

ArtReview

I wanted to be my own muse



UK £6.50



Penny Slinger

Books

Insurgent Empire: Anticolonialism and the Making of British Dissent

by Priyamvada Gopal Verso, £25 (hardcover)

During a brief stint as under-secretary of state for the colonies in 1942, Conservative politician Harold Macmillan went out of his way to characterise Britain's relationship with its colonies as a 'partnership'. He would say that; he needed colonial resources to support Britain's ongoing war against the Axis powers. And some were calling the empire a fascist occupation. By the time he was prime minister (1957–63), with India and Sri Lanka having achieved independence and the decolonisation of Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia underway, Macmillan was suggesting that a sense of 'national consciousness' was a Western invention taught to colonial subjects and that 'self-government' had been the intention of colonial rule all along. Freedom, by extension, is a Western invention; the independence of former colonies a sign of Western success. For University of Cambridge-based academic Priyamvada Gopal, such attitudes are still prevalent in Britain today, in its politics, pedagogy and press. She even finds traces of it in Brexit Britain's dreams of happy future trade with its former colonies and within the words of America's first black president, Barack Obama, during a 2011 address to the British parliament in the wake of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings. In it he appeared to suggest

that freedom is at once Anglo-American and capitalist and that, therefore, to struggle for freedom is to struggle to be more American. As a corrective to that, this book traces instances of colonial insurgency, from the 1857 Indian Mutiny to the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya almost a century later, and the way those actions were mediated, interpreted and discussed within the metropolitan heart of empire. Key to her narrative is an emphasis on the ways in which these discussions were generated in the colonies, taken up by British dissenters, and then used to inform more general debates about social and economic justice, and race and class.

Jamaica's Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 and its brutal and bloody repression, for example, provides a moment of reflection about relative definitions of freedom: the colonial government insisting that it meant the freedom of former slaves to sell their labour to white planters; the former slaves insisting that it meant being able to own the land they farmed. Meanwhile, the Jamaica Committee, set up to ensure the trial of Edward John Eyre, then governor of Jamaica, for his excesses (hundreds of innocent black people killed alongside most of his non-white political opponents) worried that what might happen under martial law in the colonies might

very well happen at home. Such warnings were later repeated by Bombay-born Indian-British Communist Shapurji Saklatvala, who was elected to parliament as the MP for North Battersea in 1922 and later arrested while supporting the 1926 General Strike. He insisted that there was a convergence between anticapitalism and anticolonialism and that, as Gopal puts it, 'resistance to empire was in the interests of both the Indian and British working classes'.

Through the course of her narrative, Gopal traces a gradual awareness that the empire is run in the interests of capitalism rather than altruism and that a foundational element of any true sense of freedom is that it is achieved not granted. Along the way her history interweaves the publishing platforms operated by Nancy Cunard and Sylvia Pankhurst, critics of colonialism and its related racisms such as G.W. Gordon and George Padmore, with overseas-based anticolonialists such as the Pan-Islamist Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and theorists of Swaraj such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, to provide a complex history of the rise of dissent and criticism of the imperial project, and the people and labour involved in it. This is an important first step in the telling of a history that has been for too long overlooked. *Mark Rappolt*

Pulp II: A Visual Bibliography of the Banished Book

by Shubigi Rao Rock Paper Fire, SGD 50 (softcover)

The second part of this epic, five-volume, ten-year project (which also manifests in artworks and films) by writer, artist and curator of the next Kochi-Muziris Biennale (due in 2020) Shubigi Rao continues her investigation into the history of library and book destruction. Where the first volume rooted the project in her own experience (via the story of her family library), this focuses on the personal stories of librarians, publishers and artists, as recounted in interviews and conversations that take place everywhere from Antwerp to Delhi (via an extensive study of various forms of ethnic and cultural cleansing during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s). It looks at the book as a site for resistance and activism (bootleg versions of *The Satanic Verses*, 1988, banned books

inserted into library collections) as much as one of legislation. As Rao puts it, she is looking at books and libraries as places in which to explore 'the possibilities of living after abuse'. The spectres of the #MeToo movement, increasing divides between rich and poor, and the rise of populist politics worldwide haunt this work.

