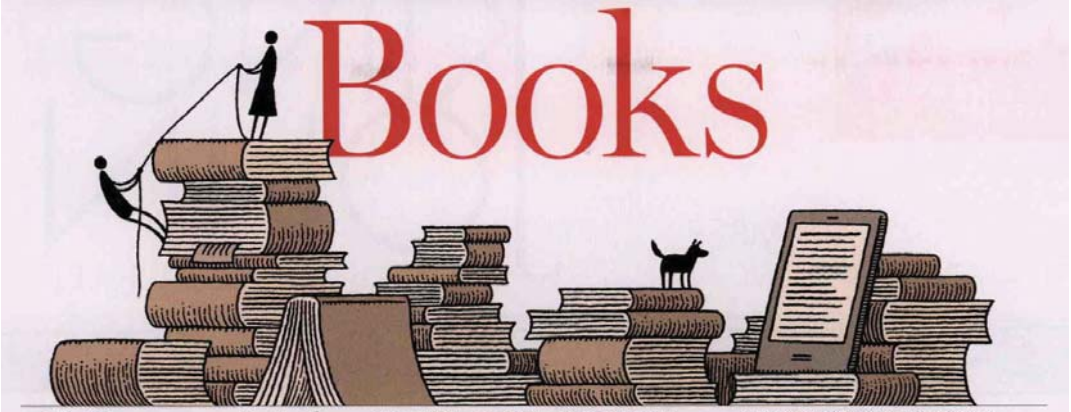
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Betjeman revisited

PAUL DEAN

Harvest Bells: New and Uncollected Poems by John Betjeman

By Kevin J Gardner

Bloomsbury £16.99

Part of the interest in reading a Betjeman poem lies in wondering whether he will fall off the tightrope.

Those thumping metres; those clunking rhymes; that tone compounded of the arch, the sentimental and the twee – will he once more, against all the odds, produce a work of art, or will he lose his balance?

It is daredevil stuff for writer and reader alike. Philip Larkin, one of Betjeman's most discerning critics, wrote of his 'vivacious affection that shimmers continually between laughter and rage'; his compound of Tennyson and Hardy, music-hall turn and saloon bar singalong, which made a virtue of anti-modernism. Beneath the knitted tea cosy, the pot could contain a brew unexpectedly strong, even scalding. There might be a dash of rum in it – or arsenic.

Reading Kevin J Gardner's collection (still only a selection: 83 out of a possible 150 items) of 'new' – ie previously unpublished – and uncollected poems by Betjeman, written between 1924 and 1979, one naturally asks how many of them are good enough to stand beside the familiar body of work. The answer is: more than you might expect.

There are some early misfires – 'The lank wisteria branches of my mind/ Droop into slow sad ecstasies' (*Wisteria Branches*) sounds like bargain-basement C Day Lewis – and the examples of commissioned occasional or dedicatory verse are mostly slight: an early Romanticism modulated into something more astringent. Stronger poems come from magazines or university archives, commentaries for films or TV programmes; among these, the longest poem in the volume, *The Finest Work in England: I K Brunel* – the soundtrack to a 1966 BBC documentary – condenses a whole industrial history into 300 outstandingly skilful lines.

There are a few surprises. *A Poem by My Old Bear Archibald*, which Bevis Hillier suggested was a nonsense poem, has a disquieting surreal quality, somewhere between Magritte and Dali. *Order Reigns in Warsaw*, written in 1941/1942, is a rare political intervention remarkable for its contained anger. *Lines on the Unmasking of the Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures*, which first appeared in *Private Eye*, is perceived by Gardner to be a genuine Betjeman poem about Anthony Blunt (a fellow Old Marlburian). In reality it was an inspired pastiche by *The Oldie*'s founding father, Richard Ingrams, and Barry Fantoni.

Sweets and Cake, a mischievous account of a romp between two public schoolboys (in couplets, appropriately), has already been sufficiently goggled at in the press, although it really should have been no news to anybody acquainted with Betjeman's biography.

