

Ticket

THE IRISH TIMES culture magazine



Once you mess with your face you can't get it back. I tried plastic surgery and it didn't work. It got me addicted to

Vicodin. I'm 22 years sober now
Jamie Lee Curtis



STAGE

Power Hour Playwright
Caitríona Daly on sending up office culture in her new play for the Abbey Theatre

TELEVISION

Laura Slattery RTÉ's **Traitors** spin-off isn't just a TV show. And it will probably have the giant microphones to prove it

BOOKS

Overturning of regimes From the Iranian revolution to post-Assad Syria
Reviews **How Countries Go Broke** by Ray Dalio; **Vera, or Faith** by Gary Shteyngart

Saturday, August 9, 2025

irishtimes.com/culture



**'I'D NEVER BEGRUDGE
SOMEBODY FOR LEAVING'**

DAVID BALFE TAKES US ON A TOUR OF HIS HOME TURF

The Guide

EVENT OF THE WEEK

The Rocky Horror Show

From Monday, August 11th, until Saturday, August 16th, Bord Gáis Energy Theatre, Dublin, 7.30pm, €57.95/€52.30/€41.05, [ticketmaster.ie](https://www.ticketmaster.ie)

From its theatrical debut in the West End of London, in 1973, to its ongoing tour of Britain and Ireland, The Rocky Horror Show is the stage musical that refuses to retire. It success of Richard O'Brien's beloved creation has broadened its reach far beyond cult status. For its Dublin shows, the Australian actor and singer Jason Donovan plays the pansexual scientist Dr Frank-N-Furter, alongside the broadcaster Jennifer Zamparelli as the Narrator. The film version has been playing in cinemas for 50 years, so you almost certainly know the songs – Dammit, Janet!, Sweet Transvestite and the perennial Time Warp – while the show's legacy of celebrating difference is still important.

TONY CLAYTON-LEA



The Rocky Horror Show. Right: Andreea Banciu. Below: Negro Impacto, Space Cadet, Public Image Ltd

TALK

Éire to Everywhere

Thursday, August 14th, Epic Museum, Dublin, 5pm, free (booking required), [epicchq.com](https://www.epicchq.com)
With the Gallagher brothers and their Oasis juggernaut at Croke Park for two shows next weekend, this is a timely discussion about the pivotal role that musicians of Irish descent played in the development of British pop and rock. Sean Campbell, professor of media, music and popular culture at Anglia Ruskin University, in England, and the author of the 2011 book Irish Blood, English Heart: Second-Generation Irish Musicians in England, will talk about the topic based on his wide-ranging archival research and original interviews.

GIGS

Public Image Ltd

Friday, August 15th, Cyprus Avenue, Cork, 7pm, €48.35, [ticketmaster.ie](https://www.ticketmaster.ie)
When the Sex Pistols imploded, at the start of 1978, few could have predicted that their provocative frontman, John Lydon, would go on to form one of the era's most important postpunk bands. Musically as far removed from the Sex Pistols as one could imagine, Public Image Ltd's first two albums – First Issue, from 1978, and Metal Box, from the following year – pushed postpunk into uncommercial areas often



imitated but rarely bettered. That contentious legacy remains, although Lydon, the sole remaining founder member, has over the decades occasionally sweetened the proverbial pill with some cracking pop-oriented songs.

Stiff Little Fingers

Friday, August 15th, Academy, Dublin, 7pm, €38.15; Saturday, August 16th, Custom House Square, Belfast, 6pm, £50.05, [ticketmaster.ie](https://www.ticketmaster.ie)
Making their umpteenth return to Ireland, Stiff Little Fingers bring with them about a dozen songs that more than 40 years later still make an impact. Two original founding members, Jake Burns and Ali McMor-



die, are present and correct, as are their punk-rock classics Suspect Device and Alternative Ulster, alongside other spiky tunes such as Wasted Life, 78rpm, Tin Soldiers and Nobody's Hero. Special guests for the Belfast show are Public Image Ltd.

Féile na Gréine

From Friday, August 15th, until Sunday, August 17th, various venues, times and prices, Limerick city, [feilelk.ie](https://www.feilelk.ie)
Féile na Gréine DIY festival champions Ireland's independent and underground scene with three days of music, theatre and performance art by emerging and experimental artists. Grassroots links and inclusivity within the arts are at its heart,

BOOK IT
THIS WEEK

● Daniel Sloss, Vicar Street, Dublin, September 27th, [ticketmaster.ie](https://www.ticketmaster.ie)
● Rinse/Amrita Hapi, October 10th-11th, Firkin Crane, Cork, [dancecork.com](https://www.dancecork.com)
● Richard Hawley, 30 Olympia Theatre, Dublin, October 22nd, [ticketmaster.ie](https://www.ticketmaster.ie)
● Biffy Clyro, 3 Arena, Dublin, January 10th, [ticketmaster.ie](https://www.ticketmaster.ie)



Julia Garner in *Weapons*.
Photograph: Warner Bros

FOUR FILMS TO SEE THIS WEEKEND

Freakier Friday ★★★★★

Directed by Nisha Ginatra. Starring Lindsay Lohan, Jamie Lee Curtis, Julia Butters, Sophia Hammons, Mann Jacinto, Mark Harmon. PG cert, gen release, 110 min. Lohan and Curtis are back, 20 years later, for a sequel to the hugely popular body-swap comedy. This time it's a double switch with the younger woman's daughter and her imminent daughter-in-law. The results are messy but charming. Jordan Weiss's screenplay is not short of zingers. "I put my heart and soul into those songs," Lohan's pop-star charge whines. "No, a 44-year-old Dutch music producer did," comes the pithy retort. This old-school confection, smartly reuniting the original cast, delights in every silly scene. Much better than recent dire disinterments such as *Hocus Pocus 2*. **TARA BRADY**

Conor Walsh: Selected Piano Works ★★★★★

Directed by Keith Walsh. Featuring Conor Walsh. 12A cert, limited release, 64 min. Touching documentary about the late ambient musician combines archival interviews with musical excerpts to attractive visuals. Much of those sequences could work in a gallery setting, but the film is also a touching study of a fascinating, if allusive, personality. Walsh's is the only voice we hear, and, while he is elliptical about the music, he has much to (gently) tell us about a life lived under the cultural radar. He died tragically, at 36, from a

heart attack in 2016. One can hardly imagine a better memorial than this quietly persuasive, impressively original project. **DONALD CLARKE**

Weapons ★★★★★

Directed by Zach Cregger. Starring Josh Brolin, Julia Garner, Alden Ehrenreich, Austin Abrams, Cary Christopher, Benedict Wong, Amy Madigan. 16 cert, 128 min, gen release

We begin with a voiceover explaining how, in the small hours of a strange morning, all but one among 18 members of the same elementary-school class rose from their beds and, arms extended, ran silently into apparent oblivion. Cregger's follow-up to the fine horror *Barbarian* goes on to tell the subsequent grim story from several perspectives: a teacher, a parent, a vagrant and so forth. The set-up is neat. The acting is excellent. But we are essentially looking at the best ever Stephen King adaptation to not actually be adapted from a Stephen King story. **DC**

The Kingdom ★★★★★

Directed by Julien Colonna. Starring Ghjuvanna Benedetti, Saveriu Santucci, Anthony Morganti, Andrea Cossu, Frédéric Poggi. No cert, limited release, 108 min. Lesia, the 15-year-old heroine of Julien Colonna's riveting 1990s crime saga, is hoping to go on a date with local shop-boy Fabien when she is instead deposited in a safehouse with her dad. The ominous sun-drenched Corsican landscape mirrors the uneasiness of every interaction. For all the familial complications on screen, *The Kingdom* neither mythologises nor tempers the Mafia. Violence lingers in the margins of mob dinners, boar hunts and bulletproof vests. The tight focus on Lesia and her realisation that the men she loves are also capable of monstrous things reinvigorates the form. **TB**



Mother of All the Behans

Tuesday-Saturday, August 12th-16th, Everyman Theatre, Cork, 7.30pm, €40/€37, everymancork.com

What started two years ago as a new production of Peter Sheridan's one-woman stage adaptation from 1987, originally performed by Rosaleen Linehan, has become a regular showcase for the singer Imelda May, who returns as Kathleen Kearney Behan, folk singer, republican and mother of Brendan, Dominic and the rest (including Brian, on whose book about his mother this show is based).



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How Oasis swept grunge away and took Britpop to the top



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Looking back on 90 years of Penguin Books



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Ticket

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DAVID BALFE

FOR THOSE I LOVE'S DISAPPEARING DUBLIN

The city the musician grew up in has changed almost beyond recognition. He takes us around Coolock and Donaghmede, whose people, places and politics are key drivers of his new album

CONOR CAPPLIS

David Balfe is hard to get hold of. He has switched off notifications on his phone and checks his messaging apps only infrequently. “It’s really f**king hard to do,” he says.

It’s an act of self-preservation.

In the messages, which are often beautifully written, and can amount to miniature novels, he says, people tell the musician how he has changed their lives. He has received thousands, and the flow never stops.

“I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t heard your music,” many say. The messages reassure Balfe that he’s on the right path, but in some ways the weight is unbearable.

Fame has also taken its toll on him. In 2018, Balfe’s best friend and fellow musician Paul Curran died by suicide. In the aftermath Balfe compiled some electronic beats he had been working on, full of samples and unique in character, and added spoken-word lyrics.

What began as a small release intended for his friends and family, under the name For Those I Love, quickly found a home in

the hearts of strangers who discovered his music online. Later, when the September label picked it up for an official release, in 2021, he became a star, in his own quiet, unassuming way.

For anybody also going through grief, the self-titled album feels like a tight hug, articulating vulnerability as few others have done in this type of music.

Balfe was on stage at a festival in Belgium the night before we meet, contributing a



I’ve tried to be very, very particular with this new record, not to revisit the concepts of the first. Partially because I just can’t – my soul doesn’t have it in it any more

song to a set by the Welsh electronic duo Overmono. It’s a remix of I Have a Love, the standout song from that first album.

“There are strangers wailing and coming back to life again as you play the song,” he says. “I had to go behind the stage last night to take a breather and have a bit of a cry and text my partner.” There’s a reason why he doesn’t perform very often, he says.

“I have never played that song, be it in my own shows or with Overmono, without seeing pockets of people who are clearly there together grieving somebody,” says the musician, who also performed the track with Overmono at this year’s Glastonbury festival.

“You can see pockets of five or six people all holding each other together. Sometimes it’s just emotional celebration of what I imagine to be somebody’s life.”

Balfe is about to release his second album, Carving the Stone. It’s a hot summer’s day, and we’re on his home turf, in north Dublin, to walk around Coolock and Donaghmede, places he brings to life in his music. Dressed head to toe in black, he is warm and gregarious, a far cry from the grief-stricken poet we encounter in his art.

We head for a pedestrian motorway underpass where he would come with





David Balfe: 'There's something really magical about feeling like you know somewhere entirely inside out.' Photograph: Bryan O'Brien



❖ friends in his early 20s; for some soccer pitches he once scored goals on; for the Church of the Holy Trinity, which he says teenagers would climb as a rite of passage; and Kay's Kitchen at Donaghmede Shopping Centre, a formative space for Balfe when he was on the cusp of adulthood. He orders coffee and orange juice, and we find a seat.

When he's chatting Balfe is free-flowing and personable, but every word becomes deliberate, almost surgically precise, when he's talking about something important, or sensitive.

Seconds pass between some of his words when he's remembering Curran, for example. There's still pain here, and a lot of love. "I've tried to be very, very particular with this new record, not to revisit the concepts of the first," he says. "Partially because I just can't – my soul doesn't have it in it any more . . . With that said, if anybody asks me to talk about Paul it's with utter joy I remember him."

"I don't think it would be right to pass up an opportunity to say he was a remarkably beautiful person and incredibly sturdy friend, and he had a fascinating intelligence and hunger for knowledge . . . The best art that I ever made, be it music or film, was made very closely in tandem with Paul."

If Balfe's first album was an ode to Curran and to his friends and family, *Carving the Stone* feels closer to a rallying



I think it's very important for me to constantly have my viewpoint challenged if I want to be able to hold it with a sense of internal authority. And I'm a bit fearful of the echo chamber

call against a breakdown of the social contract in Ireland. The array of topics Balfe broaches is dizzying – cultural strangulation, emigration, far-right politics, technofeudalism, boredom, alienation, mental health – yet the core of the record remains the sense of love and grief that permeates all his work.

On the track *No Scheme* he laments a Dublin he scarcely recognises any more, "a city that's lost its shape, held together by surveillance and vapes with some distant

memory of a better past . . . Now I'm reading comment-section politics from genocidal hollow pricks. I'm sick. Get me out of here, please."

He calls on the listener to "seize the means of chronic boredom from the bourgeoisie". "This city needs a saviour," he declares. What kind of saviour, he admits now, he doesn't know; his plea is driven by a desire for a simple solution, even though he knows it can be anything but.

His memories of the motorway underpass come from another era, another way of living. "There's something really magical about feeling like you know somewhere entirely inside out, and then finding a new addition to your life within that space, within the same geography you've walked for 10 to 15 years," he says.

Balfe and his friends would kick footballs off the walls and talk about music, films and the ups and downs of life. It gave the group an independence, a sense of a different world. "Because it's this mystery area in between pockets of obvious community and culture, this just takes up a bit of an anonymous space. It feels a little bit more lawless."

The underpass walls, once brought to life by a succession of graffiti tags and notes from passersby, have since been painted white. This strikes Balfe as a retreat from what gave this place life.

"When we first came down, we were writing on top of what felt like years and

years' worth of other people's scrawling, and none of it was particularly pictorial. It was people's names.

"A lot of it felt like real-time memorialisation: you're seeing these markings that people wrote of their own name, or of them and their friends', and it's a statement: 'I was here at this time. I was alive.' And I think there's something really powerful about that."

With the history painted over, the space takes on a new orientation, for new teenagers to claim.

Boredom comes up a lot on *Carving the Stone*. Balfe blames the "cycle of algorithmic tunnel vision" caused by social media: as well as Fomo, or the fear of missing out, that accompanies what has become a primary reference point in modern culture, "great swathes of your time are spent just scrolling a never-ending feed of predominantly useless information."

"The feeling of boredom seems, within my life and many of my peers', to be more present than ever," he says, "yet, at the same time, the feeling of immediate satisfaction is more pertinent than ever too."

"The ability to be mentally satiated by what I guess young people call brain rot, or whatever, seems to just mask the boredom until you remove the phone or the laptop for a second, and that sense of boredom becomes even more vast, even more pertinent, stronger again and louder – and

we combat that once more with going back to the well and re-engaging with it, giving our data back to the machine.”

Balfe’s struggles with technology – with an increasingly taut space that rewards the binary, and where our diminished attention spans make us look for distilled, simplified content – are also a theme of the album.

He references *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* by Yanis Varoufakis. Balfe has reread it several times. Lately, however, he has opted to listen to a 30-minute summary of the book that he says was probably created by artificial intelligence. “There is a great irony with having an AI summary of a book on technofeudalism.”

Although he has tried to reject social media outright, Balfe begins each day with a scroll on Telegram, seeking out conflict reporting and “thought pieces from people who have radically different views than me. I think it’s very important for me to constantly have my viewpoint challenged if I want to be able to hold it with a sense of internal authority,” he says. “And I’m a bit fearful of the echo chamber.”

On the album track *Mirror*, Balfe tackles the insidiousness of ethno-staters, which is to say people who want to make the State ethnically homogenous. I ask him about the song, and the jolting chant of “c**ts” at its close.

“I feel like [ethno-staters] have been able to fool people who are suffering into thinking the way out of this is to continue to punch down further, as opposed to collectivising and working toward a common goal of improving the lives of all working people – all minority people – against the better interest of the ruling class,” he says.

“They’ve done an incredible job at convincing people that those who are most like them are most unlike them, that the answer to progress is further hate towards those who deserve it least and need it least, and that does nothing other than benefit a ruling class and people with a very specific ethno-state agenda.”

That Ireland is an increasingly untenable place to make a life has led some towards the fringe and driven many to leave altogether. On his new track *Of the Sorrows*, Balfe oscillates between a sense that this place may no longer be for him and chasing something that once was.

There’s something haunting about the song, about the tragic dance that young people in Ireland perform, and the indecision between “I have to leave” and “I’ll never leave”.

“The trade just hasn’t been equal,” Balfe says. “What I’m giving here, I’m not getting in return. The cost of living is so high, and what you receive in return is so low except for the love of friends and family – which has no cost; there’s nothing that I would ever trade for that.”

“So many of my peers have left, and I applaud every one of them who has left and found what they’re looking for. I would never, ever begrudge somebody for wanting to get out of this. I understand why so many of the people that I love have looked around and said, ‘How can I justify staying when I give so much just to live in a box room?’ ”

Balfe is generous with his time as we walk – his only concern is to be able to buy a Shelbourne FC ticket at 7pm. (He’s an enthusiastic Shels fan, and our chats

Clockwise from left: David Balfe at Kay’s Kitchen in Donaghmede Shopping Centre; on the playing pitches of his youth; and at the Church of the Holy Trinity. Photographs: Bryan O’Brien



drift in and out of soccer.)

The musician is not religious, but the local church took up a mythological space in Balfe’s mind when he was growing up. As a rite of passage, teenagers would climb its steep roof and stand atop the cross.

