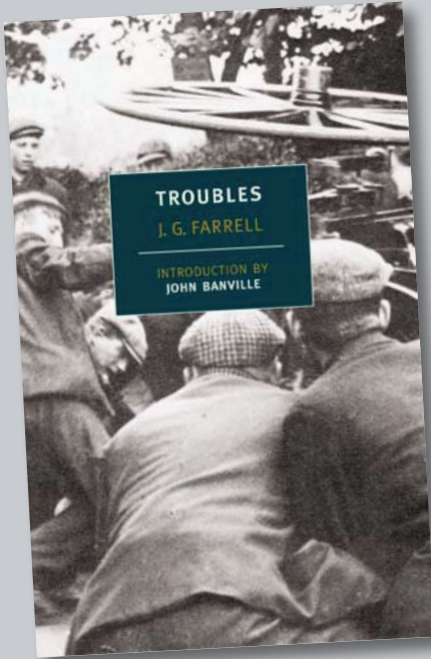


Reviews by Michael Grinter

TROUBLES by J G Farrell

Vintage



Should J G Farrell's *Troubles* win the upcoming Lost Booker prize (posthumously) – and *Brits Overseas* thinks it should – the author will be spinning in his grave. He famously denounced the business activities of the prize organizers after being awarded the Booker in 1973 for *The Siege of Krishnapur*.

Like *The Siege* and *The Singapore Grip* (1978), *Troubles* deals satirically with the collapse of Empire.

The leading protagonist in *Troubles* is the young Major Brendan Archer late of the blood soaked fields of WW1 Europe, arriving in Ireland to visit his fiancée.

Despite the death of his fiancée early in the novel the Major stays on in what is effectively the other great character of the book – the Majestic hotel – alongside his raving Tory would-have-been father-in-law Edward.

The crumbling edifice, which is the Majestic, is in its understated way, as symbolic of the Empire under siege as Singapore in *The Grip* and Krishnapur in the literal siege of the British outpost.

Because or despite of the fact Farrell was Irish, the satire is gentler, the poignancy deeper than in the later efforts; as the violence of the troubles play out on the streets; as Edward becomes barmier by the moment and as the hotel itself slowly disintegrates, the reader cannot help but empathise with the major's dogged attempts to aid and console the aged residents of the collapsing hotel.

Apart from the sensual descriptions that run effortlessly throughout the book, what one remembers is the humour pointing up through the prevailing mood of melancholia as in Edward's description of a lavender bed: "Planted by my wife." Pregnant pause: "Before she died." Indeed one of the great pleasures of the book is the wits ability to pop the balloon of pomposity and sadness.

SMALL WARS by Sadie Jones

Vintage

Sadie Jones might just be 40 years old but in the two novels she has published to date, *The Outcast* in 2008, and now *Small Wars*, she has vice-like grip on the 1950s.

In *The Outcast* she examined the suffocation of suburban ritual and routine, the sly snobbishness and prejudice.

At the heart of *Small Wars*, there is the similar underlying theme of getting by, or not as the case may be, when people are unable to express their feelings: unable to communicate their most basic needs.

Where Jones' latest novel is very different is in its setting amid soldiers and their families in a Cyprus torn apart through civil strife and the Greek determination to eject their colonizers.

Seen mostly through the eyes of the well-regarded Major Hal Treherne the story faces the moral concerns of war, and home and marriage, head-on as his marriage fails and a promising career lies in tatters.

The pitiless descriptions of low level fighting in the mountains of Troodos and the torture of child suspects is but an aspect of the ability for violence to breed violence and ultimately leads Traherne to his moral crisis and a resolution of sorts.

Jones writes with a purity uncommon among today's writers, and provides a forcefulness to the narrative that will make you want to finish the book in a single sitting.



STRANGE DAYS INDEED by Francis Wheen

Fourth Estate

In *Strange Days Indeed* author Francis Wheen does for the 70s what he did for the 80s in *How Mumbo Jumbo Conquered the World*: it holds a decade up to ridicule.

Those old enough to remember the ignominious 1970s now recall it as a decade of blackouts and three-day-weeks, the Vietnam War and poor fashion choices.

But perhaps, more than anything, it was a time of global paranoia – centred, it would seem at the White House where tricky Dicky Nixon lashed out at a vast host of real and imagined enemies before his shameful resignation following the Watergate scandal.

