et la Bête*, the other two operas in Glass's Cocteau trilogy.

### Mr President

Friday, June 21st, Town Hall Theatre, Galway, €10/€5, [tth.ie](http://tth.ie)

Mezzo-soprano Catherine Donnelly and jazz guitarist Aengus Hackett are among the performers of a new operatic work from WhistleBlast Quartet in collaboration with *That's Life*, Galway's special arts organisation, and *Electric Dreams*. Mr President includes music composed and performed by all the participants in *That's Life*, including original gamelan accompaniment led by Andrew Madec, plus young musicians from Ceol na Mara youth orchestra. There's also a public dress rehearsal on Thursday, June 20th, at 6pm.



Inside Out 2. Photograph: Pixar/Disney

## FOUR FILMS TO SEE THIS WEEKED

### Sasquatch Sunset ★★★★★

Directed by David Zellner, Nathan Zellner. Starring Riley Keough, Jesse Eisenberg, Christophe Zajac-Denek, Nathan Zellner. 12A cert, gen release, 88 min  
Sasquatch Sunset concerns a makeshift family of cryptozoological wood apes of the title. A brutish alpha male (Zellner) and his female mate (Keough) spend their days fornicating and foraging. The most talked-about festival title at both Berlin and Sundance is finally here with a riot of masturbation, defecation and Erasure-soundtracked extirpation. No film since *Swiss Army Man*, in which a frazzled Paul Dano dragged Daniel Radcliffe's flatulent corpse around an island, has married scatology and austere art-house rhythms quite like this new Bigfoot-themed dramedy from the Zellners, creators of *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter*. **TARABRADY**

### Ama Gloria ★★★★★

Directed by Marie Amachoukeli-Barsacq. Starring Louise Mauroy-Panzani, Ilça Moreno Zego, Arnaud Rebotini. Limited release, 85 min  
Amachoukeli-Barsacq's affecting quasi-autobiographical drama is sweetly reminiscent of Céline Sciamma's child-centric *will-o'-the-wisps*, *Petite Maman* and *My Life as a Courgette*. Based on the writer-director's relationship with her childhood nanny, *Ama Gloria* concerns Cléo, a motherless six-year-old, and her adoration of Gloria, her Cape Verdean carer. It's tempting to read a colonial narrative in Cléo's reluctant surrender of the only maternal figure she's ever known.

But Mauroy-Panzani's uncanny performance ensures we're solely fixated on the child's psychodrama. Touching and elegantly composed. **TB**

### Hounds ★★★★★

Directed by Kamal Lazraq. Starring Ayoub Elaid, Abdellatif Masstouri, Mohamed Hmimsa, Abdellah Lebki, Lahcen Zaimouzen. Limited release, 94 min  
Following a botched kidnapping in Casablanca, a man and his son need to get rid of a body before sunrise. There is a strong streak of anthracite-black humour in the drama. An attempt to involve a drunken fisherman ends in disaster of face-slapping proportions. The body itself, as bodies will in such things, eventually takes on the quality of absurdist McGuffin. But *Hounds* also profits from its subtle teasing out of the strained relationship between father and son. Amine Berrada's mobile camera really gets beneath the skin and gristle of the city. That sense of place adds to the pleasures of a singular thriller. **DONALD CLARKE**

### Inside Out 2 ★★★★★

Directed by Kelsey Mann. Voices of Amy Poehler, Phyllis Smith, Kensington Tallman, Lewis Black, Tony Hale, Maya Hawke, Ayo Edebiri, Adèle Exarchopoulos, Diane Lane, Kyle MacLachlan. G cert, gen release, 96 min  
If Pixar's *Inside Out* had a problem, it sprang from the profoundly American notion that all life can be made to obey a system. *Inside Out 2* is also largely about the breaking down of such order. What else but puberty could so shake up the inhabitants of young Riley's head? The jokes are strong and the adventure is diverting. What sets the film apart, however, is a central sadness. The argument is that the teenage years (and perhaps all adulthood) are ruled by anxiety, envy, embarrassment and boredom. Don't work. The new Pixar is more entertaining than that makes it sound. **DC**



### Ciseach: An Embodied Manifesto

Thursday-Saturday, June 20th-22nd, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 8pm, €20/€18, [projectartscentre.ie](http://projectartscentre.ie)

Linking with our past, grasping nature, gathering memories of folklore and age-old guidance are central themes of Catherine Young Dance Company's new work, which blends movement and live music with an ethos of uniting diverse voices.



## INSIDE



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## Ticket

### THE IRISH TIMES

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Photograph: Getty Images

# CREATED BY AI BUT IS IT ART?

As artificial intelligence grows ever more powerful, its effect on culture will only become more profound. To begin an 11-page overview, we ask if AI can truly be creative. Even some of the most successful artists are still on the fence about the answer

## CONOR CAPPLIS

**Z**ack London is reluctant to describe himself as an artist. At least for the work he's most known for. The 33-year-old American is by many accounts a talented illustrator, but to almost 500,000 followers online he's better known as the man behind Gossip Goblin.

Under this Instagram alias, London shares videos starring Fredvog, a fictional adventurer of his creation who looks a little like Gandalf in a red gnome's hat. These popular shorts see the protagonist encounter all sorts of absurd and Tolkienian creatures: goblins, trolls, tiny civilisations living atop wild truffles, ominous beings from the underworld, a holy cat empire and their age-old adversaries, the mole men.

It's all a bit surreal, but there's something compelling about the narratives London creates. What's unique about his work is that, from the soothing voiceover to the photorealistic visuals, it's all created using artificial intelligence (AI).

"It's radically different than the stuff I've been doing my whole life," London says from his home in Stockholm. As a UX – or user experience – designer he has kept a keen eye on developments in the tech world; two years ago he realised that a computer could produce artwork of a similar quality to a piece he might spend more than 100 hours on. So London began experimenting with generative-AI tools.

Generative AI is a type of artificial intelligence that creates content – such as text, music or images – by learning patterns from existing data sets and then generating similar content from user prompts. ChatGPT, the world's most popular generative AI, receives more than 1.8 billion site visits a month. That's more than Netflix.

London uses a mixture of affordable software from Midjourney and Runway to create images and animate them for his videos, then pairs them with his own script read by a computer-generated voice. He doesn't monetise his content but has sold commissions from his website. Similar works combining familiar pop-culture franchises with wacky twists have flooded the internet in the past year or so. One video depicting Harry Potter characters in a Balenciaga-themed montage has racked up 12 million views. Or how about four million views for Lord of the Rings by Wes Anderson? It's rudimentary and fun, but its potential for disruption in the art and entertainment world is difficult to overstate.

"When you see art in the world," says London, "there are some credentials behind the person putting it out. There's bad art, there's good art – whatever – but we can see that people put time into it. AI strips all those barriers to entry away. Some 'AI artists' will claim that there is a mastery in prompt engineering. But as a fairly popular AI artist myself, I can say that's bullshit. There is zero skill involved in generating AI images."

Yining Shi, who is senior engineering



manager and principal research scientist at Runway, says it is hard to predict the future of AI given how fast tools are developing. But such advancements "will make creating professional-grade content accessible to everyone, enabling users to generate complex media with minimal input and greater control". This "democratisation" of image and video creation, as she puts it, will "foster a surge in creativity and expression". The company's goal is to free up time and money for film-makers and artists, focusing on "human augmentation" rather than the outright replacement that has worried many in the industry.

This lifting of the barrier might sound exciting for some, but for others – animators, for example, whose technical expertise looks to be outstripped by a computer's generative ability – the developments are

setting off alarm bells.

Jeffrey Katzenberg, one of the founders of DreamWorks Animation, the studio behind movie franchises such as Shrek, Madagascar and Kung Fu Panda, suggested late last year that as many as 90 per cent of animation artists will soon be replaced by AI. In "the good old days when I made an animated movie", he told a Bloomberg forum, "it took 500 artists five years to make a world-class animated movie. I think it won't take 10 per cent of that three years out from now". He added that those remaining in the industry will still need "individual creativity" to "prompt" software, and predicted that prompting will become a creative commodity.

This tidal wave is already manifesting. OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, recently teased its new video-creation tool. Sora,



Gossip Goblin: one of Zack London's AI images

as it is known, uses basic text prompts to generate photorealistic videos that can dupe even the keenest eye at times. It's not available for public use just yet, but its unveiling has been met with both excitement and worry.

Barry O'Sullivan, a professor at University College Cork specialising in AI and ethics, plays down "overstatements" of a detrimental impact on the art and entertainment industries. "I don't believe there's going to be major job-loss issues around AI," Prof O'Sullivan says.

"Certainly jobs will change – sometimes they will change significantly – but overall there will be new forms of employment." Referencing Katzenberg's comments, he suggests the demand for animated content could be enough to spread remaining jobs around multiple smaller projects rather



**Some 'AI artists' will claim that there is a mastery in prompt engineering. But as a fairly popular AI artist myself, I can say that's bullshit. There is zero skill involved in generating AI images**

than the blockbuster DreamWorks films of the past.

Sweeping redundancies have been forecast for some time but "just simply [aren't] turning out to be true", Prof O'Sullivan says. "Over that period of time there are totally new roles and totally new jobs and totally new industries being created all the time."

### How good is AI art?

AI can already speedily generate content that would have taken artists months to complete in the past. But does it have artistic merit – and could it hang easily alongside conventional art? The idea that the answer to these questions may be yes has caused some controversy.

Last year the artist David Lester Mooney

created an AI-generated image of four young women in 19th-century costume. The work, titled *Throwback Selfie #Magdalene*, made it into the Royal Hibernian Academy's Annual Exhibition and caused uproar in some corners of the internet. That's not art, some keyboard critics said, that's "grotesque".

In another case, an artist's Midjourney creation won the top prize in the digital-art category in Colorado State Fair's annual art competition. The success of the renaissance-like space-opera scene, entitled *Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial*, caused some to proclaim the death of artistry in the face of AI. Almost two years later, such diagnoses from the outcome of a minor category at a relatively inconsequential competition seem overblown.

Zack London is keen to play down

❖ praise for those making artistic content with AI. “The ability to create stunning visuals is not something to celebrate,” London says. “I don’t take any credit for it . . . For instance, Midjourney has gotten so good that you can type in ‘Beautiful girl. Stunning. Cinematic’, or even just type in ‘girl’, and you will get some Raphaello or renaissance painting with stunning quality. And then people post that [online] as if it’s a reflection of their skill. So when there’s a big backlash against people claiming to be AI artists, I totally understand that, because it has taken the entire element of art that we assume revolves around skill out of the equation.”

“I cringe to be associated with this group of people who have donned the title of AI artists like it’s some type of artist. If I type in ‘hot girl’ into Google, that doesn’t make me a software developer.”

“Then it comes down to storytelling and creativity and trying to find new angles. If the act of creation itself is so incredibly simple now, then we should raise the bar in what we expect from people when anyone with the most basic understanding of the English language can produce anything.”

Would he describe himself as an AI artist? “I don’t really like the term,” London says. “I was an artist for many years before [AI], so I feel like I’ve proved my credentials. But that sounds kind of elitist.”

London is on the fence about whether AI can produce art at all. He ponders the subjective comparisons between a Rembrandt masterpiece and Levitated Mass, a 2012 installation at Los Angeles County Museum of Art that comprises a 340-tonne boulder that cost \$10 million (€9.3 million) to install. “It’s just apples and oranges. And I kind of feel like that’s where AI sits in the context of everything else. It’s like a total non sequitur, and maybe we shouldn’t call it art. It’s just some weird nebulous space that we don’t really know what to call yet.”

Prof O’Sullivan, who also sits on the Government’s AI advisory council, is more assured. “I don’t think anybody in the AI world considers [generative AI] to be artistic,” Prof O’Sullivan says. “What’s missing here is the human. These AI systems do not have any understanding of the world, so the fact that one has prompted a generative-AI system to produce [content] doesn’t mean [it] has any comprehension whatsoever. At a simple level it’s just matching words and phrases in the prompt with things it knows about in a database . . . I think the art is as much about the artist’s perception and understanding and comment on the world.” He suggests we will see more artists use the technology to make “meta statements” about AI.

Mary Cremin, head of programming at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, says certain areas of the art world have welcomed AI. “There are artists who embrace technology and use it to create their work or be integrated as part of the work,” Cremin says. “For example, Jon Rafman’s algorithmically generated paintings or Doug Aitken’s new 360-degree video piece that uses a chorus of AI-generated voices. The Irish artist John Gerrard works with digital simulations . . . In terms of what we classify as good art, it is quite subjective, but interest in digital art is growing rapidly, especially with a generation of digital natives.”



From top: Théâtre d’Opéra Spatial, an AI-generated image by Jason Allen that won the digital category at Colorado State Fair in 2022; Throwback Selfie #Magdalene, an AI-generated image by David Lester Mooney; and artist Zack London, aka Gossip Goblin. Photographs: courtesy of the artist; RHA



**Maybe we shouldn’t call it art. It’s just some weird nebulous space that we don’t really know what to call yet**

## Who owns copyright?

AI remains largely unregulated around the world, but the European Union has taken the lead in policing its development with its AI Act. A long-standing concern for artists is copyright. Generative-AI models crawl through digital data sets for images and text to add to their bank of knowledge of the world, and when prompted will regurgitate content based on this material. But these data sets often contain copyrighted material, which raises the question of who owns the finished product. As Prof O’Sullivan puts it, “All artists are inspired by others. But when does inspiration become violation of intellectual property copyrights?”

“This is actually a very tricky question,” says Barry Scannell, an AI-law expert who is a partner in William Fry and also a member of the Government’s AI advisory council. “There may be cases where the use of copyright works in data sets used to train AI systems could be considered copyright infringement, and there are a number of legal cases under way internationally, such as the well-known New York Times case against OpenAI, where copyright infringement is alleged.”

There is similar ambiguity with the

content that AI creates. “Ireland and the UK have copyright laws which state that where there is no human author, the person who made the necessary arrangements for the creation of a computer-generated work can be considered the author,” Scannell says. This would be the person who prompted the generative AI. “But if you compare the Irish position to the general European Union copyright-law acquis” – which is to say accumulated legislation and regulations – “I’m not entirely convinced that it would survive a challenge to the Court of Justice of the European Union as, to my mind, it lies so far outside EU copyright law.”

“It’s important to point out that this is very much a developing area in jurisprudence, asking questions which have literally never been asked before, and we just don’t have any definitive answers quite just yet.”

AI’s rapid pace of development can make it seem like the wild west for artificial-intelligence engineers. The case for widespread disruption in the art and entertainment world appears strong, and although Zack London is optimistic for artists, he is among those resigned to the inevitability of AI’s encroachment.

“Photography didn’t put painting out of business. I’m sure it affected portrait artists, but it changed the lens through which we looked at painting, and all of a sudden the ability to capture realism wasn’t important and artistic movements drifted towards abstraction and things the camera couldn’t capture,” London says.

“It reminds me of the Luddite movement. They probably had a point burning down all the looms and primitive factories putting weavers out of business, but in retrospect it was kind of absurd . . . Putting a banner on your [social media] profile saying ‘No AI’, it just seems like a naive ant-against-a-boulder thing. Like, yeah, it’s f\*\*ked up. But the world’s f\*\*ked up, and this is the inevitable trajectory of what’s happening. No government is going to completely regulate this. This exists in the world. No amount of sentimentality is going to stop it from happening.” ●

# Hugh Linehan

## What an old film about AI tells us about our future

It didn't much care for AI Artificial Intelligence when it came out, in 2001. The film's origin story – a decades-long, endlessly reworked Stanley Kubrick project picked up by Steven Spielberg and put into production within months of Kubrick's death – was, it seemed at the time, probably responsible for its many flaws. I agreed with the San Francisco Chronicle when it wrote that “we end up with the structureless, meandering, slow-motion endlessness of Kubrick combined with the fuzzy, cuddly mindlessness of Spielberg. It's a coupling from hell.”

But a couple of decades and several technological leaps forward later, the film looks a more convincing version of where we are heading than it did at the start of this century. Most of that is a question of pure form; the phenomenon known in English as the uncanny valley was coined in 1978 by the robotics professor Masahiro Mori to describe the sense of unease generated by machines that look, sound or behave almost – but not quite like humans.

In AI the same queasiness is generated

not by a robot (although that is one of the film's supposed themes) but by the very contrary world views and obsessions of its two creators. The movie is itself a sort of uncanny valley. As Tim Greiving pointed out in a 20th-anniversary appreciation for the Ringer, “when you cut AI open, you find cold Kubrick machinery underneath warm Spielberg skin”.

Kubrick spent almost 30 years trying to develop Brian Aldiss's short story *Supertoys Last All Summer Long*. By the early 1980s it had been reconfigured as a Pinocchio allegory, with David, an artificial boy, rejected by his human “mother” and going on a quest with his Jiminy Cricket-like friend Teddy in search of a Blue Fairy who will explain the mystery of his existence. Having hired and fired several screenwriters, as was his wont, Kubrick showed it to his friend Spielberg, who described it as “the best story you've ever had to tell”.

Kubrick was an obsessive genius with a bleak view of the human condition expressed through a canon of unique films that he managed to finance by pretending

they were in mainstream genres such as historical drama or horror. Spielberg is a populist master of commercial cinema with a humanist sensibility that seeks a transcendent redemption to every narrative arc. Kubrick, who never had a blockbuster hit on the scale of *Jaws* or *ET the Extra-Terrestrial*, thought AI could be his shot at topping the box office. But as the years wore on, the gaps between his films became longer and longer. In the final 20 years of his life he only made three – and died of a heart attack while completing post-production on the last of those, *Eyes Wide Shut*. With *Minority Report* delayed by Tom Cruise's unavailability, Spielberg jumped in.

Kubrick's long-time confidant and collaborator Jan Harlan insists the director “truly believed Steven would be the better director for this film – and I think he was right”.

He wasn't. The film has the ho-hum competence we associate with middling Spielberg. An 11-year-old Haley Joel Osment, fresh from his Oscar nomination for *The Sixth Sense*, is at the core of everything as the lost robot boy. The set pieces in a 22nd-century dystopia scarred by climate change are unmemorable. There is no sense of the internet, much less of the “intelligence explosion” that IJ Good posited in 1965, four years before Aldiss wrote *Supertoys Last All Summer Long* and 35 years before AI was made. Good predicted a tipping point at which technology achieves sentience and autonomy from

humans. In that sense, *The Terminator* is a more accurate vision of the future.

But, with all its flaws (or maybe because of them), AI still feels a more plausible future than Arnold Schwarzenegger chasing us with a big gun. A decaying capitalist society. A climate disaster. The end of humanity. It just doesn't sound like a Spielberg movie. Spielberg was faithful to Kubrick's preparatory notes and adjusted his shooting style to match the older man's visual sensibility. But that warm fuzziness is

“When you cut AI open, you find cold Kubrick machinery underneath warm Spielberg skin”

still there, encasing Kubrick's far chillier vision. And despite what the San Francisco Chronicle said, there's none of the deadpan monotony of classic Kubrickian sequences in 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *Barry Lyndon* or *The Shining*.

