

Quick reads

RevengeYoko Ogawa
Harvill Secker, £10.99

From award-winning Japanese writer Yoko Ogawa, *Revenge* provides snapshots of the lives of several characters and their unsettling tales, woven together in a seamless web of elegant narrative. These eccentric stories include that of a woman who returns ritualistically to the same bakery to purchase her son's favourite cake; although he died in an accident some time ago, and an inventor who becomes the curator of a museum of implements of torture, and not forgetting the Bengal Tiger in the garden... There are no perfect endings and certainly no heroes, just a series of interconnected lives in the city, as strange and as morbid as each other but absorbing and beautiful in equal measure. Ogawa's novel (well translated by Stephen Snyder) is unique and oddly refreshing, plunging through the warm and safe banality of day-to-day life into a core that is cold and unsettling.

Natsayi Sithole

**Orkney**Amy Sackville
Granta Books, £12.99

Amy Sackville's *Orkney* tells the story of a literature professor and his unnamed bride - his most gifted and enthusiastic student of the past year - on their honeymoon. Over the two weeks, during which the story unfolds, the professor spends his days attempting to write a book while being distracted by his enigmatic wife, who whiles away the hours by staring out to sea. Every night, the increasingly besotted professor asks her questions in a bid to uncover who she is and why she wanted to honeymoon on a barren Orkney isle. Sackville's beautifully descriptive prose transports the reader to a chilling landscape, allowing them to experience the taste of each sip of whisky, every touch of the young wife's skin. It's a haunting page-turner that must be read.

Victoria Burt

**This Is The Way**Gavin Corbett
Fourth Estate, £14.99

Gavin Corbett is an Irish author with a Midas touch on the written word. In his debut novel, he brings us into the world of Anthony Sonaghan, an Irish Traveller whose heritage is as mythical as it is deadly. Born to two people whose clans have a bitter hatred of each other, Anthony had grown up away from his family, and knew little of the feud, that is until the feud finds him. It's while he is lying low in Dublin that we first meet Anthony and Corbett writes in the character's dialect. He's a man of simple pleasures and a willingness to better himself. His uncle, Arthur, who forms the role of protector and guide, opens up the secrets of his nephew's family that are intertwined with intriguing traditional folk tales. Each page paints vivid colours of disturbing truths.

Phil Robinson



Tackling big questions in assured debut novel

The Book of GuardiansDerek Neale
Salt, £8.99

Pete Kelley

When a story is being written, choices are being made. What is to happen next? What is possible, and what is probable? It's an issue one of the earliest writers of English realist novels, Henry Fielding, talked about in the prologue to his groundbreaking 18th century novel *Tom Jones*.

That's part of the craftsmanship. But, of course, it's equally true for us all in what passes for real life. What will - what can - happen next?

Will our lives roll out with the grandeur and drama we expect in novels? Or, in the world we inhabit, is the truer 'realism' that the events of our lives are at times rather... well, inconsequential?

Derek Neale, a Norwich-based writer, explores this question - and a good many others - in a clever, witty and very humane first novel, which manages also to make for a page-turning, vivid read.

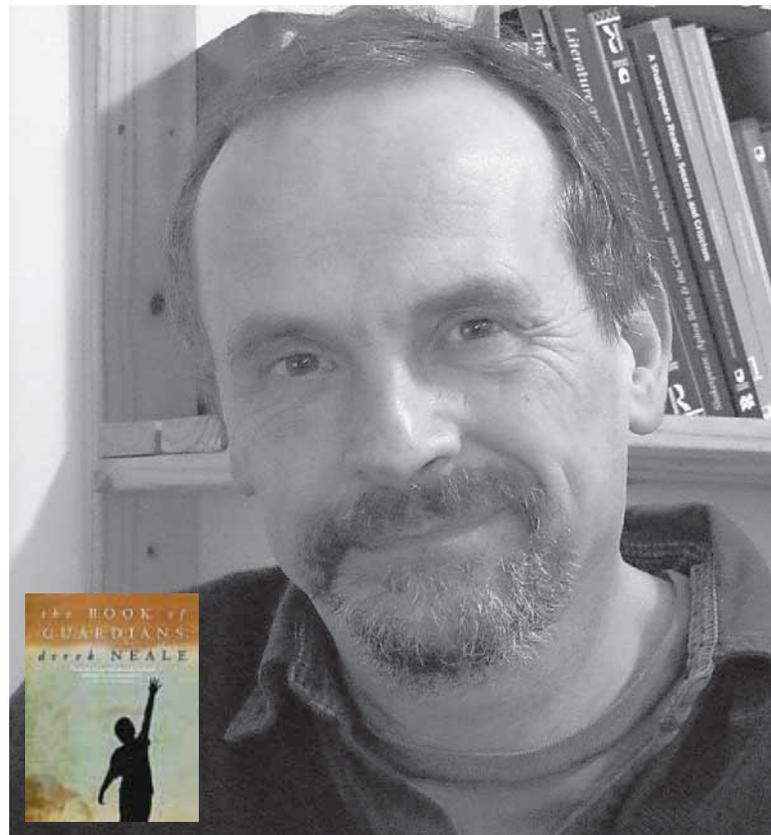
He touches intelligently on some of the big themes - what is the nature of memory? Does it deceive us? Can we express what matters in language? Do we know who we are? - but his gift, it seemed to me, is to tackle these questions in a way that never becomes ponderous. They sit lightly within a tale which plunges us into some highly contemporary issues: How are children to be protected and cared for in a world of broken marriages? What are the responsibilities - and the feelings - of a 'weekend dad'?

