

BOOKS FICTION

LITERARY FICTION

BY LAURA SILVERMAN



JUBILATE
BY MICHAEL ARDITTI
(Arcadia Books £11.99)

TWO illicit lovers are entwined on a hotel bed in Lourdes: what a great opening for a book. It promises secrets and compromises.

Gillian is on a pilgrimage with her brain-damaged husband; Vincent, her lover, is making a documentary. To complicate matters, Gillian is also accompanied by her mother-in-law: a hard-nosed Catholic who blames Gillian for her son's disability. Vincent, meanwhile, is a lapsed Catholic, dogged by the guilt of having an affair years ago when his six-year-old daughter died in a car accident.

Skippering love boats through religious waters is an Arditti speciality (his previous novel, *The Enemy Of The Good*, involved a bishop with a gay son and a daughter who turned to Judaism). His moral clear-sightedness through such turbulence is a rare find. With compassion as a compass, Arditti shows how two vulnerable people can help each other move on from difficult pasts.

It is the ingenious, if complex, structure of this tough-sounding narrative that makes this novel so compelling. Gillian and Vincent take on alternating chapters: Gillian's story inches forward from day one; Vincent's story slides backward from day five.

Sin, shame, suffering, salvation: no theme is dismissed as too weighty nor too worthy. Such topics are an acquired taste, but as a writer, Arditti excels at exposing the frailty in us all.



THE CHAMPION
BY TIM BINDING
(Picador 12.99)

TIM BINDING makes a valiant attempt at the great British novel, but his stuffed-shirt approach just doesn't sing. Spanning the Eighties and Nineties, *The Champion* charts the influence of Thatcherism on provincial life.

Charles, a small-town accountant, values loyalty, diligence and security. He gets by at school, but has few friends. Large, a bumptious classmate, is different. He's from a London council estate where everyone is out for themselves. He's popular.

After sixth-form, Large gets a City job. When he returns, he latches on to Charles, who sees this as his big break. Charles gets trampled on, but doesn't appear to mind.

The story has two pretty major flaws. The first is that Charles is incredibly bland and, as our narrator, we're forced to see everything through his eyes. The second is that Large — vulgar as he is in looks, taste and manners — is as menacing as a stuffed shark.

Binding's plot comprises strong ingredients (a death, a business takeover, a girl), but he stirs them with a plastic spoon instead of a blender. His approach is too reserved, too balanced. His prose is competent, but it rarely thrills. His characters are convincing because we know people like them but they feel more stodgily biographical than fictional.



THE FOLDED EARTH
BY ANURADHA ROY
(Quercus Books £18.99)

WHEN Maya's husband dies, she moves to remotest India to start over. 'Our town has a private history,' she tells us of her new home, 'revealed only to those

who live here by others who have lived here longer.'

In her drafty cottage, she types endless manuscripts for Diwan Sihab, an academic guarding letters between Edwina Mountbatten, the last vicereine of India, and Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister; and she teaches a peasant girl to read and write (the girl would rather be feeding her cows).

Like Anuradha Roy's debut, *An Atlas Of Impossible Longing*, *The Folded Earth* has big, expansive themes. Here, she is concerned with people destroying the wilderness (man-eating tigers, eagles or deadly foxgloves appear on every page), as well as the divisive effect of Hindu nationalism on communities.

Roy's attention to individual words pays off as she conveys the full texture of experiences. Who else would think of mountains as 'fingers' or call the sky a 'fluid blue'?

Even minor characters are evoked with inventive idiosyncrasy: one traveller disguises himself as a religious teacher hiding his compass in a prayer wheel so that he can reach China safely. Roy isn't quite as skilled at creating tension, but her prose is so tight with life that it doesn't seem to matter.

