



Pretty hot

Nicholas Roe

WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

The radical years

352pp. Oxford University Press. £25.

978 0 19 881811 3

In June 1794, William Wordsworth wrote in a letter to his friend William Matthews: “I disapprove of monarchical and aristocratical governments”. He claimed they would “counteract the progress of human improvement”. This was a seditious opinion indeed for the England of the 1790s, threatened as it was by a tumultuous revolution in neighbouring France. It was an opinion that could have landed Wordsworth in jail. Still, Wordsworth was not alone in his egalitarian thinking; as Nicholas Roe writes in his newly revised and expanded edition of *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The radical years*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was already forging a reputation for himself “as a political radical” by 1795. Roe investigates the radical “spirit” that was apparent in the early poetry and writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Both poets would later become disillusioned with radical politics, but in the 1790s Wordsworth and Coleridge were “pretty hot”, as Wordsworth himself wrote, in their feelings of political dissent.

They first met in 1795, as Roe states, “apparently encouraged by shared political opinions”. Despite having a great deal in common there was some “disparity” between them that would fuel the “strange chemistry of their creativity”, a chemistry that led to some of the most significant poetry written in English. Roe’s intention is to explore the “immediate, impulsive reactions to ideas, events and contemporaries” that shaped Wordsworth and Coleridge, so their “radical years come most vividly ... to life”. Roe is thorough in putting together evidence drawn from letters, meetings and, of course, poetry to form a coherent picture of this key period.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge found friends and political guidance in contemporary figures. Roe charts this network, which included men such as George Dyer, Basil Montagu, John Tweddle and John Thelwall, among many others. In the early 1790s, Wordsworth was a follower of Godwin’s rationalism (his enthusiasm cooled before the decade was out), while Coleridge believed that “religion” offered “the only means universally efficient” for addressing inequality. Coleridge’s thoughts also corresponded with the opinions of another Unitarian dissenter, William Frend.

Roe captures the “unity and revolutionary idealism” that was brimming over during the 1790s with a scholarly gift for bringing together evidence drawn from a wide range of sources. His research is so exacting that his study would be enlightening to a political



Cindy and Shirley, holding their cousin Terry on his Christening Day; from *Urban Gypsies* by Paul Wenham-Clarke (96pp. Hoxton Mini Press. £17.95. 978 1 910566 49 7)

historian as well as a literary critic. It was a momentous period, one that did indeed unite disparate groups for a while, as Wordsworth writes: “How bright a face is worn when joy of one / is joy of tens of millions”. Feelings would change, but, as Roe demonstrates, that radical ardour left a hugely significant impact on English poetry.

MARIA TAYLOR

Swimming

Various contributors

AT THE POND

Swimming at the Hampstead Ladies’ Pond

143pp. Daunt Books. Paperback, £9.99.

978 1 911547 39 6

There is a theory that our centrally heated, temperature-controlled lives are just too comfortable and that immersion in cool water – and, crucially, warming up afterwards – can be deeply satisfying because it is what our bodies have evolved to do: a challenge to the homeostasis makes us feel more alert, more

altered, the cold too shocking to focus on sorrow or confusion when the useful thing was courage”, writes Esther Freud. The pond is used as a symbol for the experience of being mixed-race by Nina Mingya Powles (“I am many bodies of water, strange and shifting”); for self-compassion after turning forty by Amy Key (“in water I felt more expert in my body”); and for recovery from heartbreak for Ava Wong Davies (“I feel peaceful in a way that I haven’t for a long time”). For many, it’s a place of escape: for Sophie Mackintosh, it’s escape from her phone, a “swerving of the 4G”; for Deborah Moggach, from her children; and for Sharlene Teo, from London (“a transporting haven”). For all, it’s a place of escape from men.

Sharlene Teo’s nuanced essay “Echolocation” acknowledges the “fashionable” and “feted” status of the pond, evidenced in its summer queues. While “Like A Rat”, Eli Goldstone’s distinctive and daring contribution, provides a welcome contrast to some of the more comfortable voices here with her description of living on the edges of privileged Hampstead, eating from the bins of patisseries and climbing the fence for illicit night swims. As this collection shows, Hampstead Heath Ladies’ Pond takes on different personal meanings for all who visit: no one gets in the same water twice.