Philip Eyre is a care worker, one of the 'guardians' of the title, who specialises in adoption issues. As such, he finds himself, like a detective, faced with the task of tracing the birth-father of a child called Holly, whose mentally ill mother, Janet, believes she had an unusual spiritual relationship with this man... so unusual as to draw Biblical parallels.

This is supposed to be Eyre's last case. But in a novel which draws repeatedly on music, and in which a number of ominous warnings echo like a chorus, he is told "the last case never ends".

Initially sceptical, Eyre finds himself increasingly obsessed with this vulnerable woman and, as he struggles to come to terms with his own past, he finds their stories - their own possible pasts as well

“He touches on some of the big themes... his gift is to tackle these questions in a way that never becomes ponderous.”

Asking the questions: Derek Neale, author of *The Book of Guardians* (Salt Publishing).

as their possible futures - more and more entangled.

The birth-father will turn out to have a violent secret of his own.

Eyre, meanwhile, is himself a separated father with two children who he struggles not to see as strangers. He is also in the process of moving to Canada, where he will become involved with a part-Turkish woman called Kimmy - short for Kismet - a name meaning, as he tells us, both fate and division. But if her name seems, in itself, like a theme, Kimmy is no two-dimensional cut-out. She comes stomping into this story - vivid, sassy and taking Eyre's life by the throat, demanding more from him.

In a novel which makes a number of damaged characters (including its

narrator) touchingly real, Kimmy was - for me - one of the most appealing and alive. And, as the story develops, there are reasons for that.

For those familiar with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Neale has some fun, in this book, drawing on parallels between the two stories, his own narrator's confusion becoming greatest when the two plots, and some of the characters, seem to weave together.

Derek Neale is an award-winning short story writer, and has written several books for the Open University on the craft of writing. Nonetheless, I was surprised this was his first novel, because it is assured and bold, as well as being an engrossing - and at times very funny - read. I can't wait for the next.

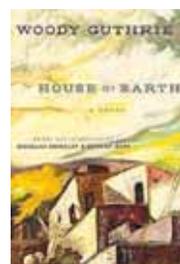
Gritty lost tale from giant of US song

House of Earth
Woody Guthrie
Fourth Estate, £14.99

Kathryn Gaw

Folk legend Woody Guthrie is best known for songs, but his recently discovered novel *House of Earth* showcases another extraordinary talent.

The plot centres around simple farming couple Tike and Ella May Hamlin, and their struggle to build a "fireproof,



windproof, rainproof, sweatproof, bugproof, foolproof, everything proof" adobe dwelling on land they don't own.

Co-editors Johnny Depp and Douglas Brinkley claim that *House of Earth* is the literary companion to Guthrie's most famous song, *This Land Is Your Land*, and there are certainly comparisons to be made.

Guthrie uses the story to rail against the big banks and business conglomerates that bought up huge swathes of the Texas

Panhandle in the post-Depression years, in an echo of some of his most popular folk anthems.

Guthrie completed the book in 1947, but it is only now being published.

Casually erotic and extremely left-leaning, it would have created quite a stir in 1940s/1950s America, although a post-50 Shades audience will probably find it quite tame.

Gritty, vulgar and aspirational, *House of Earth* tells a fascinating story of life in 1930s Dust Bowl America.