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FT Weekend Magazine



THE BLAME GAME

An inquiry into the government's handling of coronavirus is inevitable. But who will be the scapegoat? The FT reports

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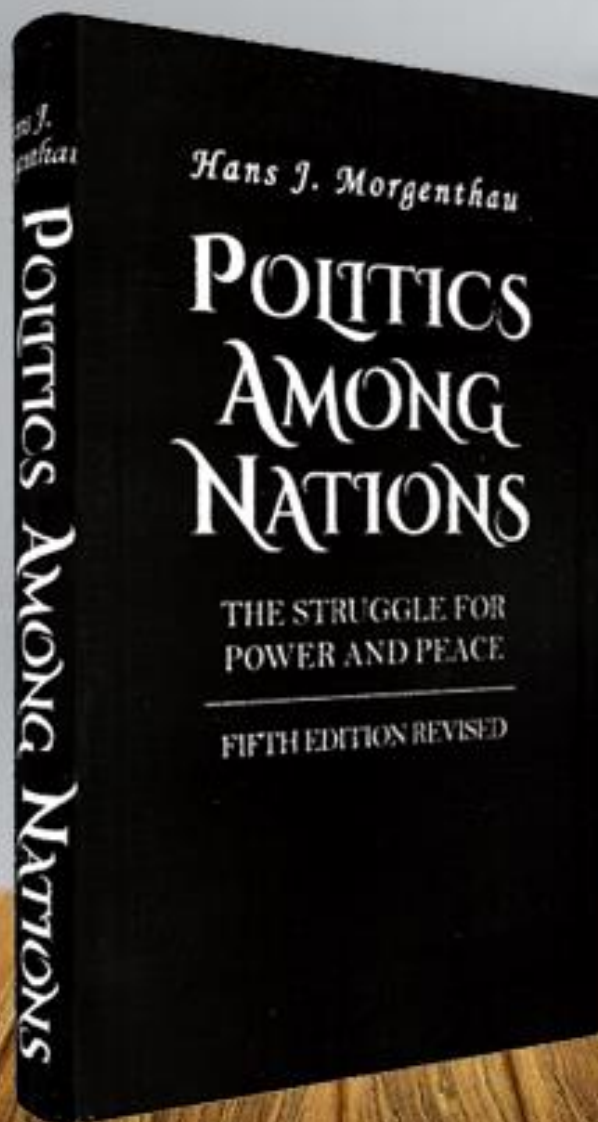
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Cover illustration by Rebecca Hendin



ALBERTO DI LENARDO

'A joyous cross-section of 20th-century middle-class life captured in vivid colours'

The photography of Alberto di Lenardo, p24



'As I walked to communion, I knew this was the riskiest action I'd taken in months'

Claire Bushey on going back to church after lockdown, p28



'We overlaid the traditions of our ancestors with the reality of our new home'

Ravinder Bhogal, p32



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SIMON KUPER

OPENING SHOT

What the US can learn from other democracies



In 1946, a group of Americans gathered in a ballroom in occupied Tokyo to write Japan's constitution. A supervisor told 22-year-old Beate Sirota, born in Vienna and raised mostly in Japan: "You're a woman; why don't you write the women's rights section?" Sirota borrowed copies of other constitutions from libraries (the Soviet and Weimar ones proved most useful) and within a week drafted what became Japan's revolutionary Article 14. It began, "All of the people are equal under the law", and banned all forms of discrimination.

Her Article 24 laid down that marriage required mutual consent and equal rights for both spouses. Meanwhile, the 26-year-old ensign Richard Poole redefined Japan's emperor from human god to "symbol". When Poole and Sirota testified before a Japanese parliamentary committee in 2000 on whether the constitution should be changed, she said, in fluent Japanese, that it was better than the American one.

The US helped rebuild democracy in Japan and Europe. If Donald Trump loses November's elections, the Japanese and Europeans may get the chance to return the favour.

The historian John Dower wrote of Japan's transformation: "There are moments in history - fleeting occasions of opportunity - when people actually sit down and ask, 'What is a good society? How can we bring this about?'" The US may now be approaching that moment. If Trump goes, the country can fix the weak spots in its democracy - the ones that Trump exploited, and others that became obvious long before him. The US is too divided to change its constitution, and few Republicans want to tackle voter suppression, but many serious reforms are possible. The US's old allies can advise.

In the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, the first step to change is admitting you have a problem. The US seems close to hitting rock bottom. Only 17 per cent of Americans still consider their country "a shining city on a hill", found a poll by YouGov for Yahoo News; only 14 per cent say they are "very happy", by far the lowest figure since 1972, reports the University of Chicago; and even before the pandemic, only 17 per cent said they could usually trust government to do what was right, near the all-time low, according to Pew Research.

Trump has helpfully uncovered bits of the American system that need fixing fast. What were unwritten norms before him could now become laws. All future presidential candidates should be obliged to divest their assets, release their tax returns and report foreign attempts to meddle in an election. Presidents should lose their power over federal prosecutors, and over inspectors-general who act as watchdogs of cabinet departments. Presidents shouldn't be allowed to pardon criminal associates like Roger Stone.

To go beyond these baby steps, the US needs to do something outside its experience: benchmark

itself against other countries. While it was going around proclaiming itself "the world's greatest democracy", it didn't bother. Now US policymakers need lessons in democracy from foreigners.

How to drain Washington's swamp? France in 2017 passed a law on the "moralisation" of politics. This bans politicians from employing close relatives or taking certain payments, and generally removes impunity. Former prime minister François Fillon was sentenced to jail for embezzlement in June, after paying his wife more than €1m of state funds for work she never did.

'The US needs to do something outside its experience: benchmark itself against other countries'

Former president Nicolas Sarkozy awaits trial in a campaign-finance case.

How to combat fake news? Teaching children to evaluate sources "belongs in all school- and teacher-training curricula", wrote Andreas Schleicher, head of education at the OECD and Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck of the NGO Lie Detectors.

What to do with statues of dead bad people? Budapest's open-air statue museum preserves giant busts of Lenin and other communist mass murderers without letting them infect Hungary's main public spaces.

Should armed police handle people in mental-health crises? Spend a week with Stockholm's mental-health ambulance.

US delegations could also shadow New Zealand's race relations commissioner Meng Foon, and visit Norway's prison without cells or armed guards, in a forest, which looks like a holiday camp. Its prison system has the world's lowest recidivism rate, notes Rutger Bregman in *Humankind*.

Sometimes it's a matter of learning new norms. German politicians after Hitler tacitly agreed to treat each other as opponents not enemies, to avoid emotive language (German chancellors are deliberately boring) and to ensure that the people at the bottom never fell dangerously far. Germany is also a model for dealing with the national past. A German friend of mine who tends Jewish graves says: "I don't feel guilt - I was born in 1968. I feel responsibility."

Countless schemes were set up after the war to help Europeans and Japanese study in the US. Many of these young people fell in love with America. I know - I was one of them. This year relatively few foreigners will go to study in the US. Instead let's help young Americans study in Europe, in English, for much lower fees than at home, and show them how modern democracies work. It's the least that we owe the US. **FT**

.....
simon.kuper@ft.com @KuperSimon



INVENTORY SARAH STEWART JOHNSON
PLANETARY SCIENTIST

‘I am driven to try to answer the big questions – are we alone in the universe?’

Sarah Stewart Johnson, 41, is an assistant professor of planetary science at Georgetown University. A former Rhodes Scholar and White House Fellow, she has worked with Nasa to put the rovers Spirit, Opportunity and Curiosity on Mars. She is a visiting scientist with the Planetary Environments Lab at the Nasa Goddard Space Flight Center.

What was your childhood or earliest ambition?

I thought I might become a singer, which is quite hilarious as I have a terrible singing voice. I was in the church choir and they asked me to stand at the back and mouth the words.

Private school or state school? University or straight into work?

State school, then Washington University in St Louis. After that I was really fortunate – I got a scholarship to move to England. I studied at Oxford and did a PPE programme at Magdalen College and a master’s in biology. I got my PhD in planetary science from MIT.

Who was or still is your mentor?

I’ve been incredibly fortunate to have had many great mentors, more than I can name. My PhD associate Maria Zuber is unfailingly supportive and incredibly inspiring.

How physically fit are you?

The only reason I am fit is running around after my two little kids – they keep me and my husband on our toes.

Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?

James Baldwin was once asked a version of this question. He responded the answer is endurance. I couldn’t agree more. I’d also add opportunity and confidence. So many talented people don’t have an idea what they’re capable of.

How politically committed are you?

Very. It’s hard not to be in this day and age, when you look around at all the disturbing things happening.

What would you like to own that you don’t currently possess?

A vegetable garden. My mother was an incredible gardener and I always imagine that one day I’ll grow tomatoes, chickpeas – I’ve had some success in containers but nothing like the garden I thought I’d have by now.

What’s your biggest extravagance?

Travel, for sure. Getting to far-off places.

In what place are you happiest?

At night, I lie down between my children as they fall asleep and it’s heaven.

What ambitions do you still have?

To find life beyond Earth. It’s the key question in all the scientific work that I do.

What drives you on?

Trying to answer the big questions – whether we are alone in the universe. I think there’s no possible discovery that could tell us more about who we are. Did that something from nothing happen just once, or time and time again?

What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?

I made two people and I still can’t believe I did that – I made two human beings!

What do you find most irritating in other people?

Lack of empathy. The world would be such a better place if people could have a little more of it.

If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would she think?

She would think I’m crushing it. My younger self would be thrilled to see how things turned out.

Which object that you’ve lost do you wish you still had?

My engagement ring was made out of Libyan desert glass, formed when a meteor crashed into the eastern Sahara 26 million years ago. The setting gave way a few years ago and I lost the stone. I didn’t want a diamond or a gemstone, so it was so lovely my husband came up with that. He says we’ll get another one day.

What is the greatest challenge of our time?

The pandemic has laid bare fault lines and inequalities that show we need to build a just society.

Do you believe in an afterlife?

I grew up in Kentucky and went to a Baptist church when I was young, but the Sunday school version of an afterlife didn’t stay with me for very long. I have suspended judgment for now.

If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?

Nine. There have been disappointments, of course, but mostly I feel tremendously grateful for what I have. **FT**

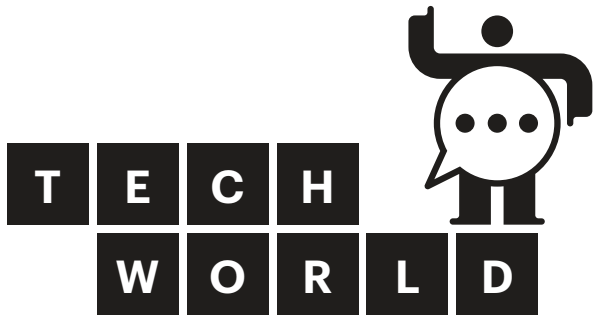
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Interview by Hester Lacey.

“The Sirens of Mars: Searching for Life on Another World” by Sarah Stewart Johnson is published by Allen Lane



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BY TIM BRADSHAW IN LONDON

How many tech titans does it take to change a light switch?

A debate has been simmering for several years in my household. A debate about light switches.

My contention is that using Alexa to control multiple lights simply by speaking a couple of words is convenient and quite fun.

My wife maintains that the intellectual might of the world's most valuable companies could be more usefully expended in other areas than innovating on the light switch, which is reliable, has zero latency and rarely talks back.

Her argument was bolstered last month when, at 3am, one of our smart speakers spontaneously announced that it was “upside down”. I have been unable to explain this outburst. Virtual assistants have come a long way in the past few years but they still have their foibles.

Nonetheless, Silicon Valley is waging a relentless war on the physical button. Ever since the iPhone's touchscreen slew the BlackBerry's keyboard more than a decade ago, software has made buttons infinitely malleable.

However, that can also make them more ambiguous. Tactile, single-purpose buttons are blunt but effective instruments. Everyone knew how to press play on an iPod or VCR, sometimes without even having to look. Once designers leave that obviousness behind, they risk confusing people.

This challenge is only going to get harder as the hegemony of the touchscreen wanes and we enter the era of what tech types call “ambient computing”, such



ILLUSTRATION BY PÂTÉ

as augmented-reality glasses and artificially intelligent assistants.

Sci-fi movies have advanced some intriguing but as-yet-unrealistic ideas. Alexa and Siri are a long way from being able to chat like Scarlett Johansson does with Joaquin Phoenix in *Her*. My arms get tired just watching a gloved Tom Cruise wave through holographic crime-scene investigations in *Minority Report*.

Back in the semi-reality of Silicon Valley, though, even the best designers' attempts to create new kinds of interaction can fall flat.

When Apple introduced “3D Touch” in 2015 with the iPhone 6S, it promised to bring “entirely new and fun” interactions with apps. Menus and options popped up when users pressed

‘Everyone knew how to press play on an iPod or VCR... once designers leave that obviousness behind, they risk confusing people’

firmly into the touchscreen. It was a useful shortcut to compose a new message or switch camera modes.

Alas, the feature was also invisible. There were no on-screen hints to indicate when it could be used. Many iPhone owners were oblivious to its existence. In the latest iPhones, 3D Touch is being phased out.


The same discoverability problem plagues voice assistants. It is why – despite the existence of thousands of apps or “skills” – most of us still just use Alexa and Siri for setting timers, playing music or (in my case at least) controlling the lights.

Creators of virtual-reality experiences have the opposite problem. When immersed in VR, users might expect every object they see to behave as it would in “real reality”. When anything can be a button, anticipating every possible interaction is a daunting design task.

Realising it needs to play the long game, Apple is starting to lay the early groundwork now for this virtual future. In June, the company introduced its next big idea in software design: physicality. Textures and tactility are displacing the oversimplified “flat” look that has pervaded Apple's software for most of the past decade. The next version of the Mac's operating system features sumptuous new app icons: the speech bubble in Messages is smooth and bulbous; the Preview document reader incorporates a realistic magnifying glass.

It is easy to picture these icons leaping from a MacBook screen and into the 3D world of VR. Apple is said to be working on “smart glasses” for release in the next couple of years. Digital icons that look more like physical objects will sit far better in a virtual world than the iPhone's flat buttons.

In hindsight, moving from keyboard to touchscreen was easy – both existed on the surface of a two-dimensional display. As we step inside the screen with VR and AR, it may take a new generation of software designers – weaned on the 3D worlds of *Minecraft*, *Roblox* and *Fortnite* – to invent intuitive new control systems.

In the meantime, I should probably concede defeat on my domestic debate. If there is a way to make digital interfaces as intuitive as a light switch, I can't quite put my finger on it. 