“When people go into Donaghmede they go, ‘Yous have a f**kin mad church, don’t you?’ ” he says as we approach the distinctive building, the four sides of which have sharply angled roofs that lean against one another. “It’s very hard for me, and some of my friends, to talk about [Donaghmede] without referencing the church.”

Balfe never climbed it. Soon before it would have been the singer’s turn, one unfortunate boy fell and broke both legs. (According to local lore, he managed to cycle all the way home afterwards.) “With that, people were, like, ‘No más.’ So, in my head, that person – who will go unnamed – is the last true Donaghmeder. I haven’t heard of anybody doing it since.” He’s quick to add that it’s not something he’d advise anybody to try, either.

“Like I was saying about people writing messages on walls, there’s a cultural narrative to places that make them what they are,” he says. “The idea of building importance into things that traditional culture or the State or your parents would tell you is silly, or without value, is something that comes up a lot across this record.”

“Carving the stone” – chipping away at a project to reveal a finished core – is a phrase Balfe has found himself using when asked about his music. “You start with this mess – a big wall of sound, a large stone – and you’re slowly chipping away and revealing the image or the narrative that you want to tell at the end.

“I think it’s also very reflective of the process of making the record, which took years. It was a really, really long process, a very laborious, intense and extremely exhausting process – probably a lot more so than the first record,” he says.

“Maybe you’re losing parts of yourself in the process, but ultimately you’re doing it in order to try and find that thing at the core, like a new sense of beauty, a new sense of self and, ultimately, a new sense of emotional security.”

In the spring of 2023 Balfe spent a month secluded in a house in Co Leitrim, with little more than wild goats for occasional company.

“I wrote from morning until night every single day,” he says. “I’d stand outside sometimes and shadowbox and do some push-ups. Otherwise I was back inside writing – and I just wrote garbage. Absolute garbage. I was forcing something I wasn’t ready to write. And I think I needed to remember that all the best writing I’ve done has been at home.”

He finds it clichéd to recount now: on his

final day in Leitrim, after he’d packed up most of his gear, he felt a draw to try one last time. He’d soon written the chords for the final track on the album, *I Came Back to See the Stone Had Moved*, by far its most distinctive and uplifting song.

The name gets at a sort of resurrection Balfe felt when he returned to Dublin. Still, there’s a deeper layer of meaning stemming from “something a little bit darker and more valuable, something I’m a little bit more uncomfortable to speak about but coming back to a desire to be here”.

Its piano chords, uncertain, gradually build into something cohesive and propelling. Balfe revisits harrowing themes from earlier on the album and drips in pieces of hope – hope about building a “better cultural and social future for working people in Ireland”, he says.

It “ultimately arrives at a very life-affirming point, a very brazen statement on the desire to be alive and to be here. And I think the writing was reflective of the place that I was arriving to in my own self through years of work, great therapy and incredible love from the people around me.”

I try to dig a little deeper, but Balfe is hesitant. “I’d probably hold on to an element of privacy around some of the lyrics on the record,” he says. “Despite the fact that this record is a record that I’m sharing publicly – with the knowledge that I’m sharing it publicly, unlike the first one – there are still parts of it that are written very directly for just my friends . . . I’d never want to get to a place with this project where it turns its back on what it originally was.”

Listen closely and at certain points on the album you can hear Balfe talking in the background, buried odes to the people he cares about, to make them part of *Carving the Stone*’s DNA.

At the close of the final song there’s a thunderous bagpipe interpretation of *Amazing Grace*. Here, transformed, the hymn becomes a euphoric counterpoint to the dark insularity of other parts of the album. Balfe’s final lyric, “I’m choosing to live,” bookends a project he’s not sure has a future but can only reflect an artist secure in himself, in a city that gets stranger by the day. ●

Carving the Stone is released by September



Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan in *Freakier Friday*.
Photographs: Glen Wilson/Disney; Ryan Pfluger/New York Times

THE QUEEN OF SCREAM

Freakier Friday, which reunites Jamie Lee Curtis with Lindsay Lohan, is good clean fun. But its themes mean a lot to the Oscar-winning actor, who has had her share of personal trials

TARA BRADY

When Jamie Lee Curtis won the best-actress Oscar, in 2023, for *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, there was much talk of her as a show-business legend.

She certainly has the heritage: Mum was Janet Leigh; Dad was Tony Curtis. And she had certainly served her time. It was as long ago as 1978, when she was just 19, that she broke through as the tormented babysitter Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, John Carpenter's genre-defining horror film. She has worked like a Trojan ever since.

There's more to it than longevity and membership of a cinematic dynasty. She has always given the impression of being a good sport. In interviews she mugs and yells like a vaudeville act. From her teens right through to her 60s – Curtis is now 66 – she has always been the most engaged person on screen. There is a sense that Hollywood, a town now at home to caution, needs someone this unrestrained.

In *True Lies*, James Cameron's huge action comedy from the mid-1990s, she played a suburban wife who is swept into Arnold Schwarzenegger's secret world of international espionage. In *A Fish Called Wanda*, the beloved late-1980s double-cross caper featuring John Cleese, Kevin Kline and Michael Palin, she played the titular con artist. Before either of those, as *Trading Places*' streetwise hooker, she provided a brilliant buffer between Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd.

But the film people really want to hear about, she says, is *Freaky Friday*, the stubbornly popular body-swap comedy featuring Curtis as an overworked psychiatrist and Lindsay Lohan as her discontented teenage daughter.

Now we have *Freakier Friday*, its sequel, and Curtis is back to noisily spread the word.

"I didn't expect it to be so large," she says of the first movie. "But I think it touches at the very core of human beings, right? Walk a mile in my shoes and then you'll see what my life is. That's a universal theme that crosses all cultures and barriers. The film

had heart and family and humour and a little bit of magic."

Based on a popular novel that became a Disney vehicle for Jodie Foster in 1976, *Freaky Friday* allowed Curtis, whose career had gone a bit quiet, to remind viewers how much they liked her. It's still a slumber-party staple.

"It felt like I was asked for an immediate reboot wherever I went," she says. "Of course we had to wait, because the new film required Lindsay to have a 15-year-old child so we could get into another round of it."

More than two decades after their original life-swapping fiasco, *Freakier Friday* reunites Curtis and Lohan as Tess and Anna Coleman. For reasons too complicated to explain, Tess ends up swapping bodies with Lily (Sophia Hammons), soon to be Anna's stepdaughter, while Anna does the same with her own daughter, Harper (Julia Butters).

"I don't know how to flirt as an old person," comes one terrible realisation. "What do they talk about? Transitional lenses? Phone repairs?"

It is all good clean fun. But it has things to say.

"Imagine being a 15-year-old and you wake up in the morning looking like this," Curtis says, gesturing at herself over Zoom. "It's not a good day. I very specifically tried to encourage the writing staff and our director, Nisha [Ganatra], to make fun of it. Because I have no vanity about ageing. I really don't. Even just these lips . . . I've always had thin lips."

She enjoyed referencing them in the scenes in which young Lily takes over her body.

"That was my contribution, speaking as a teen in my body and asking, 'Where are her lips? She has no lips. Where have they gone?'"

So *Freakier Friday* is, in its humble way, important to Curtis. Not just because it gets her back before fans but also because it dovetails with her concerns of many years. Long a critic of Hollywood's unrealistic beauty standards, she recently described the rise of fillers, surgical enhancements and cosmetic filters as "wiping out generations of beauty . . . Once you mess

with your face you can't get it back."

The star speaks from experience. A cinematographer's unkind remark while she was filming the 1985 gym romance *Perfect* – "Her eyes are baggy" – prompted her to undergo surgery in her mid-20s, a decision she deeply regrets, not least because it sparked a decade-long opioid dependency. "I tried plastic surgery and it didn't work. It got me addicted to Vicodin," she says. "I'm 22 years sober now."

Curtis had quite an upbringing. Her father was the sleek golden-age star of such classics as *Some Like It Hot*. Leigh, though busy in hits such as *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Bye Bye Birdie*, was destined to be remembered as the murdered traveller Marion Crane in *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 classic.

So Curtis saw the glamour of Hollywood but also how cruel the acting life can be, as she watched her parents' careers decline in later years. Some children of stars hunger for the spotlight. Others find safe lives in less intrusive professions.

Curtis made at least one attempt to escape the family business, initially studying law enforcement at college. But she soon drifted towards the studio lot.

Halloween, Carpenter's hugely tense shocker, was a refinement and an enhancement of a genre that her mother helped invent through her role in *Psycho*.

Arguably, no one is now as synonymous with the slasher flick's final-girl trope as Curtis is, having survived Michael Myers's attempts to kill her in five Halloween films. She has a vulnerability in those movies. But the actor – whose mother declined a request from a producer friend to allow her to audition for *The Exorcist* when she was 13 – also has a toughness that shows through even when she's screaming for her life in a cupboard.

Stereotyping could easily have followed. Many are the "scream queens" who, after early success in horror, find it hard to thrive outside its world. Linda Blair, who eventually landed that juvenile lead in *The Exorcist*, failed to build on early visibility.

Curtis was initially shuffled towards shockers such as Carpenter's durable *The Fog*, Paul Lynch's grisly *Prom Night* and Roger Spottiswoode's *Terror Train* (helpfully described by its own producer as "like Halloween on a train").

"I do not like horror movies," she later said. "I do not say this for a joke. Although it gets a laugh, I really don't." But that was where the work was.

Trading Places, from 1983, is the film that changed things for Curtis. John Landis, its director, fought with Paramount Pictures to get her into the starry cast. The studio heads couldn't understand why he would want the girl best known for fleeing masked maniacs in increasingly shabby slashers.

It was no mean feat to prove her comic chops against Aykroyd and Murphy, but her work was sufficiently strong to land her a Bafta.

Comedy opened the door to a wider career. From then on she was as likely to be carrying out perfect pratfalls as defending herself with hatchets. Watch five minutes of her owning the sofa on *The Graham Norton Show* and her funny bones seem unmistakable. But it took a while for the industry to get it.

Curtis has been married to the comic actor, director and writer Christopher Guest since 1984 – the year he gained his first hold on immortality as Nigel Tufnel in *This Is Spinal Tap*. As Guest is a baron – his grandfather was a British Labour Party MP who was awarded a peerage – Curtis is technically a baroness. Photographs exist of her attending the House of Lords with the co-composer of *Big Bottom* and *Lick My Love Pump*.



“An unkind remark when Jamie Lee Curtis was in her 20s prompted her to make a decision she deeply regrets. ‘I tried plastic surgery and it didn’t work. It got me addicted to Vicodin’

Her next notable role looks set to be as Jessica Fletcher in the movie reboot of *Murder, She Wrote*, the classic American television mystery series that, despite many efforts at resurrection, has been dormant since Angela Lansbury last played Cabot Cove's amateur sleuth, in 1996.

Some reports have suggested that it will be Curtis's final role before she retires. The actor, who is the most energetic interviewee imaginable, certainly doesn't look or sound like someone who's getting ready to walk away from the movieverse.

"I hate the last day on set of every movie," she says. "It's very hard for me to say goodbye. I've had to say goodbye for 47 years to my work families, and it breaks me every time. I would love to be, like, 'Oh my goodness, there's Madonna!' – and everyone would look, and then I'd run off. I find it very emotional."

Showbiz legend. Hollywood royalty. Actual baroness. The late, great Lansbury only got to be a dame. ●

Freakier Friday is on general release

Donald Clarke Are Pamela Anderson and Liam Neeson really in love?

I couldn't love someone who failed to celebrate the news that Liam Neeson is (apparently) dating Pamela Anderson. What ogre would not want to don bells and dance to the harmonies of the couple's (apparent) happy union?

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments," Shakespeare wisely ventured. "Oh, oh, I love her so," the Ramones later followed up.

The general merriment has something to do with how unselfconscious they seem. They look like the sort of neighbours you'd trust to feed your cat while you're in Marbella. Unquestionably glamorous. Startlingly good looking. But approachable in a way that, say, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton never seemed.

Age is a factor. For all the attention lavished on youthful stars, the online public can't help coming over all blubby when a 58-year-old glamour puss looks to have hooked up with a 73-year-old geezer. There is hope for us all. Right? Well, there is hope for all of us who look like Pamela Anderson or Liam Neeson.

It also helps that both actors, currently appearing in the hit *Naked Gun* sequel, deserve their bit of happiness. Neeson lost his wife, Natasha Richardson, in a freak skiing accident in 2009. Last year he waved off rumours about romantic attachments by claiming he was "past all that".

Anderson, unavoidable face of the 1990s, has, throughout her career, endured consistent sexist sneering – and no little abuse – from men who demonstrate not a smidgen of her dignity. "It's never too late to start again," she told Tara Brady in these pages earlier this year. "It's never too late for your career. It's never too late to be the victor and not the victim."

Quite right. And that stands for both of them. But what if it's not true? What will we do? They may as well cancel Christmas.

As I write, we are still required to insert the odd "apparently" and the occasional "it seems". Fortunately the celeb sites have detailed the relationship's progress with the diligence that Kremlinologists once brought to the positioning of Politburo members on May Day.

As long ago as last October *People* magazine was picking up signs of imminent fraternisation. "With Pamela, first off, I'm madly in love with her," Neeson told that publication. "She's just terrific to work with. I can't compliment her enough, I'll be honest with you. No huge ego."

Wait? What? "Madly in love"? It's as if the CIA missed footage of Lee Harvey Oswald taking practice shots from the Texas School Book Depository in early 1963. The information was right there.

Anyway, it seems nobody took him literally. In May this year Anderson talked cryptically about a relationship that was "professionally romantic". On July 22nd

they were seen sharing an embrace on the red carpet. By August 2nd a "source" was pushing back against rumours that the "romance" was a PR stunt.

"It's very sincere how they feel," the alleged "insider" was telling *Page Six*. "That is the truth. They're not going to show up on the red carpet and be adorable just to be fake. That's not either of them."

Confirmation that the press were getting desperate came with the "news" that Joely Richardson, Neeson's sister-in-law, had placed seven hearts beneath an Instagram post showing the (apparent) couple sharing a bucket of popcorn. Well, that settles it. Book the church. Declare a bank holiday.

All this comes as Anderson manages a wave of conflicting reactions to her decision, which she spoke about in 2023, to no longer to wear make-up – precipitated by the death of her long-time make-up artist, Alexis Vogel, a few years earlier – on red carpets and at gala events.

“They look like the sort of neighbours you’d trust to feed your cat. Unquestionably glamorous. Startlingly good looking

The fact this was felt worth reporting says something grim about contemporary attitudes to women. (We apologise for mentioning it again.) How awful that, after decades of primping and painting, she should dare to look oh, I don't know, just 10 years younger than we know her to be.

Some mainstream media overreacted by declaring her a hero, but there was also a deal of negative reaction from bottom-feeding dunderheads on the social media. "We don't have to do the industry standard, which everybody was so horrified when I decided I didn't need a glam team for certain events," Anderson said last month.

So that also feeds into the public's desire for her relationship with Neeson to be real and to blossom. We are here dealing with a real-life version – if the red carpet counts as real – of those couples we yearned to get together on our favourite TV shows. They are Tim and Dawn from *The Office*. They are Lorelai and Luke from *Gilmore Girls*. They are Daphne and Niles from *Frasier*.

Only, unlike the last example, the show won't go down the drain when (if) they do definitively link up. Tell me that is so. ●

STORY OF A RELUCTANT BRITPOPPER

For a teenager in rural Ireland in the 1990s, Liam and Noel Gallagher were a sibling soap opera, Nirvana the real stars. But Oasis, who are about to play at Croke Park, became key to the wave that swept grunge away

NADINE O'REGAN

What's the price of nostalgia? In the late summer of 2024 it was €440: the amount I paid for one ticket to see Oasis play at Croke Park, in Dublin, next weekend. Even allowing for the great dynamic-pricing scandal, I can't quite believe it either.

There are lots of ways to justify the expense. One, obviously, would be to say that you're a huge fan of the band. This, in my case, would not be strictly true.

I was not a paid-up member of the Oasis fan club as a teenager. I didn't queue through the night on Patrick Street to get tickets for their Páirc Uí Chaoimh gigs, in 1996. Nor did I spend my guitar-class time learning the chords of She's Electric or Some Might Say.

