



"The Inquisitors" by Beth Cavener Stichter, 2004; from *Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary Ceramics: The Garth Clark and Mark del Vecchio collection* by Garth Clark and Cindi Strauss (484pp. Yale University Press. £70; US \$100. 978 0 300 16997 3)

trated with superb colour plates of classic instruments and performers, looks set to remain the definitive work on the subject.

LOU GLANDFIELD

Biography

Nancy Henry

THE LIFE OF GEORGE ELIOT

A critical biography

313pp. Wiley-Blackwell. £60.

978 1 4051 3705 8

Nancy Henry frames her volume in the Blackwell Critical Biographies Series by reviewing (and often disapproving of) the thirty-seven previous Lives of George Eliot. She offers three introductory chapters (the early years, the move to London, life with George Henry Lewes), five chapters on Eliot's work and then a final chapter on "The Final Years: 1879 to Cross's Life". The balance is significant.

Henry focuses on Eliot's work providing a key to her life; not on her life providing a key to her work. She pays fresh attention to the late *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* and to Eliot's poetry. She is very good on *Romola*, indicating that it moved Eliot "into a new phase of literary allusiveness, historical recreation, and mythic symbolism". On the *Middlemarch* period she comments insightfully that "the burden of greatness affected her sense of how she might benefit others", but adds that, "despite the agonizing in her journal", Eliot "preferred to be judged by what she had written, not how she had acted" – a position that anyone but Eliot might justify as ethical double-think.

Critical freshness comes at some cost. In treating her subject's writing career, Henry does not look closely enough at Eliot's intellectual background. There is also no factual foundation for her undocumented speculations that George Henry Lewes chose not to

marry Mary Ann Evans because he wanted to avoid the publicity of a divorce. Moreover Henry's recurrent criticism of earlier biographers like Gordon Haight, who did the hard work of finding and publishing the primary sources on which later biographical interpretation must rest, seems overdone, while there are lapses in proofreading: *Scrutiny* was not published in "1846–47", *George Eliot: Centenary essays* was edited by Anne Smith, not Haight and Van Arsdell, and the violinist Joseph Joachim appears as "Joaquim". The book is set in the "10/12 PT. Bembo" type that makes it difficult to read though, in compensation, there are twenty-seven illustrations, including a drawing of the Talmud scholar, Emanuel Deutsch, with whom George Eliot took Hebrew lessons.

WILLIAM BAKER

History

Richard Butterwick

THE POLISH REVOLUTION AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1788–1792

A political history

400pp. Oxford University Press. £65

(US \$125).

978 0 19 925033 2

The long Polish parliament in Warsaw from 1788 to 1792, later known as the Four-Year Sejm, was recognized by contemporaries as the Polish Revolution, culminating in an enlightened constitution in 1791. Edmund Burke praised the Polish Revolution as a backhanded way to emphasize his loathing of the French Revolution: "All from the King to the day labourer were improved in their condition . . . Not one drop of blood was spilled; no treachery; no outrage; no system of slander more cruel than the sword; no studied insults on religion, morals, or manners; no spoil; no confiscation". These last matters of religion, morals and confiscation

doomed effort to ward off foreign domination by Russia, is discussed by Butterwick under the blunt section heading, "Plunder".

By the middle of 1790, according to Butterwick, "most envoys and senators present in Warsaw had become either bored or vexed by ecclesiastical business". Butterwick's challenge is to take this same business and bring out its historical interest. He has done wonderful work in presenting the large pamphlet literature on church affairs, from classic authors of the Polish Enlightenment like Stanisław Staszic and Hugo Kołłataj to more obscure occasional pieces like "A Virtuous Gipsy Flogging Disorder with the Whip of Truth" and, in reply, "The Priest with an Aspergillum for the Gipsy with a Whip". While noting the vitality during these years of the Polish public sphere, Butterwick also follows the hidden politicking of such principal actors as King Stanisław August, Ignacy Potocki, and the king's brother, the primate of the Polish Church, Michał Poniatowski, who did actually consult with Burke. Playing defence throughout was the papal nuncio Ferdinando Maria Saluzzo, deploying his Italianate "sweet manners" as an antidote to the "philosophical poison" of the Enlightenment.