Tim Bradshaw is the FT's global technology correspondent

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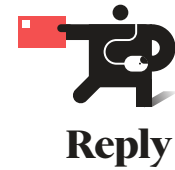
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Never fear, Millionaires for Humanity are here

In an exciting and glamorous development, nearly 100 wealthy people disarmingly calling themselves “Millionaires for Humanity” have signed a letter asking their governments to make them pay more tax. They could simply have called themselves Millionaires for Tax Rises, but that might not quite have conveyed the higher level of consciousness reached by these happy enlightened few.

Millionaires for Humanity: seriously, how great must these people be? You have to admit, it’s a catchy name – and also necessary to distinguish them from the millionaires against humanity, the millionaires who are ambivalent about humanity and the millionaires who are also for humanity but prefer to keep their money. The better-known signatories include Abigail Disney, Jerry of Ben & Jerry’s and the British film-maker Richard Curtis.

Other supporters come from the world of finance and business, and include a former Citibank trader who joins from the splinter group Millionaires who Retired at 27 for Humanity.

Many of the group penned a pretty similar letter in January to the World Economic Forum in Davos. That group, using the catchier name Millionaires Against Pitchforks, argued for higher taxes with an appeal to self-interest that, if the wealthy did not hand over the cash they had stuffed away in tax havens, people might rise up to take it off them. There is, obviously, a Millionaires for Tax Havens group but they tend not to put their names to letters in the New York Times.

This time around the Millionaires for Humanity have taken a loftier tone. They begin with the self-effacing statement that “as Covid-19 strikes... millionaires like us have a crucial role to play in



ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS VARELA

healing our world”. You know, that’s so true. Every Thursday we should clap for them.

The Millionaires for Humanity, or MFHs, admit they have not been driving ambulances, saving lives or even stocking shelves. But they add tellingly: “We have money, lots of it.” If that’s not worth a clap, what is? They then go on to set out the problems facing the post- and indeed pre-Covid world, before adding that these cannot be solved through charity “no matter how generous”. Hear that, Bill Gates? You are not really helping.

After a few more lines about ordinary people who aren’t like them, they urge governments to whack them with immediate, substantial and permanent increases: “So please. Tax us. Tax us... It is the right choice. It is the only choice,” before concluding with the supposedly profound observation that “humanity is more important than our money”.

This last line perhaps seemed quite a concession, though some might wonder if anyone actually thought otherwise.

Some critics argue that any of them could voluntarily pay more tax. But this misses the point. They are arguing that *all* the rich must pay more, so voluntary gestures, while noble, would not achieve

the goal of making all the wealthy shoulder more of the burden.

To be fair, this is a compassionate initiative by people whose hearts are in the right place and who are not entirely wrong. Yet somehow their sincere plea has been wrapped up in a tone so sententious, so self-reverential, as to open the entire exercise to mockery. Forgive those who sneer, they know not what they do. Instead of saying, for example, that “millionaires like us have a critical role in healing our world”, they might have opted for the less egotistical “millionaires like us must step up and play our part”. It could be that they are willingly setting themselves up for ridicule to attract publicity, because that’s what a Millionaire for Humanity does. Somehow, though, I doubt it.

So here is my small contribution to the struggle. When they deliver the next letter, perhaps entitled Only Millionaires Can Save Us, they might cut the Olympian prose and opt for something simpler and shorter. “Societies are facing a lot of problems and do not have enough money to solve them. So make the very rich, like us, pay more in tax. It won’t solve every problem but it will help.” **FT**

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“How the Mafia infiltrated Italy’s hospitals and laundered the profits globally” (July 11/12) is one of the best articles I have read this year. It is deeply depressing and yet fascinating as it displays the ingenuity of the recidivist mind.
Sam the Springer Spaniel
via FT.com

@James_Cockayne July 9
Brilliant reporting by the @FT on the development and financialisation of the Ndrangheta. This should raise red flags for financial and development actors alike

As an Italian, I was already aware of the courageous work done by Gratteri and his team (as well as countless others all over Italy), but this article brought it home even more. These people are heroes, accepting a life of permanent restrictions and fear in order to stand up for justice. I wish their work was even better recognised at all levels. Gratteri, Italy is grateful!
Ottavia via FT.com

Gillian Tett is absolutely right (“New York vs London: my Covid-19 culture shock”, July 11/12). Wearing a face mask is a sign of concern for others. How can it not be policy and a social norm to wear them? For too many people, the attitude is “it won’t happen to me”.
LMK via FT.com

“Time for tech companies to Zoom out of Hong Kong?” (July 11/12) demonstrated the losing battle international companies are in with the CCP. Western companies that claim to uphold values of freedom, free speech and human rights cannot do business in China.
RBLM via FT.com

Fantastic pictures (“What Tel Aviv’s blacked-out billboards tell us about life under lockdown”, July 11/12). Some of them reminded me of the French painter Soulages.
Gloubiboulba via FT.com

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Quiz answers The link was modes of transport 1. Bus Stop 2. Subway 3. Show Boat 4. The Girl on the Train - by Paula Hawkins 5. Peter Kay's Car Share 6. YouTube 7. Bryan Ferry 8. "Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles" 9. Jan van Eyck 10. Greyhound racing **Picture quiz** The Globe theatre + the Trotters (from Only Fools and Horses) = Globetrotters

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THE BLAME GAME

As the number of UK deaths in the coronavirus crisis hits 45,000 and the economy faces the biggest recession of any European nation, a public inquiry into the government's handling of the pandemic is inevitable. Why didn't lockdown happen more quickly? What went wrong and where? The hunt for a scapegoat is on but who will it be? The FT investigates. Illustrations by *Rebecca Hendin*





20,000

Estimated number
of coronavirus-related
deaths in care homes
in England and Wales

B

oris Johnson was enjoying a Sunday barbecue at 10 Downing Street when the blame game over Britain's handling of the Covid-19 crisis formally began. News was leaking that he was about to oust the head of the civil service, Mark Sedwill, after months of tensions and hostile briefings over the way the country had dealt with the virus. By June 28, it was clear the UK was facing one of the worst death rates and biggest economic disasters of any major economy.

Advisers urged the prime minister to drag himself away from the garden to formalise Sedwill's departure immediately. Johnson wiped his hands and disappeared inside to scrawl a handwritten note confirming that, after little more than two years in his post, the security expert would be leaving. Amid the sloping text of the two-page letter, laden with praise for the official he was effectively sacking, Johnson added ominously that Sedwill was "instrumental" in drawing up the country's plan to deal with coronavirus.

After months of mistakes, fatal delays and episodes of incompetence at the heart of the British state, that is a line that few would choose to put on their CV. Johnson knows blame will soon start to be apportioned ahead of an eventual inquiry into the handling of the virus. "There are plenty of things that people say and will say that we got wrong and we owe that discussion and that honesty to the tens of thousands who have died before their time," he said in a speech two days later in the West Midlands.

But when the blame is distributed, Johnson's team will try to ensure it remains as far away from the prime minister as possible. Civil servants, scientists, public health officials and ministers are all being eyed as potential scapegoats for a searing episode that has seen about 45,000 people die and, according to the OECD, left the British economy facing the biggest recession of any European nation.

"Parts of government... seemed to respond so sluggishly, so that sometimes it seemed like that recurring bad dream when you are telling your feet to run and your feet won't move," Johnson lamented in his speech. Some things - such as the speedy building of emergency hospitals, work on a treatment and the Treasury's emergency economic response - had gone well, he said.

But the list of silent omissions was longer: the fiasco over testing, the shortage of protective

equipment, the tide of death surging through care homes and - crucially - the failure to lock down the country more quickly. Earlier that week, Dominic Cummings, Johnson's iconoclastic chief adviser, told political colleagues in a Zoom call from the cabinet room - a none-too-subtle symbol of his power - that he would use the crisis to reshape the British state, adding: "A hard rain is coming."

Meanwhile, Johnson's cabinet lieutenant Michael Gove reinforced the argument that Covid-19 failures were the result of a long-broken system, not political failure. Citing the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci in a speech to the Ditchley Foundation late last month, he said: "The crisis consists precisely of the fact that the inherited is dying - and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

When the public inquiry comes, its spotlight will shine most brightly on the week leading up to Britain's lockdown on Monday March 23, the climax of a saga that saw it stumbling reluctantly towards a policy already adopted by many other western countries, who followed China's lead after the initial outbreak in the city of Wuhan.

The epidemiologist Neil Ferguson, one of Britain's most influential advisers in that crucial period, later admitted to MPs: "The epidemic was doubling every three to four days before lockdown interventions were introduced. So, had we introduced lockdown measures a week earlier, we would have reduced the final death toll by at least a half."

By early March, it had become clear that Britain, like many western countries, was preparing for the wrong kind of pandemic. Previous outbreak planning had focused on influenza and the country had not built up a test-and-trace capability of the kind seen in Taiwan and South Korea, which had previous experience of dealing with coronaviruses such as Sars in 2002 and Mers in 2015. Jeremy Hunt, the former Tory health secretary, told the Financial Times in May that testing and contact tracing were the big differences between fighting a flu pandemic and a coronavirus outbreak: "You can't stop flu but you can stop a Sars-like virus."

To many, it seemed inevitable as early as March 12 that Britain would have to lock down: that was when the government suspended mass community

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testing. The rejection of the World Health Organization's later plea to "test, test, test" was presented as a policy choice, part of a grand strategy in which Britain would focus its testing effort on hospitals, which were well prepared to cope with the pandemic.

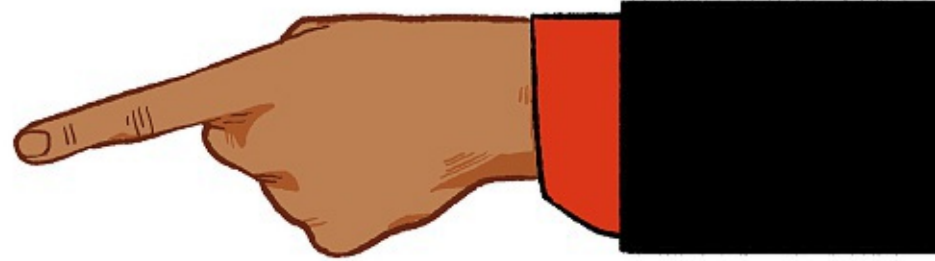
It was nothing of the sort. Ferguson told MPs on March 25 that the real reason why mass community testing was abandoned was because, from January onwards, it was "very clear from messages from Public Health England that we would have nowhere near enough testing capacity to adopt that strategy". When it stopped, capacity was only about 5,000 a day and frequently only about half of that number were carried out. It was not until early April that health secretary Matt Hancock sidelined PHE and launched a national effort to reach 100,000 daily tests by the end of the month.

The chair of the British Medical Association, Chaand Nagpaul, says that once contact tracing was stopped, "we were effectively working blindfolded". According to Devi Sridhar, professor of global public health at the University of Edinburgh: "It was absolutely catastrophic that the decision was made to delay locking down and to stop community testing and tracing. It was equivalent to just giving up and letting the virus go."

One government adviser suggested that ending mass community testing was not just about capacity but a very strategic decision taken by a small group of modellers who sit on the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage). "Early on, this was treated like flu, a mild illness that should be allowed to pass through," the adviser says.

Hancock has argued that this is an unfair criticism and Covid-19 was a new and unpredictable disease, but the adviser says: "It was a strategic choice very early on about how we were going to deal with this, giving up on containment did not have anything to do with capacity and had everything to do with following a flu plan."

"Our preparedness plan, as we had it, didn't include a lockdown," says one Sage member who admits that during March "there was a sense of panic" as it became obvious one would be needed. Johnson confirmed this week that there will be an independent inquiry - although its format and timing will be hotly contested.



Mark Sedwill, former cabinet secretary, is sure to be a star witness in the inevitable inquiry



When the review does come, it will study closely the decisions taken in those crucial few weeks.

Alarm bells were sounded in a paper by Steven Riley, a professor at Imperial College, dated March 9. Another Sage member says: "Riley was concerned there would be dead bodies in corridors and it would be too late. We would end up with the worst of all worlds - and end up locking down anyway."

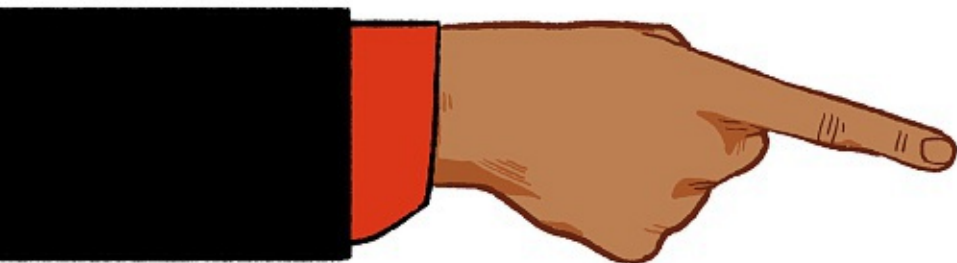
Riley says: "The key scientific assumption was that any benefit you get in lockdown you'll lose immediately after - that transmission would return with the same strength. I didn't know for sure that wouldn't happen but based on Sars, Mers and even Ebola, I thought it was valid to assume it might not. Following precautionary principles, you've got to lock down. My view at that time was that we were thinking a bit like the 1918 pandemic flu when there really was nothing they could do."

Meanwhile, as hospitals braced for a likely influx of very sick patients, it became clear that the NHS and care home sector did not have the equipment they needed. A scramble to build ventilators was launched. The UK's stockpile of protective kit in the event of a flu-like pandemic had no surgical gowns, despite warnings a year ago from some of the government's top scientific advisers that they were needed. The Department of Health confirmed that no gowns had been added before the crisis took hold. Sharon Peacock of PHE, responsible for preparing for pandemics, later told the Commons science committee on March 25 that this was "an unprecedented pandemic, which it would have been difficult to plan for".

Unable to conduct a test-and-trace scheme because of a lack of tests, ministers and scientists now faced a stark binary choice: let the disease rip through the UK with whatever mitigation measures could be mustered or halt the virus by locking the nation down. They hesitated, perhaps fatally.

Sadiq Khan, mayor of London, knew there was something wrong when Johnson invited him "out of the blue" to a meeting of Cobra, the government's emergency committee, on Monday March 16. "I'd been asking to be invited for a while, but I kept on being knocked back," he recalls. Johnson chaired the meeting, Cummings at his side, along with senior ministers and advisers. ►

'Boris made a bold move by sacking Sedwill. He was there when the PM was dithering. They should be worried he will turn on them'
Government official



Sadiq Khan was among those urging Johnson to start closing down London in mid-March



'I left the Cobra meeting thinking they've told me about this ticking time bomb but not how they were going to defuse it'
Sadiq Khan, mayor of London

◀ "I was given a paper saying that half the Covid cases were in London and were coming quicker than had been expected," Khan says. "I was quite shocked. It was the first time I'd been told this." Those attending recall how Johnson seemed under-prepared, passing questions to others in the room.

