

photo book of the week

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

26 | 07 | 2015



PHOTOGRAPHY

WHITE EBONY

By Patricia Willocq
EDITION
LAMMERHUBER
£45

Just as the African continent is nothing like as monochrome as our stereotyped ideas of it, so neither are the skin tones of its inhabitants. One variant, however - here more than anywhere - marks people out as misfits: very white skin, unusually light hair colour, blue or green eyes. This congenital metabolic disease is called albinism. People with albinism (PWA) often are visually impaired and need special protection from the sun. Most of all they suffer from social stigmatisation. So, it is little short of a miracle how courageously and

confidently the PWA of Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, try to overcome their treatment as outsiders, and demand respect.

In her photographs, Patricia Willocq helps boost the self-assurance of people with albinism in the Congo. Her book is a testimony to hope, courage, love, and success.

Says Flavia Pansieri, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights: "While we continue to receive shocking reports of killings and attacks against persons with albinism, Patricia Willocq's photographs send a message of hope and encouragement."

TOP FIVE HISTORY TITLES

THIS WEEK'S BESTSELLERS SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONES

- 1 WATERLOO: THE HISTORY OF FOUR DAYS, THREE ARMIES AND THREE BATTLES Bernard Cornwell
- 2 THE EDGE OF THE WORLD: HOW THE NORTH SEA MADE US WHO WE ARE Michael Pye
- 3 ARDENNES 1944: HITLER'S LAST GAMBLE Antony Beevor
- 4 EUREKA! EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ANCIENT GREEKS BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK Peter Jones
- 5 TEN CITIES THAT MADE AN EMPIRE Tristram Hunt

Experiment fails to ignite

SHORT STORIES
LUCKY ALAN
 By Jonathan Lethem
 JONATHAN CAPE
 £16.99
 REVIEWED BY DOUG JOHNSTONE

Jonathan Lethem has a reputation across the pond for experimental writing and diverse subject matter, and while this slim collection shows signs of both, it's also for the most part not very good. The nine stories can be loosely spilt into two categories, realist and absurd, with the four tales that tend towards realism being the more successful.

The final story, "Pending Vegan", is a stand-out moment, a tense and terrifying first person account of a young father having a minor breakdown while visiting SeaWorld with his uptight wife and twin four-year-old girls. The story packs a real emotional punch and reminds us of Lethem at his best, when his linguistic gymnastics work in service of character and plot, rather than jarring against them.

The other story really worth reading is "The Empty Room", a quirky, troublesome yarn about a family who move to a house in the suburbs where the father declares one room can be used for anything, as long as it forever stays empty. Like "Pending Vegan", this story flirts with weirdness and subversion, but within a realistic framework, which adds to the story's power.

The two other "realist" stories here are typical Lethem tributes to his beloved New York. One features a washed-up theatre director, the other tells of a student who reviews porn movies in his spare time. Both men are lonely and trapped in isolation, and while they're diverting character studies, neither really goes anywhere interesting.

Of the experimental stories, "Traveler Home" is the only one that engages. A dreamlike, staccato narrative tells a strange pseudo-fable of a loner who is presented with a human baby in a basket by a pack of wolves, only to have it taken from him by neighbouring girls. Written in deliberately juddering syntax, it feels a little like an exercise in writing, but just about pulls together some heart. The other stories are less successful. "Their Back Pages" sees obsolete cartoon characters stranded on an island, while "Procedure in Plain Air" is a very thin piece of Kafka-esque absurdity.

There are two stories here that really annoy with their pretentiousness. "The King of Sentences", where a couple worship an ageing author, is supposed to satirise literary pretension but reinforces it, while "The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear" appears to be snidely mocking blog culture. Experimentation and diversity in writing are great, but not at the expense of quality.

Bank bailouts diverted to pay for bonuses? Thank God it's not real

FICTION
THE MARK AND THE VOID
 By Paul Murray
 HAMISH HAMILTON
 £12.99
 REVIEWED BY LEYLA SANAI

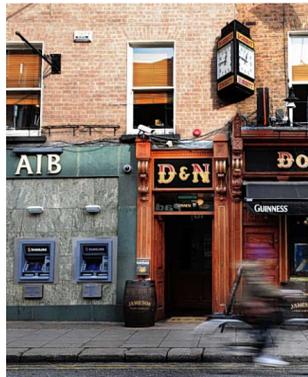
It was a tall order for Paul Murray to come up with a follow-up to 2010's *Skippy Dies*, a novel which I declared in my review to be the funniest book I had read all year. Longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, shortlisted for the Costa, and a finalist for the National Book Awards, *Skippy Dies* was a bittersweet story of a boy in a Catholic boys' boarding school in Ireland, and was itself a sequel to Murray's debut novel *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, which was shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award in 2003.