The legacy of the Four-Year Sejm is complicated by the fact that most of its work was cancelled out by the Russian invasion of Poland in 1792 and the ensuing partitions. Nevertheless, Butterwick argues that by averting schism the Polish Revolution permitted "the myth of unity between Church and nation to put down, in the rich soil of Providentialist euphoria, the roots of its future luxuriant growth".

LARRY WOLFF

Spanish Fiction

Javier Montes

LA VIDA DE HOTEL

198pp. Anagrama. Paperback, €15.90.

978 84 339 7236 1

La ceremonia del porno (The Porn Ceremony), which Javier Montes co-wrote with Andrés Barba, won the essay prize in 2008 from Anagrama. In a discursive tone just short of academic, their book assessed the history and recent developments in the debate over pornography. The study paid particular attention to boredom and dissatisfaction. These feelings have a double function in the genre: while porn seeks to banish them, it also depends on them for its appeal.

The unnamed narrator of Montes's new novel, *La vida de hotel* (The Hotel Life), occupies a similarly contradictory position. As a journalist employed to review hotels, he is more effective at his job the more demanding he is, and thus the more liable to be disappointed. In one establishment he is given the wrong room key, and finds himself spying on a porn shoot through a crack in the door. Later the director, a woman, comes to his

room to explain, and the two have a drink. The selling-point of the website she runs is that all the films are set in hotel rooms, and so he sees her as a sort of distant professional cousin.

Apart from this coincidence, little is really exchanged in their encounter. But in the weeks that follow, the narrator pursues her from town to town, trying to guess her next shooting location and hoping to run into her. She rejects his attempts to make contact, but this does not deter him.

The kinship the narrator feels between himself and the woman is a tenuous pretext for such a quest. And so while it stretches credibility as narrative, the commentary that emerges is all the clearer for it. Montes reminds us that the ultimate pornographic fantasy is that porn should come to life and so no longer involve representation. Fantasies live by their fictitiousness, though, so the voyeur has a certain amount invested in not realizing them. An image of the novel's narrator on a hotel balcony, watching the occupants of another hotel opposite and hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman, could serve to illustrate his increasing detachment from his own life: "Leaning against the railing, I let the hours slip by". The narrator of *La vida de hotel* spends much of the novel in a purgatory of his own deliberate creation.

He is the subject of another entrapment, too. He is lonely, and his real name is now used so little that it seems to him "more pseudonym than the pseudonym"; writing has become his refuge. Just as images replace experience for the porn addict, so words perform the same function for our anti-hero. He can scarcely have an experience, however brief, before he is translating it either into the notes that form the novel we are reading, or the reviews that are interspersed between chapters. These rather fussy, nostalgic dispatches are a convincing and entertaining invention, and give texture to the characterization: as well as a painstaking account of the man's thoughts, we have the public persona that he presents. The gaps between these two performances speak eloquently of the distance that separates our actions from the stories that we tell about ourselves.

OLLIE BROCK

Literary Criticism

Claire Chambers, editor

BRITISH MUSLIM FICTIONS

Interviews with contemporary writers

368pp. Palgrave. Paperback, £18.99.

978 0 230 30878 7

The interviews in *British Muslim Fictions*, edited by Claire Chambers, offer a heterogeneous mixture of voices. Some of these writers were born in Britain (Hanif Kureishi and Zahid Hussain), while others came to it as teenagers (Aamer Hussein and Nadeem Aslam), or adults (Fadia Faqir, Tariq Ali, Abdulrazak Gurnah and Ahdaf

in the 1970s, to Gurnah's depictions of the plights of an asylum seeker in *By the Sea*. They are generally uncomfortable with the label implicit in Claire Chambers's title. As Robin Yassin-Kassab says, "I want to be a writer, not a Muslim, Arab or British writer. But I'm not concerned, so long as people aren't using it to reinforce stereotypes".

