



## The Queen is Dead

The thriller is probably the second most popular read in Britain after romance and sagas. I say probably because no one can offer any hard figures. But *The Guardian's* 1986 review of best-selling paperbacks, shows 23 thrillers in the top 100, including five in the top 12. Wilbur Smith's **The Burning Shore** comes in at No 2 with sales of 889,968, with Len Deighton's **London Natch** at No 6 (557,753 copies) and Dick Francis and Jack Higgins close behind. Alistair MacLean, who died early in February, had **The Lonely Sea** at No 12.

The popularity of thrillers is borne out by the fact that of the authors earning over £1,000 in Public Lending Right (PLR) in 1985, 24% wrote thrillers.

E M Forster defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence, as in 'the king died and then the queen died.' What, then, is a plot? 'The king died and then the queen died of grief.' There you have a plot. But Forster takes it further: 'The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.' This, he says is a plot with a mystery in it, capable of high development.

In the thriller the element of mystery, action and suspense is erected into a governing principle. Andre Jute, a successful writer of thrillers, puts it like this: 'What differentiates the thriller from all other literary forms is a greater benefice of ten-

sion.'

The genre has evolved and matured since Wilkie Collins, Edgar Allen Poe, Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard and John Buchan invented it between them. I include adventure stories such as Buchan's **The Thirty-Nine Steps** and the very different Sherlock Holmes stories of detection which Conan Doyle thought so little of himself because they share a basic characteristic: the reader expects them to *keep going*. They have the benefice of tension.

From time to time, those of us who choose to write this kind of book try to get closer to the novel proper, perhaps because we suspect there's more kudos in being Iris Murdoch than Len Deighton - more kudos but far fewer sales. This attempt is very difficult. I fancy Graham Greene came nearest to achieving something of the kind with **The Third Man**, and Patrick Hamilton came close with **Hangover Square** and **The West Pier** (both reissued in Penguin and well worth discovering). John Le Carre, a most distinguished writer of spy thrillers, now tries to give his books the broader characterisations and deeper sub-texts of the novel proper. My own view is that he is at his best when he gets on with the story.

It is doubtful whether such attempts are well-conceived. The tightly plotted, neatly characterised and suitably atmospheric thriller is a perfectly respectable genre in its own right and has no need to develop ambitions above its station. Johann Strauss was quite right not to attempt grand opera and it seems to me that Charlie Chaplin was mistaken in aiming, towards the end, at mainstream cinema.

So it is with thrillers. Which is not to say that they cannot be intelligent, decently written, and even 'true' in the way the novel proper sets out to be true.

Andre Jute defines 12 sub-species of the genre - taking in pretty well everything that sets out to thrill: the spy story, the political thriller, the whodunnit, the police procedural (always strong on

tv), the story of mad financiers who nearly wreck capitalism as we know and love it, the psychological story, soon degenerating into that emetic of literature the chiller, the doomsday tale where hotels blow up, enraged bees kill God-fearing Americans, and cities sink unexpectedly into the ground. Then there are adventure stories (territory colonised by Wilbur Smith), the private eye (by Carter Brown out of Raymond Chandler), and what they call the caper, in which the reader is invited to love the villain.

Some of this hasn't much overt ideological content, though nearly all spy thrillers see the socialist world as a den of iniquity. Le Carre's widely admired breakthrough thriller **The Spy Who Came In From The Cold** was a vintage cold war product. As for political thrillers, nearly all take a jaundiced and therefore basically undemocratic view of the political process as such. Sensing the popularity of this proposition, Jeffrey Archer, himself a failed politician, recently offered **A Natter of Honour**.

As for the Western intelligence services, it has become fashionable for our own spymasters to be bone stupid and the employees of MI6 to have problems with their sex lives. The CIA heroes of American spy stories are inclined to be clean-cut, uxorious and lacking all credibility. Colonel Oliver North is straight out of this branch of literature.

Anthony Cheetham, chairman of Century-Hutchinson, who publish Deighton, Frederick Forsyth, Ruth Rendell and Evelyn Anthony, believes the libraries are getting harder to please. 'It seems, he says, 'that the readers of thrillers are more intelligent and demanding than they were. And within the genre there appears to be a shift away from spies towards the story with plenty of hardware in it.' Tom Clancy's **The Hunt for Red October**, for instance, teaches you everything you ever wanted to know about submarines but were afraid to ask.