Two days earlier, on March 14, Johnson had been briefed on a devastating report by scientists at Imperial warning that 250,000 people could die in the UK from the disease and that the NHS would be quickly overwhelmed. Pictures of Italian patients in makeshift field hospitals were a clear warning sign.

Yet at that Cobra meeting on March 16 - which coincided with the publication of the Imperial report - there was no sense that Britain should imminently go into lockdown, as other European countries were starting to. "There was a discussion about how we might flatten the bell-curve of the disease and how people might feel fatigued if we introduced restrictions too early," says an attendee.

Azra Ghani, professor of infectious disease epidemiology at Imperial, says: "I had expected the Downing Street press conference that day to announce the lockdown and was surprised that it didn't." Sadiq Khan recalls: "I left the meeting thinking they've told me about this ticking time bomb but not how they were going to defuse it."

One explanation offered for the delay is that Johnson is a free-wheeling politician instinctively uncomfortable with the idea of the state telling people to stay at home and ordering businesses to close. He is advised by anti-establishment figures led by Cummings, who himself later famously went on to break the government's own lockdown rules.

Fortunately for Johnson, his caution about lockdown was shared by some Sage advisers. Graham Medley, professor of infectious disease modelling at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and a Sage attendee, says: "It was not clear that a lockdown could be achieved without some kind of authoritarian force, and it was not clear that this would be possible in the UK."

Economic factors were also weighing heavily on Johnson. Rishi Sunak, chancellor, and Alok Sharma, business secretary, raised concerns at the Cobra meeting on March 16. Sunak, who had delivered his first Budget on March 11, could see his whole strat-

egy going up in smoke. The Budget put aside £12bn to help deal with coronavirus. When he gave an economic update to MPs on July 8, Sunak revealed he had now put aside £188bn in Covid support measures. Neil Ferguson confirmed to MPs on March 25 that Sage was trying to avoid a strategy that the UK would be paying for "this year [and] for many decades to come, in terms of the economic impact". But economic considerations were not publicly given as the main reason for delaying a lockdown.

Instead, Johnson and his scientists repeatedly stated that it was right to introduce restrictions "at the right time" because they feared people would tire of lockdown and start to emerge from their self-isolation just as the virus was at its peak.

Susan Michie, professor of health psychology at University College London, says: "When I first heard Chris Whitty [chief medical officer] talking about behavioural fatigue, I thought, 'Where did that come from?' It's not a term from behavioural science." By March 16, more than 600 behavioural scientists had signed a letter challenging ministers to provide an evidence base for the assertion, which they claimed was being used to justify a policy of "herd immunity", risking "large numbers of lives".

Michael Tildesley, a Sage member from Warwick university, says the debate on a lockdown was based on advice that the "policy might come in for four to five weeks and wouldn't necessarily be sustainable for longer than that". He adds: "Where that advice came from, I don't know. This is something that we were wrong about. We completely underestimated how incredible the general public were."

Minutes from the Sage meeting on March 13 say: "There is some evidence that people find quarantining harder to comply with the longer it goes on. The evidence is not strong but the effect is intuitive." Given the weight attached to "lockdown fatigue" by ministers and scientists as a reason for not shutting down Britain earlier, it was a remarkable admission that it was based on little more than a hunch.

The other explanation for the delay is the most pernicious and persistent one: that Johnson's scientific advisers were prepared to see the disease sweep through the country in the hope that "herd immunity" would then be established. Hancock and others have insisted that herd immunity was a scientific concept but it was never government policy.



£188bn

Amount put aside by
Chancellor Rishi Sunak for
Covid-19 support measures

Patrick Vallance, the government's chief scientific adviser and Sage chair, initially told Johnson the best way to handle the disease would be to suppress the virus's peak, which would happen during the summer months, while ensuring that the most vulnerable were shielded at the height of the epidemic. Johnson called this "squashing the sombrero".

The idea was that by the winter flu season much of the country would have had the disease and acquired some immunity. This was very different to the "hard stop" suppression strategy being adopted around the world - including by China and Italy - to stop the virus in its tracks. "It was British exceptionalism," says one Treasury official.

For Johnson, savouring the first flush of "independence" after Britain's exit from the EU on January 31, the Vallance argument was appealing. It would avoid the economic disaster of a spring lockdown and what was then seen by Sage as the near certainty that the virus would only reappear later in the year, causing more economic chaos and overwhelming the NHS during the winter flu season.

On March 11, David Halpern, a government behavioural science adviser and Sage member, told the BBC: "There's going to be a point, assuming the epidemic flows and grows as it will do, where you want to cocoon, to protect those at-risk groups so they don't catch the disease. By the time they come out of their cocooning, herd immunity has been achieved in the rest of the population."

To Hancock's dismay, Vallance was more explicit on March 13, telling Sky that 60 per cent of Britons - roughly 40 million people - "is the sort of figure you need to get herd immunity". He added: "If you suppress something very, very hard, when you release those measures it bounces back and it bounces back at the wrong time." With an estimated 1 per cent fatality rate, that implied 400,000 deaths.

According to some Sage members, the turning point came with the intervention of Cummings. Johnson's adviser was later criticised for attending some Sage meetings by those who saw it as muddying the waters by mixing political and scientific advice. But others believe he cut to the heart of the crisis - the need for a lockdown.

In that crucial week starting March 16, Cummings reviewed the evidence. Britain had given

up testing in the community and the disease was spreading exponentially; Ferguson's Imperial team had produced a compelling report warning that the NHS would soon be overwhelmed by demand for intensive care beds. Yet still the scientists on Sage, fearing the possibility of a second peak many months down the line, were holding back from drawing the obvious conclusion.

"Cummings was there at two meetings and I was relieved he was there," says one Sage scientist. "He was watching, listening and asking questions. He said: 'Hang on a minute, we're going to have half a million people die in 16 weeks? Why aren't we locking down?' And everyone turned round and said: 'I don't know. We should be.' My feeling was a sense of relief, that the prime minister was no longer going around shaking hands - he's sent his chief adviser."

On March 17, hospitals were ordered to start clearing beds of non-urgent cases to make way for the expected coronavirus influx. Up to 25,000 people were discharged into care homes at the height of the pandemic before the government started testing all patients entering care homes, not just those with symptoms. The seeding of the disease among Britain's most vulnerable people remains a raw - and hotly contested - issue and will be a major focus of the eventual inquiry.

There have been about 20,000 coronavirus-related deaths in care homes in England and Wales. Hancock insisted on the BBC in July that care homes were well protected and that coronavirus death rates there were lower than the EU average: 30 per cent against 50 per cent of total deaths in care.

Johnson and Hancock have both argued that in mid-March the assumption was a person could only transmit the disease if they had symptoms - and allies of Hancock said doctors would not discharge a patient displaying Covid symptoms. But it was by no means seen as certain - Sage minutes on January 28 had stated: "There is limited evidence of asymptomatic transmission, but early indications imply some is occurring. PHE developing a paper on this."

Johnson this month appeared to be rehearsing his arguments for the public inquiry when he claimed that some care homes "didn't really follow the procedures". It created a howl of anger from the sector. The chief executive of a care home charity claimed the prime minister was being "cowardly" ▶



Chief medical officer
Chris Whitty, left, and
chief scientific adviser
Patrick Vallance at a
conference with Johnson



'Vallance may not go immediately. They may want to hold one back for after the public inquiry'

NHS insider



44%

Proportion of YouGov poll respondents who think that the British government is handling the crisis well, down from 72 per cent in March

Dominic Cummings, Johnson's adviser, saw the crisis as a chance to reshape the British state



'If you'd dropped in from Mars, you'd struggle to work out whether Cummings or Johnson was the prime minister'

A person involved in talks at No 10

◀ and creating a "Kafkaesque" alternative reality by blaming care home workers.

By Thursday March 19, the situation in London was critical. Sadiq Khan was among those who had been urging Johnson to start closing down the capital and was summoned back to No 10 that day for crisis talks, along with Cressida Dick, head of the Metropolitan Police.

The London mayor told Johnson that if he wouldn't lock down the whole country, he was ready for London to lead the way and the prime minister appeared to agree. Khan warned that there could be problems: for example, Londoners driving out into the country to pubs or restaurants or heading to second homes, spreading the disease.

But the dramatic move to lock down London was put on hold for 24 hours as the government turned towards taking a country-wide approach. On the morning of March 20, Emmanuel Macron, French president, asked Johnson what he was doing and warned he would close the border unless Britain went into lockdown, according to French diplomats.

Later that day, a plan to lock down the UK simultaneously finally took shape, an approach backed by leaders in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

On that fateful Friday, Cobra was chaired by Michael Gove, cabinet office minister, not Johnson. Khan says: "I went to that meeting expecting it to be London only." Gove proposed that the pubs should close on Saturday lunchtime, but Khan and Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, argued that this was a disastrous idea and that Friday night would see mayhem. "There would have been an end of days party," says one participant.

Gove agreed - Cummings had also come to the same conclusion - and a message was hastily relayed to Johnson, preparing for the 5pm press conference, that Cobra had agreed that the closure of pubs and restaurants should take immediate effect on Friday night. Only Jesse Norman, a Treasury minister, raised any doubts, asking whether there had been any cost-benefit analysis of the economic and health impacts of lockdown or consideration of less onerous alternatives. Around the room there were blank looks: the decision had been taken.

But it was not until Monday March 23, after a sunny weekend in which many Britons went about

their lives as normal, that Johnson introduced the travel restrictions and shop closures that finally put the country into lockdown.

When the inquiry does begin, the primary target for the Johnson government's ire is already clear: PHE. The executive agency was created in 2013 following the troubled and complex reorganisation of the NHS by former Conservative health secretary Andrew Lansley, with a mission to improve health and reduce health inequalities. It works at arm's length from ministers with operational autonomy.

Duncan Selbie, the chief executive of PHE, argues that they operate specialist labs rather than mass diagnostics. "Our expertise in rapidly developing a diagnostic test, one of the first outside of China, and its roll out across 40 NHS labs, was the fastest deployment of a novel test in recent UK history," he says. "The UK did not have a mass diagnostic capability at the start of the pandemic but the good news is that it does now."

But it was widely criticised for failing to fully involve the private sector earlier. One ally of Matt Hancock says: "They didn't want to bring companies in. When Matt asked about it, they patted him on the head - he didn't like that."

One health service official predicted it would be "toast" after the inquiry. One minister says: "We haven't blamed Public Health England - yet." Meanwhile, No 10 insiders say ministers want to tighten their grip on England's NHS, whose boss Simon Stevens also has operational independence. "You pull levers but they aren't attached to anything," complains one.

Britain's independent civil service, seen by Cummings as an organisation poor at analytical rigour but good at back-covering, will also face reforms, overseen by whoever replaces Sedwill. "Boris made a bold move by sacking Sedwill," says one well-placed government official. "He was present when the PM was dithering. Given how badly Boris treated him, they should be worried he will turn on them come the inquiry." Sedwill will be a star witness; Johnson will hope that the offer of a seat in the House of Lords and a £250,000 payoff will have made him less inclined to play the blame game.

Also facing the pillories is Vallance, who, as chief scientific adviser, is vulnerable because of the way

Johnson has set the scientific community up as a shield: the prime minister's mantra throughout has been that he has been "guided by the science".

One NHS insider says: "[Vallance] may not go immediately. They may want to hold one back for after the public inquiry." But the scientific adviser, formerly president of research and development at GlaxoSmithKline, was a leading sceptic about the merits of a lockdown and his public musings on herd immunity continue to rankle with ministers.

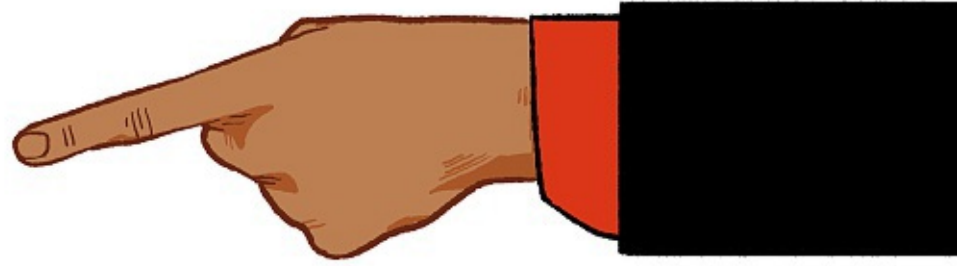
Indeed, Britain's wider scientific community will face tough questions, amid fears that group-think took over on the Sage committee, whose membership and deliberations were only made public weeks afterwards. Peer review was not possible in real time, and many scientists outside the advisory group were baffled at what was going on.

Johnson has not criticised scientists publicly and both he and Hancock have pointed out that they were dealing with incomplete data - China is blamed for failing to provide reliable information early in the outbreak. But Helen Whately, a health minister, said in June that it was legitimate to stick it on scientists in relation to the spread of Covid-19 in care homes. She quickly retracted the comment.

Matt Hancock is seen by some in the Johnson circle as a likely scapegoat. Although Johnson praised his health secretary at cabinet, the catalogue of errors around testing, the availability of protective equipment and a botched attempt to develop a UK-specific NHS tracing app have put him in the firing line. One No 10 official referred to Hancock as "Matt Handjob" in a hostile briefing to The Sunday Times in April.

Hancock is, however, a deft political operator, who points to successes such as the quick establishment of emergency hospitals and the eventual speedy ramping up of testing. Like Johnson, he was diagnosed with coronavirus on March 27, but was less badly affected. A staunch Remainer - and by definition not part of the Johnson inner circle - some believe he will be moved to another department in a cabinet reshuffle rather than being axed. "Matt knows too much," says one friend of the minister.

But the figure who will face the most intense scrutiny is Johnson himself. Although the prime minister is increasingly seen as a chairman-like figure who devolves decision making to advisers



Health secretary Matt Hancock is seen by some as a potential scapegoat due to the errors around testing



like Cummings and ministers such as Hancock and Gove, the major choices in dealing with the pandemic were ultimately his.

Slow to get a personal grip on the crisis, Johnson has appeared poorly briefed on occasions. "If you'd dropped in from Mars, you'd struggle to work out whether Cummings or Johnson was the prime minister," says one person involved in talks at No 10. "I imagine Dom will do whatever it takes to insulate the PM from criticism," says one senior civil servant. "But I can't see Sedwill and the other officials playing ball. It's going to be brutal."

One senior Downing Street figure says that the situation inside No 10 was very tense but decisions were made in haste, with good faith, based on the advice available. "It was a national emergency and everyone was under incredible pressure," says one government aide. Hancock tells colleagues: "People were doing their best in a sea of uncertainty."

