

Seymour's lonely son drowned in a pond at the age of seventy-four. We glimpse the blighted old age of the *Pickwick* illustrators, Robert Buss and Hablot Browne (Phiz), and the death in a Melbourne hospital of one of its possible writers, the drunken poet Charles Whiteread. The King's Bench Prison, the Fleet Prison and Bethlem are visited. Among the many figures brought to life are Moses Pickwick, innkeeper and owner of the successful Bristol to Bath coaching line, and Sam Vale, the comic actor whose patter popularized the "Hang on a minute, as the coachman said to the . . ." joke. There is an odd interlude in Christ's College Cambridge in 1857 when students, including the future palaeographer Skeat and the future poet Besant, sit a two-hour written examination in *Pickwick* and learn sections of the novel

by heart under their tutor C. S. Calverley. In 1934 in the Shepherd's Bush studios, a crowd of fat people eagerly audition for a *Pickwick* film that was never made.

Moving between merriment and pathos, the multifarious text of the novel is united by its easy affable tone, the antithesis of biographers' chronological fact-marshalling. Vivid scenes are casually introduced: "About sixty years ago in the town of Doncaster . . ."; "Let's bring in Boz". Here are Dickens's publishers who will come to play a cruel part in the rejection of Seymour:

Two good friends were out walking in the Terrace Gardens of Richmond in early spring. One was a small, smart and oddly formed man of about thirty years of age, with a prominent nose and short thin legs, as well as long thick

arms which were constantly in motion. He chattered frequently, at speed. The other, a few years younger, was stouter and taller, with ruddy cheeks and a taciturn, meditative manner, who walked with his arms behind his back. The first man was William Hall; his friend was Edward Chapman.

As the objects and incidents increase and characters recur, an amiable self-consciousness about the novel's controlling intentions reassures the reader. The narrative may be complex but the reading experience is leisurely and pleasant. Mr Inbelicate has a Footnotes Room, full of things no longer in use that need explaining: a bottle of gamboge liquid for boot flaps, Brummagen buttons, hard bake, a bottle of Camphor Julep. And he happily asserts that "Discovering tenuous links is one

of the great rewards of long and rambling study", as well as remarking on "cantankerous old professors . . . always ready to assume that others have committed howling errors". "Ah, the riding-roughshod hypothesis", he teases Inscriptino. He makes references to Borges and *Don Quixote* and likes to play records – The Kinks' song "Death of a Clown" and Bob Dylan's "Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" with its clown who cried in an alley. The novel ends in Bath and a man departing to take the coach to London. He is carrying a brown paper parcel which is revealed to contain a mulberry suit, the uniform of a liveried Doughty Street footman; so Job Trotter was Dismal Jemmy. It seems there is always room for one more hidden clue. If only *Death and Mr Pickwick* had an index.

Polly Samson's second novel *The Kindness* spans twenty-three years and many twists. It lacks the startling verbal accuracy of her previous book, the short story collection *Perfect Lives* (2011), but it has a densely plotted power of its own.

The characters in *The Kindness* inhabit the same bourgeois milieu as those in *Perfect Lives* with their bath oils smelling of "grapefruit and roses" and fridges full of "Persian stews" and Samson is word perfect on these details.

There is a languor to *The Kindness*, however: lovers drift around in each other's clothes and take long baths even in moments of crisis. Julian, "an old man at 29" lives alone in his childhood home, Firdaws. The house is ominously free of any trace of his daughter Mira and the child's mother, Julia. This absence weighs heavily on Julian; "There is no sticky bottle of Calpol by Julia's side of the bed, no chewed copy of *Goodnight Moon* on his", and his bed "smells only of himself so that he has to curl into a ball to bear it". Later, a character reflects "You think it would be hard to remove every trace of yourself from a life, but it really isn't". Ephemera are everywhere in this novel, however. At one point, a character picks through a box of her own belongings, finding "single socks, dried-up old face cream in a lidless pot, an ancient gardening glove grown hard and calloused as a hand, bits of broken pottery, a tampon that had swelled and burst its wrapper, some crushed silk irises".

This is a narrative full of loss, and hopes that have ruinously gone unrealized. Julian appears to be in a state of deep grief, refusing to engage with the present and tended to by his overbearing mother Jenna, his kind if bumptious stepfather Michael and his childhood sweetheart Katie. Arriving back at Firdaws after university, Julian reflects "the smell of home turned him tender: wet earth and roses, honeysuckle, farmyards, cows as before, newly cut hay and fruit on the trees burnished

Anatomical quirks

ALEX PEAKE-TOMKINSON

Polly Samson

THE KINDNESS

304pp. Bloomsbury Circus. £14.99.
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by the summer he'd all but missed. He took several breaths, each as satisfying as the air gulped down after crying".

