

BOOKS OF THE YEAR BIOGRAPHY

Portraits of those who didn't fit in

The most striking image to emerge from this year's Lives is of a society blinkered by prejudice, says **Gaby Wood**

It is an unholy practice, the telling of a life story that isn't one's own," the biographical writer Janet Malcolm suggested earlier this year. The occasion was a review of **Sontag** (Allen Lane, £30) by Benjamin Moser, whose intelligence-gathering diligence is occasionally undermined by his

questionable parsing of the loot. "How many American women of her generation had lovers, male and female, as numerous, beautiful, and prominent?" Moser asks about Susan Sontag. And, 300 pages later: "How many people, after all, need to exhort themselves to bathe?" His rhetorical formulation gives the game away: if Moser sees his subject as extreme, then there must be some kind of "normal" she is failing to be. Who is the biographer to determine such things?

While Sontag's behaviour was felt by her biographer to require explanation, the ruthless Lucian Freud's was not, by his. To devote 700 pages to half the life of a painter as nakedly self-interested as Freud requires an exceptional level of tact – or at least, that is what William Feaver brings to **The Lives of Lucian Freud: Youth** (Bloomsbury, £35), the first of two volumes. With remarkable elegance, Feaver – who spoke to Freud almost daily – gives a robust and intricate evocation of the man at work: on canvas, in the world and in his mind.

"I thought you were your own Romeo," Freud's grandfather Sigmund quipped, when the teenage Lucian said he'd been to the theatre. As predictions go, it wasn't bad. The boy would go on to father 14 children and claim that "everything is a self-portrait". Freud was forever getting drunk, crashing cars, chasing women and losing bets; it's a wonder he had any time left for painting. "Lucian told me he often had girls who had had 'trouble' with their fathers," a former lover reports. It's a pinprick of pain – why did so many women put themselves in Freud's path? Feaver places that point on the penultimate page, and leaves it. We are left to judge, or not judge, Freud's trajectory for ourselves.

If life was a part of Freud's art, Walter Gropius fostered the idea that art should be part of life. He navigated the egos of artists and the advent of the Nazis, had a lasting influence on architects and designers of the 20th century, and has occupied the thoughts of the spy, eminent biographer Fiona MacCarthy for several decades. In **Walter Gropius** (Faber, £30), she takes a man often accused of being humourless and cold, and renders him charismatic, resilient and more subtly significant. She is also funny in his defence. "Sexually," she notes, "Gropius was far from negligible."

The first image Laura Cumming's mother ever owned was a cut-out colour bookplate: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel.



OFF THE SPECTRUM
The Meteorologist, 2014 in *Stickybeak* by Julie Cockburn (Chose Commune, €40/£34)

Cumming's parents went on to be artists; she is the *Observer's* art critic. "Nobody notices the legs the first time," she writes of the Bruegel painting. "Bruegel played upon our habits of looking five hundred years ago, knowing that we would be a good while pondering the ploughman, the sun, the sea and ship" before we see a pair of flailing limbs, belonging to the mythic boy plunged to his death from failed flight. Though **On Chapel Sands** (Chatto & Windus, £16.99) has a mysterious kidnapping at its heart, "habits of

looking" are its author's real subject. "In life as in art we do not always see what is going on at the edges," she writes. A story of this sort lay within her family, and the beauty in Cumming's book comes from her patience with the paradoxical notion of choosing not to see, among people whose sight was their livelihood.

The known and not-known – the "things that society hushes up, without knowing it is doing so" – come into Annie Ernaux's **The Years** (Fitzcarraldo, £12.99), too, on a grander scale though no less

muffled. Ernaux is a significant figure in French literature, having coined over decades a way of recording individual experience in brief, sharp volumes. *The Years* is a different endeavour altogether: a patchwork of collective history, up close yet depersonalised, so that an entire century of unprecedented change (in the lives of women, particularly) is evoked in just over 200 pages. Everything is given grace and stature: the gestures of school friends, the German occupation; the whispers of lovers; the advent of Aids. Within *The*

Years, we see the project beginning to form, along with its obstacles. "Her main concern is the choice between 'I' and 'she,'" Ernaux writes. "There is something too permanent about 'I', something shrunken and stifling, whereas 'she' is too exterior and remote." The balance she strikes is the book we are holding: nothing else approaches the intimacy and majesty of its sweep.

There has been an intriguing drift, in many biographies, towards restitution: restoring certain stories to their protagonists. **The Five** (Transworld, £16.99) is Hallie Rubenhold's stirring and impressively detailed reconstruction of the lives of the five women murdered by Jack the Ripper in Whitechapel in 1888. Rubenhold shows that only two of the women could be proven to have worked as prostitutes, yet for 130 years Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Polly Nichols,

Until the lions have their own historians, the story of the hunt will glorify the hunter

Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly have all been classed that way. Consciously or not, it has become a moralising shorthand for women at a certain level of poverty or despair. Why has history been so lacking in curiosity about this aspect of the facts? Jack the Ripper can only retain his cultish infamy, Rubenhold argues, if his victims are forgotten. So their invisibility is no accident: "We have become complicit in their diminishment."

