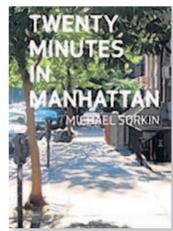


# nonfiction

## Talk the talk, walk the walk

An architecture writer's morning stroll offers a guided tour of New York's turbulent social history – with some exotic detours



Twenty Minutes in Manhattan by Michael Sorkin

Reaktion, £16.95 \* £15.26; 216pp  
James Scлавunovs

Architecture, of necessity, thinks big. When it comes to buildings and cities, and the men (it's almost always men) behind them — whether it's the scale of their works, the breadth of their talent or their larger-than-life personalities — size implicitly matters.

*Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* grapples with a colossus of a city and the titans that made it; but Sorkin, formerly the architecture critic for the *Village Voice*, carries out his exploration of New York City architecture, public works and city life at a decidedly non-epic human level of the street. Although his book is intimately linked with a small segment of one particular city, his thoughts on urban living have a broader relevance for city-dwellers everywhere.

The conceit that propels *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* is the twenty-minute walk that the author takes daily from his top-floor Greenwich Village apartment to his office in downtown TriBeCa. Each chapter is set in a distinct portion of the city en route; along the way, a shared social space he encounters — the staircase in his apartment, the vestibule, the street, the park — is duly considered for all it signifies and how people interact in it. The seemingly mundane is given a new, greater significance.

The manner in which Sorkin relates his tales of the city is conversational. Coming to grips with the Manhattan landscape is Sorkin's central concern, but along the way a variety of topics enters the narrative. The sprawl of the city is echoed in the expansiveness of his attention; and the reader encounters, just as one would when strolling down a typical New York City block, an array of diversions, nooks and untidy tableaux. As he walks, Sorkin shares anecdotes



AT THE CROSSROADS "Sixth Avenue at Waverly Place", from *Store Front: The Disappearing Face of New York* by James T. and Karla L. Murray (Ginko Press). Family-owned neighbourhood shops are disappearing at a fast rate from Manhattan

about the achievements and obsessions of famous architects and ambitious public figures, and asides about his wife and neighbours. The trove of thumbnail sketches and obscure facts is augmented with fascinating ruminations about the socio-political ins and outs of the business of construction and urban renewal in New York City, the intricate socioeconomic consequences that result, and the ethical ramifications of these undertakings.

Sorkin also sees fit to pepper us with prolonged diatribes about his landlord ("over the years, my relationship with the landlord has sometimes verged on the psychotic"), and pernickety discourses on the finer points of mobile-phone etiquette and rubbish-disposal diplomacy. "It was some months before we met this new neighbour, who had already gotten on our bad side by leaving vast quantities of unbagged trash on the landing". He takes a moment to speculate about a stranger's motivations for collecting street litter and applauds pooper-scoopers; but these diversions all go with the territory. Sorkin guides us on exotic detours ranging as far afield as the Medici-commissioned "corridoio Vasariano" of Renaissance Florence and the present-day new town experimentation of Chandigarh, India.

As well as Sorkin's clever wife and malignant landlord, a key recurring character is the late Jane Jacobs, the activist and author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs lived on the first floor of the same apartment building. She is warmly remembered; but it is her idealism and quintessential good citizenship (more than her stalwart opposition to big development) that he celebrates. Jacobs fought with spirited zeal to protect structures — both physical and social — that serve the real needs of

Jacobs fought with spirited zeal to protect structures that ... serve and suit the real needs of 'the people'

"the people". She embodied a pragmatism that stood opposed to the grandiose visions of architects and stratagems of planning commissions or politicians, and her principles occupy a moral high ground that disdains the petty aspirations of real estate speculators, slumlords and yuppies.

Sorkin upholds Jacobs as the gold standard by which the efforts of those who would make and remake our cities must be evaluated and judged. Her legendary nemesis, Robert Moses, megalomaniac erector of public works and destroyer of neighbourhoods, is inevitably among those targeted by Sorkin. Moses (who more than anybody bears responsibility for the shape of present-day New York City and its boroughs) was the juggernaut behind such upheavals as the Cross Bronx Expressway. Cutting through the heart of that borough, the CBE laid waste to communities, engendered plummeting property values and imposed an enduring blight on the city.

The Bronx debacle was just one of many controversies in Moses's career, and Jacobs merely one of the determined individuals who challenged him. Yet Sorkin, while no admirer of Moses, concedes that his legacy is "ambiguous": Moses also engineered hundreds of parks, playgrounds and beaches plus 600,000 units of housing. Sorkin's sense of fair play runs throughout.

Unsparring in his revelations about the turn-of-the-century "muckraker" Jacob Riis, scathing in his critique of Le Corbusier — he can still find something unashamedly positive to say about both. Modernist architects and their urban-renewal cohorts are taken to task for paternalistic efforts to oversee our needs, for endeavouring to homogenise and regulate our living spaces — and thereby sanitise the streets of the unpredictable, dynamic and contradictory confluence of elements that enliven and enrich a metropolis and its populace.

