

TOP FIVE CHILDREN'S BOOKS

THIS WEEK'S BESTSELLERS SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONES

- 1 **AWFUL AUNTIE**
David Williams
- 2 **THE BLOOD OF OLYMPUS (HEROES OF OLYMPUS)**
Rick Riordan
- 3 **THE MAZE RUNNER**
James Dashner
- 4 **OPAL PLUMSTEAD**
Jacqueline Wilson
- 5 **THE SCORCH TRIALS**
James Dashner

Powerful look at life in limbo

FICTION WEST
By Julia Franck
(Trs by Anthea Bell)
HARVILL SECKER
£12.99

REVIEWED BY LUCY POPESCU

During the Cold War, refugees from communist Eastern Europe were often sent to the Marienfelde transit camp in Berlin. There they received housing and food while being interviewed by intelligence agencies. They might remain there for months, or even years. This is the setting for Julia Franck's powerful novel.

After obtaining a visa, supposedly in order to marry a West German, Nelly Senff leaves her fiancé and arrives at Marienfelde with her two children. She refuses to cooperate with the CIA agents investigating her past in the German Democratic Republic. The agents are particularly interested in the father of her two children, Vassily Batalov, who had apparently committed suicide three years before. One of them, John Bird, becomes erotically obsessed with Nelly. In the camp, she is befriended by Krystyna Jablonowska, a Polish cellist, who has travelled west to seek medical help for her brother, and Hans Pischke, an actor who was imprisoned in East Berlin for attempting to deface a statue of Lenin.

Franck weaves their stories together to create a vivid sense of how persecution, deprivation, and loss leave terrible psychological scars. Nelly becomes increasingly paranoid in the camp while Hans, who professes to be "incapable of love", slides into depression. Krystyna has sacrificed her career for her family, works in appalling conditions, and suffers taunts for being "a podge".

We know it is 1978 because the radio stations are forever playing Boney M's "By the Rivers of Babylon" and John has just been to see *The Deer Hunter*. But what is most striking about Franck's novel is how little has changed for those fleeing repression, who find themselves just as helpless on the other side. As Nelly observes: "A hand comes down from above on each one of them, picks them up or waves them on."

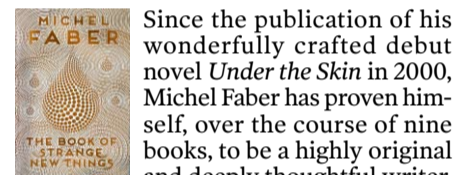
Franck slyly reveals the West's hypocrisy. The transit camp is effectively an open prison with its own laws, prejudices, and pecking order – the Poles are labelled "gypsies" while the children are treated as outsiders at the local kindergarten, "strangers who spoke differently and used different expressions, didn't wear snow suits, had different boots and school bags from the rest of the class"; their poverty is treated with contempt. The housing is cramped and the food rationed.

Franck's spare prose evokes an atmosphere of claustrophobic menace. Her unflinching gaze at lives in limbo, seamlessly translated by Anthea Bell, is a compelling and resonant read.

An interplanetary mission back to the heart of darkness

FICTION THE BOOK OF STRANGE NEW THINGS
By Michel Faber
CANONGATE £18.99

REVIEWED BY DOUG JOHNSTONE



Since the publication of his wonderfully crafted debut novel *Under the Skin* in 2000, Michel Faber has proven himself, over the course of nine books, to be a highly original and deeply thoughtful writer. From the macabre yet prosaic horror of that debut to the Victorian melodrama of his biggest seller *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Faber has used a wide range of genres and subject matter to peer in minute detail at what it means to be human.

And that focus is ultra-sharp in this latest absorbing and enthralling novel. The premise is simple but ingenious. We spend the entirety of *The Book of Strange New Things* in the company of Peter, a Christian minister sent on a mission to a far away planet called Oasis with the sole purpose of bringing the word of God to the indigenous population.

He is employed by a rather mysterious multinational corporation called USIC, who have established a base on Oasis, and Peter shares his time between the engineers and grunts on the base and the benign Oasians in their more primitive settlement, without electricity and with long, long nights to fill.

Peter isn't starting completely from scratch, though, as a previous pastor named Kurtzberg has already educated the Oasians in the "techniques of Jesus" as they put it, before disappearing and apparently going native. There is an obvious homage to *Heart of Darkness* here, and that book certainly haunts the pages of *The Book of Strange New Things*, but this novel is very much an original and thought-provoking read in its own right.