Viewed in 2024, though, AI Artificial Intelligence bears many of the qualities that are becoming familiar from the chatbots and generative products that are beginning to infiltrate our day-to-day lives courtesy of Google, Microsoft and soon, apparently, Apple. The humanlike touches. The ingratiating tone. And, beneath it all, the cold, dark void. ●

UNMISSABLE SUMMER THEATRE
PAVILION THEATRE
PAVILION THEATRE, DÚN LAOGHAIRE

FOURRIVERS

## A HANDFUL OF STARS

BY BILLY ROCHE



Directed by **Conall Morrison**

Starring Gary Lydon, Dermot Murphy, John Olohan, Brian Doherty, Michael Power, Éilish McLaughlin, Tiernan Messitt-Greene

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8PM

MATINÉE: SAT 22 JUN, 2.30PM

WINNER: FRINGE FIRST AWARD - EDINBURGH 2022

THE SCOTSMAN

★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
THE STAGE	THE LIST	THE IRISH TIMES
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
SYDNEY MORNING HERALD	ARTS HUB AUSTRALIA	THE TIMES
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
THE SCOTSMAN	THE GUARDIAN	FEST MAGAZINE



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# AI vs THE AUTHOR

We asked ChatGPT to write like Marian Keyes, John Boyne and Paul Howard. What do the three bestselling authors make of its attempts?

## RÓISÍN INGLE

**W**e asked ChatGPT, the artificial-intelligence content generator, to write in the style of the bestselling authors John Boyne, Marian Keyes and the Irish Times columnist Ross O'Carroll-Kelly, aka Paul Howard. Could it do a convincing take – and what would those award-winning writers think of the robot's attempts? The chatbot came up with its version of each author's prose in mere seconds. Here they are, along with each author's responses.

## JOHN BOYNE

John Boyne is the author of several acclaimed novels for adults and younger readers, including *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *A Ladder to the Sky*, *The Heart's Invisible Furies* and *The Echo Chamber*. His novels are published in more than 50 languages

### ChatGPT's attempt

The old, dilapidated house loomed in front of me, its weathered facade a stark reminder of the secrets that lay buried within its walls. I hesitated for a moment, unsure if I was ready to confront the ghosts of my past that had haunted me for so long.

As I stepped inside, the musty scent of dust and neglect filled my nostrils, sending a shiver down my spine. Memories flooded back to me in a rush, each one a painful reminder of the events that had led me to this moment.

I made my way through the darkened hallways, the floorboards creaking beneath my feet as if whispering their own secrets to me. I knew I was getting closer to the truth, closer to the answers I had been seeking for so long.

Finally, I reached the room at the end of the hall, the room where it had all begun. With trembling hands, I opened the door and stepped inside, the weight of years of guilt and regret heavy on my shoulders.

But as I looked around the room, I realised that the past was just that – the past. And in that moment, I knew that I had the power to shape my own future, to let go of the pain and finally find peace.

### John Boyne responds

“Every writer has some device they unintentionally rely on in their prose. A few years ago, I realised that every time I wanted to slow a scene down, a character would ‘hesitate for a moment and look away’. So it was hard not to laugh when I reached the second sentence of ChatGPT’s offering and found most of this phrase there.

“The writing is bland, generic stuff, lacking any wit or originality, so obviously it’s a million miles away from my own work, which fizzles with humour and crackles with inventiveness! However, I’ll admit the themes are a little familiar. After all, hidden secrets, long-repressed memories, and suggestions of emotional resolution appear in my novels more often than red-dye recipes cribbed from *The Legend of Zelda*. But, ultimately, it feels more like parody than plagiarism – and shouldn’t parodies make people laugh? This just feels stilted.

“That said, would I like to read one more Dickens novel? A new Philip Roth? The further adventures of Holden Caulfield? Sure I would. But, left in the hands of artificial intelligence, the chances are I’d simply glance at a few paragraphs, hesitate for a moment and look away.”

## PAUL HOWARD

Paul Howard is the creator of Ross O'Carroll-Kelly and the author of 24 satirical novels set in the south Dublin stomping ground of Ireland's most notorious rugby jock. Howard recently announced that the next Ross book, *Don't Look Back in Ongar*, will be the last, although he will continue to write Ross's adventures in his weekly Irish Times column

### ChatGPT's attempt at Ross O'Carroll-Kelly

I was standing in the queue at the coffee shop, trying to decide between a double-shot macchiato or a caramel frappuccino. A difficult decision, I know, but one that had to be made with the utmost care – after all, my reputation as a coffee connoisseur was at stake.

As I pondered my choice, I couldn't help but overhear the conversation happening behind me. A group of girls were discussing their plans for the weekend, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes at



**The first thing that struck me about this is the inclusion of words that Ross would never use, much less understand, words like connoisseur and nonchalant**



their predictable choices – a night out in town, followed by a greasy kebab at 3am.

I turned back to the counter just in time to see the barista give me a knowing smile. He knew me well, knew that I was a man of refined tastes and impeccable style. I placed my order with a nonchalant wave of my hand, confident in my decision.

As I waited for my coffee, I couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction wash over me. Life may be full of uncertainties and challenges, but one thing was for sure – I,

Ross O'Carroll-Kelly, would always know how to enjoy the finer things in life.”

### Paul Howard responds

“The first thing that struck me about this is the inclusion of words that Ross would never use, much less understand, words like connoisseur and nonchalant.

“The second thing I noticed was the complete lack of humour. I'm not sure if comedy is something artificial intelligence will ever be able to replicate. This piece has no cultural awareness, and the voice sounds disembodied. It reminds me of being in a pub when a person comes up to me and starts doing a Ross impersonation but don't really have any material in their head.

“My humour is parochial. I don't think there is an algorithm to write jokes about someone like Ross, a person lacking self-awareness who lives in south Dublin. You might get a chatbot to write “Why did the chicken cross the road?” jokes, but on this evidence they can't do satire. This is dull, bland writing.

“This experiment has reminded me of a young guy years ago at St Mary's College in Dublin. For his transition-year project he had produced a Ross comic book – he was a brilliant artist. As I was reading it I thought, ‘This is actually great: I would love it if I'd written it’. This ChatGPT attempt doesn't feel like that. It's more like the office bore doing his best David Brent or Frank Spencer impression.”

## MARIAN KEYES

Marian Keyes has sold more than 30 million copies of her novels, including *Rachel's Holiday*, *This Charming Man*, *Anybody Out There?* and her latest, *My Favourite Mistake*. Her recent bestseller *Grown Ups* is being adapted for television by Netflix

### ChatGPT's attempt

As I sipped my third cup of tea that morning, I couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled over me like a heavy fog. The sun streamed through the window, casting a warm glow over the room, but inside, I felt cold and lost.

I had always prided myself on being in control, on having everything neatly organised and planned out. But lately, it





Main: John Boyne. Above: Marian Keyes.  
Far left: Paul Howard, the creator of Ross O'Carroll-Kelly. Photographs: Alan Betson; Hoda Davaine; Dave Benett/Getty Images

seemed like the world was spinning out of my grasp, leaving me struggling to keep up.

I glanced at the pile of unopened letters on the table, each one a reminder of the chaos that seemed to be closing in on me from all sides. I knew I needed to face whatever was waiting for me in those envelopes, to confront the truths that lay hidden within their pages.

But the thought of opening them filled me with a sense of dread, like peering into a dark abyss that threatened to swallow me whole. I took a deep breath and reached for the first letter, steeling myself for whatever revelations lay ahead.

Little did I know, those letters would hold the key to unlocking secrets long buried, and setting me on a path towards healing and redemption.

#### Marian Keyes responds

“First of all, isn’t it incredible that artificial intelligence can produce something so coherent in just a few seconds? Like, it actually does make sense. However, the big giveaway is the tea-drinking. Almost none of my characters drink tea, because I don’t drink tea and I despise tea-drinkers.

“Now and again I will let people in my books drink tea – but certainly not three cups in a row.

“What this reminds me of most of all, the way it’s overwritten and dwelling on the dark feelings, is pretty much how it was when I wrote *Lucy Sullivan Is Getting Married*. I do think I’ve since got much better at cutting stuff and not banging on and on about dark feelings and the abyss and having my (w)hole swallowed. Sorry, I’m just being vulgar now.

“Speaking of which, where is the vulgarity? Where is the humour? Where is the lightheartedness and lightness of touch even at the darkest times?

But sure lookit, fair play, good on it. A bit more practice by the robot and soon I’ll be out of a job.” ●

# ARTIFICIAL ANTAGONISTS

## 12 GREAT AI TRAILBLAZERS

Artificial intelligence has been entertaining us with its gloomy prognostications ever since Mary Shelley put quill to paper in 1818

DECLAN BURKE

**‘W**hy stop now,” to paraphrase Douglas Adams’s immortal Marvin the Paranoid Android, “just when we’re hating it?” Artificial intelligence, or a-life, has been entertaining us with its gloomy prognostications ever since Mary Shelley put quill to paper in 1818, and we’re still only getting started. Here are 12 of the most iconic AI trailblazers in fiction, film and theatre from the past two centuries.

### Frankenstein (1818)

The granddaddy of posthumanism, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; Or, the Modern Prometheus invented a genre with one galvanising blast of electricity, blending Lazarus and the legend of the Golem to create the first artificially created life to be endowed – or afflicted – with needs, wants and desires. Forget the clanking Hollywood monsters and Boris Karloff stomping about: *Frankenstein*’s “creature” is all too human, and the novel is a heartbreaking work of genius that persuasively delivers the first terrifying glimpse of a future in which technology begins to break the bounds of its creators’ control.

### RUR (1920)

Or, Rossum’s Universal Robots. Karel Capek’s play coined the word robot – the Czech for serf – in a drama that envisaged an uprising of artificial life against its human creators. There’s no clanking here, either: organic creations who physically resemble humans, the robots eventually have enough of doing the heavy lifting and turn on their creators, only to discover that the creativity required to generate their kind is a uniquely human gift. Capek was unsuccessfully nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature no fewer than seven times; still, it’s the coining of “robot” that ensures his immortality. Recently published by MIT Press, and edited by Jitka Cejkova, Karel Capek’s *RUR* and the *Vision of Artificial Life* is essential reading for the a-life enthusiast.

### Metropolis (1927)

The clanking begins. Adapted from Thea von Harbou’s 1925 novel, and set in 2026 (yikes!), the aesthetic of this pioneering sci-fi was heavily influenced by director Fritz Lang’s first impressions of 1920s Manhattan. We’re in a futuristic dystopia, of course, because futures are dystopian to a fault, in which capitalist swine oppress the humble workers. Boo, says the idealistic Freder, who is in love with the beautiful



worker-saint Maria, who becomes a rebellion-inciting robot who unleashes havoc on the industrialised society. Hurrah for robots!

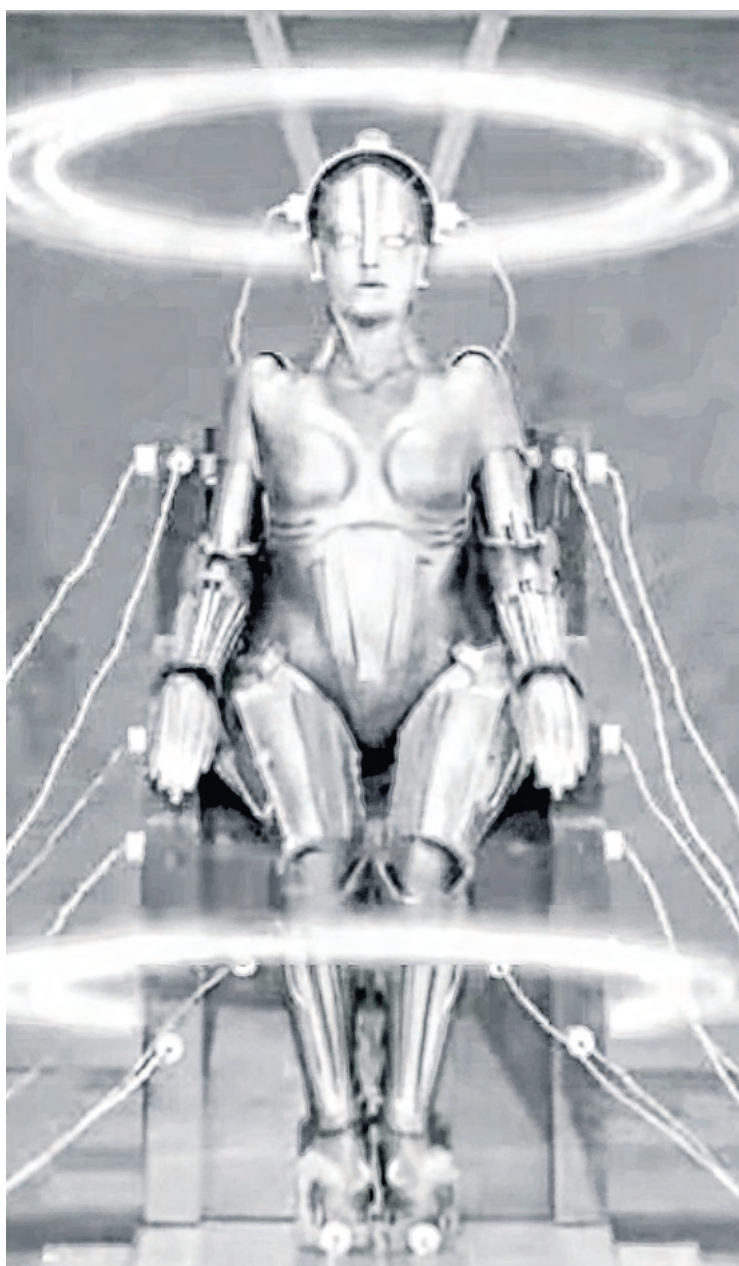
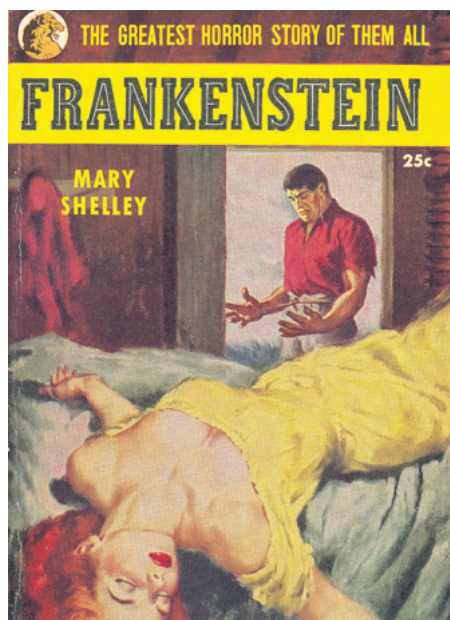
### I, Robot (1950)

But would the radical idea of human and a-life finding common cause catch on? It would not. Indeed, things eventually got so fractious that Isaac Asimov was obliged, in this collection of short stories, to outline the Three Laws of Robotics, which theoretically eliminated a robot’s ability to harm a human, even by inaction. Alas, where there’s a will – even a positronic will – there’s a way, and *I, Robot* (along with a slew of sequels) documents the many, many

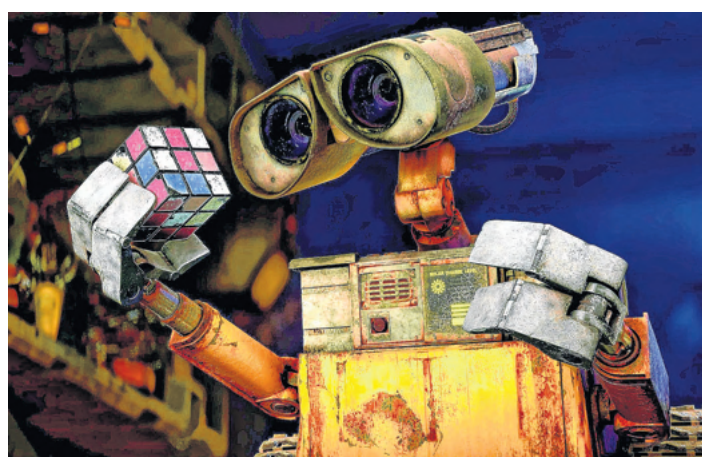
ways in which a-life might deliberately, accidentally or simply by adhering too literally to the rules cause humans to come to grief. Blame the human programmers who somehow failed to anticipate every potential wrinkle in life’s great tapestry.

### Solaris (1970)

Adapted for film by Andrei Tarkovsky (1972) and Steven Soderbergh (2002), Stanislaw Lem’s novel finds astronaut Kelvin arriving on the space station Prometheus (oo-er!), which is in orbit around the eponymous planet. There he encounters his wife, Rhexya, even though, to the best of Kelvin’s knowledge, Rhexya died some years previously. Rather more tactile



Clockwise from left: The Terminator, Frankenstein, Blade Runner, Metropolis and Wall-E



than hallucinations tend to be, Rheya seems to have no awareness of who she is – might Solaris itself be responsible for generating this artificial life? And why? Here hard sci-fi meets existential philosophy – but you'd have to say metaphysical speculation is the real winner.

#### Robot (1973)

Lem's fellow Pole Adam Wisniewski-Snerg published *Robot* a couple of years later, his ambition, it seems, to write the most narratively dense sci-fi novel ever. Hats off to him, then, for this yarn about BER-66 (who may or may not be a robot) attempting to defy "the Mechanism" on a miniature, labyrinthine world recently detached from its home planet and currently barreling through the trackless wastes of space at a significant fraction of the speed of light. A metaphor for life under Soviet rule? Probably. To say that a reread will prove rewarding is to significantly understate the case: it's more accurate to say that *Robot* can only be fully appreciated by a reader possessed of multiple PhDs in cosmology, theoretical physics and advanced paranoia.

#### Blade Runner (1982)

Sometimes – heresy alert – the movie is better than the novel. Adapted from Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* still looks futuristic. Harrison Ford stars as the eponymous bounty hunter, Deckard, who leaps into action when a group of rogue replicants, led by Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), arrive on Earth hoping to have words with the creator who designed them with built-in obsolescence. Whether Deckard is himself

human or android is a cause for contention but actually irrelevant: what makes *Blade Runner* such a wonderfully poignant sci-fi is the furiously blazing desire to live that fuels Roy Batty's doomed rebellion. All together now: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe..."

