Where I’m Reading From: The Changing World of Books
by Tim Parks (Harvill Secker, £12.99)

Tim Parks appears to possess the ideal sensibility for discussing the state of contemporary literature: he spurns authorial pretension, yet also takes books seriously. Originally published in the New York Review of Books, the 37 essays in Where I’m Reading From still manage to coalesce into a worldview. First, Parks aims to explode the gaseous grandiosity of the literary establishment. Second, he sees “globalisation” as applying beyond Apple’s production of iPhones in China. A rapidly expanding market for works written in English and sold in translation has fostered the “global novel.” For Parks, the increasing dominance of the international literary blockbuster entails a host of sacrifices, set against gains that are marginal at best.

Aply, one of Tim Parks’s favourite words is “provocation.” Thus he targets various pieties of his profession, among them that the human race “needs” stories. He pillories the notion that providers of a luxury—the long, involved tale in which we may immerse ourselves on summer afternoons with our feet up—are instead purveying a primitive necessity without which the species would flounder. He concedes, “Personally, I’m too enmired in narrative and self-narrative to bail out now. I love an engaging novel, I love a complex novel; but I am quite sure I don’t need it.”

In deriding the exalted claims made on behalf of the novel, Parks naturally faults the novelists who advance them. He nurtures a particular hostility toward Jonathan Franzen and Salman Rushdie, both of whom promote storytelling as on a par with bread and water. “There is an enormous need,” Franzen has declared, “for long, elaborate, complex stories, such as can only be written by an author concentrating alone, free from the deafening chatter of Twitter.” Parks objects that Franzen “appears to get all his energy, all his identity, from simultaneously evoking and disdaining America, explaining it (its gaucheness, mostly) and rejecting it.” This assumption of “superiority and distance” makes Parks uncomfortable, as does the broader literary community’s inclination toward outsize self-regard. As for Rushdie, he was “so spectacularly out of touch with the nation he was supposedly presenting to the west that the violent reaction to his Satanic Verses after its publication in India caught him entirely by surprise.”

A novelist himself, as well as a fine non-fiction writer and essayist, Parks deunks the vanities of his occupation with what lawyers would call “admission against interest.” It is a refreshing approach, perhaps especially for unpublished authors who feel shut out. Curious how rarely it’s observed that the distinction we bestow on the published author, in contrast to the ignominy that attends the dread wannabe, is absurdly arbitrary. Yet overnight the hanger-on is transformed into the revered talent. What effect does this sudden adulation have on writers? It’s only human: they make haste to dissociate themselves from the wannabes (that is, their friends).

Another under-examined subject that Parks addresses is the effect of higher incomes on writers—as people, of course, but also on their work. Big advances, especially early in a career, can apply a destructive pressure to produce, since publishers want their money back. “Does Money Make Us Write Better?” was one essay I wished were longer. For income influences not merely emotional but intellectual and political disposition, and therefore the content of an author’s work. Bestselling writers live in very different worlds than embittered obscurites, and surely write very different books.

Not that Parks elides literary content. In a nod to the transcendental meditation that he describes in his engaging book on surmounting prostate pain, Teach Us to Sit Still, more than one essay despairs that so many fiction writers fill their books with forensic dissection of a self-induced misery. In “The Chattering Mind,” he notes “how obsessively the mind seeks to construct self-narrative, how ready it is to take interest in its own pain, to congratulate itself on the fertility of its reflection.” Parks identifies a particular brand of hero that emerged in the 20th century, one characterised by paralysis and gratuitous suffering. The protagonist’s consolation: “at least I’ve understood and brilliantly dramatised the futility of my brilliant exploration of my utter impotence.”

In questioning the value of “chattering” text that ruminates on interior afflictions, Parks dares to impugn a massive proportion of modern literature—including his own.

Parks charges that the abstruse criticism spoiling from university English departments (which almost no one reads) is “impenetrable,” a view with which most jobbing book reviewers would concur. He also takes issue with the predominant notion among academics that the work must be considered separately from the author’s life. While writers at literary festivals complain about being asked petty personal questions, Parks comes to the audience’s defence. Readers attend these events with no expectation of a productive discussion of your latest book. They want to know who you are. And what is wrong with that? (Personally, I would never assert that the all-hallowed “work” has no connection to the author’s life—whom the writer has loved, where the writer has lived, etc. I just don’t happen to care about the connection. I’m mercantile: I want the product.)

At this point it will come as no surprise that Parks dislikes creative writing courses and distrusts literary prizes. As for the latter, the vast majority of scribblers who have never won a Nobel might take comfort in the impossibility of the jury’s having read the thousands of books published annually in English alone, much less every author’s entire backlist. The Swedes must often resort to political bias, if only as a shortcut—rewarding Eastern European dissidents or anti-apartheid activists.

