

was when leaders blatantly disregarded first the law, then their opponents' opinions and finally their lives.

Elsewhere the tipping point might come with contempt for truth, international law, scientists or hungry children.

For British readers unfamiliar with the rawness of Latin American politics there is plenty in this book to shock. There's also plenty there that should serve as a warning.

Unhealed wounds

Boyd Tonkin

Invisible Ink

by Patrick Modiano,
translated by Mark Polizzotti
Yale, £16, pp. 176

At some point in his twilight, enigmatic novels of vanished lives and buried memories, Patrick Modiano likes to jolt his reader with a glimpse of the all-too-real horrors that underpin his work. In *Invisible Ink* such a moment comes when the narrator recalls images from a postwar trial, where 'behind the accused were about 30 suitcases — the only remaining traces of persons who had gone missing'.

You might say that Modiano has spent a literary lifetime opening those suitcases to find out whose lives they contained. Born in Paris in 1945 to a Belgian actress mother and a Jewish father who had survived the Occupation by weaving through an underworld of shady deals, he grew up in a family microclimate of evasion and oblivion. It matched the public amnesia about collaboration and betrayal in France itself. 'Faced with the silence of our parents, we worked it all out,' he said in his 2014 Nobel lecture (a model of its kind, by the way) after, to some surprise beyond France, he won the prize.

Several of his brief, sinister and peerlessly atmospheric books — more than 20 since 1968 — have plunged overtly into what he calls the 'primordial darkness' of Paris under Nazi rule. The early 'Occupation trilogy', the semi-documentary search for the fate of one girl deported to Auschwitz in *Dora Bruder*, and the succinct but scorching revelations of his memoir *Pedigree*, gaze into the molten core of the trauma he inherited. Much of his fiction, though, tells obliquely of detective quests for forgotten or erased persons and events through the streets of an eerily inscrutable metropolis. Here the sleuth must decrypt an obliterated past as if it were (as *Invisible Ink* puts it) 'an ancient language. Like Etruscan'. His amnesiac Paris becomes a city where everyone disappears — if not quite without trace.

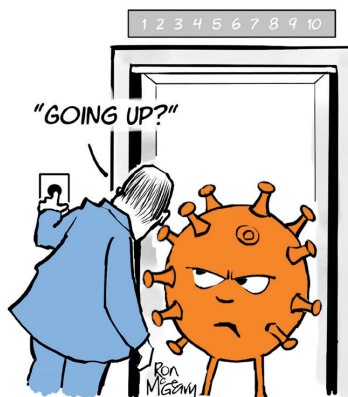
Modiano's stories circle, perhaps obsessively, around the same unhealed wounds.

In *Invisible Ink*, a man named Jean Eyben looks back to his youthful stint as a trainee private eye in Paris and his fruitless pursuit of a missing woman who called herself Noëlle Lefebvre. Who was she, what befell her, and how — a classic Modiano manoeuvre — does his quarry's past connect to the gumshoe's early memories to form 'a missing link in my own life'? Modiano fans will not expect or want any gift-wrapped resolution, although an odd coda set in Rome hints at some degree of 'closure'.

Rather, we relish the spine-prickling psychogeography of Paris, especially the 15th arrondissement south of the Eiffel Tower. Here Eyben mooches around cafés, shops, streets, even garages, 'those spaces where memory blurs into forgetting'. At first 'neither accustomed nor inclined to look to the past', later he understands that a remembered life has not only 'blanks' in its fabric but a 'refrain' — a pattern or motif, 'like the words of a children's song that still has a hold on you'.

We learn in stray fragments about Noëlle's time in Paris, her boyfriend Sancho (or Serge?) and his Chrysler convertible, a failed actor who went by the name of Gérard Mourade, their flash chum Brainos and his dancehall, and her childhood in the same lakeside town as the investigator (Modiano also went to school in Annecy). Nothing amounts to very much; no great historical secret comes clearly to light. With Modiano, the repressed always returns — but only in flickers and whispers at the edge of perception. His spare, elliptical prose — translated again with finesse and panache by Mark Polizzotti — casts its glow of mystery and menace over the tiniest detail, like lamps along the Seine's *quais* in a misty winter dusk.