#### Neuromancer (1984)

William Gibson doesn't do things by halves, so it's no surprise to find that *Neuromancer*, the first of his *Sprawl* trilogy, is fairly teeming with examples of a-life. The story follows the "virtual cowboy" Case, a computer hacker, as he teams up with Molly, a cyborg, to carry out a series of crimes, during the course

of which he encounters a host of robots, artificial intelligences and trans- and posthumans, many of whom have been technologically advanced according to the theories still current when Gibson was writing the novel, in the early 1980s. From bodiless computers to identities enhanced and uploaded into organic hosts, Gibson's characters pretty much cover the gamut of what is theoretically possible when the tentacles of hard science begin colonising the soft machine.

#### The Terminator (1984)

"I'll be back," the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) tells an unsuspecting cop in James Cameron's blockbuster, and

he didn't disappoint. The Terminator franchise might have returned to the well a couple of times too often, but the original still retains its power as a brutally stark metaphor: the future is coming, and it won't be pretty. Schwarzenegger was perfectly cast as the implacable, unstoppable and seemingly unkillable cybernetic assassin that is wholly unaware of such human niceties as morality and compassion as he relentlessly pursues the child he is programmed to kill. The future, eh? Why does it always have to be so blummin' dystopian and postapocalyptic?

#### Wall-E (2008)

Which brings us very neatly to the cute 'n' cuddly Waste Allocation Load Lifter: Earth Class, or Wall-E for short. Set in 2085 on an Earth that ecocide has made uninhabitable for humans, the film begins with the little robot Wall-E bumbling around the planet salvaging parts from other robots with only his pet cockroach for company. Fond of watching the musical *Hello Dolly!* on videocassette (oh, the humanity!), Wall-E's grim existence is enlivened one day when he encounters the egg-shaped Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator, or EVE. Can robots experience love? Pixar robots certainly can, which is good news given that Pixar will likely end up running the planet one day.

#### Autonomous (2018)

When William Gibson hails a novel as thrillingly new, you know you've hit the motherload. Set on Earth in 2144, Annalee Newitz's tale focuses on Jack, an anti-patient scientist gone rogue and operating (from a submarine, natch) as a kind of futuristic Robin Hood, manufacturing affordable medicines for the poor and disenfranchised in a world ruled by consumerism and greed. Hunting her down are military agents Elias and his robot sidekick Paladin, neither of whom understands the tenuous bond that appears to be forming between them. As the title suggests, *Autonomous* is a meditation on free will, agency and the concept of freedom itself. Are robots doomed to become the slaves of the next generation? And, if so, how long are they likely to stand still for it?

#### The Maniac (2023)

A mathematical genius and the creator of the self-replicating machine, and so the godfather of artificial intelligence, the Hungarian-born John von Neumann is the subject of Benjamin Labatut's novel, which blends fact and fiction as Labatut explores, via experimental maths and physics, von Neumann's relentless pursuit of the impossible. The first man to establish a mathematical framework for quantum mechanics – no mean feat in itself – von Neumann would go on to push the human mind beyond the frontiers of rational thought and into a realm in which artificial intelligence developed the potential to outstrip its human creators. Which hasn't yet happened at the time of going to print but may well have occurred by the time you read this online, in which case let me be the first to roll out the digital red carpet for our a-life overlords. Hail! ●

## Donald Clarke

# The technocalypse is less Terminator and more banal

**T**he history of artificial intelligence (AI) in cinema dates back to the early 20th century, with the first notable AI character being Maria in Fritz Lang's iconic film *Metropolis* (1927). The portrayal of a humanoid robot . . .

I was tempted not to put quotation marks around those lines. What fun to lure readers into thinking they were beginning a boilerplate article on artificial intelligence in culture only to have them then discover that a free website had generated the copy. No. Better not go there. Even a hint of confusion is dangerous.

The (I'll confess, eerily convincing) cyberarticle went big on technoapocalypse but declined to note how books, movies and TV had failed to conjure up the low-grade tediousness of so much AI. The "art" in particular. Who would bother structuring a science-fiction novel around not-quite-photorealistic images of blandly attractive lady warriors with seven fingers on each hand? Speculative nightmares are not fashioned from autogenerated reviews on travel sites that deal in suspiciously interchangeable rave clauses.

**“ Background actors could see their images replicated for decades to come**

The perils of death by robot are everywhere. The perils of midlife redundancy thanks to programs that produce indifferent simulacrum of hand-drawn animation – or greeting-card text, or ambient soundscapes – are just a little too ordinarily depressing to interest zesty creatives (as nobody then called HG Wells or Georges Méliès). There is, here, a misty parallel with speculative fiction about manned space exploration. There are yarns about travelling to Mars. There are stories about achieving light speed. Stanley Kubrick was less ambitious and, by the beginning of the 21st century, merely had us making it as far as Jupiter.

Did anyone bother to write a novel in which, after landing on the moon, we just sort of gave up on the idea? Never mind the way the world ends, TS Eliot. This is the way it potters on. Not with your epic bangs but with your spineless whimpers. Not with *Terminator 2* but with a website that turns your holiday snaps into sword-and-sorcery postcards.

Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, of course, also offers one of the most memorable depictions of AI gone wrong. No

better man for the job. The director of *Barry Lyndon* and *Eyes Wide Shut* is, among other things, the great poet of exquisite boredom. HAL is not a gleaming protoman with fingers that shoot lasers. He operates from behind a bland panel decorated with a single red light. By the close of the film, as artificial intelligences will in cinema, the computer has taken to murdering his human companions. He does even that in drab, monotonic fashion. We will never encounter the psychedelic shift to a higher state of being that closes *2001*, but being put out of a job by a characterless sliver of software is something with which we can already identify.

"The history of artificial intelligence in cinema is a fascinating journey that mirrors our evolving relationship with technology," the autogenerated alternative to this column tells me. Shame about the repetition of "history of artificial intelligence in cinema", but there is something close to a banal truth here. It would perhaps be better to say that the fictional timeline mirrors the most extreme of our fears.

And those fears remain grimly unchanged. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is not quite an artificial-intelligence story, but the eponymous creature is indeed the creation of a misguided scientist. We were, nonetheless, more than 200 years ago, already on a path to hubristic annihilation. It goes back further than that. Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, in which an enchanted helper brings unmanageable chaos, echoes a Greek story from the second century.

The *Sorcerer's Apprentice* runs through the fevered misery of the *Matrix* films. It is certainly there in the *Terminator* sequence. There is a particularly horrid incarnation in Harlan Ellison's great 1967 story *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*: an entity that (spoiler) becomes so bored it annihilates all humanity bar four men it elects to torture for eternity.

After all that, it is scarcely a surprise that we have become so nervy about the eventual arrival of the real thing. Just look at the outrage that greeted the news that the makers of the recent horror film *Late Night with the Devil* had "experimented with AI for three still images". It was as if they'd been caught collaborating with an occupied power. But this is not just paranoia. The recent US actors' strike addressed a real fear that background actors could see their images replicated for decades to come. Workers in visual effects and related postproduction also know that jobs are in danger. They (quelle horreur!) may even be coming for film reviewers. As so often in human existence, the actual terrors are more insidious, more subtle and, yes, more tedious than anything Hollywood would bother imagining. ●



# PITCH PERFECT?

Jennifer Walshe is well placed to see where artificial intelligence may lead. The composer has been working with AI technology for a decade



Jennifer Walshe. Photograph: Tom Jamieson/New York Times

PATRICK FREYNE

Long before the current media obsession with AI, and the free availability of song-generating programs such as Udio and Suno, Jennifer Walshe was experimenting with artificial intelligence.

In 2018 the acclaimed composer improvised with an AI-generated version of herself in a project called Ultrachunk. In 2020 she had an AI system imagine an alternative version of 20th-century music in her *Late Anthology of Early Music*. The same year she generated an AI Enya in a project called *Ireland: A Dataset*. Walshe, who is also professor of composition at the University of Oxford, recently wrote an excellent 8,000-word essay for the Polish Unsound festival called *13 Ways of Looking at AI*.

“I’ve been working in this space for about 10 years,” she says. “I had read so many what I considered to be quite ill-considered, not-very-well-researched hot takes. I felt there was a lot more nuance in here than people are realising.” She laughs. Newspa-

pers “don’t want people to have cognitive dissonance at the end of the oped”.

AI platforms need large data sets from which to generate their responses. Newer iterations, such as Suno, Udio and GPT-4o – which powers the ChatGPT chatbot developed by the Open AI research organisation – get much of that material from the internet.

Walshe’s early AI projects worked from data sets she created herself. One of her first projects was called the Text Score Dataset. Text scores are a type of avant-garde musical score, first popularised by composers such as John Cage and Cornelius Cardew in the 1960s, that gave instructions to performers in often poetic and ambivalent words rather than in musical notation. Walshe was working with earlier versions of the AI platforms that have become well known today.

Microsoft “let me have access to Microsoft Azure, as it was [called] at the time,” says Walshe. “I also contacted Open AI, and I was on an early version of one of the GPTs... I have an assistant called Ragnar [Árni Ólafsson], and I think his

brain has been completely rewired through having to do all the data entry for that.

Ragnar and I, when we were walking along the street, we’d see a text instruction [on a sign] and we’d go, ‘Oh, that should go on the data set.’ That project was launched in 2021... There would just be no point now, because we could just dump all the stuff into ChatGPT or Claude.”

Walshe comes from the Cagean tradition of embracing uncertainty in music, so AI was a natural fit. “When somebody like John Cage is using chance, he’s using it to try to jog himself out of his own stylistic and artistic roots, to give himself some sort of fresh inspirations. And so I think myself and a lot of the artists that got interested in this early, we thought of this as a way to experiment and to try new things.”

What does she think of the publicly accessible platforms that produce pieces of music in any genre to order? “There would be all these hysterical articles where people are, like, ‘Oh my God, it’s over.’ People love saying ‘It’s all over.’ It’s almost like they hate artists... Udio was the first one where I thought, ‘Oh, we’re fucked.’” She laughs.

Walshe still enjoys experimenting with

them. She recently spent a bit of time creating different versions of Kurt Schwitter’s sound poem *Ursonate* with Udio.

In her essay she writes about how much of the publicly available AI work is enjoyable pastiche. “There’s all this Frank Sinatra AI, where a human has done a really clever jazz arrangement of *Gangsta’s Paradise* [by Coolio] and a human who has a really good voice has performed that vocal trying to approximate Frank Sinatra,” she says.

“And then they’ve taken a voice model that they’ve trained on Frank Sinatra’s voice and run that human performance through that voice model. It’s not like they just typed in, ‘Frank Sinatra singing *Gangster’s Paradise*,’ and it just popped that out. There are levels of human ingenuity and skill involved.”

Walshe categorises this work as a type of fan fiction. “When somebody takes a Kendrick Lamar diss track and reworks it in the style of a 1970s funk track and puts it on YouTube, that’s a type of creativity, because it’s working with the fandom, making clever, fun decisions... Gen X understand it because of remix culture and sampling and mash-ups... It’s not something radically new. It’s one thing that people are doing



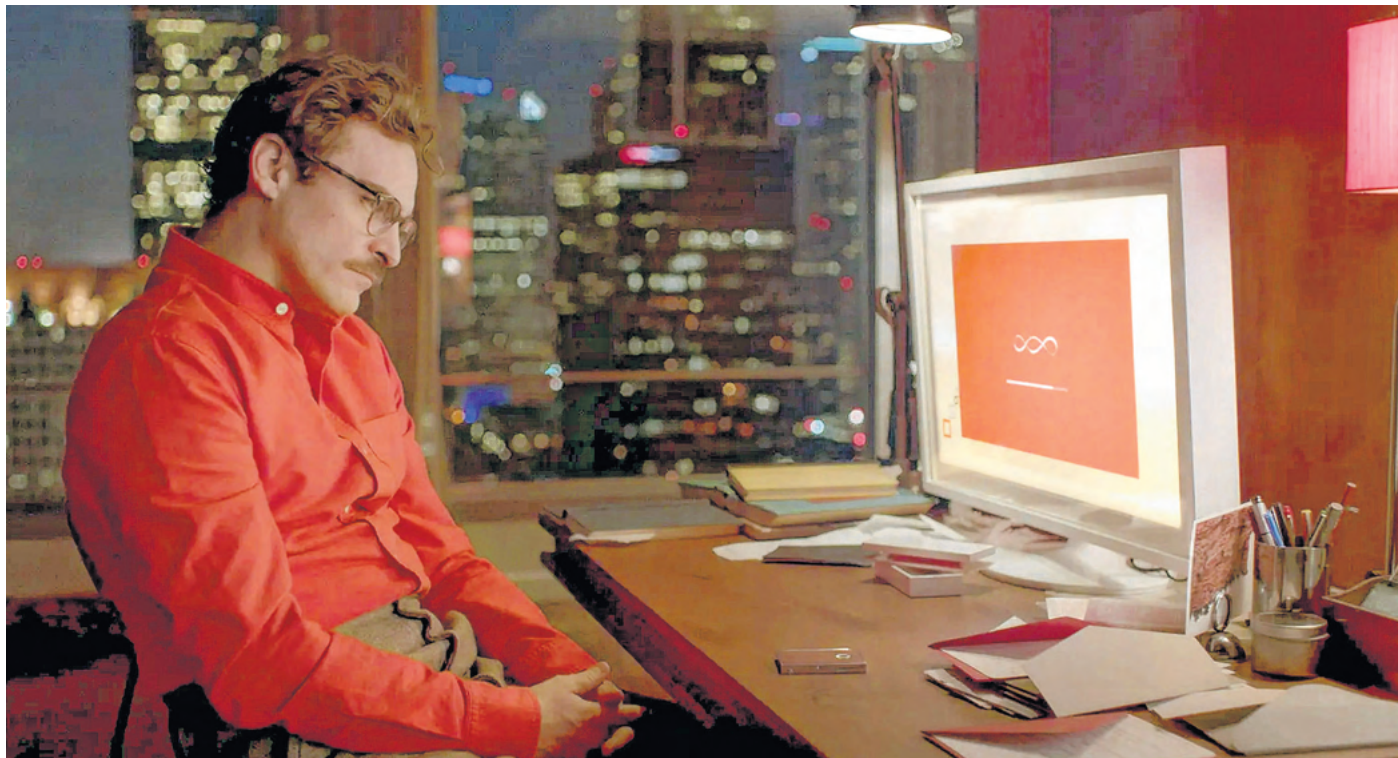
**If you came up with the idea for *I Glued My Balls to My Butthole Again*, and you saw that through and played around with it, it probably takes 20 minutes to make. Is that art?**

with [the technology] that allows people to sort of reach out and connect with one another.”

She also enjoys a YouTube channel that presents AI-generated songs as historical artefacts. “There’s one called *I Glued My Balls to My Butthole Again*, and it’s done like a 1950s skiffle... Then there’s a 1980s song that’s called *It’s Time You Took a Shit on the Company’s Dime*. That’s something that you can do very easily with Suno or Udio... If you came up with the idea for *I Glued My Balls to My Butthole Again*, and you saw that through and played around with it, it probably [takes] 20 minutes to make... Is that art? People will say that the art is having the idea.”

For some fans of AI music, the skilled elements of music that people learn over time as a craft are intrinsically elitist. “They’re trying to say there’s been structural inequality that has prevented people from making music and now, finally, these platforms are going to allow you to make a song called *I Glued My Balls to My Butthole Again* and that will be a true picture of human creativity.”

Walshe is unconvinced. The poorest



Above: Joaquin Phoenix talks to his AI assistant, voiced by Scarlett Johansson, in *Her*. Below: cover art for the AI-generated song *I Glued My Balls to My Butthole Again*; Jennifer Walshe performing in Brooklyn in 2017. Photographs: Warner Bros; Jacob Blickenstaff/New York Times

communities have made music for millennials, she says, because even though playing music requires work, the process brings joy. “If you really wanted to unleash the creativity in every human, you could take the [billions in] capital funding and simply buy children instruments. My grandparents were working-class people. They had a piano, which is a very sophisticated piece of musical technology. There wasn’t this feeling that music was inaccessible.” If somebody is “able to describe a track that they think they’d like to have churned out, I don’t think that that track being delivered to them is actually ‘unleashing their creativity’.”

She also notes that the prosaic “prompts” that users need to employ to order music from AI algorithms are very different from the way musicians or listeners have traditionally thought, spoken, felt and written about music. “It’s completely reductive... You’re not describing how it felt to listen to it; you’re not describing what the music did to your body or what it means culturally.”

The AI version of creativity is also based on the notion that artists start with a fixed outcome in mind. This is at odds with how most artists work. Walshe prefers it when the system she is using breaks down and produces unexpected results. She thinks that as these AI systems “improve”, and so become more predictable, they grow less interesting artistically. “I’m a free improviser. I’m used to the idea that there’s a bunch of noodling for five minutes, and then something starts to emerge, and then you pick those threads apart. I have very different interests to a kid who’s just trying to make a cool techno track.”

In her project *Ultrachunk*, a collaboration with the artist Memo Akten, Walshe performed with a painstakingly created AI version of herself. The public could also interact with her avatar as part of an installation that was an uncanny experience for her. “There was something really weird about watching strangers sock-puppet you,” she says. “And it’s you on a bunch of days where you didn’t wash your hair, or



you were backstage just before show... and you have extra teeth and extra eyes and stuff.”

Walshe is very aware of the more negative uses people might have for such technology. “If you’re a kid that’s growing up now, and starting to leave a data trail about yourself, you’re going to have to contend with the fact that your schoolmates could decide to bully you by making fakes...

And there have already been cases of sexualised-images abuse in schools.”

The human image and voice feel intimately linked to identity. Walshe recalls when the singer Tom Waits sued the snack-food company Frito-Lay for using a soundalike in an advertisement. Most recently, Scarlett Johansson took issue with Open AI’s use of a voice that sounded very like hers for its new ChatGPT assistant. The organisation’s chief executive, Sam Altman, even tweeted the word “her”, in an apparent reference to the film starring Johansson as the voice of an Alexa-like digital assistant. (*Her*, which Spike Jonze made in 2013, is a dystopian tale about the downside of artificial intelligence; referencing it to launch an AI product implies poor comprehension on Altman’s part.)

“When it’s Frank Sinatra singing rap songs, it’s high/low culture and dead/live culture, and African-American/white culture, and all those things that make your brain explode,” says Walshe. “That’s fantastic. When it’s somebody modelling Joe Biden’s voice to robocall elderly people telling them not to vote, that’s terrifying.”

This ease with which these new systems can create content also leads to a surfeit of mediocre and weird content online. Walshe calls this gunk. The internet is already flooded, she says. “There’s a long-form essay that 404 Media published about what they call the zombie internet... They did this deep-dive into all these bizarre pages on Facebook where it’s AI-generated pictures of Jesus and AI-generated pictures of children from the global south who have built cars out of water bottles. Really weird, niche stuff.”