Otherwise, the familiar properties are here: social satire; beady-eyed observation of class differences (*The Wykehamist at Home*); every hue in the liturgical spectrum of Anglicanism (*The Divine Society* and *Not Necessarily Leeds*) and some sly digs at nonconformity (*Zion*); the loving evocation of architecture, landscape, sea and sky; the perfect pitch with brand names. There is the odd macabre twist in the tail (*Emily Wrenn* and *The Corporation Architect*) and a smattering of jolly hockey sticks (*The Most Popular Girl in the School*).

There are, too, the expected targets: soulless capitalists, business corporations, town planners, ecological vandals and trendy modernisers of every kind.



GARY WING

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Yet if Betjeman is sometimes an old fogey, he is an old fogey with taste. He does not want the past tout court but the best of what remains, and not just for itself but for the variety of human life to which it bears witness. *Who Took Away...* protests against the boundary revision and renaming of English counties in 1979 as an attempt to abolish history. The intimate link between land and people is a recurring preoccupation, and there is always an aesthetic aspect to Betjeman's antiquarianism.

Gardner sensibly does not claim to have discovered neglected masterpieces. He explains that the composition of the *Collected Poems* was a hit-and-miss affair, owing to Betjeman's self-doubting overreliance on other people's judgement and the chaotic state of his papers. His introduction and notes provide ample context, although he misses a few things – including an intentional comic misquotation from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* in *Clifton 1940* and a parody of Othello in the prologue for the 70th anniversary of the Dublin Gaiety Theatre. Two appendices give drafts of a version Betjeman made of a poem by Fernando Pessoa which was set to music by Bliss, and a send-up of Nikolaus Pevsner in heavily Teutonic English.

The future editor(s) of a new, more substantial Collected Betjeman will owe a great debt to this volume.

The Sun King shines

HAMISH ROBINSON

King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV

By Philip Mansel

Allen Lane £30

Philip Mansel begins his superb biography of Louis XIV, *King of the World*, with a 12-page introduction, in which he whisks the reader through 'A Thousand Years of France' from the reign of Clovis to the death of Henri IV.

This feat of coherent compression is a foretaste of the virtues that the book as a whole brings to the study of certainly the longest and perhaps the most copiously documented reign in European history.

From birth to death, even more than monarchs before and after, Louis lived his life in public. He was, and understood himself to be, a spectacle. As other kings at other courts, he was attended at his rising and at his going to bed, while he was dressed and undressed, washed and shaved. Some courtiers even had the privilege – the brevet d'affaires – of attending him on his commode.

However, visitors to Versailles were



'I said we need to update our Equality and Diversity profile, you deaf old bat'

astonished by the scale and the manner of the attendance – above all by the lack of ceremony. Contrary to what one might have thought, although he thrived on routine, Louis disliked ceremony. Had he been a contemporary politician, his watchword might have been 'accessibility'.

While court etiquette was strictly enforced (duchesses alone had the right to sit on a stool in the presence of the queen) and new etiquette introduced (only those in favour were permitted to wear shoes with a red heel), traditional court hierarchy was bypassed.

This was not merely a matter of his visibility, but connected to the way in which Louis went about the business of ruling. In his minority, his reign had been threatened by an aristocratic rebellion, the Fronde, and he had learnt at a young age the usefulness of ministers untrammelled by aristocratic affinities, who were faithful servants, rather than sharers of power.

From Cardinal Mazarin, the minister who had overseen his early years and to whom he was closely attached, Louis learnt to handle all aspects of government. When Nicolas Fouquet, a protégé of Mazarin, sought to step into the Cardinal's shoes with alluring displays of wealth and influence, Louis was spooked and had him imprisoned. With this coup d'état, Louis established his personal rule, free of both aristocratic interference and over-mighty servants.

Thereafter, there were ministers – above all Colbert and Louvois – but none who aspired to the heights of Mazarin, or of Louis XIII's minister Richelieu. Likewise, princes of the blood, particularly the Prince of Condé, the senior frondeur, were kept out of executive roles in government. The lack of ceremony and the crush at Versailles can be seen as a function of this singularity. As 'Roi Soleil', Louis needed to be eminently visible. As a working king, he also needed to be surrounded by all the apparatus of government.