Many of the main characters are governed by desire – at one point Julia reflects, "Her primitive instincts were winning". Later, when aroused, she experiences "shaming pain at her groin". Julian's experience of love is emphatically corporeal, "Kidneys, stomach, gall bladder, bowel. The shape of Julian's love was littered with organs". Julian's best friend from university, a medical student called Karl, insists that love is merely an "anatomical quirk" and it is hard to know whether this is

only confirmed by a couple who find themselves "always left sweat-soaked and reeling".

We know of Julian's intense desire to procreate even before he meets Julia because he is mesmerized by his own sperm and its potential when he looks at it underneath a microscope as a nineteen-year-old student. Karl (who also, separately, saves his life) is testing the motility of sperm and shows Julian his. The latter was "oddly moved by what he saw. This constellation – no more than that, so many of them, each with its own halo as though lit from within – sparkling, darting, flickering. His very own universe composed entirely of comets. They seemed so purposeful, so bright and full of promise, that for a moment he felt sad for each and every one of them, for their urgency, for the messages they would never get to deliver". The day after this, Julian falls deeply in love with Julia at first glance. He ditches a promising academic career to be with her and their unborn child, even though this involves disen-

tangling her from her abusive husband Chris.

Julian is enchanted by their daughter Mira, and hopes that "for her, kingdoms would be renounced, incurable diseases cured, world records broken". His present-day grief seems focused on his failure to spot Mira's childhood cancer and these reflections are hauntingly ominous. The scenes in Great Ormond Street Hospital are powerfully drawn and Samson sensitively manages to capture the boredom, frustration and resentment that can accompany serious illness. Julian's anxiety during this period has not faded with time and he remembers: "The pumps and IV tubes doled out the hours in droplets. He watched the rise and fall of her chest: if his concentration failed, her heart might stop. His eyes twitched from monitor to monitor, his ear tuned to every breath and click".

The text is littered with references to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, some more explicit than others, not least the fact that the hawk that appears at the very beginning of the novel is called Lucifer. In this context, readers may anticipate certain outcomes. The ultimate plot twist is nonetheless a genuine shock.

The German book burnings of 1933 have become a powerful image of Nazi barbarism, and the list of banned books now reads like an index of Germany's literary canon, including Brecht, Döblin, Kafka, Mann, Seghers, Zweig. So it is rare to encounter a novel from that time whose prohibition actually succeeded in a suppression. Such was the fate of Ernst Haffner's *Jugend auf der Landstrasse Berlin* (1932). The novel was banned a year after publication, and its disappearance was followed by that of the author himself. Nearly all traces of the journalist and social worker Haffner vanished during the war, due not least to the bombing in 1943 of the archive of his Hamburg-based publisher, Bruno Cassirer. We are fortunate that the novel was rescued by a Berlin publisher in 2013, and that it is now available for the first time in English.

The "blood brothers" of the title are a gang of adolescent boys in interwar, post-crash Berlin, most of them choosing a harsh life on the streets over incarceration in a "welfare home". Permanently on the run from these institutions and therefore without identity papers, they are forced into a tramp's life in the big city. This is a supremely seedy Berlin, with neither the cabaret whirl of the 1920s

Ernst Haffner

BLOOD BROTHERS

Translated by Michael Hofmann
176pp. Other Press. Paperback, \$14.95.
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nor the gangster glamour depicted in films of the era. At one stage Haffner turns his ire on precisely those filmic depictions, in an eloquent and impassioned excursus on the gulf between that romanticized image and the city's bitter reality. A kind of redemptive narrative does start to build in the latter part of the novel – a spark of hope as two of the boys detach themselves from the rest of the gang, who have graduated from scrounging and petty crime to picking the pockets of the working classes. But as the pair begin to seek an honest living, the cards remain stacked against them, with no papers to legitimate their above-ground existence.

Haffner's narrative hurtles along, its clipped sentences matching the pace of the boys' frenetic lives. The prose switches without markers between third-person narration and the boys' internal monologues, so that the reader is dipped directly into the consciousness of individual characters without warning. Haffner does not reserve this style

for his main characters – at one stage we slip suddenly into the mind of a new character, immediately seeing how he calculates friendship and risk: "but what about this other guy, Ulli? If Jonny's brought him, he's sure to be on the level".

The breathless pace can express the boys' excitement or terror, but it also reflects the speed at which individual fates are sealed, as well as the minimal opportunities that the boys have to assert or defend themselves when confronted with the weight of state authority. It takes, for example, only a scant paragraph for young Ludwig to be rushed through court and into prison – in this instance, the reader knows, for a crime he did not commit: "Do you plead guilty to theft?" "No." Evidence. Witnesses . . . Everything works like clockwork".

Michael Hofmann's translation captures the novel's street-eye view, its burrowing into the minds of these individuals, with a street slang that never misses its mark in either dialogue or narrative. The boys may be disenfranchised and dislocated, but they are ever-present in both Haffner's and Hofmann's prose.

CHARLOTTE RYLAND

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