Michel Déon, who died in 2016 aged ninety-seven, wrote some fifty novels, plays and essays which reflected his congenital anticonformism and cosmopolitan outlook. He first emerged as part of the small group of creative “Hussards” who resisted the annexation of post-war French culture by left-wing ideology, existentialist philosophy and progressive literary tendencies. Like a cornered octopus, the group squirted black, obscuring ink in all directions. Déon thought himself more European than French and in his writings turned a clear, ironic, disillusioned eye on the human predicament, his own life and his times. Your Father’s Room (2004) is a memoir of a childhood spent in exotic Monaco, where his father was an adviser to Prince Louis. He was taken to tea with the wife of the Turkish ambassador, was taught injustice by a Catholic priest, and learned to see women, his cool mother Blanche not least, as unfathomable.

On the other hand, he basked in the affection shown him by his father whose sudden death in 1933 left just one of the scars of childhood which, Déon said, never heal. Though his novel The Great and the Good was published earlier, in 1996, it is in some ways a continuation of this account of his childhood. Arthur Morgan was born in the year his father died and, aged twenty-two, is awarded a scholarship to an American university, just as Déon was taken to tea with the wife of the Turkish ambassador, was taught injustice by a Catholic priest, and learned to see women, his cool mother Blanche not least, as unfathomable.

As the story of an American’s quest to recover his Scottish roots, this book could easily have descended into cliché. But as the poet Iain Crichton Smith pointed out in a review of the original edition in 1969, John McPhee manages to be “neither sentimental nor judgmental” in the portrayal of his ancestral highland home. Documenting a year on the Hebridean isle of Colonsay, The Crofter and the Laird reads like a well-executed piece of social anthropology.

McPhee – who is best known for his “fact” writing at The New Yorker, as well as the Pulitzer Prize-winning geological history of America, Annals of a Former World (1998) – studies a community of 138 people divided into “two castes”: the “crofters and farmers” on one side and “the permanently unestablished establishment” on the other. When Crichton Smith said of McPhee that he avoids sentimentality, it has to do with his even-handed portrayal of both parties. The book is as much taken up with Donald Gibbie, an indus trial crofter with “a frown on his face, and a look of felt responsibility in his eyes”, as it is with the Toad of Toad Hall-like laird who owns the island. If the locals complain that this “absentee landlord . . . thinks he’s the cat’s pyjamas”, McPhee gently understands his “preoccupations with places other than Colonsay” as belying a genuine concern for his tenants’ welfare. Rather than a tired contrast of Sassenach versus Scot, we are shown the difficulties of maintaining an outmoded system that aims at “protecting people from the terrors of the eighteenth century”, but ends up “isolating them from the twentieth”. Medieval feudalism, McPhee explains, has lived on in the Hebrides to ensure “no repetition of the Highland clearances should ever occur”. McPhee offers interesting glosses both on the clearances and the clans they destroyed, but is critical and occasionally funny about highland nostalgia. “By the time of Walter Scott”, he reminds us, “all that was left up there was the scenery”, a fact that hasn’t registered with the women in their “knitted caps and tweed coats and walking sticks” who come in search of “Hebridean lore and legend”. There is some clever weaving of the laird into this scheme – a man “cheerfully resigned to being an exhibit of the Hebrides” to the island’s tourists. On the serious subject of the clearances, McPhee reminds us that various nineteenth-century progressives, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, were tacitly supportive.

The Crofter and the Laird is an educational, warmly remembered but at times dry account of an isolated community. By his slow and reasoned documentary approach – itself an anachronism in our age of romantic, investigative travel literature – McPhee provides a clear-sighted portrait of a people frozen between ages.

**GUY STEVENSON**

**Fiction**

Elif Shafak

Three Daughters of Eve


Three Daughters of Eve Elif Shafak captures the anxious mood of the post-9/11 world. Following the fall of the Twin Towers, three students at Oxford University – Peri, Shirin and Mona – enter into a new reality in which their Muslim identity is regarded with suspicion and paranoia. Each must separately struggle with the clash between secularism and orthodoxy in their own lives.