AMY LIPTROT

Bills

Elsa Schiaparelli

SHOCKING LIFE

231pp. V&A Publications. Paperback, £9.99.

978 1 85177 959 8

In *Shocking Life*, first published in France in 1954, Elsa Schiaparelli provides a linear account of her life, from privileged childhood in Italy to postwar irrelevance and bankruptcy, but not an honest or reliable one: as she provocatively claims, “I have always had a bad memory for names, faces, and detail”. Her frequent recourse to the third person (as “Schiap” or “She”) further casts doubt on what she says about herself.

Like Coco Chanel (whom she refers to as “perhaps my bitterest rival”), Schiaparelli recognized the value of publicity and was pleased when other designers copied her work. She had a tendency to sloganize her views on style (“Really good clothes never go out of fashion”) and a charmingly playful edge to her writing: she describes *Shocking*, the perfume that made her name (like Chanel No.5 the bottle had a distinctive shape, in this instance based on Mae West’s silhouette), as “Bright, impossible, impudent, becoming, life-giving, like all the light and the birds and the fish in the world put together, a colour of China and Peru and not of the West – a shocking colour, pure and undiluted”. Her collaborations with the leading surrealists of the 1930s allow her to highlight her avant-gardism, but she does not dwell on her most famous designs – the lobster dress; the cravat jumper; the zodiac collection – as though unable to anticipate their lasting significance, or unwilling to recognize that her greatest creative days were behind her.

Schiaparelli always insisted on the primacy of the body – one of her maxims was “Never fit the dress to the body, but train the body to fit the dress” – but for all her business acumen during the 1930s, when women appreciated

alive. Bathers at Hampstead Ladies’ pond, tucked away behind trees on the heath in London, have long known these pleasures: the pond has been open to the public since 1925. “If men [check quote] could see this they would correctly call it paradise”, writes Lou Stoppard in this collection.

At the Pond brings together personal experiences from an impressive range of writer-swimmers, from those new to the pond to those who have been swimming for decades, from summer-only dippers to those who break the ice, from well-known novelists to poets publishing their first collections. The formalization of the admittance of trans women swimmers has recently been in the news, and the poet and academic So Mayer, who is transgender, writes on the pond’s longer history of inclusivity. Each writer attempts to capture its atmosphere. Margaret Drabble comes closest when she describes the “strange mix of permissiveness and purity”.

Many talk about the psychological benefits of outdoor swimming: “My sense of self was

her bold designs, her fortunes declined after the war. She failed to keep up with changing tastes as Christian Dior's "New Look" remoulded the female form and revolutionized mass fashion. As she begrudgingly admits, "I did not immediately realize that the sort of elegance we had known before the war was now dead". In the end, *Shocking Life* was published in an attempt to alleviate her financial troubles – she declared herself bankrupt just months after its publication. The twelfth of the "Twelve Commandments for Women", a flip-pant parody of a modernist manifesto which concludes *Shocking Life*, is "And she should pay her bills".

The V&A first published this version of *Shocking Life* in 2007; this edition has a new cover which features Schiaparelli's famous 1927 cravat jumper. Aside from this, it remains sparse, with no preface, notes, or introduction. In the unhelpful absence of this kind of editorial guidance, the woman behind the House of Schiaparelli remains something of a mystery.

HELEN SAUNDERS

China

François Bougon

INSIDE THE MIND OF XI JINPING
232pp. Hurst. Paperback, £12.99.
978 1 84904 984 9

In thinking about Xi Jinping, it's worth keeping in mind one of Mao Zedong's favourite words: contradiction. Xi has been celebrated as a champion of "globalization" – yet some of his economic policies are protectionist and he takes a pull-up-the-drawbridges approach to intellectual life, calling for universities to be vigilant against the flow into China of allegedly poisonous Western ideas. He gives speeches praising Mao – yet has lauded Confucius and made reverential visits to the sage's birth place. He is far more frequently and assertively in the public eye than were Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, his two immediate predecessors – yet there have been many fewer opportunities to observe him in unscripted moments.