Much of the “gunk” is sexual in nature. “My collaborator John Lydecker says ‘All information wants to be porn,’” says Walshe. She cites a crowdsourcing campaign for a tech company called *Unstable Diffusion*, which wanted to create images that were “30 per cent naked ladies, 30 per cent porn and 30 per cent anime. That isn’t even a real female body. It’s like a weird version

of the female body.” She mentions another generative-AI platform where people were making “Nazi anime pornography of women on all fours as pigs... There’s an entire generation of boys whose minds are just going to be very melted”.

The flood of new material further pollutes the public data sets from which these AI platforms generate these results. Public data sets are already problematic. “Trevor Paglen did this fantastic ImageNet Roulette project with Kate Crawford, who wrote the *Atlas of AI*,” says Walshe. “It was a deeply political project about [how] the image data set on which loads of the AI networks are built is deeply racist... And in response to that artwork the data set was pulled, and they said, ‘We need to clean it up.’ A lot of the time the artists are doing the Lord’s work. They’re engaging with it politically. They’re trying to interrogate what’s happening.”

In some ways, says Walshe, critics of AI are focusing on the wrong things. It’s a human problem, not a technological one, she says. It’s about the humans who want to use the tech, the humans who should be regulating it and the humans who profit from it. “Every step of the way, these decisions are made by humans.”

She thinks there are some areas where AI music will flourish. For friends working in commercial music, she says, their commissions already sound like AI prompts. “The directors say, ‘I really liked the Stereolab track. Can you make it sound like that?’ I can see AI being used in ways like that. It’s the new muzak in many ways, [designed] to be junk in the background. There’s lots of music we hear every day we don’t listen to in detail. We just let it wash over us.”

Walshe doesn’t believe humans will ever lose the desire to make music with their own voices or with physical instruments, because the things that are difficult about making music are the things that make it meaningful and fun. “In London there’s an amateur choir called *Musarc*. I’m doing a project with them at the moment, and they just all like being in the same room together, singing.”

The musician and musicologist Christopher Small “calls it ‘musicking’”. It’s an activity that we do together. I don’t think there’s ever any danger that that’s going to disappear. I don’t think there’s ever any danger that people aren’t going to want to write music from scratch. There are people for whom that’s a really interesting problem to solve. We could all just go to restaurants every single night, and we could buy prepackaged food every single night, but people still love to cook.”

Walshe is unsure what these AI music platforms will ultimately be used for. She doesn’t think that all their creators even know. “They’re just dumping it into the public domain and seeing what happens,” she says. “There’s probably going to be uses for this tech that we can’t quite foresee yet. One of the exercises I do when I’m doing workshops about AI is I say to people, ‘Write down what would help you and what would actually be useful. What would you be willing to pay €10 a month subscription to?’ And generally what people are willing to pay for is not what’s available right now. I think maybe there isn’t enough dialogue with artists. They seem to be solving a problem that doesn’t need to be solved.” ●

# WHAT'S NEXT... FOR ARTIST AOIFE CAWLEY AND THE NEW CELTIC REVIVAL?

Aoife Cawley is part of a new school of young Irish artists bringing Celtic and old Irish Christian iconography into popular culture, with eye-catching results

UNA MULLALLY

**A**oife Cawley's work is nothing if not eye-catching. The young artist recently completed her degree show at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, at the University of Dundee, in Scotland. Inspired by the Book of Kells, other illuminated manuscripts and medieval choir books, it's a neon shock of playful, bold and colourful contextualisations of Irish saints. She is part of a new school of young Irish designers, printmakers, illustrators, graphic designers and textile artists bringing Celtic and old Irish Christian iconography into contemporary popular culture, with incredibly fun results.

In her latest show, featuring the saints Brigid, Patrick, Colmcille, Gobnait, Íta and Kevin, Cawley reframes – literally – these religious icons and their stories in an explosion of illuminations that are more at home under UV light than in ancient scriptoriums.

Cawley loved art at secondary school, “but I always steered towards something more academic,” she says. “I was quite good at languages, but I ended up dropping out of UL [the University of Limerick] when I was doing French, German and Irish. I still really love Irish, and I can speak it to quite a good level, but the academic learning of language wasn't for me.” She began taking photographs on film, then, encouraged by friends who were at art college, took a portfolio course.

“Because I had done two years already I couldn't get Susi,” she says, referring to the higher-education grant. “My mum and dad were already a bit raging that I dropped out of college, so I started looking for places that were cheap. Scotland was free for EU students at the time.” She applied for a fine-art photography degree at the University of Glasgow. “I went over, did the interview and missed out by one mark. Then I ended up getting into Dundee. It was going to be the last year I could get my fees funded before Brexit kicked in. I'm so glad I did. I completely changed my practice when I was there.”

Studying online at first, because of the pandemic, Cawley returned to embroidery, which she had enjoyed at school. “I was able



to sit on the couch all day, doing embroidery, go to bed, wake up and stay there again until three or four in the morning, and then do it all over again. I started posting my embroidery on Instagram. I think because they weren't traditional – mad, full of sequins – and because I started doing tarot-cards embroidery as well, it blew up. That's how I really started.”

Once she was able to move back to Limerick after lockdown, as well as going to college she started going to Limerick Printmakers. “I love screen printing. I love how graphic it is. I never saw myself as a traditional painter or illustrator, but in screen printing you can make really vivid work.”

One of her inspirations was a hugely celebrated Irish artist. “I was very into the Irish language in school, and looking at the people reviving the language – I was really passionate about that. I saw the importance in the culture, the history, the language, the heritage. For the art-history exam there was a gallery visit; at the Hugh Lane I got introduced to Harry Clarke. I had never seen anything like it. I remember drawing his images, looking for more of his work. I was blown away by his stained glass. That led to iconography, saints... It's all very bling. I started embroidering those kinds of things, and started a practice around female saints. When you start reading about them, they've done mad things. It's



Aoife Cawley and (top) her neon depiction of St Brigid; the artist sells her designs online

like mythology.”

In Limerick she had made friends with a nun after emailing a religious order to ask to learn more about St Cecilia. “We were best pals,” Cawley says of Sr Rose Miriam. “I'd meet up with her on my lunch, walking around Limerick with me in full leopard

print and her in her habit. She was American and was able to tell me about stories of different saints and who I should look up. I told her a lot about St Brigid. I'm from Kildare, so I was brought up with St Brigid. It's hard trying to explain that to people outside Ireland. My tutors were, like, ‘Where are your sources about St Brigid's cloak?’ I'm, like, ‘Er, my ma told me.’”

Of the broader New Celtic Revival, Cawley says, “There are so many amazing illustrators, graphic designers, artists, who are dealing with this type of imagery... I'm very, very proud to be Irish. I'm delighted it's happening. We can use the language now in a way that's not so strict. I'm seeing people on TikTok doing get-ready-with-me videos in Irish. It's a living language. Manchán Magan is huge.”

Cawley also designs and sells enamel pins and scarves, and has hosted printmaking and embroidery workshops. She has a residency coming up at Creative Spark in Dundalk, as well as one in Florence, after an award from the Royal Scottish Academy. She'll be travelling to the Italian city later this year to create new work. “It's been mad. I'm really grateful,” she says. “I feel ready to put my all into this, and hopefully be able to make a living from doing all this weird art about saints. It's bold, bright, crazy, funny. I want people to have a laugh but also revitalise these stories.” ●

# THE 10 BEST IRISH ALBUMS OF THE YEAR SO FAR

Halfway through 2024, we've already had a bumper haul of memorable LPs

## TONY CLAYTON-LEA

### Souvenir Chequerboard

You can't hurry some people. John Lambert has taken more than 10 years to deliver his fourth album, but, like a virtuoso craftsman patiently tending to his long-term work, he fusses over his delicate "miniature" music in a way that would give a Zen master the shivers. Centred around nimble-fingered acoustic guitar, Lambert's music gathers together elements of postrock (the very tranquil parts of Sigur Rós spring to mind), minimalism (from Brian Eno to Max Richter) and postclassical (from Jóhann Jóhannsson to Stephan Moccio). Cultivated tracks (co-produced, mixed, engineered and mastered by Lambert's fellow Dublin-based electronic musician Stephen Shannon) such as A Story of a Decorative Plate, The Art of Friendship, Imperial Finery, Red Admiral and Vermilion place Chequerboard at the forefront of Irish ambient music. Lambert is no commercial slouch, either, with more than 22 million Spotify streams testifying to his popularity (even though you'd probably fail to recognise him on the street).

### A Kind of Dreaming Driven Snow

Partners in music and life, Kieran McGuinness (ex-Delorentos) and Emily Aylmer (ex-Republic of Loose) formed Driven Snow under the cloak of Covid – and under a duvet as their three children scurried around. There is, then, a level of truth attached to these songs that can come only from knowing your co-writer extremely well. On Tonight, They'll Find Me Lost, Aylmer sings "I know every crack on the old main road, but tonight you'd find me lost... so lost I need some help from you, not from anyone else..." McGuinness, meanwhile, on Trying, sings "My dreams get dark at 3am, and I'm not so zippy like I pretend, but I'm trying..." Let's not dwell too long, however, on the

confessional (but not necessarily autobiographical) words of self-doubt and anxiety: surrounding them are some of the most gorgeous acoustic-folk earworms you'll hear this year.

### Fine Art Kneecap

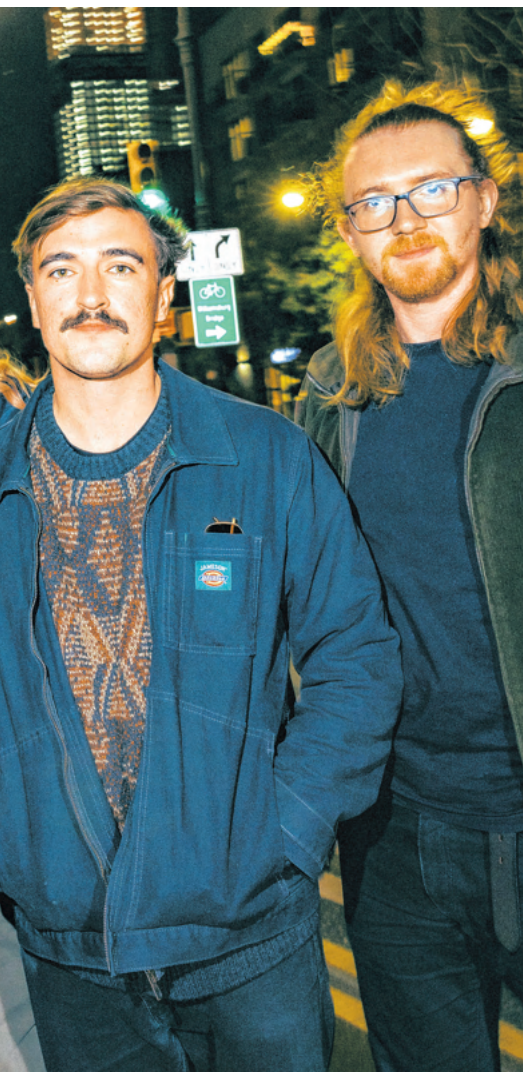
Welcome to the spiky world of Kneecap, the Belfast trio of Mo Chara, Móglaí Bap and DJ Próvaí. They live in a community pub called the Rutz, wherein "religious affiliations are irrelevant", everybody talks in bilingual bursts of chatter, and trad music wafts in the background. Produced in a defiantly crunchy manner by Toddla T (aka Thomas Bell, husband of the Dublin-born radio presenter, DJ and writer Annie Macmanus), the album's dozen tracks (and six contextual interludes) tell the trio's story via knuckle-duster songs such as I'm Flush, Ibh Fiacha Linne, Better Way to Live (featuring vocals from Grian Chatten of Fontaines DC), Parful and Rhino Ket. Lankum's Radie Peat lends her voice to the opening track, 3CAG, which, while mellower than the bangers, sets the tone perfectly for what comes next.

### Madra NewDad

Despite NewDad's drummer, Fiachra Parslow, saying otherwise, there are no influences we can detect of "barefooted, hurdy-gurdy-playing buskers" on his Galway band's debut album. There are instead indelible traces of the very best of shoegaze music – those steel-fist-in-a-velvet-glove rhythms that were presented to us in the 1990s by the likes of Curve, Slowdive, Ride, Mazzy Star and My Bloody Valentine. NewDad might take the music as their artistic model, but the success of Madra lies not in what's familiar but in the way it's delivered. A key component is Julie Dawson, the band's singer and primary lyricist, who doles out equal measures of charisma and anxiety in dapper songs such as Nosebleed, In My Head, White Ribbons, Nightmares,







Clockwise from far left: Belfast trio Kneecap; Dublin band Sprints; Oisín Leech; Villagers frontman Conor O'Brien; Galway band NewDad; Pillow Queens; and Niamh Regan. Photograph: Alice Backham

**Come As You Are**  
**Niamh Regan**

Niamh Regan's 2020 debut, *Hemet*, slipped out during the pandemic, quietly introducing a voice that felt familiar and comforting but also agitated. A cagey customer of a songwriter, Regan layers her work with hints of her life without divulging too much, but *Come As You Are* is different: it's littered with songs that confess all to music that has as much swoon as swagger. *Blame and Belly* are ice-crisp indie rock-pop, while silkier tracks such as *Long Haul* ("Give me a chance, I will make this right again"), *Waves* ("I've been nervous my whole damn life, careful with how I feel"), *Paint a Picture* ("Hear me out, I'm still sketching it out"), and *Mortgage* ("Leave me with strangers, I need their applause") confront the complications of balancing needs and wants in creative and personal parts of life.

**Cold Sea**  
**Oisín Leech**

At just a few seconds over 27 minutes, you might think that Oisín Leech's debut solo album would drift away before you had time to delve into it, but there is – no pun intended – more depth to *Cold Sea* than one could imagine. Taking an extended break from his role as singer-songwriter in the Americana-driven *Lost Brothers*, Leech delivers nine tracks that showcase his natural gifts for blending solitary sensibilities with welcoming affection. Three tracks are mood-enhancing instrumentals, while most of the album features textured work from the American guitarist Steve Gunn (who also produced). The songs, meanwhile, are of a kind: quiet, odd, attractive, altogether remote, and brimming with just the levels of light and shade.

**Name Your Sorrow**  
**Pillow Queens**

There is a lot to be said for pop-punk bands that just get on with writing infectious, novelty-free songs. Every track on *Pillow Queens*' third album packs a punch, but there are a few vital calling cards here, with the likes of *Like a Lesson* (which deserves an earworm-of-the-year award), *Blew Up the World* (likewise for guitar solo of the year) and *Notes on Worth* (lyric of the year: "I could feel my body beating, hated it all my life... but I think I'm worth the time") sprinting to the finish line with control, self-assessment and flair.

**Letter to Self**  
**Sprints**

"There is no gleaming surface left untouched, no scorched-earth policy left unread," we said in January, when the Dublin band *Sprints* released their debut album. Those words still stand, but after six months of repeated listening you know that comments perceived to be somewhat over the top are grounded in truth. Blame the songs. They jump out of the shadows, initially startled by bright lights but quickly settling into a hypnosis-induced reverie that is supported by gear-crashing guitars, inherent melody and the resonant vocals of

Karla Chubb. The band's primary lyricist, Chubb is front and centre here. "I swim the seas between paranoia and disbelief," she says on *Up and Comer*. Similar high-anxiety motifs are explored in songs such as *Literary Mind*, *Heavy*, *Adore Adore Adore* and the title track, but the outcome is more relief than repression.

**That Golden Time**  
**Villagers**

Conor O'Brien's previous album, *Fever Dreams*, from 2021, was aptly titled, with its swirls of psychedelic soul and splintered lounge music. Fans of *Villagers*' full band sound might be disappointed with *That Golden Time*'s retracing of footsteps, but the album is no less ambitious for that. You know matters have been taken down a notch from the first song: *Truly Alone* set the pace, but what follows isn't at all sluggish. Indeed, the leisurely tempos of *You Lucky One*, the title track, *Brother Hen*, *No Drama*, *Behind the Curtain* and *I Want What I Don't Need* are never left to wither on the vine. Subtle sonic touches that hint at Pink Floyd, Sigur Rós, Radiohead and Bob Dylan weave their way from start to end, but the strength of the songs belongs solely to O'Brien, who is at his folk-pop best here. ●



Where I Go and *Dream of Me*. The band react accordingly, with sharply honed riffs and earworm melodies.

**Oops...! Pop**  
**New Jackson**

David Kitt has never been one to look at what's happening outside his front door and wonder what it would be like to chase it down the street. His creative alter ego – *New Jackson* has been stalking him since 2011, so it's hardly a side project – connects with this frame of mind, with a new album that's as fresh as a daisy and as familiar as your face in the mirror. Reference points zip into your head (*Pet Shops Boys*, *Wham!*, *Kraftwerk*) while a vocoder-treated cover of *Stone Roses*' *I Wanna Be Adored* takes you from perplexed to charmed across a sprightly five minutes. It's all deft killer, no dim filler, with the added gift of a superb closing song (*With the Night at Our Feet*) that glides from ear to ear in a forever loop of throbs and pulses.

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Written by Elizabeth Kuti  
Directed by Annabelle Comyn

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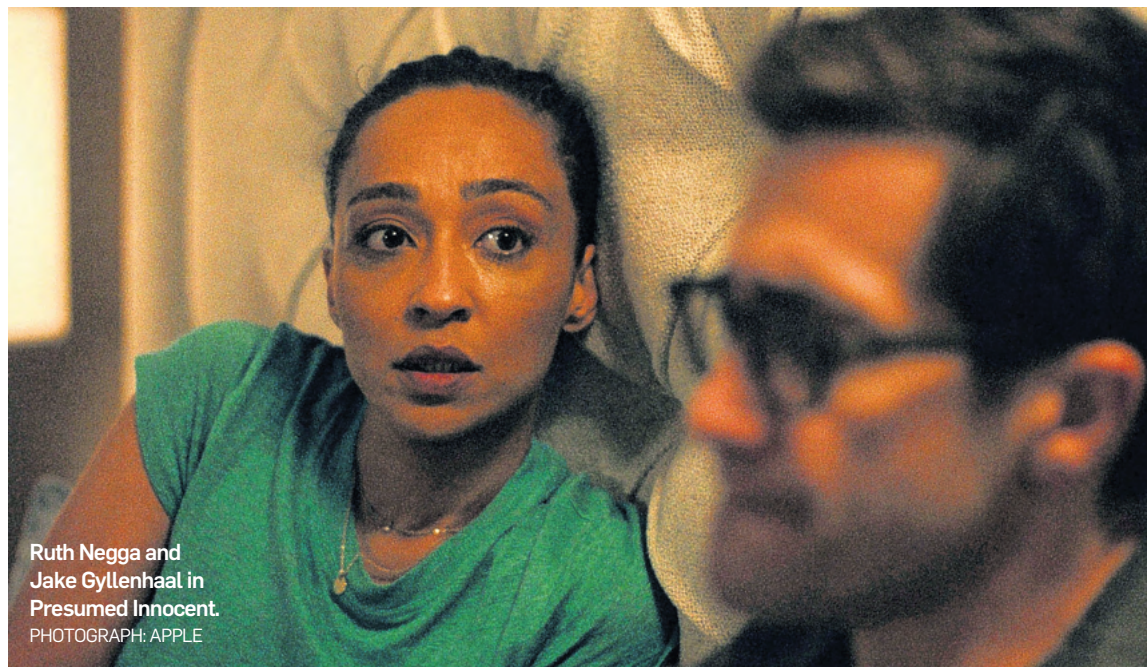
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Ruth Negga and  
Jake Gyllenhaal in  
*Presumed Innocent*.  
PHOTOGRAPH: APPLE

## ‘All that shame. It was all wrong’

Long Lost Family goes in search of the families of foundlings; Presumed Innocent is a rebooted erotic thriller without a pulse

### Television Ed Power

**B**ritish film-makers have a mixed record when it comes to retelling the history of Ireland’s Magdalene laundries and mother-and-baby homes. The injustices of these institutions – virtual prisons for so-called fallen women and clearing houses for their babies before adoption abroad – were unflinchingly detailed in Peter Mullan’s *The Magdalene Sisters*, from 2002 (set in Ireland, filmed in Scotland). But then there was last year’s Hammer Horror mishap *The Woman in the Wall*, which dishonoured the suffering of the women sent to the laundries with its hokey plot and a tone that lurched from twee to hysterical.