A more interesting heresy is Parks’ assertion that, even when the book is good, you don’t have to finish it. Endings, he believes, are overrated, “a deplorable closure of so much possibility.” Fiction writers might cling to this low bar: “The best we can hope
"I love an engaging novel, I love a complex novel; but I am quite sure I don’t need it,” says novelist Tim Parks

from the end of a good plot is that it not ruin what came before.” While I’m all for granting readers permission to do whatever they like with a book (so long as it is procured through legal means), there is an art to endings, the best of which are profoundly satisfying, as well as crucial to a novel’s larger intent. Anyone who has not read the mercifully restorative final chapters of my own, otherwise despairing We Need to Talk About Kevin or So Much for That has not read the book and has not got the point.

Along with his desire to lay bare the writing trade and all its attendant froufrou, Parks’ second big subject is more admission against interest: the epidemic of books translated from English, from which he and I have both generously benefited. British-born but a long time Italian resident (thus becoming by sheer accident, as he says himself, “Mr Italy”), Parks teaches translation, has translated numerous Italian works into English, and has had his own books published in foreign languages.

The popularity of translations works appallingly in one direction. About half the novels published in Germany are foreign translations, which constitute only 3 to 4 per cent of American fiction lists. Just as English-speaking tourists luck out when travelling abroad, where so many natives have studied English as a second language, authors who write in English are privileged internationally. Apparently in Italy you haven’t arrived literarily unless your work has been published in New York, and Parks believes that the very cadence of the English language has infected the ears of Italian writers and Englishified their syntax. Worst of all, translations from English are crowding out local work.

With ambitions to reach a global audience, some writers in English such as Kazuo Ishiguro tailor their novels for ease of translation, which can entail eliminating idiom, wordplay, insider allusion, and geographic and cultural specificity, thereby surely risking a dumbing down of the prose. Parks
worries that novelists are, to some extent, “being asked to contribute to building a vast and for the moment largely imaginary global culture.” In the food world, localism is all the rage. But in literature, authors increasingly strive to break the bonds to their communities, the better to access an international readership. Yet Parks believes fiction, and meaning in general, thrives in the exquisitely particular.

Where I’m Reading From portrays the growth of the global literary blockbuster as a “commercial convenience.” With this model, publishers have to pay only one writer, and then can capitalise on economies of scale. As a result, we’ve the irony of an ever-growing world population, yet an ever-shrinking number of spots for successful novelists, who are therefore understandably less consumed with art than with winning. By the late 20th century, the job took on the characteristics of a lottery, in which “a precious few authors sold vast numbers of books while vast numbers of writers sold precious few books.” Thus successful novelists are now entangled in a corporate machine. Given that the author is encouraged to cultivate an image of the maverick, the critic outside the system, “This is an incitement to hypocrisies.”

The problem is greater than reduction of opportunity. When novels are sold en masse in dozens of languages, one of the casualties is style. Parks observes, “In translation, stripped of its style, Gatsby really doesn’t seem a very remarkable performance.” In comparing original and translated passages of classics, Parks demonstrates that the distinguishing linguistic oddities, the slight strangeness of expression that will set a paragraph in DH Lawrence apart for an English reader, is often eliminated entirely in foreign editions. In translation, the poetic devices that contribute to the distinctive sound of a writer’s prose can readily vanish:assonance, internal rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, onomatopoeia.

Since these are devices I use both consciously and instinctively in my own books, Parks reminded me of my gratitude that, being hopelessly monolingual, I cannot read the translations of my novels. If I could, with all due credit to hardworking translators, I would certainly be horrified. I’m touchy about the arc and the land of a line. The sound of prose and what it means are intertwined. For me, the loss of style is the loss of, well, everything. (Take the three section headings of my last novel: “Up,” “Down,” and “Out.” How were the sections titled in my French translation? “Up,” “Down,” and “Fragile.” Excuse me—what doesn’t belong in this picture? But apparently my French translator struggled to find a perfect parallel to the English preposition “out.” To call the solution inelegant is an understatement.)

Because translation “disturbs the relationship between sound and semantics,” Parks warns, it will “deceive you less, and charm you less” (which makes me realise that, like most of my brethren, I may care more about charming than telling the truth). Parks is a fitting advocate for the importance of style, since his own is droll, concise, and crisp.

In “The Writer’s Job,” Parks makes what is perhaps this volume’s most discouraging assertion. Traditionally, any serious novelist’s most driving aspiration is finally to graduate to “the canon”—peopleed by the likes of William Faulkner and Gustave Flaubert, the very authors who inspire successors to take up the craft. “But in the publishing culture we have today,” Parks laments, “any idea that a process of slow sifting might produce a credible canon such as those we inherited from the distant past is nonsense. Whatever in the future masquerades as a canon for our own time will largely be the result of good marketing, self-promotion and pure chance.”