One of the best features of *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, an information-packed, briskly written and engaging work by François Bougon, is the way it makes sense of contradictions like these. In doing so, Bougon, the former Beijing bureau chief of *Le Monde*, makes it clear that many key phenomena began well before but have become dramatically heightened since Xi was named head of the Communist Party late in 2012 and then president in 2013, a post that according to the constitution he could hold for at most a decade. There are other things to like about this book, the French edition of which came out in 2017 with the English edition updated to bring in such recent developments as the constitutional tweak that will allow Xi to stay president for life (the fluid translation, by Vanessa Lee, is uncredited on the title page). Among the topics Bougon handles well, for instance, is just how wrong some foreign observers were about Xi early on. The most misguided were those who claimed to see in him a liberalizing "Gorbachev" figure. In reality, as Bougon argues, Xi views the champion of glasnost and perestroika as a negative model, who let a Leninist Party fall and an empire break apart.

Anyone picking up this book expecting to

get a rounded sense of Xi's personal life, sense of morality, or decision making process, however, will end up frustrated. This is not surprising given how limited access to Xi is, the fact that he gives virtually no interviews, and the lack (so far) of any defections by talkative members of his inner circle. What we get instead is a careful look at Xi's speeches and writings on his own life, and the way his views are presented by the media. But anyone with even a passing interest in China can benefit from a smart primer on the writings, policies and carefully constructed public image of the PRC's most powerful leader since the contradiction-loving, Confucius-hating Mao. And this is just what Bougon provides.

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM

Africa

Terri Ochiagha

A SHORT HISTORY OF "THINGS
FALL APART"

146pp. Ohio University Press.
Paperback, \$14.95.
978 0 8214 2348 6

Few debut novelists have experienced the atomic burst of success enjoyed by Chinua Achebe. When *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, it won instant international acclaim – unprecedented for an African novel at the time. Since then, the story of Okonkwo, a revered Igbo warrior in nineteenth-century Nigeria who reacts violently and tragically to changes imposed by British colonizers, has sold over 12 million copies in dozens of languages and inspired generations of African writers.

Adapted for stage, radio and television, and burdened with a cultural representation that has made it a fixture of academic debate, *Things Fall Apart* has become a historical subject in its own right. The novel as cultural phenomenon forms the basis of Terri Ochiagha's new book, *A Short History of "Things Fall Apart"*. Ochiagha (a lecturer in English at Royal Holloway, University of London) traces the book's influences, critical reception, legacy and film and theatrical adaptations in a self-described "tribute" to Achebe's masterpiece.

Things Fall Apart was not the first African novel to address colonial violence or capture indigenous life and speech, Ochiagha notes, but its uniqueness lies in the "highly conceptual way in which Achebe impresses all these traits in his novel – an aesthetic and intellectual sophistication". Achebe attended Government College Umuahia (the "Eton of the East") and fused his English colonial education with his indigenous identity, becoming the first African writer to put Igbo aesthetics, orature, language and world view into the novelistic form.

Achebe almost didn't publish the book at all, after losing the manuscript for a few heart-stopping months. On publication, the critical response to *Things Fall Apart* came in many shades: the Nigerian literary establishment reacted with either amazement or tepid enchantment. The *TLS* praised this "fascinating picture of tribal life", while the *Listener's* review – snarkily titled "Hurray to Mere Anarchy!" – criticized what it perceived to be Achebe's ingratitude towards colonialism, though it conceded that he had "literary gifts of a high order".

Ochiagha charts (in occasionally dense, academic prose) the evolving trends in the ensuing

critical debates. Being aesthetically Western but rooted in African traditions, the novel was inevitably caught in a tug of war over canonical classification. Critics, for example, were split between "universalists" who stressed the human-condition aspect of the narrative, and those who emphasized its cultural specificity. The "neocolonial gaze" is a constant risk, however, and Ochiagha decries the tokenist approach adopted by some Western academics who overlook the novel's sophistication. In conclusion, she entreats us to appreciate its subtle complexity – a vital quality, she says, in our "politically charged present".

NOO SARO-WIWA

Wristiness

Mike Brearley
ON CRICKET

418pp. Constable. Paperback, £12.99.
978 1 4721 2946 8

Mike Brearley's first two books, *The Art of Captaincy* (1985) and his recent *On Form* (2017), were monographs seamlessly blending theory and practice. His latest, *On Cricket*, is a box of delights containing bite-size pieces on colourful individuals, burning issues and memorable events. What links all three is the way they integrate Brearley's unique set of personas: modest Test batsman; outstanding England captain; first-rate classical scholar and philosophy lecturer; committed psychoanalyst.