Shafak centres her narrative on Peri, who has spent pretty much her entire life in Istanbul, except for a few years studying at Oxford in the early 2000s; the timeline shifts between the present day, the Oxford years and her childhood. The household of her youth is a miniature model of twentieth-century Turkey. Peri’s mother is a devout Muslim and her father avowedly secular in the Atatürk tradition. The young Peri finds herself caught between their world views.

At Oxford she meets the Iranian Shirin and Egyptian-American Mona; the three women then take a life-changing class, simply entitled “God”, which is taught by a controversial professor. The headstrong Shirin is openly contemptuous of piety, whereas Mona is devoted to her faith. The vacillating Peri is once again trapped in the middle. The dialogue between the characters is extremely engaging, though Mona does feel underdeveloped. Her faith is never examined in any depth.

At a TED talk she gave in 2010, Shafak spoke of using her fiction to imagine the experience of the “other”, and this seems to be what she is exploring here. Throughout this novel, opposites both fascinate and repel one another. The Three Daughters of Eve is a perceptive depiction of social conflict as played out in the microcosm of a friendship – a novel for an age of mutual, even wilful, incomprehension between people, religions and cultures.

**CANDICE HOLDSWORTH**

Emily Fridlund

History of Wolves


Emily Fridlund’s Minnesota-set novel, History of Wolves, is haunted by a dead child. From the outset, readers know that
four-year-old Paul is dead; a trial is also mentioned, but it’s not until halfway through the book that Madeline Purton draws how he died under her care. This becomes a familiar narrative pattern: careful withholding of information followed by revelations that muddy the question of complicity.

Brought up by hippies in a now-defunct commune, her father, free as a bird, canoeing, gutting fish and hiking with her dogs. When she competed in the History Odyssey, she won the Originality Prize for doing a presentation on wolves instead of a predictable topic like the Vietnam War. At the age of fifteen (now more than two decades ago), she gets entangled with the Gardeners, the neighbours across the lake. Introducing herself to the lonely housewife Patra as “Linda”, Madeline agreed to watch their son Paul for $10 a day and, while Patra’s astronaut husband was away, became more of a governess than a babysitter, with an almost sexually possessive attitude towards Patra and a startling roughness towards the precocious Paul. The novel’s complicity is deceptive: it’s not merely a slow-building coming-of-age story with Paul’s untimely death at its climax. For, after a first part entitled “Science”, the second section (“Health”) morphs into something more complicated and seemingly aimless, wherein the details of Paul’s last days form just one of many painful memories, and a former teacher’s paedophilia conviction serves as a parallel trajectory of guilt and sought-for absolution. “I know better than to be wishful”, Madeline confesses; her past is a font of trauma rather than nostalgia.

Frindlund gets the cynical adolescent girl’s psyche just right. Madeline is forthright yet inventive, even lyrical in her metaphors: “I was flat-chested, plain as a banister. I made people feel judged”. The novel’s atmosphere is powerful, too, which is a hard feat (“the trees against the orange sky looked like veins”) ceding to an equally brutal summer. Attractive high-rise buildings with “airy” apartments, he believes, would be more convenient for city-dwellers while protecting the countryside, he writes, “we must first regenerate our housing and foreign policy. “To save our countryside”, he writes, “we have corruption of intervention in Afghanistan, asking whether any “replacement government” and “democratic elections” could work.

These articles are refreshingly honest, fearless, insightful and humane. Sewell was awarded the Orwell Prize for them in 2003.

HARRY JOHNSTONE

Religion

Suleiman Mourad
THE MOSAIC OF ISLAM

A conversation with Perry Anderson


978 1 78663 212 8

If that we understand least is that which we fear most, Islam and its adherents qualify as areas of alarm in the West, including Britain. This ignorance, which pervades the political establishment and the mainstream media, has helped engender near-paranoiac among much of the population. Suleiman Mourad is the author of Islam, and its imponderables is an instructive and non-polemical work that should be in the pocket of every Government minister, MP, journalist, editor and producer who have to deal with Muslims, at home or overseas.