Between 1948 and 1963, 300,000 people migrated to the UK from the West Indies, fleeing unemployment at home and encouraged, as colonial residents, to come and help with postwar reconstruction. "As far as you can look it bomb and burn outright through and through," one of Colin Grant's interviewees says in **Homecoming** (Jonathan Cape, £25). Grant, whose parents arrived in Britain from Jamaica in the late Fifties, often invoked Chinua Achebe when interviewing people for this oral

history. "Until the lions have their own historians," Achebe wrote, "then the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." Grant's subjects speak about the cold and the dirt and the cost, discrimination and heartache, the birth of the carnival, all manner of lost-ness. One, the writer Viv Adams, may be the most poetic voice of the biographical year: "We were embarked upon something of glamour," he says, "that lay beyond tomorrow." Their generation, Grant argues, "redefined the very notion of what it is to be British."

The godmother of "novels in voices", as she calls them, is the magnificent Belarusian Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, whose decades-long oral project has been to tell – or rather hear – a version of history that has been silenced or rendered small. Her latest book to be translated into English, **Last Witnesses** (Penguin Classics, £12.99), was in fact her second, written in the early Eighties, after the masterpiece now titled *The Unwomanly Face of War*. Composed of the testimonies of Russians who were children during the Second World War, it grew out of an earlier volume about female Russian soldiers: some of its protagonists were their children. Her most pure and pared-back work, *Last Witnesses* is so searingly narrated by its multiple recollectors that, as she told me when I visited her in Minsk earlier this year, "I tried to put my comments beside them, but you couldn't put anything that would be equal to that text". As twin tomes, Alexievich's works on women and children are unbeatable – and only just bearable.

The central drama of Bart van Es's **The Cut Out Girl** (Penguin, £9.99), winner of this year's Costa Prize, is also the Second World War. Lien, the titular character, was cut out of her context multiple times, like the little paper figures glued on to empty white pages in her childhood notebook. Sent away by her Dutch Jewish family before the rest of them died in the Holocaust, she grew up alongside Van Es's father. But by the time Van Es was born, Lien had been cut out again, and was absent from their story. As Van Es returns the now-elderly Lien to her rightful place in it, a poignant act of intergenerational forgiveness takes place on the page. "There are no problems with Norman," a childcare officer

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reported, after visiting a seven-year-old boy in foster care in Lancashire in 1974. Well, no: Norman was not the problem. And his name was not Norman. Norman Greenwood was Lemn Sissay, born to an Ethiopian student as a result of an act by a man she called "the cruelest person in the world". Just four years ago Sissay managed to get hold of all his official files: the result is **My Name Is Why** (Canongate, £16.99), a memoir as unvarnished as it is eloquent. The author reclaims his life, after suffering an identity theft at the hands of institutional power. It's tempting to imagine, reading this and **Lowborn** (Chatto & Windus, £14.99), by the novelist Kerry Hudson, that writing is a route out of hardship. (The life of the playwright Shelagh Delaney

might prompt that thought too, thanks to Selina Todd's excellent **Tastes of Honey** (Chatto & Windus, £18.99), though Delaney's working-class background was closer to Ernaux's, and her ambition twinned with angry wit.) That's too easy an assumption, but the existence of these two books is like a blaze of survival: the raw revealing of a strongest self, as a "happy" child learns to make trouble, before finding a way to show the world that the trouble lay elsewhere all along.

Countless threads might be drawn between these books – surprising, inconsequential links, like the reading of Dostoevsky, or addresses in Knightsbridge. But there is a line that shoots like lightning through many of the lives described: the deprivation and prejudice that have passed for allowable living conditions in this country for well over a century. It is their most memorable shared attribute, and it is sobering.

2019'S TOP 50

42
GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER
by Bernadine Evaristo

Evaristo's verse novel about black British women felt fresher and funnier than 2019's other Booker winner, Atwood's *The Testaments*. (Hamish Hamilton)

41
VERTIGO AND GHOST
by Fiona Benson

A thrilling book of two halves: a nightmarish verse sequence with Zeus as a modern-day rapist; and a set of beautiful, intimate lyric poems. (Cape)



40
PROMISE ME YOU'LL SHOOT YOURSELF
by Florian Huber, tr Imogen Taylor

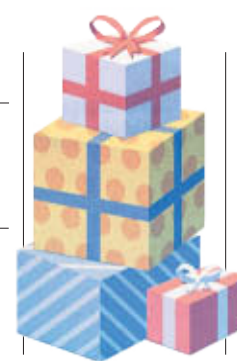
Hitler's war took an appalling toll on ordinary Germans, too. With compassion, Huber tells the story of "the suicide epidemic" that began in 1945. (Allen Lane)

39
WE ARE MADE OF DIAMOND STUFF
by Isabel Waidner

A garrulous, magical-realist and Brexit-tinged comedy about a pair of trans migrants working at a "no star" hotel on the Isle of Wight. (Dostoevsky Wannabe)

38
CONVICTION
by Denise Mina

Two people thrown together when their spouses elope go on a hilarious road trip around Europe in pursuit of a possible murderer. (Harvill Secker)



37
I AM SOVEREIGN
by Nicola Barker

An astonishingly intricate novella about an estate agent, a homeowner, a buyer and her daughter at a house viewing. (William Heinemann)

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TIM MARSHALL

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