Regarding the technological tumult in modern publishing, these essays address neither the rise of self-publishing—even if Parks clearly fears a future where everyone writes and no one reads—nor the cannibalising behemoth of Amazon, though he does laud e-books as expressions of cerebral purity. (Cleansed of distracting packaging—covers, overcooked blurbs—e-books are text alone, which redeems itself exclusively on the strength of the work.) Unfortunately, I question his sanguiony over the safety of authorial copyright in the digital age.

It is a rare nonfiction book that I have this heavily underscored or with which I feel in such accord. Parks’s undermining of his profession’s pretensions comes as a relief, and by contrast serves to highlight the painful pomposity of so many of our colleagues. This collection will especially appeal to other writers—although if we include the unpublished, that’s a large audience. And doubtless just about everybody will welcome an author writing about literature who isn’t full of shit. Lionel Shriver’s latest novel is “Big Brother” (HarperCollins)

The best-run states in the world

Francis Fukuyama’s passion for democracy seems to have deserted him, says Adam Kirsch

Political Order and Political Decay
by Francis Fukuyama (Profile, £25)

The End of History and the Last Man, the book that made Francis Fukuyama’s reputation as a political thinker, was a product of its moment. Published in 1992, and based on an essay from 1989, it captured the heady, world-historical optimism that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet empire. With the disappearance of communism as a credible form of government, liberal democracy had triumphed over its last philosophical rival. What had ended was not history in the sense of things happening—commentators who try to rebut Fukuyama by pointing to the latest war or disaster are off the mark. Rather, Fukuyama argued that the age-old argument about the best kind of government had been concluded. Even if many people still lived under undemocratic regimes, said Fukuyama, democracy was the destination to which they were headed.

A quarter of a century later, however, the west’s mood has soured considerably. Liberal democracy is in retreat. After a brief window of liberalisation, Russia has returned to its traditional identity as an aggressive authoritarian state; China remains under the grip of the Communist Party; the revolutions of the Arab Spring have dissolved into civil strife and repression; America’s attempts to build democratic states in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely ended in failure. If democracy is so desirable, we may well wonder, why is it so hard to achieve? When will the rest of the world catch up to the west at history’s pleasant terminus?

In his new book, Political Order and Political Decay, Fukuyama puts the question this way: how do you get to Denmark? “By this I mean less the actual country Denmark,” he explains, “than an imagined society that is prosperous, democratic, secure, and well governed, and experiences low levels of corruption... The international community would like to turn Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Haiti into idealised places like ‘Denmark,’ but it doesn’t have the slightest idea of how to bring this about.”

“The international community,” here, seems more like a euphemism for the west and its NGOs. If you asked the leaders of China or Russia whether Denmark was their role model, you might get a very different answer. From the opposite end of the political spectrum, many American conservatives would also contest the Denmark ideal, seeing its extensive welfare state as a problem rather than a solution. But once you grant Fukuyama’s presuppositions, as most American and European liberals would be inclined to do, then the need for...
a road map to Denmark becomes urgent.

**Political Order and Political Decay** is the second and concluding volume of Fukuyama’s long attempt to provide such a map. The first volume, *The Origins of Political Order*, took the story of the world’s political development from pre-history up to the French Revolution. A successful society, Fukuyama argued, rests on three pillars. First is a strong and effective state, which possesses an independent bureaucracy run on technocratic principles. It is only once a strong state exists that you can begin to worry about limiting the power of that state through the second pillar, the rule of law. The third pillar is accountability—that is, mechanisms for making the state answerable to the people it governs.

Fukuyama’s thought has moved on since 1992. In keeping with our more sceptical and disillusioned moment, he no longer believes that these three pillars will emerge necessarily from the development of history. In *The Origins of Political Order* Fukuyama threw off the influence of Hegel. His new intellectual patron saint was Charles Darwin. Fukuyama now saw political evolution as similar to biological evolution—uncontrolled and highly contingent process. The Darwinian metaphor presents a number of problems when applied to politics—for one thing, Darwin denied that there are “higher” and “lower” forms of life, while Fukuyama argues that modern liberal democracy is the highest and most desirable form of government. Still, Darwin helped to cure Fukuyama of the Hegelian notion that History was an inevitable process.

Indeed, Fukuyama’s new theory, in what must be considered his magnum opus, consistently emphasises the extreme difficulty and unlikeliness of successful human government, when you consider the forces militating against it. Fukuyama sees good government as especially miraculous because, in keeping with his new Darwinian orientation, he believes human beings are “hard-wired” for kin selection and reciprocal altruism. In practical terms, this means that we will always favour our relatives first and our friends second, while trying to do down strangers. In his first volume, Fukuyama provided many examples of how kin-based tribes are the earliest and most enduring form of political organisation. In many parts of the world, tribal structures remain under the veneer of the impersonal state, and re-emerge once the state vanishes—as has happened in Afghanistan. And even advanced societies are vulnerable to what Fukuyama calls “repatrimonialisation”—the danger that elites will simply use the government to advantage themselves and their allies, instead of the people at large. This kind of takeover of the state by venal officeholders is what crippled the French monarchy in the 18th century, leading to the revolution.

