



## Social History

**Nicholas Hammond**  
GOSSIP, SEXUALITY AND SCANDAL  
IN FRANCE (1610–1715)  
168pp. Peter Lang. Paperback,  
£32.

978 3 0343 0706 2

What's the difference between gossip and rumour? Is gossip always scandalous? At what point does it become slander or libel? And what is the French word for gossip? These are some of the questions that Nicholas Hammond addresses in *Gossip, Sexuality and Scandal in France (1610–1715)*. While the first question is easy to answer (gossip, we are told, is a form of storytelling involving a narrative, while rumour is based on the transmission of a simple piece of information), the last proves intriguingly elusive. This is one of the challenges posed here, another being the inherent orality of the material. Yet Hammond successfully draws on a variety of primary texts, among them Tallemant des Réaux's *Historiettes* (which was not published until 1834) and the *Chansonnier Maurepas*, which include some remarkably blue language, all translated into correspondingly blue modern English. The study culminates in an analysis of the role of gossip in *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), which, for Hammond, represents the moment when gossip became literature and vice versa.

Hammond argues that gossip remained mostly on the margins of society in seventeenth-century France, where it occupied a position that was at once devalued and privileged. This paradoxical status is particularly apparent with regard to the question of same-sex desire between men and, occasionally, also between women. By definition, gossip is concerned with what is prohibited and taboo, and one of its functions is thus to give such desires a voice and a space in which to exist and act. Sometimes, gossip can even allow the illicit to become normative, albeit always under constraint. To illustrate this point, Hammond provides the fascinating example of a society of homosexuals known as "la confrérie italienne", whose statutes reveal how the group relied on gossip for recruitment while at the same time ensuring that any gossip about them and their activities remained within safe confines. Given that gossip was, in the absence of written evidence, sometimes used by the police in order to inculpate individuals suspected of crimes including sodomy and witchcraft, it was, in the wrong hands (or mouths), highly dangerous. Overseeing all this, we are reminded, was a king, Louis XIV, who actively persecuted homosexuals yet adored his notoriously bisexual brother.

JULIA PREST



An eighteenth-century set of silver and ivory drawing instruments in a shagreen étui, marked "Whiford \* London"; from the *Catalogue of the Andrew Alpern Collection of Drawing instruments*, by Andrew Alpern (133pp. Norton. £43. 978 0 9789037 3 2)

## Travel

**Tessa de Loo**  
IN BYRON'S FOOTSTEPS  
Translated by Andy Brown  
220pp. Armchair Traveller. £9.99.  
978 1 906598 77 8

This is a charmingly puzzling work. It seems designed as a travel book (its shape makes it ideal for tucking into the pocket), yet its clear-eyed representations and evaluations of present-day Albania bring it close to reportage, while the author's decision to filter her own impressions through the eyes, work, and mind of Byron also make it an *hommage*, perhaps even an imitation. Whichever of these labels fits – or if all do – it engages on many levels.

Tessa de Loo decided to visit Albania out of a desire to see unknown places, modelling her journey on Byron's trip of 1809 out of "nostalgia" and admiration for the poet. The book details her adventures on a route that mirrors Byron's, stopping at villages he visited and in some cases experiencing almost exactly what he experienced. As in Byron's day, there are difficulties with transportation (disagreements about horses transcend time), one must resign oneself to endless waiting and arguing, the people are welcoming, and the government is oppressive. Women remain almost entirely out of sight, so de Loo is something of a curiosity on her own trip, and in this way the book becomes a meditation on the place of women.

De Loo alternates between chapters describing her journey and those offering snippets of Byron biography and ruminations on the poet's life. These, too, offer delights. The discovery that Byron's friend Edward Trelawny wanted to display Byron's damaged foot in a cabinet of curiosities after the poet's death is simultaneously jarring and of a piece with what one knows of Trelawny, but it is surpassed in grotesquerie by the revelation that in a library in Ravenna one can see strips of sunburned skin Teresa Guiccioli peeled from Byron's back.

Not much of this book's Byron information will be new to Byronists, but its keen-

eyed observations of Albania make it an interesting piece of travel literature, while de Loo's decision to use Byron as her travel conceit seems appropriate to a writer who owed his initial fame in large part to a travel poem.

EMILY A. BERNHARD JACKSON

**Christopher Howse**  
A PILGRIM IN SPAIN  
224pp. Continuum. £16.99.  
978 0 8264 9769 7

In the 1760s, Laurence Sterne was so incensed by the objectivity of Tobias Smollett's travelogue that he felt compelled to write *A Sentimental Journey*. Now, it seems, many journeys are sentimental ones. Judging from much contemporary travel literature, few expeditions are conceived without hope of self-discovery or self-improvement. Christopher Howse's book bucks this self-absorbed trend. The author makes so little reference to himself that, at times, you forget he is there. Howse thereby allows the strange Castilian backwaters he chronicles to speak for themselves.

