

in short

fiction

The Streets by Anthony Quinn
Cape, 272pp; £14.99, e-book £8.99
It's 1882 and David Wildeblood, the 21-year-old son of a Norfolk pharmacist, has a new job. He's employed by the journalist Henry Marchmont to collect stories for his weekly rag, *The Labouring Classes of London*, which is filled with sensational stories about the lives of the poor. Fresh young David is thrown straight into the slum of Somers Town — and is immediately robbed of his money and his coat. He is horrified by the squalor and despair of the streets. A broken-down doctor makes him see the fragility of gentility: "If someone of his education and class can fall through the net . . . who is to say that it could not happen to oneself?" David discovers that someone is making money from the misery, and the Victorian melodrama becomes a thoroughly modern conspiracy-thriller. It's ambitious, gripping and disturbingly well done.

The Sound of Things Falling
by Juan Gabriel Vásquez
trans Anne McLean
Bloomsbury, 320pp; £16.99, e-book £16.99
A hippo has escaped from a Colombian zoo created by Pablo Escobar, and reading about it jogs the memory of Antonia Yammara. He's taken back to the 1990s and the struggle between Escobar's cartel and government forces, when he was a young professor of law who spent lazy afternoons playing billiards with a mysterious character named Ricardo Laverde. One day, Laverde turned up with a cassette tape he wanted to listen to. He was shot dead in the street, and Yammara took one of the bullets. This trauma has cast a blight on his family life. Now he wants to find the truth behind the murder, and face up to the ways his country's history has shaped his life. This is a powerful, humane novel

about a man trying to make sense of a war he didn't choose to fight.

Kate Saunders

non fiction

Empire Antarctica by Gavin Francis
Chatto, 260pp; £16.99, e-book £17.73
There is colour in the white wastes of Antarctica. "Lilac and azure flooded my eyes: I had dropped into a cathedral of light." Gavin Francis, for 14 months the base-camp doctor at Halley, a British research station on the Caird Coast of Antarctica, has just swung down on a rope into a crevasse. He perceives the wilderness of snow and ice in colour and experiences it as continuous sights, sounds and sensations, writing as vividly and as fiercely in darkness at noon or in sunlight at midnight. It is a climate of extremes and a land of loneliness: except for thousands of large, curious penguins, who are surprisingly interesting. They live life faster and hotter than humans, and experience life, says one naturalist, as a series "of almost discontinuous eternities", which are "eternities of joy". His time at Halley was an "eternity of joy" for Francis.

Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine by Yang Jisheng
Allen Lane, 656pp; £30, e-book £17.99
This abridged, authorised translation of a tremendous two-volume work, banned in China, is a testament to Yang Jisheng's father, who died of starvation, and a memorial to the 36 million more who did not survive the years of "natural disaster" — the official euphemism for food shortages and totalitarian abuse — from 1958 to 1961, made by the hubris of Mao. In this edition, the political and social background preceding the years of starvation are integrated with the human horror stories of individual despair and death. This everlasting "tombstone" erected over a national cemetery, stands



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as a powerful, relentless memento mori, exhaustively researched, to the armies of the dead who have been more or less effaced from Chinese history but now condemn, in their enforced silence, the system that denied them life.

Iain Finlayson

not think of simpler word that does the job better?" This is always good advice, O Aristotle.

Lost Words by Philip Howard, Robson Press, £14.99 * £11.99

word routes

English explored
by Philip Howard
Militate

We are still confusing militate, even in "The Times" last week. Grrr. It does not mitigate our semantic error that many others share our confusion. These are hardy perennial confusibles, caused by love of the longer word and desire to impress. Come on. Every schoolchild knows that militate is derived from Latin "miles", a soldier, and can mean to tell (fight) against something. 1853: "The whole character and history of mathematical science militates against the admission of this consequence." Nigel Molesworth and any fule kno that mitigate comes from the Latin "mitis", soft, mild gentle, definitely non-militant, and means to render less violent, appease, or abate the vigour of something or someone. 1895: "The king does his best to mitigate the disastrous effects of the blunders of his middle life." The confusion arises, I guess, because the two words rhyme and differ by only one letter. But when tempted to use either of them, I address myself: "Steady on, Philip! Can you

LITERARY FICTION

CLARE COLVIN



THE COOK
by Wayne Macauley
(Quercus £18.99 £16.99)

THIS IS a deliciously dark satire about foodyism, celebrity chefs and aspiring consumerism, seen through the eyes of Zac, a 17-year-old petty criminal. Given the choice of a young offenders' institute or a rehabilitation scheme, Zac chooses a course that teaches juveniles how to cook.