Critical categorization can lead to narrow-minded views as to the "ideal" directions these writers should take. It is not necessarily a cause for rejoicing when Chambers writes in her conclusion that the "recognition that [British Muslim writers'] work forms a unique generic category is growing". An apt example of why comes in the bizarre comments made by Jonathan Ruppin, one of the judges of the Muslim Writers Awards in 2011, which passed over *The Cloud Messenger* by Aamer Hussein as the "easy choice" because its protagonist, Mehran, "retained his appreciation for Islamic culture while assimilating successfully into Western society".

Considering that six of the thirteen authors are linked to Pakistan, *British Muslim Fictions* would be well served by being read alongside *Granta's* impressive "Pakistan" issue, which features work by Aslam, Shamsee and Hussein. The brief essays that preface the interviews are intelligent and concise; and although one would have hoped for longer, more detailed interviews, *British Muslim Fictions* provides a welcome opportunity to engage with old favourites and talented newcomers alike. Chambers – who is working on the follow-up to this volume, "a monograph on artistic representations of British Muslims, 1966–present" – has done an exemplary job.

ANDRÉ NAFFIS-SAHELY

Kate Thomas

POSTAL PLEASURES

Sex, scandal, and Victorian letters

304pp. Oxford University Press. Paperback,

£15.99 (US \$24.95).

978 0 19 9730 91 9

While many eighteenth-century British novelists chose the epistolary form to stage their narratives, nineteenth-century culture became increasingly interested in the technologies and institutions that made such exchanges possible. Kate Thomas in *Postal Pleasures: Sex, scandal, and Victorian letters*, makes a strong case for the erotic content of an age's fascination with the Royal Mail. The promiscuous postbox, whose ever-open mouth solicited messages unchecked, metonymized an avowedly universal service, enabling exchanges between "all sorts and conditions of men" and women. The system's efficiency could itself be a turn-on. Men fantasized about being parcels in the "pneumatic despatch tunnels" criss-crossing underground London, cramming themselves into tubes to be shuffled around together in the dark. Queer impulses have often been

tion of the unevenly applied "Gross Indecency" laws. Thomas underlines the postal character of the affair, demonstrating persuasively that the youths' regally stamped uniforms were as much matters of anxiety for contemporary moralists as thrills for their patrons: as the first chapter suggests, "Having sex with a telegraph boy was a way of having sex with Queen and country, with officialdom". Elsewhere, it is inevitable that Anthony Trollope, who worked for the Post Office for thirty years, should feature: his "invention" of the pillarbox is a well-circulated myth. But a stimulating interpretation of Thomas Hardy's neglected novel *The Laodicean* (1881) is surprising, linking the telegraphic connectivity of an ancient castle inherited by the protagonist Paula Power, to her sexual ambiguity. Another chapter's emphasis on the material networks beneath Anglo-Saxon global bloodlines promised more than it delivered, however, drawing on a few too many sources, insufficiently bridged.

Like much Queer scholarship, Kate Thomas's persistently entertaining prose is energized by puns. Their piquancy is variable – "(b)analit", "mail/male" etc – and at times her fondness for imparting readerly frisson through anachronistic innuendo runs against the sophisticated thinking that underpins this important work.

MATTHEW INGLEBY

Religion

Paul Murray OP

IN THE GRIP OF LIGHT

The dark and bright journey of Christian contemplation

118pp. Bloomsbury. Paperback, £10.99.

978 1 4411 4550 5

There are three lectures in Paul Murray's short book on Christian contemplative prayer, one given to a non-specialist audience, and the others to fellow Dominicans. Fr Murray's brief introductory chapter promises – with quotations unnervingly ranging from the ecstasies of St Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) to the caution of T. S. Eliot by way of the rarefied *Cloud of Unknowing* and the inclusive optimism of the French Jesuit Jean Pierre de Caussade – that the lectures will describe the journey of the soul towards God.

The first lecture suggests a familiar pattern, redescribed by Murray as falling into sin, falling into grace and falling in love with God, to explain the progress of contemplative prayer. He quotes well, if rather predictably, but has no space to contextualize the different kinds of experience recorded by Pascal, John of the Cross, Augustine, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and several others.

The second lecture concentrates on one of St Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs. The focus is here sharper, and the lecture's