

# The idealist with a hidden skeleton

## THIS IS HOW IT ENDS

Eva Dolan  
(Raven Books, £12.99)

### Review by Sarah Hughes

Increasingly if you want to read fiction that reflects the world in which we are living, your best bet is to pick up a crime novel. From long-established practitioners such as Ian Rankin to rising stars such as Eva Dolan, the best modern crime novels both delve deep into our darkest impulses and examine bigger questions about the way we live our lives. Dolan, in particular, excels at presenting knotty, addictive tales that also force the reader to think more widely about the way in which society treats its most vulnerable members.

Her previous four novels, which follow detective pairing DI Dushan Zigic and DS Mel Ferreira and their work in the Peterborough Hate Crimes Unit, have covered everything from violent crimes against trans women to rising tensions about immigration. They are richly imagined, cleverly plotted and socially aware stories, which will also have you turning the pages well into the small hours.

This – her first stand-alone book and the novel that her publishers

hope will propel her onto the crime fiction A-list – has a wonderfully prescient premise. Ella is a young, attractive and highly visible campaigner for housing rights. On the night of her greatest triumph – a party to celebrate her upcoming book about gentrification and a successful Kickstarter campaign raising money for a homeless shelter – she calls her friend Molly away from the festivities in a soon-to-be redeveloped tower block to one of the building's abandoned flats and asks for her help disposing with a body. Whose? And why?

"Of course it was an accident," Molly thinks. "Ella is a peaceful girl, too small and too smart for violence. He'll have had a fit or a stroke, the result of some obscure hidden condition, the kind that occasionally cuts down the young without warning. Or he'll have taken something that got the better of his system. Either way, a stumble, an unlucky fall against the tiles. An accident, just like Ella says."

But was it? As the story progresses, so the older Molly, herself a protest veteran with an activist history stretching back to the heady days of Greenham Common, finds herself beginning to doubt Ella's story. Is there more to this photogenic young protester



Body of evidence Eva Dolan slowly reveals the truth behind the corpse that Ella needs to bury MARK VESSEY

than the socially concerned face she presents to the world? Why did she befriend Molly? What does she really want from the campaign to protect the inhabitants of Castle Rise? And who exactly was the dead man to her?

Dolan keeps the tension rising as she expertly juggles two distinct voices and timelines. While Molly's story plays out in the present, from the moment Ella asks for her help with the body

to the bleak and brilliant conclusion, Ella's unspools backwards, from her desperate call to Molly through her frustrations as a young blogger trying to make her name ("he knew it annoyed her how so much of the press had been focused on her youth and her looks... although according to the trolls who targeted her day and night, she was 'too gross to get raped'") to the dark past she has hidden from her friends.

Occasionally the tricksiness of having Ella's timeline unfold backwards threatens to derail the main plot, but Dolan is a master of pace and it's fascinating to watch the real Ella slowly emerge.

Ultimately, this smart, deftly told story resonates so strongly because of the complex, claustrophobic relationship at its heart: like Molly, we are drawn inexorably to Ella's flame, unable to step away even when it might burn.

# The final frontier

## SPY OF THE FIRST PERSON

Sam Shepard  
(Alfred A Knopf, £13)

### Review by Alasdair Lees

The Pulitzer-winning playwright Sam Shepard died of complications from motor neurone disease in July, leaving behind a formidable legacy of nearly 50 plays which often put forward unwaveringly bleak critiques of American ideals.

From the late 1970s, he also had a parallel career as a character actor in the classical mould, from his Oscar-nominated performance as the astronaut Chuck Yeager in 1983's *The Right Stuff* to his autocratic patriarch in the Netflix family melodrama *Bloodline*. He also wrote novels, short stories and screenplays for films such as Wim Wenders's haunting *Paris, Texas*.

He was working on another novel right up to his death, writing by hand then dictating into a tape recorder with the help of his daughter and sisters.



American pastoral Sam Shepard looks at his country in an elegiac light AP

Friend and former girlfriend Patti Smith helped him edit the final manuscript. Clocking in at just over 80 pages, *Spy of the First Person* is clearly partly autobiographical, narrated by a man in his later years being treated for a crippling illness. Sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of his house in southern California's Colorado desert and being cared for by his family, he looks back over his life and reflects on a changing America. All the while, a younger man in a property

opposite watches him, fascinated by his enigmatic neighbour.

*Spy of the First Person* captivates in its distillation of many of Shepard's enduring themes: the death of America's frontier, identity and loneliness.