In fact I was scathing about a band whose frontman spent gigs with his hands clasped behind his back and had a propensity to row

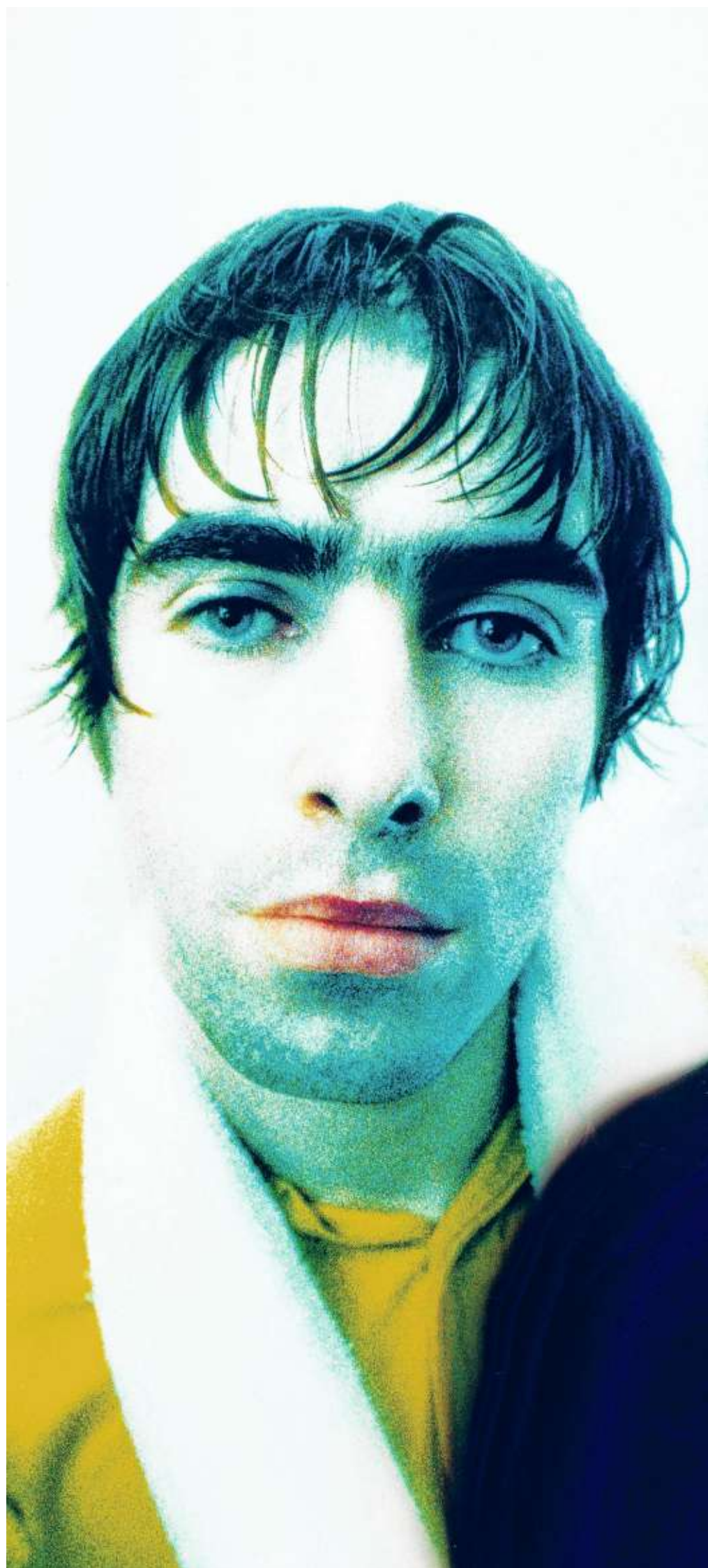
with his older brother. I wanted to go to gigs to hear music, not to sit through a sibling soap opera.

That Blur vs Oasis competition for the number-one spot three decades ago this month? I was on Oasis's side, but only because Country House was a weak single from a talented band. Roll With It was better. But not by much. I didn't identify with either group.

Yet here we are – and I'm excited about the gig in a way that the 1990s version of me, a fair-weather Oasis fan if ever there was one, could never have foreseen.

My friend who lives abroad will be home for it. Two schoolfriends are coming up from west Cork. The memes are flying with details of how Oasis have got on at the gigs they've played so far: debuting in Cardiff, on July 4th, before playing five nights in Manchester, five at Wembley and three in Edinburgh.

We're planning our wardrobes. We're days away from bucket hats, zippy tops and singalongs. Like. Favourite. Repost. Flickers





Clockwise from far left: Liam and Noel Gallagher in 1995; Nirvana in Frankfurt in 1991; Radiohead in Los Angeles in 1997; and Oasis in the Netherlands in 1994. Photographs: Niels van Iperen/Getty Images; Paul Bergen/Redferns; Jim Steinfeldt/Getty Images; Michel Linssen/Redferns



of excitement. Prickles of anticipation.

We are remembering how we used to be in the 1990s. I can flash back to exactly where I was when I first picked up the tape of Definitely Maybe to play in my bedroom. I can recall the heat and jostling bodies of the first gig I attended: Suede at Cork City Hall, when Bernard Butler was in the band.

Back then we hadn't a clue what we were doing at live events. No one did, really. I remember the shock and exhilaration of my first festival – Sunstroke, in Dalymount Park in Dublin – where, when Red Hot Chili Peppers appeared on stage, I drove forward, plunging into the crowd, losing my friends.

These were the days before barriers and proper security – before a young woman died at Smashing Pumpkins at the Point, in 1996, and nine lost their lives at Pearl Jam at Roskilde, in Denmark, in 2000.

I fell, swallowed up by bodies, my palms hitting the ground. I was saved by a man who plucked me from the ground by my

scrunchie, pulled me up and dusted me off. I should have felt terrified. I felt exhilarated. All I wanted to do was crowd-surf. I was 15.

I have a theory that, although we try to be objective about music – giving it star ratings, debating the strengths of albums – much of the time the character of the band is what's important to us. We'll listen to a lot of dubiously good records if the band's personalities find an echo in our own. Music divides us into tribes, or so the Arcade Fire line goes, and when you're young, you spend a lot of time trying to find your tribe.

In the late 1990s I spent a summer in Galway teasing out OK Computer, by Radiohead, because the band meant so much to me. As soft rain fell endlessly, and my housemates groaned, I'd suggest sliding the CD into the kitchen stereo one more time, just to hear the haunting Karma Police and to figure out if repeated plays would make some of the other songs, so spiralling and complicated after

♣ the comparative ease of The Bends, make sense. One friend still recalls with a shudder those three months as akin to being the subject of a laboratory experiment.

It was the same in the early 1990s when I came across Pearl Jam and Nirvana. Pearl Jam were an easier listen. But, spiritually, Nirvana were the match. Maybe, partially and paradoxically, it was because they were an intentionally difficult proposition. With their squalls of noise, Nirvana didn't care to make it easy for you.

Smells Like Teen Spirit and Lithium are classics now, but back then their quiet-loud dynamics were alien and thrilling. The snaking bass guitar by Krist Novoselic that introduces Come as You Are might have drawn ears, but Kurt Cobain's protest-too-much bridge – the repeated lyric of “No, I don't have a gun” – takes a scissors to any imagined bond. You don't know him. And he might be lying: that's what he's saying.

Grunge oozed pain. Nirvana sounded oppressed, depressed, angry and sincere – emotions easy to identify with as a teenager in the Cork countryside, lamenting my distance from gigs, record shops and cultural hubs.

Lambs might be gambolling in the fields, the sun shining, but all I craved was a dark venue, some loud guitars and a frontperson who felt authentic.

There were a few Irish bands like that – The Frames and Scheer come to mind – but no scene. And there was so much repression, looking back. The 1990s were an odd time in Ireland: a Mass-going culture, a taken-as-given second-place status for women – and inequality everywhere you looked. A sense of suffocation was standard.

I'd look at MTV videos longingly every day after school and wonder when life was going to begin.

Nirvana were an antidote to the macho, paternalistic culture of the time. While British music magazines were still busying themselves objectifying women musicians and making glib comments about groupies, Cobain was upending convention, wearing skirts, kissing Novoselic on stage, and writing uneasy lyrics that reflected on rape culture.

Feminism was peeking out from the fringes of the scene. Around the same time PJ Harvey was delivering the thrilling *Dry*, a young Shirley Manson was emerging, and the sprite-like Björk was creating her own realm.

Occasionally women artists were even allowed on the front of a magazine, although usually only if they were together, such as Q's hedge-your-bets cover of Harvey, Björk and Tori Amos that appeared in the summer of 1994.

The cultural moment felt deeply exciting. What I didn't know then was that it was the beginning of the end. Even before April 1994, when Cobain died by suicide, the British music press was getting impatient for a home-grown scene, in part because it would make their working lives so much easier.

“It was difficult for British music papers to get access to those bands,” Miranda Sawyer writes in *Uncommon People*, her excellent book about Britpop. Uneasy with fame, US bands such as Soundgarden, Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins and Pearl



Jam were pulling back from the media machine. How much easier, then, to simply start again and lay the foundations for a new movement.

Of course this had already happened, many times before. Every generation needs to sweep away the one that came before it: its totems, its values, even its style of jeans. Music has an inbuilt obsolescence. What is cool for one generation cannot be so for the next. The point is to overthrow.

Nirvana themselves had overthrown what came before. In the early 1990s, hair-metal bands such as Guns N' Roses and Mötley Crüe got a shock when grunge exploded into the public consciousness in the United States.

Those bands had traded in sleaze. Axl Rose had famously had sex with a woman on the studio floor while recording *Appetite for Destruction*, their debut album from 1987, embedding her moans into the mix on

the song *Rocket Queen*. Their garishness was incompatible with an early MTV that played music videos 24/7 and was always hunting for the next big thing.

Now, the pop-culture dice were about to be rolled again. From hair-metal to grunge. From grunge to Britpop.

For this grunge fan, the opening salvos of Britpop registered as a rude interruption. Nirvana wanted to talk about pain. Oasis wanted to talk about cigarettes and alcohol.

It felt remarkably superficial in the wake of a movement that had dealt so purely and plainly in anguish. From flannel shirts to the (admittedly brilliant) Union Jack dress Geri Halliwell wore at the Brit Awards in 1997, Britpop was a sideways leap in culture.

From contemplating the meanings behind a Nirvana song named after pennyroyal tea, an abortifacient, I was now reading the views of a man called Bonehead.

This, bear in mind, was the pre-Spotify era, when, in order to hear an album, you first had to read about it, and then make up your mind to buy it, and then acquire the funds, and then find a record shop that stocked it. The music press had immense, unassailable power.

I put on *Definitely Maybe*, the debut album from Oasis, in late 1994, prepared to hate it. Yet you couldn't deny the vigour of songs such as *Supersonic* and *Live Forever*, the stridency of Liam Gallagher, the swagger of Noel Gallagher or the pile-driving effectiveness of the record as a whole.

Laura Slattery

RTÉ's Traitors: Uncloaked isn't a TV show. So what is it?

RTÉ has unveiled The Traitors Ireland: Uncloaked, its upcoming companion show for The Traitors Ireland, with the comedian, actor and podcaster Kevin McGahern recruited to be its “mischievous host”. Not too mischievous, though, right? No one wants another Oireachtas committee hearing.

Uncloaked is designed to superserve Traitors addicts who, it is expected, will indulge in extra content after the main show's end credits flicker by. This “access all areas” sister programme promises to bring them “deeper into Slane Castle”, in Co Meath, which is where The Traitors Ireland was filmed in the spring, while also taking fans behind the scenes of a separate and, some might say, even more intriguing location: RTÉ Limerick.

That Uncloaked will be made there seems worth highlighting, if only because six years ago RTÉ's studio in the city, on Cornmarket Square, was put on the chopping block by the public-service broadcaster's former leadership.

The political response to this was so hostile and deafening that no director general of RTÉ is going to try that tactic again any time soon. It would be like going on The Traitors – a brilliantly absurd and absurdly brilliant reality competition show – and telling everyone how clever and discerning you are. The target would shift instantly to your back.

So instead we have the fleeting beginnings of a regionalisation strategy, as previously flagged by Kevin Bakhurst, the current head of the broadcaster. Coincidentally, this particular instance of it should delight any local TDs who happen to be, say, a Government Minister with responsibility for RTÉ.

Any regionalisation will, inevitably, be followed by a spike in Freedom of Information requests by journalists keen to do stories on how much RTÉ is spending on transport for guests, so you could say it's a win-win situation all around.

It often seems to surprise and annoy people, but television costs money to make. Still, there are ways and means to mitigate the expense. If, for instance, Patrick O'Donovan, Minister for Culture and also a TD for Limerick County, happened to be free one evening, he could save RTÉ a train fare and pop in for a chat with McGahern about all the latest betrayals and banishments.

But enough about Fine Gael. What about Uncloaked? I've already misclassified it as television, like some stubborn 20th-century traditionalist. Uncloaked isn't technically a television show. Well, it is in the sense that it will air on television and people will watch it. But it also isn't in the sense that it's not defined by

anything as old-school as a single medium.

The show will air directly after each episode of The Traitors, a moreish game of deception, paranoia and wild logic that originated in the Netherlands and went on to be a hit in several countries around the world. The Irish version, produced by Kite Entertainment and presented by Siobhán McSweeney, is RTÉ's big autumn-schedule hope.

The Traitors itself is definitely a TV show, but Uncloaked, like the BBC companion show of the same name, is a multiplatform affair. This in-house RTÉ production will be broadcast on linear television and on RTÉ Player, while also existing as a podcast. It's a visualised podcast, which is the industry term for a podcast you can also clamp your eyes on.

They sound as if they should be the same, but visualised podcasts are different from visualised radio. With visualised radio, the concession to cameras is incidental. The presenters are not looking down the lens. They're largely just cracking on the way they were before.

The choreography of RTÉ's Uncloaked remains a mystery for now, but the usual deal with visualised podcasts is that presenters stare straight at the camera, mimicking the grammar of television either occasionally or throughout, YouTube style.

On the BBC's version of Uncloaked, the host, Ed Gamble, explains at the start of each edition that this is a visualised podcast, lest viewers get confused about the production values and the un-TV-like presence of giant microphones on screen.

Whenever you see an array of enormous microphones on television, this is what they're there to say: “Look, we're podcasters and this is actually a podcast, a modern podcast with modern, professional equipment that distinguishes us from amateur podcast hobbyists or those loser television guys with their invisible clip-on mics.”

I'm not predicting RTÉ's Uncloaked will have that vibe. But I do generally find this genre of not-TV-but-on-TV a bit jarring. I long for the big-mic trend to disappear, like a hooded Traitor, into the night.

These aftershows are a strange beast anyway. They force random guests to speculate about events that were filmed months earlier while sitting beside booted-out contestants who know precisely how everything panned out but are contractually obliged not to let anything slip.

It's too uncomfortable for mere audio, in other words. For the full squirm, it really must be watched, mics and all. ●

Clockwise from far left: Sunstroke, at Dalymount Park in Dublin, in 1994; Noel and Liam Gallagher at Wembley last month; PJ Harvey, Björk and Tori Amos on the cover of Q in 1994; and the Britpop collage from Nadine O'Regan's 1995 homework diary. Photographs: INM/Getty; Oasis/Instagram

irreverence of Supergrass and the appealing eccentricities of Pulp.

Eventually I got the memo. My homework diary from 1995, full of glued-together collages from magazines such as Q and Vox, tells its own story. Nirvana get a full two-page illustration on their own, my loyalty never wavering. Britpop in its entirety gets a two-pager, including a cartoon composite of what Madonna and Liam Gallagher's baby could look like. (Budgets were big back then, and editors had way too much time on their hands.)

I felt reluctant about Britpop. That never changed. I hated the jingoism, the laddishness, the condescension to frontwomen such as Manson, of Garbage, and the blending of music and politics. No one ever needs to think of a pop song and Tony Blair at the same time.

But the great songs of Britpop remain timeless: The Verve's Bittersweet Symphony, Oasis's Live Forever, Pulp's Common People, Radiohead's Creep. These are fantastic tunes, generational high points.

If Oasis in the 1990s was all about declaring fealty to one band over another, Oasis in the 2020s is about being grateful to have made it this far and still have a fist to pump in the air with your mates.

It's about realising Oasis are embroidered into the fabric of your youth. It's about knowing that all things must pass, so it's good to celebrate what you have while you can.

And, of course, the scene would change again, in the blink of an eye. Parkas out, smiley faces in, as culture swerved in the direction of ecstasy-fuelled electronica.

Sometimes I fancy I can pinpoint the exact moment. It's the summer of 1996, and we've all gone to see Radiohead at the Big Day Out in Galway. On the way home a traffic jam brings cars to a standstill as festival attendees line the road. My friend, who's driving, puts on a song and opens the windows. It's Born Slippy, by Underworld. Gig-goers dance around the car. “Shouting ‘lager, lager, lager . . .’”

The scene was morphing again, and this time it was Oasis who would be left out in the cold. Not that they knew it then. “You and I are gonna live forever.” No. But for a moment, as we listen to the song, we can imagine it. And that's good enough. ●

Oasis play at Croke Park, in Dublin, next Saturday and Sunday



Oasis were a band who felt like a gang. “I need to be myself, I can't be no one else.” Simple and as effective as a hammer blow to a nail.

The Gallagher brothers held Britpop by the scruff of the neck for a large chunk of the 1990s. They were funny, charismatic and (take your pick) either influenced by or derivative of one of the best bands the world has produced: The Beatles.

Oasis wanted to be famous at a time when the press was looking for a group who could take the heat of that elevation.

The term Britpop might have seemed a loose connecting point for the many kinds of bands who became big in Britain between 1993 and 1997, but it drove interest in all of them. The Britpop boulder was pushed up the hill by the music press until it had nowhere to go but down, knocking all in its path. It was a lesson in band economics and how business begets business.

Cumulatively, Britpop bands became a force. Elastica shot to fame in what seemed like seconds, showing everyone, for at least a little while, how it should be done. Manic Street Preachers, suffering the tragic loss of Richey Edwards, became the wise old men of the scene. And Blur kept reinventing themselves, getting more interesting with each record.

Despite myself, I accepted the terms that were offered. For every Shed Seven or Menswear record that was mis-sold to me, there was the surprising joy of that first Elastica record, the lush androgyny of Suede, the weirdness of Tricky, the

'OFFICE CULTURE IS PERFORMANCE'

Caitríona Daly, author of *The Lunch Punch Power Hour in Conference Room 4*, on sending up office culture and the language games and power plays it involves

ROE McDERMOTT

Caitríona Daly originally wanted to be an actor but fell into playwriting at the age of 10 out of necessity – “because even at that age,” she says, “I knew there weren’t good parts for women”.

