

WHAT BOOK?

CONN IGGULDEN
AUTHOR



...are you reading now?

I'M IN the middle of Seneca's Letters From A Stoic. It still astonishes me that if I want to read the opinions of Emperor Nero's mentor, I can pick up a selection of the letters he wrote to friends.

Nero's mother Agrippina wrote what must have been the most sizzling autobiography of all time — but it vanished. Tacitus wrote a brilliant life of Nero but the ending is missing from the historical record. I wish more survived from the period!

(In the interests of full disclosure, I also have Desert Star by Michael Connelly in my bag. Love a bit of Harry Bosch.)

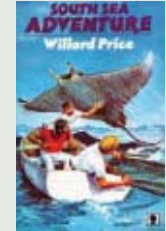
...would you take to a desert island?

I LOVE questions like this. I suppose the boring but sensible response is something thick, soft and pliant. The ancient Greeks used little toilet stones, but I don't fancy sand. I am also assuming it can't be a complete works of Shakespeare. I saw Mark Rylance do an all-male cast of Henry V and it was fantastic. I could read those lines for ever, choking on envy.

If Shakespeare and the King James Bible are out, but it still has to entertain the little grey cells... I think it might be a Wilbur Smith. I read The Sunbird for the second time recently and was reminded what an absolute master he was, perhaps the best of my lifetime.

...first gave you the reading bug?

IN PRIMARY school, I collected Willard Price books like trading cards. They were simple adventures about the Hunt family collecting strange animals around the world for zoos. I loved them like Gollum loved his precious, reading them over



and over. I learned a surprising amount about animals and exotic places — and enjoyed the tension of the boys being menaced by a shark or a gorilla. I probably owe Willard Price a great deal for instilling a love of story.

...left you cold?

AH, NOW, that's a tricky one. I've thrown books across a room when they've gone badly wrong. I wouldn't name one though, because I have an idea of how hard they are to produce. It would be petty of me to pick flaws in someone else's efforts.

A few years back, an author I knew used fake identities online to write scathing reviews of his competitors. Then he accidentally posted one under his real name. The lesson is clear — praise the good, but be silent for the bad.

■ *NERO* by Conn Iggulden (Michael Joseph £22) is out now.

BOOK OF THE WEEK

INSIDE OUT: THE EXTRAORDINARY LEGACY OF APRIL ASHLEY

by Douglas Thompson
(Ad Lib £10.99, 240pp)

YSEDA MAXTONE GRAHAM

SO, WHEN would you like to transfer from monsieur to mademoiselle?' asked Dr Georges Burou at his clinic in Casablanca.

'Immediately,' replied George Jamieson. The year was 1960. Aged 25, he was desperate. All his life, he'd known for certain he was a female trapped inside a male body.

Born in working-class Liverpool in 1935, he'd suffered an appalling childhood, with a mother who loathed his effeminacy and bashed his head on the ground like a pneumatic drill while the city was being bombed to pieces. He was bullied so violently in the playground that he was once crippled for four months.

But none of that was as bad as the inner conflict he was suffering.

Aged 17, he escaped and went to work, first as a sailor (during which he was pumped with male hormones and underwent electric shock therapy to try to suppress his urge to change gender) and then in a cross-dressing nightclub in Paris called Le Carrousel. One of his co-workers, Coccinelle, showed him sex change was possible. She'd had it done. She opened her legs to prove it.

George decided that he, too, would have to change sex and went to Morocco to meet the Gauloises-chain-smoking surgeon who could help him.

During the consultation, Dr Burou tested his resolve by showing him photographs of blood-soaked, chopped-off body parts, reminding him what the gender-reassignment operation would entail: photos so graphic that, as he put it, 'only a real transsexual would stay put.'

George didn't flinch.

'I'll book you in for 7am tomorrow morning,' said Dr Burou.

This was 12 years before that same doctor would perform the operation that made acclaimed travel writer James Morris into Jan Morris. When it came to gender reassignment, George Jamieson — soon to be 'reborn' as Miss April Ashley — was the true trailblazer.

The next morning, the operation went ahead. Look away now if you don't want to know the full details: castration, after which penis skin was inverted into the newly created space, and the remaining tissue used to complete the new vagina. The official name

of the operation: an 'anteriorly pedicled penile skin flap inversion vaginoplasty'.