We leave so little behind, Modiano hints; only a few 'secrets and receding lines' endure. The dogged sleuth must make them, through memory and story, into 'the opposite of death' — the death that, in its genocidal form, his parents somehow cheated to allow this past-haunted voice and vision to exist.



Laurels for Ardi

Adrian Woolfson

Fossil Men: The Quest for the Oldest Skeleton and the Origins of Humankind

by Kermit Pattison
William Morrow, £25, pp. 544

To comprehend ourselves and the future of humankind we have to understand where we came from. Unlike the approximately 350,000 known species of beetles on Earth, there is just one existing species of human. It is hard to imagine how our bodies and minds might have been constructed along different design principles or generated even a fraction of such diversity. With our growing ability to manipulate human genomes using gene editing, and the emergence of technologies that *may* enable human genomes to be rewritten in their entirety, the question of what we might become is no longer theoretical. Should humankind decide to redesign itself, the crashshoot of design by Darwinian evolution may become as redundant as taxi drivers in an age of driverless cars.

We are one of four different types of ape. The techniques of molecular biology have demonstrated that we are more closely related to the African versions — chimps and gorillas — than to orangutans, and closer to chimps than gorillas. Together with molecular evidence indicating that we share a common ancestor with chimps and gorillas around six million years ago, biologists concluded that *Homo sapiens* is a recent arrival — descended from an as-yet-to-be discovered chimp-like ancestral relative. In this pervasive 'chimp-centric' view of evolution, modern humans are made-over naked chimps.

In *Fossil Men*, Kermit Pattison takes us on a dazzling journey into deep geological time to explore the distant roots of humankind and shows how this 'out-of-chimps' theory was up-ended. The narrative focuses on the unearthing of 'the most important fossil that most people have never heard about' — the skeleton of *Ardipithecus ramidus*, or 'Ardi' for short. It indicated how bizarre and unpredictable nature's 'blind' rewriting of ancient pre-human genomes could be, and provided tantalising glimpses into human possibility.

The finding in Ethiopia in 1974 of 'Lucy' — a fragmented 3.2 million-year-old skeleton, at the time the most ancient human ever discovered — was a global sensation. It showed that ancient humans were bipedal and erect, had ape-like heads, brains one third the size of modern humans' and lacked the ability to fashion tools. Initially

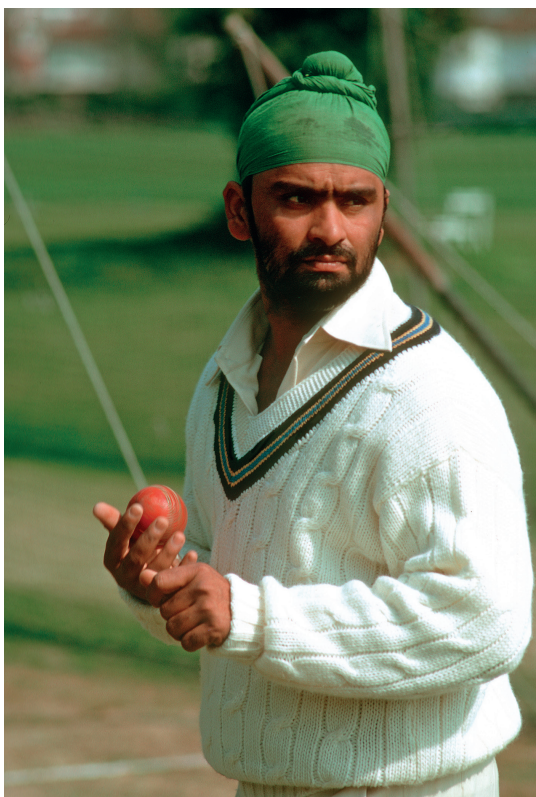
touted as the potential ancestor of all modern humans, Lucy was eventually shown to be just an older example of an already familiar human-like anatomical theme. There had to be a precursor.