By 1974, the population of the US was waking up to the idea that a police state was not the exclusive preserve of the wicked, Communist USSR. With Nixon's behest the CIA had compiled files on more than 500,000 US citizens. Although it should be noted some deserved suspicion. Wheen notes that the husband of actress Jane Fonda, Tom Hayden lived on a commune that worshiped North Korea dictator Kim Il Sung where they sang each morning to the tune of "Maria" from *West Side Story*: Kim Il Sung, Kim Il Sung, Kim Il Sung.

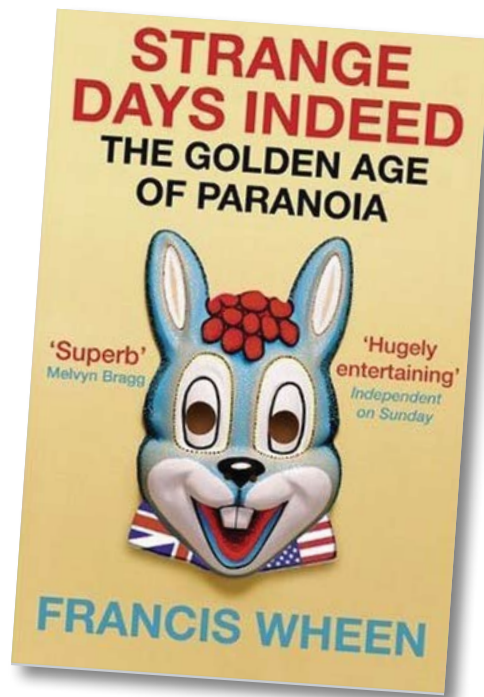
Back in the UK, when Harold Wilson (Premier 1970 and 1974-76) wasn't looking out for Russian vessels coming to get him off the Isles of Scilly, or business leaders were not indulging in drunken conspiracies for a right wing coup, the country was bowing to the comic but cruel whims of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Known to his citizens as "His Excellency President for Life Field Marshall Al Hadji Dr Idi Amin, VC, DSO, MC, Member of the Excellent Order of the Source of the Nile, Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular.

Earlier seen as a bit of a buffoon, by 1972, the ex-Sandhurst graduate piqued at the lack of common courtesy displayed by the English Queen in failing to respond to his offer to mediate over the Irish troubles, Amin ordered the arrest of Dennis Hills, a teacher living in Uganda.

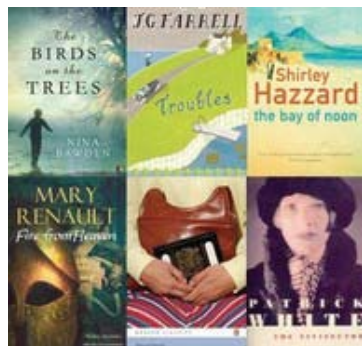
Two of Amin's former commanders from the King's African Rifles were sent out to negotiate Hill's release. As a preliminary they were made to enter a small thatched hut on hands and knees because the entrance was so low; thus the dictator achieved his wish of bringing the UK to his feet.

From civil servants discovered literally naked, to strange orders from Wilson, who by the end of his short second reign thought himself to be "the big fat spider in the corner of the room", Wheen unearths the bizarre, the humiliating, and the just plain scary.

While at first the incidents and the paranoia might seem a lifetime away, the all-pervading paranoia has resonance in our post-2001 world.



The Lost Booker prize



Some may call the Lost Booker prize a cynical marketing exercise in getting books off the shelves. And yet, in its intention to honour worthy contenders published in 1970, which due to a change in entry criteria in 1971, were never eligible for the Booker, there is a sense that justice is being handed out albeit belatedly.

Brits Overseas has made its vote for the winner that will be announced on May 19. But don't let that deter you from dipping into some of the finest fiction of 40 years ago.

Lost Booker Short List

Troubles by J G Farrell

The Vivisector by Patrick White

The Bay of Noon by Shirley Hazzard

The Driver's Seat by Muriel Spark

Fire from Heaven by Mary Renault

The Birds on the Trees by Nina Bawden

Reviews by Michael Grinter

LIGHTS

Ellie Goulding (Polydor)



ELLIE GOULDING'S brief career to date (it began in earnest in 2009) had been full of accolades even before she laid down the tracks that form this debut album. Having topped the BBC Sound of 2010 poll and won the Critics Choice Award at the 2010 Brit Awards, this young lady must be feeling the weight of high expectations.

Lauded as a mistress of multiple genres – indie pop, electropop, synthpop and folktronica - to name a few, one might reasonably expect to be hit by something rushing at you from out of leftfield. But no, *Lights* is pure MOR, which is not to condemn it out of hand.

What's really going on here is a folksy singer songwriter turbocharged by layers of synth, drum n' bass and a pyrotechnic display of bleeps and electronic spangles, courtesy of the precocious producer Starsmith.

