

The ghostwriter and the con man

FIRST PERSON

Richard Flanagan
(Chatto & Windus, £18.99)

Review by Allan Massie

Some novelists are “putters in”, others “takers out”. The former drench you with incident and information, and work on a big canvas; the latter value economy, of words and effects. Richard Flanagan, winner of the Booker Prize three years ago for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, has been called Australia’s greatest living novelist, and is very obviously a putter in.

First Person is a rambling, garrulous novel, telling a story which a different sort of writer, Ron Rash, for example, might have written at a third of the length. In this, he resembles Jonathan Franzen, and, like Franzen, lavish praise and big sales have been his reward.

The outline of the story is simple. A young writer living in Tasmania is struggling to write his novel. He is poor, has a wife and young daughter, and there are twins on the way. He supports himself with odd jobs. Suddenly a publisher makes him a proposition: \$10,000 to ghost-write the autobiography of Australia’s most

famous con man, a swindler on a mammoth scale, who is awaiting sentence and an unavoidable long prison sentence for his crimes.

As a serious writer, he is high-mindedly tempted to reject the offer, which he owes to his closest friend from boyhood, Ray, a wild man who has acted as the con man’s gofer and trouble-shooter. But of course, he accepts; whatever his reservations, it’s money he can’t afford to turn down.

The con man, Siegfried “Ziggy” Heidl, an Australian who speaks with a German accent, is difficult. More than difficult. On the one hand, he wants the book written, because he needs the payment promised in the contract. On the other hand, he is quite uncooperative. He says he remembers nothing about his childhood or adolescence. If he produces what seems to be a fact, he retracts it almost at once. There are no true facts, merely stories, and he won’t even tell the stories. The supreme con man is a solipsist for whom nothing beyond himself is real, and who will even question or deny his own reality.

It is, very evidently, a novel of our time, a 21st-century novel which recognises that in the age of the internet, reality is no longer objective; it is whatever you choose it to be.



Wild boys Flanagan harks back to his narrator’s risk-taking youth, kayaking in Tasmania GETTY IMAGES

Ziggy is an emblematic figure. In a world in which governments and banks invent money out of nothing, what’s the difference between them and the con man who fleeces them? Was the money he stole ever real?

There’s some wonderful writing about Tasmania and the wild kayaking exploits which the narrator and Ray enjoyed, at the risk

of their lives, in their youth. There is some very fine descriptive writing and narrative passages that go with a swing. There’s the sadness of lives gone wrong or torn apart, the desolation that is the consequence of family break-up.

Yet the strength of the novel rests in its mordant intelligence, in its recognition that the world today is essentially Ziggy’s, one

of make-believe and denial. If you can’t quite believe in Ziggy, this is because Flanagan presents him as the faceless face of a world given over to self-invention and fantasy.

So it’s an absorbing novel, intermittently very enjoyable too. Yet I can’t avoid the thought that it would have been better had Flanagan taken more out and stuffed less in.

A life of glossy gossip

THE VANITY FAIR DIARIES: 1983-1992

Tina Brown
(Weidenfeld & Nicholson, £25)

Review by Sarah Hughes

“You never know when you’re living in a personal golden age until it’s over,” notes Tina Brown wistfully at the end of her racy, pacy diaries about her time as editor of US magazine *Vanity Fair*.

VF (as Brown refers to it) became a byword for the meld of high and low culture which pretty much defines journalism today and Brown was the editor who set the tone, transforming an unsuccessful relaunch into America’s most buzzed-about magazine stuffed full of exclusive interviews, eye-catching covers (including, memorably, Demi Moore naked when seven months’ pregnant) and the sort of stories that the in-crowd gossiped about.

If that all sounds like so much hyperbole, then blame it on the cumulative effect of reading Brown’s diaries, which are stuffed full of



Friend to the famous Brown with Meryl Streep in 2015 GETTY IMAGES

breathless accounts of dinner and drinks parties, both attended and thrown: literally in the case of one notorious event involving the current President, who, disgruntled with a *Vanity Fair* profile, pours a glass of wine down the back of the author, Marie Brenner, before quickly vanishing.