This perceived loathing of the street is what Sorkin condemns as the consummate flaw of Le Corbusier and his ilk. Sorkin finds value in the mismatched buildings that line the streets of an urban agglomeration. These are not aberrations to be purged; they reflect, harbour and nurture — are essential to — the rich fabric of community culture.

Ultimately, for Sorkin and Jacobs, overreaching control and design, the sterile "Disney-fied" Utopian ideal of Modernist city planning, is anathema to a city such as New York. Vivacity is what makes a city succeed or fail, what makes it a "good" or "bad" place to live — this is as true of Manhattan as it is of Mumbai; of London as much as Lisbon. The streets are arteries that carry the city's life-blood; the messy and jarring juxtapositions that take place in those streets are what feed and rejuvenate its vibrancy and magnetism. New York is home, not merely habitation, to millions of human beings — aesthetically flawed, stubbornly inconsistent and all too often rude as they may be.

James Scлавunovs is a Brooklyn-born musician who plays drums for Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds and fronts his own band, the Vanity Set

### in short

#### non-fiction

Another Point of View: A Little Book of Big Ideas by Lisa Jardine

Preface, £7.99 \* £7.59; 178pp  
The *Point of View* slot on BBC Radio 4 provides British independent-minded public thinkers with ten minutes each week in which to reflect wittily and wisely on a current issue. Lisa Jardine's conversational tone, when she broadcasts her own point of view, is deceptively casual; her mind is eclectic, ecumenical, associative and rigorous. Her talks, on such matters of common concern as knife crime, the credit crunch, national identity and climate change, are informed by her historical knowledge and experience of past crises. In short, these published essays hold up well beyond the spoken voice.

The Marvelous Hairy Girls

by Merry Wiesner-Hanks  
Yale, £18.99 \* £17.09; 248pp  
Hypertrichosis universalis, known as Ambras syndrome, a rare genetic condition that results in the sufferer being completely covered in thick hair, is very rare. In 16th-century Europe, the Gonzales family — father, sons and three daughters — was afflicted but, far from being shunned, they were welcomed into the highest society as court pets and dramatic subjects for artists. This fascinating book not only sets the "dog-faced" Gonzales girls in the context of Renaissance culture but also comments on a recent instance of Ambras syndrome in our own culture, which is no less raptly interested in so-called freaks of Nature.

The Dead Yard: Tales of Modern Jamaica

by Ian Thomson  
Faber and Faber, £14.99 \* £13.49; 370pp  
Jamaica — a knee-jerk response include Ian Fleming, Noël Coward, rum and sugar, Rasta culture, music — and, uh, slavery, gangs, drug culture, emigration, homophobia, police brutality, political corruption, poverty: Utopia and dystopia in one small island. Thomson makes the points that for long enough Jamaica and Britain had a symbiotic relationship that contributed to the wealth of many British people and that of late it has become unrecognisable as their homeland for many who emigrated from there to Britain in the postwar years. Thomson brings back traveller's tales that we need to hear from a Third World basket case.  
Iain Finlayson

#### fiction

Kneller's Happy Campers

by Etgar Keret, trans. Miriam Shlesinger  
Chatto & Windus, £6.99 \* £6.64; 86pp  
It's knowing and slightly twisted, with an off-the-wall charm. Mordy, the narrator, is dead. He exists in a part of the afterlife populated by people who killed themselves and carry around their bullet-holes and hanging-burns (unless they are "Juliets", who took poison). It is not Heaven. "Mostly," Mordy says, "it reminds me of Tel Aviv." Existence is a bit pointless — hanging out in bars, Friday night suppers with his friend's parents who both committed suicide — until he hears that the girl he loved on Earth has also killed herself, and he sets out to find her. Keret is one of Israel's most original writers and film-makers, and this novella is like nothing else.

Friends, Lovers and Other Indiscretions

by Fiona Neill  
Century, £12.99 \* £11.69; 388pp  
Neill had a huge hit with *The Secret Life of a Slummy Mummy*, her hilarious take on modern motherhood. This is every bit as funny, and packed with observations of wine-making accuracy. A group of middle-class friends is about to hit 40. Laura is longing for a third baby but her husband is making secret inquiries about a vasectomy. Her friend Janey is about to give birth to her first child, with a man who dislikes her old mates. Jonathan, meanwhile, is about to hit the big time as a TV chef, but can't control his totty-chasing. These three couples decide to go on holiday together and, soon, friendships and relationships start to unravel. Superb entertainment.

