

#005

# the long good read

#guardiancoffee

Articles algorithmically picked by readers, writers & robots







# Introduction

**Welcome to the Long Good Read. This is an experimental, almost entirely automated newspaper that uses an algorithm to pick the week's best long-form journalism from the Guardian. The idea was started by developer Dan Catt, print-your own newspaper service Newspaper Club, the design team at Mohawk and the technology editorial team at the Guardian. We've put this together for you to read with your coffee. Enjoy! And please do tell us what you think - what else should we include in our experimental, automatic newspaper?**

**@thelonggoodread or  
hello@thelonggoodread.com**

Spend time listening to anyone in the media industry, you might think newspapers are dead. In fact it's just pulse of the big media businesses around the newspapers that is growing weaker, with readership and advertising revenues falling and increased competition from new technology just a part of that.

But newspapers themselves are a delightful, tactile, luxurious technology in their own right. The success of Newspaper Club, which lets anyone cheaply print their own newspaper, shows that newspapers have been reclaimed in a way.

Its success is partly down to our curiosity about being able to professionally print in a format that used to be hard for an individual to access, but it is also part of a wider craving for tangible, physical products to compensate for our digital dependency. Our screen lives make much of our life feel overwhelming, yet at the same time we have nothing physical to show for it. And there's a real human pleasure in being able to make and hold something in your hands.

Editorially, we get enormous satisfaction in exploring and playing with new projects. It's not about finding a future for paper, but a future for the stories that deserve telling. Where shall we go next?

**Jemima Kiss**  
**Head of technology - editorial**  
**The Guardian**  
**theguardian.com/tech**

**This newspaper is in beta. It's an experiment in combining the Guardian's readers, writers and robots with Newspaper Club's short-run printing tools, to produce a newspaper that's completely unlike the daily Guardian.**

We're only printing 500 copies, and it's just for #guardiancoffee, so it needed to be quick and easy to produce. 'One person, one hour' was the goal, and achieving that required automating as much as possible, while still retaining an editorial eye.

First, the team at the Guardian wrote a small tool to sift through the most popular and interesting long form content, as driven by website analytics, comments and social media.

A selection of these are then imported into Newspaper Club's browser based tool, ARTHR, and they're quickly laid out into templates designed just for this project.

Then, it's onto one of Newspaper Club's printing presses, where it's printed, packed, and delivered straight to #guardiancoffee and into your hands.

Of course, this isn't designed to replace the daily Guardian paper. It's an experiment to see what's possible at the other end of the spectrum, using new technology and techniques to produce a newspaper as quickly as a webpage.

And if you like it, wait a little while and maybe we'll be able to generate one tailored just for you.

**Tom Taylor**  
**Co-founder and head of engineering**  
**Newspaper Club**  
**newspaperclub.com/longgoodread**

**I believe we're nearly at the end of Season One of the long good read, stopping after issue #006 in time for all the Christmas and end of year craziness. Which I'll get into in just a moment.**

One of my tasks, when firing up the long good read machine each week and seeing what interesting selection of stories it has waiting for me, is rejecting stories that I can see aren't going to survive being a few days old. This week it was all about the "London Slaves", a story that still unfurling as this issue goes off to press. By the time it hits the streets there'll either be newer information or the media will have moved on.

Taking those out of the equation a different trend became apparent. Much like Christmas trees and decorations seemingly going up earlier each year, end of year and Christmas lists are the order of the week. Apparently, according to the data "best of 2013" are the current hotness.

I thought about holding them back for the last issue, but decided that was too much editorial control. And so, into ARTHR Newspaper Club's layout robot they went for some of the longest articles yet. It was interesting to see how it handled even-longer form stuff. Answer: it managed it with unsurprising aplomb.

Really interested to see where Newspaper Club takes this technology in 2014, and what happens when you start pointing whole blogs and websites at it.

The cover this week is an update to the code used in the first couple of issues to generate a network map of the "hottest" tags in the Guardian for the last week. Only, without the tags written on it. We've been playing with "generative data covers" for a while, to see what could in theory work as a weekly abstract, but driven by data, design.

This isn't quite that yet, but fun to rather traditionally have Sport (green) on the back page of the paper :)

**Dan Catt**  
**Developer**  
**revdancatt.com**



# Microsoft ready to kill Windows RT as Larson-Green says three is too many

**Remarks by senior executive and failure in market point to end of ARM-based version of Windows in favour of Windows Phone and 'full-fat' Windows**  
By Charles Arthur

Microsoft looks ready to kill off Windows RT, its version of Windows devised for chips based on ARM's architecture, judging by remarks by senior executive Julie Larson-Green.

Larson-Green, who is executive vice-president of Devices and Studios at Microsoft, said that the aim of Windows RT was "our first go at creating that more closed, turnkey experience [that Apple has on the iPad]..." but that Microsoft now has three mobile operating systems: "We have the Windows Phone OS. We have Windows RT and we have full Windows. We're not going to have three."

Her comments, made at a UBS seminar, appear to confirm the growing suspicions that Windows RT has been a failure both with OEMs PC makers and developers, who have all but abandoned it. Only Microsoft and Nokia's handset division, which is being acquired by Microsoft, make any RT devices. Microsoft had to write down \$900m at the end of the June quarter on unsold Surface RT devices.

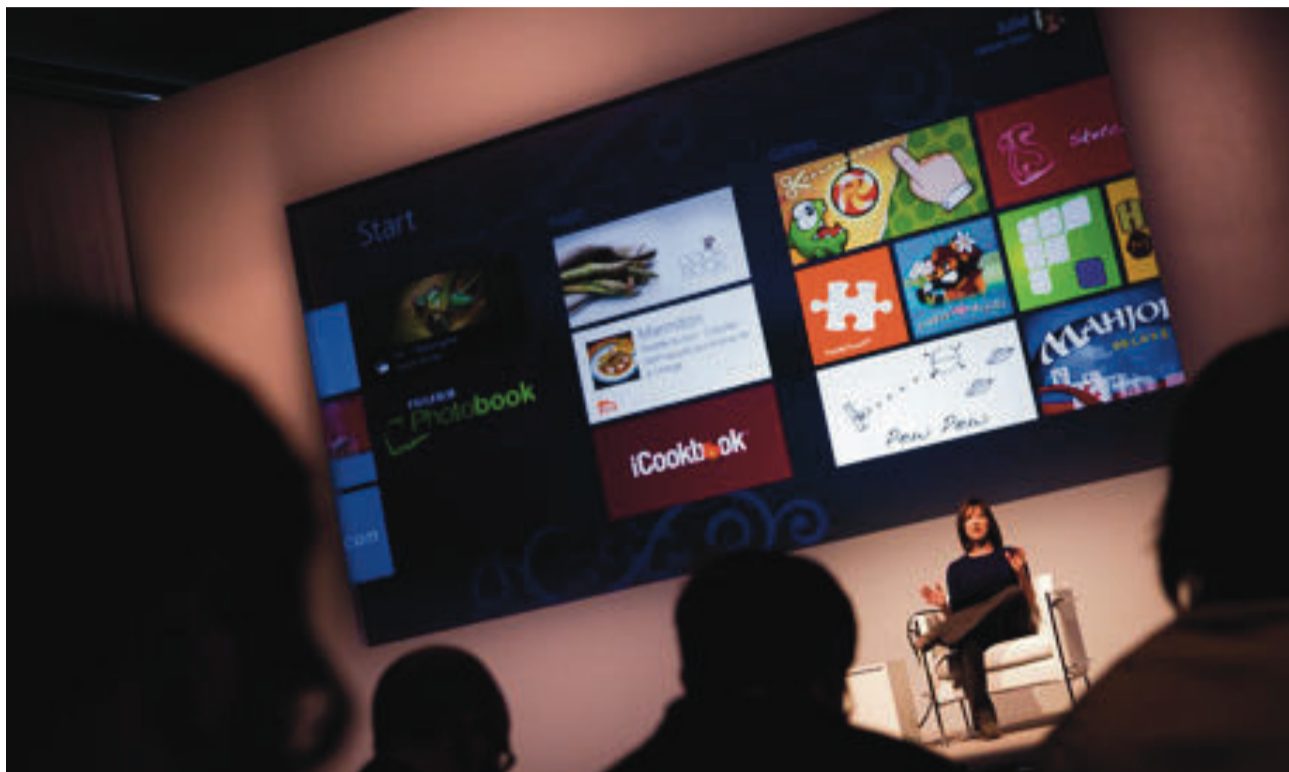
Richard Windsor, who runs the Radio Free Mobile consultancy, commented: "I have long suspected which is that Windows RT will be killed off sooner rather than later. Always one to treat hot potatoes delicately, Microsoft has not explicitly said that RT will be terminated but has made it very clear that there will not be three operating systems. Windows RT is an orphan child that sits between Windows 8 and Windows Phone and is neither fish nor fowl. Hence the devices that are based on it are under-powered with hideously limited functionality on the desktop making them inferior to both Android and iOS tablets."

"I suspect that there will be no Surface 3 and no successor to the Nokia 2520 [an 8in tablet running Windows RT]. Furthermore I am confident that RT will be quietly put to sleep during 2014."

A focus by Microsoft on Windows Phone and "full-fat" Windows - the latter able to run all the legacy applications from the past two decades - would simplify the company's OS strategy.

Larson-Green explained the original aim of Windows RT: "Windows on ARM, or Windows RT, was our first go at creating that more closed, turnkey experience [like the iPad], where it doesn't have all the flexibility of Windows, but it has the power of Office and then all the new style applications. So you could give it to your kid and he's not going to load it up with a bunch of toolbars accidentally out of Internet Explorer and then come to you later and say, why am I getting all these pop-ups. It just isn't capable of doing that by design."

"So the goal was to deliver two kinds of experiences into the market, the full power of your Windows PC [on the Surface Pro], and the simplicity of a tablet experience that can also be productive. That was the goal. Maybe not enough. I think we didn't explain that super-well. I think we didn't differentiate the devices well enough. They looked similar. Using them is similar. It just didn't do everything that you expected Windows to do. So there's been a



Microsoft's Julie Larson-Green showing off an early glimpse of Windows 8 in March 2012. Photograph: Emilio Morenatti/AP

lot of talk about it should have been a rebranding. We should not have called it Windows."

Microsoft announced Windows RT at the Consumer Electronics Show in January 2011, and launched it in October 2012 at the same time as Windows 8, having planned it to take advantage of what it thought would be a new wave of personal computers built on ARM chips rather than Intel. ARM chips generally have the advantage of low power requirements, leading to their use in smartphones and tablets.

But the market never materialised, and buyers mostly shunned the Surface RT because of a relative lack of apps, and confusion over why popular programs such as Apple's iTunes and Google Chrome were not available for it.

Manufacturers abandoned it rapidly as they saw that there was no market for PCs based on Windows RT. Samsung decided not to sell its RT-based Ativ line in the US before January, citing weak demand and no clear idea of the "value proposition."

In July, Asus's chairman Jonny Shih said that "the result [of building RT devices] is not very promising."

In September, a Lenovo executive said there was "no longer a need" for Windows RT given the improvements made by Intel in power consumption in its Haswell chip.

Dell was the last besides Microsoft to leave the RT space, dropping its XPS 10 in September.

Meanwhile Windows Phone has been scaled up to larger and larger screens, such as the 6in 1520, and smaller 8in tablets with Intel architecture have begun to go on sale - leaving Windows RT with no obvious niche.

Nokia's release of the 2520 has surprised some - though its announcement after the deal with Microsoft to buy the handset business points to an attempt to support its buyer's aims.

But Windsor said that it would have been made in small quantities: "I suspect that volume commitments to the Surface 2 [an RT tablet] and the Nokia 2520 are almost non-existent. Hence I am pretty cer-

tain that there will be no repeat of the huge write-off endured by Microsoft for either company."

He said that the decision to sideline RT is "excellent news" as "Microsoft is being more pragmatic in its approach to strategies that don't work. If Microsoft can apply this pragmatism to the rest of the company and to its choice of CEO, we might just have a phoenix rather than a turkey."

Larson-Green also acknowledged that the reorganisation of Microsoft by outgoing chief executive Steve Ballmer was part of a long-running discussion within the company. "When I ran the Windows organization my job was to really get other groups inside of Microsoft to bet on the platform and we had Bing build apps for us. We had Xbox team build music and video that became the default music and video experience for Windows. We had Office building OneNote on our new experience. And so it's not completely foreign to us to work cross group. But, the incentives in how you worked, we had different ship cycles, we had different P&L goals. There was no mal-intent, it was just we were busy with our own things. Now we're busy with one thing. We're busy with bringing together the experience for our customers at a Microsoft level."

Asked how Microsoft would compete in tablets, Larson-Green said: "with Apple there was an inflection point with tablets, or with phones, with touch... There will be another inflection point and it's going to come from the hardware input model. So that's why you've seen us doing things with Kinect, with gesture. You see us doing things with voice. There's one coming."

Asked how Windows on tablets could compete with Apple's app ecosystem, she said: "So you enable a new kind of app. So [Apple] were very successful in creating a curated set of applications that took what most people were trying to do on the web and made it valuable to do it on the device and created a model for them to get paid and all those things. There will be another one of those coming is my belief. I think you already start to see some of it. I think connecting apps to each other, because so





specifically to help you meet members of the opposite sex, began to appear. I joined them. Over time, this first wave of dating sites began to be subsumed and crushed by the behemoths: Udate, match.com, datingdirect.com, offering simple functionality, instant messaging features and lots of room for photographs. I joined them, too. Inevitably, entrepreneurs started to realise that there were people out there who were interested only in having sex, and sites such as AdultFriendFinder offered users the unique experience of deciding whether or not they would like to sleep with a person based solely on pictures of their genitals. I did not join them.