Mourad, a Lebanese Sunni educated at the American University of Beirut and Yale and now teaching religion at Smith College, Massachusetts, is interviewed by Perry Anderson, Professor of History and American Studies at UCLA. They begin with the Qur’an, and the supplementary sayings and comments of the Prophet and his companions in the seventh century, these being the Hadith, the basis of the Sunna, and therefore the Shari’a (the laws and customs by which observant Muslims live).

Mourad says Muslims have always been subject to change, interpretation and rigorous debate. Attempts by the Salafists to take Islam back to its seventh-century basics, empowered by the pervaasive and puritanical influences of the wealthy Wahhabi sect, will, he says, get Muslims nowhere. “The Qur’an legitimates a lot of things that modern Muslims consider embarrassing: slavery, military jihad, control of women.”

Mourad also examines the extreme sun-dering of the Shi’i and Sunni. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revoluc-ion in Iran, wanted the unity of all Muslims to fight his twin evils of capitalism and communism. Iran’s strength and regional influence, however, proved too threatening for the Sunni Arabs of the Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, all possessed of significant Shi’i communities. The Saudis’ funding of the Wahhabi movement and its well-armed and motivated evangelical supporters – such as Islamic State in the Levant and Pakistan’s Taliban – has become counterproductive, in a confrontation that could end (and almost has ended) in a Middle East war involving the superpowers.

TIM LLEWELLYN

Literary Criticism

Mark Calderbank
FOR ONLY THOSE DESERVE THE NAME

T.E. Lawrence and Seven Pillars of Wisdom

199pp. Profile Academic Press, £40. 978 1 84519 808 4

Winston Churchill claimed that it “ranks with the greatest books ever written in the English language”. George Bernard Shaw said it “one of the Cheops pyramids of literature and history” (he hadn’t yet read it). T.E. Lawrence himself aspired in

Seven Pillars of Wisdom: An introduction and notes (1998) by the French academics Rende and André Guillaume, are the only previous

Literary essays

T.L.S

JULY 14 2017

IN BRIEF

Diaries

Cyrus Console
ROMANIAN NOTEBOOK

176pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Paperback, $15. 978 0 8050 835 0

Rromanian Notebook by the American poet Cyrus Console is a meandering collection of short fragments that read like poems, or shards of poems, or perhaps conveying a jumble of memories. Console explains nothing. He lays it all out before us and lets us construct a kaleidoscopic image from our preferred angle.

Early on, Console establishes the possible arc of a journey, taking us across the world from Kansas to Roman, Romania, where he and his wife Paula are to spend the summer. The text moves from a chronological narra-

tion of events to random recollections, dreams and other colourful splashes of remembrance. At times, the language is taxo-

nomic, technical – memories from a past life as an undergraduate student in biology. “Song here is a technical term”, writes Con-

sole about a moth, “since the song embodies no structure complex enough to be called melody and is even audible. At other points the author gets deliberately lost in sentence structure, as if to return to a less censored representation of his experiences. In between, we are treated to short scenes from what seems like a film of famous chess games; descriptions of several sumptuous meals in Romania, delightfully rich in detail; and musings on religion, the shifting colour of a glass one-hitter pipe, a pet mouse, break-

ups in college.

Just before Console and his wife leave for Romania, he learns that the baby they are expecting may have Down’s syndrome. Console’s unvarnished self-characterization in this section is shocking; what it seems to convey above all is his incapability to care deeply about anything else; and when Console writes that “I am nothing if not a writer in language, yet I am not now not.” I ever really been a writer, not a real writer, he underse-

lts himself. The anxiety we sense in that sentence lies below the surface of the book from beginning to end, charging it with an electricity that keeps us reading.