The old man reflects that in the surrounding desert, "there used to be orchards as far as the eye can see". But even in his parents' era, such a landscape had turned to "black plastic blowing from barbed wire" and "dead pigeons in the road". In a time when migrant

workers added to local colour rather than constituting a threat, even his sick mother, who had immigrated illegally from England, faced deportation for lacking the right papers. Where do any of us really come from, he muses.

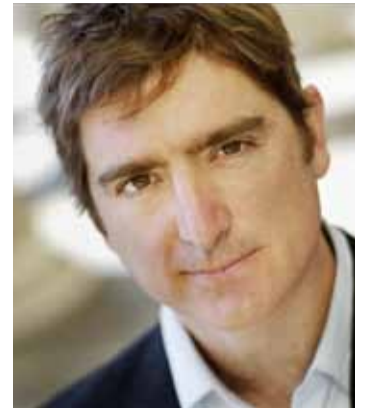
Amid the conflicted nostalgia, the old man confesses to a secret criminal past and a deranged act of violence. Memory is for him "like a scab... that you pick at".

From his position across the road, the younger man sees "big bad birds" swooping around the older man's house, and reflects on "the progressive nature of things... things run down".

There's foreboding amid the wistfulness, but it's tempting to read this novella as Shepard looking at America in an elegiac light. There's a wonderful reference to an organisation called the Shriners, a branch of the Masons where "guys from the Midwest" dress up as Arabs, "full of Arab pride" – a baffling but wonderful concept which goes to the heart of America's strangeness.

*Spy of the First Person* ends with the old man going for a tequila-fuelled meal at a Mexican restaurant with his family – "the menu had a logo of a lighthouse. Lonely illuminated." Amid a "cacophony of voices", they talk Trump, "the country in a Mexican stand-off".

Shepard illuminates loneliness beautifully in this slight but rich and moving final work. In the final lines, the old man sees "the moon getting bigger and brighter... two sons and their father, everyone trailing behind". Shepard's valiant message is one of hope. THE INDEPENDENT



## ONE MINUTE WITH...

Marcel Theroux, novelist

### Where are you now and what can you see?

I'm sitting at my desk, staring at the roofs of houses. Somewhere off to the north-east, I can see the cluster of trees around Tooting Lido, beckoning me to leave my work and go swimming instead.

### What are you currently reading?

I'm reading *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* by HP Lovecraft. He was weird, and undeniably a racist, yet vast swathes of popular culture, from Stephen King to *The Matrix* and *Stranger Things*, owe him a huge debt.

### Who is your favourite author and why do you admire her/him?

For all his flaws, I still find myself returning most often to the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. I love the brevity of his work, the way it shamelessly mixes genres – horror, detective fiction, science-fiction. He's seen as literary, but there's a lot of mischief in his writing. He loved books – silly books, difficult books, philosophical books, books in Old English, poetry – with an ardent, fan-boy enthusiasm that is an antidote to the reverential view of literature as something Big and Serious and Good For You, like cod liver oil.

### Describe the room where you usually write...

It's a tiny attic space, full of tottering piles of books, with a repurposed table as a desk, a filing cabinet and the aforementioned view.

### Which fictional character most resembles you?

I wish it were Tigger, but it's probably Eeyore.

### Who is your hero/heroine from outside literature?

I'm full of admiration for so many people, but anyone who's devoted themselves to teaching or nursing is a hero to me. I see them caring for others in a practical way, without ego or grandstanding – perhaps without any sense that what they do is amazing.

'The Secret Books' by Marcel Theroux is out now (Faber, £12.99)

## ALSO RELEASED



### CHRONICLES OF A LIQUID SOCIETY

Umberto Eco  
(Harvill Secker, £18.99)

This book was published in Italy under the title *Papè Satàn Aleppe* in the same year as Umberto Eco died, in 2016. The original title (the English one is the subtitle in the Italian) refers to a very ambiguous line in Dante that no one really understands.

Eco's last novel, *Numero Zero*, seemed to me to be a return to the form of *The Name Of The Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, after a number of works which might charitably be described as frolics of his own. His novelistic career had always run in tandem with his academic, non-fiction and journalistic work. But the reader can only leave this volume with a sense of frustration.

The book announces at the outset that it is a compilation of various columns which Eco wrote forthrightly for the magazine *L'Espresso*. Gleelessly and shamelessly, he refers to them as "jottings", "short notes" and "digressions on ideas come

to mind". Now, had I been sitting, once every 14 days, with an espresso and *L'Espresso*, I would probably have found much of the material interesting and provocative. But a column is not the same as a book. And a lot of columns put together do not make a book.