Indeed, Britain's politicians were far from alone in fumbling their way through a battle against a new disease, working long hours and sometimes succumbing themselves, against a backdrop of death and economic disaster. But Johnson knows the buck stops with him and that for all of his talk of "being guided by the science", the public elected him to make the decisions. A biographer of Churchill, he might recall the dictum credited to the wartime leader: "Scientists should be on tap, not on top."

In March, some 72 per cent of people told YouGov that the British government was handling the crisis well, but that had slumped to 44 per cent in its latest poll. For Johnson, it has been a searing experience: in six months, he went from election triumph and the delivery of Brexit to a slump in his approval ratings and near-death in an intensive care unit.

Last month, Johnson told MPs: "I do not consider at the moment, that a full-scale national inquiry is a good use of official time." But the reckoning will come and with the death toll at about 45,000, the annual deficit set to rise to more than £350bn and an economic contraction of 25 per cent in just two months, the questions of who did what, when and why will be impossible to avoid. **FT**

Reporting by George Parker, Clive Cookson, Sarah Neville, Sebastian Payne, Camilla Hodgson, Anna Gross and Laura Hughes

'PHE didn't want to bring companies in. When Matt asked about it, they patted him on the head - he didn't like that'

Ally of Matt Hancock





‘Non-fiction disguised as novels is not very satisfying’

Bestselling author *David Mitchell* may be known for genre-hopping books that defy the constraints of time and space but it is the hidden connections that animate them. He talks to *Lorien Kite* about how music inspires him, his new novel and the importance of belonging to lots of places. Portraits by *Eoin O’Conaill*

No one knows who first likened writing about music to “dancing about architecture”, but it has been annoying music journalists ever since. In David Mitchell’s new novel, *Utopia Avenue*, we hear the observation from the lips of Frank Zappa, one of many real-life stars encountered by the fictional band of the title as they rise from Soho dives and student bars to the cusp of global fame. Mitchell, reflecting on the challenge of recreating the sounds of 1967, invokes it too as he explains why he set himself the task.

“Like many people, I’ve had a relationship with music for as long as I’ve been sentient,” the 51-year-old writer tells me over video-link from his spare bedroom-cum-study in Clonakilty, a small Irish town west of Cork, before elaborating on some of the different roles it has played in his life, from simple source of joy to self-identifier. “Of course, it’s in no way unique to me. That’s why music works - maybe as a connector with other human beings, that’s also what music is for.”

Mitchell, in truth, has been dancing about architecture from the very start of his writing career. It is the search for hidden connections, though, that really animates his work. In books such as his 1999 debut, *Ghostwritten*, and the 2004 bestseller *Cloud Atlas*, later a star-studded film, he developed a narrative style defined by the very fluidity with which it moves between genre conventions, leaping at will in time and space and revelling in the intricacy of its own construction. Even *Black Swan Green*, a tender coming-of-age story published in 2007 that in many ►

ways defied the expectations he had built up, was filled with cross-references to its predecessors; the practice became such a signature that Mitchell took to describing the cumulative project as his “uber-novel”. Nor has he ever been afraid simply to enjoy himself. Questioning the demarcations of “high” and “low” literature, his stories are as rich in the visceral pleasures of character and suspense as they are brimming with ideas.

At first glance, *Utopia Avenue* is a much more traditional affair than Mitchell’s last two novels, the apocalyptic, time-travelling *The Bone Clocks* and its companion piece, *Slade House*. Here he keeps the focus on a single group: Dean, a singer-bassist bent on escape from working-class Gravesend; pianist Elf, a Sandy Denny-like figure with a folk sensibility; Griff, a northern drummer from the jazz circuit; and Jasper, a virtuoso guitarist who suffers from schizophrenic episodes and a more generalised “emotional dyslexia” that would today be diagnosed as a form of autism. (Jasper’s story will also please admirers of the fantastical side of Mitchell’s oeuvre, surely one of very few in which the introduction of disembodied spirits midway through a book could feel like a return to business as usual.)

So what attracted Mitchell to the period? “This is a really cool era in social history,” he says. “The Sixties were coming to a head, the counterculture was busy being born. Hippie idealism was not yet a busted flush. It was still credible to think in ’67 that maybe, by wanting it badly enough, by thinking about it ingeniously enough, a different kind of society could be built.”

He is interested in the social context of cultural achievement, the network of musical peers, venues, publications and entrepreneurs collectively dubbed “the scenius” by Brian Eno. “A scenius, it needs a geographical manifestation as well,” says Mitchell, “and the late-Sixties scenius found it in Soho. That odd, shifty square mile, this transgressive, liminal zone

where the usual rules don’t apply. Apparently, it’s never really been a place at an administrative level, there’s never been a council of Soho... it’s a place that’s as much a concept as a place.”

Mitchell knows the area well, walking me through its psychogeography of warren-like hotels, subterranean bars and nocturnal cafés. “I love how the interconnection of these apparently non-musical, not even particularly cultural, factors ends up creating some evergreen music, evergreen cultural commodities.”

“Connection”: that word again. If it carries a moral charge, then Mitchell’s conversation seems to reflect that – I notice that he quickly caveats his standard-issue writer’s equanimity in the face of lockdown with a recognition of others’ suffering, and even when expressing a strong opinion he will invariably pause to acknowledge the opposing point of view.

Even so, he politely resists when I suggest that *Utopia Avenue* seems like an upbeat reading of the Sixties, a novel that eschews the usual framework of idealism followed by drug burnouts and instead follows its characters through different kinds of liberation. “Maybe apart from the drummer, who just keeps drumming on,” Mitchell quips, before drawing me back to what he calls the “constitution” of the book.

“It’s just... it’s a novel about the band, and less a tracking of my ‘optimistic-ometer’ about the Sixties.” He then sets off on a long train of thought comparing *Utopia Avenue*’s ignorance of the narratives that would later be imposed on their time with our own, now, as we live through the great pandemic of 2020. “No, they probably can’t see the darkness, and it would probably be a little bit implausible if they did,” he says. “I try to write novels that are rounded acts of fiction where character and plot convey theme and ideas – non-fiction disguised as novels is not very satisfying.”

I’d become convinced while reading *Utopia Avenue* that Mitchell was a guitarist, so the amateur

musician in me was slightly crestfallen to learn from an early interview that he didn’t play. It turns out, though, that he took guitar and piano lessons for this novel, enjoying the latter so much that he continued. “I’ve got another one tomorrow,” he says. “As my piano teacher and the unfortunates I live with will confirm, I ain’t no Liberace.”

Mitchell’s own musical tastes are strikingly broad. Pop came first. Born in Southport, Merseyside, in 1969, the child of commercial artist parents, he spent his formative years in rural Worcestershire. At his “fairly bog-standard, Midlands comprehensive school”, he says, it was “politically dangerous to express affection for the wrong kind of music at the wrong kind of time”. It was afterwards, at the University of Kent, then over eight years living in Hiroshima, that he really began to explore the jazz and classical worlds that would help populate his early books.

Now, mirroring his views on literature, he tries not to classify. “If it’s beautiful and it moves you, then who cares what genre it is?” He fires up Spotify to play the EDM track “The Finishing” by Stavroz, and the meditative sax reminds me a little of later Wayne Shorter – which Mitchell selects next. We slip into a jazz reverie until I look at the clock and try to break the spell. Mitchell laughs and puts on a voice: “Oh yeah, we’re doing an interview, aren’t we? Sorry!”

I’m keen to talk about Jasper, Mitchell’s first extended engagement with autism in a character. Does this reflect his experience as the father of an autistic son, and also his and his wife KA Yoshida’s work translating two memoirs of autism by the Japanese writer Naoki Higashida? “Most certainly,” he says. “Thanks to my son and [Higashida’s] *The Reason I Jump*, I’ve spent much, much more time with autistic people, and thinking about autism, than I ever would have done.”



David Mitchell in Kinsale, Cork, earlier this month

Previous page: in The Bulman pub, Kinsale

‘I’ve had a relationship with music for as long as I’ve been sentient’

Mitchell is a supporter of Ambitious About Autism, Autistica and the National Autistic Society, and is passionate about dispelling the “pernicious myths” surrounding the condition. “We need urgent improvements to the narrative of neurodiversity. Rights won and awareness raised by LGBTQ+ campaigners over the past three or four decades are a worthy model,” he says. “The casual homophobia that you find in British popular culture in the ’80s or early ’90s – look at it now and I think most people are repelled by it, and the gut reaction is ‘How could you possibly have thought that way?’”

Family partly explains Mitchell’s presence in Clonakilty, where he moved in 2004. A few years later he said that one of the motivations was his and his wife’s desire to raise their two children in a more multicultural environment than Japan – somewhere they could be “both” not “half”. Has he found that in Ireland? “Yeah, West Cork is great, lots of blow-ins here,” he says. “It’s still really Irish in all the good ways – it’s a very ‘human-first’ kind of society. It doesn’t *always* mean that things run as efficiently as they might in Japan and Germany, say, but yeah – at an ethnic-identity level, eyelids are not batted.”

He sees less to celebrate in his old home across the Irish Sea. Brexit, in particular, he regards as an unalloyed tragedy. “It’s profoundly depressing to see the deliberate splintering of national narratives,” he says. “It’s as if factions of our government are doing the work of enemies of democracy, of enemies of progress, of enemies of civilisation, and of enemies of public discourse... what a pass to arrive at.”

Yet he still feels a strong connection to Britain. “I don’t feel like I’ve cut an umbilical cord to caring,” he says. “It’s more multiplication than subtraction, in terms of the areas of the world I feel I have a stake in. And I still feel misery when Liverpool lose and joy when Liverpool win.”

After a first league title for the team in 30 years, congratulations

seem in order. “Yes, I will accept your congratulations and not be at all vicariously modest about them – about bloody time!” he says. “But thank you. I feel the same about Hiroshima [Toyo] Carp Baseball Team – I’m kind of interested in their fortunes as well. So, yeah, one can be both, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

There’s a lovely image in *Utopia Avenue* of songs as dandelion seeds, floating who knows where and changing the world in myriad, unknowable ways. It reminded me of some lines from *Cloud Atlas* voiced by the intelligent android Sonmi-451: “Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb, we are bound to others, past and present. And by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future.” Is it reasonable to see this – interconnectedness, the hidden ripples of cause-and-effect – as a key to Mitchell’s unfolding uber-novel?

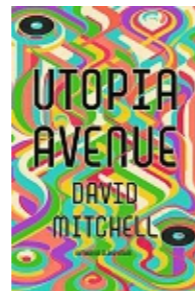
Again, he’s protective of his art, and I sense he’d prefer to focus on the fundamentals – stories, made to work through craft, imagination and the application of narrative logic. “It is demonstrably true that what happens in one part of the world, in one corner of time, has traceable and not-so-traceable repercussions and knock-on causes and effects to other times and other places,” he says. “And this never stops – it’s not a unique isolated phenomenon as much as the media of reality.”

Our time is almost up and I channel the spirit of *Desert Island Discs*. One song: how would Mitchell play us out? “I’m not going to think about this much, I’m just going to go with the one that jumps out at me,” he says, and chooses Nick Cave’s “Bright Horses” from the album *Ghosteen*. “Do play it right now. And listen to the lyrics, and remember that Nick Cave has a son who died... I have no words for this song, this song is immune to and uncapturable by words.”

I do and he’s right: words fail. You just have to listen to it. **FT**

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Lorien Kite is deputy Life & Arts editor

A scene from the 2012 film adaptation of *Cloud Atlas*, starring Halle Berry and Tom Hanks; the 1960s-inspired cover of *Utopia Avenue*





IN



LIVING



COLOUR

BEACHES, BARS, FRIENDS, LOVERS: THIS ARCHIVE OF MORE THAN 8,000 PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALBERTO DI LENARDO REVEALS A JOYOUS CROSS-SECTION OF 20TH-CENTURY LIFE





On the top floor of my grandparents' house in Udine, in the far north-east of Italy, is a library. On childhood visits, my grandfather would lead my brother and me through a door hidden in the bookshelves. It opened into a secret attic, dominated by an enormous model railway.

The secret attic is embedded in my memory as a place of charm and wonder, but it is a later experience that defines my relationship with my grandfather. One day when I was about 16, he revealed one of his less secret passions - his enduring love of photography - and he began to share with me his archive of more than 8,000 photographs.

The large body of work created by my grandfather, Alberto di Lenardo (1930-2018), reflects a joyous cross-section of 20th-century middle-class life: one of beaches and bars, mountains, road trips, strangers, lovers and friends, captured in vivid colours. Photography was his way of communicating

emotions that his generation rarely expressed in words. His images also hint at his constant search for stolen glimpses - he preferred his subjects to be unaware of his camera, so that they were unguarded and a pure reflection of the moment.

These pictures, and his excitement while sharing them with me, made me fall in love with photography and would shape my whole working life. Photography was something that he and I shared and jealously guarded for the two of us.

Looking back, his love of model railways was in keeping with his love of photography. Dioramas are nothing more than the attempt to stop a moment, crystallise it and fix it in an unchanging memory - just like a beautiful photograph. **FT**

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Carlotta di Lenardo, London/Udine, 2020. "An Attic Full of Trains" by Alberto di Lenardo, edited by Carlotta di Lenardo, is published this month by MACK; mackbooks.co.uk



PHOTOGRAPHY WAS MY GRANDFATHER'S WAY OF COMMUNICATING EMOTIONS THAT HIS GENERATION RARELY EXPRESSED IN WORDS





PATRICIA BUSHEY

Mass appeal

The return of church worship in parts of the US is surreal, but there is balm even in the adjusted rituals, writes *Claire Bushey* as she attends Sunday service in Chicago

Covid-19 has done what no pope or parish priest could ever accomplish: it has forced US Catholics to fill the church pews from the front.

Six months ago, at any service at any parish in the country the seating pattern would have been the same. Catholic churches fill from the back. The front pew facing the altar is the one most likely to go empty; we like a little breathing room between us and God.

Yet when I arrived at St Gertrude on July 5, for the first Mass I had attended in person since March, everyone was seated in the front. Ushers had escorted them to spots spaced six feet apart, marked by blue painters' tape formed into a cross.

St Gertrude is the kind of Chicago parish where I am "new" because I have only attended Mass there for 10 years. This is a really Catholic city. Irish, German and eastern European immigrants founded parishes here in the 19th century. Since then, the demographics have changed, with the Chicago Archdiocese area breaking down at 43 per cent white, 26 per cent Latino and 21 per cent black. Catholics represent a third of metro Chicago's population, the largest single religious group. On Ash Wednesday, the downtown streets are filled with office workers with blackened foreheads.

The city has a reputation for a progressive strain of Catholicism dating back to the early 20th century. St Gert's, more than a century old, stands in this tradition. There is a refugee committee *and* a Christmas bazaar, and I love it.