She first made waves in student theatre, with *Sluts*, a biting, fast-talking comedy about the labels women throw at each other and the double standards that let men off the hook. Its combination of righteous anger, whip-smart intellect, unexpected tenderness and lacerating humour has become Daly’s trademark.

The 37-year-old Dubliner has written for stage and screen, including a stint on the long-running BBC daytime drama *Doctors*, for which she won a Writers Guild of Ireland Zebbie Award. Soap, she says, taught her a huge amount about story and structure, and its role as a tool for public empathy and education deserves more respect.

“It’s the most accessible art form we have,” she says. “Its reach is huge. I remember the storyline about Todd being gay from *Coronation Street* in the early 2000s – that was huge. I don’t think I ever really knew what being gay was before that. Similarly, with the teenage pregnancy, it can take a topic that is divisive in society and help society to understand it a little bit better.”

What unites all of Daly’s work, whether on a BBC soundstage or in a black-box theatre, is her commitment to moral ambiguity, emotional nuance and sharp absurdity of modern life. In her breakout play, *Duck Duck Goose*, which ran at Dublin Theatre Festival in 2021, Daly tackled the social impact of sexual violence from a rarely seen angle: that of the bystander.

Loosely inspired by the nine-week Belfast rape trial of 2018, it features a protagonist, Chris, who is neither accused nor accuser but a friend of the accused, slowly unravelling under the weight of what he knew, what he didn’t and what he refused to see.

“I felt very strongly that if every story we see around rape culture is from a survivor’s perspective, we begin to think it’s the survivor’s problem. And it’s not,” Daly says. “We have to be having the more difficult conversations.”

The play became an international success, with acclaimed productions in Bulgaria, Australia and New Zealand. But at home the reception was more complicated. “We were very well reviewed, which was great,” she says. “But I found some of the reactions quite held back.”

Part of the unease, she suspects, came from its proximity to the real-life case – the four defendants were acquitted – and the discomfort of unspoken social truths.

“It brings in the question of doubt and the question of redemption, or whether you want to believe in it,” she says. “I left the play ambiguous, because I wanted there to be space for conversation. If we’re to take men on the journey with us, we need to have room for their voices in it too.”

Daly’s latest play, *The Lunch Punch Power Hour in Conference Room 4*, strikes a different tone – chaotic, comedic, full of noise – but the questions at its heart are no less urgent.

Set at a bland corporate firm, it centres on three employees spending the company’s social-responsibility budget. Their lunch hour becomes a warped gameshow of points, prizes, dress-up and one-upmanship. Water pistols are drawn, spinning wheels spun. Wrestling matches unfold on a boardroom table. The play quickly unfurls from office dramedy into a satire about power, survival and the rituals we invent to endure capitalism’s grind.

The absurdity is deliberate, but so is the recognition. Daly first seeded the play in 2010, during the economic crash. “I was working in an office that was pretty much abandoned,” she says. “It was on St Stephen’s Green. This entire block of offices being used by the company I worked for. Such a desolate place. And I had this idea where a load of workers re-enact *The Late Late Toy Show*.

“It was about millennials and how we all grew up being told we could have anything, and we could do anything we wanted, because the world was such a rich, plush place in Ireland in the 2000s. And then the crash happened, and all those dreams of Barbie cars just went out the window.”

Daly has always been drawn to that collision between expectation and reality, between the self and the system. *Lunch Punch* extends that, exploring coping mechanisms, language games and power plays that flourish when actual power is scarce. “The play’s really trying to explore the things we do to feel like we might have some power over something,” she says, “even though most of us don’t have much power over the structures in place.”

The setting is Gresham Professional Services. It’s entirely fictional but also a recognisable kind of nowhere, with rigid structure and absurd stakes. The rules, Daly says, are familiar to anyone who has temped or worked in an office.

“It takes you a week to learn the rules of whatever office you’re in, and they’re not the written ones. Like, you can’t do this, or say that. Some of the things I had to do in offices, I was, like, what the f**k is this?”

A receptionist named Jess becomes the audience’s entry point. She’s a smart, curious outsider with a PhD in anthropology and an interest in the individualistic construction of western identity, who is both underestimated by and quietly threatening to her colleagues.

Daly, who has temped in countless offices over 15 years, brings a lived-in authority to Jess’s role as observer.

“I love reception work. I’ve done it in so many places: doctors’ offices, cement companies, law offices. The receptionist is always a silent observer, rarely noticed. I used to love going into new worlds and figuring out how people work together. The pettiness is incredible. Like, in one office, at least once a month a woman would come out and tell me there was poo in one of the toilets.”

If *Duck Duck Goose* dealt in silence –





Fionn Foley and Caoimhe O'Malley in *The Lunch Punch Power Hour* in Conference Room. Above right: Caitríona Daly on the first day of rehearsals. Photographs: Ros Kavanagh, Róisín Murphy O'Sullivan



It takes you a week to learn the rules of whatever office you're in, and they're not the written ones – you can't do this or say that. Some of the things I had to do in offices, I was, like, what the fk is this?**

what isn't said, what isn't acknowledged – Lunch Punch is awash with language: jargon, acronyms, appropriated anthropology, and pop culture. Daly took inspiration from the choreographed fights of professional wrestling and the conflict-heavy theatrics of reality TV.

"I worked with people who thought they were in a video game or in *The Real Housewives* . . . , by how they spoke. You can feel someone doing a dramatic pause. Nobody knows how to do office culture naturally – it's performative.

"There's a line in the play where Jess asks about a no-uniform day, and they say, 'We don't have a uniform.' But of course they do. Office culture is performance: costumes and scripts."

The scripts extend beyond offices to modern life. "The play's littered with references: *The Real Housewives* . . . , *Come Dine With Me*, *Father Ted*, *Arrested Development*. They're not obvious. They're diluted, so you don't really know where they came from. But that's where we're at. TikTok is this stream of references. We're living in a Jenga tower of weird meta existence."

Despite its satire, Lunch Punch resists cynicism. "I didn't want it to be cynical," Daly says. "The world is difficult enough. If you wanted to die by cynicism right now, you could. I want this to be semi-uplifting while being truthful about the world we're living in."

The play shares thematic echoes with *The Good Place*, Mike Schur's TV series, which explored ethical complexity in a broken world. Daly welcomes the comparison.

"You've nailed it," she says. "What I wanted the end to feel like was the end of the first season of *The Good Place*. It's an empowering ending. They won't be shut down, you know?"

That instinct for resistance, both political and emotional, pulses through Daly's work. She cites Ursula K Le Guin's idea of the artist's treason: that we've been taught that only pain can be intelligent, that joy is naive.

"I see joy and playfulness as everyday resistance. That's what I was trying to get across with Lunch Punch – just finding pockets full of joy. We're taught that happiness is stupid, and artists often deny us the banality of evil and the boredom of pain."

Resistance has limits, of course, especially in Dublin. Daly speaks frankly about the precarity of making art in Ireland: the economic hostility; the shrinking opportunities; the cultural ambivalence. The play touches on this and on the often-forgotten struggles of those outside the capital.

"I'm very seriously concerned about our country," she says. "Everything is entirely Dublin-focused. We've left most of the Midlands without an industry. With the closure of Bord na Móna's ESB plants, a lot of young people had no choice but to leave. I used to mention that to people in Dublin, and they'd say, 'Oh, did they? What's that?' We can be in a bubble – myself included."

What keeps her hopeful? Daly doesn't hesitate. "We're very resilient. I'm hopeful for some kind of creative revolution. Bureaucracy is killing theatre. I'm looking for punks. I'm looking for some punk stuff to happen soon, because it's important."

She smiles, the conviction steady beneath the humour. "The win is getting to do what you love," she says. "That's it. That's the whole thing." In a world built on distraction, exhaustion, productivity and profit, choosing to keep making art and telling stories might just be radical. ●

The Lunch Punch Power Hour in Conference Room 4 is on the Peacock stage of the Abbey Theatre, in Dublin, until Saturday, September 6th

PAPERBACK WRITERS

Penguin, which celebrates its 90th anniversary this month, has always had a strong tradition of innovation and also of championing Irish writers, often in the face of censorship

JOHN SELF

‘When my first novel appeared in Penguin,” said the writer Malcolm Bradbury, “I regarded it as a step towards canonisation”.

He was surely not alone. For most of us, Penguin books have always been there, from the classroom to the bedside table. But as the publisher celebrates its 90th anniversary this month, it’s easy to forget that before its arrival, it was almost impossible to read a good paperback.

Paperback novels existed, of course, but they were mostly pulp fiction, penny dreadfuls, as disposable as they were garish. “Real books” – literature – were largely preserved in hardback, the durability of the format matching the contents.

Then in 1934, the publisher Allen Lane was returning from a visit to see his author Agatha Christie. At Exeter train station, he wanted something to read on the journey home but couldn’t find anything that was both affordable and worthwhile.

The idea hit him in a coup de foudre. Quality literature in paperback – a good book for the price of a packet of cigarettes. Lane’s secretary came up with the name Penguin: a “dignified but flippant” symbol.

A conservative publishing industry was sceptical that the idea would work. But – allowing for the benefit of hindsight – of course it was going to work. This was a culture before TV, before hand-held devices, when the people’s choice for portable entertainment was a book. Many people had one on the go at all times, borrowed from lending libraries in Woolworths: so paperback books were a way for publishers to get – literally – into every pocket.

The first set of 12 Penguin books appeared in July 1935, including novels by Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy L Sayers and (the indirect inspiration for the series, so it was only fair) Agatha Christie. The series was indeed a huge hit, shifting three million copies in the first year.

From the start, Penguin drew on Irish writers for its list. The 17th Penguin title, published in October 1935, was Liam O’Flaherty’s Civil War drama *The Informer*, though not all its Irish titles were so durable. (Does anyone now read St John Ervine’s *The Wayward Man*, published by Penguin in 1936?)

Soon, Penguin was not just republishing older books but taking on original titles. The publisher showed that books could be mass-market material without aiming for the lowest common denominator. It created a democratisation of reading.

They showed too that books could be timely as well as timeless, with the rapid turnaround of the Penguin Specials series.



The publisher showed that books could be mass-market material without aiming for the lowest common denominator. It created a democratisation of reading

In 1937, the title *Germany Puts the Clock Back* sold 50,000 copies in four days, to a public hungry for detailed information on the Nazi threat.

But it also showed that they could not just follow trends, but lead them and initiate the public conversation. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), about the dangers of pesticides and the industry’s cover-up, was a clarion call for the environmental movement.

Most famously, Penguin became part of a campaign itself with the publication of DH Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Penguin published the book in 1960 to test the new Obscene Publications Act, which allowed so-called obscene work to be published if it had “literary merit”.

The publisher invited prosecution and the authorities were happy to oblige. At the trial numerous authors and academics spoke up for the book (though Enid Blyton turned down the opportunity to do so), and the prosecution bombed.

Penguin’s marketing genius – an important part of its success – came into play: it had 200,000 copies of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* ready to distribute (using a different printer, as the usual one refused to handle the book) and managed to get some copies on sale the same day as the acquittal. One month later, the novel had sold two million copies.

Ireland’s own zealous book bans could also create a market that Penguin was keen to satisfy. In 1950 it published a translation of Apuleius’s second-century raunchy Latin satire *The Golden Ass*, which had been banned in this country.

And Ireland’s once unloved son, James Joyce, has a strong history with Penguin. Allen Lane, who had been the first publisher to produce a UK edition of *Ulysses* in 1936 (when Penguin was still a sideline for



him), reissued the novel as Penguin title number 3,000 in 1969.

He had paid £75,000 for the paperback rights, a record at the time. Within 18 months, it had sold almost half a million copies – an extraordinary figure for a novel as dense, allusive, ambitious and delightful as Joyce’s masterpiece.

More widely, Penguin has a good track record of recognising Ireland as a country that punches well above its weight in literary brilliance. In 1946, to celebrate George Bernard Shaw’s 90th birthday, it



published one million books in one day: 100,000 copies each of 10 of his titles. They sold out in six weeks.

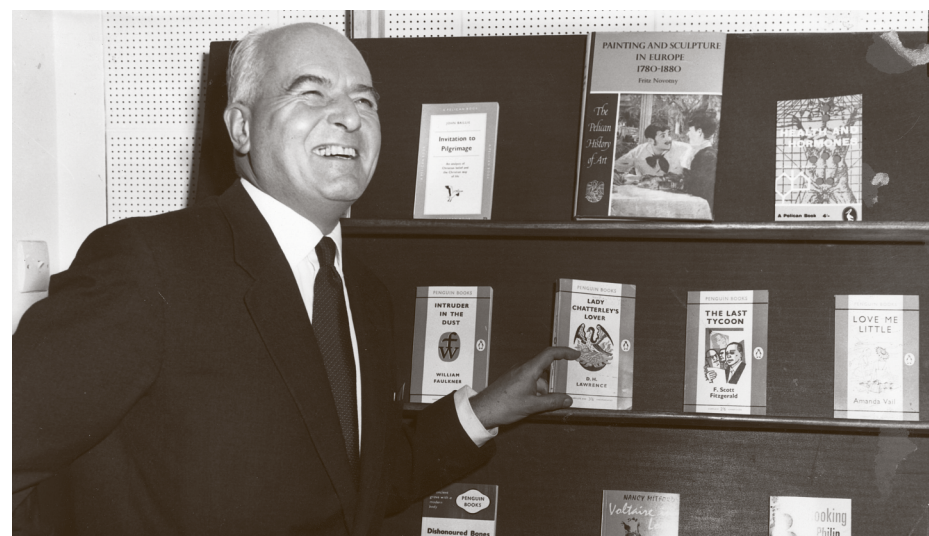
Shaw had been a Penguin stalwart since the early days. Its imprint of non-fiction work, Pelican Books, was launched with Shaw's two-volume *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism*; the author modestly claimed that these new cheap editions "would be the saviour of mankind".

Now Penguin continues to publish many of Ireland's most successful writers, from

Marian Keyes and Colm Tóibín to Donal Ryan and Ross O'Carroll-Kelly, and has its own imprint for Irish writing, Sandycove.

But what first comes to mind when many of us think of Penguin books are the classics series: the slightly forbidding black classics, or the edgier, cooler modern classics.

The Penguin Classics series was launched in 1946: its launch title, a new translation of *The Odyssey*, set out its stall clearly. This was a range to be both high-minded and accessible, to bring the greatest writers in history within reach of



the ordinary book buyer.

The Modern Classics followed in 1961, for books that weren't quite old enough to be classics, but demanded some recognition – or at least some marketing. They were given stylish covers, in line with its aim to be – as former series editor Simon Winder put it – "a series to be enjoyed, rather than something that is good for you".

But the Classics and Modern Classics ranges have a tricky line to tread: these books not only reflect the literary canon, but they also help to shape it. It took a long time for Penguin to break out of the traditional modern classics mode of white men: Orwell, Waugh, Greene, Fitzgerald. The current publishing director of Penguin Classics, Jessica Harrison, acknowledges this. When reviewing the list for the 90th anniversary celebrations, she told me, she could see that "in the 80s they brought in a lot more women writers" and later "there must have been an editor who was really interested in Japan and Chinese [literature]."

Now, the list looks wider, though even now there are only a handful of Penguin Modern Classics writers

Clockwise from far left: On the London Underground, a commuter reads a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960 after an Old Bailey jury decided that the book was not obscene, after a 33-year-old ban; Allen Lane, founder of Penguin Books; a 1937 advertisement for the Penguinincubator; a 1969 paperback edition of *Ulysses*.

Photographs: Central Press/Getty Images

from China, and one from North Africa.

But Penguin's success is not just down to the quality of the books. From the start – see the Penguinincubator, a Penguin books vending machine launched in 1937 – the publisher has been a ruthless exploiter of its own intellectual property, with special editions and rejacketed reissues a regular feature of its catalogue. (It currently keeps no fewer than seven editions of Orwell's *Animal Farm* in print.)

This approach itself leads to unexpected successes. In 2018, it launched a dirt-cheap (80p in the UK) series of Little Black Classics, including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' most famous work – which meant you could buy *The Communist Manifesto* at the till point in Tesco. As a result, it made the Sunday Times bestseller list.

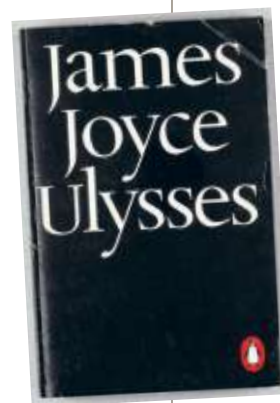
More recently, Fyodor Dostoevsky has been having a moment, thanks to handsome reissues of his novella *White Nights*, which became Penguin's bestselling classic title of 2024, outstripping hardy perennials like Jane Austen.

This ruthless reuse of its titles has its latest manifestation in the Penguin Archive series, a set of 90 short books published this year to celebrate the anniversary, with handsome covers reflecting the various styles of Penguin books over the decades.

The bestselling title of the series when it was launched? Not Austen or Orwell or Fitzgerald, but an Irishman: Bram Stoker, whose short story collection *The Burial of the Rats* outsold the other 89 titles.