Eco had at least tried to arrange them in some semblance of order, and included a rather faint-hearted apology for repetitions. But take page 147 in a piece on female philosophers: as well as the well-known Hypatia of Alexandria he mentions "Diotima the Socratic, Arete of Cyrene, Nicarete of Megara, Hipparchia the Cynic, Theodora the Peripatetic (in the philosophical sense of the word), Leontia the Epicurean and Themistoclea the Pythagorean". Skip forward to page 153 and in a piece called "Husbands of unknown wives", we read about "Diotima the Socratic, Arete of Cyrene, Nicarete of Megara, Hipparchia the Cynic" etc. Will this do, Ed? Oh, and a few pages later we have another piece on Hypatia.

While one might laud Eco's championing of relatively little-

known female philosophers, his tendency to refer to them as girls rather than women and to make frequent analogies to prostitution, and a kind of salacious bass note in many of these off-cuts, rather undermine the feminist credentials.

Eco structured the book around topics. There are five pieces on mobile phones and 13 on the internet. Both make him grumpy. There are five on conspiracy theories in which he says conspiracy theories are foolish.

Eco knows a lot of things, but few of them deeply. When he turns to politics, he is blasé and enraged at the same time. His essays on religion are pretty anodyne; yes, it would be nice if more young people knew the biblical stories and no, having a new Crusade is not a good idea. Well, blow me down.

This is a regrettable book. It taints the memory of how good those first novels, and the final one, were. Eco comes across almost like Stephen Fry – a sort of intellectual that we all want to like but secretly find infuriating.

Stuart Kelly



### WOMEN AND POWER: A MANIFESTO

Mary Beard  
(Profile, £7.99)

This slim volume gathers two speeches given by Mary Beard about the ways in which women's exclusion from power has been hardwired into Western culture at least as far back as Roman and Greek times, and what can be done to address this dysfunction.

Examples are not exactly thin on the ground. Typical, for instance, is the moment in *The Odyssey* where Penelope, head of the household in her husband Odysseus's long absence, is rudely silenced by her son Telemachus, who comes into his birthright – the right to assertive speech – in the very act of suppressing his mother's voice.

In the second speech, Beard turns to what needs to change, and how. Some women have achieved influence by apeing the manners of men, as Margaret Thatcher did. But Beard argues that radical rethinking is needed. The roots of misogyny go deep, and we are far from eradicating them. The meme which saw the face of Hillary Clinton applied to the severed head of Medusa shows that the violent imaging of the punishment women "deserve" for daring to speak out, remains darkly pervasive.

Dan Brotzel



### THE ROBIN: A BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Moss  
(Square Peg, £10.99)

There are six million robins in the UK, but at this time of the year they feel even more ubiquitous than usual. As Stephen Moss explains in this thoughtful mash-up of natural and cultural history, the birds first started finding their way up to Christmas cards in the 1840s. Moss divides his book into the months of the year, describing how their behaviour changes with the seasons, while also exploring "the cultural and historical 'robin'".

Roger Cox



### SOURDOUGH

Robin Sloan  
(Atlantic, £12.99)

Robin Sloan, author of the similarly quirky *Mr Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, tells a story of San Francisco-based techie Lois Clary, who takes possession of a mysterious sourdough starter when her foodie immigrant neighbours have to depart the US at short notice. The culture has a life of its own and begins to push back, leading this whimsical novel into sci-fi territory and towards a bizarre conclusion.

James Cann

## COFFEE TABLE CHOICE

Images of New York often focus on its cityscapes, but the metropolis is encircled by rivers, bays and to the far east, the Atlantic Ocean. Living on Jamaica Bay, the photographer Susannah Ray depicts the intersections of the city, where land meets water in her book, *New York Waterways* (Hoxton Mini Press, £17.95). Inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman, these scenes reflect the shifting seasonal moods of the Big Apple. Pictured right: 'A Train, Jamaica Bay, Queens'.



## Top 5 Books

1. **5 Ingredients - Quick & Easy Food** Jamie Oliver (Michael Joseph)
2. **Private Eye Annual 2017** Ian Hislop (Private Eye)
3. **Bletchley Park Brainteasers** Sinclair McKay (Headline)
4. **Bad Dad** David Walliams (HarperCollins)
5. **Blue Planet II** James Honeyborne & Mark Brownlow (BBC/Random House)