In juxtaposing the human with the alien, Faber here repeats the trick he performed



Michel Faber: Slow and steady prose style

in *Under the Skin* of casting a new light on old subject matter. He is asking big questions about the nature of human existence, the nature of faith and belief, also questions about the malleable nature of morality. But underneath it all he is examining the nature of language and communication. The Oasians have a very different physiognomy to humans, with no discernable

'All communication is, by its nature, a kind of fatal compromise'

mouths or eyes for example, and they struggle to pronounce certain sounds. These sounds are cleverly represented in the text as alien letters or characters, a technique that lends veracity to the initial struggle Peter has in communicating with his flock.

Indeed, it's not just the language but the very mindset of the creatures that Peter finds so distancing to begin with, but over time he becomes more accustomed to their ways of thinking, talking, and behaving.

At the same time he is becoming increasingly emotionally distanced from his wife, Bea, stuck back on Earth. Peter and Bea can only communicate through an expensive and laborious system of messages called

the Shoot, and as Bea reveals a series of natural and man-made disasters occurring billions of miles away on Earth, Peter gradually begins to feel more and more distant and alienated from his home on the other side of the galaxy.

This creeping sense of otherness and alienation is something that pervades all of Faber's writing. Everyone in this novel feels removed from their environment and those around them in one way or another, and Faber seems to be saying that all communication is, by its nature, a kind of fatal compromise, doomed to failure from the start.

It's to the author's credit that he plays all of this with a straight bat. It would've been very easy to set up Peter's authentic Christian beliefs for satire, to ridicule him as hopelessly naive and his mission as pointless. But Faber does a good job of depicting Peter's religion with honesty and warmth, opening up the story to much more interesting questions about how to maintain such belief in the face of terrible hardship.

The book isn't without a few niggling problems though. The vagueness about, and lack of interest in, USIC from all their employees stretches credibility somewhat, especially considering the astronomical expenses surely involved in such an interplanetary colonisation. I was never totally convinced by Peter's backstory of being a drunk and a drug addict before being converted to the faith by Bea. And the sub plot of Earthly catastrophes being reported by Peter's wife seems to rather fade from view as Peter becomes more entrenched in the Oasians' settlement. Also, Faber's deliberately slow and steady prose style does tend to plod a little when stretched out over nearly 550 pages.

But the genuinely inquisitive and searching story in *The Book of Strange New Things* ultimately trumps such minor logistical concerns. This is a novel of big ideas by a writer of unusual intelligence and lucidity, and it lingers in the mind after the final page is turned.

The Earl of Bute, young George envisaged a monarchy whose central family was not dysfunctional, profligate or debauched, and who could thereby – that is, by example – lead a country that was moral and socially responsible and functional, too. One of the first things he did upon accession was to make peace with his estranged uncle, the unpopular Duke of Cumberland; like so much else, this act was fine symbolism, a statement about what kind of family man he meant to be, and what kind of king.

A fortnight before the coronation, George



PHOTOGRAPHY

THE BEAUTY OF THE OMO VALLEY. THE CRADLE OF HUMANKIND
By Ken Hermann
EDITION PANORAMA
£36

The lower valley of the Omo River in south-western Ethiopia is a Unesco World Cultural Heritage Site and one of the most beautiful regions of Africa. Known as the cradle of mankind, the area is attractive not only for its particular landscape, but also for the diverse culture of its inhabitants. The banks of the river have for centuries been the homeland of the tribes of the Surma, Mursi or Hamar, whose expressive body-painting (left) and rituals are unique. Ken Hermann has visited the region several times. In his impressive photography, he portrays the self-confident Omo people, depicting their way of life and their traditions, but also the beauty of the valley and its flora and fauna. Hermann's book is a homage to a region that has for years been threatened by an Ethiopian government dam project, since this will permanently alter the delicate balance of the Omo people's eco-system – a last photographic image of a fascinating, archaic world. Danish journalist Suzette Frovin provides an introduction which describes the history, importance and current development of the Omo Valley.

All about our greatest leader (and a bit about Churchill)

HISTORY THE CHURCHILL FACTOR: HOW ONE MAN MADE HISTORY
By Boris Johnson
HODDER £25

REVIEWED BY SONIA PURNELL



BORIS JOHNSON THE CHURCHILL FACTOR

The handsome front cover of Boris Johnson's new tome is a masterpiece of subliminal messaging. His last book, ostensibly on London, was described as the "longest personal manifesto" in the capital's history with every page a "coded plea" for "Boris for Mayor". This time, you need neither buy nor read *The Churchill Factor* to detect the drumbeat for all those Conservatives and Ukipers out there in search of a strongman alternative to Cameronian appeasement of those pesky Europeans.

Just who might have the Churchill Factor now, we are encouraged to ponder by the size of the author's name in relation to his supposed subject. And who might again become the "One Man" capable of making history?

Johnson does indeed share certain Churchillian traits – not least a restless energy and talent for churning out books while apparently holding down a government day-job. The mayor's latest effort romps along nicely in places like his better columns, and makes no greater claim on a lengthy shelf-life.

