

Notable

Sarah Shaffi

'Alone, we had become the lies he had told us,' writes Chimene Suleyman in her memoir *The Chain* (W&N, March 28). 'Together, we were learning to unravel them. We were building the chain.' Examining, managing, strengthening and, in some cases, undoing chains – metaphorical and literal – tie together the books I've chosen for as my forthcoming titles for this issue.

The Chain, by former Jhalak Prize judge Suleyman, is a razor-sharp exploration of misogyny and patriarchy through Suleyman's experience of dating a man who she discovered had lied to her – and many other women – at every turn. *The Chain* is filled with rage, but fuelled by hope that things will get better if we as a society change how we treat women. It makes for intense, infuriating, tear-jerking reading, and every word is a triumph of Suleyman's talent and strength.

An examination of relationships is also central to Kyo Maclear's *Unearthing* (Pushkin Press, March 7) in which Maclear recounts what happened after she discovered the man she thought was her father was not biologically related to her. Using plants and the natural world to connect with her Japanese mother, whose health is failing, and with her own story, Maclear's *Unearthing* is a breathtaking personal story, as well as a wider look at language, nature, grief and love.

Coming later in spring, and also examining power, politics and more are George the Poet's *Track Record* (Hodder & Stoughton, April 25) and Ashley John Baptiste's *Looked After* (Hodder & Stoughton, June 13). Both are memoirs which take a look at big social issues and problems through a personal lens.

Journalist Ash Bhardwaj's *Why We Travel* (Bedford Square Publishers, April 11) describes how Bhardwaj used travel to connect with his Indian heritage and work through struggles with grief and identity. With historically few people from the global majority taking up space in travel writing, Bhardwaj's *Why We Travel* is an essential point of view.

Kenny Ethan Jones' *Dear (Cis)Gender People* (DK, June 6) offers an authentic insight into the trans experience, at a time when real stories are being overtaken by shock headlines and demonisation of trans people. Jones draws from his own life and those of others from the trans and non-binary communities. Those wanting to explore the queer

experience will also love Sanah Ahsan's debut poetry collection *I cannot be good until you say it* (Bloomsbury, March 14), a meditation on queerness and Islam.

Jones' memoir-cum-manifesto and Ahsan's collection may not at first seem like they match well with Kuchenga Shenjé's historical novel *The Library Thief* (Sphere, April 9). But with the latter interrogating gender, class, race, identity, sexual politics and more, they're not such a disparate grouping. Shenjé's story focuses on bookbinder's daughter Florence, thrown out of her home and trying to make her way by taking on a commission at Rose Hall to restore its collection of rare books. There, she encounters a mysterious death, and men whose power seemingly knows no bounds.

Powerful men, or boys, are also to be found in *Where Sleeping Girls Lie* (Usborne, March 14), Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's second novel. Like her debut *Ace of Spades*, it's set in a school for the privileged, which allows Àbíké-Íyímídé the space to explore wealth, grief, and sexual assault and rape culture; the latter make up the crux of the story, which revolves around a new pupil, Sade Hussein. Despite its size (close to 600 pages), *Where Sleeping Girls Lie* zips along.

By contrast, Jo Hamya's slim second novel *The Hypocrite* (W&N, April 25) is set over the course of one afternoon in 2020, with flashbacks back to a trip to Sicily 10 years previously. Looking at what happens when the relationship between a father and daughter fractures, *The Hypocrite* is tense and features sharp commentary on everything

from politics to racism to feminism, as well as asking questions about art's power to move, as well as its self-indulgence.

Also flitting between past and present are debut novels from Varaidzo and Iqbal Hussain. Varaidzo's *Manny and the Baby* (Scribe, April 11) follows sisters Manny and Rita in 1936 London, and Itai and Josh in 2012, as the former escapes to his late father's flat in Bath, and tries to uncover the secrets of his father's past. Hussain's *Northern Boy* (Unbound, June 13), follows Rafi Aziz. In 1981 in Blackburn he dreams of being a Bollywood star; twenty years later he has everything he wanted, but returning to Blackburn will be a test of whether he can be his true self or not.

Set further afield is Korean-Canadian author Yeji Y. Ham's *The Invisible Hotel* (Atlantic, April 7), exploring the seven-decade long Korean War; it's particularly haunting at a time when multiple long-held conflicts have spilled over, to devastating effect.

The Invisible Hotel pairs well with Nam Le's debut poetry collection, *36 Ways of Writing a Vietnamese Poem* (Canongate, March 7). A study of identity, *36 Ways* is also an incisive look at the violence of language; the poem [33. Euphemistic] hits hard as the war on Palestine continues.

'We had all supped from the ladle that stirred a cauldron of collected myths and misunderstandings,' says Florence in Shenjé's *The Library Thief*; this selection of books all break cauldrons and will change perspectives.

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Sarah Shaffi is a journalist, editor and author. Her journalism has appeared in the *Guardian*, *The A.V. Club*, *Vogue Australia*, *The New Arab* and more. She is the author of the children's books *South Asian Folktales, Myths & Legends*, a collection of retellings from South Asian traditions, and the activity book *All About Eid*. She is the co-author of the picture books *Afraid of the Dark* and *New Baby*. Sarah has served as a judge for a number of literary prizes, including the Jhalak Prize, the Costa Novel Award and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction. She programmed a fiction strand for The Bath Festival 2023, and regularly chairs author events.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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