

Reviews

Eat, Drink and Make Merry?

Paul Roberts, *The End of Food: The Coming Crisis in the World Food Industry*, Bloomsbury, 416 pages, ISBN 9780747588818, £12.99

The author of *The End of Oil* has now written an equally well researched study of what he quite properly calls ‘the Food Industry’. For that is what the mass production of cheap food has become, but cannot be continued much longer for several reasons. The first is that large scale production of grains in the main producing areas – North America, Argentina, Australia – needs great quantities of water, and we are using up the supplies, and that is even before climate change reduces them. The second is that more and more grain is being used to increase meat production to meet demand in the newly rich populations of Asia, and now also to provide bio-fuel to replace failing oil and gas. The third is the very failing reserves of oil and gas, which provide the base of the food industry, its mechanisation, transport and the raw material for its fertilisers and pesticides. The fourth, which already worries some people most, is the growing danger of pandemic disease – with possible destruction of all fowls and much livestock – following from concentrated animal production and inadequate inspection.

This is a pretty alarming list of problems for which answers are simply not apparent. The evidence for each of the four problems is rigorously examined by the author. What he believes to be fundamentally wrong with the whole current food system is that the demand for production of the greatest possible quantity at the lowest possible cost has involved larger and larger scale, until a very small number of giant corporations own or control global output. This is to be found in the sale of seeds, the growing of crops, rearing of cattle and hogs, shepherding, battery chicken farming, and the processing, transporting and retailing of the final produce. At each stage just two or three giant companies dominate the world market, and to keep lowering costs they must keep expanding sales. Huge resources of energy and chemicals are consumed beyond what is sustainable, and at the same time vast quantities go to waste. Despite rigid controls, pandemics can easily occur.

The conclusions from this analysis are pretty clear. To survive, the human race will need very soon to adopt a totally different way of feeding ourselves, and an end to the present global system. Paul Roberts quotes the Cuban success in refashioning its food production on a sustainable model,

as one experiment forced upon the Cubans by the cutting off of Soviet oil supplies and the boycott of Cuban trade with the US. This experiment could show the way to produce food without oil, fertilisers and pesticides. But Roberts warns that Cuba is still short of meat and dairy products, and had special advantages of a warm, wet climate, large reserves of labour, and an authoritarian political regime that all helped to make such a major change possible. An increase of vegetable growing and of small live stock in gardens and allotments is already taking place in the United States and in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, but the scale is still minute in relation to what is needed.

Paul Roberts proposes as an essential first step state intervention to end the globalisation of food production and to require that it be regionalised. This would at least reduce transport costs and the spread of epidemics, and Roberts argues that it would be more climate friendly and energy efficient. But he does not believe that the spread of markets retailing the produce of small farmers is a practical solution either from the point of view of cost or of food safety. The problem of a world food system that results in one fifth of the world's people starving, while at the other extreme roughly the same number are dying of obesity, requires radical new thinking. To replace the meat industry, Roberts puts much faith in the development of aquaculture, and especially the latest forms of open water production which create less pollution and generate less disease than current fish farming. Fish convert feed into protein far more efficiently than land animals.

Some such minimal solutions may be adopted, but the will to make a fundamental change in the now firmly established habits of eating convenience foods is lacking, even more than the determination to use less energy and create less CO₂. The attractions of a return to home cooking, gardening and convivial family meals seem not to be strong enough to change our way of living. Perhaps Roberts is right, that only hunger and cold, from lack of food and power, will force us to make a better world. In the mean time we eat, drink and make merry.

Michael Barratt Brown

South America Ahoy!