Today, Fukuyama finds the same phenomenon at work in the United States, in the guise of interest-group lobbying.

**Political Order and Political Decay** is more narrowly focused than its predecessor, and reads less like a work of political philosophy than as a treatise on comparative development. If you want to get to Denmark, you have to figure out how Denmark got there, and why, say, Argentina or Greece have not. Fukuyama attempts to answer that question through a concise but wide-ranging survey of political development around the world in the last 200 years. Once again, he inquires about the three pillars of development—state, law, and accountability—and tries to determine how they can be made to go together.

“Fukuyama has thrown off the influence of Hegel. His new intellectual patron saint is Charles Darwin”

Put this way, it may sound like Fukuyama’s book is the latest entry in the genre of “West is Best” books, in the tradition of Ian Morris’s *Why the West Rules for Now* and Niall Ferguson’s *Civilisation*. What sets Fukuyama apart is his refusal to reduce political development to a single overriding cause. When considering why some states succeed and others fail, Fukuyama believes that you have to consider the dynamic role of history and ideas, rather than static endowments like geography or climate. This approach is fundamentally optimistic, in that it grants human agency an important role in shaping our political destinies.

Take, for instance, the fate of Latin America. Most of Latin America, Fukuyama writes, has been plagued by extreme wealth inequality and disastrous “strongman” leaders. It is tempting to blame this on the continent’s early dependence on extractive industries, or its tropical climate, or the havoc wrought by Spanish colonialism, or the importation of Spanish models of government. All these factors can be adduced to explain why Latin America didn’t follow the path of North America to become prosperous and democratic, and Fukuyama gives each of them their due.

But then there is Costa Rica. This small country has the same deep history and the same geography as its neighbours, yet its per capita income is four times that of Honduras, and “unlike El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, there were no military coups, dictatorships, bloody civil wars, death squads, or foreign interventions on the part of the US, Cuba, or other outside parties since 1948.” Instead, Costa Rica has enjoyed civilian government with regular, peaceful elections. At the other end of the spectrum, there is Argentina, which enjoys a temperate climate and a geography more like North America’s, and which until the 1930s seemed to be on track to become a southern Canada. What happened to drive it into the more typical Latin American pattern of dictatorship, civil war and economic chaos?

The answer in both cases, Fukuyama argues, is politics. In Costa Rica, a civil war in 1948 gave way to a political consensus between leftist and rightist parties, whose leaders pursued moderate agendas and accepted the legitimacy of the state. At around the same period, on the other hand, Argentina’s elite decided to defend its own interests at the expense of the democratic state, leading to a series of coups and counter-coups that paved the way for the populist dictatorship of Juan Perón. These contrasting examples show that materialist theories of development are inadequate, since “human agency matters a great deal in institutional development.”

As Fukuyama pursues his tour of the developing world, it becomes clear that he does not view democracy as a panacea. On the contrary, *Political Order and Political Decay* displays a distinct lack of passion for democracy, which Fukuyama considers to be a problem as often as it is a solution. Given that the first requirement of good government, he believes, is a strong state, it can actually be a misfortune for a country to develop democratic institutions before it develops effective ones. That is the lesson of his analysis of the US, which he sees as the pioneer of the kind of clientelistic politics that now afflict so much of sub-Saharan Africa. The US in the 19th century ran on a spoils system, in which parties wooed voters with the promise of jobs and favours. Not until the Progressive Era and the New Deal did the country develop a professional bureaucracy. In the absence of a strong, technocratic government committed to the public interest, Fukuyama argues, democracy can simply be a way for parties to vie with each other in looting the commonwealth.

The unsettling conclusion of Fukuyama’s study is that the best-run states in the world are not the older liberal democracies like Britain or, especially, the US, which
he sees as increasingly paralysed by interest-group politics. Rather, his sympathies lean more toward Germany and Japan, which manage to combine strong executives and skilled bureaucracies with democratic accountability. That they were also the Axis powers in the Second World War is an irony Fukuyama notes but fails to grapple with fully.

Germany and Japan followed Fukuyama’s preferred order of development, achieving an effective state before they developed democratic institutions. Today, he writes, they benefit from the legacy of the Wilhelmine and Meiji-period strong state, while also enjoying the democratic institutions imposed on them at the barrel of an American gun. But in the interval, the strong state that Fukuyama so admires turned out to be a hypertrophied state, tyrannical and militaristic, that brought untold misery to its neighbours and many of its citizens. Fukuyama acknowledges this rather cursorily, with the truism that our current felicity is built on a long history of violence and dispossession: “One of the tragic aspects of the human situation is that violence has been integral to the process of political development.” But one might well decide that the sum of human happiness is better served by a concert of weak democratic states than a rivalry of strong authoritarian ones. If getting to Denmark requires going through Germany, then we might well decide it’s better to stay at home.