The course is run by the charismatic Head Chef whose motto is Power Through Service. Zac is fuelled by his deprived background, and he determines to do whatever it takes. This includes some stomach-turning descriptions of butchering lambs to prepare meals for a Michelin-star restaurant.

Sent to cook for a wealthy family, his recipes become ever more extravagant as he plies his employers with crispy duck confit with orange and cardamom reduction, or pan-seared foie gras.

Macauley's stream-of-consciousness prose has a compulsive vitality, and Zac is engaging, even at his most repellent, with a pungent line in put-downs.

As he dreams of becoming a TV chef, he realises that the lavish lifestyle is built on credit — everyone owes everyone. A cautionary tale with a macabre finale.



TWO BROTHERS
by Ben Elton
(Bantam Press £18.99
 £16.99)

BEN ELTON draws on his own family history in this ambitious novel set in both Germany from 1920 to 1945, and Berlin in the Fifties during the Cold War.

Two boys are brought up as twins in a German-Jewish family. Few people know that Paulus is a surviving twin and Otto is in fact adopted, the son of a non-Jewish mother who died in childbirth at the same hospital on the same day.

Paulus and Otto grow up as brothers, and face the same insults as anti-semitism grows and Hitler seizes power. One flees to Britain and eventually joins the British Army in the final stages of the war. The other joins the Wehrmacht.

It's a promising start, but Elton adds plot twists that confuse and irritate. The liberal use of four-letter words also sounds more suited to present-day dialogue than a conversation in 1920

between a Berlin pater familias and his wife. The subject remains a page-turner, however, and the description of the approaching Holocaust is chilling.



THE SOUND OF THINGS FALLING
by Juan Gabriel Vasquez
(Bloomsbury £16.99
 £14.99)

IN THE mid-1980s Colombia was torn apart by a battle for supremacy between the drugs baron Pablo Escobar and government forces. Innocent bystanders were caught up in the bombs and bullets that erupted in the streets, the forests and even the air. Vasquez's third novel begins after Escobar's death when the capital city Bogota began to emerge from the violence.

Antonio Yammara is a young lawyer who spends the afternoons playing billiards with ex-convict Ricardo Laverde. One afternoon Ricardo is shot dead in the street. Antonio is seriously wounded.

Obsessed by the contents of a cassette tape from a crashed aircraft's black box that Ricardo got hold of shortly before his death, Antonio puts his marriage at risk as he traces the connection between the tape and his friend's demise.

Whether Antonio has been traumatised by the violence, or if detachment is simply part of his character remains an enigma, but one thing is clear — Bogota isn't somewhere you'd want to visit.

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The inheritance of fear

Review by Ángel Gurría-Quintana

Forgiveness and fate in the wake of Colombia's drug wars



The Sound of Things Falling, by Juan Gabriel Vásquez, translated by Anne McLean, Bloomsbury, RRP£16.99, 320 pages

The drug-related violence that shook Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s has become fertile ground for fiction. Fernando Vallejo's *Our Lady of the Assassins* (1994) and Laura Restrepo's *Delirium* (2004) have already covered this troubled period.

In contrast, Juan Gabriel Vásquez – one of the country's leading younger novelists – has previously stayed away from the subject, even though it is all-too-familiar to his generation of Colombians. His debut novel, *The Informers* (2004), is a tale of guilt and betrayal woven around a scarcely known episode – the internment of Germans in Colombian detention camps during the second world war. *The Secret History of Costaguana* (2007), set during the construction of the Panama Canal, is written with tongue firmly in cheek, with a protagonist who claims to have been the unacknowledged source for Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*.



[The Sound of Things Falling](#)
Juan Gabriel Vásqu...
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While Colombia's recent drug wars do provide the grim backdrop to Vásquez's new novel, *The Sound of Things Falling*, his bigger questions are about forgiveness and memory, about randomness, fate, and about the individual's relationship to history.