Tariq Ali, *Pirates of the Caribbean – Axis of Hope* (revised edition), Verso, 308 pages, paperback ISBN 9781844672486, £8.99

Tariq Ali has been an ever-present figure on the British and international

Left for more years than the reviewer cares to remember, and always an inspirational figure battling against the odds on a wide variety of issues. Activist, writer, broadcaster, a true socialist polymath, he might be getting ready to draw his pension, but as this text makes clear, he has lost none of his hopes for a truly radical break with the current global dispensation. Neither has his ageing inclined him to join the ranks of those he describes as “‘matured” and crumbled or, to put it bluntly, sold out’.

In fact the first chapter, ‘The Age of Disinformation’, deals with the ‘mass conversion’ triggered by the collapse of Soviet ‘socialism’ and the consequent rallying of erstwhile former friends of the Left around the banner of the Washington Consensus and the ‘neo-liberal free market’. In what might be termed a spirited ‘piratical’ defence, Ali cuts a swathe through the underpinnings of the Washington Consensus and their hirelings within the Western media who seek to isolate, undermine and misrepresent the evolving radical movements of the South American continent, rendering Venezuela and Bolivia in particular to the pariah status so successfully foisted onto Cuba, in the popular captive Western mind-set. Lambasting the BBC and ABC as the ‘disinformation corporations’, and singling out *The Economist* and the *Financial Times* for their predictably biased treatment of the coup to unseat Chávez, he has some deservedly harsh words indeed for the community of ‘reptilian journalists’ concerned. Also mentioned in dispatches is Denis MacShane, Labour MP for Rotherham and former Minister for Europe no less, who worries that ‘Tony Blair is very disturbed about the turn to the Left in Latin America’ and categorises Chávez as a ‘ranting demagogue’. The French media fare little better, *Le Monde* and *Libération* being particularly sad cases whose coverage, the author maintains, did undoubtedly deteriorate after 11 September 2001, taking an avowedly ‘Atlanticist posture’. This is an exhilarating and stimulating chapter, which not only trounces the detractors but demonstrates the efficacy and need for books such as this to redress the information deficit.

After this rousing introductory chapter the rest of the book broadly maps out the current picture, within a concise historical outline, of Venezuelan, Bolivian and Cuban politics, situating the analysis in the overall context of South American and global politics; a fairly tall order even for a book of 300 pages, but one which the author manages to accomplish with both panache and insight. Ali shows a clear grasp of the differences between these radicalised nations, and how their differing historical experiences have influenced the forms their struggles have adopted. The ramifications of Cuba’s guerrilla war of liberation and subsequent US blockade contrasts

with the parliamentary constitutional gaining of power by the Left in Bolivia and Venezuela. In contrast, however, many threads tie them together: the role of the military; the participation of the indigenous population in the struggle for economic and social liberation; the problems of structural racism. Differences there may be, but there is always one common denominator. The main shared stumbling block to any continental advance is the opposition of the United States and its allies, and herein lies the primary purpose of this book: to undermine the Washington Consensus and its hold over public opinion and to provide a vehicle of support for these radical movements. This is not to say that the book shies away from mentioning difficulties, past and present, particularly with regard to Cuba. On the other hand, Ali finds the Workers Party administration in Brazil a great disappointment and scathingly refers to President Lula da Silva as the ‘tropical Tony Blair’, with good reason. Also discussed, albeit briefly, is the attempt by the Kirchner administration in Argentina to find a middle course between, as the book puts it, ‘a third way between Chávez and Lula’.

The book contains some interesting passages on the life and times of Simon Bolivar and his importance for a new generation of South American revolutionaries. Bolivar, dismissed by Marx, as that ‘dastardly, most miserable and meanest of blackguards’ was a colourful yet determined revolutionary whose privileged upbringing allowed an education in the new radicalism sweeping Europe in the late 18th century. These ideas combined with his observations of the reality of colonial life in South America caused him to become the accomplished political and military leader so revered by today’s South American revolutionaries. He died in relative obscurity, a disappointed and resentful man, having been sidelined by the more grasping of his military colleagues, but still willing to fight on to end colonialism. In addition, Bolivar’s failure to effectively confront slavery, in spite of the support he received from the Black revolutionaries of Haiti, was, as the book makes clear, a ‘tragic weakness’. One perhaps Marx had in mind?