Red Dog, Red Dog

by Patrick Lane  
Heinemann, £12.99 \* £11.69; 332pp  
The *Montreal Gazette* called this "A rich variant on Cormac McCarthy's biblically cadenced western noir and Flannery O'Connor's Southern gothic". So beware — you will not laugh, or even smile, for 332 pages. The lugubriousness is incredible. We begin with a man called Elmer Stark burying his infant daughter somewhere remote in British Columbia — she narrates part of the story from her grave. Then we leap forward to 1958, and the lives of her brothers, Tom and Eddy. Tom is serious and fearful, Eddy is wild, and both are adrift on a sea of utter misery. Lane is an award-winning Canadian poet, and some of the writing is beautiful, but this is a novel for emos.  
Kate Saunders

### audio books

Murder and mayhem is the preferred leisure listening of the nation, and CrimeFest 2009 in Bristol last week saluted the ingenious imaginations of writers in the genre by announcing the winners of the Sounds of Crime awards. These are sponsored by the download site Audible.co.uk, from which all the winning entries are available. There was a tie for first in the abridged category between Ian Rankin's *Doors Open*, read by James Macpherson (Orion, 5 CDs, £25 \* £22.50), and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, read by Martin Wenner (Quercus, 6 CDs, £15.65 \* £14.09). Larsson did well as Rankin won outright last year with his last Rebus title, *Exit Music*. Larsson may do the same in 2010 with *The Girl who Played with Fire*, which came out in audio in January. His heroine, Lisbeth Salander, is one of the most original sleuths of recent times, and his writing lends itself well to listening.

There were some strong contenders for the unabridged category, including Harlan Coben's *Hold Tight*, Tess Gerritsen's *The Bone Garden* and Alexander McCall Smith's *The Miracle at Speedy Motors*, but the winner was Kate Atkinson's *When Will There be Good News?*, read by Steven Crossley (BBC, 14 CDs, £22.99). The policeman-turned-private-eye Jackson Brodie boards an Edinburgh-London train in the wrong direction, comes close to death in a train crash and finds himself reeling around the country in tow to a dogged terrier of a girl who is convinced that her doctor boss has been murdered. Atkinson's chronological zigzags confused me on the page. Listening worked better, with Crossley making it all (almost) plausible.

CrimeFest also introduced a Last Laugh award for the funniest crime novel. The winner was *The Victoria Vanishes* (Whole Story, 9 CDs, £19.56), the sixth of Christopher Fowler's books featuring the aged detective duo Arthur Bryant and John May. It is a shameless rip-off of Edmund Crispin's *The Moving Toyshop*, but after slightly too much foreplay at the Peculiar Crimes Unit HQ it gets into its stride as the body count grows. The narrator, Tim Goodman, doesn't distinguish enough between the guttural and growling PCU members but delivers Fowler's caustic humour with brio.

Christina Hardymont

Free audiobooks on CD and some on MP3 to give away. E-mail bookscomp@thetimes.co.uk with the answer to the following question: Which Victorian playwright is the sleuth in Gyles Brandreth's crime novels? The first correct entry drawn on Tuesday May 26 at 10am will win. (www.crimefest.com)

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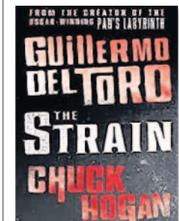
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### thriller

A vampire epidemic dripping with blockbuster potential



The Strain by Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan  
HarperCollins, £12.99 \* £11.69; 416pp  
Peter Millar



A flight from Berlin lands as normal at JFK in New York and then suddenly all the lights go out and radio silence descends. When rescue crew finally force their way on board, all passengers and crew appear to be dead.

An arresting start for a topical new take on one of the oldest themes in Hollywood movie-making, and that is surely where *The Strain* is headed, not least because it comes from two blockbuster merchants, the Mexican director Guillermo del Toro and the American writer Chuck Hogan.

Ever since September 2001 it has been an easy game to attach a whiff of the sinister to aircraft flying into New York — as President Obama found recently when a low-flying Air Force One backup caused office evacuations in Manhattan. But del Toro and Hogan have added a more up-to-date twist — fear of a viral pandemic — and then cobbled it on to the Dracula myth. Perhaps not surprising from the author of *The Killing Moon* and director of *Hellboy* and *Pan's Labyrinth*.

What this box-office double act have

done is tried to give vampirism a medical, epidemiological basis, as a cancerous virus that physically takes over the bodies of those it infects, effectively turning them into animated zombies to feed the disease.

This includes a mutation of body organs, including the growth of an insect-like "stinger" that can shoot up to 6ft from beneath the vampire's tongue to suck blood from a "host", thereby infecting him.

Some of the old magic works; garlic is a not wholly hopeless preventative, while crossing running water and mirrors remain problematic for the vamps. Our heroes are therefore a blend of the two genres: Dr Ephraim (Eph) Goodweather, a medical virologist and head of the New York office of the Centres for Disease Control, and Abraham Setrakian, an ageing Central European professor in the Van Helsing mould.

Just for good measure Setrakian is a Holocaust survivor who first encountered the vampire "Master" feeding on easy prey in the death camp at Treblinka, and has since been wandering the world with a silver wolf's head stick stolen from him, which will be a real gem for the props department.

There is also some fun for the location and cinematography crews with the beginnings of the wider infection of the Manhattan population taking place during a total solar eclipse in Central Park.  
*The Strain* is billed as part one of a trilogy and hints at where it may be heading with murky references to an "original" seven vampires, two sets of three and one rogue, plus an intriguing "not of this earth" reference that just might suggest a sci-fi element yet to come. In the meantime the cross-fertilisation between myth, science and fantasy makes *The Strain* a rattling piece of escapism, even if the climax does have a bit too much blockbuster predictability. Something to get your teeth into? Suck it and see.