Davina McCall and Nicky Campbell are the latest to turn to this stain upon 20th-century Irish history with their series **Long Lost Family: Born Without Trace** (Monday, UTV), a spin-off of their blockbusting tearjerker *Long Lost Family*, in which blood relatives separated for decades are brought back together. The subject, as the latest series begins, is “foundlings” – infants abandoned by their parents and who grew up knowing nothing of their family history.

One such example is Martina Evenden, a Dubliner found outside a church in the city in 1967. Several years ago she uploaded her DNA to a public website, hoping it might help her to contact her birth mother. It was a shot in the dark that paid off when researchers for *Long Lost Family*

contacted her while looking into the origins of another foundling, Thomas Yeo.

Yeo, who is two years older than Evenden, was left at a train station in Reading, near London. Evenden’s DNA confirmed the two as cousins – her father, Joseph, and Yeo’s mother, Peggy, were siblings.

Evenden, an office administrator, paints a vivid picture of the night she was discovered on that step. “The sacristan came to lock up. That’s where he found me. He thought I was a cat. Then he heard a cry and looked a bit closer. There I was, abandoned, bits of blood still on my body, nothing else with me.”

Yeo travels to Dublin, where he takes the Luas to meet Evenden. Beyond knowing they are cousins, they are still in the dark about their origins. “Here we’re guessing, making our own little stories,” Evenden says. “Somebody has to know something.”

The experts continue to dig. Yeo receives the sad news that his mother went to Australia, where she died – but that his father lived out his life in Carrick-on-Shannon, in Co Leitrim, where he was married with a family.

His children had no idea they had a half-sibling in England. When they meet, they are dumbstruck after their dad’s lookalike walks into the room. Yeo is astonished, too, to discover an instant extended family. Growing up, he was told he had “Irish eyes”. Now here is, among his own, and he doesn’t quite know how to process the shock.

Evenden learns that her mother had three previous children and that, before giving birth to her fourth child, she had ended up at the Sean Ross Abbey moth-

er-and-baby home, a notorious institution in Roscrea, Co Tipperary, where 1,090 “illegitimate children” died over 37 years. One of her half-siblings is in Wicklow, and Evenden goes to meet her.

Their conversation takes place off-camera. Afterwards, she tries to keep the tears at bay. At the end of a moving episode, she speaks quietly yet emotionally about the mistreatment of women such as her mother – a black mark against Ireland that should never be forgotten and that this solid documentary passionately, respectfully explores.

“All that shame. It shouldn’t have been like that,” Evenden says. “It was all wrong.”

### Slick and shallow

Hollywood keeps trying to bring back the 1990s erotic thriller, and its latest attempt, **Presumed Innocent** (Apple TV+, from Wednesday), is a small-screen reboot of the Harrison Ford-Greta Scacchi thriller. The results are slick and shallow and distinctly unsteamy – just what you’d expect from the king of the middlebrow blockbuster, David E Kelley, whose hits include *Big Little Lies* and *Ally McBeal*.

Working with the megaproducer JJ Abrams, he has assembled an A-grade cast, starting with Jake Gyllenhaal in the Harrison Ford role of the sleazy Chicago public prosecutor Rusty Sabich.

Gyllenhaal was last seen sparring with Conor McGregor in Prime Video’s preposterous remake of the action movie *Roadhouse*. In *Presumed Innocent* he faces off against another Irish star, the Limerick actor Ruth Negga, returning to TV after a 2016 Oscar nomination for Jeff Nichols’s *Loving*.

She plays Barbara, the long-suffering wife who has stuck by the odious Rusty even after he confessed to a fling with a colleague. Barbara has agreed to stay with him for the sake of their two teenage children. But now Rusty’s former lover, Carolyn, has been found brutally murdered – and it turns out that the affair wasn’t quite as “over” as he claimed. We learn that Carolyn (Renate Reinsve) was pregnant. Did Rusty kill her to save her marriage?

That’s the theory of Rusty’s unpleasant rival at the public prosecutor’s office, Tommy Molto. He is played as a punchable creep by Peter Sarsgaard, who appears to have based his performance on John Malkovich circa *In the Line of Fire*.

Gyllenhaal, meanwhile, tries to put clear distance between his performance and that of Harrison Ford by spending most of his screen time looking confused. Opposite him, Negga exudes high levels of frustration – though whether that’s coming from her character or is a reflection of her exasperation with the clunking script is hard to tell.

The original *Presumed Innocent* was a slick guilty pleasure, elevated by Ford’s Han Solo-gone-bad charisma. This remake slows the pace to a crawl and expands on Rusty’s world. We learn more about his marriage, his kids and his career – but at the price of the high-octane absurdity that powered the 1990 movie. As an erotic thriller it is pulseless. As a prestige TV show *Presumed Innocent* stands guilty of boring its audience witless. ●

### Ones to Watch

**Buckle up for a roaring good time as series two of the Game of Thrones spin-off House of the Dragon arrives (Sky Atlantic, Monday, 2am, 9pm)**

**Jane Seymour goes Irish Miss Marple in the second series of the enjoyable Dublin-set cosy crime caper Harry Wild (RTÉ, Wednesday, 9.35pm)**

# Wincing Joe Duffy reaches his cut-off point

Liveline host is affected by candid accounts of amputated extremities

**Radio**  
**Mick Heaney**

**H**aving spent his career covering stories of horrifying institutional abuse and devastating personal ordeals, you might suppose that Joe Duffy is pretty much unshockable. But some subjects test even his ability to broach taboo subjects. On Tuesday's **Liveline** (RTÉ Radio 1, weekdays), for instance, one can almost hear the host wince as he hesitatingly utters the words "amputated" and "penis" in the same sentence.

He's unlikely to be alone: half of Duffy's audience surely blanches at the thought of such a drastic procedure. Although he warns that the item is not for "very young ears", he could probably include male listeners of all ages in his caution. But if the host's conversation with Peter, who recently had such an amputation, seems designed to play on men's worst fears – "This is a nightmare for you," Duffy says to his guest – the discussion eschews sensationalism or voyeurism in favour of salutary advice.

Peter explains how, after noticing some small changes to his urinary routine, he was diagnosed with cancer of the urethra. To have any chance of surviving this rare condition he had "no option" but to have his penis removed. Less than four weeks after his operation Peter is admirably phlegmatic, even making light of his

experience. He nicknamed his tumour Urethra Franklin, and is wryly philosophical about the negative impact on his love life: "The days of me swinging out of a wardrobe in a Batman suit are long past."

And although his long-term prognosis is uncertain, Peter believes he has a better chance of a future than would otherwise be the case, and urges male listeners to seek medical advice if anything is amiss in their nether regions. "My symptoms were so slight," he says, "I was very close to just ignoring it."

Duffy also talks to Paddy, who had a similarly severe operation some years ago, and has since undergone penile reconstruction. "There is hope," Paddy remarks by way of succour. "It's only a part of your body." Sure enough, difficult though the topic is, it's no more corporeally traumatic than, say, mastectomies, which women face far more commonly. Men's health may be having a radio moment right now – the broadcaster Adrian Kennedy recently talked about his prostate cancer on *Newstalk's Lunchtime Live* – but women have long blazed a trail of openness about illness, as Duffy acknowledges. "Women have led the way over the years in talking about breast cancer especially," he observes, before allowing himself a little humblebrag: "They did it on this programme two years ago about the menopause."

That's not to downplay the severity of Peter's situation, nor his remarkable candour. Duffy rightly commends his guest as a "brilliant interviewee", and is audibly affected when Peter declares his love for his wife. "You'll have us all in tears," the host says after a conspicuously long spell of dead air. Even an old hand like Duffy can get still caught off guard.

Elsewhere, the long tail of election counts dominates airtime, from interviews



**Audibly affected:** Joe Duffy. PHOTOGRAPH: RTÉ

with candidates to analysis from pundits. Notable among the former is the erstwhile talkshow host and Independent Ireland European Parliament candidate Niall Boylan, who is much more amenable than his shock-jock persona would suggest when he talks to Cormac Ó hEadhra on Monday's **Drivetime** (RTÉ Radio 1, weekdays).

Still in the running at that point – he's eliminated on the final count the next day – Boylan is in talkative mood, admitting he's not sure how his bid will turn out, while downplaying the primacy of anti-immigrant sentiment to his voter appeal. Even Ó hEadhra sounds pleasantly surprised by his guest's countenance, briefly citing their shared experience of live radio, though one wonders if Boylan's air of Zen acceptance would have persisted had he made it to Brussels.

Meanwhile, over on **The Pat Kenny Show** (*Newstalk*, weekdays), the host mulls the electoral performance of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael with the political commentator David Davin-Power, who ascribes the two Coalition parties' comparative success to "a public that, despite the protestations of the Opposition, is largely content in the year 2024". Given the furor over immigra-

tion and the housing crisis, this seems deeply counterintuitive, but Davin-Power sticks to his guns: "Without being complacent about the state of the country, I think it's fair to say that Government tapped into a zeitgeist that things really are going quite well."

Kenny apparently agrees, observing that despite wide complaints about the cost of living, the airports are "chock-a-block". It's a tendentious argument, but if both host and guest overstate their case, it's at least a rejoinder to the apocalyptically racist fever dreams of the far right, largely kept at bay at the polls by the voters.

Not that all Kenny's guests think elections are the best way to determine how we're governed. On Wednesday the host talks to the Guardian columnist George Monbiot, who praises the virtues of "sortition", or choosing people by lottery to make decisions. It doesn't sound like a recipe for stable government, as even Monbiot admits: "In theory this system is a total disaster." But he claims, without citing much evidence, that ordinary people asked to deliberate on important matters generally make better decisions than politicians seeking to appease powerful interests.

Again, this is a contentious assertion. But as Kenny and the Trinity College Dublin academic Peter Stone note, citizens' assemblies were crucial in formulating the abortion referendum, though their role was advisory. Either way, while the idea of a government comprised of people who stick their name down for a lottery sounds dubious – just listen to the self-selecting collective wisdom of a phone-in show on a bad day – Kenny thinks it an unlikely prospect. Asking politicians to accept such a system, he suggests, is like turkeys voting for Christmas. In this case, however, the turkeys may have a point. ●

## Handsome is a warm, queer audio delight

Comedians Tig Notaro, Fortune Feimster and Mae Martin conquer the three-friends-chatting format

**Podcast**  
**Fiona McCann**

**'C**hattin' with friends on the Handsome pod, chattin' with friends on the Handsome pod. Cheers!" So goes this podcast's opening jingle, a catchy, harmonic number capturing something essential about this warm, queer audio delight. More than 40 episodes in,

**Handsome** is as bright and jaunty as its barbershop-quartet jingle and as pleasing to the ear as the rattle of ice that ends it.

Handsome convenes three funny queer people, all of whom are well known actors and comedians. We have Fortune Feimster, who brings a throaty North Carolina drawl and a zany sweetness to the mix, the Canadian Mae Martin, with their voracious appetites and wild thought ricochets, and the Mississippian Tig Notaro, in charge of real talk and bedtimes. The trio dropped the first Handsome episode last summer, and it has been a slow-burning delight ever since, as they recline fully into the format and each other.

As for that format, we're back in three-friends-chatting terrain, which can be a dicey proposition. If you want to be freewheeling in the audio world, you've got to be funny, and your audience has to

want to spend time in your company. But who wouldn't want to hang with these folk? Notaro's dry wit, Feimster's gloriously self-deprecating stories and Martin's creative brain explosions somehow gel as charming and winningly real.

To add a whisper of structure to every 60-minute-ish meander, each episode also includes a question from one of their myriad celebrity friends. When might the United States get a woman president, asks Kenan Thompson. What would the hosts' chosen superpower be is what Neil Patrick Harris wants to know. Jennifer Aniston is curious about whether a psychic has ever blown their minds. These questions tee up fresh conversations and philosophising, but also allow the hosts to talk about their lives and professional struggles in a way that's genuine and often hilarious.

Handsome has its tropes: we regularly get Mae Facts, which turn out to be things Martin googles in preparation for a conversational lull on a podcast or a date, deemed factual because they were sourced from lists of facts on the internet. (Examples: A crocodile dung bath is "very toning for the skin", and one in five Americans claims to

have seen a ghost.) And there's a running list of things the trio plan to tackle together, including hosting Saturday Night Live and dining at an American cheesecake-making restaurant chain.

It's diverting chatter that meanders in unexpected and entertaining ways and that also offers a lens on queer life in the US.

Notaro explains how she and her wife had to come out to their sons after it became clear the boys had no idea their parents were gay; Feimster talks about her first failed attempts to attend a pride parade; Martin introduces the other two to foam parties and Hocus Pocus sex dreams.

The draw, really, is the growing synergy between three charmers who have formed a kind of Handsome family: Notaro's the long-suffering mom, rolling her eyes at the wayward youth and refusing to understand any pop-culture references; Martin is the acting-out teen showing up hungover and mooting a make-out session with their own clone; and Fortune plays the sweet auntie who glues it all together with her fuzzy embrace. If handsome is as handsome does, they don't get much better looking than this one. ●

# Book Reviews



## How a taste for spice fed West's hunger for trade and conquest

Roger Crowley explores how 'restless Europeans' such as Spain and Portugal created a global 'maritime belt' of trade and empire

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### Christopher Kissane

In 1494, two European neighbours signed a treaty at Tordesillas on the Douro river, agreeing to share power over the Atlantic and the Americas along a meridian that would cut the entire world into two half-spheres of influence. "Show me," King Francis I of France protested, "where in Adam's will the sea was bequeathed to the Spanish and Portuguese."

In his new narrative history of Iberian

Spice: The 16th-Century Contest that Shaped the Modern World  
By Roger Crowley

Yale University Press, 320pp, £22

rivalry over the coveted spice trade, Roger Crowley emphasises both the "absurdity of this attempt to neatly divide up the world" and how it took these "restless Europeans just eighty years to weave the oceans together" into a global "maritime belt" of trade and empire.

Today, China's "Belt and Road" has focused attention on the overland "silk routes", but it has always been the high seas that dominated intercontinental trade. Most lucrative of all were spices, "lightweight and durable", "the first truly

global commodity". Throughout ancient and medieval times, Europeans coveted the culinary and medicinal uses of pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon and other fruits from the Molucca Islands in southeast Asia. The lucrative trade was dominated by Ottoman merchants who controlled trade through the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, a monopoly Europeans longed to break.

On the continent's southwestern edge, Portuguese mariners were pushing the boundaries of ocean navigation, seeking their own route to the east. Bartolomeu



A spice shop in Marrakech, Morocco. PHOTOGRAPH: THOMAS BARWICK/GETTY IMAGES

routes in their hands, while Spain's risky bet on Christopher Columbus (rejected in Lisbon) had got them nowhere near Asia. The ambitious new emperor Charles decided on another "moonshot", enraging the Portuguese by hiring their own out-of-favour Fernão de Magalhães (rebranded Fernando Magellan) to sail west to reach the east. Magellan's orders were to "proceed straight to the spicery", but his search for straits through the Americas proved tortuous, as did the intra-Iberian rivalries in his crew. Yet despite mutinies and disease, Magellan "stumbled his way into the end of the world".

Like Columbus, Magellan had assumed the Pacific was small, but his crew found it "more vast than mind of man can conceive", covering a third of the entire planet. Incredibly, the expedition made its way to Cebu, but there Magellan's arrogance led to a disastrous conflict with the indigenous people in which he was killed. The last dilapidated ship limped home under the command of the Basque Juan Sebastian Elcano, evading its Portuguese tormentors to land back in Spain with just 18 men.

Despite the expedition's failures, the circumnavigation was "the wonder of its age". The arrival of the next Spanish expedition, its remnants led by Basque Andrés de Urdaneta, in the Moluccas themselves "changed the game" by turning the spice cold war hot. A "dirty war" between the Iberians fed "tribal and inter-island conflict, amplifying grievances between the native people", creating "spirals of violence" that became "increasingly violent and convoluted". The unsustainability of the circumnavigation, however, gave the Portuguese a huge advantage, and in 1529 Charles gave up.

The Portuguese, however, were finding the Spice Islands bittersweet. Joao de Barros wrote that the value of nutmeg made it "the apple of all discord", cursed "more than gold itself". To Antonio Galvao, the Moluccas were an "infernal labyrinth", a "Babel" of different polities and languages that the "monstrous cases" of Portuguese colonial evil turned into "the hotbed of all the evils of the world". Albuquerque himself feared that "the time will come when instead of our present fame as warriors we may only be known as grasping tyrants".

The Portuguese worldview of "discovery" (still today a euphemism for rapacious imperialism) envisaged "an unending map, forever scrolling up over further horizon", with a cartographic revolution "literally reshaping the world". Both Portugal and Spain maintained a "master map", kept as a state secret, but even published maps and globes transformed how Europeans thought. "You could hold the world in your hand", and its "blank spaces" became territory to "discover" and possess. Iberian travellers were ravenously curious for detail about the worlds they "discovered", collecting endless information, "none of it quite innocent".

For Portugal, Crowley writes, "trade and conquest went hand in hand", a "confusion of mentalities" that would eventually contribute to their downfall. Their other greatest threat was espionage, and they guarded their navigational advantages with secrecy and deliberate misinforma-



## Like Columbus, Magellan had assumed the Pacific was small, but his crew found it "more vast than mind of man can conceive", covering a third of the entire planet

tion. The Genoese complained that the Portuguese had "taken wholly into their hands all the trade of spices... to sell them at a more grievous and intolerable price to the people of Europe than ever was heard of before". Venetian spymasters prowled the Lisbon docks, Spanish agents carried manuscripts across the border, and eventually a Dutch secretary to the bishop of Goa used information he had stolen to publish "a blueprint for voyaging to the East and trading there".