As this is an updated revision of an earlier book it takes us up to the failed referendum of 2007 in Venezuela, and makes a number of observations regarding this. Firstly, too many issues were lumped together, and no provision was made to record the vote, reform by reform. As a result many issues, where there was probably a majority, were rejected, a valid point in the context of such a small margin for rejection overall. Secondly, the campaign was rushed, which has been accepted by many commentators and Chávez himself, but in addition Ali makes the point that

if the individual proposals of the referendum had been discussed on a proposal by proposal basis it would have forced the Chavistas to campaign on a more effective 'grassroots' basis.

The book concludes with extensive appendices containing the relatively recent speech of Chávez at the UN and the speech by Evo Morales, 'Power to the People', as well as an interview with a former military colleague of Chávez. The latter is fascinating, encompassing as it does the abortive Chávez coup of 1992 and the abortive anti-Chávez coup of 2002, retold by an actual participant, Luis Reyes Reyes (a former military officer, now a state governor). In general, this book is an invigorating introduction to the new politics of South America and, as Ali himself states, it is 'not a Cuban style revolution, but a form of radical social democracy that is today unacceptable to the Washington Consensus'. No book can hope to keep pace with the twists and turns of political developments in the region, but reading this book will help to explain the undoubted difficulties and contradictions that the radical movements in South America have already confronted, and will have to confront, as well inspiring optimism for change.

John Daniels

Illegal Invasion

Gwynne Dyer, *After Iraq: Where Next for the Middle East?*, Yale University Press, 272 pages, hardback ISBN 9780300137354, £16.99

If some of the British public are confused about Middle East affairs it could be because the BBC is also confused as to its role in reporting the war in Iraq. The BBC is reluctant to mention in all its reports on Iraq that the invasion was illegal. Since the BBC lost its Chairman of Governors and its Director General for reporting, accurately, that the intelligence on Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction was being manipulated into a catalogue of lies, it is hardly surprising that some of those who remain in the BBC now report the war as one deserving of public support. But that provides only false comfort for the bereaved relatives and friends of those killed, and it will lead to another generation of misled young people.

Gwynne Dyer's readable, up-to-date and well researched book provides an intelligible survey of Middle East affairs. He was Senior Lecturer in Middle Eastern and Military Studies at the Royal Military Academy,

Sandhurst, before becoming a freelance analyst and writer with a twice weekly column published in 175 newspapers in 45 countries. Here is a sample of his writing, and his probing style.

‘In January 2002, the month after the last resistance in Afghanistan had been quelled, Bush devoted his State of the Union speech to telling the American public about his discovery of the “axis of evil”, and by the end of that speech it was quite clear that the United States was going to invade Iraq. Having cheated the Islamists of an easy success in Afghanistan, Bush gave them a free kick, for the invasion of Iraq was everything that bin Laden had hoped the invasion of Afghanistan would be: 130,000 young US soldiers fighting their way through a landscape filled with terrified civilians, calling on the enormous firepower available to them whenever there seemed to be a problem, and then a prolonged, in-your-face military occupation in which Americans with little knowledge of the country and none of the language ran everything – and ran it very badly. No wonder it blew up in their faces, and began producing a steady stream of images, from Abu Ghraib to Fallujah, that horrified Muslims everywhere. Bin Laden had no way of foreseeing the American invasion of Iraq, but it certainly has produced the radicalisation of opinion in the Arab world that he had been hoping for.’

The Nuremburg trials of alleged war criminals after World War Two established the principle for the United Nations Organisation that an unprovoked attack on one country by another was a crime in international law. Let us hope that our news media make no mistake either that an occupation to govern without consent is the ultimate in human rights abuses, subsuming all others. No surprise then that the Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, the Secretary General of the UN, General Sir Michael Rose, the Rt. Hon. E W Thomas and many other jurists, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and over one million protesters in the UK alone took the view that the invasion of Iraq without the authority of the UN was illegal. Now there are similar concerns about a threatened attack on Iran – another country with a large proportion of the world’s oil reserves.