I should not have worried about Murray maintaining form. *The Mark and the Void* is a hilarious, blade-sharp satire on the banking system featuring vividly drawn characters, and it is, once again, the funniest book I've read so far this year.

Claude Martingale is a French analyst working in the Bank of Torabundo in Dublin. The son of a blacksmith, he was encouraged to study by his father, who then resented his success as a banker in Paris. Claude fled France to come and work in Dublin, but his father died before they could reach a rapprochement, and Claude has been haunted by this ever since.

Clever but hapless and credulous, he is a perfect target for a writer who has fallen on hard times and is looking for a way to get rich fast. In a nod to the novelist Paul Auster's habit of placing himself in his books, this fictional writer has the same first name as Murray, Paul.

The Bank of Torabundo is one of the few banks that has avoided exposure to toxic investments in property and derivatives, due largely to the wisdom and caution of its old CEO, but he was judged to be "too conservative", so he has been ignominiously



Irish stew: AIB was Paul Murray's inspiration

sacked and replaced by Porter Blankly, a pro golfer and chancer with no degree, no formal financial qualifications or successes, and a policy of risk-taking and immoral practice in the previous bank where he was the CEO, and which crashed. Blankly is racist, sexist, and drives his wives to suicide. He is an artfully odious creature,

Many apparently implausible touches echo actual events

more self-serving than even Martin Amis's John Self or Keith Talent, the darts player. Blankly is in the habit of sending his employees clichés such as "All That Glitters is not Gold", or "A Stitch in Time Saves Nine", and the employees scabble around to find deep inner meaning in these banal statements.

The world of banking is conjured up with skill and acuity. There are numerous touches which would be too implausible to be true were they not echoes of the

crisis-ridden banks in the real world; self-parodies such as millions of government bail-out money being used to fund yet more bonuses for failed bank executives, and the political machinations behind such aid. The inspiration for the failing fictional Irish bank is the real life Anglo Irish Bank. Claude is drawn perfectly as the intellectual but gullible hero, and Murray covers any unfeasible turns in the story such as his continued funding of Paul by making it clear that Claude does have suspicions, but wishes to encourage creativity.

There is a cast of sterling characters. Jurgen, Claude's superior, is an emotion-free German who used to play songs about people seeking business loans with fellow German bankers in a reggae band called Gerhardt and the Mergers. There is an aloof but supremely talented, heavily-lidded Indian writer with an eye for beautiful young women, presumably based on Salman Rushdie.

But the real star of the story is Ish, Claude's best friend in the bank. She previously studied anthropology and she alone among the bankers seems to spot that the emperor has no clothes. She is human and irreverent. After an exchange on the Bank of Torabundo being too big to fail, she says: "Did I ever tell you about my Aunt Nelly?... She was always bragging that her tits were too big to fail. Every Saturday night she'd go out without so much as a lick of lippy on. 'Don't need it,' she'd say. 'Got these'. Then one day she was leaning over her fishpond and she fell in."

Ish has travelled extensively. Torabundo is a volcanic island in the Pacific Ocean with kindly tax laws for tax avoiders, and Ish was struck by the gift economy in a different Polynesian island where goods are not sold or exchanged but simply given away, the antithesis to the dog-eat-dog world of the banks.

As in *Skippy Dies*, unrequited love features. Ish is in love with another character, but he is oblivious to her, himself being obsessed by another woman, one who abhors the materialism and immorality of the banking world. As in *Skippy Dies*, the ending is not aspartame-sweet but heart-rending. A joy from start to finish.