This bald sketch of Louis's modus operandi hardly does justice to Mansel's wonderfully detailed and fluent narrative – or to its enormous scope. Huge amounts of information have been digested. As a court historian, Mansel is alive to every nuance of rank and relation and a master of the mechanics of life at Versailles and the other royal palaces. This mastery naturally extends to dynastic relations and to the diplomatic history of Louis's reign.

This is shown, to take one example, in his running account of the close ties between the French and English royal families. Two generations of Stuart cousins lived at Louis's court in exile as kings next to kings. When the young Louis danced the role of Apollo in the Ballet Royal de la Nuit in 1653, his first outing as the 'Sun King', James, Duke of York, who was in exile with his brother Charles II and who was to return as the exiled James II, danced next to him in the role of Honour. When Louis attended the first horse race outside Paris in 1683, the winner was ridden by the Duke of Monmouth, two years before his execution on Tower Hill.

The portrait of Louis that emerges from this titanic effort is compelling: a man of large appetites, capable of intense affection and loyalty, vengeful, gracious, vain, hard-working, hardened in the exercise of his own will, susceptible to flattery, conceited in his isolation, capricious, unforgiving and stubborn – a combination, as Saint-Simon asserted, 'that one admires and that one flees'.

It seems hard to believe, as we see the last vestiges of an inherited understanding of courtly manners disappearing from the world, that this biography will ever, in English at least, be surpassed.

Crikey, Fyodor!

FRANCES WELCH

Mud and Stars: Travels in Russia with Pushkin and Other Geniuses of the Golden Age

By Sara Wheeler

Jonathan Cape £20

The title of Sara Wheeler's new book is taken from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*: 'We sit in the mud, my friend, and reach for the stars.'

In her introduction, Wheeler announces that it is she who is in the mud, following an – unspecified – personal crisis, and the stars she reaches for are the Russian writers of the

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Golden Age (1800-1910). A substantial part of *Mud and Stars* is taken up with vivid portraits of these giants of Russian literature. Wheeler writes that her aim is to touch Russian culture 'with butterfly wings'; sometimes it feels more as though she is wielding a cudgel.

She outs Pushkin as a 'whoring gambler' and 'heroic shagger', who proclaimed that 'lawful c*nt castrates the mind'. Dostoyevsky, another compulsive gambler, pawned his wife's clothes and displayed other ugly characteristics, including boundless vanity and anti-Semitism. Goncharov, the creator of Oblomov, was mad, while Gogol was an 'anorexic and barking genius' with a nose so long he could touch it with his lower lip.

Wheeler is more forgiving of Turgenev, tall, handsome and in possession of 5,000 serfs who literally sang his praises. A self-proclaimed 'incorrigible Westerner', Turgenev did not go in for what Wheeler calls guff about the Russian soul. Chekhov, sainted doctor and supporter of derelict brothers, emerges generally well, fishing peacefully in a pond from his window. On the other hand, he did take Nikolai Leskov, the author of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, whoring and complained of the frigidity of Siberian women, calling them 'frozen fish'.

Tolstoy is denounced as one of the most egotistical men ever to have lived. Wheeler adds that he 'cultivated high ideas about humanity in general but didn't like individuals much'. He certainly came to loathe his adoring wife, the mother of 13 of his innumerable children. On a lighter note, he wrote the plan for *War and Peace* on the receipt for a Panama hat and had a surprising weakness for mod cons. Thomas Edison himself sent him the first recording device.

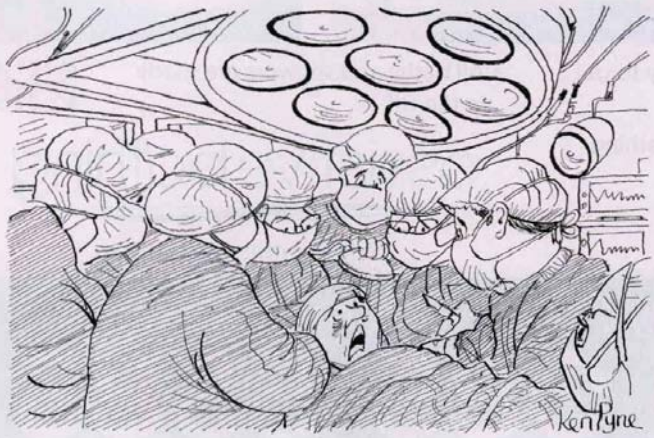
Wheeler gives elaborate accounts of visits to the writers' widespread haunts and *Mud and Stars* has a strong travel-book element. Following chequered experiences in second-class train carriages, hostels, down-at-heel hotels and random 'homestays', she conjures up a galaxy of humbler stars. There's Oleg, an overnight train companion, with just one front tooth; a homestay hostess, Tamara, with no teeth at all; and an uninvited visitor to her hotel room, who sports a toupée that goes 'up and down like the lid of a pedal bin'.