After years of on-and-off e-dating, in which I've met 150-200 women, fallen in love with one and invented extravagant excuses to extricate myself from awkward encounters with countless others, you might think I'd be tired of it all. And you'd be right. I'm exhausted. Yet the latest innovations, the first app-specific ones, Twine and Tinder, have thrown up new possibilities. They are the yin to each other's yang. Twine, suggesting the slow process of binding, offers just that - its USP is you get to know people via the exchange of messages and reveal your profile photo only when you both feel you have connected personality-wise. Tinder is the spark of immediate heat, in which your phone tracks down singletons in your vague area, and gives you the simple option of noting whether or not you find them fanciable. If you do them, and they do you, then you can start talking and, presumably, arranging illicit trysts. Or coffee.

With Twine, I came within a couple of days of meeting up with one of the - apparently extremely few - people who are giving it a go, before she got fed up with the painful functionality of the app and decided that it wasn't for her. And she had a very good point, because Twine is interminable. It tries to maintain a near-perfect ratio of men to women which, as any dating website will tell you, is never going to happen, thanks to the inherent desperation of men. After a lengthy signing-up process, I was still unable to view any profiles because there were

"462 more men than women in my area" but I could "jump the queue" by suggesting to my female Facebook friends that they join. Only then would I be invited into the inner sanctum. Once I had harangued a friend into joining, each "twine" (message) took about a minute to load. Worse, it turned out the person I was sending anonymous banter to was a man. Perhaps it wasn't surprising; I later logged on and found out there were no women between the ages of 29 and 45 local to my postcode. Instead the load-screen offered up the phrase "Establishing cross-system neural links", which sounds like the kind of thing the on-board computers say in Pacific Rim.

Of the two apps, though, Tinder sounded worse, just because it seemed so contemptuously superficial. There are hundreds upon thousands of women, about whom you know almost nothing, and you snap-appraise them with a single swipe. It's a finger-flicking hymn to the instant gratification of the smartphone age. It's addictive.

At first, the sheer deluge of random faces, selfies, girls kissing other girls (is that a thing nowadays?) and girls wearing cat face paint (apparently that is) was bewildering and meaningless. I rejected, I accepted, I rejected some more, a couple of people responded. I started to feel like the evil sheikh from Taken, picking out women: "I'll take that one... that one... and those two!" Or maybe I was getting annoyed that nobody was really liking me back.

Then I discovered that, as Tinder had synced with my Facebook profile, it had made my main picture a flyer from a battle rap event at which I'd performed. The ladies weren't seeing my face. So I changed it to one of me dressed in a pair of pink foam rubber buttocks. All of a sudden, the people I was favouriting were returning the favour. All because of foam buttocks.

Eleven days after I joined, I had my first Tinder date, in a once-fashionable pub. And it was really good. Three days later, we had a second one, and then another one the next day for good measure. I am calling her Anna, as she has begged for anonymity. Anna is great. We spent most of our first date

laughing, our second in a kebab house (it was a lot more romantic than it sounds) and our third watching damp fireworks. That night I asked her what she was even doing on Tinder.

"Apart from the simplicity and time-consuming fun of Tinder, the feeling of exposure for a woman is a lot less than putting yourself on a dating website," she said. "And I always found that, in the main, what men were writing on their profiles was 90% bullshit, to the point that you may as well disregard it. You can tell just as much about a person from their choice of picture. And you were dressed as an arse in yours. What's not to like?"

One day, someone may find a way to combine the laudable old-school romantic ideals of Twine with the fast-food menu feel of Tinder, but at the moment Tinder is winning hands down. I imagined that nobody would ever meet anybody they cared about through something so shallow. It seemed absurd. Now I'm wondering if it's the absurdity of it that's part of the appeal, throwing together people who have a keen sense of the ridiculousness of what they are doing.

Something for me to think about as I prepare for Friday, when I am meeting Anna's mates.

### The golden rules of tinder

#### 1 No photos of weddings or babies in your profile - especially if either is yours

One surprised Tinderer was flicking through photos of a dapper-looking man when she discovered that the reason he'd scrubbed up so well was that they were taken at his wedding. There are only two possibilities here: horrendous cad, or horrendous baggage. Similarly, only the worst babysitter in the world uses the image of an angelic toddler to bolster his dating chances.

#### 2 Resist the urge to make your first picture just your torso

It might seem sexy at the time, and you may well be proud of the spoils from your summer-long workout, but coming across a headless pic is creepy, and looks more like a serial killer's Polaroid collection than a tempting romantic opportunity.

#### 3 Don't send more than two messages without a reply

If they haven't messaged you back, chances are that they've decided they don't fancy you any more, or their friend drunkenly swiped your face for a joke. Dust yourself off and get back on the horse.

#### 4 Don't Tinder-chat for more than a week

This is the point at which it gets weird. You've bantered, you've worked out what each other does for a living, you've ascertained their level of literacy... Now go on a date - otherwise you've just got a pen pal.

#### 5 Don't act ashamed

Tinder has already passed the social acceptability test: groups of friends debate faces in the pub, flat-mates sit around Tindering together over the weekly group meal. There's no need to act as though you've been reduced to scraping the dating barrel, so don't include slightly ashamed assurances in your profile, such as: "We'll say we met at a party." Similarly, don't echo the sentiment on a date. Either Tinder wholeheartedly, or not at all.



Pete Cashmore and Holly Armstrong: 'It feels uncomfortably shallow - at first.' Photograph: Michael Thomas Jones for the Guardian



# Pixies: 'We were off the planet'

**Black Francis and his fellow Pixies knew life would be tough when bassist Kim Deal quit the band in a Welsh coffee shop. They explain how they overcame a rash of bad reviews - and found fresh inspiration in outer space**

By Alexis Petridis

Francis frowns and nods briskly, in a way which suggests that something I find a bit peculiar doesn't seem particularly peculiar to him. "Right. Caffè Nero. So we're sitting there in chairs chatting, and Kim walks in, like this" - he walks back to the table, wreathed in smiles - "Hey guys, how's it goin'?"

"I talked to my better half," says Santiago, "and she went: 'Why didn't you just talk about it?' I go: 'What? What the fuck are you talking about?' 'Well, why didn't you just sit down and talk about it?'" He laughs. "Why would we do that? It makes too much sense. We're shitty communicators."

It does all seem a little odd, which, you could argue, makes it entirely of a piece with pretty much everything else about Pixies. Their initial rise to fame was, they concede, strange. Within 18 months of their first rehearsal, they had developed a huge, obsessive European following while back in the US they had barely played outside their hometown, Boston. After a German gig on their first European tour, Santiago remembers a mob of fans attempting to pull him out of the door of the band's van by his feet.

They appeared at the height of an extraordinary era for guitar music - their breakthrough album *Surfer Rosa* came out in the same year as Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation*, Dinosaur Jr's *Bug* and My Bloody Valentine's *Isn't Anything*. But Pixies seemed somehow removed from everything else that was happening: they were never part of a scene, they appeared to exist entirely in their own world, and it was hard to identify their influences. They looked nothing like anyone's idea of a cool indie band, something that holds true today: Black Francis arrives at the interview wearing what appears to be an embroidered poncho.

Even the circumstances of their reformation in 2003 were unlikely. Attempting to parry yet another question about whether Pixies would get back together during a radio interview, Francis jokingly quoted George Harrison's mischievous line about how the Beatles might secretly have reformed and not told anyone: "There's stuff that goes on that you guys don't know about." But nobody got the reference and "the next day it was literally on CNN". Francis found himself fielding calls from the other former Pixies asking him what the hell was going on.

Reading on mobile? Watch here

All three remaining members of the band appear genuinely surprised that Deal left, even if the news wasn't exactly greeted with shock by the outside world, the tension between Black Francis and Kim Deal being one of the facts about Pixies that anyone with even a passing interest in the band knows. It's up there with the vast, unimpeachable reputation of the five albums they made between 1986 and 1991, Kurt Cobain claiming *Smells Like Teen Spirit*



**Pixies in 2013 (from left): Black Francis, temporary member Kim Shattuck, David Lovering and Joey Santiago Photograph: Michael Halsband**

In the lobby of a Dublin hotel, Charles Thompson IV, better known as Pixies frontman Black Francis, is literally acting out bassist Kim Deal's recent departure from the band for my benefit. "So," he says, walking away from the table at which guitarist Joey Santiago and drummer David Lovering are also seated, "you gotta imagine we're in this coffee shop in Monmouth. Not Costa, the other one, with the Italian name."

Caffè Nero? You're saying that the original line up of Pixies - arguably the most important and influential American guitar band of their era; purveyors of howled songs about incest, lust, Biblical violence, death and UFOs; a band who, on arrival, appeared so strange and alien to British audiences that, as one critic put it, they "seemed to have crawled out of the desert, babbling in tongues" - lost their bassist in a Caffè Nero in a market town in south Wales?

Not for the last time during our meeting, Black

Good to see you guys.' We're talking about a football game or something and she's joining in - 'Oh, did you see that?' - and then she just said, 'So, I'm flying home tomorrow.' That's my memory of it anyway. And I think that Joey and I said: 'OK,' and we just kind of walked out."

Hang on, the woman you just said was "practically the mascot of the band" quits halfway through the recording sessions for your first album in 22 years (the songs are being released online, without warning, in batches of four - the first, EP1, came out in September - but it's still an album in all but name) and you didn't ask her why? "Well, I think I probably sensed that it was going to get tense," shrugs Francis, "so I left."

"And I had an errand to go on, actually, I had to get a slide for my guitar," says Santiago, "so I followed him. The conversation was over."

"It was classic Pixies," nods Francis.

was his attempt at sounding like them, Radiohead refusing to go onstage after them at a 2004 festival because "it would be like the Beatles supporting us", and their 1988 track *Where Is My Mind?* soundtracking the climactic scene of *Fight Club*.

The rivalry first erupted during the making of their third album, 1989's *Doolittle*, and ultimately led to their initial break-up in 1993. Francis wrote the songs; the band declined to play Deal's, deeming them "way different than our other stuff". He was the frontman, but she swiftly became the band's most celebrated member, exuding a nonchalant, cigarette-smoking cool onstage, her calm, measured voice the perfect foil to Francis's yowling and screaming: in the 2006 Pixies documentary, *Loudquietloud*, Deal is pursued by her own coterie of fans, who hyperventilate when they meet her and hold up signs during gigs proclaiming her to be God.

As such, her disappearance casts something of a shadow over the band. There are Pixies fans who don't think it's really Pixies unless Deal is stage right, fag smouldering in gob: it's hard not to think that EP1 - which, as Lowering notes, got "bad reviews, which we've never really had" - might have been more favourably looked upon if Deal was still in the band.

For that reason, I had expected the band to be wary of discussing her departure, but it's quite the opposite. They are not, it has to be said, the most relaxed interviewees in the world: at one point, I notice Santiago snapping a rubber band against his wrist, in the manner of someone who suffers from anxiety. Inquiries about Francis's songwriting processes or the psychological effect of playing the same album, in order, at every gig for two years - as Pixies did with *Doolittle* between 2009 and 2011 - don't yield a great deal, beyond Francis wryly comparing the latter to working in a restaurant: "I want that macaroni cheese and I want it exactly the way you made it before." Mention Deal's name, however, and Francis is out of his seat and doing impersonations of the moment she left. I get the impression they actually rather like talking about her departure, because they are still trying to puzzle it out themselves (Deal has remained silent on the subject).

They seem pretty certain that, at its root, was the question of whether or not a reformed classic band should record new material, an idea to which Deal remained vocally resistant. "Some of her reasons were perfectly valid," Francis says. "Just sort of like,

if it's not broke ... We're getting requested to do reunion tours, we've got the reputation, we've got these five albums, that's what we're known for. It's a risky move when bands get back together and make new songs, it's so hard. You know, I validate her for her reasons. But ultimately, you know, come on. I'm not saying she intended it in this way, but if you're sensitive, and I like to think maybe I am a little sensitive anyway, you're going to take that as a sign of non-validation from somebody else. They're saying: 'Well, look, you did some good work when you were young, but I don't trust you now to come up with the kind of fodder this band needs. You don't have it any more.'"

Besides, Francis says, once their reformation had gone on longer than their initial career, the rest of the band were starting to feel wary about just playing the old material, particularly when they found themselves booked to play a Canadian casino, the kind of venue that is traditionally the preserve of oldies acts: "It was just sort of symbolic, like ha-ha, here we are, at the casino. Uh-oh, we're in Palm Springs." They tried everything to convince her, he says. "We got together in LA without her, just to see what we got, like we could seduce her in the process, come up with something that would tickle her ears and she'd go: 'Oh wow, you guys are really up to something good here'. Then I had the bright idea of, like: 'Let's get together just like in the old days, just the four of us in a rehearsal room, jamming and rocking out.' We got a rehearsal space in the same damn area of Boston where we started. It was disastrous. From the very first day, every day."

"Passive aggressiveness," nods Santiago. "People think we shout at each other, but no. It was just the worst three fucking weeks of my life. Really it was, it couldn't get any worse than that."

"Three weeks?" frowns Francis. "We were only there a week."

Nevertheless, by the time they arrived at Monmouth's famous Rockfield Studios, with *Doolittle* producer Gil Norton in tow, Deal appeared to have come around to the idea. The sessions went well. The night before Deal announced her departure, the band went out to dinner together. "We had a nice meal, a nice chat," says Francis. "I can't remember the last time we had a meal together, just the four of us, without our manager or our crew. Afterwards, I realised, oh, that was like the Last Supper, that was the goodbye dinner."

Reading on mobile? Watch here

They briefly considered breaking up, he says. "We

didn't know what to do for maybe a day, but then we were like: "Well, this studio's booked for another six weeks. Jesus Christ, we're going to fucking record these damn songs. Fuck it, we're going to do it. So we followed through. Even with her leaving, which was sort of like the big no-no, you know, no one wants her to leave - 'Oh God, not Kim Deal, anybody, but not Kim Deal' - we still went: 'No, we're going to finish the job.'"