There are lovely cameos, too, from a young Boris Johnson (“an epic shit. I hope he ends badly”), Jackie Onassis (“I felt if you cleared the room and left her alone, she’d be in front of a mirror screaming”) and an easily distracted Warren Beatty, who

takes Brown to lunch and gives her the run-around, pontificating about politics before concluding: “Look, any time you want to waste some time... no interviews.”

She has a wicked eye for small details and enough affectionate mockery to leaven the lengthy lists of names which populate these pages – some more well-known to a British readership than others. You would have to be an obsessive fan of New York culture in the 1980s to unpick sentences such as “*Vanity Fair*’s success designated me a great seat at Alice’s table next to the aggressive takeover

king, Carl Icahn, along with the creamy TV anchor Diane Sawyer, mag magnate Malcolm Forbes, the TV writer Norman Lear, and the gossip columnist Aileen Mehle, aka Suzy”. Although the sheer amount of names dropped may well leave you wondering: “Who are these people and why should I care?”

Yet if you simply relax and go with the turbo-charged (another of Brown’s favourite words) flow, then these diaries are a great deal of fun. Brown is fascinating on the ins and outs of putting out a magazine and her enthusiasm for a good story is winning (her tendency to promote male writers while sacking women somewhat less so).

She’s also gloriously open about the way in which her triumphs are consistently talked down – “I love the way he says ‘throwing money around’ as if I am some ditz girl run amok with the budget” – and honest about her struggles balancing motherhood and work. There is sadness, too, as the arrival of Aids sees the parties replaced by a slow parade of funerals and even the unstoppable Brown is moved to moments of sombre self-reflection.

Ultimately, though, this is a perfect primer to the gaudy excesses of 1980s culture. “This is what I appreciate most about the city at night, the life force of New York aspiration, wanting, wanting to be seen,” Brown writes in September 1985. The same could be said of the author: it is her joy in her job, her delight at being ringside in this moment, and, most of all, her sheer chutzpah, which keeps you turning the pages.



JONNY L DAVIES

ONE MINUTE WITH...

Sally Rooney, author

Where are you now and what can you see?

I’m sitting at my kitchen table. Directly before me I can see the dishwasher, as yet unemptied, and out the back door, the garden.

What are you currently reading?

Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*.

Who is your favourite author and why do you admire her/him?

The author whose work I return to most often is Jane Austen. She just seems to understand how extremely funny life is.

Describe the room where you usually write...

I try to work in the spare room, upstairs, at a desk by a window, but more often I end up back at the kitchen table, where forms of procrastination are close at hand.

Which fictional character most resembles you?

A few years ago I’d have said JD Salinger’s Franny Glass, who is having a nervous breakdown on the couch in *Franny and Zooey*. But I think I’m just slightly too old now for that routine to be as charming as it once was.

Sally Rooney, the author of ‘Conversations With Friends’ (Faber & Faber, £14.99), is shortlisted for the Sunday Times/PFD Young Writer of the Year Award, in association with the University of Warwick. The winner is announced on 7 December (youngwriteraward.com)

ALSO RELEASED



A FIELD GUIDE TO THE NORTH AMERICAN FAMILY Garth Risk Hallberg (Vintage, £12.99)

Garth Risk Hallberg pulled off a major coup in 2015. The film rights to the young New Yorker’s novel *City on Fire* were picked up by the Oscar-winning Hollywood producer Scott Rudin before he’d even signed the book deal – which came in at nearly \$2m. Set in and around Manhattan’s punk scene in the mid-1970s, *City on Fire* was an overnight best-seller that turned Hallberg into the most-highly written of the year.

More astonishing, the novel itself, clocking in at just over 900 pages, is a work of genuine brilliance, Hallberg’s relentless gifts gleaming off every page. Following a cast of characters from various echelons of New York society, the story spins out from a death in Central Park into a transcendent aria of the metropolis.

A Field Guide to the North American Family, Hallberg’s first work of fiction, originally published a decade ago, is now

being reissued on the back of *City on Fire*’s success.

Where *City on Fire* is Dickensian in scope, *A Field Guide*, focusing on two modern-day middle-class families in the Long Island suburbs, is a svelte novella made up of 63 interlaced vignettes, which runs to just over 120 pages.