The result is a high-octane rush through early tweens' angst and infatuation with more stirring climaxes per song than a whole Beethoven symphony.

WAKE UP THE NATION

Paul Weller

Paul Weller's renaissance began with 2008's *22 Dreams*. Would it continue apace with *Wake Up the Nation*? was the big question. Pleased to say that those who thought that *22 Dreams* was the last blinding flash of a dying star, fear not: W.U.N has enough energy to light up a distant planet.

Those who have been along for the ride since the beginning of Weller's turbulent stop-start career will have moments of déjà vu that hark back to the earliest days of The Jam. Not surprising, as after years of acrimony Jam bass player Bruce Foxton forms part of the mix. Brought together by grief – the death of Foxton's wife and Weller's dad – the reunion appears to have been a cathartic experience.

This is also something of a family affair. Joining the two old rockers is the Woking Gay Community Choir aka Weller's daughter. And for good measure there are guitars courtesy of My Bloody Valentine's Kevin Shields.

Will the old fans relish the look back? More of that later.

So how good is it? Well despite most of the lyrics pouring out the old man's ever-abiding anger at a changing world – "Get your face out of the Facebook, and turn off the phone" he moans: his defiance of the inevitable – "Once I was a man my c**k as hard as wood", by contrast there is a joy in the music, particularly in the "sha la la" chorus of *Find the Torch, Burn the Plans*.

With 16 songs in barely 40 minutes, Weller is a man in a hurry, pushing the envelope every which way. Rock and roll piano, swirling guitars, and a tipping of the hat to psychedelia and David Bowie on *Fast Car/Slow Traffic*. The only criticism might be that with all that rushing along some compositions have a not quite finished feel.

Trees best celebrates the determination to stuff a song with as many ingredients as possible in the minimum amount of minutes: a five-part suite that moves up through stark keyboard ballad to psychedelia, it moves onwards and upwards through electronica so swiftly that you know you liked it but not what it was exactly that caught your ear.

And so, back to those old fans. Weller was 50 this year. Do his life-long fans have the energy to keep up with him? The charts will tell.



ACOLYTE

Delphic (Chimeric Records)



THE TITLE OF THIS debut album from Manchester's most recently hailed tells it all. That Delphic are following the path well trodden cannot be denied. But what paths: just ahead of them the Klaxons, and looming over it all, fellow Mancunian masters New Order.

Delphic ply a brand of indie rock that's as layered as a wedding cake. The light industrial electronica provides the momentum that will send your arms upward in two-handed salute as the light-as-a-feather multi-tracked vocals lift the soul. Under the right circumstances we're approaching an out-of-body experience here.

The abiding sentiment here is yearning, best illustrated by the recent single "Doubt" where voices are multi-tracked to heavenly choir proportions and the underlying bitter sweetness of the synths get you to thinking about all those things you planned on doing but never did.

And yet, one is still left with the sense that this four-piece baulked at stepping out of their comfort zone. The title track is perhaps most symptomatic of a formulaic approach in evidence across much of the album: begins busy as a street crowd in a time-lapsed film, builds to a stirring crescendo, collapses into a coda of twinkling electronic bleeps as insubstantial as the lights from a dying firework.

PLASTIC BEACH

Gorillaz (EMI)

DAMON ALBARN'S transition from Blur front man to musical sage is probably complete with the arrival of the much-anticipated Plastic Beach.

Are there no limits to the man's powers of persuasion? Given the appearance of Bobby Womack, the Clash's Mick Jones, Lou Reed and, for good measure, the Lebanese National Orchestra for Oriental Arabic Music, all lining up to feature beside a virtual band, clearly the answer is no.

For some the mix in 2010's first eco-album might be a little too rich. Certainly if the Middle-Eastern strains that open "White Flag" get your music juices flowing you might be brought up sharp by the far from seamless slip into hip-hop.

But for those who like their genres mixed this is an album that plucks its inspirations from all points of the musical compass –often from within a single composition: witness "Empire Ants" sweeping from languid vocals accompanied by minimalist percussion to a disco-ball of sparkling dance music.

"To Binge" is a shuffle as relaxed as a cocktail on a sun drenched sand dune.

"Stylo" is as smooth and unrelenting as an approaching oil slick until it explodes with the power of Womack's blustery, eighties style delivery. With the arrival of Sweepstakes" we're washed up on Urban shores and as tough hip hop as you're likely to hear from Mos Def this year. And so it goes; Albarn's Uri Geller-like ability to bend genres amazes as it pleases.