"Writing, like playing cricket", says Brearley in his introduction, involves a "sort of marriage between discipline and spontaneity". What follows bears him out. The book's eleven parts emerge, through Socratic midwifery and Freudian free association, from somewhere between the conscious and subconscious. One part, entitled "Raking Through the Ashes", ends tangentially with an assessment of the four great all-rounders Ian Botham, Kapil Dev, Imran Khan and Richard Hadlee. Another finds the quintessence of "Indian Batsmanship" in five essential qualities: deftness, unorthodoxy, fluidity, flexibility and, of course, "wristiness". Other sections range from categories ("Heroes", "Game Changers", "Wicketkeepers") to controversies ("Cheating and Corruption", "Cricket and Race"), all treated with Brearley's customary clarity and nuance.

Throughout the book we learn as much about Brearley himself as we do about cricket. "Did I unconsciously copy him?" he wonders of a local childhood hero who played with collar upturned. Elsewhere, we are told how his father Horace played once for Yorkshire in 1937 with Len Hutton and Hedley Verity against Denis Compton and Bill Edrich; and how the legendary off-spinner Fred Titmus, who played in Horace's first game for Middlesex in 1949 and Mike's last in 1982, observed wryly, "I saw the father in and the son out". Reflections on other players are evocative but never sentimental. His tribute to Compton, for instance, includes the sobering concern, "I wonder which way Compton would have voted on Brexit".

One of the book's most touching sections is on Commentators. Here Brearley shows genuine affinity with C. L. R. James, deep affection tinged with melancholy for John Arlott, and warm admiration for Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. Yet nowhere do we find him

more relaxed, and on form, than in an interview (conducted as a Socratic dialogue) with the art critic and cricket-lover David Sylvester. At one point, Sylvester asks if cricket, in terms of its rhythms, is akin to making love. Brearley concludes that, viewed holistically, the fielders' recurrent "coming together intensely and moving apart", their "ebb and flow, like breathing, like waves breaking on the beach and then drawing back" is something that "echoes deep rhythms in life, including sexual ones". This moment comes, like many in the book, *de profundis*.

SHOMIT DUTTA

Cinema

Sue Thornham

SPACES OF WOMEN'S CINEMA
Space, place and genre in contemporary
women's filmmaking
226pp. BFI Publishing. Paperback, £21.99.
978 1 84457 911 2

"Time is a man, Space is a woman", wrote William Blake in 1810. This is the quotation that opens Sue Thornham's *Spaces of Women's Cinema*, and it's a more complex proposition than Blake's stark, binary statement makes it seem. Thornham's book gives an overview of how theorists from the early twentieth century to the present day have grappled with the interrelation between time, space and gender. Broadly, time has been aligned with things that society has deemed masculine, such as history, progress and politics. Space has been aligned with female things like stasis and the body. Thornham offers an admirably clear guide to the history of such ideas, and how they might relate to what we see on the cinema screen.

In her view, film is a medium uniquely equipped to work through both space and time together: the camera is always both an agent of description of space and of narration through time. Her central question, then, is: what kinds of space-time relations are constructed in cinema made by women? Each chapter takes a different sort of filmic space as its focus. In the first chapter, she looks at women filmmakers who have gone against the masculine generic traditions of the western, in which male explorers conquer the mythic virgin land. In Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), the female protagonists don't boldly penetrate the frontier landscape; instead they "live in it and with it". We then move to the city, as depicted in Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel*, for example, a film about a policewoman whose "attempts to see into its dark spaces are persistently compromised by her femininity". Thirdly, she turns to a space that is already conceived of as the rightful place of women: the domestic interior, in films ranging from Carol Morley's eerie British boarding school drama *The Falling* to Samira Makhmalbaf's *At Five in the Afternoon*, the first feature film to be shot in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban.

Teasing out unifying traits in the way women filmmakers have subverted traditionally male models of how narrative should work, Thornham takes us into uncharted territory. This book will be of most interest to those who already have a grounding in film theory, but it could direct even the casual viewer's attention to meanings in films that they hadn't been attuned to previously.

IMOGEN WEST-KNIGHTS