Dyer’s appraisal of the consequences of an attack on Iran by the United States or by Israel is remarkably close to that offered more recently by Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency, whose inspectors have so far found no evidence of manufacture of a nuclear weapon there. ElBaradei predicted ‘a ball of fire’ not confined to the Middle East. Dyer wrote many pages describing several possible severe scenarios, but with one firm conclusion: most Middle East states supportive of an American presence in the Middle East would be under much pressure to cause them to leave.

When I was ten years old, in 1939, I knew about Hitler's plan to attack Poland because my teacher, who was also the headmaster, explained the news over a map of Europe every week. Mr Ramsbottom, for that was his name, of Moss Street Council School, Blackburn, communicated his dread of war even though it was not yet a fact. When I talk to 12 year old pupils and 17 year old students about human rights and the 'War on Terror' as a representative of Amnesty International, I am surprised to find that they know very little about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In a class of 12 year old pupils only one, a boy, knew that Britain was at war, and that the country was Iraq. There must be few teachers like Mr Ramsbottom ready to discuss current affairs routinely with their pupils, and not enough parents to encourage them to take an interest. The 17 year old students were only slightly better informed. They had concerns about the war on terror out of all proportion to the terror that has been wrought by governments. A few thought that restoring the death penalty might help.

Dyer has no illusions about the error and futility of the war in Iraq, and the damage done not only to the people and infrastructure of Iraq – probably by now one million dead and two million refugees – but also to international law and to the United Nations. His estimates of the dangers to world peace of the threatened attacks by George W Bush and Israel on Iran need to be appraised by a larger population of parents and teachers. His speculations are well founded on the recent history of Western involvement in the countries surrounding Iraq, which he examines in the early part of the book. The speculations will be particularly useful to those criminally responsible for the illegal invasion of 2003 who remain in power – perhaps only briefly – but who still have the opportunity to effect radical changes in policy to bring about reconstruction and perhaps even peace.

Christopher Gifford

A Script for Freedom

***These are the Times: A Life of Thomas Paine*, a screenplay by Trevor Griffiths, Spokesman Books, 210 pages, ISBN 9780851246956, £15**

Screenplays are not often published; they are even less often reviewed. A film is so much the product of a collective effort that a screenplay is regarded as being in some way incomplete until it has been filmed, and yet if the same principle were applied to a play it would seem patently absurd.

No one suggests that a play cannot be discussed except in the form of a specific production. We understand the relationship between the screenplay and the film differently because of the vast corporate machinery that is required to make and distribute a film. The writer is dwarfed and seems to be an almost subsidiary figure to the director. But the distinction between screen and stage has no artistic foundation. That becomes clear when we have the opportunity to read a screenplay of the calibre of Trevor Griffiths' *These are the Times*. This is a work that stands in its own right as a piece of literature.

Griffiths is perhaps best known for having co-written the film *Reds* (1981) with Warren Beatty. That film told the story of the American revolutionary John Reed who visited the Soviet Union and wrote *Ten Days that Shook the World*, an account of the Russian Revolution. Griffiths was nominated for an Oscar for that screenplay and won a Writers Guild of America Award.

Revolution has been a major theme in all of Griffiths' work for cinema, television and the theatre. His play *Occupations* dealt with Antonio Gramsci's role in the Turin factory occupations of 1920. *The Party* was concerned with the Paris events of 1968 and the reaction to them of a group of intellectuals, writers and artists who encounter the leader of a revolutionary party. It was drawn from life and reflected Griffiths' own experience in that period. The figure of John Tagg, the revolutionary, was based on Gerry Healy, leader of the Socialist Labour League, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. *Absolute Beginners* dramatised the Bolshevik/Menshevik split in the Russian Social Democratic Party. *All Good Men* concerned the conflict between parliamentary reformism and revolutionary politics that is expressed in the relationship between a Labour Member of Parliament and his son. It was broadcast during the three-day week that the Conservative Government of Edward Heath imposed as it clashed with the miners.

