

would show her in the car ready to leave, contemplating the camera screen and wearing “an indefinable smile ... without real joy, but triumphant”.

The original self-portrait-with-portrait was a Venetian painting from 1715, in which the artist holds a likeness not of her child, but of her sister, rendered in what Weil finds to be a “somewhat mawkish” way. The elements of Weil’s three-stroke episodes never quite match up, refracting rather than mirroring, hinting at unspoken questions to self, self-image and history in a brave, original and unsettling work.

LORNA SCOTT FOX

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## Spanish fiction

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**Antonio Muñoz Molina**

TUS PASOS EN LA ESCALERA

320pp. Planeta. €19.90.

978 84 322 3507 8

Early in Antonio Muñoz Molina’s *Tus Pasos en la escalera* (Your Steps on the Staircase), the narrator describes the view across Lisbon from his new flat in hackneyed, mawkish terms. This is the first hint we get of his unreliability. Later we learn that he has deluded himself into thinking that his ex-girlfriend will leave her home in the United States to join him.

Bruno (his name only gets mentioned once) is Spanish and has previously held down a menial job in New York. The cornerstone of his happiness has been his relationship with Cecilia, a beautiful neuroscientist whose attraction to this decent but seemingly charmless man remains unexplained. Various reverses of fortune oblige the couple (or so Bruno thinks) to settle in Europe. He flies back first to set up home in Portugal, then to endure a long, melancholy wait. The novel’s fundamental theme – the fear of ending up alone – is underscored by a parallel between Bruno and the hero of the book he is reading while yearning for Cecilia. It is a memoir by a scientist who spent five desolate months in a cabin at the South Pole. Both men face unfamiliar environments in their own company; both fear a lonely death. But whereas the scientist is rescued alive from his Antarctic expedition, Bruno’s hoped-for source of deliverance is less reliable.

At first, *Tus pasos en la escalera* feels narrow and unappealing, despite glances at questions of burning relevance such as climate change and political populism. The language is heavy with cliché. Once the realization dawns that this style mirrors Bruno’s character, however, it becomes easier to see the novel as an effective reflection of his tragic self-deceit – and also, perhaps, of a universal fear of abandonment.

EMMANUEL ORDÓÑEZ ANGULO

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## Location, location

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**Colin Sackett**

PRINTED LANDSCAPE

112pp. Uniformbooks. Paperback, £12.

978 1 910010 19 8

The work of the pioneering British land artist Richard Long hovers over Colin Sackett’s *Printed Landscape*. One of Long’s seminal works is a “Line Made By Walking”, a photograph of a path he flattened in the grass

by walking backwards and forwards through a field in Wiltshire. It is simultaneously a record of his presence and of its erasure. By photographing the path, Long acknowledges the impermanence of his physical intervention in the landscape even as he records it.

*Printed Landscape* is similarly interested in the provisionality of human traces. Maps, paintings, verbal descriptions and grid coordinates all feature here, interspersed with the occasional personal anecdote. These flashes of autobiography are lyrical and intriguing. The section “Aggregate” describes the geography of Sackett’s childhood, “a hundred square kilometres that are part of the London Boroughs of Sutton, Merton and Croydon”. Sackett touchingly evokes the sense of dissonance that returning to an intimate landscape can bring. “I would travel out to this area and walk from one familiar place to another. There seemed to me to be specific ideas of connectedness, a psychological understanding of the way locations are related to each other.” This underlying nostalgia perhaps explains the book’s restless hoarding of landscape memorabilia.

There is a rough geographical focus – the River Axe in Devon, and southwest London and Surrey – but the connecting logic binding this miscellany is obscure. One suspects, flicking through half a dozen pages of carefully reproduced watercress card labels, some degree of leg-pulling. But the humour in *Printed Landscape* is most often serious. In the sequence “Geeoogrraapphy”, for example, which gradually overlays maps of Sussex, one on top of the other, what starts as a recognizable rendering of place slowly morphs into a chaos of overprinted black ink: a tangle of letters and lines which seems to generate its own topography. Overall, *Printed Landscape* is a timely reminder that landscapes are not always comprehensible or beautiful; rather, they can be prickly, impenetrable and wilfully obscure. The same goes for their their textual representations.

ALEX DIGGINS

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## Happy endings

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**Edythe Haber**

TEFFI

A life of letters and of laughter

304pp. I. B. Tauris. £20

978 1 78831 258 5

In 1885, Nadezhda Lokhvitskaya went to see Leo Tolstoy in order to demand that he rewrite the ending of *War and Peace*. She ultimately chickened out and came away with an autograph – an understandable climbdown given that the world-famous writer was a grizzled sixty-seven and she only thirteen. Instead, this precocious teenager set about making her own happy endings, first in marriage – which went badly – and then as a professional writer at the heart of St Petersburg’s literary bohemia – which went very well indeed. Nadezhda was never comfortable in the traditional roles of wife and mother. But she thrived once her comic plays, poems and articles started to appear in Russia’s flourishing periodical press and especially when, in 1902, she acquired the pseudonym that would accompany her until her death in exile in Paris in 1952: Teffi. So successful were her sharply observed satires that, like a pop star or Brazilian footballer, one name proved enough and

the “Teffi” brand even came to sell sweets and perfume.