The various stars of the book shine brightly, but they never quite outshine their chronicler. Wheeler is a stranger to oblomovshchina, the sleeping disorder named after Goncharov's indolent hero. Indeed her appetite for every aspect of Russian culture – history, politics, music, language and cuisine – seems insatiable.

Though she never fully describes the crisis she underwent, or her travails in what she calls 'the suffering department', she advises us not to read Dostoyevsky on wife-beating. If she was beaten, she remains decidedly unbowed: when not kneeing a would-be mugger in the balls or thrashing women in the banya with birch twigs, she is leaping naked into the Volga. After quoting Chekhov's lament about wasting his life on fornication, Wheeler suddenly chimes in, 'Who hasn't?'

She is quite an exclaimer. At odd points in the narrative come a Crikey, a Yikes and a *Bozhe moi* (my God). Occasionally she goes in for repetitions as well as exclamations. Of Gogol on his deathbed she writes, 'They had put leeches on his nose (his nose!).' And later, 'Alexander Herzen was born ... in 1812 (1812!)'. She also offers shouty instructions on pronunciation: Boris must be pronounced BaREECE and Turgenev ToorGAYnyeff.

This might not be to everybody's taste, but I found Wheeler's brash humour and courage exhilarating. *Mud and Stars* is packed with fascinating details. Where else would you learn that Sergei Bondarchuk had two heart attacks while directing 13,000 extras in the Russian film of *War and Peace*? Or that *khalatnost* is the ability to spend all day in an oriental dressing-gown?



'Do you mind making one small mistake? – I need the money'

Cornish home truths

TANYA GOLD

Homesick – Why I Live in a Shed

By Catrina Davies

Riverrun £16.99

Catrina Davies lives in a blue shed near Land's End. She is vague about the exact location, possibly because she lives there illegally. Her home isn't classed as a dwelling, a categorisation that baffles Davies, who is a student of real life: the kind where you eat the vegetables you grow and eat the fish you catch.

I think I can work out where it is because I moved to the far more urban Newlyn, ten miles to the east, two years ago. I work so hard to pay the mortgage on the house in Newlyn that I often see nothing of Cornwall beyond the computer screen; sometimes so much so that I might as well have stayed in London. I wonder if Davies would think me a fool for coming to west Cornwall, looking for exactly what she has, but with the prison of borrowed money I treat as something to be grateful for. Home can be a hearth – she is very interested in precise definitions, and pores over her immense dictionary – but it can also be a trap.

This is a wonderful book. You would think that a story about the renovation of a shed would appeal to the John Lewis shopping classes, and that is true. But *Homesick* is so much more. It's a personal memoir that investigates how we fetishise the idea of home and, in doing so, misunderstand its meaning, and deny it to others. It's a book about living; about hunger, and greed.

Davies opens with the shed being robbed: everything she made, torn from her. Next comes the story of her leaving a rented box-room in Bristol for the shed in Polgigga; why work every hour for a home that isn't a home? The shed was her father's office in the 1980s. When he went bankrupt – he was an architect; he literally made homes – only the shed remained.

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But that is not her real beginning. Davies's parents brought her from Wales to Penwith when she was a child. They wanted to give her a fantasy childhood, and they did, but, when Black Monday came, they lost everything. In the way that sensitive children do, Davies imbibed this loss for all of them and she drifted: 'I struggled to find my future'. Sometimes she thinks, 'I wanted to be a seal, a crow, or even a rabbit. I wanted to be anything but human.'