Ardi's discovery in 1994 by a team of Ethiopians — including Berhane Asfaw, Giday Wolde Gabriel, Yonas Beyene — and the brilliant and enigmatic Tim White, a paleoanthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley, resulted in a shocking and unexpected reassessment of human origins. Like a character who would be at home at the bar in a *Star Wars* movie, Ardi's 4.4 million-year-old skeleton revealed a jumble of paradoxical anatomical features that flew in the face of theories that pegged humankind to a chimpanzee-like ancestor. The skeleton was extracted from the arid ground using porcupine quills and dental tools and painstakingly reconstructed over a period of 12 years from delicate fragments. White kept it secret until he was ready to reveal the full scope of his findings.

Pattison combines his meticulously researched examination of the science of ancient humans with a visceral and penetrating tale of the intrigue, academic rivalry, pathological jealousy and intellectual inertia that has helped shape the evolution of scientific paradigms around human origins. He uses his first-hand experience of being on site in Ethiopia to detail the art, science, joys and challenges of fossil-hunting in a landscape as turbulent and unpredictable as the badlands of the Afar Depression in Ethiopia. His relationships with the key protagonists have enabled him to provide a compelling account of their characters, which turns out to be every bit as fascinating as the fossils they hanker after.

Perhaps the greatest surprise was Ardi's juxtaposition of the primitive anatomical features of tree-living apes — including a grasping toe, big hands and curved digits — with multiple human-like features. These included a bump on the front of the hip bone, which indicated the presence of thigh musculature unique to bipeds. While lacking the forward-facing toe associated with walking upright, Ardi had a robust second toe, suggesting that she walked with an idiosyncratic gait. Notably absent were many of the anatomical features of chimps. Materials gathered from the same geological strata as Ardi indicated that she lived close to trees rather than the savannah's grasslands.

The denouement of the story is unexpected and revelatory. While we continue to search for the last common ancestor of apes and humans, our genomic material has been inherited through many circuitous routes. So the notion that the roots of humanity issue from a single species of protohuman may be a straw man. There may not be a unitary Eden.



The most combative of all Guha's heroes: Bishan Bedi at Lords in 1974

GETTY IMAGES

Grand disillusion David Crane

The Commonwealth of Cricket: A Lifelong Love Affair with the Most Subtle and Sophisticated Game Known to Humankind

by Ramachandra Guha
William Collins, £20, pp. 312

There is nothing in world sport, 'nothing in the history of the human race', Ramachandra Guha modestly reckons, that can remotely match the passions that surround

It was not long before Guha discovered that his cricketing idols were best worshipped from a distance

Indian cricket. I have no idea how many listeners or viewers hung on every ball of Ben Stokes's Headingley heroics last year, but it is a safe bet that had it been Sachin Tendulkar or Sunil Gavaskar batting, and an India victory over Pakistan at stake, then you could add as many noughts to that figure as will accommodate a cricket-mad population edging its way towards the one and a half billion mark.

The Commonwealth of Cricket is part

celebration, part elegy, but before all else unashamedly the book of one of those tens of millions of India's cricket fans. Ramachandra Guha is an historian, environmentalist, journalist and political biographer of wide-ranging distinction, but save for a dismal-sounding phase in his Marxist twenties, when E.P. Thompson edged out the cricket writer A.A. Thomson in his pantheon, cricket has been his obsession and the cricketers of his youth — Viswanath, Prasanna, Chandrasekhar and the 'Sardar of Spin' and most combative of them all, Bishan Bedi — his earliest heroes.

'There are no cricketers like those seen with 12-year-old eyes,' the old Middlesex and England leg spinner Ian Peebles once wrote, and *The Commonwealth of Cricket* is a testimony to that. Guha is open-minded enough to admit Virat Kohli to his all-time Indian XI if not quite to his heart, but just as with Cardus and Archie MacLaren's Lancashire, or Alan Ross and the Sussex side of the 1930s, old memories, affections and loyalties die hard. Guha recalls:

It was in the same summer of 1970 that I shook hands for the first time with a Test cricketer. One morning, my uncle and I were driving in his Fiat along Nrupathunga Road when he spied a tiny figure hunched over a scooter. Durai overtook him from the left, shouted out 'Vishy! Vishy!', and with his