So they carried on, with friends filling in: Kim Shattuck of LA pop-punk band the Muffs is currently playing bass. Their European tour, which finishes in London on Monday, is sold out and there seems to be a general consensus that Pixies, who suddenly find themselves with everything to prove, are playing ferociously. "And from my perch on the drums," smiles Lowering, "I've noticed that not too many people have been leaving to use the restroom during the new songs."

They are pleased with the new material, the novelty of bad reviews notwithstanding. In any case, it's not like Francis didn't anticipate the reception: "Well, looksee what the wind blew back," he sings on EP1's *Indie Cindy*, "as we follow the bouncing ball, they call this dance the washed-up crawl". In fact, he says, he struggled for a while to write songs for Pixies again, bothered by what *Indie Cindy* refers to as the band's "more or less unchequered record", until Gil Norton came up with the unlikely suggestion he simply imagined the band had never broken up, but instead spent the intervening years touring in outer space.

"We were elsewhere, off the planet, sequestered in space for 20 years. Still making music, still being who we are and now we're back: what does that sound like?"

Santiago and Lowering protest they had no idea what Norton was on about, but Francis really ran with the idea: painting gig posters for intergalactic Pixies shows, inventing a planet called Pan, on which the band had apparently been particularly big, famed for their appearing at a venue called the Panoprodromo. "It's had an impact on some of the songs, you know: 'Oh, I've got a new one here, what do I write about? OK, space opera! Here we go!'"

Panoprodromo and passive aggression, sudden unexplained departures and space operas. Your band is genuinely weird, I say. Black Francis frowns. "How so?" he asks, apparently surprised.



# Alan Moore: 'Why shouldn't you have a bit of fun while dealing with the deepest issues of the mind?'

Alan Moore talks about *Fashion Beast*, Jacques Derrida and modern superheroes

By Stuart Kelly

There is a certain degree of swagger, a sudden interruption of panache, as Alan Moore enters the rather sterile Waterstones office where he has agreed to speak to me. The jut of beard, the ringed fingers, the walking stick one feels he could use as a wand or a cudgel at any moment: he looks like Hagrid's wayward brother or Gandalf's louche cousin. He has a laugh that might topple buildings, though I doubt the man who reinvented the superhero comic would want such powers. He is here to promote *Fashion Beast*, a project that is unusual even in terms of a career that has been exceptionally idiosyncratic. *Fashion Beast*, an idea initiated by punk legend Malcolm McLaren, was to have been a film. It is now - 28 years later - a comic book. The story charts the relationship between a reclusive fashion designer, Celestine, an apprentice, Jonni Tare, and their favourite model, Doll. As one might expect from the author of *V For Vendetta*, *Watchmen*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Lost Girls*, it combines satiric wit and furious philippic, the politically radical with the sexually ambiguous. Perhaps strangest of all, Moore can barely remember writing it.

I tell Moore how delightful it is to be speaking to him about an unmade film that turned into a comic, rather than a comic of his turned into a film. Moore has been outspoken in the past about his disdain for the latter. He makes a characteristic cross between a laugh and a harrumph, and says: "It was certainly a lot more agreeable from my point of view. My main point about films is that I don't like the adaptation process, and I particularly don't like the modern way of comic book-film adaptations, where, essentially, the central characters are just franchises that can be worked endlessly to no apparent point. In most cases, the original comic books were far superior to the film. With this, it started out as my first-ever film script or attempt at one. I was pleased with the results and I think that Malcolm was quite pleased with the results, but through circumstances quite unconnected to either of us the film never got made. So it was kind of existing in a weird hinterland of my memory."

"It was probably never going to be realised," he continues, "but when my publisher said he'd managed to find a copy of the screenplay and suggested that perhaps he get the excellent writer Anthony Johnson to do the adaptation ... I didn't know



Exceptionally idiosyncratic ... Alan Moore. Photograph: Phil Fisk

whether it would work but it sounded very handy in that I wouldn't have to do any labour at all. That was what attracted me to the project. But then when the material started to come in, it was very unusual. For one thing, the adaptation had been really smooth. And when I started to see what Facundo Percio had done with the artwork, it was a fantastic experience because I'd completely forgotten everything to do with *Fashion Beast*. It really was like reading something that was by somebody else, and I was quietly impressed with myself. I was pretty pleased with it," he beams.

For a story conceived in 1985, *Fashion Beast* both foreshadows later Moore works and seems eerily as if it were written with foreknowledge of what would transpire in the world in the intervening years. "1985? Blimey!" he bellows, with a startled look in his eyes. "Was it that early? I hadn't remembered it was 85, but I had accepted it was probably late 80s and I was very surprised because there is a lot of the politics that would be expanded on in other works, the sexual politics certainly. There's also some precursors to my magical thinking; we're talking about fashion as an almost shamanistic activity, so I was very surprised to find that I'd been thinking about all these things back then."

McLaren, Moore says, was pitching the film as "a mash-up of *Beauty and the Beast* and the life of Christian Dior. He had these other elements as well - a bit like *Chinatown* and a bit like *Flashdance*, which I was bowled over by. I think he was expecting me to bring political depth and sexual politics to the mix.

"It was Malcolm who suggested that the main characters be a boy who looks like a girl who looks like a boy and vice versa. What was strange was that, actually, in 1985 this was nobody's vision of the fashion industry. Since then, fashion and fascism have crept closer: you've got John Galliano doing his promotional bits for the Third Reich, you've got Alexander McQueen killing himself, you've got Versace and that horrible, violent stalker coming for him. Since it was written, almost all of it has come true apart from the nuclear winter, but I think we're working on that. The actual society that the story happens in is much more like the society we have now than culture was in 1985."

McLaren was described as a "couturier situationniste", and I wondered what Moore felt about the movement. A few moments of trading slogans commenced ("It is forbidden to forbid", "Be rational: demand the impossible", "A mental disease has swept



the planet: banalisation”), and Moore was in full flow. “I’m a lot of things,” he says. “I’ve got a great deal of sympathy with the situationist position. Situationism is one of the roots of psychogeography.

“I like Jacques Derrida, I think he’s funny. I like my philosophy with a few jokes and puns. I know that that offends other philosophers; they think he’s not taking things seriously, but he comes up with some marvellous puns. Why shouldn’t you have a bit of fun while dealing with the deepest issues of the mind? The situationists - I like their style, I like their attitude, I like the ‘below the street the beach’; I like that it was basically a more intellectual take and a more artistic take on anarchist principles. Malcolm was a situationist: the last time I was talking to him, he was trying to make music with some people out of Game Boy chips. It sounded like it might be rubbish, but I liked the spirit he brought to everything. He was fiery, he was subversive and I think he meant it.”

One underestimates Moore at one’s peril: yes, he may have written *Swamp Thing*, but he did so while reading continental philosophy. *Fashion Beast* is about oedipal influences - who can inhabit and subvert the master’s voice? Several writers have acknowledged Moore as a key influence: Neil Gaiman told me Moore made a whole generation possible. *Fashion Beast* is about apprentices and masters, pupils and teachers. So how does he feel about this? “I don’t generally read very much at all. I’ve got no problem with people taking certain inspirations or perhaps being interested in one of my ideas, but it’s important they make it their own voice, not my voice or an echo of my voice. If being influenced by my work is part of a process leading them to develop their own proper voices, then I’m glad. I believe China Miéville gets a lot of respect; I’ve not read his stuff, but I’ve heard he’s done that. Grant Morrison has actually self-confessedly made a tactic of not only basing some of his narratives on my style or my work but also trying to make himself more famous by slagging me off at every opportunity. I have nothing to do with him.”

When I mention that Geoff Johns has done a whole series of *Green Lantern* based on his story “Tygers”, he gets tetchy. “Now, see,” he says, “I haven’t read any superhero comics since I finished with *Watchmen*. I hate superheroes. I think they’re abominations. They don’t mean what they used to mean. They were originally in the hands of writers who would actively expand the imagination of their nine- to 13-year-old audience. That was completely

what they were meant to do and they were doing it excellently. These days, superhero comics think the audience is certainly not nine to 13, it’s nothing to do with them. It’s an audience largely of 30-, 40-, 50-, 60-year old men, usually men. Someone came up with the term graphic novel. These readers latched on to it; they were simply interested in a way that could validate their continued love of *Green Lantern* or *Spider-Man* without appearing in some way emotionally subnormal. This is a significant rump of the superhero-addicted, mainstream-addicted audience. I don’t think the superhero stands for anything good. I think it’s a rather alarming sign if we’ve got audiences of adults going to see the *Avengers* movie and delighting in concepts and characters meant to entertain the 12-year-old boys of the 1950s.”

Having seen comics turned into movies, and film-scripts turned into comics, Moore is most concerned with *Jerusalem*, his fiction.

“I am currently on the last official chapter, which I am doing somewhat in the style of Dos Passos. It should be finished by the end of the year or close to it. I don’t know if anyone else will like it at all,” he muses. I say that I can’t wait, and that it strikes me that the style he and the likes of Iain Sinclair and Michael Moorcock pioneered has become central to literary culture. He sighs, shaking the walls: “Oh God, have we? Oh no, we’re the mainstream!”



# A third of young women feel they 'cannot cope'

**Poll reveals a bleak picture of loneliness, low pay, unhappiness and bouts of mental illness as a generation feels it has no one to turn to**

**By Yvonne Roberts**

Young women today believe they have more job opportunities and a better chance of balancing parenting and a career than their mothers had at the same age, but then, for many, the picture becomes very much bleaker. A third do not believe there will ever be equal pay; a fifth say they have less respect and status in society than their mothers did; almost a third say they are less happy; and two thirds believe they are more prone to eating disorders and mental illness.

The information comes from a poll of more than 1,000 young women aged 16 to 30, which is part of a year-long review conducted in England and Wales, the results of which will be published tomorrow. The poll also reveals that 40% of young women are often lonely; 46% don't know whom they can trust; 36% said "they often felt that they could not cope with their lives"; and one in four said that they felt they had nobody to whom they could turn when they were unable to sort out their problems by themselves.

The review also included a poll of the public conducted last week and the results of 10 focus groups by the charity formerly known as the Young Women's Christian Association England and Wales (YWCA) and currently named Platform 51. On Wednesday it relaunches again as Young Women's Trust (YWT). Deborah Mattinson, chair of trustees of YWT, said: "What we know from our year-long investigation is that there are over a million young

women living with disadvantage in a system that offers them too few second chances. When the YWCA began its work 150 years ago, this was the group on which it focused. The new organisation is returning to that cause."

The YWT research looked at qualifications, jobs, housing, health, family ties and outlook. While more than 58% of young women appear secure and in work, 42% are struggling with issues that include a lack of qualifications, difficult relationships with partners and family, debt, poverty, housing and depression. Five per cent of young women with degrees also suffer from depression and isolation.

"In popular culture, young women are stereotyped as a story of two halves," said Carole Easton, YWT's chief executive. "Either it's about bad behaviour, having babies and benefits. Or they are portrayed as successful, salaried and sorted. The real story is quite different. Young Women's Trust wants to challenge the stereotypes and change outcomes."

Tammie Wingrove, 23, is resilient and articulate, despite the difficulties she faces. She is eight months' pregnant and lives on £56 a week Jobseeker's Allowance. Her mother died when she was seven, her father died when she was 13. A year later her stepmother threw her out. She went into care and was moved 15 times. She was diagnosed with dyslexia at 17. "Before that, teachers always said I was lazy," she said. She returned to one of her care homes in a work placement. "I know how to handle little rude boys," she said with a smile. "I know what it is to go to sleep with nothing and wake up with nothing."

Her aim is to do an access course, go to university

and become a social worker. She has a partner, but as someone who has been in care she has her own flat. "I've learned from the past," she said. "I rely on no one except my sister and nan, who have never let me down in my life."

"I cried my eyes out when I knew I was pregnant," she added. "But now I'm fine. I will go to university next year if I can." Tammie is on the YWT advisory board. "I want to help other young women," she said. "I smile, but that doesn't mean I am happy."

The YWT's report challenges a prevailing myth that boys are having it bad, while girls have never had it so good. One in three girls - 100,000 a year - do not achieve five GCSEs A\*-C, including English and maths. Half a million young women are Neets - not in employment, education or training. That is over 100,000 more than young men of the same age. The report says young women are often steered into stereotypical apprenticeships, such as childcare, hairdressing and beauty, which are low paid. Currently, while there are 10 applicants for every high skilled role, there are 45 applicants for vacancies in the low skill sector.

Nadine White, 23, has been unemployed for three years. "I had a decent upbringing, then my dad died when I was 13. I went downhill. I didn't behave at school. I fell out with my mum and she asked me to leave home at 17. We get on better now, but we can't live in the same house," she said.

Nadine has a Level 3 childcare qualification but can't get a job. She has lived in a hostel and sleeps on friends' sofas, and she sometimes stays with her grandmother. "It's clothes in plastic bags and kipping on floors," she said. She receives £56 a week JSA. "I've done lots of courses. I've volunteered. I don't want to sit on my backside but the longer you are out of work, the harder it is to persuade someone to give you a chance. I am isolated because if you go out, that's the price of food."

Nadine is also on the YWT advisory board. "I want a career not a job but I don't have the resources. Of course, it's depressing and frustrating and I can't see how it will end. I need the opportunity to show the potential I have but that doesn't happen by filling in an application online and never finding out why an employer has said no."



Tammie Wingrove lives on £56 per week job seekers' allowance. Photograph: Sophia Evans for the Observer



# Labour faces cash crisis as Co-op's new bosses move to cut funding

**Flowers scandal fallout 'could cost £850,000' in what would be a major blow for the party in the runup to a general election**

**By Daniel Boffey, policy editor**

The Labour party is facing a major financial crisis after the scandal stricken Co-operative Group told its MPs that they will slash their funding as part of a review of their historic partnership.