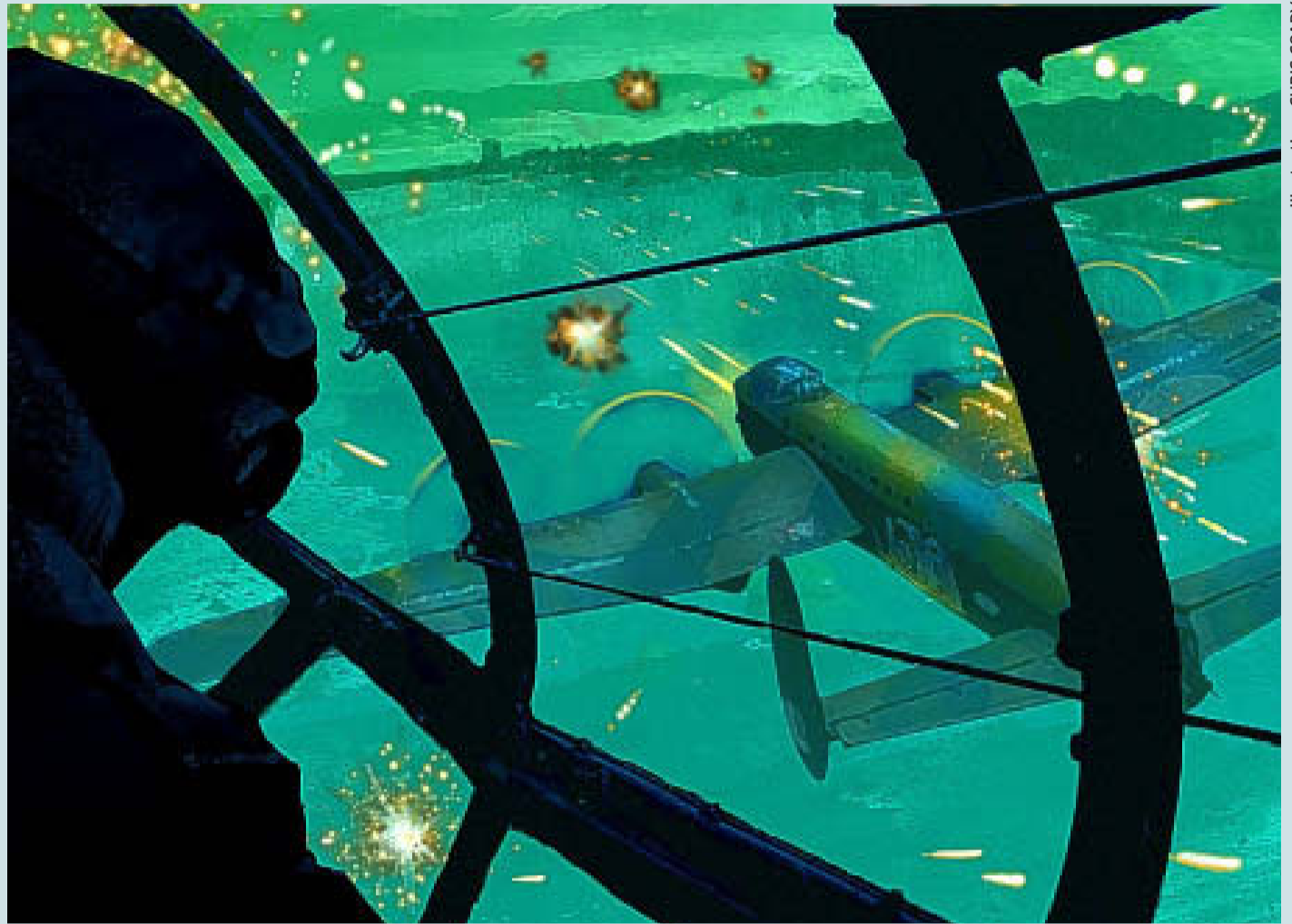


Illustration: CHRIS COADY

Did spies inform on the bouncing bomb?

HISTORICAL FICTION

KATHY STEVENSON



DAMBUSTER
BY ROBERT RADCLIFFE
(Little Brown £16.99)

THERE can be few more iconic images of World War II than the Dambuster raids on the Ruhr, and the equally iconic film which most people will be familiar with.

Central to Radcliffe's novel is Peter Lightfoot who, having been stood down after many heroic missions, misses the buzz of operational flying so much he volunteers for Guy Gibson's 617 Squadron and becomes part of Operation Chastise.