Churchill was dressed, we are told, "like some burly and hungover butler" from *Downton Abbey*. Other points are driven home with many cameo scenes from Johnson's life.

In fact, it becomes increasingly difficult at times to separate Churchill's story from Johnson's. When describing a figure of obvious appeal to young people today, Johnson refers to an "eccentric" with "his own special trademark clothes" who was a "thoroughgoing genius". Who can he mean? We hear how Churchill was considered an adventurer, reckless, disloyal, untrustwor-

'He refers to himself some 30 times in the short introduction'

thy, in possession of "death-defying self belief" and consequently "not what people thought of as a man of principle; he was a glory-chasing goal-mouth-hanging opportunist". And yet this embodiment of unlikely qualities eventually became the saviour of the nation and the hero of the free world. So, are we being subtly induced to believe that that is what Britain is also in need of now? If so, who can Johnson have in mind?

And just in case we missed the coincidence, Johnson makes a point that Churchill was surely entitled to the enormous sums he was paid for his journalism "because he was popular with the public, and helped boost circulation". Yes, our mayor of London is paid a Churchillian £5,000 plus per column; so no more criticism of this largesse, please.

In another paean to his own brand of personality politics, Johnson declares that "Character is destiny, said the Greeks, and I agree". We already know that Johnson believes his destiny resides in Downing Street and here are 350 pages on why he should shortly be sent there. There are impressive passages in this book, where Johnson flexes his journalistic talent for rendering historical landfill into shiny new consumables. He does have a certain genius – as displayed in his previous *The Dream of Rome* book – for making history, in that dreaded term, "accessible".

But he refers to himself some 30 times in the short introduction alone, and on many more occasions in the following pages. Overall, the book says perhaps less about Churchill than it does about the ambition and self-image of Boris. In history-book terms, it is an opportunity missed. For Johnson's career, it will no doubt work wonders.

Sonia Purnell is the author of *Just Boris: A Tale of Blind Ambition*. Her book on Clementine Churchill is out next year.

A blueprint for blue bloods

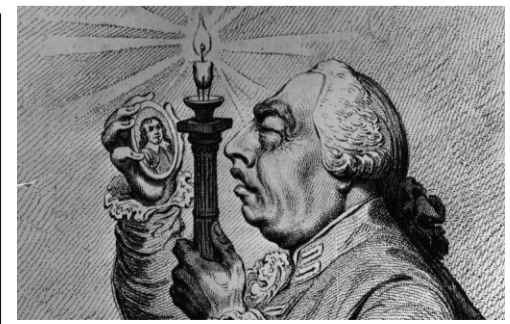
HISTORY THE STRANGEST FAMILY: THE PRIVATE LIVES OF GEORGE III, QUEEN CHARLOTTE AND THE HANOVERIANS
By Janice Hadlow
WILLIAM COLLINS £17

REVIEWED BY DANIEL HAHN



"I have lost my eldest son," wrote George II upon Prince Frederick's death, "but I was glad of it." The prince's mother, Queen Caroline, had also fantasised about her unlucky son's premature demise. Hanover family relations were never uncomplicated ... so, when George III came to the throne in 1760, on the death of his old grandfather, he determined to change that. Having bought into the lessons he'd learned from his controversial tutor,

recruited a partner in this noble enterprise, the clever young German princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. The new queen fulfilled a part of her role in the domestic project bravely, going through a debilitating 15 pregnancies in 15 years – 13 of the children survived to adulthood. Indeed, one of the many pleasures of Janice Hadlow's attempt to understand the dynamics of this strangest of families is the picture it paints of a new conception of attitudes to parenting, childbirth, and childhood itself. (Rousseau's landmark work *Émile* was published the year the couple's first child arrived.)



A James Gillray caricature of George III, from 1792

But George's experiment in moral domesticity didn't work as well as he'd hoped. The King never warmed to his sons – with the relationship with the Prince of Wales (later the Prince Regent, eventually George IV) the most obviously sour and resentful of the lot. The loss of the American colonies was personally bruising to the King; the appearance and reappearance of his bouts of madness and, alongside this, the queen's increased isolation and deepening depression, shook his authority in public as well as compromising his private world.

It's in the nature of royalty that domestic matters are played out on a big, public stage, but for George the yoking together of these two dimensions was quite deliberate, if ill-fated. Hadlow's energetic, richly detailed debut combines personal sympathy for her subjects with a shrewd alertness to wider significances. She uses well-known court-side chroniclers like Fanny Burney, but also mines personal letters, whose intimacy and immediacy offer a lively challenge to our preconceptions of that most stately age, and the public family at its heart.