Nowadays the thriller often

draws away from pure fiction towards what is called facton: the story which weaves in and out of current or past history. Frederick Forsyth's **The Day of the Jackal** was loosely based on a real-life plot to kill General de Gaulle, and had as its first chapter a straight reporter's account of the failed attempt on his life at Petit Clamart (Forsyth was a Reuter correspondent in Paris).

Faction presents pitfalls. Ever since putting Gadafy into a current novel of mine I have lived in fear lest the Americans finally get him. Worse, he may start to see the Israeli point of view. Reality also plays tricks of its own, outbidding writers of fiction in the devising of horrors.

Whether such events as the Beirut kidnappings and such foul-ups as Greenpeace and Reagan's attempts to play footsie with the ayatollahs actually increase people's desire to read fictional versions of that kind of stuff, I have no idea. Who, after all, would dare invent an American president who devotes part of his 45 minute daily working schedule to inscribing bibles and packing cake for Moslem fundamentalists? You can't beat reality at its own game!

Publishers believe that more and more women are reading thrillers, though it is interesting that whereas women authors have a brilliant record in the detective and crime/psychological fields, they have not yet given male authors a run in, say, the spy thriller or the adventure yarn.

Maybe present reality is driving more and more readers to the sagas of genteel family life in the Yorkshire Dales, or, as Anthony Cheetham suggests, into some cloud cuckoo land where everyone is 16 feet tall and there is no difference between the sexes. But the thriller appears to be holding its public and is becoming more difficult to write as dozens of highly skilled practitioners jostle for ideas and a share of the libraries' dwindling spend on books. •

*Derek Kartun*

## The Next Step

**The Breakdown of Austin Rover**

*Karel Williams, John Williams & Colin Haslam*  
Berg £5.50pbk

The central thesis of this book is that the short, sharp shock treatment meted out to British industry in the Thatcher years has only succeeded in further eroding Britain's manufacturing base.

The authors challenge the commonly held view that Austin Rover represents a shining example of what can be done with tough management. They argue that in many respects the strategy devised by the former chairman, Michael Edwards, was a failure. The failure however is thought to lie outside the company in the market which was swamped by imported cars.

The solution they propose is to use the tax system to discriminate in favour of the purchase of cars built with at least an 80% British content. This would be achieved through higher rates of tax on new foreign cars or income tax penalties for users of non-British company cars. In reality this is another sophisticated form of import control.

It would in the main affect cars built in the rest of Europe, including cars imported by Ford and Vauxhall, in addition to the already existing 11% limit on the Japanese share of the UK car market.

The authors see the Edwardes strategy as failing for three reasons. First, management paid excessive attention to solving the labour problems of the UK car industry, which they argue was not the most serious source of competitive disadvantage. Second, management understated the disadvantages of being a much smaller producer than Ford and other key competitors. Third, mistaken investment decisions resulted in too much of the wrong kind of capacity being installed. This was compounded by the

failure to realise that this investment could not pay off without a big increase in volume, which never materialised. The authors argue that these failures have left Austin Rover with a critical and fatal dependence on assembling Honda designed cars in the future.

However, without political help in securing a market for its cars, the authors' view is that through implicit import controls, Austin Rover never had a chance of recovering. Indeed one suspects the authors believe some politicians were never interested in Austin Rover's recovery, a sentiment some Austin Rover managers would share.

This is yet another book about British industrial decline which recommends a political solution without providing any detailed prescriptions about what management strategy ought to be pursued. Yet some indication of the appropriate management approach is essential for any credible strategy of industrial recovery. The book also ignores the fact that the automobile industry is now organised on a global scale. National champion strategies are becoming impossible and increasingly expensive.

However sophisticated import controls become, they often seem to backfire on exactly the companies they are supposed to help. For example, it is now becoming evident that the limits on Japanese car imports into the USA may be seriously eroding the competitive position of General Motors and Ford, not enhancing them.

This book has also been overtaken by events. With the rise in the deutschmark, Ford, Vauxhall and Peugeot have recently announced plans to substantially increase output in the UK and to begin exporting again. Despite the continuing problems at Austin Rover, the fall in UK car production looks like being reversed in the next few years. There might be a future for car making in the UK after all, even if it does not include a UK-owned manufacturer •

*Daniel T Jones*

## Decameron

**Cameron In The Guardian**  
1974-1984

**A Selection of James Cameron's**  
writings

*Grafton Books*  
£3.50 pbk

We sang freedom ballads at James Cameron's funeral and Studs Terkel, with true reporters' objective accuracy, said he was unique.