The fracturing of the Hungate and Harrison families – neighbours whose lives are thrown into turmoil by divorce and a death – is told through sketches that never run to more than a page. The entries are alphabetised under thematic headings, such as “Optimism” and “Grief”, each illustrated with pictures taken by a different photographer. It’s a wholly distinct aesthetic from that of *City on Fire*, but a work equally steeped in a fascination with families of different stripes.

Hallberg’s writing style here is more lucid and malleable than the expansive immersion of *City on Fire*, evocative of masters of American suburbia such as John Updike, John Cheever, James Salter and Richard Yates. The photographs come with

meditative captions and playful cross-references to other entries (“An erratic Maturity pattern characterises the Midlife Crisis: it may remain a manageable size for years, only to reach its stature in a few turbulent days”).

The images themselves echo the work of photographers such as William Eggleston or Alec Soth, in which mundane aspects of American life resonate with narrative power.

The epigraph is a quote from James Agee, the writer who in the mid-1930s documented Depression-era dustbowl families with photographer Walker Evans. In the “how to use” section, Hallberg challenges “bold” readers to dispense with a linear reading approach and to “traverse the book at random”.

Conjuring a dreamlike filmic spell, with shades of *American Beauty* and *The Ice Storm*, this is a work that can be approached (and rediscovered) a number of ways, all equally rewarding. It’s an ideal coffee table or bedside companion, to be dipped into for flashes of pleasure. THE INDEPENDENT

Alasdair Lees

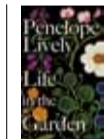


WINTER
Karl Ove Knausgaard (Harvill Secker, £16.99)

Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series of autobiographical books won him the adulation of the literary establishment and the wrath of certain family members.

In his new series, the *Seasons Quartet*, he again tackles issues relating to his own life, this time in the guise of brief descriptions of the world written for his unborn daughter. It’s pretentious, yes, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t enjoyable. In *Winter*, we find him ruminating on the weather, the trials of fatherhood and his childhood in the 1970s. Each entry ranges from two to five pages, making it easy to dip into.

Sometimes Knausgaard is showing off, bragging about how much he knows about the physiology of owls or quantum physics; other times he veers to the surreal, imagining the human brain separated from its body. But the best moments find him simply detailing small incidents in his life; when he is depressed and alone on an island and observes the thrill-seeking behaviour of an otter; or the time he and a fellow dad take turns dressing up as Father Christmas to wow each other’s children. Sam Priddy



LIFE IN THE GARDEN
Penelope Lively (Fig Tree, £14.99)

Now in her mid-eighties, Penelope Lively parts ways with her perennial subject matter of English middle-class life to write with the authority of an enthusiastic plantswoman. This is not a how-to book, nor memoir, nor coffee-table fantasia, though it contains elements of all these things. Rather, it’s a gentle survey of the garden’s place in (mostly) Western culture, which morphs into a personal meditation on time, memory and a life well lived. Liz Ryan



PLACES IN THE DARKNESS
Chris Brookmyre (Orbit, £18.99)

Though set in space, Chris Brookmyre’s latest novel is essentially a locked-room mystery. It’s set in Ciudad de Cielo, on the edge of orbit, where scientists are building a ship that will eventually take humanity out to the stars. The novel lives up to the author’s description of it as “space noir”, as our patience with the sci-fi set-up is rewarded with a crime plot heavy on misinformation and misdirection. Louise Fairbairn



COFFEE TABLE CHOICE

Top 5 Books

1. **Bad Dad** David Walliams (HarperCollins)
2. **Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Getaway** Jeff Kinney (Penguin)
3. **The Midnight Line** Lee Child (Bantam)
4. **Blue Planet II** James Honeyborne & Mark Brownlow (BBC/Random House)
5. **Ingredients - Quick & Easy Food** Jamie Oliver (Michael Joseph)

DON'T JUST DREAM BIG. MAKE IT BIG.

The book (Dewi Lewis, £4.5) includes essays by AL Kennedy, Carol Ann Duffy and Tristram Hunt, who attempt to distil the spirit of merry Albion. Pictured: Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet, 2008

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