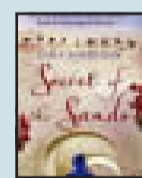
The plan is to use Barnes

Wallis's innovative bouncing bombs to attack Germany's war operation at its heart: the industrialised area of the Ruhr.

Radcliffe's novel is, to some extent, treading old ground, but what it adds is great detail of everyday life at an RAF base during wartime.

It also begs the question: were the Germans forewarned about the operation and, if so, was there a spy in the camp?

Dambuster is a romping good read — and I just had to watch that film again.



SECRET OF THE SANDS
BY SARA SHERIDAN
(Avon £7.99)

IT IS 1833 and William Wilberforce's Slavery Abolition Act is being passed in London just as Zena, a young Abyssinian

abducted from home, finds herself alone and bewildered in the slave market of Muscat.

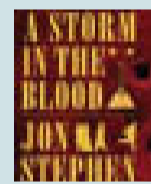
Meanwhile, James Wellsted, a lieutenant in the East India Company Navy and a student of the Arabian peninsula (he will become a well-respected member of the Royal Society after publication of his memoirs), is scouring the desert in a bid to rescue two fellow officers who have gone missing.

When fate throws them together, Zena and James enter a perplexing and dangerous world.

This well-paced story brings the perfumes and landscape of Arabia shimmering to life.

A STORM IN THE BLOOD
BY JON STEPHEN FINK
(Cutting Edge Press £9.99)

THE infamous Houndsditch Murders and the subsequent



Siege of Sidney Street in London's East End, in December 1910/January 1911, shocked the nation

and brought with it opprobrium for the perpetrators, a gang of disaffected revolutionaries.

A Storm In The Blood tells the story behind the botched robbery which led to the loss of so many lives, and of the people involved.

The ringleaders were largely Latvian, but the group also included Russians and other Eastern Europeans, many of them Jews.

The book shines a fascinating spotlight on a little piece of Edwardian history, but comes with a couple of caveats: it tends to ramble in places and is rather let down by some very poor editing.

RETRO READS



MADAME BOVARY
BY GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
(Penguin £20)

MORE fatal passion and another jilted Charles enhance Flaubert's unforgettable 1856 French classic.

'Oh, dear God! Why did I ever marry?' sobs Emma Bovary, who craves the wild sexual ecstasy she reads about in trashy novels.

Instead of thunderclaps and lightning bolts, she's lumbered with tedious, devoted, undemonstrative Charles. Her marriage is 'as cold as an attic with a north-facing window'. Then life hots up.

A torrid affair with a serial philanderer ends in tears, leaving Emma 'gasping for love like a carp for water on the kitchen table'.

Enter a toyboy to seduce the eager adulteress in a closed carriage careering

through Rouen. Amazingly, Charles never suspects. And Flaubert, with dazzling irony and wit, having mocked 'the eternal monotony of passion', contrives a spectacularly horrible ending.

Incidentally, the French government — thank goodness — failed to have the book banned as a danger to morality and religion.



THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN
BY JOHN FOWLES
(Vintage £5.99)

FORGET Meryl Streep. Forget the movie. Neither did justice to Fowles's marvellous 1969 novel.

The year is 1867 and young gentleman Charles — engaged to a spoilt rich girl — is visiting Lyme Regis to collect fossils.

He catches sight of the disgraced Sarah, as she stands on the Cobb wall, waves

crashing, long hair flying, gazing out to sea. He is lost from the moment he sees her. And what a merry clandestine dance she will lead him beneath the trees on Ware Cliffs.

As for the jilted fiancée, her terrible revenge turns poor Charles (and, to be honest, you simply cannot forget Jeremy Irons, who portrayed him to perfection) into a social outcast.

Sarah does a flit, condemning the smitten and ruined Charles to months of obsessively searching for her. Ooh! I hate her. She is a scheming, self-dramatising fantasist and certainly somewhat bonkers.

There is one startling, utterly brilliant moment in the narrative when the author suddenly introduces himself to remind us that it's all just a story.

And then, of course, there are Fowles's innovative three alternative endings.

You can read this book again and again, always finding something new and always falling in love with the hapless Charles.

BY VAL HENNESSY