At least a third of the £850,000 annual donation given to Ed Miliband's MPs is to be cut, with one senior Labour figure admitting that he believed all funding from the mutual could soon be stopped.

Such a move would be a major blow for Miliband in the runup to the general election, as it comes after the GMB union's decision to cut their £1m a year funding to Labour by 90%. It is feared that other affiliated unions could make similar announcements before 2015.

The development comes as the *Observer* can reveal that local authorities across Britain have been warned by financial advisers to urgently remove their money from Co-op bank accounts in the wake of the recent crises, including the arrest of Rev Paul Flowers in connection with the supply of class A drugs.

Mark Horsfield, director at advisers Arlingclose, whose clients include 30 local authorities which bank with the Co-op, said the situation was getting worse by the day as the bank was being buffeted by scandal. Headteachers managing school budgets have also been told to "watch out with the Co-op" by their local authorities on his firm's advice, Horsfield revealed, prompting concerns of a wider run on the bank.

"Such is the nature of the deterioration, we have advised clients to sweep any exposure of bank accounts in the Co-op," he said. "We have not only issued the advice but have made sure it is implemented. Many of them [the local authorities] had already come to that conclusion, but we have been reiterating and published advice again on Thursday softly reminding clients, and keeping it at the top of our agenda."

Around 150 local authorities are believed to bank with the Co-op and Horsfield said he believed other consultants would be offering the same advice.

A Co-op Group spokesman said the most recent figures, for the first half of the year, including the period since credit agency Moody's downgraded its rating, showed that £1.6bn in corporate deposits had been taken out of the bank. He believed retail deposits, where cash is not being held for investments, were currently "broadly stable".

As the scandal has rocked the Co-op, a Labour source said that informal contact had been made with senior politicians to warn of an impending cut to funding for the 32 MPs who are members of both Labour and the Co-operative parties.

The MPs most affected by the Co-op cuts met in private in the Commons Boothroyd room on

Wednesday. Barry Sheerman, MP for Huddersfield, who attended the meeting, said: "There is no doubt there is going to be a 30% cut across the board."

Donations from the Co-op Group go to MPs and councillors who represent Labour and the Co-op party, an affiliated organisation which, after running costs, spends its money on the election campaigns of the MPs. Labour MPs have become particularly concerned for the future of the Co-op Group after it emerged that the mutual is now being advised by Quiller Consultants, whose senior executives include David Cameron's former special adviser, Sean Worth, and George Bridges, a close friend of George Osborne and former campaign director for the Conservatives under Cameron when in opposition.

When approached to explain their role with the Co-op, Worth emailed: "We are advising the Co-operative Group, as we declare on the Association of Professional Political Consultants register, but do not discuss client matters."

This week will be crucial for the Co-op Bank and the wider group. By Friday, bond holders in the bank need to vote on a rescue plan; failure to do so could force the Bank of England to step in, with possibly serious ramifications for its account holders. The Co-op Group needs hedge funds to step in and take a 70% stake in the business to plug its financial black hole.

Last week the government announced two independent inquiries into the Co-op Bank and the embarrassing flow of revelations about Flowers prompted by claims in the *Mail on Sunday* last weekend. Video footage and text messages in the paper allegedly provided evidence that Flowers had

purchased class A substances, including crystal meth, while planning "a drug-fuelled gay orgy".

The Financial Conduct Authority later announced an inquiry into the behaviour of key individuals at the Co-op in the period when a £1.5bn black hole in its finances emerged, largely due to a disastrous acquisition of the Britannia building society. A separate more general inquiry ordered by George Osborne, will be conducted by the Prudential Regulation Authority.

It later emerged that Flowers had resigned as deputy chairman of Co-op Group in June because of concerns about his misuse of expenses; that he had two criminal convictions; and that he had left a drug charity after an investigation into his expense claims. It also emerged that he had resigned his position as a Labour councillor in Bradford after "inappropriate but not illegal" pornography was found by IT staff on his work laptop.

Last week the prime minister described the bank's former chairman, a Methodist minister and former Labour councillor, as the "man who has broken a bank".

■ Ed Miliband has hit out at David Cameron for using the Paul Flowers scandal to attack his party's links to the co-operative movement. In a strongly worded attack in the *Independent* on Sunday, Miliband accused the prime minister of resorting to a strategy of mud-slinging in an effort to win the 2015 election.

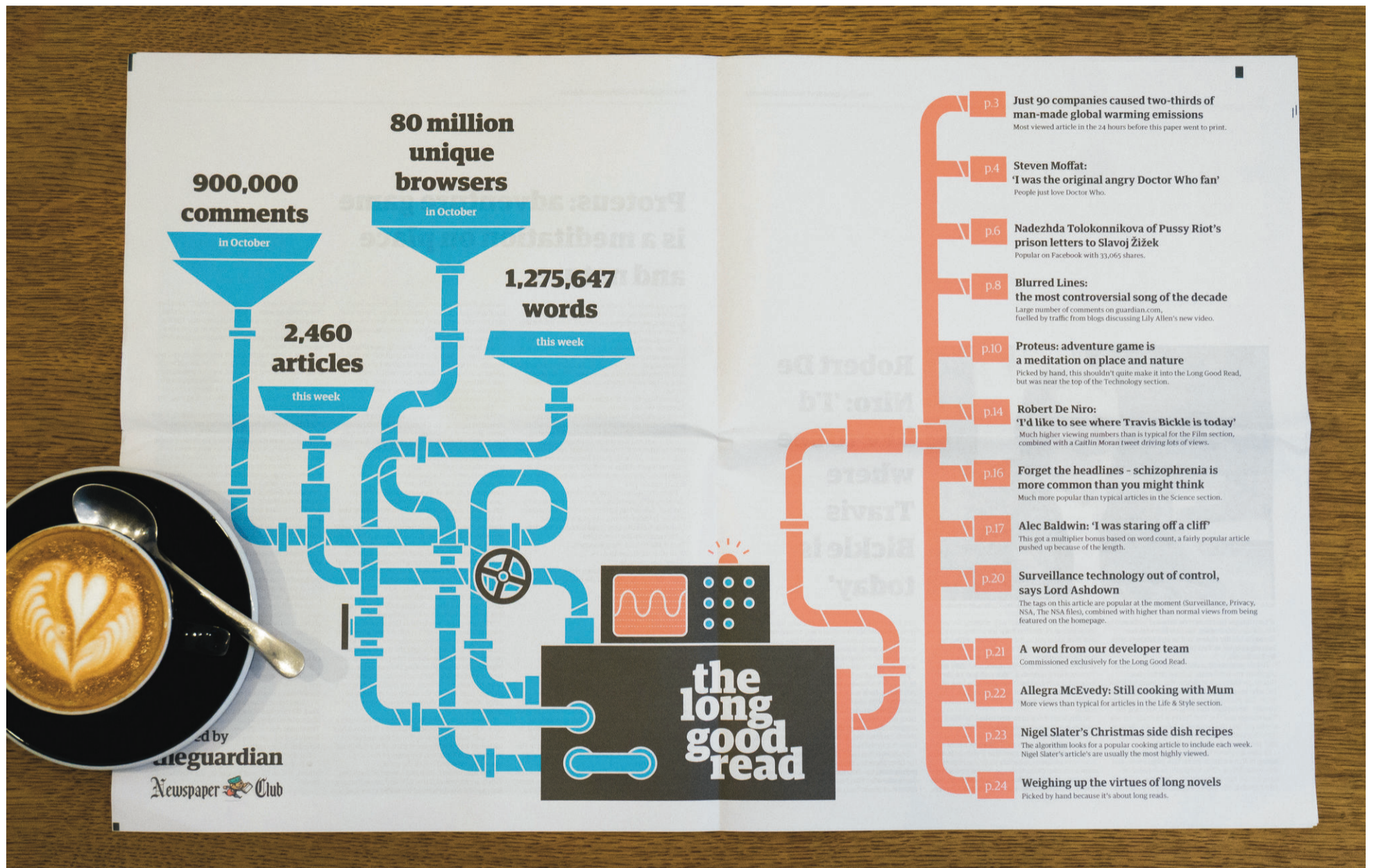
Miliband said Cameron "hit a new low by trying to use the gross errors and misconduct of one man, Paul Flowers, to impugn the integrity of the entire Labour movement".



Local authorities across Britain have been warned by financial advisers to urgently remove their money from Co-op bank accounts in the wake of the recent crises. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images



# Long Good Read 004



<http://blog.newspaperclub.com/2013/11/25/long-good-read-algorithmic-newspaper/>

We popped into [Guardian Coffee](<http://www.boxpark.co.uk/brand/guardiancoffee/>) earlier to take a look at the Long Good Read issue 4, available today. It's brilliant to see how far it's come in just a few issues. ([Find out more about the project.](<http://blog.newspaperclub.com/2013/11/04/long-good-read-guardiancoffee/>))

There's a great selection of articles from all sections of the Guardian: from [Doctor Who](<http://gu.com/p/3kf7t>) to [Pussy Riot](<http://gu.com/p/3ke39>) to [Proteus](<http://gu.com/p/3k38g>).

This time round we've tried to explain what's going on under the hood, with a natty centre spread designed by Ralph (at the top of this post).

For each article we've unpacked the reasons for including it in the paper, showing how the algorithm (and sometimes the editor) makes its selection.

Pick up your copy this week, for free, from #guardiancoffee in Shoreditch. We'd love to hear your thoughts.









# Who drives the car - him or her?

**Harriet Green usually drives the car and her husband is the passenger. This is rare - in most couples the man takes the wheel. It's a touchy subject, but is it about gender or an individual's need for control?**

**By Harriet Green**

We were giving a lift to the 12-year-old daughter of an old friend. My husband was in the passenger seat and I, as usual, was at the wheel. The 12 year old seemed genuinely perplexed by what she saw as a risqué reversal of gender roles. "Why isn't *he* driving?" she asked.

It's worth noting that her mother happens to be the family's main breadwinner and is an alpha woman in all other respects - but not, it seems, when it comes to the car. Driving the family around is her husband's domain.

It set me thinking - and looking. In the majority of cases, I noted, when couples were together in cars (with or without children), the man was driving. There were plenty of women driving on their own - to work, ferrying the kids around - but once coupledom came into the equation, some sort of 1950s model seemed to take over.

This is borne out by statistics. The Institute of Advanced Motorists (IAM) did a survey in 2010. It found that when partners drive together, men are four times more likely to take the wheel. Women drivers are more likely to feel uncomfortable driving when their partner is in the passenger seat.

In 2009, a University of Washington sociologist, Pepper Schwartz, reported that in nine out of 10 households that identify themselves as "feminist", the man did most of the driving when both partners were in the car.

And in most car ads, the man drives.

The one time women drive more than men is when they go out in the evening. In that case, the IAM found, more women drive so their partner can drink.

I grew up in the countryside. If you live five miles from the nearest anything, you're reliant on your parents for lifts unless you learn fast. I passed my test first time at 18 and never looked back. My Renault 5 came with me to university where I ended up taxiing my friends around. My boyfriend didn't drive and was happy to accept my lifts. He was still traumatised by the driving lesson he had at 17 when the teacher told him to stop his car: "Get out, sonny, I don't want to risk my life any more." So I always

had the upper hand. But, kindly as I am, I introduced him to my lovely driving teacher and my husband (as he later became) eventually passed his test.

The Renault 5 was mine and I did the driving. It wasn't until we bought a car together a few years later (well, I paid for it, but I'm generous) that he got to use the keys. Just not that often. Motorways, after all, are scary places and need an expert at the wheel.

Now to be fair to John-Paul, many years have passed and he can drive fine (even on motorways and abroad). In fact, our daughter, theoretically on my side, says he is a good driver when I'm not in the car - and quite fast. But I'm better. I love driving. I get a kick out of perfect gear changes and overtaking people and navigating country lanes. John-Paul is much happier on his fold-up Brompton bike.

I also hate being driven. I get car sick (particularly when John-Paul lurches) and he's a better map reader, so our division of labour has always made sense. It's an arrangement that we've never considered unusual until *that* child got into our car.

Outraged by her comments (this is the next gener-

ation of women!) I thought I'd subject John-Paul to a test. A little unfair - vindictive, even - as he's never insisted on driving, is happy to play the passive role in our vehicular relationship and I have far more road miles under my belt.

But I'm mean like that. I called Peter Rodger, the chief examiner of the IAM, and suggested he assess each of us and give his verdict.

Bravely, John-Paul went first. He was out for an hour and returned looking cheerful enough, then left to pick up our daughter from school (on his bike). Then it was my turn. I confidently got into the car and took off the handbrake before turning the key. It was something I've never done before. Hubris? Nerves? A bit of both? No matter, my brilliance would soon shine through.

So off we drove, Peter and me, to the wilds of north London. We negotiated mini roundabouts and dual carriageways and countryish lanes. I was excited to drive past the home of a favourite uncle long dead and told Peter all about him. I thought I was doing brilliantly. I can chat and drive and concentrate - all at the same time! I finished off with a



Harriet Green and her husband John-Paul. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian



storming parallel park in the tightest space I could find.

Perfect.

Peter smiles a lot and tells funny jokes. But he's also a former police driving examiner. Foolish me to let his good cop manner outwit me. Underneath, the man is ruthless. He sat down, smiled, then uttered the devastating words:

"How many speeding tickets did you actually want? Three enough?" In one case, he told me gleefully, I was going so fast as to disqualify me from the speeding retraining course, which can get you off a ticket.

Then, on to my personality as a driver: "You're a pushy, somewhat aggressive driver. For example, that man you called a lunatic was actually in his 70s driving a Vauxhall Zafira and just going a bit slowly."

I don't look ahead, don't plan. I gesticulate too much when I'm talking and look at the passenger when I'm doing so rather than at the road. I'm also clumsy-footed. "Every time you lifted your foot off the brake, it went clunk."

