

Life books



reviews editor
CLAIRE ALLFREE

NOO SARO-WIWA: LOOKING FOR TRANSWONDERLAND

★★★★☆ Lively portrait of a frustrating nation

Nigeria doesn't spring to mind when considering African holiday destinations. Travel writer Noo Saro-Wiwa reckons the continent's most populous nation probably 'gets fewer voluntary visitors than the Moon'.

So she set out to establish why, by journeying through Nigeria, taking in chaotic Lagos, sterile Abuja, the Muslim north, Christian south and the infamous Niger Delta.

Her book is shaped by breezy accounts of rusting amusement parks, uninformative museums, crumbling national monuments, litter-strewn beaches and grim hotels. A hopeless electricity supply and

dicating with death on public transport add to the fun.

But the trip was also a way for her to come to terms with her homeland, a place she'd resented being sent to every summer (leaving England behind) and had avoided since her father, celebrated author and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, was hanged by the military regime in 1995.

VERDICT Ken Saro-Wiwa's daughter finds much to love in Nigeria – albeit largely because she doesn't have to live there
Publisher Granta Price £14.99

It's when Saro-Wiwa grapples with the contradictions, frustrations and joys that form the modern Nigerian character, often through deft pen portraits of her relatives, that her book comes alive. She reveals a country so thoroughly mired in corruption that it seems virtually impossible to extricate it – and an impoverished people anaesthetising themselves with evangelical Christianity and stupefying Nollywood films. Her father's brave work has had little effect. But, ultimately, this is an affectionate portrait of a loud and lively nation with infuriating potential.
Siobhan Murphy



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The 'If You Prefer A Milder Comedian, Please Ask For One' EP
by Stewart Lee
Faber, £7.99

★★★★☆

Stewart Lee describes this as the slimmer EP to his '12in vinyl album' book about stand-up. How I Escaped My Certain Fate. Where the former contained meticulous annotated transcripts to three shows from 2005 to 2008, this focuses on just one – 2010's If You Prefer A Milder Comedian, Please Ask For One.

The show's gestation was tricky: acclaimed BBC2 series Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle took away the 43-year-old's outsider status and saw him attract new punters with fresh references and expectations. If You Prefer... thus saw him ponder what kind of comedian he was, at a time when Frankie Boyle was declaring no one over 40 could be funny, Jeremy Clarkson was again sparking debate about taste and Mark Watson was doing cider ads. On stage, Lee was as assured as ever

but this behind-the-scenes story is more revealing, presenting a talented comic forced into soul-searching recalibration.
Sharon Lougher

The Legacy Of Hartlepool Hall
by Paul Torday

Weidenfeld & Nicholson, £12.99

★★★★☆

Paul Torday's newest book seems to have all the ingredients of an old-fashioned country-house farce. Ed Hartlepool, scion of a wealthy family, has lived abroad for five years before returning to Britain upon the death of his father. He inherits a £7million tax bill, an estate that gobbles money and a mysterious house guest. But with Torday, author of Salmon Fishing In The Yemen, it's unwise to assume things will remain as they appear.

From these entertaining, if one-dimensional, beginnings the story deepens as Ed tries to find a way to save his family's home and way of life. The book shifts into uncomfortable territory that Torday

creates masterfully – touching on mental illness and assuming an almost tragic poignancy – as it begs moral questions about whether a family that has squandered its fortunes has the right to salvation. It's a novel that should enhance his reputation for excellent, ingenious writing.
Tina Jackson

The Happy Life by David Malouf
Chatto & Windus, £10

★★☆☆☆

Australian periodical Quarterly Essay devotes each issue to one heavyweight, single-author submission, plus correspondence about the previous issue's piece. David Malouf's wide-ranging discussion of what happiness means is here presented shorn of its QE context and comes with a £10 price tag. It's in danger of feeling not only glancing but also a shameless cash-in targeting January blues sufferers.

Malouf frames his essay with the question of how it was that prisoners in Soviet gulags and Nazi concentra-

FIVE QUESTIONS

Geling Yan

Your latest novel, *The Flowers Of War*, is set during the 1937 Rape Of Nanking – why did you choose to write about this?

I found a passage in the biography of a person who was trapped in Nanjing when the Japanese invaded. It described a group of prostitutes taking the place of some young girls the Japanese soldiers were trying to take away, in an attempt to save the girls' lives. I thought it was very

moving. I also had the diaries kept by my uncle who was trapped there, which gave me a lot to draw on.

It's still controversial; what does the event mean to the Chinese people now?

Chinese people living outside China know more about what happened than those in China – probably because most of the accounts were written by Westerners who escaped. But my book was well received in China; and since it's been made into a movie it seems to be more well-known than my other novels.

