

HAVING SURVIVED A childhood in Calcutta blighted by poverty and abuse, Ritwik Ghosh, the hero of *A Life Apart* by Neel Mukherjee (Constable 352pp

£12.99), arrives in Oxford determined to make England his home. Bookish, bright and gay, an idealistic scholarship student, he looks past the dreaming spires and delves into the hedonism of the city before later moving to Brixton and working the streets at King's Cross.

Beautifully written and intelligently perceptive, *A Life Apart* is a novel about difference and expectation and the ironies that punctuate the middle ground between them. Brought up on Enid Blyton, Ritwik doesn't imagine he'll feel as culturally isolated in England as he does, even though most of the xenophobia he experiences comes from other foreigners in London: his Pakistani neighbours; the eastern European pimps who patrol Meat Mile.

During the day, Ritwik pens a novel about a young English woman living in schismatic Bengal at the turn of the century. Based on a minor character in a Tagore novel, Miss Gilby lives – like every character in Mukherjee's novel – a life apart, both culturally and, as an unmarried woman, socially. Her role beyond the novel-within-the-novel mirrors Ritwik's own experience as an outsider. However her story feels like a self-conscious add-on to what is already a standout novel and hints at the aborted remains of an earlier fictional project. Still, this is a minor quibble. *A Life Apart* is a wonderfully assured and fresh debut that might end up on this year's Booker longlist.

The title of *The Imperfectionists* by Tom Rachman (Quercus 272pp £16.99) says it all: people who strive for, yet necessarily fall short of, perfection (or indeed, any kind of ordinary excellence) populate this brilliant debut about a flailing international English-language newspaper in Rome.

It opens with Lloyd Burko, the rather desperate Paris correspondent, hacking out an unsourced story, followed by the obituaries editor, Arthur Gopal, spying his big chance to escape the monotony of Puzzle Wuzzle and write a proper feature, and a moment-in-the-life of Arthur's boss Clint Oakley, a 'dandruff-raining, baseball-obsessed, sexually resentful Alabamian with a toilet-brush moustache and an inability to maintain eye contact. He is also the culture editor.' Then there is Ruby Zaga, a copy editor whose headlines include 'Kooks with Nukes' (printed) and 'Blast Kills People Again' (not printed), and 'Accounts Payable', who gets her concubance for firing a desk editor to save a few pennies.

The Imperfectionists is about the farcical futility surrounding working life. This superb novel reveals how, no matter how good we are at what we do, our human weaknesses are often magnified in the hotbed of petty office politics where our fragile egos rarely thrive.

ROSALIND PORTER ENJOYS

A SELECTION OF FIRST NOVELS

Sabra Zoo by Mischa Hiller (Telegram Books 231pp £10.99) opens in September 1982, at what was assumed to be the end of the Lebanese civil

war. Eighteen-year-old Ivan finds himself alone after his parents have fled Beirut with the Palestine Liberation Organisation. While the city remains under the protection of international peace-keeping forces, Ivan works as an interpreter to aid workers and journalists, relishing the highly-charged political and emotional mood of the city in the weeks leading up to the assassination of President-elect Bashir Gemayel and the infamous Sabra massacre.

The massacre itself forms the centrepiece of this impressive *Bildungsroman*, as the author charts Ivan's accelerated ascent from curious teenager to suspicious adult. And indeed it's Hiller's evocation of the war through a teenager's eyes that gives this novel both depth and gravitas. Without diminishing the atrocities committed against some 3,500 Palestinian and Lebanese Muslims, *Sabra Zoo* is a funny novel that reminds us that even the chaos of war can't thwart the complexities of the human spirit and the mysteries of love.

When Ashish, protagonist of *Saraswati Park* by Anjali Joseph (Fourth Estate 264pp £12.99), fails his final year at college, he goes to stay with his aunt and uncle in a residential enclave of Bombay to revise. But even in the quiet suburb of Saraswati Park, drama reigns, albeit a very placid kind that interrupts the private lives of its inhabitants even as their outer selves appear relatively unchanged. Uncle Mohan is a letter writer whose once esteemed profession is fast becoming redundant in a city where call-centres and IT support companies proliferate; his wife, Lakshmi, seeks solace for her loneliness not in the great canon of Indian literature, but in the tackiest of soap operas, while Ashish finds time to have a few botched love affairs, including one with his considerably older tutor.

There is nothing extraordinary about the disappointments that punctuate this novel, but the way the characters react to them perfectly articulates a growing sense of alienation as the old, socially fractured – yet transparent – India is superseded by a modern democracy. What sets *Saraswati Park* apart from other novels about the burgeoning middle class is the quietness of Joseph's prose and the confidence with which she allows what is not said to carry her narrative forwards. This is a beautiful novel that personifies the new India from the inside out.