But I hadn't been to Mass in person since the pandemic swept through the country in the spring. Instead, on Sunday mornings in Lent, and then Eastertide, and then at Pentecost, I opened my laptop and sat on a yoga mat to watch the St Gert's Facebook livestream,

recorded from a church empty save for priests, musicians and parish staff. The livestream offered more comfort than the archdiocese's recorded Mass on YouTube because, as the number of viewers crept upward each week, it reminded me that I was not as alone as I felt.

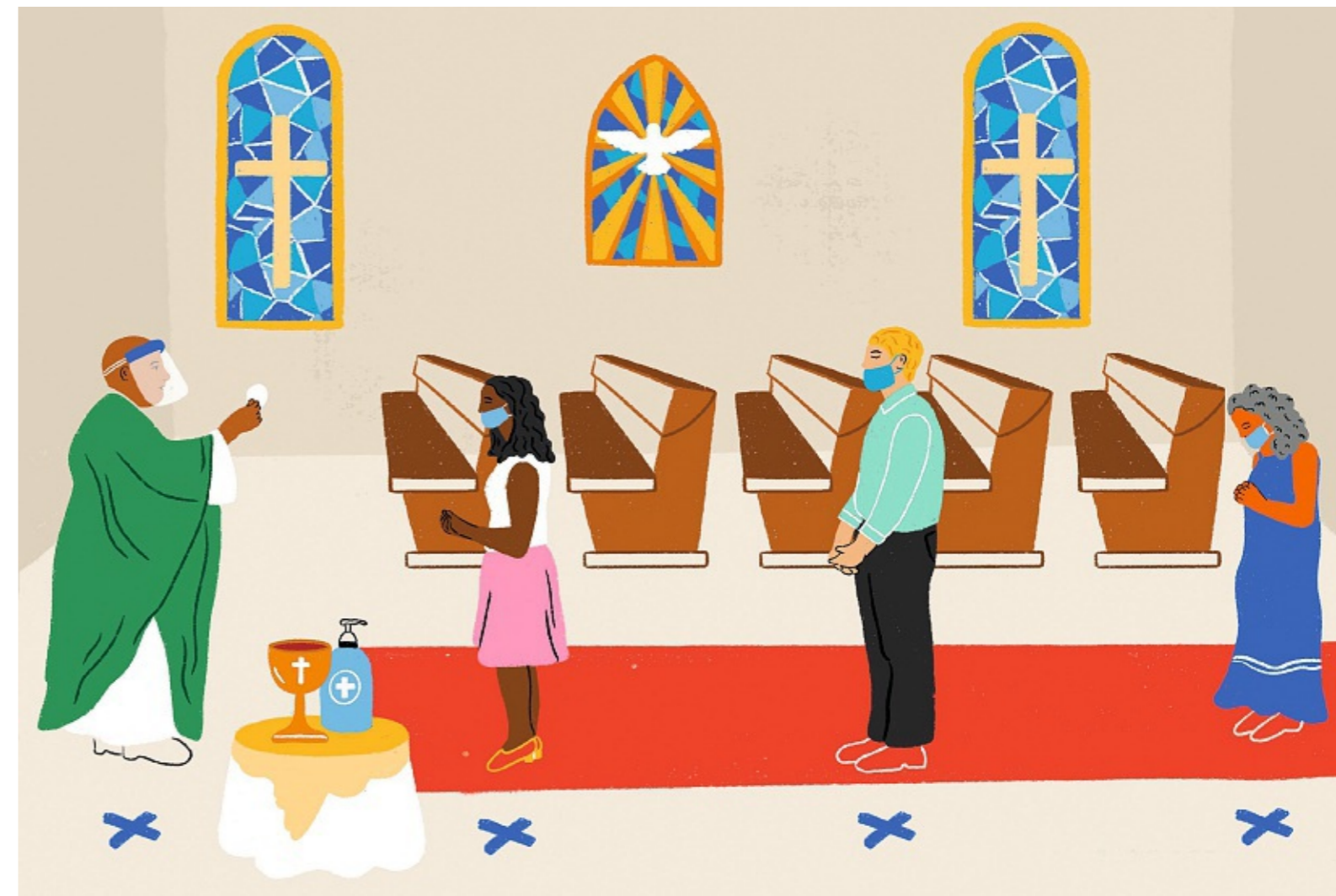
In June, the archdiocese issued a thick instruction booklet on the adjustments churches needed to make to reopen. Parishes have had to recruit a phalanx of volunteers to greet churchgoers and clean after Masses. Not all have been able to do it, and some remain closed.

I made mistakes following the new rules before I even left my house. Like a flashy restaurant, St Gertrude now requires a reservation. The church can admit no more than 150 worshippers, 20 per cent of its full capacity. Not that we reached anything like that on an average Sunday but the point is that had the crowd ever multiplied like loaves and fishes there would have been room. Reservations had closed by the time I remembered to do it but figuring it was church, not Glastonbury, I got in my car anyway.

I arrived 12 minutes late (the pandemic hasn't changed everything) but easily found parking on Granville Avenue, which was different. I donned my mask while hustling to the only available door, instinctively glancing toward the holy water font to cross myself. It was empty.

A volunteer stopped me and scanned my forehead with a thermometer. Green light: good to go. Next stop, a check-in table at the front. Reservation? No, but not a problem since there were only 50 of us. A spritz of hand sanitiser, and an usher appeared to guide me to my socially distanced seat.

I realised that, while I was no later than usual, Mass was further along. Let me tell you, ▶



Illustrations by Sol Cotti



'I love tacos and margaritas as much as the next bon vivant, but I won't die to eat at a restaurant. Yet I am willing to take my chances to go to Mass'

◀ it is exponentially more awkward to waltz in during the homily, or sermon, than the second reading - with an escort, no less - and I cringed all the way to my pew. Father Rich Prendergast, the pastor at St Gertrude, told me later that the archdiocese has instructed priests to move services along, to get people in and out, reducing the chance of transmission. Some on the parish staff worried that late arrivals at Mass would undermine safety precautions, but the pastor thought it was a problem "that will solve itself". Correct, Father.

The homily ended before I heard a word. Crowds feel threatening now, and I couldn't focus. The congregation looked more dressed up than usual; I counted five dresses, including mine. Maybe we were all just excited to go out.

We moved on to reciting the Nicene Creed, an exceptionally long prayer that no one actually knows, which lays out Catholic belief. We read it from paper strips because the hymnals were gone from the pews. Masks provided an excuse for the usual Catholic mumble.

Father Rich wore green. In the liturgical year, green signals the periods between the seasons of waiting, such as Lent and Advent, and celebrations like Christmas. "Ordinary time", we call it. It comes at points throughout the year but, in my mind, ordinary time is always summer, the hot stretch following Pentecost in un-air-conditioned churches with the smell of cut lawn drifting through open stained-glass windows. It is the green of growing things, of life gently moving forward, seed to sprout, plant to harvest, the wheel turning, Sunday after Sunday.

There is nothing ordinary, though, about these times. We prayed for an end to divisions by race and gender, for doctors and nurses

trying to slow the spread of Covid-19, for those suffering from financial hardship and grief, for broken relationships, broken dreams and those searching for new ways to grow in their lives. We prayed those who need it will find comfort from friends, family and strangers.

The Mass sped along. We skipped the collection of donations, now done online.

Mass crescendoed with the priest's blessing of the bread and wine, which we believe mystically transforms them into the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, a sacrament that confers grace upon those who participate in it. That, at least, is Catholic doctrine. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey of US Catholics found that 69 per cent instead believe that the bread and wine are, gulp, symbols, and apparently that whole Counter-Reformation thing didn't take.

Yet in the months of lockdown, a strange longing has stirred among many of us. I missed communion. Not as badly as I miss sugar when I give it up for Lent, but badly enough to notice.

"I've had a Eucharist jones," said Megan Quinn, a St Gertrude parishioner of three decades, who had felt the same craving.

While health concerns and anxiety still keep many at home, across the archdiocese priests report an unexpected eagerness among parishioners to return to church, for the community and for the sacrament. Father Rich said, "The common refrain is, 'I didn't know how much I would miss it until it wasn't there.'" Maybe we're not Protestants after all.

The Mass stopped as Father Rich gave us instructions on how to line up for communion. The sharp smell of alcohol wafted through the church as ushers again spritzed hands with hand sanitiser. Father Rich wore a face shield.

Communion was given via outstretched hands only, not the old-fashioned manner of placing it on the tongue. We were not to touch our faces except to remove our masks briefly in order to eat the wafer. As I walked to the front I knew this was the riskiest action I'd taken in months.

Then it was over, and I was back in my pew. Two violinists, 10 feet away from the pianist, who was 10 feet away from the cantor, played "Ubi Caritas", and my eyes pricked because we couldn't sing. St Gertrude likes to sing. When I think of my parish, I think of the centenary Mass and the congregation bellowing our unofficial anthem, "All Are Welcome". But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has theorised that loud vocalisation, such as singing, spreads the disease more than normal speaking. In one well known case, a superspreader in Washington state infected half of the 61 choristers who showed up for a practice in early March. Two of them died. So we can't sing.

The words got me, though. "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est": "Where charity and love are, there God is," and the first verse, "We gather together..."

In the New Testament, Jesus says to his followers, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Dorothea Tobin, who attended Mass wearing a red mask with "#love" printed on it, said it gave her a physical lift to be around people again, and she was encouraging others to return to church. That need to gather together is primal, whether it's to be with God or with each other - a distinction so fine as to be irrelevant.

When Mass ended, I bolted out of a door I never use and walked like I was leaving the scene of a fire to avoid creating a bottleneck. But then I looped around the block, and people were

chatting after Mass like they always do, outside on the sidewalk, spaced several feet apart.

Chicago evaded the worst of the pandemic. We had more time than Washington state or New York, and better political leadership than Texas or Florida. (Times are dark when Illinois, a state that has sent four governors to prison, serves as a beacon of governance.) We built a field hospital at the city's convention center but never needed to fill it. Still, it's been bad enough. More than 154,000 cases in Illinois. About 7,200 deaths.

Inside the church, the volunteer cadre started cleaning.

The US is reopening, regardless of whether it will kill people. It forces the question: what is worth the risk to your own health and the health of other people? A haircut? A yoga class? The fight in the streets for racial justice? A wafer and a few hymns?

I love tacos and margaritas with friends on an outdoor patio as much as the next bon vivant, but I won't die to eat at a restaurant. Yet I am willing to take my chances to go to Mass.

Really, I am as surprised as you. My list of quarrels with the church is long and predictable. (Ecclesial defenders who sniff that an angry laity should just get over the decades-long sexual abuse of children and resulting cover-up, ought to know the church thinks in centuries. So give us one or two.) Yet here we are.

Life is hard. There needs to be some balm in Gilead. The church gives me a sense of belonging, a rare opportunity to use the pronoun "we". It soothes an ache that I did not feel until I could not relieve it. It was easy to take for granted, until it was gone. To think it was ordinary, when it never was. **FT**

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Claire Bushey is the FT's Chicago reporter



Ravinder Bhogal Recipes



Kitchen wisdom

From smoked mackerel and potato dosas to massaman pork and peanut curry, *Ravinder Bhogal* shares memories and recipes from her new book.

Photography by *Kristin Perers*

Jikoni means “kitchen” in Kiswahili, the spirited language spoken in Kenya, the country where I was born. I grew up in Nairobi, in a whitewashed house built by my *bhaji* (grandfather). When I was seven, we made an abrupt voyage to England. Our usual trips to visit family in London had always been a merry-go-round of Fortnum & Mason, Hamleys and shiny biscuit tins but, after several weeks of living in a cold flat above a shop that was very much in need of a woman’s touch, it became clear that this trip was different and we were not going back.

Homesickness was an ordeal I found difficult to shake off. I felt displaced and alienated, bullied at school because of my foreign accent and NHS specs. I existed in a strange sort of suspended animation, carrying the burden of living between two worlds. I had been accustomed to creepers, colossal jamun trees and rugged, open terrain – my new landscape was barren, the horizon heavy with haggard buildings set against a terrifying Milky Way of artificial lights. I longed for the familiar – and for the foods that signified the familiar for me. I developed a sensual nostalgia for the smell of wet, red Kenyan earth, for the scent of guavas warming on the trees in the garden.

I can’t remember exactly how long it took me to settle – and even when I did, the dream of returning endured. Nostalgia makes the things you hastily leave behind feel more precious than ever: the favourite dolls, the language, the neat and beloved grandmother, the culture. But for me it was the distinctive taste and smell of home I missed the most. Eventually, the hole in my stomach and soul led me into our modest English kitchen with my mother, where we learnt to merge our old and new worlds. We occupied a hinterland, where we fused new ingredients with our old traditions, unwittingly creating a new cuisine.

Our recipes displayed a rebellious spirit – lawless concoctions that drew their influences from one nation and then another. We took the traditions of our ancestors and their regional home cooking and overlaid them with the reality of our new home and whatever its various food markets, delis, canteens and multicultural

supermarkets had to offer on any given day. This is what I suppose could be loosely termed “immigrant cuisine”, proudly inauthentic recipes that span geography, ethnicity and history.

Growing up in a patriarchal Punjabi family as daughter number four was, at times, stifling. I chafed at the constraints of what was permissible (embroidery, crochet, cooking for family, the oompah of the creaking harmonium at prayer ceremonies) and what was verboten (discos, climbing trees, boys and dreaming of cooking for anyone other than your future husband and children).

Cooking is a highly skilled and often selfless endeavour, especially when it is women who are doing the feeding. As I watched my grandmother, mother, aunts and sisters join the cult of domesticity, I felt restless and inwardly rebelled at the drudgery of it all. At the same time, I found solace in cookery books and cookery shows – powerful female role models such as Madhur Jaffrey and Nigella Lawson gave me the faith that cookery could be a career prospect, rather than just a feminine duty.

Many years later, after graduating and working as a journalist, opportunity finally knocked and, unexpectedly, the career I had been daydreaming about all my life became a reality. I began writing about food, cooking at pop-ups and doing private catering – until, finally, after a decade, I plucked up the courage to join the cohort of brilliant women at the helm of their own food establishments and opened Jikoni in 2016.

Even now, in the restaurant kitchen, the maternal figures who shared their culinary wisdom stand alongside me, in spirit, at the pass. I feel immensely grateful to them for giving me the best education they knew. Instead of a brood of children, it is my guests I feed with the same love and affection they taught me when I was little. It is sustaining, it’s precious, and it’s what keeps me coming back to my *jikoni*.