Adam Kirsch’s most recent book is “Why Trilling Matters” (Yale)

She couldn’t stop chuckling

A new book about Hannah Arendt reveals the playful side of one of the 20th century’s most celebrated thinkers, says Jonathan Rée

Unlearning with Hannah Arendt
by Marie Luise Knott (Granta, £16.99)

At first glance, Marie Luise Knott’s study of Hannah Arendt looks slight, even frivolous. Instead of weighing in on the big Arendtian topics—totalitarianism, revolution and anti-Semitism—Knott prefers to dally with side-issues such as the waywardness of translation, the ambiguity of forgiveness, the indirection of poetry, and the surprise of a gust of laughter. As a further hedge against solemnity, she illustrates her remarks with whimsical cartoons, teeming with multilingual puns. Yet it is hard to think of any other book on Arendt that gives out half as much light, not to mention joy.

The problems Knott explores came together in Arendt’s notorious account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the unconstructed Nazi official who was apprehended in Buenos Aires in 1960 and transported to Israel to face trial for crimes against humanity. But the process was always going to be about much more than the guilt or innocence of a second-rank Nazi bureaucrat. It was designed to establish, once and for all, the truth about the murder of six million Jews in Hitler’s death camps: as well as silencing the deniers, it was meant to dispel feelings of guilt amongst survivors, and heal the inter-secular suspicions that threatened the unity of Judaism in Israel and elsewhere. It would be, in the best sense of the word, a show-trial, marking the coming of age of a progressive, democratic Jewish state.

The proceedings opened in a converted theatre in Jerusalem in April 1961, and lasted five months. The judges were seated on the stage, with Eichmann in an enclosure of bullet-proof glass, looking puzzled but officious, fielding with his glasses, adjusting his headphones, and occasionally taking notes like a conscientious schoolboy. There were live radio broadcasts and continuous video recordings, with provision for a large and often unruly audience and excellent facilities for journalists, including the charismatic and assiduous reporter for the New Yorker.

Arendt was well qualified for the assignment. For one thing she had grown up in Germany at the same time as Eichmann—both of them were born in 1906. In addition she was a Jew, who had been arrested and detained in 1933 for distributing Zionist leaflets in Berlin, before fleeing to Paris where she worked with Jewish refugees until she was bundled off to an internment camp in 1940. She escaped the following year, and eventually made a home for herself in New York, earning a living as an editor and journalist, and learning to use the English language with fluency and reckless verve. In 1950 she became a US citizen.

Arendt was only 26 when she got out of Germany, but as Knott shows, she was already passionately engaged with the brightest new ideas in poetry, philosophy, and progressive politics. She had studied with the two pioneers of Existenzphilosophie, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, and would always cleave to the existentialist axiom that the human world is a creature not of natural processes rooted in the past but of free actions directed to an open future.

Her originality lay in applying this idea to politics, which she would always portray as a noble vocation rather than a lowly chore. Politics, for her, was essentially a creative activity, opening up an artificial realm in which natural inequalities count for nothing, and citizens are free to discuss their differences and resolve them through negotiation. In The Origins of Totalitarianism—the eccentric but insightful book that established her reputation as a political theorist in 1951—she argued that Nazism and communism were “essentially identical,” in that both of them expressed a fear of political processes and a fanatical determination to stifle their inherent unpredictability. But as far as Arendt was concerned, the pathologies of politophobia were not confined to totalitarian states: liberal democracies were subject to the same tribalistic temptation to neglect the outlooks of others and withdraw into self-certainty, self-indulgence and self-pity. Political citizenship was a fragile construction and it had to be handled with care.

A reporter with Arendt’s background was not going to be perfectly impartial; but her prejudices could be expected to line up with those of the reasonable, left-leaning, cosmopolitan readership of the New Yorker. She took it for granted, for example, that the trial was legitimate, even though the offences of which Eichmann was accused took place before the Israeli state came into existence, in territories beyond its jurisdiction. And when Eichmann was eventually sentenced to death, she expressed her satisfaction with characteristic robustness: “Just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the Earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations … we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the Earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.”

When her reports started to appear, however, they caused outrage. She found herself reviled and ostracised as a crypto-Nazi, an apostle for Eichmann, and a traitor to the Jewish people.

Arendt had indeed criticised the hammy histrionics of a trial where the prosecutor was allowed to indulge an extravagant “love of showmanship” while calling a stream of witnesses whose testimony, though full of pathos, had no bearing on the charges before the court. She also protested at the marginalisation of non-Zionist Jews, and dwelt provocatively on the supposed “collaboration” between Jewish leaders and Nazi authorities. On top of that, she contested the idea that the death camps were the natural culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism: they were, on the contrary, a facet of 20th-century totalitarianism, whose appetite for extermination was
called the “fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.” She offered no justification for the phrase, which some would see as a sneaky attempt to excuse Eichmann’s crimes. But if it was opaque, it was also memorable, and when her articles were reprinted as a book the phrase “banality of evil” was included in the title, creating the impression that the work was a tendentious treatise of moral theory, rather than an impassioned account of an unusual political trial.