Throughout, the book is considered a physical object as much as a container of content (particularly evident in a discussion about the effects and consequences of library digitisation). Graffiti, excision and marginalia are introduced into the discussion both as an act of oppression (the scoring out of passages) and as part of a process of accumulating knowledge (third languages added to bilingual dictionaries). And form

follows content in Rao's 'handwritten' side notes, scribbled deletions and drawings. More interesting is the way in which Rao traces the dynamics of ownership, censorship and rebellion from the context of family libraries (sites of sibling rivalry), through to the fates of national collections. The idea, then, is to consider the largescale effects of wars, populist politics and the politics of cultural purity and appropriation through the lens of personal experience. 'I consider that it is the particular and specific, the subjective, that punctures any apathetic diminution of vivid, diverse struggles and forms,' Rao writes in her introduction. The rest of the book is a consistent demonstration of why that should be the case. *Nirmala Devi*



The Last Leonardo

by Ben Lewis William Collins, £20 (hardcover)

If art exists to shine a light on the world in which we live, then there is no more illuminating painting than the *Salvator Mundi* (c. 1500). This has little to do with the image's supposedly transcendent power – there are good reasons why centuries passed without anyone seriously entertaining the idea that this crumbling wreck was by Leonardo da Vinci – and a lot to do with the more, let's say, mundane properties of the object. By tracing the painting's histories as a status symbol, hyperinflationary commodity and diplomatic pawn, art critic Ben Lewis exposes the corruption of the artworld and the socio-economic power structures to which it is tied.

Exhaustively researched and aimed at a wide audience, Lewis's book intertwines a potted biography of Leonardo, a journalistic investigation into the provenance of the *Salvator Mundi* and the story of a remarkable hustle. We are introduced to Alexander Parish and Robert Simon, the latter a small-time dealer who was scratching a living by scouring the market for misattributed Old Masters when, in 2005, he took a punt on a grainy photograph in an obscure auction catalogue. Having roped in Parish to help cover the \$1,175 for a painting listed as 'After Leonardo da Vinci', they gradually came to believe they might have stumbled on the greatest 'sleeper' of them all. But then they had to prove it.

That the pair would be selective in their use of sources to substantiate their claim is neither surprising nor objectionable, given what they stood to gain and their declared interests. (I

found myself rooting for the unclubbable Simon and the sizeable chip on his shoulder.) Yet Lewis's exhaustive detective work exposes the vested interests of those independent arbiters who abetted the work's attribution to the 'universal master'. These range from the desire of a gifted restorer to work with Leonardo, to the professional aspirations of experts and the National Gallery in London's need to deliver a blockbuster exhibition by including a 'rediscovered' work.

These conflicts of interest will no doubt exercise the small circle of art historians who serve as gatekeepers to the canon, but in the wider scheme of things they seem like minor and forgivable infractions. The painting is what it is. You don't need to be a Leonardist to see that certain passages in this painting are exceptional and others are disastrously degraded or markedly inferior; nor do you need a degree in art history to wonder whether the extensive restoration might on its own complicate the notion of sole authorship. All the bragging by connoisseurs about the education of their 'eye' and the unmistakable attributes of greatness are undermined by their inability to agree on whether this is a masterpiece by one of the most important artists of all time or a second-rate copy. So what does it matter whether this was an autographed work by Leonardo, a workshop production to which he added touches, a pastiche by a talented acolyte or even a flight of fancy on the part of the restorer?

The answer – leaving aside the wearisome bluster about Leonardo's mythical genius – is

money. That much becomes clear when Lewis moves out of the worn-leather world of Old Masters historians, dealers and curators into the glitzier and more dangerous circles kept by the international kleptocracy. The final chapters of the book, after the *Salvator Mundi*'s mind-bending financial value has been (at least temporarily) confirmed, feature a Russian oligarch, a morally bankrupt Swiss businessman and the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, with cameos from Donald Trump and a Chinese billionaire who has declared his intention to deliver 'a message to the West' by buying up its art. Not to mention police corruption and international money laundering.