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This is an edited extract from “Jikoni: Proudly Inauthentic Recipes from an Immigrant Kitchen”, published by Bloomsbury, £26. Ravinder Bhogal is chef-patron of Jikoni. jikonilondon.com; Instagram/ @cookinboots ▶





Kerala crab-stuffed courgette flowers with coriander chutney

Serves five as a starter

- 10 courgette flowers (male, if possible, as they are bigger)
- 100g plain flour, seasoned with salt, for dredging
- Groundnut oil, for deep-frying
- Sea salt and black pepper

For the chutney

- 1 tsp raw peanuts
- ½ tsp cumin seeds
- 2 tbs frozen grated coconut, defrosted
- 1 large bunch of coriander, roughly chopped, stalks and all
- 1 green chilli, roughly chopped
- Small thumb of ginger, finely grated
- Caster sugar, sea salt and lime juice, to taste

For the stuffing

- 1 tbs rapeseed oil
- 1 tsp brown mustard seeds
- Pinch of asafoetida
- 15 curry leaves

- ½ tsp ground turmeric
- Finely grated zest and juice of 1 lemon
- Thumb of ginger, finely grated
- 1 red chilli, thinly sliced
- 250g white crabmeat
- Handful of chopped coriander
- 50g frozen grated coconut, defrosted

For the batter

- 150g rice flour
- ¼ tsp baking powder
- 250ml ice-cold sparkling water

1 — To make the chutney, blitz the peanuts, cumin and coconut in a blender until smooth. Add the remaining ingredients and blend again, adding a little water to make a purée.

2 — For the stuffing, heat the rapeseed oil in a heavy-based frying pan over medium heat. Add the mustard seeds and, as soon as they start to pop,

sprinkle in the asafoetida and swiftly follow with the curry leaves. Fry for five seconds, then add the turmeric, lemon zest, ginger and chilli, stirring often, for one to two minutes or until fragrant. Add the crabmeat and coriander and mix well, seasoning to taste with salt and pepper. Take off the heat and stir in the lemon juice and coconut. Set aside to cool.

3 — Make a little cylinder of crab mixture and stuff into the centre of a courgette flower, then gently twist the petals together at the ends, making sure there is no exposed filling. Repeat with the rest of the crab mixture and courgette flowers.

4 — Make the batter just before you're ready to fry. Sift the rice flour and baking powder into a bowl and whisk in the sparkling

water, being careful not to overmix. Roll each courgette flower in seasoned flour and then dip into the batter to coat lightly – you want a thin, delicate coating.

5 — Fill a large, heavy-based saucepan a third full with the deep-frying oil. Heat the oil to 180C – if you don't have a thermometer, you will know the oil is ready when a cube of bread turns golden brown in 20 seconds. Carefully holding each courgette flower by the stem, dip its head into the oil for a few seconds to set the batter before releasing. Fry in batches until golden brown and crisp. Drain very well on kitchen paper, letting the oil return to temperature between batches.

6 — Serve immediately, with the chutney alongside.



Smoked mackerel and potato dosas

Serves four

- 250g basmati rice, rinsed
- 125g white urid dhal
- 1 tsp fenugreek seeds
- Ghee, for frying
- Sea salt
- Grated fresh coconut and fried
- Eggs, to serve, if desired

For the filling

- 40g ghee
- 2 tsp brown mustard seeds
- Pinch of asafoetida
- 20 curry leaves
- 1 red onion, finely sliced
- 40g cashews
- 2 tsp cumin seeds
- 1 tsp ground turmeric
- 2 green chillies, finely chopped
- Thumb of ginger, finely grated
- 1kg Désirée potatoes, cut into 1cm cubes and boiled until tender, then drained
- Juice of 1 lime
- 500g smoked mackerel, shredded and bones removed
- Handful of chopped coriander

1 — For the dosa batter, place the rice and lentils in a bowl, add enough cold water to cover by 5cm, and leave to soak overnight.

2 — The next morning, drain the rice and lentils, then blend in a food processor with 100ml of water until smooth. Place in a bowl and gradually whisk in more water until the batter thickly coats the back of your spoon. Stir in the fenugreek seeds and season with salt, then cover and leave to ferment at room temperature for at least eight hours or overnight.

3 — To make the filling, heat the ghee in a frying pan and add the mustard seeds. As soon as they begin to pop, follow with the asafoetida and curry leaves and fry very briefly. Then add the onion, cashews and cumin seeds.

4 — Fry over medium heat until the onions are golden brown, then add the turmeric, chillies and ginger and keep frying until aromatic. Add the potatoes, stir to coat in all the spices and season well with salt. Squeeze over the lime juice, then scatter in the mackerel and coriander. Set aside.

5 — When you are ready to cook the dosas, heat a non-stick frying pan over medium heat and brush with ghee. Pour a ladleful of the batter into the centre of the pan and, using the back of the ladle, spread out the batter in concentric circles, spiralling out from the centre, to form a thin pancake. Drizzle with a little more ghee and cook for two minutes, then flip and cook for another minute or until golden. Keep warm while you cook the rest.

6 — To serve the dosas, you can either spread the filling on one half of a dosa and then fold it over or you can fill and roll it up. My personal favourite for brunch is to leave it open, with a few spoonfuls of mackerel and potato, a grating of fresh coconut and a fried egg on top.



‘Even now, the maternal figures who shared their culinary wisdom stand alongside me, in spirit, at the pass’

Massaman pork and peanut curry with pineapple relish

Serves six

- 1kg diced pork neck
- 1 tbs coconut oil
- 1 star anise
- 3 green cardamom pods
- A few curry leaves
- 1 cinnamon stick, broken up
- 300ml coconut milk
- 3 potatoes, peeled and diced
- 3 shallots, peeled and halved
- 1 tbs fish sauce
- 2 tbs tamarind concentrate
- 1 tbs palm sugar
- Handful of roasted peanuts
- Sprigs of Thai basil, to garnish

For the curry paste

- 4 dried Kashmiri chillies
- 2 tsp coriander seeds
- 2 tsp cumin seeds
- 7 green cardamom pods
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 star anise
- 1 tbs rapeseed oil
- 2 banana shallots, roughly chopped
- 6 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
- 1 tsp shrimp paste
- 100ml coconut milk
- 2 lemongrass stalks, roughly chopped
- Thumb of ginger, roughly chopped

For the relish

- ½ small pineapple, finely chopped
- 70g jaggery, grated
- 3 tsp basil seeds – optional
- 4 tsp fish sauce
- 2 tbs rice wine vinegar
- 2 tbs lime juice
- 1 red chilli, finely chopped
- 1 banana shallot, very thinly sliced into crescents
- 2 kaffir lime leaves, stalks removed, very thinly sliced
- Handful of finely chopped mint
- Handful of coriander leaves

1 — For the curry paste, put the chillies, coriander and cumin seeds, cardamom pods, cinnamon stick and star anise into a dry frying pan and toast over medium heat, stirring frequently, until aromatic. Transfer to a spice grinder or pestle and mortar and grind into a powder.

2 — Pour the oil into the frying pan, add the shallots and garlic and fry until caramelised. Add the shrimp paste and the ground spices and fry until fragrant, stirring constantly.

3 — Tip the contents of the frying pan into a food processor, add the coconut milk, lemongrass and ginger and blend to a smooth paste.

4 — In a large pan, fry the pork in the coconut oil with the star anise, cardamom pods, curry leaves and cinnamon stick until the meat is lightly sealed. Add the coconut milk, then fill the empty tin with water and add that to the pan as well, along with the curry paste. Bring to a simmer, cover and cook for 1½ hours or until the pork is butter-soft.

5 — Meanwhile, make the relish. Place the pineapple in a bowl. Put the jaggery into a small pan with 100ml of water and stir over medium heat until the jaggery dissolves, then bring to the boil and simmer for two minutes or until syrupy. Remove from the heat and leave to cool completely. If you are using basil seeds, put them into a small bowl and soak in just enough water to cover for 10 minutes – they will puff up.

6 — Pour the cooled syrup over the pineapple, then follow with the soaked basil seeds, if using, and the remaining ingredients except the mint and coriander. Refrigerate until needed. Just before serving, toss through the herbs.

7 — Add the potatoes, shallots, fish sauce, tamarind concentrate and palm sugar to the curry and simmer, uncovered, for 30 minutes or until the potatoes are tender, then stir through the peanuts. Garnish with Thai basil leaves and serve with the pineapple relish.



Turkish delight trifles with pashmak

Serves six

- 200g raspberries
- 200g strawberries
- 1 tbs rosewater
- Crème de framboise, for drizzling
- 500g good-quality vanilla custard
- 300ml double cream, lightly whipped
- 100g pashmak
- 75g Turkish delight, chopped
- Seeds from one pomegranate
- 2 tbs finely chopped roasted pistachios
- Dried rose petals, to serve

For the jelly

- 300ml pomegranate juice
- Juice of ½ lemon

- 1 tsp rosewater
- 125g caster sugar
- 5 gelatine leaves

For the sponge

- 150g unsalted butter, softened
- 150g caster sugar
- 3 eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 150g self-raising flour
- ½ tsp baking powder
- 100g finely ground pistachios

1 — The jelly will take up to six hours to set, so you'll need to make it in advance. In a bowl or jug, combine half the pomegranate juice with the lemon juice, rosewater and 150ml of water. Put the other half of the juice into a small

saucepan with the sugar and heat gently, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Once it has come to a simmer, remove from the heat.

2 — Soak the gelatine leaves in cold water for five minutes, then squeeze out the excess water. Stir the gelatine into the hot juice until it has completely dissolved. Mix the two juices together and pour through a fine sieve into a 500ml container. Leave to cool, then chill until set, about four to six hours.

3 — To make the sponge, preheat the oven to 180C/160C Fan/Gas Mark 4. Line a 26cm square cake tin with baking parchment. In an

electric mixer fitted with the beater attachment, cream together the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating each one in well before adding the next, then mix in the vanilla extract. Gently fold in the flour, baking powder and ground pistachios, then pour the batter into the tin and bake for 20–25 minutes or until a skewer inserted in the centre comes out clean and dry. Leave the sponge to cool in its tin.

4 — Meanwhile, combine half the berries and the rosewater in a small bowl and mash with a fork, then strain the berry purée into a bowl, discarding

the solids. Hull and slice the remaining strawberries and set aside, along with the remaining raspberries, to decorate the trifles.

5 — Cut the sponge into 2cm cubes and divide between six glasses, then drizzle with crème de framboise. Turn out the jelly, cut into cubes and divide between the glasses, then top with custard and whipped cream. Chill until needed.

6 — To serve, spoon some of the berry purée over each trifle, then top with pashmak, Turkish delight, sliced strawberries, raspberries, pomegranate seeds, chopped pistachios and rose petals.



The History Cook Polly Russell

The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook by Dorothy Gessert

Raised during the Great Depression, the author of this unique book was a survivor, natural educator and role model for our current time of crisis

Early on in the Covid crisis, when pasta was momentarily scarce but comparisons with rationing were plentiful, I was drawn to *The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook* published in 1976 by Great Lakes Living Press in Illinois.

It was passed on to me a few years ago, through a chain of family connections and unknown previous owners, and had sat on my shelves forgotten until now. Its author, Mrs Dorothy Stuessy Gessert, who was born in 1928 at the start of the Great Depression, offers “down-to-earth” country recipes, alongside tips on canning, pickling, brining and even making cosmetics.

With an economic downturn looming and lockdown trundling on, knowing how to fry a squirrel or make soap out of beef tallow seemed like a sensible plan.

The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook has 17 chapters, with headings

such as “Wild Game Dishes”, “Old Family Favourites” and “Uses for Salt”. Gessert is pictured on the back in a black-and-white 1970s photograph wearing thick-rimmed glasses, a no-nonsense dress and a steely smile. Next to her is a large bag of salt, weighing scales, a pickling jar and a huge hunk of pork. She looks like a woman who could cope in a crisis. I was curious to discover more.

Gessert died in 2018 at the age of 90. But, thanks to a helpful funeral director, I find myself speaking via video-link to her youngest child, Robert, a retired farmer and commercial pilot in his early sixties. “You could write a book about my mum and her family!” he says. “There’s so much history.”

Gessert’s ancestors were among the 12,000 or so Swiss immigrants who settled in Wisconsin in the 19th century. Echoes of a frontier past linger in *The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook* with recipes such as “Stuffed Muskrat”, “Ground Opossum” and even “Baked Beaver.” According to Gessert, beaver flesh is, “fine grained and moist” but the fat has an “objectionable flavour” and should be removed prior to cooking. Good to know.

Gessert’s parents, Albert and Elizabeth Stuessy, bought a farm near Avon Township in the 1920s,

in an area regularly flooded by the Sugar river close to the Illinois border. “How people who originally came from mountains ended up in a swamp is beyond me,” Robert laughs. They may have swapped mountains for mud, but Gessert’s predecessors evidently passed on their Swiss culture. In *The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook*, there are 13 Swiss recipes for dishes such as “Swiss Carrot Pudding,” “Chaesmeus” (a “hearty cheese dish”) and “Chalber Wurst” (veal sausage), as well as lengthy instructions for making “Durta,” a pudding of cow colostrum mixed with lard, flour and sugar.

Born one of 13 children, Gessert was raised in a period of significant economic hardship. According to family legend, unemployed men routinely turned up on the family farm to seek work throughout the Depression. Gessert’s mother never sent these men away hungry, despite having a large family to feed.

Gessert herself was baking bread, helping with butchery and making sausage from the age of 12. Her sensibilities, discernible in *The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook*, were forged in an environment where self-sufficiency, looking out for neighbours and practical skills were prized. There is a detailed guide for “Making a Smoker” using a gutted

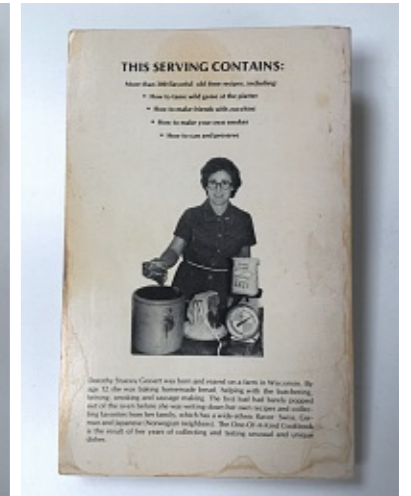


A farmer’s wife and daughter store preserves in September 1939. Gessert’s down-to-earth tips were informed by her Depression-era childhood

‘Gessert’s sensibilities were forged in an environment where self-sufficiency, looking out for neighbours and practical skills were prized’



‘The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook’ (1976) with a photograph of its author Dorothy Gessert



refrigerator, for instance, along with recipes for making cream cheese, ketchups and butter from scratch. “She was a tough lady, my mother. She was fiercely independent and it was all about community,” explains Robert. “Food was how she showed us how she cared.”

Having left school at the age of 14, Gessert found work as a maid and then in a shoe factory. She married Robert G Gessert in 1950 and the couple worked as sharecroppers for 27 years. “Dairy farming is 24/7, 365 days a year – and on top of that there were the crops,” says Robert. “For most of their lives, there was only work and little security.” As soon as their three children had graduated from school, the couple gave up the dairy farm and purchased a smallholding. “That was the happiest day of my mother’s life,” remembers Gessert, “getting free of the lordship of the farm.”