The smirk disappeared from my face. This wasn't good.

So I changed the subject. "Peter, let's get on to John-Paul."

"He's more cautious than you. And he's somewhat unstructured."

Excellent!

"But I'd probably need to intervene less quickly with him than I would with you."

Peter allocated points to our performance, using a sheet of key measures. I added them up. A high score in this case is worse. I got 41. And John-Paul got ... 42.

Whoop-de-doo! I won! Only by a point, but a win's a win!

Before he left, Peter had one more grenade to lob at both of us. We are both averagely OK drivers, in the great rump of "nothing special" but not awful either. But I take some comfort from his suggestion that I would possibly be easier to train to IAM standards than my husband (if I could keep my pushiness under control).

Why do women tend to take the passenger seat? I can't help feeling there's something worryingly passive about being driven around. When you drive, you're in control. My husband might say "Take the road on the left", but if I'm at the wheel I can wilfully ignore him and turn right. Ha! ("So you have

some kind of psychological problem with ceding control," John-Paul says, very annoyingly.)

It's a touchy subject to bring up with friends but it seems that everyone has their own perfectly reasonable explanation.

Peter Rodger says he always takes the wheel, partly because of his job and because the company car is his, but mostly because his wife doesn't enjoy driving. He says he'd love her to share long car journeys.

One of my friends says his partner doesn't drive because she had a bad accident as a child and it's put her off. Another that his wife grew up in London and has always lived there, so driving has never been a big deal.

But how to explain the statistical difference between men and women? Frankly, I don't have the answers. But maybe it's time for someone to do a thorough study.

It's not just me asking. The internet is peppered with questions such as these: "Nine times out of 10 when you look at a family in a car, the man is driving, the woman next to him in the front seat and the kids are in the back. Why do men almost always seem to be the drivers?"

The questions attract answers such as these: "It's because we women are lazy, women need to keep an eye on the kids in the back, and most women would be too busy looking into the mirror to see if their makeup's smudged."

Amanda Marcotte, a columnist for the online magazine Slate's Double X, says: "Letting women take control is considered emasculating in our culture and even pro-feminist men are not immune."

"Yes, so *what* a treasure you have in me," says John-Paul.

There is one theory that has some support among women, but I'm not sure I want to believe it. This comes down to the fact that boys like toys. The car is the ultimate gadget and women just don't care that much - the implication being that women are simply much more mature than men. So what does that say about me?

# Secret talks helped forge Iran nuclear deal

**Meetings that ran parallel to official negotiations help achieve most significant Washington-Tehran agreement since 1979**

**By Julian Borger and Saeed Kamali Dehghan in Geneva**

A historic agreement on Iran's nuclear programme was made possible by months of unprecedented secret meetings between US and Iranian officials, in further signs of the accelerating detente between two of the world's most adversarial powers, it emerged on Sunday.

The meetings ran parallel to official negotiations involving five other world powers, and helped pave the way for the interim deal signed in Geneva in the early hours of Sunday morning, in which Iran accepted strict constraints on its nuclear programme for the first time in a decade in exchange for partial relief from sanctions.

The Obama administration asked journalists not to publish details they had uncovered of the secret diplomacy until the Geneva talks were over for fear of derailing them. The Associated Press and a Washington-based news website, Al-Monitor, finally did so on Sunday.

The nuclear agreement - arguably the most important foreign policy achievement of Barack Obama's presidency - was struck at 4.30am at a Geneva hotel on day five of the third round of intensive talks. It amounts to the most significant agreement between Washington and Tehran since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

The deal releases just over \$4bn in Iranian oil sales revenue from frozen accounts, and suspends restrictions on the country's trade in gold, petrochemicals, car and plane parts. In return, Iran undertakes to restrict its nuclear activities. Over the next six months Iran has agreed:

- To stop enriching uranium above 5% reactor-grade, and dilute its stock of 20%-enriched uranium - a major proliferation concern.
- Not to increase its stockpile of low-enriched uranium.
- To freeze its enrichment capacity by not installing any more centrifuges, leaving more than half of its existing 16,000 centrifuges inoperable.
- Not to fuel or to commission the heavy-water reactor it is building in Arak or build a reprocessing plant that could produce plutonium from the spent fuel.
- To accept more intrusive nuclear inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, including daily visits to some facilities.

"While today's announcement is just a first step, it achieves a great deal," Obama said in an address

from the White House. "For the first time in nearly a decade, we have halted the progress of the Iranian nuclear programme, and key parts of the programme will be rolled back."

Iran welcomed its negotiators as heroes at Tehran's Mehrabad airport. Its currency, the rial, which has been pulverised by a gruelling succession of economic sanctions, jumped more than 3%. "This is only a first step," Mohammad Javad Zarif, the foreign affairs minister, said. "We need to start moving in the direction of restoring confidence, a direction in which we have managed to move against in the past."

But there was silence from Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia and dismal warnings from Israel that the deal would merely embolden its fiercest adversary. "Today the world has become a much more dangerous place because the most dangerous regime in the world has taken a significant step toward attaining the most dangerous weapon in the world," said Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu.

David Cameron said the deal "demonstrates how persistent diplomacy and tough sanctions can together help us to advance our national interest". In a tweet from Downing Street, he said: "Good progress on Iran - nowhere near the end but a sign pressure works".

Sunday morning's deal was agreed after a diplomatic marathon of three intensive rounds, culminating in a late-night session in the conference rooms of a five-star hotel in Geneva, chaired by the EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, a former Labour peer and CND official, for whom the deal represents a personal triumph.

Last night, it was announced that Obama has phoned Netanyahu to discuss the deal with Iran. White House spokesman Josh Earnest told reporters travelling on Air Force One with Obama that the US "looks forward to consulting with its ally Israel on international negotiations with Tehran". Earnest says the White House understands Israel's scepticism.

Britain's foreign secretary, William Hague, the French foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, and their German, Russian and Chinese counterparts, Guido Westerwelle, Sergey Lavrov and Wang Yi, also took part in a six-nation group mandated by the UN security council to handle the nuclear negotiations since 2006. Some of the complications involved in coming to a deal stemmed from the need to keep the six powers together.

However, the key overnight sessions that clinched the deal involved Kerry, Zarif and Ashton alone.

"This deal actually rolls back the programme from where it is today," Kerry said. However, he added: "I will not stand here in some triumphal moment and claim that this is an end in itself."

The bigger task, he said, was to go forward and negotiate a comprehensive deal.

The six-month life of the Geneva deal is intended to be used to negotiate a comprehensive and permanent settlement that would allow Iran to pursue a peaceful programme, almost certainly including enrichment, but under long-term limits and intrusive monitoring that would reassure the world any parallel covert programme would be spotted and stopped well before Iran could make a bomb.

That agreement would lead to the lifting of the main sanctions on oil and banking that have all but crippled the Iranian economy, and the eventual normalisation of relations between Iran and the US for the first time since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The difficulties facing the negotiators in the coming months were highlighted by the different interpretations that Zarif and his US counterpart, John Kerry, had over the fiercely disputed issue of whether the deal represented a recognition of Iran's right to enrich uranium in principle. Zarif pointed to a line in the preamble in the text which said that an eventual comprehensive settlement "would involve a mutually defined enrichment programme with practical limits and transparency measures". American argued that the phrase "mutually defined" implied Iran would still require international consent to pursue enrichment.

The Associated Press said preliminary and secret talks were held in Oman and other locations. The US envoys for the meetings were the deputy secretary of state, William Burns, and Jake Sullivan, a foreign policy adviser to Joe Biden. Al-Monitor reported that a senior national security council official, Puneet Talwar, also took part. AP said there had been five meetings since March, implying the first contacts came three months before the election of the reformist Hassan Rouhani as president. It is not clear which Iranian officials were involved in the talks.

The talks help explain why the US and Iran were able to strike a deal relatively quickly after Rouhani's election. But it also helps explain the irritation of the French foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, at the previous round of negotiations a fortnight ago when he was presented with an agreement that the US and Iran had worked out independently.



# Christmas crackers: the best shows (plus top ways to escape the tinsel)

**From the Nutcracker to American Psycho, from Mary Poppins to Kurt Vile, our critics pick their must-sees of the festive season**

By Guardian Critics

**If you wish it could be Christmas every day**

## Nutcrackers, various

You know it's Christmas in the ballet world by the number of Nutcrackers touring the world's stages. In the UK alone, there are close to a dozen doing the rounds, but the top three remain the Royal Ballet's exquisitely traditional version, the sparky family friendly production by Birmingham Royal Ballet, and English National Ballet's - with the best snow scene of them all. *Royal Opera House, London (020-7304 4000), 4 December to 16 January; Birmingham Hippodrome (0844 338 5000), to 12 December; London Coliseum (020-7845 9300), 11 December to 5 January.*

## Father Christmas

Does Father Christmas use the loo? Does he secretly long for summer? Does he have strong views on the size of chimneys? You bet he does. Raymond Briggs's gorgeous picture book gets a heartwarming makeover for under-sixes. *Lyric Hammersmith, London (020-8741 6850), to 4 January and West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds (0113-213 7700), 6 December to 11 January.*

## Messiah

The Dunedin Consort's annual performances of Handel's oratorio have become a Christmas tradition. John Butt's choir and orchestra manage to combine scholarly stylishness with wonderfully communicative singing and playing - the best possible kind of historically aware performance. *Queen's Hall, Edinburgh (0131-668 2019), 20 December; Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow (0141-353 8000), 21 December.*

## The Nutcracker

Not the ballet, but the play based on the ETA Hoffman story. So there's no lush Tchaikovsky, but instead plenty of action and emotion as Clara tries to break the enchantment on the Nutcracker and defeat the dastardly King of the Mice in an age before pest control. *Nuffield, Southampton (023-8067 1771), 5 December to 12 January.*

**El Niño**  
With texts from the gnostic gospels and Latin American women poets, John Adams's Nativity Oratorio was originally designed for both concert hall and opera house, but it works best as a concert piece. Vladimir Jurowski's performance with the London Philharmonic is the final, climactic event in the

Southbank Centre's year-long The Rest is Noise festival. *Royal Festival Hall, London (0845 875 0073), 14 December.*

**Henning Wehn's Authentic German Christmas Do**  
Henning Wehn bring his festive show to the West End over three consecutive weekends. Expect much gloating about how good the Germans are at Christmas, plus singalong *Stille Nacht* and lots of jokes about "ruthless efficiency". *Leicester Square theatre, London (08448 733433), 1, 8 & 15 December.*

**Gone with the Wind**  
Its history and politics look bizarre now, but this extravagant melodrama of America's old south destroyed by the civil war has a potent storytelling force and the performances are something to savour. Clark Gable is the devilishly handsome and uncaring Rhett Butler, Vivien Leigh is the kittenish belle he loves, Scarlett O'Hara. *On general release.*

## Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake

It's 18 years since Bourne premiered his reimagined *Swan Lake*, with its male corps of swans, witty contemporary design and lost prince. And with some new dancers added to this season's revival, including Liam Mower - the original West End Billy Elliot - its humour and imagination are reasserting themselves for a new generation. *Sadler's Wells, London (0844 412 4300), 4 December to 26 January.*

## Hansel and Gretel

Christopher Hampson's first Christmas ballet for Scottish Ballet is a *Hansel and Gretel* relocated to 1950s Scotland and mixed with other fairytales to create a new story about lost children battling a cast of magical and sinister dancing characters. Music is extracted from the Humperdinck opera. *Theatre Royal, Glasgow, (0844 871 7673), 10 to 28 December.*

## Festive family fun

### Emil and the Detectives

Not a book that's much in fashion any more, but Erich Kästner's tale, set in 1920s Berlin, about a boy who sets out on an adventure on his own, should transpose to the stage very well. *Olivier, London (020-7452 3000), to 18 March.*

### The Wind in the Willows

William Tuckett's delicious version of the Kenneth Grahame classic sets the action in the attic of the writer's imagination, using old clothes and props to drive the storytelling mix of dance, music, puppetry and text. Grahame's words are narrated by Tony Robinson, with a fabulous dancing cast that includes Will Kemp as Ratty. Great for over-fives. *Duchess theatre, London (020-7304 4000), 11*

*December to 1 February.*

**Matilda**  
Witty, warm and wise, Tim Minchin and Dennis Kelly actually improve on Roald Dahl's novel. A show every family should see, to remind them that it's never too late to be the hero of your own story. *Cambridge theatre, London (020-7494 5080), booking until May.*

## Saving Mr Banks

For lovers of *Mary Poppins* - which celebrates its 50th anniversary next year - this film is a treat. It's the story of how Walt Disney finally persuaded *Poppins* creator PL Travers to let him adapt her masterpiece for the screen. Tom Hanks plays wily Walt and Emma Thompson the schoolmarmish author determined not to be impressed by flashy Hollywood types. *On general release.*

## Oliver!

Foot-stamping songs, winsome urchins and one of the great stage antiheroes in the reprehensible yet somehow lovable Fagin. *Crucible, Sheffield (0114-249 6000), 29 November to 25 January.*

## Mr and Mrs Moon

The latest for very young from Oily Cart who always deliver the moon when comes to kid's theatre. *Stratford Circus theatre, London (0844 357 2625), 7 December to 5 January.*

## Stonehenge Visitor Centre

Britain's most famous prehistoric monument opens its new visitor centre and an exhibition on the origins of this enigmatic site in time for the winter solstice. The mystery of Stonehenge is only equalled by the controversy surrounding its mistreatment by the modern world. Will this new presentation save it? *Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain (0870 333 1181), from 18 December.*

## The Hundred and One Dalmatians

The New Vic always do a great festive show - although quite how they are going to put 101 dogs on stage is a mystery. *New Vic theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme (01782 717962), to 1 February.*

## Antarctica

The fabulous Little Bulb theatre company are leading intrepid little explorers on a journey into a winter wonderland. It may just be an excuse for the company to dress up as penguins, but it should be great for the under-sevens. *Bristol Old Vic (0117-987 7877), to 4 January.*

## The Good Neighbour

The return of BAC's brilliant maze show which takes children and their families on a thrilling interactive journey around the Old Town Hall as they unravel the memories of George, a man who lived nearby a century ago. Part treasure hunt, part like falling down a rabbit hole. *Battersea Arts Centre, London*

(020-7223 2223), 6 December to 4 January.