The hard men of Fleet Street, on a morning off, stole a silent tear, unashamed. We all limped in his shadow, and still do, for there was none of our generation, nor for that matter of his own generation, who came within significant range of his luminous qualities. He was an Everest in the trade.

I can only applaud this latest paperback on behalf of all the Cameron clan - and there are a lot of us admirers around. It contains about a seventh of the 400 or so pieces Cameron wrote for *The Guardian* (his last port of call) in the 10 years up to 1984.

But they are all gems, not least that remarkable and moving final epic description 'A Pain in the Neck' which James wrote three months before he died in 1985 and which revealed his

lethal cancer.

There are many other gems - on virtually everything from tilling the unpromising, unfertile soil of Shepherds Bush to his beloved India.

It is all too easy now to forget that Cameron's rise to journalistic stardom came in a 'popular' newspaper - the Beaverbrook *Daily Express*. No doubt that old broadsheet would, in today's scene, be regarded as a super 'quality' newspaper!

Cameron's extraordinary description of the American A-Bomb test at Bikini in 1946, at which he literally had a ringside seat, was printed word for word as he wrote it in the Beaverbrook newspaper. Old Max Aitken knew a good journalist from a hack; and he also knew when he had a great one.

That event changed Cameron's life in every sense. It not only catapulted him to journalistic recognition and fame but it left him with the unshakeable conviction that nothing in world affairs would ever be the same again.

Nor can anything be the same again in Fleet Street after the demise of Cameron - though, to be sure, such a statement would have brought a great belly laugh of derision from the old master... •

*Geoffrey Goodman*

## Direction Finder

**Prospectus for a**  
**Habitable Planet**

*Dan Smith and*  
*EP Thompson (Eds)*  
*Penguin £3.95 pbk*

For the first time since Britain became a nuclear power the electorate has a real choice in defence policy. Although this prospect is real, the defence debate is still trapped in terms set by the supporters of nuclear weapons.

The vision is missing. This book proffers the vision, and an agenda for creating it, in Britain, Europe and globally. It shows nuclear weapons, the arms race and militarisation for what they are -

symptoms of the war between the superpowers, and instruments of repression. In its place the idea of dealignment as a way of ending the blocs, is proposed.

Independent steps to nuclear disarmament by Britain would make little difference to the overall nuclear balance, but would have a profound political effect, beginning the process of dealignment. But a government committed to nuclear disarmament will only stand up to external and internal pressure if it has convinced the majority and has an affirmative foreign policy to lead defence policies. This book offers the analysis, hope and sense of direction that could form the basis of such a policy. •

*Meg Beresford*



## Liberal At Heart

Collections of articles give me the same problem which a crowded tea-table used to pose when I was small. How do you get conscientiously from boring bread-and-butter to chocolate cake as quickly as possible? *John Kenneth Galbraith* in his introduction to **View From The Stands** (*Hamish Hamilton £14.95*) describes this selection of articles written over the past 30 years as a 'collation'.

Fortunately there are not too many fish-paste sandwiches. Galbraith ignores economics and the result is a ragbag of pieces on his wide range of interests.

But he is especially good on old colleagues. Praising Robert Kennedy in one review for his courage, he goes on to say a few pages later in a comparison of the formidable Averell Harri-

man and the wimpish Chester Bowles, 'Washington is a place where men praise courage and then act on elaborate personal cost-benefit calculations. There was cost in getting crossed up with Averall Harriman but not with Chester Bowles.'

John Kenneth Galbraith with all his Canadian Scotch quirkiness is in every sense a big man, a towering advertisement for the best of American liberalism. But then how could anyone of sensibility fail to respond to him when his literary enthusiasms include not only Trollope - after all even conservatives read him with pleasure - but also that wonderfully mysterious but under-rated fellow Canadian author, Robertson Davies. Galbraith, like Davies, is a Jung Liberal at heart. •

*Richard Holme*

## Spending Power

Much of the private sector relies for its survival on the purchasing power of central and local government. This provides enormous potential for the public sector to influence the employment practices of private firms.