It's impossible, of course, to cover the full range of Penguin's history even in a generous spread of 90 titles. But nonetheless, there do seem to be one or two curious omissions. Are there, I asked Jessica Harrison, any authors she regrets not including in the Archive?

"It did feel odd," she said after a long pause, "to be without [James] Joyce." Not half. ●





Summerhill boys in
North Circular.
PHOTOGRAPH: RTÉ

Glimmers that shine through the gloom

Channel 4 explores the rise in ADHD diagnoses; Netflix relocates its gothic hit Wednesday to the wilds of Wicklow; North Circular explores an old Dublin behind the new

Television
Ed Power

There has been a surge in cases of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, with much of the awareness about the condition driven by influencers on TikTok and Instagram. But has incidence of ADHD truly increased or are we simply more alert to the symptoms than we used to be?

That question is considered, though never satisfactorily answered, by Dr Karan Rajan, a British surgeon, in his enjoyable **Do You Have ADHD?** (Channel 4, Tuesday). Rajan doesn't pretend to be a definitive expert on the subject, and he's upfront that the documentary is an introduction rather than a deep dive. He goes out on the street to talk to people with ADHD about their experiences. "My brain feels as if there are all these particles firing," one of them, Ellie, says. "It feels like there is always a swarm of bees in my brain trying to fight each other," another, Milly, explains.

There is also a guinea pig of sorts in Dr Clare Bailey Mosley, widow of Dr Michael Mosley, who believes that both she and her late husband had undiagnosed ADHD. She puts that theory to the test by going for a professional diagnosis; Rajan advises those in a similar situation to first complete an ADHD screening questionnaire devised by the World Health Organisation.

He is at pains to point out that the questionnaire is not itself a diagnostic tool. Still, it could indicate whether it might be helpful to seek a professional assessment. That's sufficient for Bailey Mosley, who answers "yes" to a question about having trouble wrapping up the final details of a project. "I do kind of fade towards the end," she says.

Is a diagnosis recommended in every case? It depends, according to the ADHD researcher Val Harpin. For children the answer is always yes: "There are no downsides." For adults the question can be more nuanced. "Older people have different responses. The biggest is relief," she says, but "sometimes it makes them feel resentful: 'My life could have been different if I'd known.'"

Rajan acknowledges that there's an element of faddishness to some of the online conversation about ADHD. He points to TikTokers who diagnose "T-rex arm" – which is to say holding your arms close to your body, with your wrists limp – as a trait. "Be mindful," he warns, "of internet diagnosis."

That said, ADHD is not at all uncommon. It seems to affect about 5 per cent of people – more than epilepsy or autism, at 1 per cent each – according to Prof Stephen Scott. But experiencing symptoms doesn't mean you need professional assistance, as Bailey Mosley discovers. She goes for an assessment but "falls" at the final hurdle after it's concluded that she doesn't experience any "impairment" in her day-to-day life. She sounds relieved

rather than disappointed – though others believe ADHD is, in the round, a benefit. A journalist with the Ladbible website says the condition has given him the ability to "hyperfocus" at work.

The point is taken up by the daredevil George King, who was jailed after scaling the Shard skyscraper in London. He says his ADHD played a huge part in his climb. "When I have something that means something to me, all those [out of control] thoughts get compressed," he says. "The universe gets out of the way."

Wicklow stands in

The second series of **Wednesday** (Netflix, Wednesday) features a blindingly high-end cast, Jenna Ortega, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Joanna Lumley and Lady Gaga among them. But for Irish viewers the real star will be Co Wicklow, where the series was filmed after a relocation from Romania.

Wicklow is a stand-in for spooky rural Vermont, but nobody in Ireland is going to be fooled. From the grey skies to the spongy green foliage, everything about it screams Ireland – even the way the shadows pool and linger as the high-school goth Wednesday Addams (Ortega) sets off on another sleuthing mystery.

You have to credit the producers for making the most of what they have. While much of the series was shot at Ashford Studios, Charleville Castle in Westmeath is pressed into service as Wednesday's boarding school, Nevermore Academy, and the former Holy Cross College seminary, in Ballybough in Dublin, is transformed into the lunatic asylum that Wednesday investigates after a series of freakish murders involving killer crows. As with series one, it's ghoulish good fun – with the bonus that Nevermore has never been more close to home.

Received with acclaim

There's a beautifully hallucinatory quality to Luke McManus's **North Circular** (RTÉ One, Wednesday), a dreamlike black-and-white Valentine to North Circular Road in Dublin that comes to the small screen three years after it was received with acclaim on the film-festival circuit.

Ones to Watch

Three Irish contestants are among those looking for romance in the new series of Love Is Blind UK (Netflix, Wednesday)

The story of the cult Irish songwriter Fergus O'Farrell and his band Interference is told in Breaking Out (RTÉ One, Wednesday, 10.35pm)

It's a documentary with a thesis: that Dublin's grittier postcodes have a down-at-heel glamour particular to themselves that should be cherished at a time when much of the capital's urban landscape is passing into history.

Whether or not you agree that the city should be preserved in perpetuity, like a specimen in a bell-jar, there is no denying the poetic punch of this travelogue. It takes a Joycean hike from the Phoenix Park, past the site of the old O'Devaney Gardens public-housing scheme. Then it's on to Dalymount Park soccer stadium, Mountjoy Prison and Croke Park, before continuing down to the docklands via Sheriff Street (not on the North Circular, strictly speaking, but very much part of the same spiritual hinterland).

McManus was inspired to make the film after strolling around these neighbourhoods during lockdown. Reflecting its perambulatory roots, the documentary has the pottering charm of an intense hike on an overcast day. He begins with the 1861 Wellington Monument in the Phoenix Park. There is an acknowledgment of Dublin's complicated relationship with Britishness. The British army, an unnamed narrator explains, was handsomely provisioned with volunteers from inner Dublin, driven to fight for the British Empire by poverty and desperation.

Rambling up into the northside, we hear a former resident of O'Devaney Gardens lament the loss of community and the construction of new apartments. "You'd have the robbed cars flying around," she says. "It used to be chaos sometimes – but good fun." Then we arrive at Dalymount Park, where Bohemian FC fans chant about their bitter rivals, Shamrock Rovers.

Amid the grungy greys are flashes of darkness. Sitting in shadows in his living room, the tin whistle-player Seán Ó Tuama recalls witnessing his brother strangle his father. Elsewhere, a former inmate at Mountjoy talks about how he would walk out of the front gates and seek the nearest drug dealer, before belatedly cleaning up.

North Circular finishes with the singer Gemma Dunleavy, who talks about how people from Sheriff Street are looked down on and regarded as "spongers". Her rejoinder is that "there are spongers in suits. Look at the banks: it's a different type of sponger. They're sponging off the public."

It's gorgeously filmed, with a stunning soundtrack, much of it courtesy of the new wave of Irish folk artists centred on the Cobblestone pub in Smithfield. They include the singer John Francis Flynn, who insists that living in gentrified Stoneybatter doesn't make him "posh".

As Dublin continues to change – as all cities must if they are to thrive – McManus's film bears witness to a particular moment in its history when the old capital was giving way to something new. It has the grainy quality of a Polaroid in the drizzle – a snapshot of a period that, for better or worse, is slipping away before our eyes but that McManus has ensured will now be preserved.

By the credits you might feel you've paced the length of the North Circular – and returned home weary but wiser, and with a better appreciation of the old bones that glimmer, milk-white, beneath the new Dublin. ●

Final farewell to one of RTÉ's finest

Arena's send-off for Seán Rocks had the same depth and range that he made the programme's playbook for so many years

Radio
Séamas O'Reilly

John Murray's **The Pitch** (RTÉ Radio 1, Sundays) continues its itinerary through GAA clubs up and down the country with a trip to meet Dublin's Na Gaeil Aeracha (the Rainbow Gaels), the first LGBTQ+ club in GAA history.

We hear from several members about their journey from "getting hammered left, right and centre" in their first season, four years ago, to their undefeated status in this year's football campaign, which saw them win the division IIA men's league. Their hurlers, meanwhile, finished a creditable third in their division, narrowly missing out on a promotion spot. Last year, the club won the Dublin LGFA Junior K championship.

"It's more than a team," says Becca Connolly. "I've played football my whole life, but this is more than a team: it's a community – it's a family, I'd go as far to say. For me it feels like an adventure and coming home all at once."

Division 10A now awaits the men's footballers, a prospect that Cian Griffin, one of the players, remarks on.

"We're not a token team," he says, and now they've gone a season unbeaten they no longer judge victory in terms of putting out a team and scoring the odd point. "No one could beat us," he says. "Take that to the bank." With all this success, the host says with a mild twinkle, they may come in for more stick along the road.

"Well," says Ciaran Murphy, a men's footballer, "if they're giving out about you because you're beating them on the pitch, then you're inside their heads already, so that's happy days."

This column was going to press when the untimely death of Seán Rocks was announced, last Thursday, so there was no opportunity to cover the tribute that aired on Arena, his weeknight arts show, that evening.

The broadcaster, who died on July 30th at the age of 64, after a short illness, had presented the flagship arts programme since it began, in 2009, maintaining a convivial, impish presence at its head.

The tribute show, presented by Rick O'Shea, opens with a lament from the piper Mark Redmond, entitled Sé Fath Mo Bhuartha (The Reason for My Sorrow). Among the host of contributors is the novelist Anne Enright, who describes getting to know Rocks when he "made the leap" from teaching to acting, in 1988.

He was "very much himself" on stage, she says – which might come across as faint praise were it not for the benevolence in her voice, which makes clear it's anything but. Eileen Walsh adds that his knack for interviewing actors came from the fact that he'd been on the stage



A convivial, impish presence: Seán Rocks.
PHOTOGRAPH: ANDRES POVEDA/RTÉ

himself and so "knew the cost . . . He had all the feels – every part of him was subjected to his emotions".

And an audibly moved Gavin Friday calls in to share his memories of encountering Rocks at Patrick McCabe's stage adaptation of his own novel *Emerald Germs of Ireland* – "a piece of McCabian macabre the likes of which we'll never hear again" – before adding, with tender irony, that so many of his own appearances on Arena have been "usually, sadly, when someone had passed".

The programme is peppered with snippets of Rocks's interviews, including an insightful chat with the playwright Tom Murphy and a somewhat flirty clip on the subject of bonkbusters with the actor Victoria Smurfit, from when she

Moment of the week

On Wednesday **Pat Kenny** (Newstalk, weekdays) discusses jellyfish with Tom Doyle, a zoologist at University College Cork. He draws out several fascinating facts. You may be wowed, for example, by the news that jellyfish are as much as 98 per cent water – humans are a paltry 50 per cent at best – or by Doyle's accounts of his research into their stings. His reference to "the difficulties of milking jellyfish of their venom" may be the first use of the phrase on Irish radio.

When the topic turns to after-sting care, Doyle recommends rinsing with water, whether fresh or salt, just won't do the job. At which point, speaking for every listener shouting at their wireless, Kenny takes one for the team and asks, in a mildly halting way, "the, uh, remedy of peeing on the sting, does that work or not?"

"We did actually test that," Doyle says with the tone of someone who may have been asked this once, twice or three thousand times before, "and what we found was that urine makes it worse."

Every day, as they say, is a schoolday.

appeared in last year's television version of the Jilly Cooper novel *Rivals*.

All of this helps to give Arena's send-off precisely the depth and range Rocks had made the programme's playbook for so many years. He will be sorely missed.

If you're looking for more range and depth, you could do worse than listen to **Liveline** (RTÉ Radio 1, weekdays) on Tuesday, when Sarah McInerney begins the show with a call-out for stories to do with separation and divorce, as well as the happier subject of finding love later in life, prompted by Liam Neeson's nascent romance with his *Naked Gun* costar Pamela Anderson.

That business out of the way, McInerney then speaks to Antoinette Foley, a recovering addict from Athy, in Co Kildare, who talks movingly about her battle with heroin addiction and the homelessness that ensued. She describes the three years she spent living in a tent as hell on earth: "There was mornings I woke up drowned; mornings you could pull the ice off the tent. One night I woke up and it had been set on fire."

Now clean and dedicated to helping others in the situation in which she once found herself, Foley is given space to lay out the everyday struggles and degradations of homelessness, and the sense of living without any hope of a way out.

We then hear from her friend James Mahon, the owner of a shop across from Foley's tent, who got to know her when he asked if he could photograph her for an exhibition. Foley couldn't believe he was serious. "There's something in you worthwhile," Mahon replied.

His account – "she was totally surprised that anyone would have an interest in her" – hits at one of the more pernicious, and lasting, debasements heaped on those on society's margins: the erasure of self that one feels when rendered invisible. It's a striking and humane story that neither infantilises nor sentimentalise the issues under discussion.

Subsequent calls are about motorway-overtaking etiquette, shortfalls in funding for childcare provision and, adding to last week's coverage, day services for adults with intellectual disabilities, especially in the context of those whose parents are advancing in years.

If such a broad and worthy survey of Ireland's social issues still leaves you wanting, we end with Marie Blake, who describes how she ended up with a wounded seagull in her bath, and asks for advice from fellow listeners on how best to relocate him.

If national public radio is, at its best, a window into the world, then here is that world in miniature, nimbly overseen by McInerney, a broadcaster with an uncanny talent for knowing just when to speak and when to listen along with the rest of us. ●

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Stories of revolution in Iran and Syria

An account of the Iranian revolution is thoroughly engrossing despite its Washington-centric focus, while a study of post-Assad Syria is an essential read

Oliver Farry

Scott Anderson's thoroughly engrossing account of the Iranian revolution, *King of Kings*, is a welcome refresher for many in the West, whose perception of US-Iranian relations is no doubt coloured by the hostage crisis and the subsequent mutual vilification by the two countries.

Anderson provides ample nuance in his account of the prior relationship between Washington and Tehran, one that the Americans were not automatically giving up on after the advent of the mullahs.

Popular resentment in Iran against the US for its role in the 1953 coup that over-

threw Mohammad Mosaddegh and for its steadfast support for the Shah fuelled the revolution from both the secular left and religious right. In reality, however, as Anderson points out, Washington was fairly hands-off after 1953, probably a bit too much for its, and Iran's, good.

King of Kings: The Fall of the Shah, the Iranian Revolution and the Unmaking of the Modern Middle East
By Scott Anderson
Hutchinson Heinemann, 512pp, £25

Transformed by the People: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Road to Power in Syria
Patrick Haenni and Jerome Drevon
Hurst, 320pp, £19.95

The most striking thing we learn from *King of Kings* was how negligent Washington was of Iran. The country was America's most important ally in the region, according to Anderson (I am presuming he is not counting Israel), and yet, right until the fall of the Shah, employed barely any Farsi-speakers at its Tehran embassy and was far too content to listen to, and relay, the good news it wanted to hear from Iran.

This was true of successive administrations but it became particularly acute



The remains of the bronze statue of Reza Shah Pahlavi in Saadabad Palace in northern Tehran, Iran.

PHOTOGRAPH: AMIR/MIDDLE EAST IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

under Jimmy Carter, when competing egos in his cabinet, the worst offender being Zbigniew Brzezinski, engendered an institutional sclerosis that resulted in the rare warnings from seasoned Iran hands, such as Farsi-speaking consular official Mike Metrinko, and head of the State Department’s Iran desk Henry Precht, going unheard.

When the revolution did come, being almost instantly usurped by the supremely vicious and obscure Ruhollah Khomeini, the White House was as taken aback as were American expatriates in Tehran, blissfully ignorant in their sociolinguistic bubbles and suburban homes.

Admittedly, many Iranians, even Khomeini’s more moderate revolutionary allies, were caught equally unawares by the grim ayatollah, whom few had heard of until a few months before the Shah’s fall, forgotten as he was in his Iraqi exile since being expelled by the regime in 1964. But they didn’t have the resources Washington had, and the US assumed that the Shah, as the successor of a monarchy that had survived 2,500 years, was eternal and unassailable.

Washington also made the mistake of giving far too much credence to the Shah’s

own conviction that communism, and not Islamism, was the greatest threat to his rule. Anderson wryly notes that a “red” Iran, unlikely as it was, would have in the long run been far less of a headache for the US.

One of the great pleasures of King of Kings is the portrayal of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a man as fascinating as he was fatuous. He resembles stars of 1960s TV in being one of the world’s most famous men in his day while now being largely forgotten.

Praised by foreign nationals for his sharp intelligence (at least by royal standards), he was also a workaholic with a risible tendency for self-regard and an adamantine obliviousness to how Iranians regarded him (his younger wife Farah was a lot more sensitive to this).

Pahlavi’s eldest son and heir Reza has been touting himself in recent weeks as a potential transitional leader in the event of the US once again effecting regime change, no doubt reasoning that four decades spent in Paris and suburban Washington can’t make him any more out of touch with Iranians than his father was in the Niavaran Palace.

Which brings me to a major flaw in Anderson’s book: his overly Washington-centric outlook. While fair in his assessment of the Shah and his regime, Anderson is rather too wistful about its passing. There is no doubt that the Islamic Republic is an infinitely worse entity than its imperial predecessor, but that was not a historical inevitability. And while Anderson is correct to say that the Shah’s regime was considerably less bloody than that of Arab dictators in the region, why should that be a concern of the Iranian people, any more than citizens of liberal democracies should be content with their rights being rolled back simply because other countries have it far worse?

The source of Iranian anger at the Shah, be it from the educated middle classes or the more religiously devout poor, was far from illusory. If the United States lost a good ally in the region, maybe it should have been a bit more attentive. That said, King of Kings is well worth a read.