Although Gessert’s education was curtailed, she was passionate about learning and a committed conservationist. She was an active member of the Historical Society and The Prairie Enthusiasts, taught at Sunday school and wrote for local newspapers and periodicals throughout her life. “She was ashamed of her lack of education,” says Robert. “She could have been

a physician or something like that but she never had the opportunity.” When she retired, Gessert took a General Educational Development test, equivalent to a high-school diploma, and got a perfect score.

While she was devoted to the local community and environment, she was also curious about the world beyond Wisconsin. “Mum loved learning about other foods and other cultures,” explains her son. “She was accepting of everyone, every creed.” In this book, recipes such as “Cracklin’ Cookies” (sweet biscuits made with dried fruit and pork cracklings), “Sorghum Pie” and “Fried Elderflower Blossoms” sit squarely in the rural American tradition, yet dishes from Japan, Greece, Norway and Hawaii feature too. There is even a recipe for “Cornish Pasty”.

Dorothy Gessert may have felt embarrassed by her truncated schooling but she was a survivor who was also a natural educator, engaged in the world around her and beyond. *The One-of-a-Kind Cookbook* was written by a one-of-a-kind woman and if the day comes when pasta actually does run out, she will be my role model. **FT**

Polly Russell is a curator at the British Library; @PollyRussell1; Instagram: the_history_cook

JOHN VACHON/FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION/ OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

A feast of learning for children...

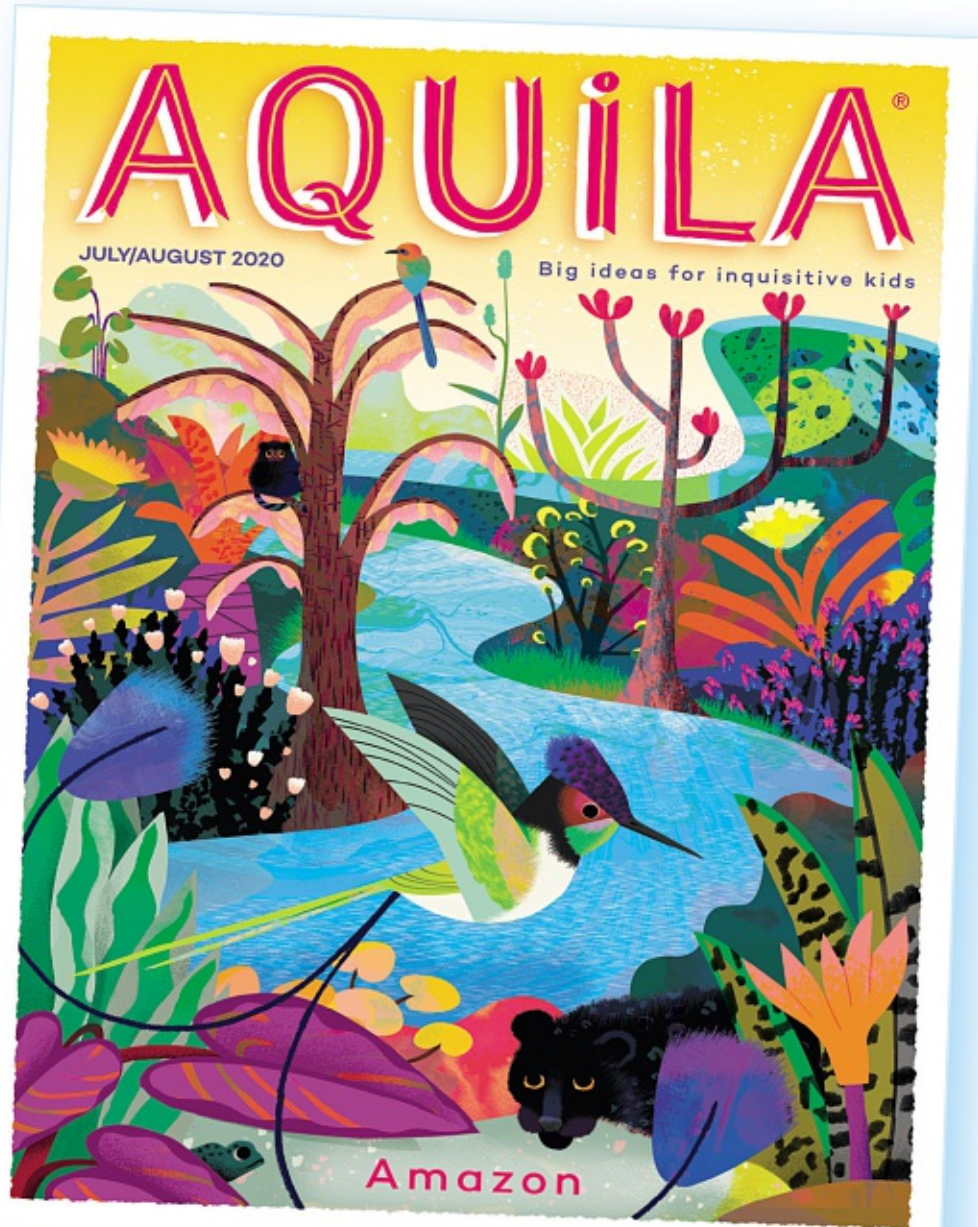
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Jancis Robinson Wine

Cool China

Would you pay more than £100 for a bottle of Chinese wine? In the current political climate, perhaps not. You would therefore be unlikely to shell out for either of the ambitiously priced Chinese wines being launched so hopefully in the UK this month.

One was made by an Austrian and one by a Frenchman. In a way, the roots of both wines are Australian, put down long ago when Sino-Australian relations were more cordial than they are today.

Tony Jordan was a hugely admired wine consultant based outside Melbourne. He established Moët & Chandon's Australian sparkling-wine operation in the 1980s and, in 2008, was charged by the parent company LVMH to find the ideal spot in China to produce a copy of the wine the Chinese liked most: red bordeaux.

It wasn't easy. In most Chinese regions, vines have to be buried in winter to save them from fatal freeze - and they don't take kindly to it. The east coast is milder than other parts of the country but has been subject to ill-timed monsoons that play havoc with the grape crop. It took Jordan four years to find one of the most improbable settings for viticulture in the world: on precipitous slopes at 2,500m elevation in the upper reaches of the Mekong valley in Yunnan province, almost on the Tibetan border, overlooked by the Himalayas. Here, winters are warm enough to avoid the annual vine burial and the climate is dry.

Jordan died last year, far too early and much lamented. I thought of him as I tasted the past two vintages, 2015 and 2016 (both £200 approximately), of Ao Yun, the bordeaux blend that has resulted from his Chinese research.

Maxence Dulou is the man in charge of making Ao Yun. I met



As imagined by Leon Edler

him and his family in Yunnan in 2014 before the wine had even been launched. In those days, they lived in the only town of any size in the region, now called Shangri-La, four hours' drive from the winery. For the sake of the children's education, they have since moved to Hong Kong - and Dulou's commute to the winery now takes a day and a half. But he could not be more passionate about the enterprise.

On a phone call from Hong Kong, as I tasted the latest vintage and compared it with the previous one, he was obviously supremely proud of his newest baby. In 2016, his team had subdivided their 28ha of vineyard for the first time into 900 blocks by soil type, water retention and location. This meant they could be sure of pruning, irrigating and picking every grape at the optimum moments. (The



altitude of the villages where their grapes are grown can vary by as much as 400m, which means that the grape harvest in the highest, coolest village can be well into November whereas they start picking the lowest sites as early as mid-September.)

At this elevation, winemaking operations have to be recalibrated because the effects of extreme altitude on the role of oxygen and sulphur dioxide, the evaporation rates, the ideal length of maceration and even the logistics of bottling have proved so unlike what happens closer to sea level. Even tasting is skewed. The atmosphere at vineyard altitude is apparently so dry, a bit like on

'In most Chinese regions, vines have to be buried in winter to save them from fatal freeze'

a plane, that the palate dries out and tannins predominate. Dulou now takes his blending decisions in Hong Kong, shipping the 50 to 60 samples of different possible ingredients there.

The other Chinese wine being launched this month is also a concentrated red bordeaux blend made in 2016. It is the debut vintage of a wine rather clumsily called Purple Rain Comes from the East. It comes from the province of Ningxia, south-west of Beijing, which was also well known to Tony Jordan. (The other half of his brief was to find somewhere for LVMH to establish a sparkling wine operation, and Ningxia was where he recommended they build their Chandon winery and plant the vines to supply it.)

Purple Rain is the brainchild of Lenz Moser, a name famous in Austrian wine. Moser has developed the Château Changyu ▶

Better buys

I tasted these during lockdown and thought they were particularly good value. All are red unless otherwise stated.

- Rall Red 2017 Swartland £25.68 *Justerini & Brooks*
- La Rioja Alta, Viña Ardanza, Selección Especial Reserva 2010 Rioja £23.50 *The Wine Society (Widely available in the US from \$24.99)*
- Pinuaga, 200 Cepas Tempranillo 2015 Vino de la Tierra de Castilla £22.96 *Private Cellar*
- Hanewald-Schwerdt, Kalkriff Spätburgunder 2014 Pfalz £19.50 *Woodwinters*
- Quinta da Silveira Reserva 2011 Douro £18.95 *Davy's*
- Diamantis Moschomavro 2017 PGI Siatista £18 *Maltby & Greek*
- Pelassa, Corte Enrichetta 2017 Langhe £14.95 *Davy's*
- Melipal Malbec 2018 Agrelo £14.95 *Jeroboams*
- Ch du Gazin 2016 Canon-Fronsac £14.95 *Haynes Hanson & Clark*
- Couly-Dutheil, Les Gravières 2017 Chinon £14.50 *Woodwinters*
- Hattingley Valley, Still by Hattingley Rosé 2019 England £14 *hattingley valley.com*
- Ronan by Clinet Merlot 2015 Bordeaux £13.95 *Gerrard Seel (Widely available in the US from \$10.95)*
- Dom Rochette 2018 Beaujolais-Villages £13.95 *Lea & Sandeman*
- Pasji Rep, Zelen 2018 Vipavska Dolina (Slovenian white) £13.50 *Stone, Vine & Sun*
- Yalumba, Samuel's Collection Viognier 2017 Eden Valley (Australian white) £13.50 *Wine Direct and others*
- Wirra Wirra, Church Block Cabernet Sauvignon/Shiraz/Merlot 2018 McLaren Vale £13.49 *Waitrose*
- Mas Seren, Étincelle Nomade 2019 IGP Cévennes £12.95 *Stone, Vine & Sun*

- Fiorano Sangiovese 2018 IGT Marche £12.95 *Stone, Vine & Sun*
- Dom Pique Roque Rosé 2019 Côtes de Provence £12.45, £29.95 a magnum or £78 a double magnum from *Haynes Hanson & Clark*
- Dürnberg, L & T Grüner Veltliner 2018 Niederösterreich (Austrian white) £11.73 *Secret Wines*
- Sibille Syrah 2018 IGP Pays d'Oc £11.28 *Secret Wines*
- Ch Ksara, Blanc de l'Observatoire 2018 Bekaa Valley (Lebanese white) £10.39 *All About Wine or £13.75 at help4hospitality.com to include a donation to individuals in the hospitality industry*
- Kellerstöckl Zweigelt Rosé 2018 Niederösterreich £9.97 *Secret Wines*



Tasting notes on all wines mentioned in this article on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com. International stockists via Wine-searcher.com

◀ Moser XV brand in co-operation with Changyu, the owners of China's oldest winery on the east coast of the country. His previous wines have been well made and some of them well priced, but Moser has clearly set his sights on making an "icon wine". Purple Rain, priced at a cool £150, is apparently a selection of his best barrels and made from "the smallest berries I have ever worked with", thanks to the desert climate.

For most of the past decade the local government seemed set on making Ningxia the pre-eminent wine province of China, with subsidies and initiatives directed at maximising wine quality in this rather barren region watered by the Yellow River. The first team to make wine here that was widely exported was Australian, from Jacob's Creek in 2005, under the brand name Helan Mountain.

The fact that both of these wines are packaged in particularly heavy bottles suggests they are aimed at the Chinese market with its appreciation of fancy trappings - preferably including an elaborate gift box. According to Dulou, it is very much easier to sell Ao Yun in China than anywhere else, but the aim is to share the 26,000 bottles equally between the US, Europe and Asia.

At the same time, I also tasted the Silver Heights bottling known as The Summit - again the 2016 vintage and, like Purple Rain, from

'The mountain-grown 2016 had a greater resonance for me than the two Ningxia wines'

Ningxia. This was not made with the backing of a huge company but by a Bordeaux-trained Ningxia native, Emma Gao, who has worked just as hard as Lenz Moser to put her wines on the international map. They are imported into the UK by Oeno.

I have to say that the mountain-grown 2016 had a greater resonance for me than the two Ningxia wines, even if I could think of many better ways to spend £200 on wine (see left). Dulou confessed that when the wine was launched in 2015 he felt it was overpriced, but now that he has seen how much LVMH have invested in the project he is more sanguine. "And we're not limited financially by LVMH, which is fantastic for me. So I try to enjoy each moment." He added, "I'm very proud of the Chinese team. The Chinese are not afraid of moving mountains. We can change so many things from one day to the next, which is unique to China. This would never have happened so fast anywhere else." **FT**

More columns at ft.com/jancis-robinson

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FT Weekend





FANTASY DINNER PARTY

CLAER BARRETT

The FT's personal finance editor selects the chef, guests, dishes, drinks and location for her ultimate supper

My feet might still be in London, but my heart is in Italy, our holiday destination of choice.

My stepson once dared to ask, "Why don't you and dad go somewhere else?" To which we replied: "Because nowhere else is as good!"

For me, food heaven would be sitting outside a simple backstreet trattoria and stuffing my face with aperitivi (bruschetta, arancini and fat Nocellara olives) washed down with a goldfish bowl of Aperol spritz. But this dinner demands rather more sophistication and I have to name a chef.

The best Italian food I have eaten in London is Angela Hartnett's. At the height of the mid-noughties property boom, a firm of estate agents treated 27-year-old me and several other property hacks to a "chef's table" experience where she

prepared a meal in front of us in the kitchens at the Connaught Hotel. I have never forgotten the fresh pasta with shaved truffles - simple yet exquisite. Or the fact that lovely Angela, sensing I was having the equivalent of a food orgasm, gave me another helping. So I would charter a plane, fly her out to Murano in the Venice lagoon and beg to accompany her around whatever food market she bought all the ingredients from.