The film adaptation stars Christian Bale and is China's



Here's to a great 2012

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PAPERBACKS

Stop What You're Doing And Read This!

Vintage, £4.99
Mark Haddon, Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson and others describe why reading matters to them. Not as self-indulgent as you might think, and a strong argument for making 'reading more' one of your New Year's resolutions.

Titanic Thompson by Kevin Cook

Picador, £8.99
A deliciously freewheeling book about Titanic Thompson, the larger-than-life US gambler, who turns out to be the most entertaining biographical subject you've never heard of.

Pigeon English by Stephen Kelman

Bloomsbury, £7.99
The best thing about Stephen Kelman's debut – one of the most talked-about novels of last year – is the skill with which it captures the world of an 11-year-old living in a tough London housing estate. **CA**

tion camps could describe themselves as, relatively speaking, having 'happy' days. He breezes through thoughts on why 'the pursuit of happiness' was guaranteed under the US Constitution, how happiness has shifted from a spiritual to a material condition and, inevitably, what the ancient Greeks made of it all. But over 95 pages, Malouf intelligently touches upon issues rather than interrogates them and, oddly, fails to engage with non-Western concepts of happiness. **Andrzej Lukowski**

In The Orchard, The Swallows
by Peter Hobbs
Faber, £10.99
★★★★☆

Canadian-based Brit Peter Hobbs writes this novel from the perspective of a Pakistani villager who is kidnapped and jailed when he falls for the daughter of a politician. Freed after 15 years, only to find his family missing, he sets down

his experience in a notebook that he dreams of one day giving to his lost love. This is an emotive novel, with a focus on the sensations of touch, taste and colour. But buried within it is an attack on Pakistan's post-9/11 US alliance, the results of which the narrator witnesses in prison.

To Hobbs's credit, the story feels like a work of imagination rather than research but its brevity (140 pages) contributes to the sense this is more of a sketch than a portrait. You feel for the narrator more because of the facts of his case than because Hobbs makes you walk in his shoes. **Anthony Cummins**

The Wonderbox: Curious Histories Of How To Live by Roman Krznaric
Profile Books, £14.99
★★★★☆

It's possibly the oldest question in philosophy: what is the good life,

and how can we achieve it? Roman Krznaric delves into the 'wonderbox' of history to understand how modern societal conventions developed, and to find alternative approaches.

In the case of relationships, it means dispensing with romantic love's aspiration to total fulfillment through our partners. Instead, Krznaric asks us to remember other forms of love identified by the Ancient Greeks.

As regards materialism, if we can't heed Quentin Crisp – 'Never keep up with the Joneses. Drag them down to your level. It's cheaper' – we should at least refrain from jealousy. And as for terminal care, exiling the elderly to nursing homes would never happen if families adhered to Confucianism's filial piety.

You can carp at Krznaric's Pollyanna-like idealism but he does reveal how the past can prompt us to aim higher than we do. **Ben Felsenburg**

entry for the 2012 Oscars. Were you involved in any of the filming?

I was one of the two screenplay writers. I live in Germany now, so I wasn't involved a lot on set. When other books of mine have been adapted, some directors have made their films very different; Zhang Yimou has kept the major storyline the same but still made some big changes with Christian Bale's character. The emphasis on the female perspective of this tragedy is still the same, though, which is important.

You served in China's People's Liberation Army

during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Do you have one abiding memory of that time?

I joined when I was 12 as a soldier/performer – they recruited us early so they could train us to perform. I remember there were eight of us girl soldiers. We'd all eat together and have our rifles, because we were at the start of our military training, and we weren't allowed to talk, which was very hard for me. I spent 13 years in the army and became a major. I learned a lot of self-discipline. It was hard but then life at home was not much better: my father was condemned as a counter-revolutionary writer,

and my older brother would have been sent to the countryside if I hadn't joined up.

Having lived in the West for many years now, what would you say is its biggest misunderstanding about the Chinese?

Their understanding always seems to be a little off. With Westerners, things are either right or wrong; they never bother to look back into history. For us, lots of things have to do with our history; it requires a more subtle understanding and being less judgmental.

The Flowers Of War is published tomorrow by Harvill Secker, £10.



PICTURE THIS

Boombox, beatbox, ghetto blaster: the portable stereo system had many monikers and still holds icon status. Lyle Owerko's **The Boombox Project** (Abrams Image, £15.99) combines archive photos, lush portraits and heartfelt reminiscences from hip hop greats. An accompanying exhibition at London's Whisper gallery runs till January 15 (www.whisperfineart.co.uk).

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