Mr Peanut by Adam Ross (Jonathan Cape 335pp £16.99) is virtually impossible to sum up. Even the publisher's blurb makes little more than a gesture towards acknowledging what the book is actually about before comparing the reading experience to the playing of a computer game, the watching of a film, and the viewing of an Escher drawing, all very apt likenings for an ambitious novel that sets out to engulf the reader in a maze of

form and manages to fulfil one of the cornerstones of Hitchcock's aesthetic: 'to tell a completely unbelievable story with inescapable logic'.

There are three main plotlines, the primary being David and Alice Pepin's bizarre, yet tender, marriage. Alice is overweight, her life one long attempt to diet, while David – a secret writer – begins a book about a man who kills his wife. Before long, Alice is found dead and David is the prime suspect. Investigating the murder are two detectives whose own marital problems cloud the case, one of whom – Sam Sheppard – was wrongly convicted and later exonerated of his wife's murder. This reference to the real Sam Sheppard (famously acquitted of his wife's murder in 1966) adds a layer of slightly distracting true crime to the already multilayered novel.

Distraction is perhaps the defining feature of this book. The narrative strains are constantly diverging and being

interrupted, characters morph effortlessly in and out of personas and physical forms, and the text shape-shifts its way into various aesthetic composites. What binds these plotlines is less the whodunit of Alice's death than an investigation, by Ross, into the act of marriage, and this is the novel's greatest strength. The emotional language and perceptions of *Mr Peanut* are extraordinary, and all the more so for their position within such a formally stylised novel. My only complaint is that while the book does at times evoke the pitch of the greatest Hitchcock films, text can never replicate the cinematic experience and shouldn't be expected to do so. 'Hitch', says one character, 'was trying to tell stories that were possible only in the medium of film', and at times *Mr Peanut* falls slightly short of fulfilling its novelistic mandate, even if it does entertain, inform and thoroughly delight.

To order these books, see LR Bookshop on page 18

EDMUND GORDON

'MASSACRE OF MOTHERS'

THE BIRTH OF LOVE

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By Joanna Kavenna
(Faber & Faber 308pp £12.99)

JOANNA KAVENNA'S AMBITIOUS second novel comprises four separate narratives. The first centres on Ignaz Semmelweis, the real-life physician who, having failed to persuade his colleagues that the incidence of childbed fever would be drastically reduced if they disinfected their hands after autopsies, was committed to an asylum in 1865, raving about a 'massacre of mothers'. The two central narratives are set in present-day London: one follows Brigid Hayes, an exhausted and embattled woman in her early forties, going into labour with her second child; the other introduces Michael Stone, the author of a novel about Semmelweis, whose publication-day nerves are exacerbated by the news that his estranged mother is to be moved to a nursing home. The final narrative takes us a hundred years into the future, when climate change has necessitated measures to curb population growth: women are 'harvested' for eggs, then rendered infertile, their 'progeny' birthed and reared collectively on 'breeding farms'. We follow the interrogation of Prisoner 730004, who has assisted at an illegal birth.

As well as the implicit thematic links between them, each narrative is explicitly echoed by at least one of the others: Brigid listens to a radio discussion of Michael's novel about Semmelweis, whose nightmares of 'swimming in a sea of blood' are shared by Prisoner 730004.

The fourth narrative is strongly reminiscent of a section from David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (both are set in a dystopian future, and both are presented as the transcripts

of interrogations) and highlights a structural debt to that book. It is also, and by some distance, the weakest section of Kavenna's novel. Her language becomes uncharacteristically stilted: the clinical jargon of the interrogator ('So you admit that you have desired the ruination of the species and that you have favourably contemplated societal collapse?') is pitched against the sentimental clichés of the prisoner ('We have our instincts but we have been encouraged to suppress them and it is hard for us to name such ancient forces').

Kavenna is on much firmer ground in the two present-day narratives, which demonstrate her talent for creating complex and affecting characters. It is in her Gothic depiction of the nineteenth-century asylum, however, that she makes the strongest impression. The turmoil of Semmelweis's once-formidable mind is rendered with claustrophobic intensity, and the description of his physical degradation is strung with grotesque yet appallingly credible details: 'his hair had fallen out in clumps, and his skin was drawn tight, like that of a reptile. ... there was a chaos to his limbs ... It was as if his bones had been broken and had mended strangely.'

That *The Birth of Love* never quite builds to something greater than the sum of its four parts is, to a large extent, due to the gulf in quality between them. But the sense of inconsistency is heightened by the seemingly erratic nature of Kavenna's intentions. She seems to have been moved by two very different instincts: at times the novel is clearly meant as an examination of the darker side of nativity, while at others it seems more interested in the plight of individuals who reject the certainties of their time. Kavenna never convincingly blends these two themes, nor does she show them to be in any way complementary. And yet, while it is impossible to grant full assent to this uneven book, it is just as hard to deny its complexity and verve, or to remain unmoved by the bittersweet vision of motherhood it presents.

To order this book for £10.39, see LR Bookshop on page 18