### **Silly Kings**

A new show for children and adults who haven't lost their sense of fun, inspired by the fairytale flights of fancy of Monty Python's Terry Jones. The setting will include a Spiegeltent in the grounds of Cardiff Castle, the adventures should be madcap, the humour slapstick, and the sound of the horses' hooves will definitely be made by coconut shells. *Cardiff Castle (029-2063 6464), 19 December to 4 January.*

### **Wendy and Peter Pan**

Why are there no lost girls in Neverland? The gender focus is shifted to Wendy (often portrayed as horribly soppy) in Ella Hickson's new adaptation of JM Barrie's masterpiece. Peter's refusal to grow up is contrasted with her realisation of the need to do so, in a production that promises ticking crocodiles and a murderous Captain Hook. *Royal Shakespeare theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon (0844 800 1110), 10 December to 2 March.*

### **Escape the tinsel**

#### **Let the Right One In**

Bullied boy meets vampire girl in this flesh-creeper based on a Swedish novel and horror movie. *Royal Court, London (020-7565 5000), until 21 December.*

#### **Coriolanus**

Shakespeare's greatest Roman tragedy gets a rare outing with Tom Hiddleston as the uncompromising warrior who turns his back on his native city. Mark Gatiss and Deborah Findlay co-star as Coriolanus's wise counsellor and his militant mum in an ever-topical play that warns of the dangers to democracy of strong men. *Donmar Warehouse, London (0844 871 7624), 6 December to 14 February.*

#### **Parsifal**

The Royal Opera's new production is also its belated contribution to the Wagner bicentenary celebrations - his last and most enigmatic opera, with Simon O'Neill in the title role and the wonderful René Pape as Gurnemanz. *Royal Opera House, London (020-7304 4000), 30 November to 18 December.*

#### **Ciara**

If Christmas is all about families, Ciara's Glasgow gangland clan is one you wouldn't want to meet. The magnificent Blythe Duff reprises her role in David Harrower's award-winning solo about an art dealer who realises she has been traded all her life. *Traverse, Edinburgh (0131-228 1404), 3 to 21 December.*

#### **Shobana Jeyasingh: Strange Blooms**

Jeyasingh's rich, inventive spin on her classical past is showcased in this double bill that ranges from her 1988 collaboration with Michael Nyman, *Configurations*, through to her stylish take on cities, flowers and the baroque, set to music by Gabriel Prokofiev. *Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, (020-7960 4200), 3 and 4 December.*

#### **American Psycho**

Doctor Whos are everywhere this Christmas. While David Tennant is installed at the Barbican as Richard II, Matt Smith stars in this musical thriller based on the notorious Bret Easton Ellis novel about a serial killer at large in 1980s Wall Street. Expect plenty of shock and schlock. *Almeida, London (020-7359 4404), 3 December to 25 January.*

#### **Jordi Savall**

If the viola da gamba is your thing, then a solo appearance by Savall on the instrument that established his international reputation is a must. *St George's, Bristol (0845 4024001), 6 December.*

#### **Nebraska**

Veteran actor Bruce Dern is terrific in this bitter-sweet American road movie about a grumpy, bewildered old man who journeys to Nebraska in search of a lottery payout. *On general release.*

#### **Protest Song**

Rhys Ifans plays Danny, a homeless man living rough by St Paul's, who wakes up one morning to find himself at the heart of the Occupy movement. Tim Price's monologue promises to be funny and savage, while offering a reminder of the thousands who will be homeless this Christmas. *The Shed, London (020-7452 3000), 16 December to 11 January.*

#### **Festival of Fairytales for Grown-ups**

Dare you venture into this Victorian warehouse by the Thames to meet the devil, fly with fairies, and encounter the dead? The Crick Crack Club's annual festival of bawdy performance storytelling also features live music and rum-laced hot chocolate. *Barge House, London, 11 to 15 December.*

#### **X Marks the Spot**

The London jazz underground gets into the festive spirit with a semi-improvised production from Pop-Up Circus and the Chaos Collective. Christmas has gone missing. Can a crack team from Edinburgh-fringe favourites Clout Theatre and the Xmas Big Band including rising-star jazz pianist Elliott Galvin and drummer Mark Sanders save it? *Vortex, London (020-7254 4097), 18 December.*

#### **Trevor Noah**

South African standup Noah made a big impact at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe with his set about growing up mixed-race under apartheid. *Warwick Arts Centre (024 7652 4524), Tuesday, then touring.*

#### **Brian and Robin's Christmas Compendium of Reason**

Last year, their End of the World Show featured contributions from Steve Coogan, Eric Idle and Simon Singh. This year, TV physics heart-throb Brian Cox and rationalist comic Robin Ince return with another comedy-and-science floorshow. *Hammersmith Apollo, London (0844 249 4300), 12 to 14 December.*

#### **Jonzi D - Lyrikal Fearta**

When hip-hop choreographer and impresario Jonzi D was offered an MBE, the conflicting emotions he experienced inspired him to choreograph *The Letter*. It returns to the stage alongside a new work that examines old and new school generations of hip-hop artists. *Lilian Baylis Studio, London (0844 412 4300), 9 to 11 December.*

#### **Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art**

For childless adults who plan to spend the holidays in a metropolitan setting safe from cosy family gatherings, this superb exhibition offers fun that's far from Christmassy. Best not to get a print for your grandparents. *British Museum, London (020-7323 8181), to 5 January.*

### **Seasonal singalongs**

#### **Frozen**

Disney's animated musical is a new twist on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. Elsa is a princess with the power to control snow and ice. When an evil duke exiles her to a freezing wasteland, her gutsy sister Anna must rescue her. With songs by the Book of Mormon writing duo Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez. *On general release.*

#### **The Sixteen at Christmas**

A beautifully devised touring programme, interleaving early carols with seasonal choral pieces to mark two anniversaries, Britten's centenary and the 50th anniversary of Poulenc's death, including the former's *Ceremony of Carols* and the latter's *Quatre Motets*. *St John the Evangelist, Oxford, 7 December; then touring.*

#### **Meet Me in St Louis**

Have yourself a very merry Christmas with UK stage premiere of the 1944 Judy Garland vehicle. This tiny venue should burst with festive goodwill. *Landor, London (020-7737 7276), 11 December to 18 January.*

#### **That Day We Sang**

Lives unfulfilled and missed opportunities are the subject of this play with songs about a middle-aged insurance clerk in 1960s Manchester who thinks that life might have peaked for him 40 years previ-



ously when he sang at the Free Trade Hall. Victoria Wood's 2011 charmer is reinvented for a new space. *Royal Exchange, Manchester (0161 833 9833), 5 December to 18 January.*

#### Chicago

Murder just got musical with this new revival of Kander and Ebb's tale of 1920s Chicago and femmes who prove pretty fatal to the men in their lives. Paul Kerryson's revival should give rein to the mix of comedy and corruption that exposes this adult musical's dark heart. *Curve, Leicester (0116 242 3595), 29 November to 11 January.*

#### Michael Clark

Clark has always claimed rock music as his most formative influence, alongside his Royal Ballet training - and this triple bill is set to Scritti Politti, Relaxed Muscle, Sex Pistols and Pulp. *Barbican, London (020-7638 8891), 22 to 30 November.*

#### Kurt Vile and the Violators

Celebrate the end of 2013 with the maker of one of the albums of the year. Wakin' on A Pretty Daze by Philadelphia singer-songwriter Kurt Vile (his real name) is hypnotic and beautiful, packed with long, slowly unfurling songs and surprisingly witty lyrics. *Various venues, (kurtvile.com/live), 11 to 17 December.*

#### Warp x Tate

Collaboration between the UK indie label (famed for techno, but far more eclectic than that) and artist Jeremy Deller, Warp x Tate features sound installations by Rustie, Oneohtrix Point Never and Hudson Mohawke, and a performance by Deller's Acid Brass: a brass band performing old rave hits. *Tate Britain, London (020-7887 8888), 6 December.*

#### Calvin Harris and Tiësto

Giant EDM festive jamboree: the sheer size of the venues visited by the two DJs showing the commercial impact of this strain of dance music. *Various venues, 18 to 23 December.*

### Perfect pantos

#### Aladdin and Twanky

Great excitement at Big news from the Royal: tThis year's panto will have an exciting addition - a plot. One of the great annual shindigs with a great dame in Berwick Kaler, spectacular sets and groan-inducing jokes. *Theatre Royal, York (01904 623568), 12 December to 1 February.*

#### A Gay in a Manger

The nativity story gets a queer makeover, with lifestyle gurus Tranny and Roseannah giving tips on manger decoration. Should be outrageous trashy

fun for adults only. *The Arches, Glasgow (0141 565 1000), 12 to 21 December.*

#### Jack and the Beanstalk

Its 30 years since Kenneth Alan Taylor first donned his frock to play Dame Daisy. This will be his last panto, but it's less of swansong than a melodious moo. *Nottingham Playhouse (0115 941 9419), 29 November to 18 January.*

#### Peter Pan and the Incredible Stinkerbell

Terrible Tink has always been a tearaway, but now she's got flatulence too. JM Barrie's story remade as a wild romp that will make us all clap our hands and say we believe in fairies. *Tron, Glasgow (0141 552 4267), 29 November to 4 January.*

#### Dick Whittington

Will the streets be paved with Olympic gold? Will the cat get the cream? We can't answer those questions, but we're confident this will be one of London's finest pantos in a theatre that lends itself to the art form. *Theatre Royal Stratford East, London (020-8534 0310), to 11 January.*

### Gather round the TV

#### Moonfleet

A sumptuous new adaptation of J Meade Falkner's 1898 novel of diamonds and smuggling. Sky's Christmas dramas have faltered in the past, but this - starring Ray Winstone, Phil Daniels and Aneurin Barnard - looks like perfect family fare. *Sky 1.*

#### Death Comes to Pemberley

Having run out of books by Jane Austen, BBC1 gets as close as possible to a new *Pride and Prejudice* in an adaptation of PD James's crime-fiction sequel. *BBC1, TV timings not yet finalised.*

#### Still Open All Hours

The ghosts of Christmas schedules past haunt some of the BBC's most-anticipated offerings. In the absence of Ronnie Barker, David Jason takes over Arkwright's grocer's shop in a revival of Roy Clarke's sitcom *Open All Hours*. *BBC1.*

#### Nan

Despite repeated suggestions that she had hung up the cardigan of her highest-profile character, Catherine Tate has been persuaded to return in a special edition of *Nan*, with commissioners hoping it can repeat the success of *Nan's Christmas Carol* some years back. *BBC1.*

#### 12 Drinks of Christmas

Christmas is all about two things: alcohol and worrying that Alexander Armstrong lacks the ability to say no. This show - where he and his brother-in-law Giles Coren attempt to assemble the perfect selec-

tion pack of Christmas booze - has both. *BBC2.*

#### Man Down

Traditionally, sitcoms have to be established and beloved to warrant a Christmas special. *Man Down* - Greg Davies's brilliant new offering - is neither. How will the show's funniest scenes, usually the ones where Rik Mayall attacks Davies while dressed as a bear, translate to the festive season? *Channel 4.*

#### Sherlock

Sherlock finally returns after delays caused by writer Steven Moffat's *Doctor Who* commitments and Benedict Cumberbatch's soaring movie career. *BBC1.*

### For the parsnip peelers

#### Iggy Pop's Christmas show

Christmas lunchtime wouldn't be the same without a screaming topless man. Mr Pop will present a two-hour radio show about "joy and compulsion". And then, because there's nothing more festive than cognitive dissonance, you'll watch the Queen's speech. *BBC 6 Music.*

#### Desert Island Discs

Would Miranda Hart actually listen to any music if she was on a desert island? Surely she'd be too busy tripping over the gramophone again and again. Nevertheless, the Sunday before Christmas we hear her choices, redundant as they obviously are. *Radio 4, 11.15am, 22 December.*

#### National Velvet

This new adaptation of Enid Bagnold's classic starring Alison Steadman and John Sessions sounds like precisely the thing to tune into. *Radio 4, 2.15pm, Christmas Day and Boxing Day.*

#### Friday Night is Music Night

Ken Bruce presents a star-studded Christmas concert by the BBC Concert Orchestra. If you've ever wanted to hear what the West End's biggest names sound like doing Christmas standards, this is for you. *Radio 2, 20 December.*

#### The Radio 4 Comedy Advent Calendar

Throughout December, acts like Mitchell and Webb, Lenny Henry, Sue Perkins and Johnny Vegas will pop up all over the place - from *Today* to *Woman's Hour* - to deliver their politely skewed take on the world. All the fun of a real advent calendar, without the disappointing sliver of chocolate that tastes like cardboard.

*Selections by Lyn Gardner, Michael Billington, Andrew Clements, Alexis Petridis, Judith Mackrell, John Fordham, Brian Logan, Stuart Heritage, Mark Lawson, Jonathan Jones*

# Writers and critics on the best books of 2013

**Hilary Mantel, Jonathan Franzen, Mohsin Hamid, Ruth Rendell, Tom Stoppard, Malcolm Gladwell, Eleanor Catton and many more recommend the books that impressed them this year**  
By Briony Kidd

## Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

*Five Star Billionaire* by Tash Aw (Fourth Estate) is a brilliant, sprawling, layered and unsentimental portrayal of contemporary China. It made me think and laugh. I also love Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (Hamish Hamilton), which is a sharp-eyed and funny satire about the obsession with "sharing" our lives through technology. It's convincing and a little creepy.