*A Pilgrim in Spain* is not one of those books on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela that "seem to come out every couple of weeks", as the author drily puts it. He does go to Santiago, but via a circuitous route through the less visited parts of central Spain. Over the past three decades, Howse has visited the region many times. Here he describes the highlights of these trips. Some of his ports of call, like Toledo and Salamanca, are well known. Others are off the beaten track, such as Turégano with its crumbling castle, or the Visigothic cathedral at Baños de Cerrato. Howse is an excellent companion. Drawing from a wealth of knowledge about the region, his digressive monologue digs up innumerable nuggets and finds fascinating in the most diverse material, from the graffiti on the wall of a toilet to the inscription on the pedestal of a saint. At his best, he makes you feel that the towns he visits are places where history lingers on the evening air like the smell of black pudding. Much of that history is hagiographical, and occasion-

ally the roll call of saints is exhausting for the reader. But it is part of the book's mission to help us understand this uniquely Spanish preoccupation. It fulfils its aim admirably.

FRED FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO

## History

**Tiina Kirss and Rutt Hinrikus, editors**  
ESTONIAN LIFE STORIES  
539pp. Central European University Press.  
£35.95.  
978 963 9776 39 5

Estonia was invaded by Stalin in 1940, and the following year by Hitler; the Soviets returned in 1944 and did not leave until the Berlin Wall came down forty-five years later. *Estonian Life Stories*, an anthology of eyewitness accounts of deportation, survival and resistance in Soviet- and Nazi-occupied Estonia, is a grave if important book. Each of the twenty-five contributors has felt the need to testify for the sake of posterity and as a human chronicle. None of them is a writer by vocation, though their "life-stories" are part of a collection housed in the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. Over 2,000 such biographies have been collected to date. The project has been under way in Estonia since 1988.

Overwhelmingly, the volume records the mass deportations of June 13–14, 1941 when, one week before Hitler declared war on Stalin, some 10,000 Estonian army officers, clerks and priests were put on cattle trains bound for the Gulag. David Abramson, an Estonian Jew, recalls how the Red Army first bayoneted the wallpaper of his parents' house in search of valuables. They were in a hurry to "grab what they could" ahead of the advancing Germans.

The arrogance displayed by the Germans is amply recorded. A Wehrmacht officer's eyes are "grey and cold like the blade of a bayonet", while the German military police (known as "chain-dogs") exude a colonial contempt. Between Stalin and Hitler the Estonian people were buffeted mercilessly; young men found themselves "brother against brother" in the European conflict, depending on whether the Red Army or the Wehrmacht had conscripted them. "Most of my life's journey is behind me", says one contributor, with evident relief. In 1941 her sister had vanished in the deeps of Novosibirsk, a statistic among the millions of Siberian dead.

IAN THOMSON

## Literature

**Ernesto Sábato**  
THE TUNNEL  
160pp. Penguin Modern Classics.  
Paperback, £8.99.  
978 0 141 19454 7

When Ernesto Sábato wrote *The Tunnel* in 1948, he had recently given up a place at the prestigious Curie Institute, abandoning a career in physics to search for meaning in writing and painting instead. Sábato died at the age of ninety-nine in April this year, and Penguin's reissue of his first novel is a tribute to a writer who became, after that extraordinary mid-life switch, a grand old man of Argentine letters.

*The Tunnel* is narrated by a well-known

Buenos Aires painter, Juan Pablo Castel, who falls in love with and eventually kills María, the "one person who could have understood me". He forms this conviction after María notices an out-of-the-way panel on one of his canvases in an exhibition, "a scene I had painted as a kind of key meant for her alone". Castel announces the murder in the opening sentence of the novel; his narrative is "animated by the faint hope that someone will understand me – even if it is only one person".

Owing something of its offhandedly callous tone to Sartre's *Nausea*, and having received assistance with its French translation from Camus, *The Tunnel* fits historically within the bracket of existentialist fiction, although it can be read now as simply what it is: an intelligent and disturbing account of a mind's pendulum-swing between logic and impulsiveness, exposed yet unfaithful ("My mind is like a dark labyrinth . . . my mind is like a calculating machine, constantly computing").

A consequence of the text's paying such close attention to Castel's minute fluctuations of thought is its sharp articulation of normally buried social insecurities: "why take the elevator at all? Because it would have been conspicuous not to".