**New Roads to Equality: contract compliance for the UK?** (*Fabian Tract 517 £1.50*) is written by *John Can* who pioneered the GLC's policy of contract compliance and who now chairs the powerful trading and supplies committee of ILEA. He argues that a coordinated national policy of contract compliance could help to tackle discrimination against women, black

people and the disabled.

The public sector spends an estimated £5.5 billion on the goods and services provided by private firms - almost a quarter of their total output. The extent of the potential influence this spending power provides is demonstrated from the US experience where government contractors have increased the number of women and blacks they employ faster than firms not subject to the controls.

This is one element of the American way that central government under Mrs Thatcher is unlikely to adopt. 0

*Chris Pond*

## Sketches of Neglect

*David Selbourne's Left Behind* (*Jonathan Cape, £10.95*) portrays frustration, hostility and despair, as industries are destroyed and communities disintegrate. The sharpest of these sketches show the dilemmas and divisions of municipal labourism under pressure. Cynicism and distrust seem to characterise Labour support.

But Selbourne is saying more. He sees socialism itself as hopelessly trapped in the abstractions of the 'all-knowing ideologue', to the neglect of the individual person. Distancing from the Left is signalled by a series of code words - 'inconvenient truths', 'the real human being', 'exhausted concepts'. There is a case to answer.

There will be much to say, in the discourse of a re-

newed Left, about individual experiences and needs, the multiple ways people live their lives, within and beyond 'class' categories. What else have the agendas of sexual politics, which Selbourne largely neglects, been trying to tell us?

Selbourne bases his criticism on 'things observed'. But, as he acknowledges, there is 'artifice' in all writing. Some of the conventions of Selbourne's writing produce images as stereotyped as any 'ideologue'. Such terms as 'Bradford bazaar', 'Imam-led', 'the tide of Islam' evoke racial confrontation in Bradford. As for women, they speak 'demurely', or with 'bosom heaving'. With this kind of writing it is Selbourne who is lagging behind the more progressive parts of the Left. •

*Robbie Gray*

## Roots Denied

In 1984 the black British writer *Caryl Phillips* set off 'across Europe in an attempt ... to come to terms with what it is like to feel both of, and not of, Europe'. The result is **The European Tribe** (*Faber & Faber £7.95*). From Spain to the Soviet Union, he searches the streets of Europe for the identity he cannot find in Britain.

Casablanca is his first stop. Here the romantic images of Sam the piano player, the Hyatt regency and Rick's cafe (which does exist) are supplanted by a city submerged in poverty and squalor. Disillusioned, he goes to Gibraltar and then Spain, a 'beautiful country' which he sees being eroded by tourism, for which he blames the British. Phillips nonetheless sees in the image of an old woman reading to her blind husband an authentic Spain that will survive.

In France he visits James Baldwin, a sad and lonely figure living behind 'tall, iron

gates', which to Phillips symbolise prison bars allowing the admittance of only the occasional visitor. One of the only 'black European success(es)' Phillips finds is in 16th century Venice. He writes at length on Othello, although one senses this was an essay paper he wanted to give at Oxford but for some reason never did.

It is in France that Phillips begins to find answers to his sense of rootlessness. The manufacturing of a split between West Indians and Arabs, the use of their labour to profit the system, and an extreme intolerance towards their presence in a country that otherwise bends over backwards to make its citizens French.

But, at the end of his grand tour, Phillips discovers neither roots nor a sense that the black contribution to the past or present is in any way acknowledged. He concludes by asking 'How much more of this will we take?' •

*Sandra Agard*



## The Misfit

*Gloria Steinem's Marilyn* (*Gollancz £12.95*) promises that part of the profits will go towards a fund at the Tavistock Clinic Foundation whose work is threatened by government cuts. There is little other reason for buying the book.

It is the first book written about Marilyn by a woman. Steinem writes as an American feminist, but surprisingly nothing that is said is new.

Marilyn Monroe is remembered chiefly for her luminous appeal as a film actress. She was called a 'natural', possessing innate abilities which assimilated and extrapolated

from every kind of learning to which she was exposed.

But what she was and what she appeared to be were rarely at one. Steinem perceives her as a lost child trapped in a body of succulent sensuality. Sadly, in trying to empathise with Monroe, she has only succeeded in patronising her. And in acknowledging the industry her death produced, she has added one more product to the pile without understanding that their mutual country of origin sees death as the ultimate orgasm, a trip devoutly to be desired and then prolonged as much as possible. •

*Anna Raeburn*