The story begins in 2009 with the narrator, Antonio Yammara, reading about the killing of a hippopotamus. It is an escapee from the now-abandoned zoo created decades earlier by drug lord Pablo Escobar on his ranch in the Magdalena Valley. The incident triggers an old memory from the mid-1990s: "I found myself remembering a man who'd been out of my thoughts for a long while, in spite of the fact that there had been a time when nothing interested me as much as the mystery of his life."

And so Antonio sets out to tell the story of the dead man who has become "a faithful and devoted, ever-present ghost", beginning with the first time he meets Ricardo Laverde in a pool-hall in Bogotá. Antonio is a carefree young law lecturer, Ricardo a taciturn older man ("just turned forty-eight, but he looked much older") who was rumoured to have spent time in prison. They become pool partners, though Ricardo is reluctant to share any confidences. When Antonio learns that Ricardo's estranged American wife is coming to visit, he doesn't see his friend again for months.

When they next meet, Ricardo asks Antonio if he knows someone who has a cassette player. There is a tape he has to listen to. Antonio recalls how he watched Ricardo sob uncontrollably while he listens to the recording: "I was afraid of what that sadness might contain, but my intuition didn't go far enough to understand what had happened." Afterwards, on the street outside, assassins on a motorcycle shoot the two men, injuring Antonio and killing Ricardo.

During his recovery, Antonio becomes obsessed with unearthing the life-story of the man whose casual acquaintance transformed his own world. He tracks down the recording his friend listened to on that fateful day. Then Maya, who claims to be Ricardo's daughter, contacts Antonio. It is in the meeting between these two strangers, whose lives have been shaped by a man they hardly knew, that the heart of the novel lies. Antonio tells Maya about her father's last day. Maya reciprocates by telling the story of how her parents met. Her mother, Elaine, was an American Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia; Ricardo was a brash young pilot. Both were caught up in circumstances beyond their control as the global narcotics trade gripped Colombia.

Vásquez shows how the personal is linked to the political: "Maya Laverde was born in the Palermo Clinic in Bogotá in July 1971, more or less at the same time President Nixon used the words War on Drugs for the first time in a public speech." Nor is he coy in implying that drugs traffic in Colombia was directly linked to US Peace Corps volunteers sent overseas.

The story is compelling but through Vásquez's vivid prose (rendered brilliantly into English by the award-winning translator Anne McLean) it also becomes haunting: "on her [Maya's] face a girl's skin met a mature and careworn woman's expression: her face was like a party that everyone had left"; a particular word in Spanish becomes, for Elaine's English-speaker's

tongue, “like a racetrack full of curves”.

Landscapes of the Magdalena Valley, memorably described by a previous generation of great Colombian authors (Gabriel García Márquez, Alvaro Mutis) are reimagined here through darker prisms. The novel is also an examination of the conflicted relationship its characters have with Bogotá. “I began to despise the city, to fear it, to be threatened by it,” Antonio says after the shooting. Fear, a doctor tells him, is the main ailment of Bogotanos of his generation.

“Colombia produces fugitives,” Antonio declares, “but one day I’d like to find out ... how many left my city feeling in one way or another that they were saving themselves, and how many felt that by saving themselves they were betraying something, turning into proverbial rats fleeing the proverbial ship by the act of fleeing the city in flames.” This is a poignant and perturbing tale about the inheritance of fear in a country scrabbling to regain its soul.

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Another violent trip down memory lane

ARMINTA WALLACE

Sat, Dec 15, 2012

Juan Gabriel Vásquez's new novel draws on his life in Colombia during Pablo Escobar's reign of terror

Juan Gabriel Vásquez has come all the way from Bogotá to talk about his new novel, *The Sound of Things Falling*. But when he begins to explain his concerns, his interests and what's close to his heart as a writer, it's clear that it's not such a long, long way from Colombia to here as you might expect.

Vásquez, who left Colombia to live in France, Belgium and Spain for many years, is well acquainted with such themes as political violence and enforced exile. He recently returned to live in his native city, only to find it hugely changed. And if all that wouldn't have Irish readers nodding their heads in recognition, how about this: one of his literary heroes is John Banville.

When it comes to sheer Gubudom, of course, the outrageousness of Colombia's recent history puts Ireland into the halfpenny place. *The Sound of Things Falling* opens with this arresting image: "The first hippopotamus, a male the colour of black pearls weighing a ton and a half, was shot dead in the middle of 2009. He'd escaped two years before from Pablo Escobar's old zoo in the Magdalena Valley."