Lewis does not spare the reader the nauseating details of the painting's exploitation as cash cow by auction houses, fig leaf over human rights abuses in oil-rich states or instrument of tax evasion for the super-rich. Anyone who still holds that art might serve some humbler purpose will feel compelled to throw this book across the room (this is to the credit, to be clear, of its author). My own copy was dented after I learned that the catalogue published to support the auction of *Salvator Mundi* for \$450 million was prefaced with the quote that 'Beauty will save the world'. I cling to the hope that some aspiring satirist on Christie's editorial team understood what it means to cite Dostoyevsky in support of a 'trillionaire's pissing contest' and chose to withhold that this phrase is taken from *The Idiot*. But it seems unlikely. Ben Eastham

Clone

by Priya Sarukkai Chabria Zubaan, Rs 595 (hardcover)

Blending the dystopian plotlines of us and European sci-fi with stories specific to or evocative of narrative traditions in the author's country of origin, *Clone* is set in twenty-fourth-century India, now called The Global Community. The title character – full name Clone 14/54/G (she's the 54th clone in batch G's 14th generation) – has begun manifesting individuality. With frictionless replication guaranteed only to the 13th generation, Clone may be a mutant. She is aware of this possibility – she recognises as aberrant her decision to conceal a diary in one of the cellchips in her neural circuits – and so is The Global Community's security apparatus, which

subjects her to special surveillance when she develops an interest in history and other stories from the past.

Interrogated by a sympathetic poet-creature-thing named Couplet, Clone draws the attention of a very important Original (from whom clones descend...) both for her bravery and for the mix of riddles and 'visitations' issuing from her as she develops a sense of her own identity. Running the gamut from snippets of Gustave Flaubert and Rabindranath Tagore to stories-within-the-story told from the perspectives of a pet parrot, a palace guard and a fish seeking Eternal Knowledge (and representing close to a third of the novel),

these narrative effusions point to a literary sensibility. Indeed *Clone*, we learn, is descended from a dissident writer killed 14 generations earlier just as she was about to reveal the hypocrisy and corruption at the heart of The Global Community. Enlisted by The Cause – the resistance movement – to channel the message her 'mother' was on the verge of delivering, Clone works her way towards the identical revelation. An exemplar of post-colonial sci-fi, a parable of awakening and a metafiction concerned with the creative process, this work may be more hybrid than clone, but it gets to the heart of what it means to be human. David Terrien

We, The Survivors

by Tash Aw 4th Estate, £14.99 (hardcover)

We, The Survivors is a novel about how people cope with change – although it is perhaps misleading to offer a definition of a work in which precise definitions are elusive. Even the novel's central character, Ah Hock, a Chinese Malaysian who grew up in a rural fishing village (during the late 1990s), turns out to have been using the name Jayden, because it has a cooler ring. We learn this at the beginning of the book, when Ah Hock describes his trial and conviction for the murder of a stranger (the full details of the act itself only come at the end), and his annoyance at his lawyer's inability to pronounce 'Jayden' properly, thus giving it the shifty character of an alias. For Ah Hock that name is an assertion of freedom in a world governed by determinism: he even had it printed on his business cards. And yet, despite the rest of the book appearing to be Ah Hock's summary of his life up to the murder, Jayden is barely referenced again. Ah Hock is, in any case, merely the familiar name of Lee Hock Lye, whom Ah Hock, again referencing his trial, describes as 'another guy who shared my name'.