The details are fascinating to a reader drugged on home-improvement magazines – although such things, as Davies notes, are a mere distraction from the real meaning of home. She begins again in the shed and relates her simple life in glorious prose which seems, sometimes, to bleed. She bleeds, too. She poisons the rats that live in the shed, until she realises that the owls in the field depend on eating the rats. Instead she builds a rat-repelling skirting board, and cuts her hands. She collects gorse for fuel on the cliffs: 'What would be left when the sea had finally finished its epic task, when the whole world was sand?' She learns she is strong, and she heals.

The poverty of west Cornwall is explicit; in summer, those who own homes rent them out to tourists. 'It rather defeats the object of having a house if you can't afford to live in it,' says Davies's friend. She laments the plague of holiday cottages; in seeking their rural idyll, the London classes have deprived the Cornish of their reality.

There is comedy, too, from the second-home owner whose garden Davies tends. Like me, this creature sees west Cornwall over the lip of a laptop, and though Davies laughs at her, she pities her, too. She thinks she loves Cornwall, but she cannot see it as Davies does. 'If I had been there between 200 and 300 million years ago,' she writes of a journey to a cave, 'I would not have been shivering in the mouth of a cave. I would have been standing in the centre of a mountain range the size of the Himalayas.' That kind of aside is easy to write, I think, from what I am beginning to call the shed of truth.

This is a glorious book, making a heartfelt call for a land tax, so we can all come home again. Reading Davies, you can only hope they think about it in Westminster, and learn the meaning of home: 'how,' as she says, 'every wreckage contains within it some kind of salvage'.

Kings of the road

ALAN JUDD

High Performance: When Britain Ruled the Roads

By Peter Grimsdale

Simon & Schuster £20

Accounts of the post-Second World War British motor industry usually make depressing reading.

With steel rationing and pressure to export or die, most manufacturers initially produced updated versions of 1930s cars. For a time it worked, making Britain temporarily the largest car-exporter in the world. But it was downhill thereafter: too many manufacturers, cars designed only for British roads, taxation policies that meant most were underpowered, conservative and out-of-touch managements, mergers that didn't work and an increasingly truculent labour force encouraged by unions to strike until there were no jobs left.

Peter Grimsdale knows all this but gives a very different and uplifting slant to the story by concentrating on successes. He focuses on people who did things differently and whose achievements are with us still, either because we collect them or because their successors are still achieving. His subjects include: William Lyons, founder of Jaguar; Colin Chapman of Lotus, who taught the industry to 'add lightness'; Alec Issigonis, designer of the Morris Minor and the Mini; John Cooper and Donald Healey, who could make anything go faster; Stirling Moss, Paddy Hopkirk and Jim Clark, who proved it; Malcolm Sayer, the mathematician who designed the E-Type; and David Bache, who made Rover what it was while running a sideline in tailoring.

There's also a shoal of lesser-known influential figures: Walter Hassan, whose fire-pump engine triumphed in Formula 1; ex-US serviceman Bob Blake, who fashioned the E-Type's hardtop without a drawing; Gerry Coker, who designed just two cars – the Austin Healey and the Sprite; and the glitzy Lady Docker, whose Daimler with 7,000 gold stars, gold-plated radiator and hubcaps, and silk interior with Cartier fittings, was an infusion of glamour into drab post-war Britain.

We are accustomed now to seeing British-made or -driven cars winning F1 Grands Prix; yet before the Second World War, only one had ever done so. After Bentley's Le Mans successes of the 1920s, Britain didn't feature in performance motoring, on or off the track. Where Americans and Continentals were innovative, most British car-makers were risk-averse and complacent, sheltering from competition behind a 33.3% tariff wall, doing what was done before.

Significantly, few of the post-war generation Grimsdale writes about were trained engineers or designers; still less managers. They were enthusiasts who started under railway arches or in Nissen huts or the backyards of pubs, preying like magpies on the expertise of others. Colin Chapman strapped a leading aerodynamicist to the bonnet of a racing Lotus so that he could observe wind effects at 100mph.