Griffiths' work has been informed and shaped by the political experiences of the working class in Britain. He was born in Manchester in 1935. His father worked in the chemical industry. Griffiths was one of the first generation of working class youth to benefit from the 1944 Education Act. He went to Manchester University where he studied English. He was part of a group of new writers including David Mercer, Ken Loach, Jim Allen and Dennis Potter who were associated with Tony Garnett, who brought a new realism to British television in the 1960s. In the theatre, where much of his work has been done, he is one of a group of politicized playwrights that includes David Hare, Howard Brenton and David Edgar.

Yet Griffiths is a distinctive voice among his contemporaries. Whereas many of them seem to want to express a sense of disillusionment, Griffiths resists that prevalent intellectual trend. His writing is never cynical. That is surprising because the disillusionment has a real social basis in the position of intellectuals in capitalist society.

In *The Party*, John Tagg says to the intellectuals gathered at the house of Joe Shawcross: 'In 1919 London dockers went on strike and refused to load munitions for the White armies fighting against the Russian revolution. In 1944 dockers in Amsterdam refused to help the Nazis transport Jews to concentration camps. What can *you* do? You can't strike and refuse to handle American cargoes until they get out of Vietnam. You're outside the productive process. You have only the word. And you cannot make it become the deed. And because the people who have the power seem uneager to use it, you develop this ... cynicism ... this contempt.'

Griffiths' strength is that he knows what the word can and cannot do. He is aware of the limitations of words, but he has respect for his own craft as a writer. Paine is in many ways the ideal subject for him because Paine was a man of words. He was not like Washington a soldier, or like Jefferson a statesman, although he shared with both an interest in science, and he was certainly not a businessman like Morris. His power lay in his words and their ability to give expression to, and to influence the development of, social consciousness in a revolutionary period. His greatness lay in his willingness to carry on doing that in a period when the revolutionary impetus was temporarily spent.

In another respect, too, Paine is the ideal subject for Griffiths. Paine was an Englishman who became a citizen of France and of America. He regarded himself as a citizen of the world. Griffiths differs from many of the representatives of his generation of socialist-minded writers in that he has never been parochial in his outlook, either in a literary or a political sense.

Even when dealing with what might be thought of as British themes, his work has always taken in a wider horizon. His *Country*, which was a BBC *Play for Today*, is set in 1945 on the eve of the election that was to bring the Labour Party to power. It featured an English upper class family who find the stables of their country home invaded by homeless people. Within the space of a short and beautifully crafted piece, Griffiths shows how the British political élite adapted to the threat that the working class posed to them and their way of life.

In many ways *Country* is a quintessentially English piece. That

character is emphasised by the way in which it was filmed. It could almost be any one of the nostalgic costume dramas in which British television excels. But Griffiths' portrayal of the English upper class was influenced by his earlier adaptation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. His upper class characters have a depth and pathos that takes the drama to the level of serious art and gives to the class struggle in which they are involved an immediacy and intensity that is deeply disturbing. This is not a comfortable evening's entertainment. The viewer will never take the tour of an English stately home in quite the same way again. Nor will they view post-war British history in quite the same way again. Griffiths reveals the current of class struggle that runs just below the complacent surface of the parliamentary democracy that has dominated the public face of post-war political life.

A great deal of Griffiths' work for television is now almost unobtainable. His *Bill Brand* (1976), a Thames Television series about a left-wing Labour MP, and his *Food for Ravens* (BBC 1997), which was about Aneurin Bevan and the foundation of the National Health Service, seem to have vanished. The BBC commissioned *Food for Ravens* to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Bevan's birth, but then refused to network it and restricted it to a late night slot on BBC Wales.