My passion for Italian food is surpassed only by my love of detective fiction. My first guest would be **Donna Leon**, whose Inspector Brunetti novels contrast grisly Venetian crimes with glorious Italian cuisine. (I also have a copy of *Brunetti's Cookbook*, a collection of recipes by Roberta Pianaro inspired by the novels; perhaps Angela could put her own slant on the *branzino al forno* or *filetto di vitello*.)

An American writer who lived in Venice for decades, Leon's books also explore the social and environmental impact of mass tourism, cruise ships and pollution on the Laguna - a poignant topic to discuss as La Serenissima enjoys one of its quietest summers in decades.

I would also bring **Arthur Conan Doyle** back from the dead (he was a spiritualist, which must

help). Would he be surprised at the enduring popularity of Sherlock Holmes, his fictional detective, after more than 130 years? And was Holmes - as Sir Arthur's son claimed - modelled on Conan Doyle himself?

We could also find out which on-screen portrayal of Holmes and Watson he most admired. For me, nobody can hold a candle to the classical actor **Jeremy Brett**, a fine

'We could also find out which portrayal of Holmes and Watson Sir Arthur most admired'

addition to our table. After filming the Granada series that got me hooked on Holmes in the 1980s, he remarked to Sir Arthur's daughter: "I've danced in the moonlight with your father for 10 years. The moonlight, not the sunlight - Holmes is a very dark character." His portrayal of Holmes, marked by his own battle with manic depression, remains unsurpassed.

While I'm not a fully paid-up "Cumberbitch", I do admire Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat for getting a new generation addicted to their more recent BBC adaptation. And if

you haven't seen the US series *Elementary*, starring Jonny Lee Miller as Holmes and Lucy Liu as Dr Joan Watson, then I have just solved the mystery of what should be your next box set.

My next guest has achieved the impossible - making personal finance prime-time television viewing. **Martin Lewis**, the Money Saving Expert, was made OBE in 2014, and I predict a knighthood will soon follow. Nobody has done more to help educate the nation about their financial rights and how to avoid financial wrongs. He has considerable influence in government circles and is a powerful advocate for greater financial literacy (he's personally funded a textbook that has been shipped to every secondary school in Britain), reforming student finance and better understanding the link between financial and mental health problems. I fear that his greatest challenge lies ahead, as millions face the financial shock of redundancy and the paucity of the UK benefits system. We would have plenty to chew over.

For the wines, we would nip over to Sicily. At the start of lockdown, fearing supply chains would collapse, I bought 24 bottles of Grillo and 24 bottles of Primitivo (I know what I like - and I am not at liberty to disclose how many are left). I am sure we could fit a few more crates on the plane coming back.

But I would ask Angela to knock up a suitably sublime mocktail for **Nile Rodgers**, the US hitmaker (he quit drugs and boozing in the 1990s). I have been a huge fan of Duran Duran since early childhood and, although I still lust after John Taylor, it was Nile who produced their biggest hits - not to mention blockbusters for David Bowie, Madonna and more recently Daft Punk. And all of this after writing some of the most infectious tunes on earth with his own band Chic.

He is the living musician I most admire. If you haven't seen his Glastonbury set from 2017, watch it on iPlayer and you'll see why (three songs in, he grinned and said: "For the rest of this set, I'm just going to play my number one records," to rapturous applause). I do hope he brings The Hitmaker (his knackered-looking 1960 Fender stratocaster) for some after-dinner entertainment.

Frankly, some light boozing would negate some of the calories from Angela's zinging lemon tart, platter of oozing Italian cheeses and bottle of vintage grappa, which would be my final request. **FT**



I'D BE LOST WITHOUT...

Garlic

From chicken Kiev to chicken tikka, the pungent bulb improves just about any savoury dish, says *Alexander Gilmour*. Illustration by *Namyoun An*

never paid much attention to garlic as a small boy, except to feel morally, culturally and spiritually superior to the rest of my extended family.

My mother married into a family full of tall men who hated garlic. They favoured nursery food - meat and potatoes in puddles of gravy, dead carrots, all beige. They could handle haddock mousse or steak and kidney pudding, and they liked apple crumble.

But garlic was beyond the pale. It never entered my grandparents' house. A stray clove in the

Sunday soup could scarcely be less welcome than a live mouse.

Undaunted by this flagrant madness, my mother put garlic in everything. She converted my benighted father and then raised four garlic-loving children.

It is one of her greatest gifts to me. For what is a person without garlic? What can they know about the joys of being French, for example? Or Italian, Indian, Iranian...? What can they know of Tutankhamun, whose tomb was found full of it?

And what a soul-destroying existence to be forever telling

baffled waiters to ask the chef to leave out their A-list ingredient.

From chicken Kiev to chicken tikka, garlic improves basically everything. (I wouldn't want all my desserts to be awash with it and certain Japanese dishes are probably fine without, but everything else.)

My approach at the stove is "the more the merrier". (That's also my approach to butter, salt, olive oil, lemon, stock, soy sauce and wine, sometimes with mixed results.) Should Jamie Oliver, for example, recommend the use of four cloves in his *spaghetti vongole*, I will assume he's being coy - pandering to his middle-English audience, perhaps - and slot in six. (I know that Jamie's probably right, but I can't take the risk and I'd rather taste the garlic than the clams, if I have to make desperate choices.)

Garlic has an ethereal, lacy beauty that onions, leeks and chives, its lowly cousins, can scarcely dream of - the shallot is a chubby sausage by comparison. It also has great healing powers, according to some. Alas, I don't really believe it - and, in this, I am not my mother's son - but I do believe in its miraculous powers of transfiguration. Plaster a snail with enough garlic

'Garlic has an ethereal, lacy beauty that onions and leeks, its lowly cousins, can scarcely dream of'

butter and it goes from being le garden pest to l'escargot, the cornerstone of French culture.

And while this superlative allium did not cross my mind much as a boy, it did enter my soul. It wasn't just about feeling better than my vampire uncles. When I started cooking as a grown-up, I understood that garlic smells of my mother's kitchen, which is the smell of home.

That holds true now. In confinement, the smell of garlic spitting softly in a pan signals the end of a day's work. It signals coming home, even though we haven't really left it since March.

And bad breath? Chew a nice sprig of parsley and kiss your sweetheart anyway. **FT**

.....
Alexander Gilmour is the FT's food & drink editor

Games



A Round on the Links

by James Walton



All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the link, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1. In which 1956 film does Marilyn Monroe (right) play a saloon singer called Cherie?

2. Which fast-food chain has the most global outlets?

3. "Ol' Man River" is a song from which 1927 American musical, last revived in the West End (above) in 2016?

4. As what was Rachel Watson known in the

title of a bestselling novel of 2015?

5. Which sitcom features the supermarket assistant manager John Redmond and his colleague Kayleigh Kitson?

6. Which website did Google buy in 2006 for \$1.65 billion?

7. Before Mick Jagger, Jerry Hall was in a relationship with which other singer?

8. Since the second world war, the German national anthem has omitted its first two verses

– which begin with which four words?

9. Which artist painted the work known variously as The Arnolfini Portrait, The Arnolfini Marriage and The Arnolfini Wedding?

10. Mick the Miller and Ballyregan Bob are two of the most celebrated figures in the history of which sport?



The Picture Round

by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



+

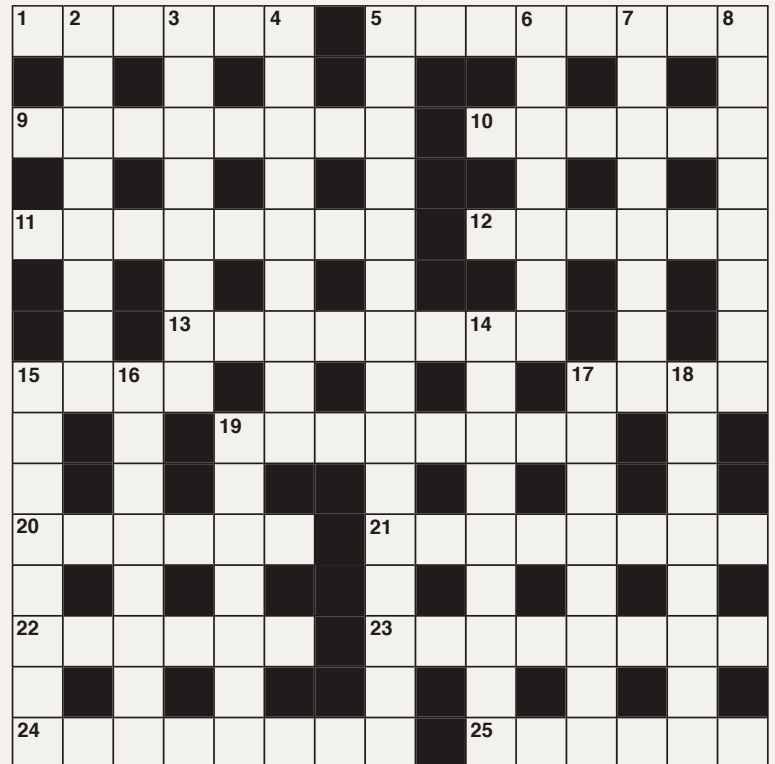


= ?

Answers page 10

The Crossword

No 497. Set by Aldhelm



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

ACROSS

- 1** Of milk (6)
- 5** Scornful (8)
- 9** Sumptuous, magnificent (8)
- 10** Squirm (6)
- 11** Erasure (8)
- 12** Saying (6)
- 13** Three-panel painting (8)
- 15** Differ (4)
- 17** Simple green plant (4)
- 19** Tale of woe (8)
- 20** Tired (of eyes) (6)
- 21** Assume corporate control of (4, 4)
- 22** Bureau (6)
- 23** Lift (8)
- 24** Final destination (8)
- 25** Profoundly (6)

DOWN

- 2** Scholarship exam aid edited with no unknown account, at first (8)

- 3** Go without a piece of clothing to get mockery (8)
- 4** Rice is mixed without it under top of cooking pan (9)
- 5** Cold shoulder of lamb not quite cooked with rennet – test it (6, 9)
- 6** Notable spinner, perhaps, to catch Hampshire's opener after drive's botched (7)
- 7** Number get high without a bit of pot, finally? No! (3, 2, 3)
- 8** Without menu's starter, make a meal (5, 3)
- 14** Elegant Kew modified tops of every diseased plant (9)
- 15** Waffle from Belgium I gave out without hesitation (8)

- 16** Clerical title forever endorsed? Only partly (8)
- 17** Champion lawyer (8)
- 18** Open goal one missed badly – encapsulates England's historic inheritance (4, 4)
- 19** In France I circle around wealthy old city (7)

Solution to Crossword No 496





GILLIAN TETT

PARTING SHOT

How cyber criminals saw a Covid-19 opportunity

A few weeks ago I took part in a webinar designed to help US Hispanic-led businesses survive the economic shock of Covid-19. One of the speakers at this “Hispanic Recovery” event was Jesus Mantas, an IBM executive, who issued a heartfelt warning.

Levels of cyber crime have multiplied recently he said, pointing to “a 6,000 per cent increase in Covid-related spam” at the height of the pandemic. He went on to cite some chilling examples. One was of an email sent to people who “are desperate for PPP [the US Paycheck Protection Program]. It installs malware into their computers, steals all their information [and] says, ‘If you don’t pay us a ransom we will infect you and your family with Covid-19,’” he explained.

Another “pretends to be from the World Health Organization and is installed to grab every single thing you do to your computer”. His conclusion? “Cyber crime is one of the fastest growing businesses right now.”

Allegations of state-sponsored cyber attacks have grabbed the news in recent weeks. The FBI (and the White House) have accused China of using digital espionage to steal research on a Covid-19 vaccine, while Australia has fingered China for widespread cyber attacks.

But, as Mantas says, the more striking trend is the explosion of attacks on businesses and individuals. And although minorities in the US, who may be less informed about the risks and more nervous about approaching the authorities, seem particularly vulnerable, the onslaught is being felt by almost everyone, almost everywhere.

As Echo, the EU’s cyber security network, recently pointed out, Covid-19 has left many of us so distracted and disoriented that our defences are down, even as we are more dependent than ever on all things digital. “This pandemic offers cyber attackers unique opportunities to leverage existing attack tactics, techniques and procedures to exploit new opportunities,” Echo notes, before identifying “a massive increase of employees working from home, children using home computers for schooling, as well as the human factor and emotions caused by the pandemic”, as issues that are increasing risk levels.

There have been some high-profile victims. In London, for example, Zaha Hadid Architects admitted that some of its data was stolen back in April. “With all our 348 London-based staff working from home during this pandemic and cyber criminals poised to exploit the situation, we strongly advise the architectural community to be extremely cautious,” it declared, adding that it had refused to pay the ransom demanded.

In San Francisco, a University of California laboratory also suffered a “ransomware” attack. The hackers froze its systems – systems that were supporting the search for a cure for Covid-19 – and demanded payment. The laboratory did hand

over a ransom of 116.4 bitcoins (\$1.14m) because “the data that was encrypted is important to some of the academic work we pursue as a university serving the public good”, it told the BBC.

Microsoft has recently unveiled measures to prevent a spate of hacker attacks on companies via its Office program. These typically use phishing messages with terms such as “Covid-19 Bonus”, the company said. Meanwhile, the cyber-investment group Option3Ventures tells me it has seen an explosion in attacks on hospitals, often using a Covid-19 tag.

‘Covid-19 has left many of us so distracted that our defences are down, even as we depend more than ever on all things digital’

The group has also witnessed a new target. “Previously, hackers were targeting coronavirus efforts. Now, they have their eyes set on the George Floyd protests,” writes Lisa Donnan, a partner at Option3Ventures, who says that the FBI has recorded 20,000 cyber attacks linked to Covid-19 and the protests.

What should we conclude from this profoundly depressing trend? First, these attacks should remind us all that we still do not really understand the many second-order effects of the Covid-19 horrors. Long after the medical shock of the disease dies down we will be counting the other forms of collateral damage, cyber hacks being one.

Another lesson revolves around the issue of what economists might describe as “extreme information asymmetry” – the fact that we all rely heavily on processes that only a tiny minority of experts actually understand, be that in medicine, finance or cyberspace. In normal times, we usually quite happily ignore these asymmetries and dependencies. We live our lives, in other words, with extreme levels of blind faith in the safety of systems, and assume they will protect us, even though we are ill-equipped to check that.

However, Covid-19 has revealed the folly of assuming that medical systems – or digital experts – will always protect us: unless we all make more effort to understand pandemics, they are more difficult to fight. It should also remind us of the risks of putting excessive levels of trust in those experts – and networks – that we find even harder to comprehend.

Naturally, I welcome the steps those such as Mantas of IBM are taking in terms of educating business communities about cyber crime. But there needs to be dramatically more effort made across society. All of us need to close the “asymmetries” in our understanding of digital technology – something that we are relying on even more in the age of Covid-19. **FT**

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