At times, Crowley's own analysis contradicts his bolder claims. The Dutch would indeed be explicitly "pitiless" in their exploitation of the Indies, but the "more idealistic" Portuguese justifications had been mere window-dressing for their own cruelty. While he argues that "the years 1511-1571 saw Europe, hungry, competitive and aggressive, shift decisively from the margins to the centre", in conclusion he rightly notes that "despite the noise of exploration, it was China that sat at the centre of the world and around whose needs and industries the Europeans rotated", with the Europeans still "confined to the archipelagos and peripheries of great continental empires".

### Further Reading

**The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis** by Amitav Ghosh (Chicago University Press, 2021). The acclaimed Indian novelist uses the Banda Islands, the source of nutmeg, to explore the catastrophic environmental impact of colonial capitalism.

**Straits: Beyond the Myth of Magellan** by Felipe Fernández-Arnesto (Bloomsbury, 2022). Fernández-Arnesto reveals Magellan to have been a cruel, deluded failure, whose fame for circumnavigation is based on later propaganda.

**Navigations: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance** by Malyn Newitt (Reaktion, 2023). Newitt explores the intellectual, ideological and navigational backgrounds to Portuguese imperialism.

The Ming dynasty's insularity had given the Portuguese an opportunity in Japan (where they introduced gunpowder and printing), and careful negotiation (and bribery) gained them a priceless entry point into China itself through the tiny outpost of Macau in 1557. As Portugal completed its eastward network, the Spanish finally found a reliable route from the west. A 1565 expedition led by Basques Miguel López de Legazpi and Urdaneta reached Cebu from New Spain, beginning the conquest of "the Philippines", and creating an entirely new "Galleon route" between Asia and the Americas that the Spanish hoped would make the Pacific "a Spanish lake".

In Mexico and Peru, Spanish conquest had brought catastrophe and genocide to indigenous populations. Most hellish of all was the Andean "wild west" of Potosi, by the early 1600s the fourth largest Christian city in the world. Enslaved and exploited Quechua people would labour and die in its silver mines for centuries: locals called it "the mountain that eats men". In Portuguese Brazil too, exploitation and enslavement expanded. Now, Crowley writes, American silver "flowed in all directions", running through the world "like wildfire, an element beyond human control". It fed the "slavery machine" in the Atlantic, and after the Ming dynasty adopted silver for tax payments – the booming trade with the east.

By contrast, the spices that had sparked this new "global economy" faded in importance, and they are themselves often a minor character in Crowley's grand narrative. Food historians have noted how Europe's taste for spices waned as tastes evolved, but we still don't entirely understand why. Sugar (often considered a spice in medieval minds, making its absence here at times confusing) would become Europe's next addiction. Crowley briefly notes how the spice trade and its global networks and currencies had put "the apparatus in place" for the new sugar-silver-slavery nexus.

Both Iberian empires would sink under the burden of their own greed as "money vanished like water in the sand". Portuguese excess would spark local backlashes from Japan to the Moluccas, with the rising Dutch and the British taking advantage: their Golden Ages would be "paid for, in part, by the suffering of the people of the Malay archipelago". Spanish power would fall with the price of silver, something that would also doom the Ming dynasty.

While the totalising ambitions of European imperialism quickly outstripped the original search for spices, Crowley is right to remind us of the transformative impact of the new ocean routes they inspired. Truly "global history" requires more than narrative, but it was indeed these mariners who brought a global world into reality. "Although we call them the 'Old World' and the 'New World'", the half-Inca Spanish chronicler Garcilosa de la Vega wrote in 1609, "that's because we only came across the latter recently, and not because there are two worlds; there is but one."

Christopher Kissane is the author of *Food, Religion and Communities in Early Modern Europe*

Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and Vasco da Gama used the African route to reach India. From new bases there, Alfonso de Albuquerque would conquer Hormuz to control the Gulf, and then in 1511 Malacca on the Malayan peninsula, within striking distance of the "Spice Islands". Crowley argues that Iberian competition over these small islands in the subsequent six decades (before the Spanish founding of Manila in 1571) set in motion a global revolution.

Crowley has compiled his narrative primarily from printed translations of early modern Iberian travellers and scholars, which brings a vibrant immediacy to the events and descriptions. But there is limited engagement with recent historical research in Iberia, the Americas, and southeast Asia on ideologies, contacts and conquests. This limits the book's ability to go beyond its sweeping narrative. But Crowley's ability to weave threads together makes his story flow effortlessly across time and space. His details of maritime expeditions in particular emphasise their mix of adventure, ambition and cruelty.

The Portuguese had left their rivals "playing catch-up", especially because the Tordesillas line put the valuable eastern



A child sits at a memorial to the victims of political repression at the Bykivnia graves near Kyiv, Ukraine, where an estimated 100,000 people shot by Stalin's regime were buried in a mass grave in Bykivnia forest on the outskirts of the city.

PHOTOGRAPH: SERGEI SUPINSKY / AFP/GETTY

ments such as: “17 November, Viliansk, Zaporizhzhia region. Night missile attack on private residential dwellings. Nine dead.”

There are dozens of these short unadorned reports giving details of deaths, rape and infrastructural destruction.

Civilian deaths in Ukraine, at the time of writing, run to more than 30,000.

Yevhen Spirin, the journalist who exhumes bodies, is from the city of Luhansk, known to its Russian-speaking inhabitants as Lugansk and to the older Soviet generation as Voroshilovgrad after Stalin’s lickspittle field marshal, Kliment Voroshilov, who came from the now battle-scarred town of Bakhmut.

Spirin studied at the Luhansk University. He notes the divisions in loyalty in the city. “My classmates, university mates, a bunch of acquaintances remained there in support of the LDPR (Kremlin-backed Luhansk Democratic Peoples Republic).

“Why is that, guys?” he asks. “You and I used to eat from the same plate.” Spirin no longer thinks of Luhansk as his own home place.

Lara Yakovenko’s story is a familiar one: packing personal belongings, medication and pets for the journey away from the war with her 80-year-old mother. Since I served as an observer for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, almost all of the women employed as my local assistants and their friends have left Ukraine with their young families for safety elsewhere. One is now living here in Ireland.

Yevhen Tereshchenko is a professional soldier who has seen the bloodiest of battles. One of his friends is a retired Russian officer in Crimea. Their exchange of views in the book, in stark comparison with Mykhed’s views, is remarkable for its lack of bitterness.

And Mykhed’s mother, Tetiana, in her contribution reveals, ironically, that her mother Raisa, Oleksandr’s grandmother, was from Russia.

In conclusion, Mykhed tells us: “The stories I need now are simple. They should have rage, love for the homeland and life according to the laws of the Old Testament. This is how I tried to write The Language of War.”

He is torn, he tells us, between wanting to forget what has happened and wanting never to forget it.

# What Russia’s war has sparked

Seamus Martin

The Language of War  
By Oleksandr Mykhed

Allen Lane, 304pp, £18.99

**O**leksandr Mykhed is a writer who left the ranks of literature to serve in the Ukrainian territorial defence forces in the war with Russia.

His is the main voice in *The Language of War*, but there are others: Yevhen Tereshchenko is now a full-time soldier; Lara Yakovenko is an artist now in exile; Yevhen Spirin is a journalist who has taken on the macabre task of exhuming bodies from mass graves; and the author’s mother, Tetyana Mykhed, is a literary scholar who, with her husband, survived the terrible events that took place in Bucha and Hostomel.

There are stark statistics supplied by Roxolyana Gera, a lawyer who has devoted her time to chronicle the atrocities, civilian casualties and infrastructural devastation

carried out by the Kremlin’s forces.

Of all the voices, Mykhed’s is the most strident. His emotions, with some justification, tell him all Russians are bad. He hates them all equally: “My hatred flows from the small things to the big ones. Every fibre is filled with it. Hatred towards the smallest particle of Russian collective consciousness and to their greatest symbols.”

But emotion and logic are uncomfortable bedfellows. Russian literature, in Mykhed’s view, is used to promote imperialism and in some cases he has a point.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was lionised in the West for his opposition to communism, but returned to Russia to spout the type of great Russian nationalism that strongly influenced Vladimir Putin’s views and actions. But would the same apply to the poet who took the nom-de-plume Anna Akhmatova? She did after all bear the Ukrainian surname Gorenko and was born in the Ukrainian city of Odesa. Mykhed, as a sign of disdain lists her as “akhmatova” along with “tsvetaeva, bulgakov and bunin” without their initial capital letters.

He also frequently uses the portmanteau word *ruscism* which connects Russia with

fascism and racism and demands that all Russian culture should be subject to international opprobrium.

Poor Tchaikovsky has already been banned by some western musicians simply because of his nationality, but were he alive in today’s Russia he would be persecuted as a gay man.

Dostoevsky is Mykhed’s most frequent target as a symbol of Russian imperial ambitions, but during his lifetime, he was imprisoned and subjected to a mock execution by the imperial authorities in St Petersburg.

Mykhed makes no exceptions. All Russians must bear collective guilt. Dmitry Muratov, the editor of *Novaya Gazeta* who sold his Nobel Prize medal to raise more than \$100 million for Ukrainian refugees, is deemed to be as guilty as Yevgeny Prigozhin and his murderous Wagner mercenaries.

The genuine emotional reasons for Mykhed’s hatred are best set out in Roxolyana Gera’s dispassionate chronicles of events which make up a significant part of the book. Her contributions are without embellishment. They are simple state-

# Managing a midlife crisis

Edel Coffey

All Fours  
By Miranda July

Canongate, 336pp, £20

**M**iranda July’s new novel, *All Fours*, is her first in almost 10 years and challenges assumptions about ageing women and desire, gender and sexuality norms, marriage and monogamy. That all sounds a bit earnest, and in anyone else’s hands it

might be, but instead, through July’s unique lens, what we get is an absurdly funny, graphically sexual and wincingly honest depiction of one Gen-X woman’s midlife crisis.

As well as a writer, July is a celebrated film-maker and artist. Her 2007 collection of stories, *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, won the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award and her 2005 film *Me and You and Everyone We Know* won prizes at the Cannes and Sundance film festivals.

*All Fours* revolves around a nameless protagonist in her mid-40s, married with a

child, working as a multidisciplinary, semi-famous artist living in LA, much like July, although she has clarified that this novel is fictional with some basic autofictional elements.

At the beginning of the book, her protagonist plans a road trip from LA to New York, ostensibly to work, but really to escape her stifling marriage and confront her panic prompted by a perimenopause diagnosis. “I was a throbbing, amorphous ball of light,” she writes, “trying to get my head around a motherly, wifely human form.”

Barely 30 minutes into her trip, she pulls off the freeway and checks into an anonymous motel where she holes up for the next few weeks on a journey of sexual awakening and self-discovery.

As with all of July’s work, the novel is

suffused with her offbeat, cringingly frank humour. There are deadpan one-liners on every other page that make the reader bark with laughter and much of the humour is derived from the mundanity of domestic life.

At one point, a description of the protagonist masturbating while simultaneously fretting about a hopefully benign polyp before being interrupted by her child feels like a painfully accurate recipe for midlife malaise – just add one part worrying about dying to two parts thwarted pleasure-seeking.

In *All Fours*, July balances a similarly precarious mix of humour and profundity without once losing the reader’s interest, and the result is a startlingly honest, vivid and funny tale of one woman’s quest for life after midlife.



## Aimée Walsh 'I felt the social divisions much more acutely in England than I do in Northern Ireland'

### Q&A by Martin Doyle

#### Tell us about your debut novel, *Exile*, just published by John Murray.

*Exile*, set in 2008, follows 18-year-old Fiadh as she moves to Liverpool for university and then back to her home city, Belfast. It's a novel primarily about the diaspora experience of leaving and returning home, the aftermath of sexual violence and the shifting nature of friendships.

#### *Exile* is set in a pre-#MeToo Belfast, when women's bodies and sexuality were always under surveillance. Being a young woman then was a minefield, you've said. Tell us more.

Being a teenager in the pre-#MeToo era was a nightmare. I remember very clearly flicking through pages of *Heat* magazine to the Circle of Shame page, as if having a normal body was an ungodly sin. From school to school, there were videos that could now be described as revenge porn. I remember hearing boys discuss these tapes like pundits. Then there were the rape jokes. And the fear of pregnancy and having to seek help abroad. There's a lot of resonance between then and now. It's just repackaged. Now, we're dealing with a much more violent strain of this through incel culture.

#### Emigration has always been a feature of Irish life and writing. Returning home is a recent twist (*Close to Home* by Michael Magee, *Lazy City* by Rachel Connolly). What did living abroad teach you about your identity? How important is identity in your writing?

When I moved to England in 2008 it was as if my identity was revealed to me in its totality. That may sound strange, but it was when I first heard and saw myself through the eyes of another. My accent was spoken back to me, mockingly. So many times I'd be asked to say "potato" only for them to realise the Belfast accent wasn't the sing-song lilt they were hoping for.

#### Do you see your work as part of a wave of more confident or assertive Irish writing from the North?

Writing from the North is quite assertive by nature. I think *Exile* is part of a wave of new novels concerned with the material crises we're facing in the North: austerity, violence against women and girls, and economic exile.

#### What is the literary scene like in the North? Is it able to transcend social divisions?

I've just moved home and the literary scene is so welcoming. I felt the divisions much more acutely in England than I do any social division in the North.

#### Your PhD topic at Liverpool John Moores University in Irish literature and cultural history is published by Liverpool University Press as *Writing Resistance in Northern Ireland*. Tell us more.

When I started the PhD, I was completely taken by the women prisoners in Armagh Gaol and their bodily protests. *Writing Resistance* explores how this ignited debates within feminist and republican groups through pamphlets, literary texts and historical narratives of the Troubles.

Liverpool is very much a sister city to Belfast.

#### How would you sum the cities up?

Liverpool is filled with the loveliest people, but Belfast gives me that feeling of catching the eye of a familiar face in the crowd.

#### You review regularly for *The Irish Times* and others. What strikes you?

Books that speak to our current times, no matter what era they're set in.

#### You've also been a journalist. Has that fed into your writing?

Absolutely, it's fuelled my curiosity about the lives of others. I love how people mythologise themselves.

#### Which projects are you working on?

I'm working on a second novel, which is about the New York Irish during the 1980s.

#### Have you ever made a literary pilgrimage?

I haven't, but I'd love to visit Jane Austen's house.

#### The best writing advice you have heard?

The first draft will be rubbish.

#### Who do you admire the most?

Bernadette Devlin McAliskey.

#### You are supreme ruler for a day. Which law do you pass or abolish?

I'd increase funding for healthcare. Nobody should have to wait years to be treated.

#### Which current book, film and podcast would you recommend?

The *Zone of Interest* is the most moving piece of cinema I've ever seen. Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* is a must-read. Patrick Radden Keefe's podcast *Winds of Change* about the CIA writing a power ballad is bizarre and brilliant.

#### Which public event affected you most?

The current genocide in Gaza.

#### The most remarkable place you have been?

Bagan City of Temples in Myanmar.

#### Your most treasured possession?

I'm the guardian of an 18-year-old chihuahua, who we adopted when she was 10.

#### The most beautiful book that you own?

My tattered copy of Audre Lorde's *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. I love the broken spine and the way it flops open to well-thumbed pages.

#### Which writers, living or dead, would you invite to your dream dinner party?

I'd like to order pizza with Jane Austen, Ali Smith and Toni Morrison.

#### What is your favourite quotation?

"Your silence will not protect you" – Audre Lorde.

#### Who is your favourite fictional character?

Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*.

#### A book to make me laugh?

The only book to ever make me laugh out loud is the audiobook of Joe Lycett's *Parsnips, Buttered*.

#### A book that might move me to tears?

Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*.



In *Rabbits*, Hugo Rifkind explores the rundown castles, flamboyant kilts and dangerous gun play of the modern Scottish aristocracy.  
PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK

# Where guns are people and people are guns

## Crime Fiction

Declan Burke

**T**he spy and the private eye are two sides of the same literary coin, so it makes sense that Elliott Kane, an ex-MI6 veteran, might set himself up as a “private spy”. **The Shame Archive** (Abacus, £16.99), Oliver Harris’s third Elliott Kane novel, opens with Rebecca Sinclair receiving an anonymous message that threatens to expose the truth of the licentious life she lived before she married Robert Sinclair, a high-profile Conservative MP and – all going well – a future prime minister.

At roughly the same time, the deeply cynical Kane discovers that the MI6 archives have been breached and all of their juicy details are for sale on the dark web. But what first appears to be a rather amateurish attempt at extortion and historical score-settling very quickly escalates to threaten the very foundations of British democracy.

If Mick Herron is this generation’s John

le Carré, then Oliver Harris has a decent claim to be our Len Deighton: Elliott Kane is a no-nonsense anti-hero living “a stupid, morally blank life” as he operates in the crevices where professional spooks interact with international finance of dubious provenance. But even Kane can’t turn his back on his former joes, whose identities are revealed when “the shame archive” is ransacked for its secrets, and whose lives are now at risk of termination by Unit 22195, aka “Putin’s personal assassination squad”. Harris’s deceptively understated style powers a relentless thriller that deep-dives into the digital battlefields where future wars will be fought.

A honeymoon on a Greek island promises an idyllic experience in Scarlett Thomas’s **The Sleepwalkers** (Scribner, £14.99), but Evelyn and Richard aren’t exactly love’s young dream when they arrive at the Villa Rose after their “cursed” wedding, and matters are further complicated by their idiosyncratic host, Isabella, who seems hell-bent on antagonising Evelyn.

Worse, Evelyn and Richard have walked into the aftermath of a tragedy in which a married couple drowned while sleepwalking – or so the locals claim. What really

happened to the sleepwalkers, and what might well happen to Evelyn and Richard, forms the narrative spine of a novel that simultaneously functions as a deconstruction of a novel: delivered for the most part in the epistolary form, it also features an American film producer who – tellingly – “believes movies nowadays are much more about synecdoche and metonymy, you know, like the adjacent stories”.

Sounds tricky, but Scarlett Thomas’s



**Tommo is merely a middle-class interloper in a world of Scotland’s rundown castles, flamboyant kilts and the shabby rich**

taut, bone-dry style, and her vivid evocations of a Greek tourist destination running to seed, ensure that her narrative experiments are gorgeously readable.

Set on the Dorset coast as the “country Eden” destination *The Manor* opens its doors for the first time, Lucy Foley’s **The Midnight Feast** (HarperCollins, £18.99) revolves around Bella, a woman who “looks like London and money” but, as she tells herself, is “constructing a new persona around my rented wardrobe”.