His reputation has been a victim of the continuing rightward trajectory of British politics. Griffiths' kind of political drama is generally regarded as outmoded. There could be no greater contrast with the late 1960s and mid 1970s. Griffiths' reputation was then at its zenith. When *The Party* was first performed by the National Theatre at the Old Vic in 1973, Sir Laurence Olivier played the part of John Tagg the Glaswegian Trotskyist. It played to packed houses and brought Griffiths enthusiastic offers from television.

What the Tom Paine screenplay demonstrates is that even in the present period of eclipse Griffiths' focus on the guiding themes of his art has not lessened and his powers as a writer have, if anything, sharpened. The screenplay is a remarkable piece of work. Griffiths has always had the ability that a great portrait painter has to get inside the mind of his subject and present the inner essence of that character on the page. In *The Party* we see a revolutionary leader drawn to the very life. In *These are the Times* we have the real, living, breathing Tom Paine before us. Paine comes off the page and challenges us.

Paine emerges in a way that no history book or biography has ever presented him. That is no easy task because he was a difficult man, at war with the times that produced him; one of the finest products of his times

and yet one of the most reviled. It was not easy for his contemporaries to comprehend Paine's restless character and it is not easy for us to place him. He remains a revolutionary whether in the eighteenth century or the twenty-first. For Paine the revolution did not end when the British quit America, and if he walked in on us today it would not have ended now. His project was world revolution. The injustices and the inequalities that he condemned in the eighteenth century are still with us today and Griffiths' screenplay makes an explicit connection between then and now.

In the final scene of the film, Paine's grave lies open and we hear him reading his words from *Agrarian Justice*. 'The contrast of affluence and wretchedness, continually meeting and offending the eye is like dead and living bodies chained together ...' Griffiths' directions run: 'The shot tilts suddenly, reveals a modern highway, heavy with traffic, ripping past New Rochelle. Mixes with the south bound flow, to today's New York City and its images of wretchedness and affluence ...'

Paine's voice continues reading: '... The great mass of the poor are become an hereditary race, and it is next to impossible for them to get out of that state of themselves ... The condition of millions in every country ... is now far worse than if they had been born before civilisation began ...'

The shot returns to the open grave and Paine calls for a 'revolution in the state of civilization.'

In this immensely economical scene, Griffiths has summed up both Paine's revolutionary project and its relevance for today without being in the least didactic. In a matter of a few hundred words that would perhaps make a few minutes of film he has succeeded in creating a self-expanding concept that opens up to fill our minds. We see far more than he presents.

Is there some deception here? We are so accustomed to being manipulated in the cinema it is impossible not to ask. It is surely part of the stock in trade of any competent Hollywood screenwriter to know their way round the levers of human perception. Most use their knowledge in a cynical way. The better ones use it to entertain us. But Griffiths is doing more than even the best of the better screenwriters. Just as he writes characters that are fully human by portraying the essence of their souls, so he allows his audience to be fully human by appealing to what is essential in their social being. Someone coming out of this film would know more about Tom Paine for sure, but they would also know more about themselves.

It is possible that in the present political climate this film will never be made, but it is far more likely that there will come a moment when it has

to be made because it will so closely express the consciousness of masses of people. In the meantime, buy the screenplay.

Ann Talbot

The Capitalist Frankenstein

Francis Wheen, *Marx's Das Kapital : A Biography* , Atlantic Books, 128 pages, ISBN 9781843544012, £7.99

Marx's *Das Kapital* is frequently dismissed as unreadable because of the difficult discussion of commodities in the very first chapter, and unusable because of the manifest failure of his prophesy that capitalism would be supplanted by socialism. But as Francis Wheen, who wrote one of the best full length biographies of Marx, explains in this brilliant little short biography: 'Marx's errors or unfulfilled prophecies about capitalism are eclipsed and transcended by the piercing accuracy with which he revealed the nature of the beast'. And it was as a *Frankenstein* monster that he saw capitalism, one that would destroy its own creator.