## William Boyd

By strange coincidence two of the most intriguing art books I read this year had the word "Breakfast" in their titles. They were *Breakfast with Lucian* by Geordie Greig (Jonathan Cape) and *Breakfast at Sotheby's* by Philip Hook (Particular). Greig's fascinating, intimate biography of Lucian Freud was a revelation. Every question I had about Freud - from the aesthetic to the intrusively gossipy - was answered with great candour and judiciousness. Hook's view of the art world is that of the professional auctioneer. In an A-Z format, it is an entire art education contained in under 350 pages. Wry, dry and completely beguiling.

## Bill Bryson

*The Compatibility Gene* by Daniel M Davis (Allen Lane) is an elegantly written, unexpectedly gripping account of how scientists painstakingly unravelled the way in which a small group of genes (known as MHC genes) crucially influence, and unexpectedly interconnect, various aspects of our lives, from how well we fight off infection to how skilfully we find a mate. Lab work has rarely been made to seem more interesting or heroic. But my absolute book of the year is Philip Davies's hefty, gorgeous *London: Hidden Interiors* (English Heritage/Atlantic Publishing), which explores 180 fabulous London interior spaces that most people know nothing about, from George Gilbert Scott's wondrous chapel at King's College to L Manze's eel, pie and mash shop in Walthamstow. It is beautifully illustrated with photographs by Derek Randall and worth every penny of its £40 price.

## Eleanor Catton

My discovery of the year was Eimear McBride's debut novel *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (Galley Beggar Press): in style, very similar to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, but the broken ellipses never feel like a gimmick or a game. I was utterly devastated by Colin McAdam's *A Beautiful Truth* (Granta), and utterly delighted by Elizabeth Knox's sly and ingenious *Mortal Fire* (Farrar Straus Giroux). My favourite novel for children published this year was the marvellously funny and inventive *Heap House* (Hot Key), written and illustrated by Edward Carey.

## Shami Chakrabarti

Helping to judge this year's Samuel Johnson prize meant getting stuck into some serious non-fiction. The six books that made the shortlist - *Empires of the Dead* (David Crane, William Collins), *Return of a King* (William Dalrymple, Bloomsbury), *A Sting in the Tale* (Dave Goulson, Jonathan Cape), *Under Another Sky* (Charlotte Higgins, Jonathan Cape), *The Pike* (Lucy Hughes-Hallett, Fourth Estate) and *Margaret Thatcher* (Charles Moore, Allen Lane) - are among my favourites from 2013. Dalrymple's masterful retelling of the first Afghan war had an eerie modern-day relevance, while Hughes-Hallett's portrayal of the fascist poet Gabriele D'Annunzio was a sombre reminder of the perils of political extremism. On a completely contrary note, Goulson's case for the importance of bumblebees will live long in my memory for its sheer passion and scientific detail.

## Sarah Churchwell

Janet Malcolm's *Forty-One False Starts* (Granta) provides a masterclass on the art of the essay from one of its most formidable living practitioners - often, as with the title essay, by sharing object lessons in failure. These occasional pieces offer glimpses into the creative process, the writer's constant search for structure, order and consonance. Even when individual essays did not live up to Malcolm's rigorous standards, the collection as a whole shows how connections emerge from the workings of one memorably searching, restless, ruthless mind.

## Jim Crace

The four non-fiction books I most valued this year have an unusual strength and depth in common; the single themes they profess to focus on are also the Trojan horses through which their writers smuggle in a whole wide world of instruction, knowledge and contemporary significance. They are: *Spillover*, David Quammen's investigation of animal-to-human viruses (Vintage); *Falling Upwards* (Harper Collins), Richard Holmes's history of ballooning; *The Searchers* (Bloomsbury), Glenn Frankel's account of the 1836 abduction by Comanches of Cynthia Ann Parker and its unending aftermath; and Mark Cocker's loving and magisterial *Birds and People* (Jonathan Cape).

## Roddy Doyle

George Saunders's collection of stories, *Tenth of December* (Bloomsbury), is spectacularly good. The stories are clever and moving, and the title story is the best piece of fiction I've read this year. *The Searchers*, by Glenn Frankel, is about the stories behind the story that became the classic John Ford film. It's a history of America, an exploration of

racial intolerance, an account of how, and why, real events can become legends. It's also hugely entertaining - as well as huge. My favourite book this year is Paul Morley's *The North (And Almost Everything in It)* (Bloomsbury). History told backwards, a memoir, a love letter to Liverpool, several to Manchester; the book pushed me to go to the Lowry exhibition at the Tate and made me listen again to George Formby and the Buzzcocks. The book filled my head. It was much too long and occasionally irritating, but when I got to the end I wished there'd been more of it.

## Richard Ford

James Salter's novel *All That Is* (Picador). Not in my (admittedly failing) memory have I read a novel that, at its crucial moment, made me just stand straight up out of my chair and have to walk around the room for several minutes. Laid into the customary Salterish verbal exquisiteness and vivid intelligence is such remarkable audacity and dark-hued verve about us poor humans. It's a great novel.

## Jonathan Franzen

My vote is for Eric Schlosser's *Command and Control* (Allen Lane). Do you really want to read about the thermonuclear warheads that are still aimed at the city where you live? Do you really need to know about the appalling security issues that have dogged nuclear weapons in the 70 years since their invention? Yes, you do. Schlosser's book reads like a thriller, but it's masterfully even-handed, well researched, and well organised. Either he's a natural genius at integrating massive amounts of complex information, or he worked like a dog to write this book. You wouldn't think the prospect of nuclear apocalypse would make for a reading treat, but in Schlosser's hands it does.

## Antonia Fraser

*The Poets' Daughters* by Katie Waldegrave (Hutchinson) is an engrossing study of Dora Wordsworth and Sara Coleridge. A double biography is an intricate pattern to achieve, but Waldegrave brings it off triumphantly: she also brings compassion as well as scholarship to her aid, so that at times the story is almost unbearably moving. After reading this book, I went right back to the paternal poetry and read it with fresh eyes. *Olivier* by Philip Ziegler (MacLehose Press), published appropriately enough as the National Theatre celebrates its 50th anniversary, is another narrative that sweeps you along. While in no sense a hagiography - there is plenty of discreet criticism when necessary - it enriched my sense of this amazing multi-faceted, multi-talented man. When I watch *Henry V*, for the umpteenth time, I shall gaze into those brilliant enigmatic eyes with even more awe, and a certain amount of apprehension.

## Stephen Frears

Best read of the year was *Into the Silence* (Vintage), Wade Davis's account of the three unsuccessful Everest expeditions, through the back door of Tibet, culminating in the death of George Mallory in 1924. Men from the first world war showing endurance and a capacity for suffering beyond my comprehension. Maybe the prime minister should read it before he makes an idiot of himself. Oh and *Love, Nina* by Nina Stibbe (Viking). But I would say that since it's about my ex-wife and our children. Letters from their Leicester nanny. Very funny and sharp.



## Malcolm Gladwell

I read so many books this year that I loved - Jeremy Adelman's biography of Albert O Hirschman, *Worldly Philosopher* (Princeton University Press), David Epstein's *The Sports Gene* (Yellow Jersey), and Jonathan Dee's magnificent *A Thousand Pardons* (Corsair) - but my favourite was a novel I picked up entirely randomly, in an airport bookstore: *The Paris Architect* by Charles Belfoure (Sourcebooks Landmark). It is a beautiful and elegant account of an ordinary man's unexpected and reluctant descent into heroism during the second world war. I have no idea who Belfoure is, but he needs to write another book, now!

## John Gray

Adam Phillips' *One Way and Another: New and Selected Essays* (Hamish Hamilton). Writing of Ford Madox Ford's hero Tietjens in *Parade's End*, who in the middle of a conversation suddenly wondered if he was in fact the father of his child but "proved his reputation for sanity" by going on talking without any sign of distress, Phillips comments: "As though sanity for this Englishman was about being apparently undisturbed by one's most disturbing thoughts." Witty and somehow liberating, it's a comment that could only come from Phillips. Covering a wide variety of topics - "On Being Bored", "First Hates", "On Success" and "The Uses of Forgetting" are just a few - these short pieces from the psychotherapist and critic will confirm him as the best living essayist writing in English.

## Mark Haddon

*The Great War* edited by Mark Holborn, text by Hilary Roberts (Jonathan Cape). A collection of photographs from the vast holdings of the Imperial War Museums. I have never seen or read anything that brings the first world war quite so vividly alive. Some of the events of 1914-1918 have been told and retold so many times that the whole conflict has, for many people, acquired an obscuring antique patina. This book strips it all away. It will make me seem a fool, perhaps, but I kept turning pages and thinking, my God, these are real people. These things actually happened.

## Mohsin Hamid

Those unfamiliar with the American short-form master George Saunders should go out immediately and pick up a copy of his latest story collection, *Tenth of December*. Wow. Sharp and fun. Also, we should all be grateful for the New York Review Books Classics series, which this year has brought us Frances Pritchett's English translation of Intizar Husain's famous Urdu novel, *Basti*. Husain was nominated for the 2013 Man Booker International prize, and this, his best-known work, deserves a UK publisher.

## Robert Harris

In 1983, the 50-year lease on a safe deposit box on the island of Mallorca expired. It was opened and found to contain tens of thousands of pages of the diary of a minor German aristocrat, Count Harry Kessler (1868-1937), covering the years from 1880 to 1918. These have now been meticulously translated and edited by Laird M Easton, and the result is *Journey to the Abyss* (Vintage), a 900-page marvel. Kessler, an aesthete and amateur diplomat, trav-

elled relentlessly between Paris, Berlin and London before the first world war and the list of his friends and acquaintances, each vividly described, is staggering: Bonnard, Cocteau, Nijinsky, Stravinsky, Diaghilev, Ravel, Rodin, Renoir, Gide, Monet, Mahler, Matisse, William Morris, Richard Strauss, Strindberg, Rilke, Verlaine, George Bernard Shaw, Hofmannsthal, Gordon Craig, Munch, Sarah Bernhardt, Max Reinhardt, George Grosz, Nietzsche (whose death mask he helps make), Walter Rathenau, Gustav Stresemann, HG Wells, Augustus John ... And then comes August 1914 and Kessler - hitherto the most cultured companion - joins the Kaiser's army and briefly becomes a swaggering German nationalist. An important, underappreciated, unforgettable book.

## Max Hastings

Thomas Harding's *Hanns and Rudolf* (William Heinemann) tells the story of how a young German Jewish refugee serving in the British army - the author's uncle - was responsible in 1945 for tracking down and arresting Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz and one of the most dreadful mass murderers of all time. Harding sketches the parallel lives of the SS officer with notable skill. The book is a moving reminder of what an extraordinary amount Britain gained by the Jewish flight from Europe in the 1930s - it could have been still more had we offered a warmer welcome to a host of German scientists who moved on to the US.

## Philip Hensher

Volume one of Charles Moore's *Margaret Thatcher* (Allen Lane) is an extraordinary reconstruction of a political way of life now completely vanished, written with a clear eye and full of incidental pleasures. (Not least about the surprising number of adoring gay men surrounding her at all stages.) The novel I enjoyed most was Richard House's sensational pile-driver, *The Kills* (Picador). Catching-up reading brought me Tapan Raychaudhuri's superb memoir, *The World in Our Time* (HarperCollins India), not yet published in the UK, but full of the tumultuous life of the Bengal delta - a masterpiece.

## Simon Hoggart

*An Officer and a Spy* by Robert Harris (Hutchinson). Hard to imagine a thriller where you know the ending before you pick up the book, but Harris's retelling of the Dreyfus case is as taut and exciting as anything by Forsyth or Follett. The tale is told through the eyes of Col Picquart, the head of "the statistical section" within the French secret service, who witnessed Dreyfus's degradation but gradually came to realise that another officer was the traitor. The story of how he went over the heads of his superiors, none of whom wanted to rock the ship of state, is gripping, the evocation of turn-of-the-century France appealing, and the ending is magnificently downbeat, a terrific anticlimax - if that's possible.

## AM Homes

*Woody Guthrie's Wardy Forty: Greystone Park State Hospital Revisited* by Phillip Buehler (Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc) is a hauntingly beautiful book about the five years the American folk legend, songwriter and activist spent as a patient at the Greystone Park State Hospital in New Jersey.

Guthrie, who had Huntington's disease, lived among the mental patients on ward 40. It was here that he was introduced to the 19-year-old Bob Dylan. Photographer Phillip Buehler, who has made a career of exploring 20th-century ruins, first climbed into Greystone through a window. The beauty of the decaying building, thick curls of paint peeling off the walls, light seeping into long empty narrow patient rooms like cells, spurred his curiosity. He located Guthrie's files and, working with archivists and the Guthrie family, was able to put together a portrait of a man, a place and a point in American history when large state hospitals were all too often warehouses for humanity. There are notes from doctors indicating they had no idea who Guthrie was; or they saw him as a wanderer a vagrant, and thought his claims about songwriting were delusions of grandeur. A particular quote from Woody's son Arlo stayed with me - a patient tells Woody that he loved his book *Bound for Glory*. "You read my book?" Woody asks. "No, I ate your book," the patient says.

## Barbara Kingsolver

I love surprise finds, so I'll recommend two debut novels that swept me away. *The Golem and the Jinni* by Helene Wecker (Blue Door), has the detailed realism of historical fiction, the haunting feel of a folk tale, and is one of only two novels I've ever loved whose main characters are not human. (The other was *The White Bone* by Barbara Gowdy.) And Susan Nussbaum's *Good Kings, Bad Kings* (out in March 2014 from Oneworld Publications) is a ferociously honest, funny, completely unstoppable trip through an institutionally corrupt home for disabled teenagers. I had no intention of going where they took me. That's the thrill of fiction.