Arendt always maintained that she wrote as a reporter, critic and commentator, or on occasion a political theorist—but never as a philosopher. She did not go in for painstaking dissections of concepts or discriminating discussions of alternative worldviews; she preferred to observe events unfolding around her and describe exactly what she found. Her method, if it can be called that, is eloquently conveyed in the central scene of Margarethe von Trotta’s 2012 film Hannah Arendt—a passage which uses archive footage of Eichmann in the dock, looking like a baffled clerk struggling to expedite a procedure whose meaning eludes him, spliced with images of Arendt herself, wonderfully played by Barbara Sukowa, as she gazes at him and tries to find the words to describe his incomprehension.

If Knott is right, then the way Arendt looked at the world had more to do with poetry than with philosophy. Her sensibility was formed by the poems she adored when she was young, and she would remain a disciple of poets all her life—of Bertolt Brecht and Rainer Maria Rilke in the first place, and also of a wide range of poet-friends including Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell and WH Auden. Arendt’s English may not have hummed with literary allusions as her German did, but she was capable of using it with the power of a poet, or as Knott puts it, “the ability to allow the reality she encountered to shake and confuse her.” She was a poetical animal as much as a political one; and the politics was in the poetry.

Knott clarifies the affinities between poetry and politics with an excursion into the problem of forgiveness. Arendt had a long-standing fascination with Christian notions of forgiveness, which seemed to her to require a strange and perhaps sinister complicity between the humble petitioners who seek it and those superior beings who have it in their gift. But then she started to think of forgiveness as a political transaction rather than a religious one, and after observing Eichmann for several months she was able, in Knott’s words, “to relearn forgiveness as the foundation of politics.”

For Hannah Arendt politics was essentially a creative activity in which citizens are free to resolve their differences through negotiation.
Forgiveness is always painful—it requires us to put away our cherished grievances—but as far as Arendt was concerned, it offers us the only hope of new beginnings in politics: we must forgive one another or die. Forgiveness is complex as well: it involves an exquisite choreography of remembrance and forgetting, of reproachfulness and love. Forgiveness is also arbitrary, even impulsive, but if it cannot be coerced by force of arms or force of argument, it may sometimes be sparked off by poetry, with its generous power to “shake and confuse.”

Last but not least there is laughter. Arendt seems to have been incapable of talking without chuckling, and when you look out for it you will find the same quality in her prose. What her critics found most unforgivable in her account of Eichmann was her confession that she regarded him as a beleibiger Hanswurst—a silly old sausage—and that the mere thought of him could make her burst out in guffaws. To her critics, this was a damaging confession, but if Knott is right then Arendt’s laughter “loosened a moral fabric that theologians, philosophers and scholars had woven too tightly.” Her laughter was alert to the “wisdom of poetry” and alive with “the promise of politics.” If the world is to have any chance of changing, we may need to unlearn our solemn self-righteousness and find out how to laugh.

Jonathan Rée is a historian and philosopher

Kierkegaard in Iowa

Marilynne Robinson’s novels expose the religious wiring behind American culture, says Thomas Meaney

Lila
by Marilynne Robinson (Virago, £16.99)

There is something puzzling about Marilynne Robinson’s place in American culture. It has to do with the way her admirers praise her bravery for writing Christian novels. At a time when American liberal Protestantism is thought to have irrecoverably surrendered its mid-century high ground, Robinson is taken to be one of those soldiers who loses radio contact with headquarters and continues to hold the territory. Her essays have squared up against neo-Darwinism, nuclear reprocessing, fiscal austerity and psychotherapy, while her novels are temporally sealed in small midwestern and western towns in the 1950s, when liberal Protestantism was still thick in the land.

But in a country that still self-identifies as 75 per cent Christian, does it really require the full measure of courage to write novels from a religious perspective? The protectioneness one senses among Robinson’s Christian readers seems misplaced. Robinson found an early admirer in Doris Lessing; President Barack Obama declares her books “changed” him; she has won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize; she teaches at the most prestigious writing workshop in America, and contributes the occasional Sunday sermon to the New York Times. The beauty of her prose is often cited as the reason for her worldly success, but it cannot be the only one.

One of the sources of Robinson’s appeal for American readers may be that she has dedicated herself to exposing the religious wiring she sees behind the secular circuitry of American culture. It is not simply that the country’s major writers—from Abraham Lincoln and Herman Melville to William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor—saturated their writing in biblical themes and imagery. It is also that Robinson still hears ordinary Americans, consciously or not, speaking scriptural language—words and phrases like “soul,” “grace,” “awesome,” “broken heart,” “bearing witness” still circulate in American speech, though their religious overtones have faded. For Robinson, these words are evidence of an inheritance that her fiction seeks to recover. I suspect some of Robinson’s secular readers get a certain satisfaction from being invited to re-inhabit an enchanted world they or their ancestors left behind; or if they are farther from the source, they may experience the quickening of a voyeur, looking into the minds of fictional characters who believe, or struggle to believe, or struggle to make peace with their disbelief, in God.