If the fall of the Shah in 1979 was unexpectedly rapid, the toppling of Bashar al-Assad in December last year by comparison took place in the blink of an eye, albeit after a protracted conflict that had stagnated for about six years. With Assad’s Iranian, Russian or Lebanese allies either in disarray or occupied elsewhere, the Syrian army was overrun in the space of a week and the president fled to Moscow hours before Damascus fell to insurgents led by former al-Qaeda member Ahmad al-Shaara.

Western governments, which had long since reconciled themselves to Assad as better the devil they know, moved quickly to meet the new Damascus government, even as Shaara and his group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, were still designated terrorists.

Not since the days of the Mujahideen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan have jihadis (or in HTS’s case, former jihadis) been so readily courted by western countries.

Of course, foreign governments probably felt there was little else to work with if Syria were to remain stable after Assad’s



When the revolution did come, the White House was as taken aback as were American expatriates in Tehran, blissfully ignorant in their sociolinguistic bubbles and suburban homes

departure. There were also some among them, Germany and Austria in particular, who cynically saw the moment as an opportunity to finally send home the Syrians they had taken in as refugees.

Even so, it is a fact that Shaara and HTS were a much less radical force than they once were, even a relatively respectable one, given the group had its origins in al-Qaeda in Iraq (Shaara spent most of the war there in Abu Ghraib and other prisons before returning to Syria to wage jihad

Further Reading

Shah of Shahs by Ryszard Kapuscinski (Penguin, 1982) The great Polish foreign correspondent published this account of the Shah’s Iran three years after the revolution, but it is remarkably seminal in the way it has preserved the anachronistic absurdity of Pahlavi rule and the pervading atmosphere of dread in the imagination of readers.

Islam in the World by Malise Ruthven (OUP, 2006) Updated in its third edition to take in 9/11 and the various tumults that have cascaded from it, Ruthven’s study of the intersection of Islam and politics remains an essential read.

The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East by Patrick Cockburn (Verso, 2017) Veteran Middle Eastern correspondent Cockburn’s account of the 21st-century wars between the West and the Arab world, which culminated in the rise of the Islamic State, is a superb synthesis of reportage and analysis and reads like a cautionary tale that will no doubt be disregarded time and time again by western leaders.

against the Assad regime in 2011).

Shaara’s Al-Nusra Front split with al-Qaeda in 2016, and then in turn splintered to form HTS a year later. Since then, HTS has moved inexorably towards the centre of the Islamist spectrum.

Patrick Haenni and Jerome Drevon’s impressive study of the group, based on a wide range of detailed interviews, including with Shaara and other figures in HTS, charts this deradicalisation, which the authors contend was born of pragmatism to survive in the ever-fragmented insurgent landscape of mid-2010s Syria.

No doubt cognisant of the popular revulsion in Syria at the excesses of the largely foreign Islamic State, HTS focused instead on coalition-building with more moderate groups and battles for hegemony against more radical ones. Overseeing the Salvation Government in Idlib from 2018 gave it experience of ruling, and conferred popular legitimacy on it.

Though HTS has remained authoritarian, it is far more tolerant of dissent and criticism than its antecedents. It also eased sectarian tensions in Idlib, reaching out firstly to mainstream Muslims, particularly Sufis, whom Salafis generally view as suspiciously similar to Shiites, with further tentative openings-up to Christians and Druze.

For this reason, Syrian commentators, secular ones included, were less panicky than foreign observers, although still cautious, about the rise to power of HTS and Shaara last December.

Nonetheless, HTS, however mellowed and more tolerant they might be, are still an Islamist group and intend to implement sharia law in Syria. Haeeni and Drevon also doubt it will undergo any further liberalisation. But, given the collapse of civil society and the Balkanisation that Syria has undergone over the past decade, an illiberal if non-capricious government is probably the best anyone can expect for now.

Haenni and Drevon are also no less circumspect than many other observers about how long this more moderate stance of HTS’s will last. They acknowledge that detractors of the group view this moderation as a strategic deception, but they themselves feel that HTS being overtaken by radical popular sentiment is a more likely outcome.

With Syria now awash with weapons and battle-hardened soldiers, there have already been questions over the interim government’s ability to rein in sectarian violence by Sunni militias, such as massacres of Alawites in April and deadly attacks on the Druze, also in April and in July.

The authors see HTS as now potentially swimming against the tide of popular opinion; where there was previously “deradicalisation from the top”, Syria’s new rulers must grapple with “reradicalisation from below”. This could entail another “transformation by the people”, in a far less benign direction than the one that prompted them to pitch towards the centre.

Transformed by the People is by its nature a book that will have a particularly select readership but it is probably the best of its kind in English to date on the subject and is essential reading for anyone with an interest in Syria in the post-Assad era.

A bleak picture of volatility

The founder of one of the world's most successful hedge funds imparts his economic wisdom through a sequence of books

Paschal Donohoe

How Countries Go Broke: The Big Cycle
By Ray Dalio

Simon & Schuster, 400pp, £30

The earliest known occurrence of sovereign states defaulting on their debts are the Greek city states in the 4th century BC. Cities such as Rhodes and Byzantium refused to pay tributes to Athens. The consequences stretched beyond economics to the decline of Athenian power.

A recent example of Greek credit worthiness is their recovery from the debt crisis. Their government bonds are now performing at historically positive levels due to the extraordinary improvement in their public finances.

These are all reminders that confidence in the debt of a country reflects the performance of their economy and a confidence in future prospects.

However, it is not just a passive indicator. It also contributes to economic growth or decline. Low interest rates make government borrowing affordable. This funds investment. Alternatively, high rates of interest can cause big problems.

Ray Dalio is a famous founder of one of the most successful hedge funds in the world. He is now imparting his economic wisdom through a sequence of books.

The latest, *How Countries Go Broke*, is an immense reflection on the causes of the loss and recovery of national credit worthi-



Greek riot police guarding the parliament building during an anti-austerity protest in Athens in 2015. A recent example of Greek credit worthiness is their recovery from the debt crisis.

PHOTOGRAPH: REUTERS

ness. While occasionally technical, this is an analysis of the epic trends of history: why countries rise and fall.

It explains the importance of short- and long-term debt cycles and how governments and central banks respond to their development.

Short-term cycles last for about six years. Central banks create additional credit to revive a flagging economy. Rising inflation causes a change in policy that results in lower growth and higher debt.

The author is precise in his analysis of economic history. With some authority, he concludes that the United States has experienced 12 complete short-term debt cycles and has completed two-thirds of the 13th cycle.

A longer debt cycle is the gradual build-up of indebtedness due to the accumulation of shorter-term cycles. This eventually leads to efforts to make debt more sustainable. Dalio writes that this creates a “period of big market and economic turbulence”.

The gradual interplay between short- and long-term dynamics creates the Big Cycle. Over a longer time period, changes

in productivity and the impact of this long-term debt cycle will shape the rise and fall of economies.

Five important factors influence the Big Cycle. They include the operation of the normal economic cycle, acts of nature and the impact of human creativity through the development of new technologies.

The author acknowledges the role of political and social decisions in causing the cycle. Changes in the order of societies have repercussions for the performance of economies. This occurs when “those who don’t run the existing order acquire more power than those who do and want to change it”.

Dalio examines 180 years of economic history through this framework. He concludes that two full cycles have been completed in the US and within the wider global economy.

The decision by President Nixon, on August 15th, 1971, to cease the conversion link between the dollar and gold was a seminal economic moment. It increased the ability of central banks to create money and credit. Authorities were now able to “more freely create money and credit than

in the past . . . and this affects all mediums of exchange and storeholds of wealth”.

The consequences of these changes for China and Japan are examined. These chapters are full of insights. The changes in the living standards of Japanese workers and the growth of debt in China are just some examples of this analysis.

This book also lucidly explains how central banks and governments co-ordinated their policies to support economies during the pandemic.

The explanation of his Big Cycle framework and the validation of it through economic history sets the stage for the most interesting part of the book. The concluding chapters look to the future, and paint a bleak picture of volatility.

Conclusions are grim. Dalio writes that “the current configuration of conditions is most analogous with those that existed in 1905-14 and 1933-38”. He forecasts major debt difficulties and is very pessimistic about the future of international co-operation.

One hope is the benefits that technology will create. The best recipe for national success, in this harsh scenario, is to keep debt under control and invest in people.

This work understates the importance of growth as an ingredient in the elixir that infuses the ebb and rise of economies. It also underestimates the political difficulty of the most important economic decisions.

How Countries Go Broke is oddly thrilling and extremely relevant, full of wisdom, mostly expected and all forensically explained. Dalio cautions of the need to look for signals amid the intense noise of the everyday.

It explains his huge success as an investor but, more importantly, offers policies for economic safety and security as our world rapidly changes. These recipes apply both to the individual investor and to a country.

Paschal Donohoe is the Minister for Finance and President of the Eurogroup

Chasing coups or scoops

Andrew Lynch

Three Revolutions: Russia, China, Cuba and the Epic Journeys That Changed the World
By Simon Hall

Faber & Faber, 400pp, £25

Irish people can be as susceptible as anyone to the charms of a communist dictator.

Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera approved a \$20,000 loan from Sinn Féin to Vladimir Lenin’s Bolsheviks. Young Bob Geldof distributed 100 copies of Mao Zedong’s *Little Red Book* around Blackrock College, while President Michael D Higgins paid a warm tribute to Fidel Castro when the “giant among global

leaders” died in 2016.

As Simon Hall shows in his lively, insightful but disjointed study of how revolutions shaped the 20th century, however, Lenin, Mao and Fidel’s biggest overseas fans came from a more unexpected source. Three American journalists played key roles in presenting these tyrants to the West as principled, charismatic and a force for good.

Hall frames his episodic narrative around six gruelling journeys that led to either a coup or a scoop. In 1917, Lenin and about 30 other Russian dissidents took a train from Zurich across war-torn Germany to Petrograd where his fiery rhetoric inspired the world’s first Soviet republic.

That was a cakewalk compared with Mao’s Long March, the 6,000-mile retreat

from Chinese nationalist forces in 1934-5 that cost more than 80,000 lives, but still established him as the Communist Party’s toughest leader. Castro ended his exile in 1956 by sailing from Mexico to Cuba on what Hall calls “a creaking, leaking leisure yacht”, escaping into the Sierra Maestra mountains and plotting a guerrilla war.

The newspaper men profiled here are less familiar, but formidable characters in their own right. John Reed was a bohemian poet who watched Saint Petersburg’s Winter Palace being stormed and penned the Lenin-approved bestseller *Ten Days that Shook the World*. The goofy, part-Irish Edgar Snow spent three months living among Red Army troops and obediently wrote up Mao’s autobiography. Donnish veteran Herbert Matthews hiked through a dangerous wilderness to secure his star-struck interview with Castro, which caused a sensation when it appeared on the New York Times’s front page.

Three Revolutions works best on a



Fidel Castro with guerrilla fighters in the Sierra Maestra, circa 1958. PHOTOGRAPH: PHOTO12/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY

storytelling level, full of colourful human details such as Lenin drawing up rules for who could use his carriage toilet. Hall is clear-eyed about his despotic subjects, but goes a little too easy on the newshounds. Journalism may be the first draft of history, but the copy these idealists delivered has turned out to need a radical rewrite.

Q&A by Martin Doyle

Tell us about your latest thriller, *The Stranger Inside*.

The Stranger Inside is about a woman whose life completely unravels when she's framed for her husband's murder. She's imprisoned, separated from her child and left to piece together what really happened from behind bars. But when she realises her daughter may be in danger too, she makes the desperate choice to escape. This story is my most fast paced.

You've just signed a big UK and US deal for your next novel, *Beautiful Liars*. What's the storyline?

Beautiful Liars is set in Dalkey, a place that looks idyllic from the outside, privileged, and picture-perfect. But beneath that surface, things quietly break apart when 17-year-old Saskia Foley vanishes during what was meant to be a harmless game of dares in the woods. It follows three mothers, each tied to the incident, each protecting her own child. And there are wolves!

Your debut novel, *Breaking*, was shortlisted for the 2023 CWA John Creasey Dagger Award. What's it about?

Breaking follows Mirren Fitzpatrick, whose child goes missing while on holiday in the Florida Keys. As the search intensifies and the media spotlight grows, the story becomes less about the child and more about what the mother is hiding, and what the world expects her to be.

You benefited from the advice of writer friends Andrea Mara and Glenn Meade. Tell us more.

Andrea and I became friends when our sons were in the same class at school. When I told her I'd always wanted to write fiction, she encouraged me to go ahead and just start. Glenn told me if it doesn't move you, it won't move the reader. That line has guided a lot of what I write.

Your second novel, *The Returned*, draws on a real-life event: a fire that destroyed your home.

We came home to find our house on fire. I had a newborn and two toddlers at the time so we were lucky no one was hurt, but I still have flashbacks to the melted toys and smashed glass everywhere. Channelling that into *The Returned* felt cathartic.

Has your journalism background influenced your fiction?

As a journalist, you witness the extremes of human behaviour. Every day you are covering stories of grief, joy, resilience and cruelty. You see people in their rawest moments, and I often wanted to change the endings of the stories I covered. Fiction gave me that freedom.

What are your career highlights so far?

Seeing *Breaking* on a bookshop shelf for the first time will always be special. Being shortlisted for the Dagger Award in London. More recently, getting the call about *Beautiful Liars* being picked up in both the UK and US was incredible. It was evening time so I had to get dressed and walk down to the local Texaco to buy a bottle of bubbles and 7Up for the kids!



Amanda Cassidy: 'We came home to find our house on fire. I had a newborn and two toddlers at the time'

How important is setting in your novels?

My time as a travel journalist gave me access to some amazing places that left a deep impression on me. I love writing books that feel rooted in a specific atmosphere.

What projects are you working on now?

I'm launching *The Stranger Inside*, which I think makes for a great, pacy summer read. Then I'll start writing the next book.

Have you ever made a literary pilgrimage?

My dad brought me to Corleone in Sicily, the original Godfather house.

What's the best writing advice?

Write drunk, edit sober. That's more of a metaphor than a lifestyle choice.

Who do you admire the most?

People who keep going when things are hard.

You're supreme ruler for a day. What law do you pass or abolish?

I'd abolish "thank you" texts in the school WhatsApp after birthday parties.

Could you recommend a book, podcast and film?

The Night I Killed Him by Gill Perdue. Gill writes with heart as well as tension, which is rare in crime fiction. Film wise, my daughter is making me watch all the *Final Destination* movies. The *Nobody Zone* is an atmospheric true-crime podcast about a man who may or may not have been a serial killer in London in the 1980s.

Which public event affected you most?

The death of Ashling Murphy. I still think about her and her family.

The most remarkable place you've visited?

Whitehaven Beach in Australia.

Your most treasured possession?

My gold locket. My laptop, because it holds everything from my brain. And a sign from my late father's first pub that says "Cassidy's".



As a journalist, I often wanted to change the endings of the stories I covered

The most beautiful book you own?

A beautifully bound edition of *A Little Princess*, a very special gift.

Dream dinner party guests?

Stephen King, because he's a master storyteller with a deep understanding of people and fear. I'd invite Joan Didion for her razor-sharp observations. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who created *Fleabag*, for her wit. I'd also want Gillian Flynn there because I'd say she's deliciously dark. And I'd have to have Andrea Mara and Catherine Ryan Howard there to gossip about everyone over wine when they leave.

Best and worst things about where you live?

The best thing is that I'm only 10 minutes from the sea. The worst thing is that I'm 10 whole minutes from the sea.

Your favourite quotation?

"Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final." I like this quote by Rainer Maria Rilke because it's so beautifully brutal about how life is a little of everything all at once.

Your favourite fictional character?

Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley. Ripley does terrible things yet we still root for him.

A book to make me laugh?

Dial A for Aunts by Jesse Q. Sutanto is such good fun.

A book that moved you to tears?

Poor by Katriona O'Sullivan. I found her honesty completely affecting.

The Stranger Inside is published by Canelo Crime

Darkness is all around

A family separated in a supernatural thriller; the perils of being an elderly serial killer; and a ragtag military team anchored by a sardonic sense of absurdity are among this month's highlights

Crime Fiction

Brian Cliff and Elizabeth Mannion

Many thrillers revolve around a parent trying to rescue a child, but few test the parent's limits as fiercely as Stuart Neville's gripping **Blood Like Ours** (Simon & Schuster, £16.99), which offers the moving story of a very particular family wrapped up in everything you'd want from a supernatural thriller.

The second novel in what's now billed as a trilogy, *Blood Like Ours* picks up just days after the concluding events of *Blood Like Mine* separated Rebecca Carter and her daughter Moonflower. Sure that her mother's gone forever, Moonflower's bereft, afraid and desperately struggling to hold on to her true self. Unbeknown to Moonflower, though, Rebecca's hunting feverishly for her, a hunt that drives Neville's narrative.

Despite this separation, their singular relationship remains absorbing and central, even as Neville considerably expands the role of FBI agent Sarah McGrath, and introduces brothers Will and Jacob. The brothers are strays like Moonflower and they take her on the run, while their own backstory unfolds amid terrifying violence. The women are the highlight, though: Rebecca, Moonflower, Sarah and even the more remote Emma all bring a vividly persuasive depth to these pages.