The novel's fabric is woven of such self-cancelling reflection, set into a repetitive structure of meetings and journeys, argument and forgiveness, and interspersed with very funny invectives against, among other "plagues", art critics and detective novels. Margaret Sayers Peden's appropriately plain and precise translation of *The Tunnel* will help gain this book an anglophone audience as the obituaries remind us that there is more to twentieth-century Argentinean literature than Borges. It is to be hoped that Ernesto Sábato's two later novels, including the masterpiece *On Heroes and Tombs*, will soon receive similar treatment.

DAN ELTRINGHAM

## Social Studies

**Jay Bahadur**  
DEADLY WATERS  
Inside the hidden world of Somalia's pirates  
288pp. Profile. Paperback, £12.99.  
978 1 84668363 3

A new kind of buccaneer fantasy has accompanied the reporting of piracy off the coast of Somalia. Jay Bahadur, a Canadian journalist, is wary of all swashbuckling myths and his book is a clear-eyed corrective based mostly on first-hand reportage of trips to Puntland, a semi-autonomous region in north-eastern Somalia that has been a notorious centre of pirate activity. He describes meetings with pirates – active, reformed or imprisoned – and uses their accounts to piece together their actions and motivations. We also hear from their victims, including a Romanian former hostage who recounts his experience with surprising cheer.

Alongside these portraits sits thoughtful analysis. Bahadur considers a wide range of factors, from the political instability of the country to illegal fishing by foreign fleets. In the 1990s, many early pirates were local fishermen provoked by illegal competition; but for the current, "third wave" of pirates, he considers this a tired excuse.

A surprising finding is that piracy is less

lucrative for most than typically claimed. Most of the money paid to the attackers and "holders", who guard the captured ships, must be shared with their clansmen, and Bahadur sees little evidence that it has enriched Puntland.

The global nature of the shipping industry has made piracy a truly international problem. Although any solution requires international support, Bahadur is highly critical of current efforts, especially the "defence theatre" of the international naval presence and the millions of dollars that go to the Mogadishu-based Transitional Federal Government, a "government in name only". A successful strategy, he argues, requires looking to the land as well as the sea and engaging local partners, including the disillusioned Puntland residents who would be willing to inform. Otherwise, violence and ransoms are likely to escalate.

Puntland is no longer the hub for Somalia's pirates, but *Deadly Waters* illuminates the broader problem that remains. Bahadur's writing does not dazzle yet his portraits of the pirates are vivid and often funny. He bypasses hyperbole and delivers insight rather than thrills.

DANIEL COHEN

## Science

**Lawrence M. Krauss**  
QUANTUM MAN  
Richard Feynman's life in science  
350pp. Norton. £15.99.  
978 0 393 06471 1

Freeman Dyson described his friend and fellow theoretician Richard Feynman as "half genius, half buffoon". It is Feynman's intellectual achievement rather than his role as a sometimes tiresomely egocentric jester that is the focus of this engaging biography by Lawrence M. Krauss, a physicist well known as an accomplished communicator with a flair for publicity.

After Feynman's death in 1988, several biographies of him were published, notably James Gleick's *Genius* (1992), which featured well-written explanations of the physicist's work and a rounded account of his life and personality. So the need for *Quantum Man* is not immediately obvious. Krauss praises Gleick's biography and declares, with commendable candour, that his "modest" aim is to focus on his hero's legacy and the impact it may make on the future of science. He does this well and also gives us a sensitively drawn – if not deep – portrait of this remarkable man.

Feynman's most famous work is in his formulation of quantum mechanics, the theory of matter on the smallest scale, and in his hugely influential reframing of the theory of the interaction between light and electrons. As Feynman would readily have agreed, he is given too much credit here for the originality of his work on reformulating quantum theory (he later remarked, repeatedly, "I don't know what all the fuss is about – Dirac did it all before me"). For the most part, however, Krauss gives an accurate account of the role Feynman played in various branches of physics, including the theory of the weak interaction (responsible for some radioactive decays) and the behaviour of liquid helium. Towards the end of his career, Feynman was

remarkably sagacious in many fields, from nanotechnology to high-speed computers.

Behind his bravado, he was modest. He knew that he was not quite of the very first rank of scientists, who revolutionize our understanding of nature. There are several twentieth-century scientists who were (or are) in Feynman's league but much less colourful. Many of them deserve to be much better known. The success of *Quantum Man* shows that Krauss may be an ideal writer to persuade publishers – and eventually readers – that modern theoretical physics is the work of many more world-class scientists than the few who have caught the public eye.