Why Bella has come to *The Manor* in disguise, and the truth of her relationship with its owner, the “Goopy yoga princess” Francesca, leads us into a complex web of lies, betrayals and murder rooted in a summer holiday some 15 years ago. It’s a promising set-up, but one that is frequently undermined by the main characters’ bizarre habit of reminding themselves of their backstories (“When I first learned *The Manor* was looking for an architect,” Francesca’s husband Owen tells himself during an interior monologue, “I knew there was no way I could do it. I’d barely worked in the UK full stop. Recent builds included an Icelandic actor’s holiday home in the western fjords, a hotel in Costa Rica . . .”)

An odd habit, on the face of it, but maybe Owen & Co feel the need to root themselves firmly in a multilayered tale of duplicity, ostentatious luxury, class warfare and warped folklore told by a bevy of characters with dark secrets they’re desperate to conceal.

Recently arrived back in Dublin from San Diego as Andrea Mara’s **Someone in the Attic** (Bantam, £14.99) begins, Julia,



# State-sponsored death of theatre

Declan Hughes

*The Playbook: A Story of Theatre, Democracy, and the Making of a Culture War*  
By James Shapiro

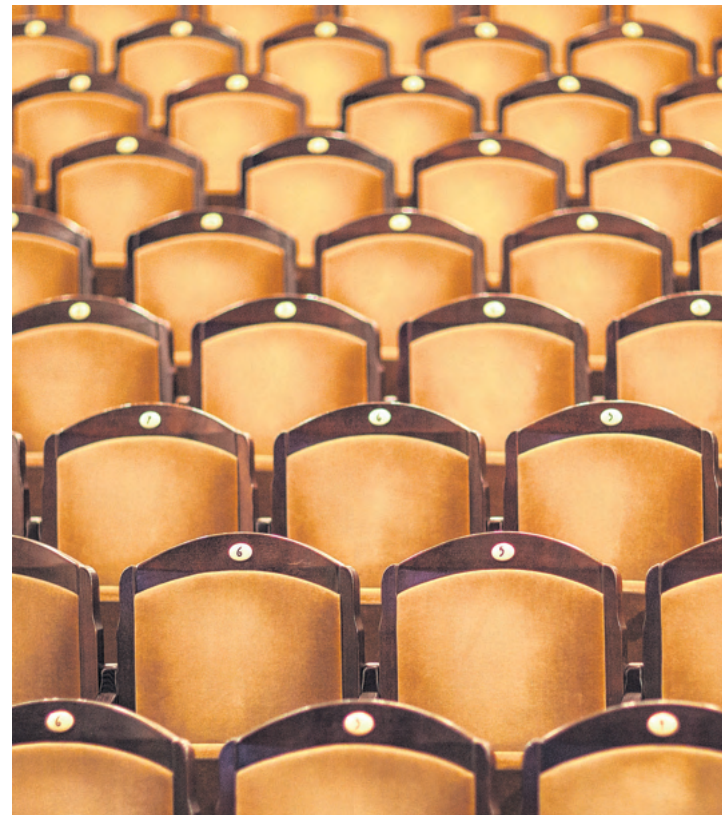
Faber & Faber, 384pp, £20

**T**he epigraph to James Shapiro's gripping history of the Federal Theatre Project offers two dictionary definitions of "playbook": a book containing the scripts of dramatic plays; and a set of tactics frequently employed by one engaged in competitive activity.

These definitions serve effectively to frame Shapiro's compelling narrative, which is similarly dual-purposed: in essence it's about a relief programme set up under the New Deal America's Works Progress Administration, "the Federal Theatre Project, which from 1935 to 1939 staged over a thousand productions in 29 states seen by roughly one of four Americans, two-thirds of whom had never seen a play before". Offering "traditional fare, like Shakespeare, mixed in with contemporary plays on issues . . . such as slum housing and the threat of fascism . . . it employed over 12,000 struggling artists". But *The Playbook* is also a warning from history about the way in which the newly founded House Un-American Affairs Committee successfully attacked and abruptly terminated the Federal Theatre, and how the late 1930s culture war that made this possible "took place at a time, much like our own, of economic uncertainty, racial tensions, and rising nationalism and fascism, with new technologies transforming how entertainment and news were experienced".

Beginning with the spirited but ultimately disastrous appearance of Federal Theatre director Hallie Flanagan in Washington before a five-man investigative committee led by its ambitious, charismatic, bigoted chairman Martin Dies, Shapiro takes us back through the project's history, charting its creation and focusing in detail on a handful of representative productions before rejoining Dies and his committee for a series of extravagantly theatrical confrontations.

Having established through the perceptive eyes of Willa Cather (in her early career incarnation as a theatre critic) just how embedded theatre had once been in every corner of American life before the rise of Hollywood, and how the combination of moviegoing and the Great Depression had devastated prospects for theatre workers, Shapiro introduces theatre professor and playwright Hallie Flanagan via an essay advocating for an American National Theatre. In words that would later be denounced by the House Un-American Affairs Committee, and that were in truth more politically radical than Flanagan's own cautious blend of pragmatism and New Deal liberalism, she registered her admiration for the



In *The Playbook*, James Shapiro draws parallels between the 1930s US culture war and present-day threats to theatre.  
PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK

non-commercial workers' theatre's intention to "shape the life of the country, socially, politically and industrially".

Of the productions the Federal Theatre Project staged, probably the best-known was their first and biggest hit, an all-Black version of *Macbeth* set in 19th-century Haiti which launched the career of its young director, one Orson Welles. Shapiro deftly punctures the various self-aggrandising myths peddled by Welles, gives credit to a unit of black actors well-established before Welles's arrival and examines the scepticism and unease felt about "a white man's play done for whites by negroes" by black writers such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes.

When MGM cancelled its screen adaptation of *It Can't Happen Here*, Sinclair Lewis's bestselling novel imagining the horrors of a fascist takeover of the United States – as Shapiro tartly states, "A movie depicting the erosion of democracy through official censorship was itself censored" – the Federal Theatre saw an opportunity, not quite to turn the clock

back and compete with Hollywood but to stake a claim for a truly nationwide theatre. In the face of considerable hostility from the anti-New Deal Hearst press, and with Flanagan desperately scrambling to ensure the show was not derailed by accusations of political partisanship, it was a triumph when, on October 27th, 1936, 21 separate productions opened in 18 cities across the country; the show would run for a total of 260 weeks.

Perhaps the most innovative shows the FTP produced were what FTP alumnus Arthur Miller called "the only new form that was ever introduced into the American theatre": *Living Newspapers*, a form of staged documentary focused on current events or policies and now an enduring staple of the repertoire.

What makes the account of the Dies Committee hearings so unsettlingly resonant in a contemporary context is the way in which Dies himself chose to exclude the public and play exclusively to the press, which were largely opposed to the New Deal and willing to print unsupported allegations without pushback. Scaring people with slurs and distortions was easier than building a consensus to legislate: "what was at issue was who would serve as the arbiter of culture and whose narrative would prevail".

A sombre epilogue recounts how contemporary culture war attacks have resulted in American schools banning plays such as *Three Sisters*, *Oklahoma* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and concludes: ". . . the clash between the playbooks of Martin Dies and Hallie Flanagan continues to resonate across the land, with lessons for both the right and the left".

James Shapiro is in conversation with Fintan O'Toole at Dalkey Book Festival today



**The late 1930s culture war took place at a time, much like our own, of economic uncertainty, racial tensions and rising nationalism**

her ex-husband Gabe and their kids Isla and Luca have moved into a new-build gated community in Foxrock. It sounds like an ideal homecoming, but there's a wrinkle or two. First, teenager Isla finds videos on social media of a masked man emerging from their attic to explore their home, and then Anya, Julia's teenage friend, is discovered drowned in her bath.

By now the reader knows that Anya's death wasn't accidental, and that she was drowned by a masked man who climbed down out of her attic; will Julia and her family be the next victims of a killer who appears to be taking his cues from the wildly popular TV show *The Loft*? Andrea Mara establishes a simmering tension from the off and then proceeds, like a sadistically refined maestro of Chinese water torture, to very gradually increase the temperature via a whole shoal of red herrings and a series of vertiginous cliffhangers.

An inventive, unsettling take on domestic noir, one in which the past is constantly trembling on the verge of erupting into Julia's increasingly frantic attempts to keep her children safe within the suddenly claustrophobic confines of her "nice, safe, luxury gated complex", *Someone in the Attic* is Andrea Mara's most accomplished novel to date.

"When the shotgun went off under Johnnie Burchill's brother's chin, word had it, the top of his head came off like a turnip lantern." So begins Hugo Rifkind's *Rabbits* (Polygon, £14.99), a novel that opens in 1996 in a milieu described by our teenage narrator, Tommo Dwarin, as "niche posh Edinburgh madness". Tommo, alas, is merely a middle-class interloper in a world of Scotland's rundown castles, flamboyant kilts and the shabby rich; it's a world, he learns at his first pheasant shoot, where "guns are people and people are guns".

Tommo's entry into this world comes courtesy of Johnnie Burchill, who is "only tenuously bound by the usual rules"; and when Johnnie comes to suspect that his older brother's death by shotgun wasn't necessarily an accident, as the police reported, but a murder rooted in the complicated inheritance laws that underpin what passes for the modern Scottish aristocracy, all bets are off.

Tommo makes for delightful company as he navigates this alluring, alien world. Probably the world's least ambitious social climber, Tommo pursues the glamorous Flora McPhail without ever really understanding how out of his depth he truly is in "the whole Scottish shooting, fishing thing". What he does appreciate, however, is that the boarding school ethos, with its celebration of its glorious dead and sacrifices made on foreign fields, creates a mentality in which young men accept that violent death is par for the course: "Not so much that they'd died for us; more that they *were* us, exactly us, gone before."

Told in a breezy, irreverent style that plumbs black comedy to reveal its tragedy, *Rabbits* feels like a blend of *Brideshead Revisited* and *Less Than Zero* reworked by Chris Brookmyre.

Declan Burke is an author and journalist. His current novel is *The Lammisters* (No Alibis Press)

# Immigrant hustle, grief and joy

Cauvery Madhavan

Thank you Mr Crombie: Lessons in Guilt and Gratitude to the British  
By Mihir Bose

Hurst, 344pp, £25

**‘W**ithout your letter, I would still have been in India, a millionaire with servants and chauffeurs, who turned left when boarding an aeroplane.” And without that letter from the eponymous Mr Crombie, we would not have had more than 50 books on an astonishing array of subjects – sports, history, biographies, finance, politics and, finally, this very honest autobiography, from Mihir Bose.

Bose Da, for I write respectful of my Indian roots, gets straight to the point about what coloured his life from the moment he was born – his unfortunate dark complexion. He writes with no squeamishness about the cruel realities of tradition and rituals in India. Early chapters are an absolute delight as he reminisces about his extended family and growing up in a chaotic household with a hierarchy of servants. It is telling that he uses no euphemisms – there are no domestic helps, just peons, ghattis, sweepers, drivers and cooks. Bose Da presents us his very privileged life in India, warts and all. His gentle and affectionate mocking of his mother’s many Hindu fetishes is endearing, but he has no hesitation in admitting he grew up top dog in a very unfair feudal society.

“Colonialism made us doubt ourselves,” he says. So, validation by the former conquerors was craved, and the Thappa, the stamp of British approval, was needed to seal even a modicum of self-esteem. Why then, having arrived in England and finding himself at the bottom of the pile, with the wrong skin colour, an accent that was mocked, smelling of food that stank, did Bose Da stay?

A dogged determination to fulfil a childhood dream of becoming a writer and a genuine love of sport steeled him against racism – both the unrelenting, covert kind, couched in deadly niceties, interspersed with occasional overt “Paki bashing”, a box to the face, a punch here, a slap there. The second half of the book is an incredible account of rising above it all, writing and broadcasting headline events for every top paper, radio and TV station in the UK.

A moving, relatable telling of the universal hustle, grief and joy of all immigrants – Bose Da has hit a six, straight out of the stadium.

Gemma Tipton

All that Glitters: A story of Friendship, Fraud and Fine Art  
By Orlando Whitfield

Profile, 336pp, £20

**Y**ou don’t have to be rich to be awful, and you don’t have to be awful to be rich, but a compelling fascination ensues when the two coincide. Add contemporary art for a truly heady cocktail. At the coal face of rich awfulness for more than a decade, Orlando Whitfield worked as a London art dealer and gallerist; for some of that time with erstwhile friend, Inigo Philbrick.

“Our names are ridiculously impractical,” Philbrick admits at one point in the narrative, but in this tale of excess and lies so slippery you feel as if you’re skating on the surface of a weirdly mirrored reality, the extravagant names are just the tip of an almost unbelievable iceberg.

In brief, Philbrick, who was released from a US prison into house arrest in January of this year, pleaded guilty to multimillion-dollar art fraud in 2021. Quite simply he sold shares in the same art works to too many people, and also sold works he didn’t own. How can such a thing happen? Surely if you buy a work of art, you own it and hang it in your home.

Not in this part of the art world: art is collateral, an asset class, a way of moving money around, something to flip for profit. It is telling that early in the book, Whitfield, who writes with brilliantly descriptive, and often tendentious eloquence, goes into detail on the demeanour and clothes of a buyer, but



Orlando Whitfield reveals a decultured world in which art is something to flip for profit. PHOTOGRAPH: Gabby Laurent

## Money corrupts: how rich people ruin art

dismisses the art work in two words: “the [Paula] Rego”.

All that Glitters has all the ingredients: Philbrick (now 36) is handsome and charming, and you get a gallop through famous art world names, shady people, and plenty of flash clubs and fine wine. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that this is what art is. This is what money does to art. From property to the environment, it’s the same: rich awful people ruin

everything.

Early on, Whitfield dismisses all those who don’t deal in phone-book figures as bottom feeders, but he himself is conflicted. The narrative of his friendship with Philbrick that weaves through the book is elusive, and this is just one of the forthcoming capitalisations. In March, Vanity Fair published a lengthy “Confessions of Inigo Philbrick” and a BBC series will air this summer.

## The rise and fall of the Avant-Gardists

Sean Sheehan

The Avant-Gardists: Artists in Revolt in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union 1917-1935

By Sjeng Scheijen

Thames & Hudson, 504pp, £35

**A**rt histories of the Russian avant-garde usually begin, for good reason, with Kazimir Malevich’s white frame and its square painted in the noncolour black, first exhibited in 1915. Scheijen likes narratives and genesis for him goes back two years to a happening of performance art on a Moscow street featuring painted faces.

Whatever, the avant-gardists had arrived proclaiming their abandonment of traditional art before Dadaism took to the floor at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich or Duchamp’s porcelain urinal, “raised to the dignity of a work of art” as he put it, was submitted for an exhibition in New York. Duchamp’s gesture took place in 1917 and, when the October Revolution enacted its own abandonment of the status quo, the political and the artistic interfaced in Russia in ways never seen before.



A Marc Chagall painting from The Avant-Gardists

The convergence of the aesthetic with the political was never seamless and someone wrote to a newspaper to complain about workers being depicted with “sawn-off, triangular faces”, but Malevich, Kandinsky, Tatlin, Popova and others threw themselves into the revolution with the commitment of a Lenin or Trotsky and some were appointed to high office in the new Soviet state.

Doubts and recriminations among the artists were legion and Scheijen, accessing source material in Russian, delves into these to tell stories that fill out an extraordinary period of cultural history. Sometimes the author seems tone deaf to the aspirations and idealism of the Bolsheviks who, seeking to create a new kind of body politic, inspired the

avant-gardists in their pursuit of a revolution of the soul.

The end, as Stalinism tightens its grip on artists and the intelligentsia, is always in sight and the book’s final chapter is a sorry tale.

Malevich survived arrest in 1930 – in time nearly all his former students would be interrogated or arrested – but died five years later; his coffin hoisted on a small truck with a large black square attached to the grille. Tatlin is said to have looked at his body and remarked: “He’s just pretending”. A small monument marked where his ashes were buried but no trace remains; even the exact location is now unknown.

# Universal sense of being an outsider

Niamh Jiménez

All the Lonely People: Conversations on Loneliness

By Sam Carr

Picador, 256pp, £16.99

In Dr Sam Carr's latest book, *All the Lonely People*, the social scientist provides readers with a comforting realisation of the ordinariness of loneliness. Challenging the notion that loneliness is an uncommon affliction reserved for the elderly and the bereaved, Carr's conversations with the young and the old suggest that this deeply human condition emerges from four main sources: through the loss of significant relationships, through the invisibility of heartache and hidden trauma, through the experience of being an outsider and, ironically, through our very attempts to escape the state of loneliness itself.

Though Carr is an academic psychologist, *All the Lonely People* is not a scholarly discussion of loneliness but rather a book of human stories, aimed at bridging that gulf between our vast internal experience and the limited tools we have for expressing it.

While each chapter stands alone as a story – Carr encourages his readers to “move around . . . the stories, in the same way you might approach curious examination of a sculpture or statue” – some exhibits prove far more engaging than others. There is no doubt that Carr revisits some rather hackneyed portrayals of loneliness, but he ventures into fresh territory just often enough to sustain the reader's attention.

One will encounter the experience of “double isolation” felt by a migrant straddling two cultures; the repressed anguish of a woman who, conditioned by “stiff upper lip culture” prefers the idea of euthanasia to emotional dependency; and the hopelessness of a young porn addict who, trapped within a “supernormal” template of sex, finds himself emotionally and physically disconnected from the woman he loves.

In one of the most powerful chapters, Carr documents an intimate car conversation he shares with Alex, his teenage son, about Alex's experience of loneliness. Any reader who has survived adolescence will nod knowingly at that all-too-familiar variety of loneliness that seems to transcend time, culture and place. It seems to grow out of that warped perception that revealing your true self – or your real music tastes – would expose you as far less interesting or worthy of friendship than your peers. However it begins, this special brand of loneliness always seems to end with simply pretending to like what everyone else likes, since bland conformity or self-erasure is apparently preferable to being a pariah.

Carr does not shy away from unmasking his own vulnerabilities, including his habit of trying to avoid the scrutiny of others by adopting the role of listener or “faceless



screen”. He is equally honest about his fear that Alex's loneliness might reflect his own parental deficiency. And yet, the reader gets the sense that, although Carr is pained to realise that his child is just as lonely as the next kid, he is also comforted by the knowledge that Alex was spared the “barren desert landscape” of his strained relationship with his own father – an alcoholic who seemed as ambivalent about showing love as he was about receiving it.

Unlike Carr's experiences of loneliness – first as a “parentified” child growing up in a dysfunctional family and later as a single father amid a sea of co-parenting couples with perfectly manicured lawns – Alex's loneliness may simply be an inevitable product of learning to navigate a world with other living bodies.