Vásquez came across a photograph of the dead hippo in a magazine, and it triggered a series of memories that became his way into writing the novel. "I had suppressed them, because they were linked with a decade which was very difficult," he says. "We lived with the constant threat of a bomb. Pablo Escobar was bombing shopping malls and civilian planes. It was completely unpredictable. There wasn't a target. He was just trying to create fear and cause chaos in order to force the government to negotiate with him."

Vásquez never thought he would find himself writing about the drugs trade. "It has become a very popular subject in Colombia, mostly in crime fiction and thrillers, occasionally in literary novels," he says. "But I don't work with themes. I never say, 'I should write about the drug trade,' or, 'I should write about the Nazis in Colombia.' When I began to remember what I felt during those years of violence, I realised that there are very few books about the internal, private, emotional and moral consequences; how public events have affected us as private individuals."

Nazis in Colombia form the dark heart of Vásquez's haunting debut novel, *The Informers*. His second book, *The Secret History of Costaguana*, explores the intrigue that surrounded the building of the Panama Canal. The central focus of Vásquez's narratives, however, is firmly inside the head of his narrators. *The Sound of Things Falling* has a strikingly idiosyncratic tone: wistful, elegiac almost, but not at all sentimental.

"I suspect it's the tone of somebody remembering," he says. "Memory is a very big thing for me – it's in all three of my books. In this book, it's particularly important. The narrator is about to turn 40, and he remembers his 20s and the way his life was sidetracked by a violent situation. An accident of violence."

How do Vásquez and other young writers in South America remember their illustrious forebears – the big names of what is now called the Latin American boom? "I know that for many writers they are a threat to the imagination, and it has become a sort of fashion to disparage and disavow their influence," he says.

"But Borges, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes and Julio Cortázar are the founders of my

literary tradition. For me, only good things have come from this tradition. The only thing they have done is to open roads for us.”

One major contribution was to open Latin American literature to the outside world. Where it was once regarded as heretical to admire Kafka or Joyce, “now I can say that one of my greatest influences is Banville, or Philip Roth, and nobody says anything”, Vásquez says with a smile.

As we’re talking, his mobile rings, bringing the news that *The Sound of Things Falling* has just won a French literary award, the Prix Roger-Caillois, putting Vásquez in the same starry company as previous winners Fuentes, Vargas Llosa and Roberto Bolaño. Vásquez is clearly delighted, but he modestly says that the timing of his novel has helped it gain admirers in Europe.

“It was written in Barcelona after the al-Qaeda bombings in Madrid, so it was written among people who were afraid,” he says. “I saw this on people’s faces for some months – the mistrust when somebody saw a bag left in the metro – and so I think it’s a book written in a world that understands what it means to be afraid of acts of terrorism. It’s about questions that we all have: fear, the anxiety of unpredictable violence, the inability to protect people that you love.”

But it’s also a beautifully written novel.

Goooaal! How Pelé set Vásquez on a literary path

Reading fiction in translation brings many pleasures, not all of which are, strictly speaking, literary. A mention of something called arepas in the early pages of *The Sound of Something Falling* had me scurrying to Google and, shortly afterwards, salivating over photographs of these Colombian cornmeal treats.

Mostly, though, the sign of a really good translation is that it doesn’t draw attention to itself. No clunky gear changes or awkward sentences. In this Vásquez is fortunate. All three of his novels have been silkily translated by Anne McLean, the Canadian translator of – among many other books, both fiction and nonfiction – Javier Cercas’s *The Soldiers of Salamis*. She even has the translator’s equivalent of a knighthood: earlier this year she was awarded the Spanish Cross of the Order of Civil Merit for her role in making Spanish-language writing accessible in English.

Vásquez, mind you, has his own record in translation. At the age of nine he was commissioned by his father to translate a biography of Pelé into English. It was, the writer recalls fondly, a smart educational move on the part of Vásquez snr. “Football was the only thing that interested me at that moment,” he says. “My father, who was a very good reader and who loves the English language, wanted me to fall in love with the language at the same time as I was doing something I liked.”

He never did finish his translation of the life story of the great Brazilian footballer, he adds with a smile. But it was the first step on a reading road that led Vásquez through Joseph Conrad to Philip Roth and John Banville.

The *Sound of Things Falling* is published by Bloomsbury

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