GRAHAM FARMELO

## Film

**David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson**  
MINDING MOVIES  
Observations on the art, craft, and business of filmmaking  
320pp. University of Chicago Press. Paperback, \$22.50; distributed in the UK by Wiley. £14.50.  
978 0 226 06699 8

The husband-and-wife team of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson are among the world's most influential film scholars. Lecturing jointly at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, they have written seminal textbooks on film art and film history, as well as monographs on more specific aspects of cinema. *Minding Movies* is, however, a relatively informal affair: a collection of meditations taken from their blog, on subjects ranging from the use of the flashback in 1930s Hollywood to how DVDs and the internet are changing modern viewing habits.

The essays vary both in content and quality. Bordwell and Thompson have explored the length and breadth of cinema, from silent films to modern Hollywood action movies, and their observations are grounded in a familiarity both with the cinematic canon and with the structure of the industry. At times, this enables them to demolish the ill-thought-out generalizations of other critics; journalistic claims that worldwide interest in Hollywood blockbusters is declining are, with unanswerable evidence, refuted.

But Bordwell and Thompson are themselves prone to generalizations, some of them questionable. They have a particular objection to something they call "zeitgeist criticism", which "most journalists and academics" apparently consider important; seeing cinema as a reflection of society leads, they claim, to "vague and vacuous explanations". But this is a straw man: many socially oriented critics see individual films as comments on society, engaging with social trends from a specific and personal point of view. And indeed, the generalizations made by zeitgeist criticism are surely no vaguer than Bordwell's claim that mainstream US filmmaking "depends on clearly defined characters pursuing well-defined goals", a description true of almost all popular storytelling from Homer to J. K. Rowling.

Perhaps this is ultimately a problem with the format. These are short essays, and Bordwell and Thompson have advanced their theoretical arguments more rigorously elsewhere. Indeed, one may question whether it is worth paying for a volume whose contents are

mostly freely available on the internet (although some updates and additions have been made). *Minding Movies* is enjoyable, nonetheless, with a breezy and lively style, as befits a blog. At times this studied informality is grating, but the authors' avoidance of academic jargon is certainly welcome.

ALEXANDER JACOBY

## Russian Literature

**Sergei Dovlatov**  
THE SUITCASE  
Translated by Antonina W. Bouis  
250pp. Oneworld Classics. Paperback, £7.99.  
978 1 847 49178 7

In 1979, Sergei Dovlatov left the USSR for America with a single suitcase – the rules allowed for three, but all his possessions accumulated over thirty-six years fitted into just one. Even those few things turned out to be hardly indispensable: they were not taken out for several years. Discovered by accident, the suitcase gave rise to this collection of stories, which came to Dovlatov as he went through its contents with mixed emotions. Among them, there is only a hint of nostalgia; the main motif is the author's surprise at the series of chance encounters, ventures and escapades his pre-emigration life appears to have amounted to.

The motley collection of items, including a jacket once worn by Fernand Léger and a belt by which Dovlatov was almost killed during army service, could have led a more portentious author to write a full-blown novel. Dovlatov, with his trademark irony, confesses that he was considering a memoir titled "From Marx to Brodsky" or "What I Acquired". That he settled on *The Suitcase* would not surprise those who praise him above all as a storyteller. These Soviet anecdotes may be nothing out of the ordinary, but they are told in Dovlatov's wry, at times scornful voice, which is convincingly brought alive in Antonina W. Bouis's newly revised translation.

Among the suitcase's contents are smart crepe socks, a poplin shirt, a heavy-buckled officer's belt and a sealskin hat. It is impossible to imagine Dovlatov having worn any of these garments in exile, so firmly is each rooted in the life he left behind. The *nomenclatura* half-boots were stolen from a tipsy mayor for no better reason than to illustrate the observation that "completely mysterious thefts without any rational goal" are a uniquely Russian phenomenon. The driving gloves are equally impractical (their owner never learnt to drive), but the story they bring to mind is, perhaps, the best in the book. It has Dovlatov, cast as Peter the Great, wandering the streets of Leningrad in a tsar's costume, his ridiculous figure not much out of step with the absurdity of the surroundings.

Many of these stories have long become folklore for their Russian readers. "By 'conjugal obligations' my wife means sobriety, first and foremost" is just one famous quotation. What makes the sketches so distinctive is their random nature: if the suitcase had stayed in the closet, they might never have emerged. Engaging and touching, they illustrate Sergei Dovlatov's gift for turning the detritus of human existence into literature.

ANNA ASLANYAN