More than just the trilogy's middle act, from its first scene to its gratifying conclusion *Blood Like Ours* simultaneously evokes hope and a spiralling dread, both of which resonate across the novel. As do the best thriller writers, Neville draws out the darkness of a seemingly mundane world.

Just as dark in its way, Denise Mina's excellent **The Good Liar** (Harvill Secker, £16.99) is another August highlight. The novel opens like a procedural before slyly becoming a much broader example of how crime fiction can dissect power's inner

workings, as her characters learn the cost of the compromises they've made for their own convenience and comfort.

The *Good Liar* shifts between two timelines. The first is set at a gala as Claudia – a blood spatter forensics expert, recently widowed under suspicious circumstances – steels herself to deliver a speech. It's meant to be blandly honorific, but she's prepared a bombshell revelation that will destroy careers, including her own. The other timeline begins one year earlier, as Claudia and her powerful mentor Philip (sorry, *Sir Philip*) are called to a crime scene: the staggeringly wealthy Earl of Strathearn and his much younger fiancée have been brutally murdered.

Mina weaves these timelines ever closer, steadily increasing the pressure on Claudia. The varied plot strands – divorce, betrayal, murder, shell companies, illicit relationships – are anchored by the deadly weight of aristocratic class, painted here in all its inbred connections and relentless self-interest. Even Claudia struggles to resist the temptations of shiny bangles such as lunch at Claridge's.

As persuasive as the storytelling is, the real hook is Mina's voice. Devastatingly angry and acidic, its sceptical, desert-dry wit gives Claudia and the others – many of whom are more than they seem at first – the sharp edges that make this book gleam.

It's easy to see why Elliot Ackerman's entertaining **Sheepdogs** (Viking, £16.99) drove a TV bidding war: lean but globe-trotting, it's both funny and deadly earnest. Where lots of military thrillers lean on gruff brutality, this instead lends something like the castoff perspective of *Slow Horses* to the chaotic pessimism of David O Russell's film, *Three Kings*.

We meet Skwerl and Cheese as they're hustling to repossess – not steal! – a private jet stashed at an isolated Ugandan airfield. They're both over-qualified: Skwerl's a former CIA operative fired for going public about a bloodily botched mission, and Cheese was the best Afghan pilot employed by the Americans, a credential that did him little good when the US left (Ackerman's also written non-fiction about America's Afghan allies and shows real conviction in



his depiction of Cheese's experiences).

Tricky from the start, their plan immediately grows even messier. Skwerl, Cheese and their ragtag team are soon enmeshed in everything from revenge, blackmail, and professional BDSM to smuggling and off-books paramilitary funding. The connective tissue here is a sardonic sense of absurdity that's anchored in their lives, like when Cheese recognises that "Stealing (or repossessing) a luxury jet probably didn't fall into the category of good behaviour in his adopted country. But having five hundred grand in his bank account did. Cheese understood this much about America." After 300 quick pages, Ackerman sticks the landing, tying up the diverse threads while promising further exploits from these characters.

The cosy centre of Samantha Downing's gleeful **Too Old for This** (Michael Joseph,

£16.99) may appear less flashy, but it's ringed by a deadpan humour that perfectly complements its eccentric plot and narrator, Lottie Jones.

Back in the 1980s, single mother Lottie faced a media frenzy after being questioned by the Spokane police for three murders. She committed all three, but was exonerated when the cops couldn't prove anything. Using a large settlement for wrongful arrest, she changed her name and moved to a small town where she raised her son, her past a secret. Now 75, she's settled into a rhythm of church potluck dinners and bingo nights spent gossiping with friends about their children's questionable life choices.

The arrival of Plum Dixon, a young documentarian, disrupts Lottie's quiet existence and – deploying an umbrella, her spare freezer and a chainsaw – Lottie's

The Louvre, Paris: Laura Lippman delivers an armchair tour of France in **Murder Takes a Vacation**. PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK

suddenly back to what made her notorious those many years ago. The world has changed, though: cameras, smartphones and DNA evidence make it so much more difficult to cover one's tracks. Between this new technology and her bad hip, "murder began to feel like a chore instead of a joy", just one more demand on her time. Now, she has to juggle a growing body count, appointments to tour retirement homes, and her son's wedding preparations. She needs a nap. That, and maybe one more opportunity to "feel all lit up inside" by the "sound of hitting a skull".

Bringing a big city detective's instincts to the warmth of a cosy mystery, Laura Lippman delivers an armchair tour of France in **Murder Takes a Vacation** (Faber, £9.99), a witty adventure starring Mrs Muriel Blossom, former employee of Lippman's series protagonist, PI Tess

“Where lots of military thrillers lean on gruff brutality, this instead lends something like the castoff perspective of **Slow Horses** to the chaotic pessimism of **David O Russell's film, Three Kings**

Monaghan. Tess does make a brief appearance, but this tale belongs to Muriel. Well into her 60s and accustomed to going unnoticed, she's surprised by a flood of attention from a bevy of strangers, whose veiled motives shape the events.

Widowed, and recently enriched by finding a multimillion-dollar lottery ticket in a convenience store parking lot, Muriel treats herself and best friend Elinor to a luxury cruise up the Seine, anticipating a relaxing week of good food, museums and day trips. However, after being befriended by the handsome, mysterious Allan at the airport and unknowingly eating a marijuana gummy during the flight, she departs from her meticulously planned itinerary.

Before long, further complications arise involving the motives of a dead man whose phone contained her details, a stylist who might be an FBI agent, an enigmatic heiress on the same cruise and the men swirling around Elinor. All of them learn not to take her keen observation skills lightly.

This art-infused tale's light touch is animated by its moving observations on marriage, ageing and friendship, as Muriel eases into the grace of time-earned wisdom. Elegantly folding Muriel's insights into her deft plotting, Lippman's produced a perfect summer read.

Not as funny as it thinks it is

None of this satirical writer's shots at capitalist America bite so fiercely that he risks his phone being examined by the TSA when next he enters Trump's US

John Boyne

Vera, or Faith
By Gary Shteyngart

Atlantic Books, 256pp, £16.99

A recent television programme saw comedians competing not to see who was funniest, but who could keep a straight face the longest while fending off witty remarks.

A similar challenge for readers of novels that feature jacket quotes like "I barked with laughter" might see contestants go for weeks without even cracking a smile. Gary Shteyngart's latest book, *Vera, or Faith*, garlanded with such tributes, is a perfect example of this.

The eponymous 10-year-old heroine, suffering from intense anxiety, is trying to become more popular at school, a social elevation that isn't helped by her use of words like "electable" and "exquisite".

Her father, the editor of a left-wing magazine, hopes to sell it to a billionaire to make capital, as opposed to the "cultural capital" upon which he's been trading for years. Her stepmother, Anne, is exhausted from "trad wife" duties, while younger brother Dylan routinely greets visitors to their apartment by



Gary Shteyngart.
PHOTOGRAPH:
AMIR
HAMJA/THE
NEW YORK
TIMES

inviting them to inspect his genitals.

Vera is half-Korean and her birth mother vanished many years earlier. However, when an overheard conversation leaves her convinced that the woman she refers to as Mom is dying of cancer, she decides to play amateur sleuth to discover the truth about her absence.

Like many young people in contemporary fiction, Vera loves a good list and draws up several, each designed to make us chuckle at her precocity, but the problem is they're just not funny and the concept has been done so often that it has grown tired.

Shteyngart has been described as a

satirical writer, and he takes a few shots at capitalist American culture from the point of view of an outsider – he's a Russian immigrant – but none bite so fiercely that they'll see his phone being examined by the TSA when next he enters Trump's United States.

Vera's attempts to ingratiate herself with a classmate, Yumi, will be relatable to anyone who went through school as a bit of a loner, but I reached the end with a sense of time wasted and the impression that the author is nowhere near as amusing as he thinks he is.

Why don't comic novels make us laugh out loud any more? They used to.

Imaginative tribute is a fresh story

Henrietta McKervey

Before Dorothy
By Hazel Gaynor

Harper Fiction, 368pp, £16.99

I love reading new fiction inspired by old fiction, but for the author there is danger as well as temptation in heading down an imaginative path first drawn by another writer. With *Before Dorothy*, Hazel Gaynor has made wise choices, both in her characters and their circumstances.

The action of *Before Dorothy* begins in 1922, so the Kansas prairies Gaynor depicts are not that of L Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (published in 1900), but closer to the 1939 movie

adaptation. By setting *Before Dorothy* before and during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl of the 1930s, the reader retains the visual cues from the film in this Aunt Em origin story.

Baum's Aunt Em is a minor character, described as thin, gaunt and unsmiling, almost destroyed by the harsh reality of farming, whereas Gaynor has given Emily a complete history and a joyful and fully realised interior existence.

The Emily of *Before Dorothy* is one of three sisters from an Irish immigrant family. She marries would-be farmer Henry Gale not long after her sister Annie marries his wealthy cousin, John. Several years later, John and Annie drown in a boating accident on Lake Michigan, and their orphaned child is given to Emily and Henry to raise: "Dorothy had nothing and she now needed her Aunt Em to be

everything." Dorothy's fortune has gone too, for John Gale died bankrupt.

Gaynor's Kansas is a place where "prosperity and ruin were as finely balanced as a circus performer on a high wire", and her descriptions – particularly of weather and nature – are so evocative you can almost feel the relentless heat and taste the dust.

Wizard of Oz fans will enjoy this novel's many Easter eggs, including references to circus acts, a nasty neighbour, a toy lion and such knowing comments as Henry saying of John, "I'm quite sure if you tapped his chest there would be an echo where his heart should be."

This imaginative tribute is a fresh and vivid story of one woman's extraordinary adventure and the places that shape us. Even – perhaps especially – those that aren't home.

Browser

Busy and Wrecked
By Dermot Whelan
Gill Books, €18.99

A book that purports to assist to “re-claim your calm, regain your lightness” – I was dubious. But then isn’t cynicism a symptom of burnout? The former radio broadcaster and comedian, turned mindfulness expert, articulates in this self-help book many of the thoughts and feelings currently coursing through my WhatsApp group chats. We are all wrecked! Meditation is the primary remedy, Whelan suggests, and a series of bespoke online audio-meditations, available on the author’s website, accompany the book. The obvious flaw here is that this requires accessing the internet, and one online thing, of course, leads to another . . . Nonetheless, *Busy and Wrecked* is certainly an affirming read. **BRIGID O’DEA**

Baltic: The Future of Europe
By Oliver Moody
John Murray, £25

The ancient struggle with Russia for mastery of the Baltic is the focus of a rigorous study by the Times’s Berlin bureau chief who reports on Germany and northern and central Europe. Murray contends that the Baltic has faded away to the periphery of the wider West’s imagination. However, the region is one of the least understood places and the author explains both its historical trajectory and strategic relevance. There are insights into why the nine countries bordering the Baltic face similar problems, but often look at them in different ways. Sweden is steeling its troops for every conceivable kind of attack. It has begun reviving its Cold War-era templates for crisis preparedness and has appointed its first civil defence minister since the 1940s. **PAUL CLEMENTS**

Shattered Dreams, Sliding Doors: The Republic of Ireland’s 1982 World Cup Qualifying Campaign
By Paul Little
Pitch Publishing, £18.99

As Eoin Hand once said when managing the Republic of Ireland: “In football, you’re either a hero or a bollocks, there’s no in between.” It’s the “in between” that Little captures well here, as he recounts the team’s near-miss qualifying campaign for the 1982 World Cup. Ireland had a golden group of players, but faced a tough draw in France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Little builds the story to its (anti) climax, with passages of his young-supporter autobiography built in. A much too straightforward writing style weighted with cliché (“all at sea” etc) bogs the book down, and the stylistic repetition of someone’s full name again and again grates as you go along. But followers of the boys in green will take something from it. **NJ McGARRIGLE**

Slick but has a raw punch

Mei Chin

Notes on Infinity
By Austin Taylor

Michael Joseph, 400pp, £16.99

In Austin Taylor’s ambitious geek-chic novel, Zoe and Jack are Harvard students in love, a union “looped around them . . . tightening, lacing them together”. What’s more, they have conceived an anti-ageing theory that gets old cells to revert to their original DNA blueprint; in short, a potential key to eternal youth. Like Bill Gates, they drop out and found a start-up.

Structured like a DNA helix, *Infinity* follows two strands – Zoe’s and Jack’s – moving in opposing directions but entwined. We begin with Zoe until an inevitable shattering revelation, then restart with Jack to pinpoint the original flaw.

Much relies on familiar tropes, like its classic Cambridge backdrop, which hasn’t changed much since Zuckerberg – students still listen to Radiohead and debate the universe. There’s a hint of the Stanford biomedical scandal Theranos, and Easter eggs (an Emily Dickinson poem, a character named Anna Lee) for fans of the



Austin Taylor: so streamlined it’s practically a screenplay.
PHOTOGRAPH: MARYAM HIRADFAR

Harvard start-up novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*.

Broad strokes convey worlds of backstory and baggage, because we’ve encountered these characters before. Jack’s a scholarship kid with a drug-addict mother; Zoe’s a daughter of an MIT physicist and a southern belle. Despite, or because of its predictability, there are unexpected moments of devastation, like an episode when Jack overhears his privileged friend make him the subject of a bet.

Many novels seem written these days with a future adaptation in mind. *Infinity* is no exception, so streamlined it’s practically a screenplay. Still, the author’s words can have a raw punch. “[Jack] felt the fear and anger and embarrassment . . . come slouching back. Not even taking turns with him any more: all sitting

together in his belly, having drinks and making jokes at his expense.”

However, I was most captivated by the beauty of Zoe and Jack’s theory, which Taylor – herself a recent Harvard chemistry graduate – supports with scientific papers in the appendix, and the construction of her tale as the two narratives interlock and unravel.

According to a 2010 paper in *Nature Nanoscience*, “When a theory or a model explains a phenomenon clearly, directly and economically, we say it is elegant.”

“Elegant” – a word employed by the novel to describe experiments – is one of science’s favourite adjectives. With a simple formula and two people in love, *Notes Toward Infinity* seeks to shed some clarity on the untidy business that is existing.

Trainspotting gang back with a new addiction

Ruby Eastwood

Men in Love
By Irvine Welsh

Penguin, 544pp, £14.99

At the start of *Men in Love*, we meet Edward Allister Reece, a seedy, world-weary sailor and mentor figure who bears a striking resemblance to Samuel Beckett. He sets the tone with a blunt dichotomy: “You need to decide whether you’re a shagger or a lover . . . when a shagger falls in love, it’s game over.” This framing haunts Irvine Welsh’s return to the *Trainspotting* gang as they stagger out of heroin’s death grip and into a new addiction: love.

The novel, set at the tail end of the 1980s, follows Renton, Sickboy, Spud and Begbie as they try to rebuild lives fractured in their early 20s. There are no clean

breaks, no sanctimonious endorsements of sobriety, just a swap of dependencies. Heroin is out; MDMA is in. Love is the last available high, the ultimate one.

Told through their distinctive voices, Welsh delivers a funny, propulsive meditation on sex, intimacy and vulnerability. Most compelling is the ruthless Sickboy. His pursuit of Amanda, a posh Londoner, is less romantic than tactical. For him, love is social currency, a tool for crossing class lines.

Men in Love, a doorstopper nodding to DH Lawrence, is a proper, traditional novel, intricately weaving multiple lives and perspectives into a portrait of a society in flux. The characters’ internal shifts mirror a broader cultural transition, from heroin’s nihilism and stagnation to rave culture’s ecstatic individualism.

Each short chapter opens with an epigraph from a Romantic poet. Initially puzzling, this choice reveals Welsh’s deeper ambition: sincerity. This is a novel



Men in Love follows Renton, Sickboy, Spud and Begbie as they try to rebuild lives fractured in their early 20s

about growing up and searching. It’s steeped in that old Romantic ideal of yearning for transcendence. These men are chasing a better life, an ideal love, a high that might last forever.

In the end, each character offers a reflection on love. Renton’s lingers: “And I know she is out there, and everything I do – every other love I have had or will have – can only be about getting myself ready for her.” This is what Welsh captures so well: the seething toxicity in much of what we pursue as love, alongside the powerful beauty of those misguided ideals. It’s the logic of addiction: knowing something is wrong and still being helpless under its spell.

Memoir from the front line

Claire Hennessy

We Don't Use Words Like 'Crazy': On The Frontline of Mental Health
By Elliot Sweeney

Blink Publishing, 304pp, £20

In mental health, it's not hard to get away with bad practice," Elliot Sweeney ruefully notes of his chosen career. A nurse in this field for 20 years, he is ideally placed to comment on how some, in the profession, are "more interested in cutting corners, publishing papers and booking holidays than doing some good", while also sympathetic to how difficult the work is, and the gaping holes in provision.

The term "firefighting" is repeated. Sweeney writes specifically of the crumbling NHS, but Irish readers will find many points of comparison with overextended mental health services here, and understand that "without gallows humour, the bleakness would overwhelm".

Some reminders – for example, that mental health is "a serious business" – may feel a tad obvious to younger generations, used to a certain amount of lip service on this issue, but Sweeney jumps right into the less palatable cases.

A mother poisoning her children, suffering from factitious disorder, more colloquially known as Munchhausen's by proxy (a diagnosis medical dramas and crime novels are fond of), is not an immediately sympathetic character.

Nor is someone wielding a knife in public – knowing that severe mental



Elliot Sweeney shows rather than tells of the bind health professionals often find themselves in. PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES/WESTEND61

illness means one is more likely to be the victim of, rather than perpetrator of, violence does not magic away the real danger of such moments.