## David Kynaston

Kenneth Roy's *The Invisible Spirit: A Life of Postwar Scotland 1945-75* (ICS) is by someone who lived through the period but is admirably unsentimental. Well-informed, highly readable, slightly prickly, often opinionated - not least about the seriously flawed Scottish establishment - this feels like something that needed to be written. *Ian Nairn: Words in Place* (Five Leaves) by Gillian Darley and David McKie - I am far from alone in having the awkward, melancholic architectural writer and broadcaster as one of my heroes: partly for his deep conviction that the built environment mattered, partly for his insistence - in defiance of modernist orthodoxy - that people mattered more. One day no doubt Nairn will get a heavy-duty biography, but for the time being this elegant, rather slighter treatment does the job with charm and just the right degree of critical affection.

## John Lanchester

Nina Stibbe's *Love, Nina*, a collection of letters to her sister from the period in the mid-80s when she was working as a nanny, is funny and sharp and has a distinctive streak of wildness: no book this year made me laugh more. Also funny and sharp, though in a darker vein, is ASA Harrison's he-said, she-said psychological thriller, *The Silent Wife* (Headline). Finally, the last entry in the funny-sharp stakes are the novels of Penelope Fitzgerald, which I've been reading thanks to Hermione Lee's biography, *Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life* (Chatto & Windus). The odd thing is that Lee's book has had more influence on my reading than anything else this year, even though I'm not going to read the biography itself





Illustration by Rachel Gannon at [eyecandy.co.uk](http://eyecandy.co.uk)

until I've finished the novels. That's because I don't want prematurely to spoil the mystery of how Fitzgerald could have known so much about so many worlds, from pre-revolutionary Moscow to 60s theatre-school London to German Romanticism. (I think I can guess how she knew so much about houseboats and bookshops.) Last recommendation: Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (OUP USA), an extraordinary and very controversial intervention in the current ructions about science and religion, from one of the world's most respected philosophers.

#### Mark Lawson

On either side of the Atlantic, two octogenarian grand masters of espionage fiction were on high form: John le Carré's *A Delicate Truth* (Viking) and Charles McCarry's *The Shanghai Factor* (Head of Zeus) dramatise the cumulative consequences of decades of spying and lying by the victors of the second world war. Drawing on a lifetime of learning, and defying several life-threatening conditions, Clive James translated *Dante: The Divine Comedy* (Picador) into punchy, theologically serious and frequently funny verse. Julian Barnes reformed the conventional autobiography in *Levels of Life* (Jonathan Cape), combining essay, fiction and memoir in reflecting on the death of love, while Hermione Lee rethought the conventions of biography in a compelling account of the life and work (and overlaps between) of the until now underrated writer Penelope Fitzgerald. And, as readers migrate to the ebook, two lavishly produced volumes made the case for the physical book: a new edition (including the Olympic Flame bowl) of Thomas Heatherwick's thrilling design compendium *Making*

(Thames & Hudson) and JJ Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (Canongate): an astonishing interactive project that encloses secret books and secret readers within what seems to be a 1949 library book.

#### Penelope Lively

Hermione Lee's *Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life* is literary biography at its best - a masterly discussion of the work of that fine novelist and an illuminating account of the life of a complex and elusive person. I thought I knew both the work and the writer pretty well but have learned much - new insights into the novels, aspects of her life of which I knew nothing. Nobody does elderly men better than Jane Gardam. *Last Friends* (Little, Brown) is the concluding volume in her trilogy about the legal pack - Feathers, Veneering, Fiscal-Smith - that began with *Old Filth*. Throughout the series Jane Gardam has switched viewpoints with extraordinary dexterity. Elegant, funny, unexpected - *Last Friends* ties things up. I am a long-time fan of Adam Thorpe. His versatility is remarkable - historical novels, shrewd forays into contemporary life. And now a thriller, *Flight* (Vintage). It zips from the Middle East to the Outer Hebrides - brilliant plotting, a mesmerising read.

#### Robert Macfarlane

Never a man to take a straight line where a diversion was possible, Patrick Leigh Fermor spent almost 50 years not-quite-finishng the final book of his trilogy describing his walk across Europe in the 1930s. It appeared this autumn as *The Broken Road* (John Murray), two years after his death, brought to publication by Artemis Cooper and Colin Thubron. I opened it expecting disappointment - how could it

be as good as its sibling volumes? - and ended it amazed. I read Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (Granta) three times in my capacity as Man Booker judge, and each time round it yielded new riches. It is a vastly complex novel about investment and return, gift and theft, value and worth, which - in performance of its own ethics - gives far more than it appears to possess. Finally, in minimalist contrast to Catton's maximalist novel, I loved *Wolfhou* by Autumn Richardson and Richard Skelton, another exquisitely produced pamphlet of place-poetry from Corbel Stone Press, who work out of a cottage in the western Lake District.

#### Hilary Mantel

Indulge in a big and richly satisfying literary biography, from an artist in the form: Hermione Lee's *Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life*. It will send you back to the subject's own piquant and elusive novels. But perhaps a book of the year should be a mirror of the times? If so, feed righteous indignation on Damian McBride's *Power Trip: A Decade of Policy, Plots and Spin* (Backbite). Bankrupt of morals and bankrupt of style, it is a nonpareil of peevishness, and self-delusion shines from it like a Christmas star.

#### Pankaj Mishra

The most remarkable discovery for me this year was Kirill Medvedev's *It's No Good* (Ugly Duckling Presse), a collection of poems and essays, a brilliant artistic and political response to the depredations of the Yeltsin and Putin era. Italo Calvino's *Letters: 1941-1985* (Princeton Press) and *Collection of Sand: Essays* (Penguin Modern Classics) remind us of a type of writerly mind almost extinct in Anglo-America: worldly, invariably curious, quietly passionate



and elegant. Julia Lovell's translations of Zhu Wen's stories in *The Matchmaker, the Apprentice and the Football Fan* (Columbia) yet again affirm him as one of the most interesting Chinese writers today. This was a particularly rich and exciting year in literary translations from Indian languages; the stories in Ajay Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain* (Navayana Publications), and the novels by Sachin Kundalkar (*Cobalt Blue*, Hamish Hamilton) and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (*The Mirror of Beauty*, Hamish Hamilton) hint at the yet unrevealed depth and diversity of Indian literatures.

### Blake Morrison

Adelle Waldman's first novel *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P* (William Heinemann) is memorable for its Austen-like wit, humour, social astuteness and scarily accurate insights into men. Rather than condemn the protagonist (a young New Yorker) as misogynistic and self-obsessed, Waldman sends him up, to devastating effect. Lucy Hughes-Hallett adopts a similar strategy in her terrific biography of the poet, seducer and fascist Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Pike*. The pace is hectic, as befits D'Annunzio's life, and I enjoyed the quote from the ex-lover who said his ideal would be an octopus with a hundred women's legs - but no head. Helen Mort's *Division Street* (Chatto & Windus) is an excellent first poetry collection - lucid, intelligent, politically aware, and loyal to the northern landscapes that inspired it. Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, about the abolition of privacy in the age of social media, is a must-read dystopian novel - the future it envisages has all but arrived.

### Andrew Motion

Tim Dee's *Four Fields* (Jonathan Cape) belongs in the tradition of "nature writing", but works with it too - putting its beautifully written sentences in the service of description and evocation, but using them to frame a serious conversation about environmental preservation and its opposites; it's a deeply attractive book and also an important one. *Inside the Rainbow* (Redstone Press), edited by Julian Rothenstein and Olga Budashevskaya, is a survey of Russian children's literature from 1920-35, and the subtitle tells us what to expect: "Beautiful books, terrible times". Indeed. But brilliantly clever, seditious, amusing, brave and delightful books as well; their illustrations and jackets are all reproduced here to wonderful effect. JO Morgan's long poem *At Maldon* (CB Editions) is a riff on the Old English poem, and owes something to Christopher Logue's *War Music* and Alice Oswald's *Memorial* - but it is its own thing too: inventive, striking and memorable. And a reminder that Morgan is one of the most original poets around.

### Edna O'Brien

*La Folie Baudelaire* by Roberto Galasso (Allen Lane) is a brilliant kaleidoscopic rendering of the tormented poet, his times and the city of Paris that "breathes" in his prose and poetry. We meet Baudelaire the dandy, his indecorous mistress Jeanne, both muse and vampire, his mother Caroline and his hated stepfather General Aupick, who, in the bloodshed of 1848, Baudelaire asked one of the insurgents to shoot. It is one of the most satisfying biographies I have ever read. Sylvia Plath: *Drawings* (Faber), lovingly compiled by her daughter Frieda Hughes, shows Plath's observation of everyday things - a thistle, a horse chestnut, the willows near Grantchester. It is also salutary to compare the aus-

terity of her poetry with the rapture in her letters to her husband (included here), in which she envisages his presence "come day, come night, come hurricane and holocaust ..." *Dear Boy* by Emily Berry (Faber): from the evidence here, this poet's imagination is rich, playful and restless, with the occasional note of anguish, which Plath would surely approve of, like a glimpse of the first crocus. Last, but by no means least, Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (Doubleday Ireland) is funny, moving and beautifully written.

### Susie Orbach

Alan Rusbridger's *Play It Again: An Amateur Against the Impossible* is a wonderful account of trying to learn a complex piano piece while running the Guardian at the time of WikiLeaks and phone hacking. I had to skip some of the accounts of the fingering he is learning but he eloquently expresses the struggle to take up the playing of this piece - the Chopin Ballade No 1 - and segues into fascinating accounts of different historic pianos and the idiosyncratic manner individual musicians use them, and his various "teachers", who mostly sound very strict, alongside the emergencies from the office. A parallel story of how newspapers can move forward in the digital age runs along the narrative. I am always curious about people's daily lives and their curiosities. This book gives both in abundance.

### Ian Rankin

Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* (Doubleday) is her most challenging, complex and compelling novel yet. A woman has the chance to live life over and over again in often surprising ways. No Booker listing: no justice. Louise Doughty's *Apple Tree Yard* (Faber) is ostensibly a courtroom drama that asks how its sensible, intelligent middle-class heroine ended up in the dock in a murder case - beguilingly written, steely and plausible and occasionally shocking. Niccolò Ammaniti was a new name to me. *Let the Games Begin* (Canongate) is a wild ride with the fevered quality of Pynchon and Vonnegut as a party to end all parties sees the various characters vying to survive a grotesque uprising. It's a satire on contemporary culture, Italian politics and the writing profession itself. Funny, sharp, and really quite rude. In a similar vein, John Niven's *Straight White Male* (William Heinemann) is the story of a hugely successful Irish screenwriter and his gloriously incorrect behaviour. There are laughs aplenty, but Niven adds growing poignancy as his hero becomes self-aware. It is Niven's best book, and the protagonist is easily the match of John Self in Martin Amis's *Money*.

### Ruth Rendell

My choice isn't a new book, but it was reissued this year. I'm ashamed that I had never heard of *Stoner* by John Williams (Vintage) until I found it in a bookshop three months ago. I was stunned by it, it's so good. And yet very little happens in it except joy and pain and sorrow in the American midwest, love and passion and the mistakes everyone makes. It's beautifully written in simple but brilliant prose, a novel of an ordinary life, an examination of a quiet tragedy, the work of a great but little-known writer.

### Lionel Shriver

Three novels stand out for me in 2013: *Visitation Street* by Ivy Pochoda (Sceptre), set in Red Hook,

Brooklyn; two girls venture out on a pink inflatable raft into the filthy East River and only one comes back. Great writing, great setting, beautifully rendered characters. *The Son* by Phillipp Meyer (Simon & Schuster): an epic set in Texas that uses, among other things, that white-man-raised-by-Indians routine, and yet incredibly it doesn't feel tired. Totally engrossing. Lastly, Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* (Virago), which teems with fury, and tells a tale of breathtaking betrayal. It's a great study as well in the (possibly?) unreliable narrator. You keep puzzling over whether this woman is completely off her head.

### Helen Simpson

Hermione Lee's fascinating biography of Penelope Fitzgerald charts a life that travelled the full 360 degrees on the wheel of fortune - from early promise and privilege down to dramatic middle-aged doldrums then back up to a late-blooming two decades of literary productivity and success. I'm now reading Fitzgerald's last four novels, which are every bit as breathtaking as Lee's concluding chapters describe. I read Nikolai Leskov's *The Enchanted Wanderer* for the first time this year in a vigorous new translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Admired by Chekhov, Gorky and Tolstoy, these stories seethe with picaresque unpredictability, outlandish but touching monologues and recklessly impulsive characters like the country girl turned femme fatale in *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*.

### Tom Stoppard

This is the time of year when I try in vain to remember what I was reading up to 12 months ago, and end up choosing three books I've enjoyed in the last 12 weeks. In the present case, these are *Nature's Oracle* by Ullica Segerstrale (OUP), a biography of WD (Bill) Hamilton, the evolutionary biologist whose insight into the operation of kin selection at gene level suggested how altruism might have emerged from natural selection; a hugely enjoyable novel, *Bleeding Edge* by Thomas Pynchon (Jonathan Cape), who, when he's in his hardboiled vein, writes the most entertaining dialogue in any year; and *The New York Times Book of Mathematics*, which is what it sounds like: a century of news from maths written up for a general readership, and nobody does it better.

### Colm Tóibín

*Titian: His Life* by Sheila Hale (HarperPress) manages an intimate and careful study of Titian's body of work, plus an intricate knowledge of politics and art in 16th-century Venice and in the Europe from which Titian received his commissions. She captures Titian's vast ambition and does justice to his achievement, but also creates a portrait of an age. Reiner Stach's *Kafka: The Decisive Years* and *Kafka: The Years of Insight* (Princeton University Press) are the second and third volumes of a three-volume biography. Stach reads the work and the life with minute care and sympathy. He has a deep understanding of the world that Kafka came from and the personalities who touched his life, and this is matched by an intelligence and tact about the impulse behind the work itself.