The post-op pain was excruciating, but there was no question in April's mind: she was reborn. She'd done the right thing.

From then on, she only spoke of George, the boy she'd been, in the third person. As Douglas Thompson writes in this lively, if rather fawning and gushing, book about her (they were friends, and reminisced in her house in Provence), April would always stress that the operation didn't 'transform' her, it 'completed' her.

And then the fun started. The first thing she did was sleep with a muscular dancer at Le Carrousel called Skippy. He'd promised

She was a trans trailblazer who went from Liverpool lad to Vogue supermodel who wed a toff. Everyone from Elvis Presley to Peter O'Toole fell for April Ashley, who claimed...

'I could have slept with all four Beatles!'

her he'd be the first to have sex with her after the operation — and it worked.

Tall, skinny and beautiful, April became a supermodel. David Bailey and Terry O'Neill photographed her for Vogue, modelling underwear.

Even when she'd been a cross-dresser at Le Carrousel, Salvador Dali and Elvis Presley had been magnetically drawn to her. Now, as a fully fledged woman, she was the toast of London.

'I could have slept with all the Beatles,' she boasted. She claimed to have turned down Paul McCartney at Club dell'Aretusa on the King's Road, escaping his advances in a taxi.

She became friends with a married Old Etonian transvestite

called The Hon Arthur Corbett, who wanted to marry her. She told him about 'Casablanca', and he claimed not to mind.

The only problem, as she put it, was there were four people in his life: himself, his other self (the nasty person he became when he was dressing as a woman), April, and his wife Eleanor. Also, he was a schizophrenic.

In November 1961, a former colleague who needed money 'outed' April's sex change to the Sunday People newspaper.

'The Extraordinary Case of the Top Model April Ashley: "Her" Secret is Out,' ran the headline. That was the end of April's modelling career and every one of her bookings was cancelled.

She'd been the model for Bourn-



Pioneer: Born male, April Ashley underwent gender reassignment surgery in 1960

fumbling' with Peter O'Toole and a 'full-on affair' with Omar Sharif. She did go on to marry Arthur Corbett, after he divorced, and became the Hon Mrs Arthur Corbett.

With that title, doors opened again, socially. But the marriage was a disaster, and the next thing April knew, she was caught up in a horrible law case: Corbett v. Corbett (Ashley).

Arthur declared the marriage null and void, and 'fraudulent'. He was refusing to support her financially, saying that on their wedding day she was a person of the male sex and the marriage was never consummated. April claimed that Arthur refused to, or couldn't, consummate.

The case rumbled on and, in December 1969, she endured 17 days in court, being quizzed about endless private bodily details, such as the 'size and activity of her penis' pre-operation. Nine medical experts were on hand and she was subjected to medical examinations to decide whether she was still a man.

APRIL lost the case. Judge Ormrod decreed: 'The respondent is not, and was not, a woman at the date of her marriage, but was, at all times, a male.' Cut adrift, she fell into penury.

It's pitiful to read what she went through. She escaped to the U.S., married a gay man called Jeff West to get a Green Card, and did menial jobs in restaurants and working for Greenpeace. As she put it, she was condemned to be 'a freak living in exile'.

It wasn't until 2005 that she received the document she'd longed for: her birth certificate from HM Government, identifying her as a female. The Gender Recognition Act had been passed in 2004.

Then, as a crowning upwards swoop of the rollercoaster, in 2012 she was awarded an MBE for her services to transgender equality.

The following year, a million people came to see the exhibition, April Ashley: Portrait of a Lady, at the Museum of Liverpool. Her mother, surely, turned in her grave.

April died in 2021, aged 86. At her memorial celebration in St George's Hall, Liverpool, the place erupted with the singing of her favourite 'anthem': I Am Miss April Ashley.

The actor Simon Callow, one of her greatest fans and supporters, gave the tribute, saying that she'd led the way for others.

Against all possible odds, she'd managed to 'correct what nature had got wrong', and lead the life she knew she was born to live.

ville chocolate, but Bournville said they could not have their name associated with a sex change.