There's a touch of *American Psycho* about Aw's fourth novel, but *We, The Survivors* is in many ways the inverse of Bret Easton Ellis's late-twentieth-century controversy-magnet. It is set on the other side of the world, in Tash Aw's homeland, and is a record of the excesses that result from desperation rather than boredom and from failure rather than success. Initially, however, Ah Hock's account of his

childhood appears to offer up all the clichés that we're taught (on TV at least) make for a criminal mind: his grandparents fled China (presumably in the wake of the Civil War), then Indonesia (presumably during the communist purges and Chinese massacres of the mid-1960s) before ending up in off-the-map rural Malaysia – the narrative is peppered by words or phrases in Hokkien, Cantonese and Malay. He barely remembers the father who left for a better life in Singapore. He committed various acts of apparent animal cruelty as a youth. He lacks any academic qualifications. He's good at manual labour only because while he does it he's living a wuxia fantasy. His best friend is a drug dealer turned human trafficker. And yet, although he never seems to earn enough money, to be anything other than poor, Ah Hock appears slowly to gain a veneer of respectability: a wife, a home, a job managing a fish farm. But for every step forward, the world seems to drive him two steps back.

Malaysia, today, is undergoing rapid economic and industrial change. Successive waves of migrants – from Chinese to Indonesian, Bangladeshi to Rohingya – labour at its foundations, each subsequent wave pushing the previous one further up the social and racial pecking orders. The constant development of new homes continuously pushes older dwellings towards the status of slums, leading their inhabitants continuously to desire a new home. Desire is what drives people. Success for

one generation meant owning a Mercedes; for the next it means living abroad. Business is no longer about local markets, but global economics. Just as Ah Hock seems to have succeeded in integrating himself with the land, the land appears to have integrated itself with someplace else. The sense in which Ah Hock's life is a fantasy is more than the product of his mind. More too than the product of Southeast Asia's recent history.

While *We, The Survivors* appears to be Ah Hock's first-person narrative, that's complicated by his accepting a request to be interviewed for a PhD paper by a sociology student. As they proceed, her paper evolves into a book that is classified by the student as 'narrative non-fiction' and by its publisher as 'true crime'. And as the ownership and branding of Ah Hock's story shifts, we're left wondering if what we're reading might be, in fact, Su Min's packaged book. Does that make it even more of a lie? Towards the end of the novel, Ah Hock catches the daughter of a Bangladeshi immigrant looking at him with the expression 'of someone who didn't like strangers'; she learned that look, he assumes, from observing people as they looked at her. Ultimately this novel is a brilliant and disturbing account of what it's like to be a subject in a rootless and changing world, of how culture and identity are the product of fantasy as much as fact, and of the struggles of contemporary subjects to recognise and exercise free will. *Nirmala Devi*

Broken Stars: Sixteen Stories from the New Frontiers of Chinese Science Fiction

Edited and translated by Ken Liu Head of Zeus, £18.99 (hardcover)

In 1999, Chinese students sitting their final exams at senior school were asked the following question: 'What if memory could be transplanted?' The fact crops up in Regina Kanyu Wang's 'Brief Introduction to Chinese Science Fiction and Fandom', one of three essays published at the end of this anthology of 16 short stories. That this science-fictional exercise was included in the National Higher Education Entrance Exam demonstrates both the popularity of the genre and the state's interest in using it to futurecast the consequences of rapid scientific and technological advancement.

Edited and mostly translated by Ken Liu, a sci-fi writer in his own right who is credited

with bringing Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* (first published as a standalone book in 2008) onto the world stage, the stories in this volume date from 2004 to the present day. It opens with Liu's *Moonlight* (2009): over the course of one night, an engineer receives three calls from his future selves, each sending plans to solve environmental crises caused by the butterfly effect of decisions he has made. There are stories like Tang Fei's *Broken Stars* (2016, and from which the title of this collection is borrowed) which, you could argue, fall into the fantasy/horror genre – a deranged teenager gains control of the fates of those around her. But the more compelling stories are those that relate to the unpredicted

impacts of technological inventions, such as Hao Jingfan's *The New Year Train* (2017), in which a passenger train is feared lost within the space-time continuum, and Chen Qjufan's *A History of Future Illnesses* (2012), which dryly narrates the symptoms to prospective illnesses like iPad Syndrome. Earlier this year, the World Health Organisation warned against the excessive use of smart screens by young children and their impact on cognitive development. Here's hoping Chen's predictions of a generation of humans characterised by empathy deficit and anti-social behaviour don't come true. But then again, perhaps that future has already arrived. *Fi Churchman*