

## Review of reviews: Books

## Book of the week

**The Last Leonardo**

by Ben Lewis

*William Collins* 416pp £20

The Week Bookshop £17.99

There isn't any doubt about which painting is the most expensive in the world, said Michael Prodder in *The Sunday Times*. It's *Salvator Mundi*. In 2017, the portrait of Christ ascribed to Leonardo da Vinci fetched a "record-obliterating" \$450m at auction. Everything else about the painting, however, is shrouded in mystery. In his "forensically detailed and gripping" book, Ben Lewis tracks its murky history – a story that takes in Renaissance Italy, the courts of Louis XII and Charles I, and ends among today's sheikhs and oligarchs: people who think nothing of splashing millions on an artwork. Through it all, Lewis considers a fundamental question: was the *Salvator* actually the work of Leonardo? He's in no doubt it emanated from the master's studio, but he doesn't think it's a "signature" work. As Lewis sees it, a "potpourri of interests – financial, political and even psychological – combined to turn a workshop painting into a Leonardo".

The evidence for his verdict is compelling, said David Sanderson in *The Times*. From the 1490s, Leonardo's paintings were extensively documented – but there is no reference to a *Salvator*



(thought to have been painted around 1500). And would Leonardo really have chosen to paint his Christ on a walnut panel with a "gnarled, ticking time bomb" of a knot? A key contention of those claiming the painting is genuine is that it was owned by Charles I, whose inventory referred to a "Peece [picture] of Christ done by Leonard". But the portrait, Lewis points out, doesn't have Charles's collection stamp on its back, while in a Moscow gallery there's another *Salvator Mundi*, attributed to Giampietrino, that does.

After languishing in obscurity for centuries, the badly damaged painting was "discovered" in 2005 by two

American art dealers, said Charles Nicholl in *The Guardian*. On a "whim", they bought it from an obscure New Orleans auction house, for \$1,175. Having been "painstakingly restored", it was then exhibited, as a genuine Leonardo, at London's National Gallery in 2011. Since then, even as most experts have come to doubt its authenticity, the *Salvator* has rocketed in value, passing from a "Swiss middleman" to a Russian oligarch to its current owner (believed to be the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman). Even today, the sense of mystery continues: last autumn, its promised unveiling at its "new home", the Louvre Abu Dhabi, was abruptly cancelled, with no explanation given. Narrated with "great gusto", *The Last Leonardo* is a compelling study of a "fairy-tale frog turned into a prince of paintings".

**Extraordinary Insects**

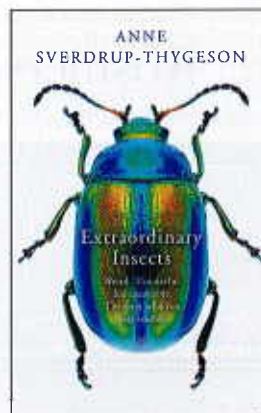
by Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson

*Mudlark* 320pp £14.99

The Week Bookshop £12.99

Did you know that there are 380,000 known species of beetle? That there's a type of Indian stick insect that has sex by sticking to its mate "non-stop for 79 days"? Or that possibly the world's noisiest insect is a 2mm-long species of water boatman that "uses its penis as a violin bow"? All these facts (and a great many more), said Tom Chivers in *The Times*, are to be found in this "fun little book" by Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson, a Norwegian entomologist who has dedicated her life to studying these remarkable but often "unconsidered" creatures. Written with "unstoppable Scandinavian positivity", *Extraordinary Insects* is a "joy".

Insects arrived long before us (about 479 million years ago) and will carry on "wriggling and buzzing" after we exit the planet, said Charles Foster in the *London Evening Standard*. Such durability is down to their "astonishing fecundity": if two fruit flies mated, producing equal numbers of males and females, which in turn did the same, at the end of a single year the "25th generation, if packed tightly together, would form a sphere whose diameter would be greater than the distance between the Earth and the Sun". This produces a "lot of new genetic material" for natural selection to work on – which is why the DNA of mosquitoes on the London Underground varies significantly between lines. And yet humans mostly ignore the "wondrous complexity" of these creatures, killing them "casually and recklessly". As a result, insect biomass is in decline: in Germany, it has decreased 75% in 30 years. But as Sverdrup-Thygeson makes clear, this has more worrying long-term implications for humans than it does for insects. "They'll survive. But if we reduce their numbers much more, we'll accelerate our own demise."

**Novel of the week****Throw Me to the Wolves**

by Patrick McGuinness

*Jonathan Cape* 336pp £14.99

The Week Bookshop £12.99

This "intensely powerful" second novel by poet Patrick McGuinness is loosely based on the 2010 murder of Joanna Yeates, and the "press feeding frenzy" around the initial suspect, retired teacher Christopher Jefferies, said Justine Jordan in *The Guardian*. Set in a "strange palimpsest of a place" – part Bristol, part "down-at-heel Kent" – it centres on Jefferies' fictional stand-in, the "otherworldly" Michael Wolphram (also a former teacher), and a pair of cops investigating the case. But while McGuinness has fun with the "colour and cliché" of crime fiction, the novel's "beating heart" lies in the past – above all, in one character's traumatic memories of the boarding school he attended decades earlier.

A great deal is "churning away" in this novel, said Melissa Katsoulis in *The Times*, from the present-day reckoning with historical sexual abuse to the rights and wrongs of Brexit. And it's all spun in "beautiful, unashamedly intellectual prose". It's a shame that the women are mostly "one-dimensional archetypes" – but in other respects, this is literary fiction as it should be: stylish and clever, while also a "page-turner".

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