The demise of capitalism, which Marx expected, did not come in his lifetime, but within 75 years of his death, half the world – from Albania to Zimbabwe – albeit for a short time, lived under regimes that had rejected the rule of capital in favour of some form of socialism. The book, however, as Wheen argues most cogently, should not be read as prophecy or prescription, but for its analysis of the workings of the capitalist system. It continues to generate inequality, as Marx noted, not only inside even the richest countries, but also between countries on a world-wide scale. The productivity of labour is steadily increased, all forms of consumer goods are more widely available – cars, air travel, washing machines, television, mobile phones — but rather than increasing leisure time for the workers, hours are longer ('the average British employee' as Wheen quotes, 'now puts in 80,224 hours over his or her working life, as against 69,000 hours in 1981').

Far from being ended, exploitation of the workers, that is the proportion of the value of what they produce which is taken off them by the capitalist, increases all the time, 'whether their wage be high or low', as Marx insisted. In 1998, as Wheen records, 'meltdown in Russia, currency collapse in Asia and market panic around the world prompted the *Financial Times* (not a socialist paper) to wonder if we had moved from the triumph of global capitalism to its crisis in barely a decade'. The

banking crisis of 2007-8 must raise the question more insistently. We should not expect the system shortly to collapse, but we should recognise how right Marx was to reveal the fundamental weakness of a system marked by capital accumulation at one pole and declining real income of workers at the other.

What, above all, Wheen makes clear about Marx's *Das Kapital* is the immense richness of allusion and illustration in the writing. Marx was never satisfied that he had got the picture quite right – and delayed publication of Volume One for many years and left the later volumes for his friend, Frederick Engels, to reconstruct from a mass of notes and drafts. It is this richness, drawn from Marx's voluminous reading in English classical literature and in official publications, that makes it so rewarding to go back to reading what he wrote 150 years ago. And the wealth of language will not disappoint. Just listen to Marx extolling the contribution of capitalists to human development as well as their threat to our humanity:

'The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors", and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment". It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value ...'

How could we not recognise that today?

Michael Barratt Brown

Roll up! Roll up!

Sara Gruen, *Water for Elephants*, Hodder & Stoughton, 418 pages, paperback ISBN 9780340962725, £7.99

The posters are going up all over town. They are adorned with beautiful white horses, flying trapeze artists, the jolly man in his black top hat and red tails, a lion or two, and the familiar face with the make-up and a red nose. A circus is coming to town, bringing with it untold joy for the spectators who watch the big top being erected. Behind the scenes the less familiar faces of the circus work hard to make the illusion possible, and the performers' graceful actions make it all seem so very simple to fly through the air. Similarly, Sara Gruen's beautiful writing makes it seem so easy to

create a wonderful work of fiction.

Water for Elephants takes the reader back stage with access to all areas. The narrator, Jacob Jankowski, takes a look back at his life in the circus, and what a life it turns out to be. It is the 1930s and the depression has hit America hard, and the death of his parents has hit Jacob harder still. Before he is to sit his final veterinary exams at Cornell, he learns that he is orphaned and penniless. His head is reeling with this news as he makes his way into the wilderness. After a long walk in no particular direction, a train comes thundering towards him, he runs to catch one of the many cars, and lunges himself onto it and into a life beyond his wildest expectations.

This imaginary tale of one man's life in the circus combines romance with horror. Sara Gruen's narrative style reflects the 'CHUNK-a-chunk-a-chunk-a-chunk' of the train that transports Jacob around America. The tempo is quick, and every detail of this amazing journey fills the readers senses, making you cry out for more. A fabulous read that lingers long after it's finished, a bit like the circus itself.

Abi Rhodes



scottish left review

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