Reading her story, we accompany April on the rollercoaster of her life,

soaring and plummeting from victory to catastrophe. She ran off to Spain to be near Arthur, who ran the Jacaranda Club in Marbella. While there, she enjoyed some 'pleasurable

in real knead of a husband



Husband material? Make him a loaf

ing the 'magic' rowan stick seems to have restored her wobbly confidence in her cheesemaking abilities.

Just occasionally, though, practical magic could take a turn towards out-and-out witchcraft. One of the most distressing sections in Stanmore's book concerns the practice of making a wax doll or 'poppet' of an enemy before sticking pins into it.

It was a good — or bad — idea to incorporate a few strands of hair of the person you were trying to harm. In those cases, where the spell appeared to work and the unfortunate 'enemy' did indeed come to harm, Stanmore suggests that, again, psychological suggestion was possibly in play.

After all, if you know that someone

wants you dead, your blood pressure is likely to go shooting up along with your cortisol levels. A stroke or heart attack might quickly follow.

Before we start to feel too superior about the gullibility of people five hundred years ago, Stanmore points to the way that Rhonda Byrne's The Secret (2006) sold 30 million copies by telling people they could get what they wanted simply by thinking about it hard enough.

And plenty of us read a daily astrology column hoping we are due a financial windfall on Thursday.

And when it comes to wearing your lucky socks for a tricky interview, is that really so different from marching up to a misbehaving milk churn brandishing a stick of rowan?

MUSTREADS

Paperback fiction



YELLOWFACE
by Rebecca F. Kuang
(Borough Press £9.99, 336pp)

ATHENA LIU and her former Yale classmate, June Hayward, are fellow writers and best friends — but with dramatically different careers. At 27, Athena is a Chinese-American literary superstar with a big Netflix deal, while June's first novel was a non-event.

Obsessively secretive about her work, Athena shows June a few pages of her newly completed novel at the end of a drunken night out.

A moment later, as Athena chokes on a pancake in a freak accident, June makes a life-changing decision. Amid the chaos of Athena's untimely death, she steals the manuscript and passes it off as her own work.

Following the success of her award-winning fantasy best-seller, Babel, Rebecca F. Kuang's latest novel is a dark, funny and addictively readable thriller about envy, creativity, and the pitfalls of modern publishing.



THE SEVENTH SON
by Sebastian Faulks
(Penguin £9.99, 368pp)

IN 2030, a childless couple, Mary and Alaric Pedersen decide to have a child via a surrogate mother, Talissa Adam, a young American anthropologist.

She undergoes IVF at a London clinic jointly run

by the NHS and the Parn Institute — brainchild of billionaire Australian tech entrepreneur Lukas Parn.

After a smooth pregnancy, the child, Seth, is born and all goes well until Talissa makes a shocking discovery 16 years later.

Sebastian Faulks's latest novel is a tender, haunting exploration of the power of technology to alter our understanding of what it means to be human.



THE WALLED GARDEN
by Sarah Hardy
(Manilla Press £9.99, 400pp)

A GREAT many novels have been written about the brave young men who fought for their country in two world wars. But what of the women who loved them and longed for their safe return, only to find their husbands so scarred by conflict that their peacetime lives were changed beyond recognition?

Sarah Hardy's debut novel tells the story of Alice Rayne, who fell in love with Stephen, a brilliant young diplomat and heir to a crumbling Suffolk estate.

Before the war, Stephen and Alice read poetry together and he admired her skill as a botanist. Now a mask of icy cruelty hides the tormented memory of his actions in combat.

The Walled Garden is a poignant celebration of the power of love to heal the most devastating wounds.

JANE SHILLING

PICTURE THIS

THE HOUSE ROMANTIC

by Haskell Harris
(Abrams £35, 272pp)

HOW do you make a house a home?

Reduce the meaningless clutter and be inspired by the possessions that hold true value, says Harris, an interior designer who makes the creation of

beautiful homes look effortless. More than a collection of gorgeous interiors, this book is filled with tips and suggestions. By drawing on the 15 houses stunningly captured here, anyone could create their dream interior.



PICTURE: CHARLOTTE ZACHARWIE 2024

KATHARINE SPURRIER