This leads us to two central arguments from the book. First, Carr contends that if loneliness is a fundamental aspect of human existence, perhaps it's best not to medicalise it. Second, he portrays loneliness as a multifaceted experience unique



**Carr contends that if loneliness is a fundamental aspect of human existence, perhaps it's best not to medicalise it**

**Sam Carr finds comfort in the idea of lonely suffering as a source of positive growth – albeit for those who have enough resilience to weather the storm.** PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK

to each individual. In one of several cringey analogies, he likens it to the many shades of a “Dulux colour chart” – akin to one of those he used to marvel at as a kid.

While Carr mostly succeeds in interweaving personal narrative with third-person accounts of loneliness, there are times when his self-disclosure does not feel particularly instructive. His recounting of a socially awkward date with a stranger, nearly resulting in a one-night stand, offers little beyond a pedestrian insight into the limitations of casual intimacy to alleviate loneliness or, more specifically, his sense of dislocation as a single father. The reader cringes no less when he prefaces the statement “it wasn't her, it was me” with the semi-apologetic admission, “I know it's a cliché”.

In equating loneliness with a kind of rebirth (in Jungian terms, a “mortification”), Carr seems to find comfort in the atavistic idea of suffering as a source of self-insight and positive growth – albeit for those who have enough resilience to weather the storm. Personally, I find the less idealistic, almost irreverent view of loneliness, embodied by the 72-year-old widow Paula, more appealing. After enduring the torment of her husband's death, she has finally discovered the thrill of being unencumbered by the expectations and wishes of others: “For the very first time in my life, I'm able to do what I want to do.”

## Browser

Greener

By Gráinne Murphy

Legend Press, £9.99

Female friendships are having a moment in contemporary literature. Romance, the turning tide would seem to say, comes and goes, but friendships last forever. Or do they? After 25 years apart, Helen, Annie and Laura are brought back together through the illness of Helen's elderly father. Can they rekindle what was once an inseparable friendship? What follows is an exploration of care, loneliness and the space required for bonds to flourish (Helen's family home would appear to be a fourth and essential dynamic in this friendship).

The story is set during the Covid-19 pandemic and the interiority of life during this period is evident in the dense, detail-orientated prose, where the action holds the weight and airlessness of a bleak period in history.

BRIGIDO'DEA

How to Think Like a Philosopher

By Peter Cave

Bloomsbury, £10.99

If your go-to spot for information and debate is social media and YouTube, rather than reading quality journalism (how very dare you), you'll have noticed that philosophical arguments, even faux arguments, have not completely disappeared from public discourse. And if getting a sound, informed and succinct outline of various philosophies is important to you, this entertaining book by popular philosophy writer Peter Cave is definitely worth a look. Cave offers an accessible retrospective of philosophers from Lao Tzu to Descartes and de Beauvoir to Iris Murdoch, while not dumbing down the theories, so you'll need to commit to the reading in order to keep up. The one-line summary at the end of each chapter is handy if you want crib notes, too.

CLAIRE LOOBY

Gordon Brewster and his Cartoons

By Pól Ó Duibhir

Letterterc, €20

Gordon Brewster was the long-time cartoonist in the *Evening Herald* and *Sunday Independent*. He died suddenly in 1946 while buying sweets in a shop in Howth, Co Dublin, owned by the mother of the author of this short study of his work. The book is based on original drawings of Brewster's cartoons held in the National Library of Ireland, dating between 1922 and 1932. Many of the cartoons have an international focus, unusual in this period when Irish society was very inward-looking. The book also contains background information on Brewster and his family; his English father was manager and secretary of *Independent Newspapers* under William Martin Murphy.

FELIX MLARKIN

## Bestsellers

## ORIGINAL FICTION

- 1 **Long Island** Colm Tóibín 3,329
- 2 **Someone in the Attic** Andrea Mara 1,314
- 3 **The Heart in Winter** Kevin Barry 1,287
- 4 **The Honeymoon Affair** Sheila O'Flanagan 906
- 5 **My Favourite Mistake** Marian Keyes 840
- 6 **Think Twice** Harlan Coben 694
- 7 **Somebody Knows** Michelle McDonagh 661
- 8 **The Trial** Jo Spain 559
- 9 **Mouthing** Orla Mackey 483
- 10 **You Are Here** David Nicholls 466

## MASS MARKET FICTION

- 1 **The Bee Sting** Paul Murray 773
- 2 **Prophet Song** Paul Lynch 647
- 3 **No One Saw a Thing** Andrea Mara 591
- 4 **Yellowface** Rebecca F Kuang 519
- 5 **Small Things Like These** Claire Keegan 401
- 6 **It Ends With Us** Colleen Hoover 360
- 7 **Someone Else's Shoes** Jojo Moyes 312
- 8 **The Last Devil To Die: The Thursday Murder Club 4** Richard Osman 308
- 9 **Aisling Ever After** Emer McLysaght & Sarah Breen 280
- 10 **The Housemaid** Freida McFadden 258

## HARDBACK NON-FICTION

- 1 **Sprout & Co Saladology** Theo Kirwan 310
- 2 **Gluten Free Air Fryer** Becky Excell 241
- 3 **The Great Irish Bucket List** 183
- 4 **The Hike Life** Rozanna Purcell 140
- 5 **A Compendium of Irish Pints** Ali Dunworth 128
- 6 **Twelve Sheep: Life lessons from a lambing season** John Connell 120
- 7 **So Good** Emily English 111
- 8 **A Pocket History of Ireland** Joseph McCullough 107
- 9 **The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse** Charlie Mackesy 91
- 10 **Endgame 1944: How Stalin Won The War** Jonathan Dimbleby 88

## PAPERBACK NON-FICTION

- 1 **Poor** Katriona O'Sullivan 596
- 2 **The Racket** Conor Niland 469
- 3 **Reeling in the Queers** Páirc Kerrigan 441
- 4 **Murder at Lordship** Pat Marry & Robin Schiller 333
- 5 **Identity** John Sweetman 247
- 6 **Atomic Habits** James Clear 170
- 7 **YOU CAT for Kids** 150
- 8 **Surrounded by Idiots** Thomas Erikson 150
- 9 **Politics On the Edge** Rory Stewart 145
- 10 **Ultra-Processed People** Chris van Tulleken 142

## CHILDREN'S

- 1 **Dog Man 12: The Scarlet Shedder** Dav Pilkey 762
- 2 **Astrochimp** David Walliams 380
- 3 **Dog Man 11** Dav Pilkey 276
- 4 **Looshkin: Honk If You See It!** Jamie Smart 266
- 5 **Taylor Swift: Little People, Big Dreams** Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara 241
- 6 **The Reappearance of Rachel Price** Holly Jackson 210
- 7 **Bunny vs Monkey: Bunny Bonanza!** Jamie Smart 209
- 8 **Diary of a Wimpy Kid: No Brainer (Book 18)** Jeff Kinney 205
- 9 **Road to the Euros (Ultimate Football Heroes)** Matt Oldfield & Tom Oldfield 200
- 10 **A Good Girl's Guide to Murder** Holly Jackson 198

Data supplied by Nielsen BookScan taken from the Irish consumer market week ending June 8th, 2024

# What the witch thinks of her trial

Eilís Ní Dhuibhne

Bright | Burn  
By Molly Aitken

Canongate, 304pp, £16.99

**T**he story of Alice Kyteler of Kilkenny, the first Irish woman to be tried for witchcraft, is well known. She was an Anglo Norman who lived between 1263 and some time later than 1325.

A moneylender, she married four times and inherited considerable wealth from her various husbands, all of whom died in fairly mysterious circumstances, so it was suspected that Alice had a hand in their demise. Although condemned, she escaped, apparently to England and Flanders. Her servant, Petronilla, was less fortunate, and was burned alive – it is to Molly Aitken's credit that she decided to spare us a graphic account of her execution.

Alice Kyteler's history has always fascinated us, not least because there have been relatively few witch trials (official anyway) in Ireland – and everyone loves a witch. Molly Aitken's is not the first novel about Kyteler, but it is the first to be told from her point of view. The author is sympathetic to her first-person narrator, who is portrayed as beautiful, desirable and sensual. There is much lyrical description of nature, herbs, flowers and scents. Alice is sensitive to her surroundings and Aitken's lusciously poetic style reflects this perfectly, in prose that is rhythmical and often mesmerising. Alice's love for her son William is convincingly depicted, as is her strong attraction for some of her husbands – especially the second, Alan de Blund. (The first she dispatches by



Molly Aitken's is not the first novel about Alice Kyteler, but it is the first to be told from her point of view.

PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTY KU

pushing him down the stairs; others she may have poisoned – she has a little bottle of deadly potion hidden at the bottom of a chest in her bedroom).

Context is well drawn as far as the built environment, the city, clothes, food and so on are concerned. The political climate is not explored – the “Gael” are mentioned as a vaguely threatening force – and language scarcely at all. The novel is standard modern English – necessarily, given that Kilkenny residents in Kyteler's day spoke some dialect of Middle English, or French – or Irish. But given Aitken's obvious delight in language she may have missed an opportunity to delve into the linguistic aspect of the sorry story.

Her research has been otherwise thorough, as she tells us in an afterword – she even describes Alice's supposed dildo, a sort of clay pipe (sounds uncomfortable), which was used in evidence in the trial – sex in the 14th century, as for so many centuries afterwards, being something of a cardinal sin, which did not stop Alice in the novel having quite a lot of it.

It's an imaginative, very stylishly written, and entertaining book.

Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's latest books are *Selected Stories* (Blackstaff, 2023) and, co-edited with Michaela Schrage Früh, *Well, You Don't Look It: Irish Women Writers Reflect on Ageing* (Salmon, 2024)

# Sisterly rivalry in a watery apocalypse

Ruby Eastwood

Private Rites  
By Julia Armfield

Fourth Estate, 327pp, £16.99

**J**ulia Armfield's atmospheric second novel, *Private Rites*, is set in the aftermath of a second Deluge. Great swathes of land are submerged, the social infrastructure is collapsing and people are turning to arcane rituals.

Out of this chaos one architect, Stephen Carmichael, has risen to prominence with his buildings designed to blot out the outside world and create havens for the few who can afford them. The story follows the unravelling lives of his three daughters, Isla, Irene and Agnes, as they respond to his death and their unequal inheritance: “King Lear and his dyke

daughters”, one of them quips.

Even as the rain keeps falling and the water levels rise, as news trickles down of mass suicides, famine and displaced populations the characters still have to tap on and off to board the boats that have replaced public transport, and Agnes still goes to work every day as a barista, drawing patterns in lattes.

What makes Armfield's apocalypse resonant (and relatable) is its banality. Her novelist's eye is trained not on the social but on the psychological. The book's most compelling insights are private: “The problem with love, of course, is that it frequently asks too much of unlovable people.”

Armfield skilfully captures the airless atmosphere between the sisters as well as their individual neuroses. The world is ending but what really bothers the sisters is that they can't seem to get along. *Private Rites* explores this innately human instinct

for self-involvement in all its nuance as a symptom of privilege, as a dangerous obstacle to empathy, and as a bizarre harbinger of hope. “I think we all have to live our own lives,” one character reflects. “We can't constantly be comparing things that happen to us to worse things all over the place.”

Armfield's method is bold. Shakespearean tragedy, Christian parable and folklore are woven together into a modern myth about queer love and climate change. Structurally, it is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, with its polyvocal narrative and painterly sketches of eerie seascapes. Tonally, the novel slides around, taking unexpected turns into horror: “This is the wrong genre,” Agnes thinks at one stage. Even if the considerable risks don't always pay off, it's impossible not to admire the ambition and daring of Julia Armfield's hypnotic and deeply weird book.

# A whirlwind tour of politics and football

Sarah Gilmartin

Godwin  
By Joseph O'Neill

4th Estate, 304pp, £16.99

**L**oyal canine friends? Check. A vibrant depiction of a particular sport and its history? Check. Deft analysis of geopolitics? Check. Dysfunctional families? Check. All of it packed into a highly original comic caper that takes place across continents? Check. Godwin, the new novel from Joseph O'Neill, is at once a reminder of what the author has done so well in previous books and a journey to a new frontier, so to speak, into some of the poorest nations in Africa through the lens of dodgy, if not downright predatory, football scouts.

From this unusual angle, O'Neill expounds on important topics, from the legacy of colonialism, the plights and rights of immigrants, the perils of international business, the questionable ethics of capitalism, to more personal issues of familial neglect and responsibility.

The latter is seen through the travails of Mark Wolfe, a married American in his 40s who flies to England to help his half-brother Geoff, an aspiring (read: broke) football scout who has video footage of a superstar in the making, the titular Godwin, a twinkle-toed teenager from Benin.

With the help of the wily old Frenchman Lefebvre, they set out to find the boy, in what proves a classic adventure narrative with plenty of obstacles along the way – among them, the unfamiliar west African

terrain, the brothers' opportunistic mother Faye and, not least, the persistent scheming and double crossing of all involved.

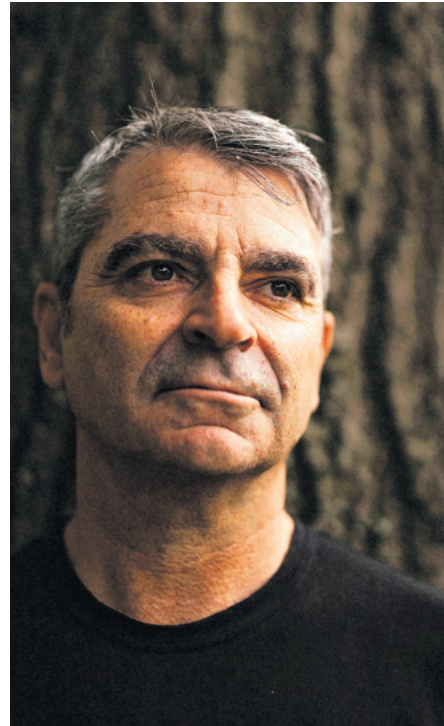
O'Neill has great fun with this, while never losing sight of the ugly mercenary politics that underpin the story.

Born in Cork in 1963, O'Neill lives in New York and teaches at Bard College. He is the author of four previous novels: *Netherland*, longlisted for the Man Booker Prize; *The Dog*; *This Is the Life*; and *The Breezes*; as well as a memoir, *Blood-Dark Track*. His short stories have been published in the *New Yorker* and *Harper's*, and his criticism has appeared in the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and *Granta*, among other publications.

O'Neill is a natural storyteller, with his flair for winding narratives on display in *Godwin*. There are many stories within stories in the complex, nimble and sometimes dazzling structure of the book. He has the storyteller's eye for detail too: the sky of west Africa "is a white sky, the colour of tin"; a man is described as having a "hyperbolic bounce in his step". Suspense is inbuilt into his style of storytelling, which is to reveal what the mission is and then to delay whether it was successful for as long as he can.

This can be problematic at times, with much of the football action related rather than experienced first-hand. *Godwin*, for example, only appears in a brief scene or two towards the end of the book, which perhaps reflects the overarching theme of exploitation but nevertheless keeps his apparent talent, and indeed his character, at a remove from the reader.

A bigger issue is with a second narrative, almost a third of the book, that competes



The sense we are learning as we read: Joseph O'Neill. PHOTOGRAPH: AHMED GABER/ THE NEW YORK TIMES

threads that unite them thematically – systemic racial inequality, the corrupting influence of money and power – they could as easily have made two great novels on their own.

But there is much to enjoy in *Godwin* as is, for fans of football in particular. O'Neill writes with great flair and authority on the history of the sport, from notorious plane tragedies, to the class dynamics of English football, to the rise of immigrant players in European leagues in the early 1990s. He is equally good on the physicality of the game: "Pace and power you can measure, you can see it; it's right there in front of you. Quality is another thing altogether. This boy had everything, acceleration, touch, match awareness, courage."

Throughout, there is the sense we are learning as we read, a whirlwind tour of African politics, office politics and football but, as with the best teachers, O'Neill distracts us with enough drama, humour and humanity to make it feel as if it's no lesson at all.

*Godwin* shows a world undergoing many overlapping crises – generational, political, environmental, economic. Part football compendium, part workplace manifesto, most of all it's a warning against the way the world works today: "I mean modern stupidity, which is to say, stupidity that's purposeful and communicable and strangely greedy."

with Mark's story. This takes place in an office in Pittsburgh where a collective of writers is about to experience a hostile takeover.

The narrator of these sections is Mark's boss, Lakesha, whose voice is brilliantly conceived, witty and incisive and utterly contemporary. It made me long for more of her history and the office machinations she handles so skilfully, leaving the overall impression that, although both plots have

## Poem Pike

By Thomas Dillon Redshaw

Where an omnibus idles in lucent July, Japanese couples come from the nuns' tearoom past postcard racks & snap redundantly, themselves before a blue boat beached in the rushes.

There are two sights of Kylemore Abbey – the Gothick chapel & this lakeside pastoral, but no Polaroid can develop the long bronzy thresh of the pike sawing the line at an oaken oarlock &

plunging deep from the light.

The instinctual hunter betrays the serene Latin of these Irish Dames of Ypres, Benedictines all – a crucifix in each varnished room of the robber baron's castle.

But the sign foresight makes is not the chalk or charcoal fish of the catacombs, but the real ravener – slick, toothy, y-boned, haunting the glacial chill of Pollacappul – implacable, ancient, myopic, deaf to human prayer.

Today's poem is from *Ago* (Salmon), Thomas Dillon Redshaw's recent new collection



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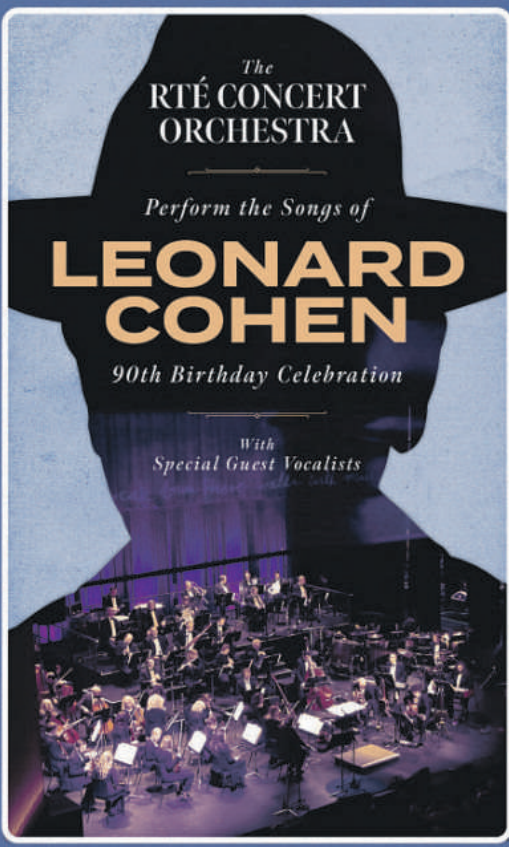
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