An exception was William Lyons, whose early passion for motorbikes led him to make sidecars. By the age of 21, he and a partner had founded the successful Swallow Sidecar Company with money borrowed from their fathers. He then turned to cars, and by the outbreak of war his SS Jaguars were popular enough to be dismissed by the motoring establishment as 'Wardour Street Bentleys'. During wartime fire-watch duties, he and two employees dreamt up a new engine, the famous Jaguar six-cylinder, which was to last the rest of the century and dominate Le Mans in the Fifties. In the run-up to the 1948 London Motor Show, Lyons designed in two weeks the Jaguar XK120, a revolutionary sports car which set Jaguar on the

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path to international success. Unable to draw and no good with his hands, Lyons approached car design like a sculptor, supervising others, who shaped his ideas in wire, wood and metal. He had an almost flawless eye for line and elegance and a genius for communicating his vision to the men with hammers.

Most of the innovative vehicles Grimsdale describes in this thoughtful and stimulating account were the products not of committees or focus groups but of individual minds like Lyons's, harnessing and inspiring those around them. It's hard to say whether there's still such scope with mass production, computer-aided design and AI but, as Grimsdale points out, our engineering skills are such that almost all F1 racing cars are made here, while the phoenixes that arose from the ashes of the British motor industry – Jaguar, Land Rover, Aston Martin, Bentley and Lotus – still carry the genes of their enthusiast founders.

The message, if there is one, is to let imagination thrive.

Domestic Blitz

YSENDA MAXTONE GRAHAM

Women's Work: A Personal Reckoning with Labour, Motherhood and Privilege

By Megan K Stack

Scribe £16.99

It's always a pleasure to read a piece of writing by a hard-nosed female war correspondent who's been immersed in all the horrors of war, but for whom nothing has ever been as tough as being a first-time mother to a screaming baby who won't sleep.

This was the case for Megan K Stack, who left her job as war correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* to enter the imagined idyll of being a mother and writer-from-home. She soon found herself in a domestic mini-war zone: holed up in a rented apartment in a high-rise block in the business district of Beijing, going mad with exhaustion and despair thanks to the constantly crying baby: 'Aerial bombardment had been easier for my nerves to withstand. Lord, somebody deliver me into a fighting zone. Shove me between life and death. Not half-awake-life-with-crying. Not this, please.'

Like many mothers, she was shocked and affronted when her husband went back to work a couple of weeks after the birth. How dare he? Parenthood should be more equal than this. But she depended on his salary. And, like many mothers, she describes all this as if she's the first person ever to have had a baby.

It's gripping, though: admirably honest and guilt-ridden. It shouldn't really be called *Women's Work*. That makes it sound too general and polemic-like. There are a few Big Feminist Observations: 'No woman needs to convince me that she would give her life for her children, because every mother has already given her life for her children. When it comes to time, it is almost always the woman who pays.' But mainly, it's a personal memoir of one mother and her three female migrant domestic helps, one in China and two in India (where she and her journalist husband moved next), and it reads like a novel, with snappy dialogue and lots of small, character-revealing incidents.

If you're fascinated (as I am) by the absurd global economic situation that forces mothers to leave their children and travel thousands of miles to look after other people's children and clean their houses, you'll be riveted. 'Help is affordable,' Stack's friends remind her when she's at the nadir of desperation, and she knows they mean 'Human beings are cheap here.' But she can't resist.

Xiao-Li, the agency cleaner she employs in the depth of despair, is as soothing to the pain and chaos of early motherhood as was the epidural to which she'd succumbed (having vowed not to) before going in for an emergency C-section. Suddenly the flat is sparkling and the cooking is done, and soon the family can't manage without her. Xiao-Li's two-hour commute across rainy, smoggy, traffic-clogged Beijing doesn't bear thinking about, but



Desert Moon **(1955) by Lee Krasner. From *Lee Krasner: Living Colour* edited by Eleanor Nairne, Thames & Hudson, £35**

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Stack does think about it, unlike her husband who refers to Xiao-Li simply as 'the full-time maid'. This drives Stack mad. She watches with appalled fascination as, each afternoon, Xiao-Li puts her head down on the kitchen work surface, her neck wrenched round in an 'impossible twist', and has a nap, refusing Stack's offer of the spare bed.