“Robinson found an early admirer in Doris Lessing and President Obama declares her books ‘changed him’”

Robinson’s new novel, Lila, is the third in a loose trilogy, which also includes her previous novels, Gilead and Home. At the centre of the novels is John Ames, the minister in a small Iowa town in the 1950s. We first encountered Lila as a shadowy figure on the margins of Gilead; she is the younger wife of Ames and has a shadowy past. But in Lila Robinson takes us from her childhood in the Great Depression to when Lila first attracts the notice of Ames and quickly settles into a marriage with him. Lila does not narrate the novel as Ames did in Gilead, but Robinson hews so closely to her consciousness that we are very nearly locked into her perspective.

On the surface, Robinson’s novel seems to be preoccupied with moral questions. Will this young woman, whose past includes time spent in a whorehouse, be able to live as a proper wife in town? Will turning her back on her old life mean repudiating the drifters who cared for her as a child? These sorts of concerns are not foreign to Robinson, who in her essays and interviews defends many of the severer tenets of Calvinism. But in Lila, Robinson also refuses to indulge high-flown theological justifications or judgements. She seems to mock the very idea of devoting too much attention to the sort of questions Ames and his fellow minister and friend, Boughton, ponder on their porches, such as how American Protestants will ever convert the Chinese under Mao Zedong to Christianity. Robinson may be that rare thing—a fiery congregationist—in her non-fiction, but her novels succeed by gently undermining the learnedness of the wise men, and showing how consciousness itself, in the case of Lila, can take on sacred properties. The novel has a Kierkegaardian edge: it examines “Christendom” from the vantage of an estranged outsider—the original position of the Christian—who exhibits more Christian qualities than many of the “Christians” she confronts.

The novels of Robinson’s trilogy are each set in motion by the crossing of a threshold: in Gilead and Home, a prodigal son returns home and creates tremors in the town. In Lila a woman steps inside a church to take shelter from the rain. Lila is curious about what goes on in churches, and suspicious as well. When she first visits the house of John Ames, Lila begs him with a question: “I just been wondering lately why things happen the way they do.” She has a curiosity that connects with Ames’s own wondering about the world: “She wasn’t getting religion, she just wanted to know what he was talking about,” writes Robinson. Lila is drawn to the Old Testament, where Ames favours the more forgiving landscape of the Gospels. When he sets Lila to read the Bible, Ames finds her attracted to the Books of Moses, which more closely conform to her experience of scavenging her way through the Depression. The Book of Ezekiel, which “talks a lot about whoring,” holds special fascination.

Much of the novel contains Lila’s reflections on her early youth before she met Ames. Her childhood is biblical in the full sense of the word. She is saved as a child by a woman named Doll, a rough-hewn character out of the Old Testament, who becomes
Robinson has often succeeded in creating characters of heroic dimensions. In *Gilead*, there was John Ames’s grandfather, the righteous abolitionist, who could conduct conversations with God aloud in the kitchen. Lila’s caretaker Doll belongs in this company. She says few words, but she looms over the book as the representative of a different moral code. “Better you take it,” she says when she gives Lila the knife she is perpetually sharpening. “Wash it down good, and hide when you get a chance. Don’t you never use it unless you have to.” Despite her survivalist code, she wants more for Lila than she wants for herself. She sends Lila to school for a year—and tries to get her to marry a kind old man with some property. The last time Lila sees her protector she has been charged by a sheriff for killing a man (possibly one of Lila’s kin) who may or may not have tried to bring Lila back into the clan. Outside the courthouse, where Doll sits on a rocking chair awaiting trial, a crowd of Lila’s extended family circles the building, demanding tribal vengeance, in one of the most powerful and primal scenes in the novel.

The transience of life has consistently been one of Robinson’s great subjects. Lila is uncomfortable with the stable world her husband wishes to provide her; yet she prepares to accept it for the sake of the child she has with Ames. There are moments where she fiercely asserts her own sovereignty over Ames and his sedentary religion—as when she cleans up the graves of Ames’s ancestors in the cemetery: “Let’s see if he thinks it was God who scraped the moss of the headstone and put the ivy there.” But at the same time, Ames and Lila move toward a tender, if hesitant, form of intimacy: “She pretended he knew some of her thoughts, only some of them, the ones she would like to show him.” The final form of surrender to the town of Gilead will only come when Lila gives up the knife that Doll has bequeathed to her as her only true possession. (This is one of the few moments where the novel’s symbolism gets too heavy.)