Sweeney is aware of the tensions between an individual's agency and the risk they pose to themselves or others; with a novelist's eye, he shows rather than tells of the bind health professionals often find themselves in. He knows the system is broken and how many have fled; he's still there.

His case studies – careful composites, as is the usual practice in books of this kind – illustrate a variety of suffering and

labels, and explore what it means to help in such cases. Sometimes he can't. One particularly volatile patient demonstrates how essential professional boundaries are.

Psychiatrists tend to be the ones writing memoirs like these; nurses – those who are "hauled in for answers" if something goes wrong – are less represented.

This is a welcome addition to the mental-health-workplace canon from someone not yet burned out: "beneath the crackle and static of paranoia," he writes, "I hear the pathos of a human in pain. It's this I try to focus on".

Women always on the verge

Liam Bishop

Women in Dark Times
By Jacqueline Rose

Fitzcarraldo Editions, 352pp, £14.99

Jacqueline Rose's book, *Women in Dark Times*, claims to be about women who "negotiate the perils of their lives" to say "something urgent about feminism today". Even without Trump's presidency (the preface is dated "November 2024"), one seemingly doesn't have to look far for regressive or ultra-conservative policies being exacted on women's rights (or lack of).

The book, originally published in 2014, comes with a new preface, in which Rose writes, "[s]urely, all dark times are dark for women? Today, woefully, I have to acknowledge the truth of that statement." She might be forgiven for her pessimism.

However, acknowledging truths, and difficult ones at that, we already know is in this psychoanalytically inspired writer's wheelhouse. From Rosa Luxembourg, to Marilyn Monroe, to a number of women killed by their fathers in modern day "honour killings", to the artists Charlotte Salomon, Esther Shalev-Gerz, Yael Bartana and Thérèse Oulton, Rose's eclectic selection of women show us how to acknowledge other difficult truths about the patriarchy.

Rose fills her book with evidence of both the public and private thoughts of the women she writes about. We're enlivened by Marilyn Monroe's deeply analytical mind, and troubled by the painter Charlotte Salomon's tragic, internal psychological conflict (both her mother and grandmother took their own lives before Salomon killed her own grandfather. She was then murdered, five months pregnant, in Auschwitz).

Either in their life or work, they all seem to be women who were on the borders of death or sanity. For Rose, proximity to these boundaries often compel, what she calls, "the subterranean aspects of history and the human mind".

It's a slightly unwieldy book due to the varied roles and lives her subjects had. Rose's central thesis also might seem a little obscure to those not schooled in psychoanalysis or feminist theory. I wouldn't let this put you off, though, because Rose is one of the most interesting and thought-provoking writers working today.

Women in Dark Times represents a more accessible way into the work of someone writing about challenging topics in a way that challenges you to think differently. Either way, it will make you want to read more about the women she writes about (and Rose I hope), which surely is the point anyway?

The pursuit of pleasure in Paris

Julia Kelly

I'm Mostly Here to Enjoy Myself
By Glynnis MacNicol

Leap, 304pp, £10.99

Glynnis MacNicol is far from the only person who spent the pandemic in complete isolation, but her experience – 16 months alone in a tiny Manhattan apartment as a 46-year-old single woman without children – was especially punishing.

When she is offered the chance to sublet a friend's apartment in Paris, she books a flight right away and announces on her arrival that she has "moved into an abundance mindset". In France, she swiftly begins hooking up with men she matches with on a dating app called Fruitz, having felt starved of touch for too long.

Subtitled "One Woman's Pursuit of Pleasure in Paris", this somewhat self-in-

dulgent memoir of a liberated middle-aged woman's adventures might appeal to lots of readers, but it wasn't really my cup of tea. In fact, I would have preferred a nice cup of tea over reading about MacNicol's ceaseless need for self-gratification.

Her unapologetic self-possession is impressive, her confidence admirable. And yes, women who embrace this kind of sexual agency are often unfairly judged, especially compared to men. Irrespective of that caveat, her choices appear risky, reckless, wildly trusting and self-indulgent – even without factoring in a global pandemic.

There are jarring tonal shifts throughout. In one chapter, MacNicol recounts a rough night out when she abandoned her friends and got lost in the Bois de Boulogne. Her sulky narration – "I don't want to stay. I don't want to have a bad night. I don't want to not have fun. And I don't have to not have fun. So I leave. And now how to get myself out of the forest" – is

oddly affecting. Just as the tension begins to build, she veers wildly off course: "It's shocking to understand how recent the notion of time travel is." The digression breaks the spell entirely.

Elsewhere, she comes off as overly enamoured of herself. "In every pool I swim, my stroke is remarked upon, my sharp flip turns marvelled at," she writes. On seeing an old video of herself: "I watch it again and again and stare at my own beauty, which leaps off the screen at me . . . My jawline, my eyes, my hair. I find myself coveting myself." Moments like these come across less as reflections on ageing or self-acceptance and more as unchecked self-regard.

Even the back cover blurb leans into overstatement: likening MacNicol to Nora Ephron and Deborah Levy, the former a comedic genius, the latter a razor-sharp chronicler of interior lives, is quite a stretch. This book seems written primarily for the author's pleasure and occasionally forgets that the reader is also there.

Bestsellers

ORIGINAL FICTION

- 1 **She Didn't See It Coming** Shari Lapena **1,086**
- 2 **Two Kinds of Stranger** Steve Cavanagh **991**
- 3 **The In-Laws** Sinéad Moriarty **711**
- 4 **The Names** Florence Knapp **553**
- 5 **Not Quite Dead Yet** Holly Jackson **494**
- 6 **The Girl with the Suitcase** Lesley Pearse **472**
- 7 **It Should Have Been You** Andrea Mara **441**
- 8 **Don't Let Him In** Lisa Jewell **398**
- 9 **We Are All Guilty Here** Karin Slaughter **333**
- 10 **The Night I Killed Him** Gill Perdue **325**

MASS MARKET FICTION

- 1 **The Housemaid** Freida McFadden **629**
- 2 **Intermezzo** Sally Rooney **607**
- 3 **Binding 13** Chloe Walsh **478**
- 4 **Frankie** Graham Norton **471**
- 5 **Heart, Be at Peace** Donal Ryan **415**
- 6 **Long Island** Colm Tóibín **407**
- 7 **You Are Here** David Nicholls **396**
- 8 **Small Things Like These** Claire Keegan **377**
- 9 **The Wedding People** Alison Espach **368**
- 10 **The Safekeep** Yael van der Wouden **361**

HARDBACK NON-FICTION

- 1 **Make & Freeze** Lou Robbie **748**
- 2 **The Let Them Theory** Mel Robbins & Sawyer Robbins **674**
- 3 **Jibrin: (Volume 15)** Izz Alkarajeh & Eman Alkarajeh **598**
- 4 **Still Me** Dr Sabina Brennan **405**
- 5 **Jane's Patisserie Classic** Jane Dunn **248**
- 6 **Ireland's Curious Places** Michael Fewer **125**
- 7 **Jess and Norma** Jessica Asquith & Norma Burton **111**
- 8 **Essential Irish History** **103**
- 9 **A Pocket History of Ireland** Joseph McCullough **103**
- 10 **The Great Irish Bucket List** **101**

PAPERBACK NON-FICTION

- 1 **Deadly Silence** Jacqueline Connolly **612**
- 2 **Money: A Story of Humanity** David McWilliams **316**
- 3 **Poor** Katriona O'Sullivan **240**
- 4 **Say Nothing** Patrick Radden Keefe **225**
- 5 **The Racket** Conor Niland **225**
- 6 **Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results** James Clear **205**
- 7 **The Trading Game: A Confession** Gary Stevenson **196**
- 8 **Obsessed: The Autobiography** Johnny Sexton **186**
- 9 **The Secret Life of Leinster House** Gavan Reilly **160**
- 10 **Surrounded by Idiots** Thomas Erikson **155**

CHILDREN'S

- 1 **Lottie Brooks vs The Ultra Mean Girls** Katie Kirby **650**
- 2 **Cozy Corner** Coco Wyo **403**
- 3 **Sunrise on the Reaping: The Hunger Games** Suzanne Collins **319**
- 4 **The Summer I Turned Pretty** Jenny Han **304**
- 5 **Big Jim Begins: A Graphic Novel** Dav Pilkey **287**
- 6 **Cozy Cuties: Coco Wyo** Coco Wyo **280**
- 7 **We'll Always Have Summer** Jenny Han **264**
- 8 **Pablo and Splash: Roman Holiday** Sheena Dempsey **258**
- 9 **Dog Man** Dav Pilkey **250**
- 10 **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** JK Rowling **234**

Data supplied by Nielsen BookScan taken from the Irish consumer market week ending August 2nd, 2025

More than just a straight legal history

A consideration of the US supreme court looks at its decisions, the lives of its justices and gives an analysis of its influences

James Meighan

The Most Powerful Court in the World: A History of the Supreme Court of the United States

By Stuart Banner

OUP USA, 672pp, £30.99

While the title of this book indicates a legal history of the United States supreme court, the book is far more than a jurisprudential analysis of the highest court in the United States.

Banner, a law professor at the University of California, sets out to avoid the traditional legal history of the court and instead writes a trilateral history, a consideration of the court's decisions, the lives of its justices and an analysis of the relevant contemporaneous political and societal influences.

Banner argues that it is not possible to consider the court in isolation and during periods of its history, the court was the driving force which directed the course of the United States.

An example of this impactful influence can be seen in the 1803 decision of Marbury v Madison which has become legendary in the canon of constitutional jurisprudence in which the court recognised the judiciary's power of judicial review.

Banner notes that the decision of Chief Justice Roger Taney in Dred Scott v Sandford (1857) is often cited as one of the most shameful opinions in the history of the court.

In Dred Scott, the court ruled that people of African descent, whether enslaved or free, were not and could never be citizens of the United States and therefore had no standing to sue in federal court. Dred Scott would go on to play a significant role in hastening the onset of the American Civil War in 1861.

During the Chief Justiceship of Earl



Warren (1953-1969), the court ushered in the most liberal period of its history. During this period, the court determined seminal cases such as Brown v Board of Education (1954) which banned the segregation of public schools, Miranda v Arizona (1966) which ruled that the police must warn a person of their constitutional rights, before conducting an interrogation and New York Times Co v Sullivan (1964) which ruled the freedom of speech protections in the First Amendment to the constitution limited the ability of public officials to sue for defamation.

The author notes that the US supreme court is not apolitical. The court is exposed to politics in a number of different ways, including through the appointment of its justices.

When a vacancy arises, the president nominates a candidate for appointment and the Senate confirms their appointment. Traditionally, Republican presidents have appointed conservative justices while Democratic presidents have appointed more liberally minded members of the bench.

Arguably the most controversial decision of the court in the past century concerned abortion rights. In Roe v Wade (1973) the court found that the US constitution protected the right to have an abortion before the point of foetal viability.

Given the polarisation of views on social

The US supreme court is exposed to politics in a number of different ways.

PHOTOGRAPH: AL DRAGO/ BLOOMBERG

issues, there was an immediate call for the overturn of Roe. The US constitution, similar to other modern constitutions, can evolve over time and the court can revisit its earlier decisions if the make-up of its bench shifts and social norms evolve.

Following a number of Republican-appointed justices, the court now leans towards a conservative interpretation of the constitution. In 2022, the court was prepared to reconsider Roe in Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization.

In Dobbs, the court ruled that the constitution does not confer a right to abortion, thereby overruling the controversial decision in Roe. The decision in Dodds has caused a legal and social cataclysm in the United States. Several states moved quickly to ban abortion, and the Roe/ Dodds line of case law is likely to reverberate in the US for many years to come.

The author brings the history of the court up to the present and considers a number of appeals to the court, brought by President Donald Trump, on various issues including the 2020 presidential election. Banner notes that Trump has a very poor success rate before the court.

While this is certainly an enlightening history of the court, there are aspects of the court's history which are considered in a summary manner only. For example, the book concentrates on the liberal period of the Warren Court but pays little attention to the Watergate scandal and its political and legal fallout.

That said, Banner, has authored an excellent, comprehensive and engaging one volume history of, as the title enunciates, possibly the most powerful court in the world.

Dr James Meighan is a practising lawyer and holds a PhD in constitutional history from the University of Limerick.

During periods of its history, the court was the driving force which directed the course of the United States

Like father, like son: Xis are loyal to a fault

Denis Staunton

The Party's Interests Come First: The Life of Xi Zhongxun, Father of Xi Jinping
By Joseph Torigian

Stanford University Press, 718pp, £41

When Xi Jinping took over the leadership of the Communist Party in 2012, his reputation outside China was that of a technocrat who was seen as unlikely to change the country's broad policy direction. Most western observers expected him to pursue the economic reform agenda that had prevailed since the 1980s and adhere to the collective leadership norms established after the death of Mao Zedong.

Chinese political insiders knew about Xi's preoccupation with fighting corruption and his focus on securing the party's grip on power. But many found reassurance in the fact that the new leader was the son of Xi Zhongxun, a communist revolutionary and a senior political figure who embraced economic and political reform.

It was not just the father's record as a guerrilla fighter during the war against Japan and the Chinese civil war or as a high-ranking official that elevated him in the esteem of party comrades. It was also his personal conduct towards others during the party's vicious power struggles and purges, some of which he found himself on the wrong side.

"He established a reputation as the very best kind of individual that the party could

produce. According to that narrative, shared widely among Chinese elites, Xi was a righteous individual who was almost uniquely practical, open-minded, and merciful," Joseph Torigian writes in his magisterial biography of Xi Zhongxun, The Party's Interests Come First.

The book's title comes from an inscription written by Mao for Xi Zhongxun in January 1943 and devotion to the party is the red thread that runs through the lives of both father and son. A member of the Communist Youth League at 13, Xi Zhongxun was imprisoned at 15 for the attempted assassination of a teacher on the party's orders.

He played an important part in the rise of the party in northwest China in the early 1930s and fought in the communist stronghold of Yan'an during the war against Japan and the civil war with Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, he held a number of high offices, including vice-premier and minister for propaganda.

He was persecuted by the party five times and purged for 15 years in 1962, during which time he was in political exile or under house arrest. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 he and his family were targeted and those years saw his daughter take her own life and Xi Jinping sent down to the countryside as a teenager to work in the fields.

Rehabilitated by Deng Xiaoping after Mao's death, Xi Zhongxun became an enthusiastic champion of economic reform and cultivated connections with intellectu-



Postage stamps commemorate Xi Zhongxun, the senior Communist Party figure and father of Xi Jinping, who died in 2002. PHOTOGRAPH: STR/AFP/GETTY

als, ethnic and religious minorities and overseas Chinese. Initially sympathetic towards the student demonstrators in 1989, he fell into line behind the deadly crackdown that saw soldiers open fire on protesters in Tiananmen Square.

The puzzle at the centre of Xi Zhongxun's life, and of Torigian's book, is why he remained so loyal to a party that betrayed him so many times and caused such suffering to himself and his family. Torigian uses memoirs, letters, interviews and archival sources inside and outside China to explore the details of his subject's life but it is the biographer's radical empathy and subtlety of mind that illuminates it.

The party was the source of meaning in Xi Zhongxun's life and the suffering it caused him bound him more closely to it so that it was a source of pride that he endured so much and remained so loyal. Xi

Jinping also endured great hardship during the Cultural Revolution but appears to have inherited his father's unwavering devotion to the party.

Many readers will come to this book looking for insights into the character and thinking of Xi Jinping and how he was influenced by his father. And his father's story and that of his own upbringing do reveal much about the forces that shaped China's most powerful leader since Mao.

But Torigian's signal achievement is in the way he takes the reader into the world of the Chinese Communist Party in the 20th century and the interior life of its elite figures. That paranoid and intensely emotional political culture had a profound influence on Xi Jinping and its consequences are playing out in China today.

Denis Staunton is Beijing Correspondent

Poem Aeneas Bhirgil

by Mary O'Malley

i.m. Ciaran Carson

Those were the travelling times when we toured like fireflies across the North

a set of pipes tuned to the whine of a late-night Hoover in Portadown,

a few years later on down the road a walk through the Tenderloin,

a mirror in a Paris bar, the lines 'Il pleure...' and you complained to the five poets

you led across Paris to toast Verlaine with 'only the finest Calva'

that no Irish poet had written such a line with all our superior knowledge of rain.

Mary O'Malley's most recent collection is The Shark Nursery (Carcanet), which is shortlisted for the Walcott Prize.



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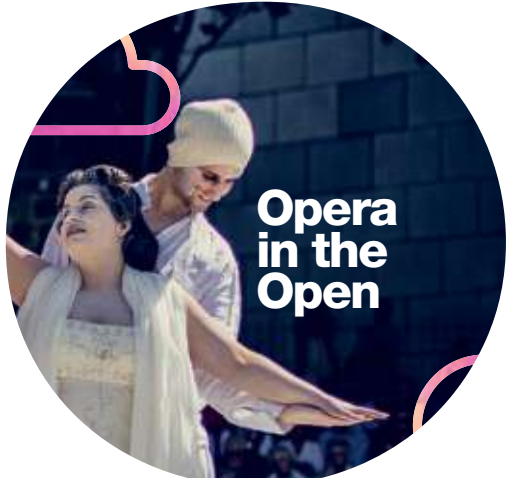
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