The exact origins of the name remain mysterious even to Edythe Haber, whose long-standing scholarly interest in Teffi has equipped this biography with an encyclopedic level of detail on every feuilleton and flirtation – two genres in which Teffi was prolific. As Haber acknowledges, Teffi’s shorter work in fiction, verse and journalism outshone her attempts at more serious long-form stuff. The same could be said of Haber’s biography, which is more enjoyable for the anecdotes than the plot. It is not that Teffi’s life was dull – far from it – but rather that she barely changed: the chutzpah, single-mindedness and love of storytelling that prompted her to tell off Tolstoy (well, almost) remained with her from pre-Revolutionary stardom to émigré penury. Come what may, Teffi always believed in the power of her gift and the power of laughter. When, during the chaos of the Second World War, she happened to read her own obituary, her response was to ask a potential publisher if he had any interest in her posthumous work. He did and, thanks to Haber and a number of recent translators of Teffi’s own writings, many future readers will too.

JAMIE RANN

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## Pop

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**Karl Whitney**

HIT FACTORIES

A journey through the industrial cities of

British pop

326pp. Weidenfel and Nicolson. £20.

978 1 4746 0740 7

“I began to wonder if, starting from this derelict site on the edge of an industrial estate, I could begin to trace the life and death of the British music industry through its physical locations, and through that come to understand Britain”, Karl Whitney writes after visiting a former record factory. From there, he set out to visit the heartlands of British music in the hopes of uncovering why different cities gave birth to different sounds. Apart from the voluntary omission of London, *Hit Factories* explores British musical cities from the north of England to the southwest via Scotland and Northern Ireland. The choices are, of course, subjective; other places could have been included, but his selection was motivated by his background as an Irish writer and academic living in Sunderland.

Along Whitney’s journey, we are reminded of how Strawberry Studio became a creative hot spot for Joy Division and Happy Mondays, and that Paul McCartney’s childhood home is now a museum (Whitney’s analysis of the lyrics to “Penny Lane” is linked to the street in Liverpool); we also learn about bands whose heritage is less well known, like the Animals, from Newcastle, and Black Sabbath, from Birmingham.

Whitney also includes Belfast, which produced Van Morrison and Stiff Little Fingers, but is rarely considered in books about pop music. He focuses on the input of immigrants from the Commonwealth in general, and the Caribbean in particular, and on the sounds of cities like Coventry (the Specials) and Bristol (Massive Attack and Tricky).

“You can only begin to remember what’s already gone”, Whitney states. Writing about

music and places does seem to demand distance and nostalgia, and certainly the author walks in the footsteps of the past, rather than exploring current music scenes – the “Bristol Sound” that he writes about in the last chapter is not the sound of Bristol today. Whitney reflects on the “importance of local scenes to the development of musical acts”, an idea a few writers have investigated city by city, including, for example, the Joy Division/New Order musician-turned-writer Peter Hook, on Manchester, and Paul Du Noyer on Liverpool. But *Hit Factories* succeeds as an interesting, sharp, swift overview of the UK’s pop music history.

MELISSA CHEMAM

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## Freaks

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**John Woolf**

THE WONDERS

Lifting the curtain on the freak show, circus and Victorian age

384pp. Michael O’Mara. £20.

978 1 78243 993 6

In *The Wonders*, John Woolf explores the personal lives of several “freaks” between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Using newly discovered material, including archival sources, private correspondence, personal memoirs and advertising material from the time, he disentangles the fantasy from the reality, simultaneously tracing the rise and fall of the freak show throughout the Victorian “Deformito-Mania” and shedding light on the lived experiences of people whose extraordinary bodies set them apart from the rest of society.

As Woolf recounts, it wasn’t until the end of the nineteenth century that the causes of various disabilities were understood: “freaks” were seen as wonders of the world and wonders of God, to be exploited for their difference and celebrated for their uniqueness. From the end of the nineteenth century, however, Darwinism and the progress of modern medicine led “freaks” to be regarded not as “wonders”, but as mistakes of nature. They became “errors” to be hidden from sight, and the freak show gradually became taboo. Woolf illustrates this shift through the stories of performers such as Charles Stratton, a 35-inch-tall man who became one of the world’s first international celebrities, and Joseph Merrick, the “Elephant Man”, who spent the end of his life institutionalized at the London Hospital: having lost the ability to support himself, he handed himself over for study.

But Woolf warns against any over-simplification: the performing world could be empowering for freaks, offering access to wealth, social status and education, but it was also highly exploitative. He reminds us that P. T. Barnum, the father of the modern American circus, started his career by exhibiting Joice Heth, an infirm elderly black woman with dementia. Barnum claimed Heth was a 161-year-old slave formerly belonging to the Washington family. When she finally died, after a gruelling nationwide tour, Barnum sold tickets to her public dissection.

Historically, freak show performers have been reduced to mere objects of fascination, but by focusing on the details of their lives, Woolf here gives voice to the members of this long-exploited minority.

LAURANE MARCHIVE