At its best, Robinson’s writing can light up consciousness, and make even the most passing thoughts feel indelible. Her older sister in American literature is Emily Dickinson, who likewise dedicated herself to the proposition that “the brain is wider than the sky.” In one of the novel’s most stirring passages, Lila considers her own invisible passage through the world:

> “Her name had the likeness of a name. She had the likeness of a woman, with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a likeness of wings. She thought, Strange as all this is, there might be something to it.”

It’s the tentativeness of Lila’s existence, its overwhelming provisionality, that Robinson’s prose transforms into something precious. There is much theological agonising on the surface of her novels, but if Christendom never comes off very well, it’s because Robinson’s religious outpourings find more open channels in the grooves of her characters’ consciousnesses. Thomas Meaney is co-editor of “The Utopian” and teaches at Columbia University.
Books in brief

The Quantum Moment
by Robert P Crease & Alfred Scharff Goldhaber (WW Norton, £20)

What do you make of quantum theory? One response is that it is weird or hopelessly mind-boggling. But many of the tropes of quantum physics have permeated cultural discourse, among them quantum jumps, the uncertainty principle and Schrödinger’s cat. Physicists may sometimes despair at how these ideas are misused—quantum jumps are small, not big, and Werner Heisenberg didn’t say that everything is uncertain. But historian of science Robert P Crease and physicist Alfred Goldhaber provide reasons why scientists should lightening up.

This survey of the cultural reception of quantum theory since its inception at the start of the 20th century shows that, like any other branch of science, it serves up elegant metaphors for human experience. In the right hands—John Updike, Tom Stoppard, Michael Frayn—the ideas can be illuminated without distorting the technical meanings. And the abuses and over-extrapolations are not the sole preserve of flaky artists and pretentious postmodernists. Niels Bohr, for example, tried to stretch his concept of “complementarity” to fit not just particles and waves but psychology, government and love. In such ways, the authors show, the line between sound speculation and “fruitloopy” is often all but indistinguishable. While examining and celebrating the interplay between the sciences and humanities, Crease and Goldhaber do a first-rate job of explaining what quantum theory is all about—and why there are still bits that no easy answers to the problems of war and peace, a conclusion that can also be drawn from readings of the Bible and Koran. Religion, Armstrong says, is not “an unchanging essence that inevitably inspires violence” as secular-minded critics maintain, but a “template that can be modified or altered to serve a variety of ends,” some of which are violent.

While Armstrong’s thesis is sound so far as it goes, it does not sufficiently emphasise the way that religious symbolism legitimises violence by lending it metaphysical force. In a pluralistic, globalised world, received traditions are forced to confront each other, challenging the monopoly status they held in the past. The religious violence that Armstrong rightly sees as integral to modernity may have all sorts of ancillary causes, including responses to the violence of the modern state. But the heart of the matter—which Armstrong avoids confronting—is rage at the absence of deity; at what Nietzsche famously called “the death of God.”

Malise Ruthven

Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence
by Karen Armstrong (Bodley Head, £25)

When videos of hostages being decapitated to shouts of Allahu Akbar (God is greater) are posted on the internet, and religious minorities from Burma to Nigeria are under threat of rape, pillage and massacre, it is tempting to blame “religion” for the violence that is inflicting misery on millions of human beings throughout the world. But as Karen Armstrong explains in this ambitious and erudite overview, “in religious history, the struggle for peace has been just as important as the holy war.”

Violence was endemic to the agrarian empires of the pre-modern era that expanded in order to create the surpluses on which culture and civilisation depended. The Hindu Bhagavad-Gita reminds us that there are no easy answers to the problems of war and peace, a conclusion that can also be drawn from readings of the Bible and Koran. Religion, Armstrong says, is not “an unchanging essence that inevitably inspires violence” as secular-minded critics maintain, but a “template that can be modified or altered to serve a variety of ends,” some of which are violent.

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Malise Ruthven

The Game of Our Lives
by David Goldblatt (Viking, £20)

Football used to be the game of the English working-class. While many of the civic and political institutions of working-class life in this country have succumbed to the scourges of deindustrialisation and globalisation, football flourishes in the era of footloose multinational capital. Or at least the “new football economy” does.

Ever since the dawn of professionalism in the north of England in the late 19th century, football clubs have been run as businesses. But, as David Goldblatt argues in his new book, since the creation of the Premier League in 1992, the idea that “money shapes the game” has become its “defining feature,” as the butchers and car salesmen who used to run English clubs have been replaced by foreign oligarchs and oil-rich investors.

Goldblatt’s history of the “meaning and making of English football” is wide ranging, dealing with gender, race and national identity as well as economics—but it is as an anatomy of the football industry that The Game of Our Lives is most interesting. This is terrain that has been explored by other writers in recent years—David Conn, Stefan Szymanski and Simon Kuper come to mind—but what makes Goldblatt’s book distinctive is a question that he asks, but never quite answers. How is it that English football, whose economy has become an “exemplar of a globalised and deregulated model of capitalism,” is still home, despite everything, to “invented rituals and solidarities” that belong to another age?

Jonathan Derbyshire