Xiao-Li has left her own three-year-old child with her parents in the provinces. The cruelty of this makes Stack feel grubby: 'Like Apple computers or Goodyear car tyres, I reaped the benefit of cheap Chinese labour. I fretted over the condition of my soul.' Fretted; but didn't do anything about it, as Xiao-Li was her life raft.

I did slightly think 'Diddums' when, on moving to Delhi for husband's new job, they found they struggled on Sundays when both the nanny and the cook (Mary and Pooja) had their day off. On one stressful day when the nanny is ill with typhoid, Stack has to miss a day's writing and take her own child to the park. But again, I admired her honesty in admitting this total dependency.

Both Mary and Pooja have children whom they've abandoned in order to earn the money to pay for their education. Mary lives on the other side of Delhi, near the airport, and Pooja lives in the servants' quarters behind Stack's house, a stifling hellhole where she gets beaten up by her husband who suspects her of having an affair, which she's not.

Stack becomes more and more fascinated by these women's personal lives, and the final section of the book is devoted to her interviewing all three of them. 'I left him when he needed me most,' says Pooja, of her own son. So it's a chain of guilt.

There are 100 million domestic workers in the world, 80 per cent of them women and, in this clear-eyed microcosm, Stack has forced us to think about them.

OLDIE NOVEL OF THE MONTH

Mature sex in the city

CHARLES KEEN

Live a Little

By Howard Jacobson

Jonathan Cape £18.99

It may be the ultimate in ageism for a man in his 70s to write a satirical novel about women (and a man) in their 90s, picking over the detritus of their murky sex lives. But we can forgive Mr Jacobson anything for the sake of his wit and wisdom.

Beryl Dusinberg ('the Princess Schw... you know who', as she calls herself to herself) has reached a state of amnesia in which she cannot remember and cannot count the throng of husbands and lovers who have enjoyed her sexual favours. It matters not, because none has inspired any emotion in her. Her heart is hard, and love is a physical activity. Children – it is hard to remember how many, or what happened to them – are part of the luggage of life. The only two who are still in touch, Sandy and Pen, are crashing bores – one a Labour MP, one a Tory. So were their fathers. She calls them Laurel and Hardy, though they are unfunny.

She speaks in epigrams, and many a true word is spat out in jest. The only nice and normal people in her life are her carers, Nastya (pronounced Nastier) from Moldova and Euphoria from Uganda. Nastya has come to England in search of a lord to marry. Euphoria is a huge woman, garishly dressed in tight-fitting, primitive colours, sweet and devoted to her mistress, who teases her a lot, but is not unkindly. 'She has a heart like molasses,' and needs to be toughened.

The Princess lives in Finchley Road, not far from the Chinese restaurant owned by Raymond Ho, who lets the upstairs room to Shimi Carmelli in exchange for the latter telling the fortunes of his clients. Shimi, who is 90, has an infallible memory and an acquired skill with cards (as well as knowledge of phrenology), which equip him for the profession of 'cartomancy'; roughly speaking, if you can ascertain a person's past and know their mental bumps, you can divine what's going to happen to them next. Shimi is tormented by the past. 'He truly does remember everything. What he would give not to!'

One memory in particular cannot be banished and has blighted his entire life. In his early teens, he secretly tried on his mother's bloomers and climbed into bed. He was instantly shocked and sickened by his own unnatural behaviour and, from then on, sought to exile himself from the world of men. His father brutalised him and his younger brother excelled him in all worldly activities. He constructed a protective wall round himself and lived in isolation from the world.

And, of course, that puts him in a position not dissimilar to that of the 'Princess'. She is flamboyant, worldly and rich but stone-cold inside, because that for her is the only way to avoid being sucked down in the turgid soup of male emotionalism.

In this way, they discover a lot of things about each other, including, disturbingly, that each has a streak of human decency lurking deep down within. Both reveal one more horrible secret from their pasts. They share, too, a gift for repartee, so, as any good cartomancer could have predicted, they are made for twinning.

This novel is pervaded by Jacobson's 'unsmiling sense of the absurd'. Readers would be ungrateful not to allow themselves an occasional smile or chortle. The pathos may be left to do its own work.



'When did you first start feeling grim?'

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