SHORT STORIES
AN ACCOUNT OF THE DECLINE OF THE GREAT AUK, ACCORDING TO ONE WHO SAW IT
 By Jessie Greengrass
 JM ORIGINALS £10.99
 REVIEWED BY RACHEL HORE

Parallel world of wish and dream

The stories in this impressive and unusual debut collection chronicle the lives of the lonely and the estranged. Some are set in the present such as "The Politics of Minor Resistance", which describes with Orwellian chill the de-humanising nature of a call centre, and the little ways by which the employees reclaim their individuality. The dystopian future feels alarmingly close in "Winter, 2058", a John Wyndham-like tale about a

member of a surveillance team for mysterious "intrusions", who feels cut off from society by the nature of the work. There are also several period pieces, including the title story, which is related by an old seaman in a matter-of-fact voice straight out of the 18th century. "We blamed the birds... we hated how they didn't run away," he says as he describes the sailors' enraged massacre of the auks, whilst acknowledging sadness "because in any loss you can see a shadow of the way that you will be lost yourself". That a tone of philosophical melancholy



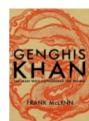
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Mongols: a massive story, badly told

HISTORY
GENGHIS KHAN: THE MAN WHO CONQUERED THE WORLD
 By Frank McLynn
 BODLEY HEAD £25
 REVIEWED BY BRIAN SEWELL



If in doubt on any major matter of myth or history, the reader should turn to the greatest of great lexicons, the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In it, Sir Robert Kennaway Douglas, sometime Keeper of the British Museum's Oriental Books and Manuscripts,

offers two whole pages to Genghis Khan (1162-1227 and spelled Jenghiz - a useful clue to pronunciation) as "one of the greatest conquerors the world has ever seen".

With his heirs he briefly expanded his Mongol Empire from the coast of the Pacific Ocean to the outskirts of Vienna. It was never an Empire in any sense that we can understand; the Mongol armies were too small, too adventurous, too deadly and destructive to control it - they wiped out populations and their cultures and moved on and, from Peking to Budapest, it was a great relief when, after half a century, the conquerors had gone.

Now we have a new book written by a "highly regarded historian" who, alas, needed a sharp



Genghis Khan: A long and unpleasant life

editor. With 646 pages it is too long, drifts into scarcely relevant excursions, has too few dates, too few illustrations and maps, and too much confusing information.

It attempts (but fails) to be a readable book, ending with the supposition that drought, cold weather and polar winds brought about the empire's end, and, if not these, then moral turpitude. Most of all, it needed to include Genghis himself in its glossary of principal personalities, for his long, complicated, beastly and unpleasant life was so confusing that the average reader frequently needs a page of reference notes, instead of keeping a finger in

the index pages or having the *Britannica* constantly at hand.

Dr McLynn admits he knows none of the eight essential oriental languages, nor the eight more that might have been helpful. He guides us on pronunciation - J as in jam, Ch as in church - but says nothing of the G other than that Genghis should really be Chingis, then observes that in the English-speaking world he was always Genghis, apparently unaware of the *Britannica*. His volume, he declares "is designed as popular history rather than an academic thesis".

As popular history it has its moments, the numbers of dead and dying on all sides probably wildly inaccurate, the herds of horses and other beasts exaggerated beyond belief, the political genius of Genghis quite incomparable, and can we really believe that 60,000 Chinese virgins leapt from the walls of Peking rather than be ravaged by his troops?

There is no doubt that the Mongols sprang from a small core platform to the north of China, conquered everything and everyone within reach, subdued the great mass of China, Persia and all points between, reached the Caspian, the Black and the Baltic Seas and had Hungary in their grasp, all within two generations before they faded back into obscurity. It is a tale so vast that it is impossible to remember - hence the need for a new book, but perhaps not this.



The dehumanising work in a call-centre is exposed

to take myself with me", a truth she finds "crushing and unfixable".

The strongest stories are the least exotic, the ones rooted in ordinary life. "Dolphin" concerns a nine-year-old girl whose neglectful father takes her on a disastrous visit to an aquarium. Greengrass, highly articulate in the language of loss and separation, skewers precisely the agonies of a child caught between warring parents. In "Three Thousand, Nine Hundred and Forty-five Miles", a female research student endures a summer of intense loneliness after her lover enforces a

separation. Falling asleep at odd times, weird imaginings; the love-craziness she sinks into without him is all too recognisable, as is the irony of the way in which she recovers. One or two of the stories are on the slight side and barely earn their keep, although the first line of one, "Sometimes I dream that there is still the internet", is perhaps its salvation. Overall, though, this is a highly original collection from a distinctive new voice in fiction.

Rachel Hore's *A Week in Paris* is published in paperback by Simon & Schuster