

chattering
class

A guide to food for thought in new paperbacks. This week: Intellectual gurus. PO: paperback original

Roland Barthes:

Roland Barthes (*Papermac*, £10) A brilliant and moving essay-memoir that reveals the critic-turned-moralist as a man of many minds and moods. His best-loved book blends intimacy and rigour, head and heart

John Gray: Berlin

(*Fontana*, £6.99) A high-level intellectual summit: the mobile philosopher (once right, now left) explains the thoughts of Sir Isaiah. Gray shows how Berlin keeps his distance from the pieties of English liberalism

Liam Kennedy:

Susan Sontag: mind as passion

(*Manchester UP*, £12.99; PO) Her star may have fallen of late (though she bravely worked in Sarajevo), but the New York writer shows the noblest face of avant-garde culture. Kennedy does her justice in this shrewd critique

Peter Singer:

Animal Liberation

(*Pimlico*, £10) A new outing for this 1975 landmark text from the Australian Green thinker. Reject his activism if you like; this exposé of cruelty and its falsehoods remains magnificent proof of "the power of ethical reasoning"

I oversaw your bricolage

MARKED FOR LIFE

Paul Magrs

CHATTO & WINDUS, £12.99

LAURENCE O'TOOLE

It's Christmas in Darlington and Mark and Samantha are unhappy. Tree's up, turkey's roasting, it's even snowing—and still they can't get merry. Samantha finds Mark too effete, a bit gender-suspect. While Mark keeps thinking about the past, of adolescent days of sexual ambivalence with his best mate Tony. Mark, by the way, is tattooed from head to toe. *Marked for life*, he's a walking, talking patchwork of fantasy graphics and ink.

Add to such muddle and strangeness the news that Samantha's widowed mum recently turned dyke; that her lover is an Orlando-like, transhistorical gender-bender born 473 years ago, and I guess you could say this is one mixed-up northern family. Or simply an excuse for some fictional fun and games. Later on, there will be a kidnapping, a chase, a haunted house, even a happy ending of sorts.

Paul Magrs has written an impressive first novel: imaginative, thoughtful, elegant and tart. *Marked for Life* brings you fairy tale, gothic, suburban farce and epiphanies aplenty, lining the exotic up beside the commonplace, and getting away with it. As well as its knockabout qualities and its technical ambitions, this is also an intelligent piece of work, mixing thoughts on memory with modish observations on gender, queerness and the fine art of getting out of the body.

Where the last is concerned, for once the references are not to William Gibson, Donna Haraway and cyberspace, but to the psychosocial realm of fantasy and desire, ego-dissolution and merging. Leo Bersani's call for *homoness* comes to mind: a state where desire is no longer about lack, but repetition, and sameness. Here subject positions blur; it's no longer clear where you end and the exterior world begins. Or, as often happens to me, not knowing where my right arm finishes and the TV remote control takes over.

Magrs is a young academic. Clearly he's done his homework. Not only do the big concepts come thick and fast, but so do the references: from Woolf to Calvino, from Michael Powell to Tim Burton. The gang's all here. Some of this learning works; some doesn't.

Nobody likes a smart-arse. Nobody. The clever-dick issue is always liable to cause trouble. Though braininess, pretentiousness even, are not intrinsically suspect, the novel of ideas has peculiar drawbacks. First, Magrs has ideas coming out of his ears: too many for them all

to be properly embedded in the story. Characters are sometimes required to recite egregious lines like: "They've all got essences and I haven't" or "I oversaw the construction of your bricolage."

In addition, all these complex notions conflict with the desire for order and resolution at the tale's end. Disputes like Essentialism versus Non-Identity aren't easily settled. *Marked for Life* closes on a satisfying note, but in time its loose ends and unfinished thoughts—the novel's living dead—are back again, nagging away. Which is another way of saying that, next time, Magrs will do even better.

The hair apparent

ADVENTURES ON THE FREEDOM ROAD: THE FRENCH INTELLECTUALS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Bernard-Henri Lévy (translated by Richard Veasey)

HARVILL PRESS, £20

PAUL RYAN

No one should be misled by the subtitle of this book. It is not a detailed analysis of 20th-century French thought but a wickedly entertaining summary of actions, errors and quarrels among the (predominantly male) high echelons of France's *classes bavardes*. Bernard-Henri Lévy may claim to be writing "in the shadow of Aragon, Zola, Eluard and Cocteau" but he is shadow-boxing all the way, and very few reputations emerge unscathed in this catalogue of great writers seduced by the totalitarian temptations of communism and fascism.

Lévy first came to prominence around 20 years ago, as the most media-friendly of that group of young French intellectuals who were known as *les nouveaux philosophes*. A former disciple of Louis Althusser ("the purest Marxist theoretician on the planet"), he achieved celebrity with *La Barbarie à visage humain* (1977), inspired by his admiration for Solzhenitsyn. It expounded the total rejection of Marxism at the heart of *la nouvelle philosophie*. His writing was brilliant, incandescent with the rage of a betrayed man.

He went on, in an even more controversial book, to define "French ideology" as essentially fascist in character, ingrained with racism and anti-Semitism. Here was a more complex rage, the passionate mixture of anger and impotence often experienced by Jews born after Auschwitz. Since then, Lévy's self-conscious glamour—shoulder-length black hair, elegantly coiffured; designer stubble; immaculate white shirts, fetchingly worn *en décolletage*—has become familiar in France from his frequent television appearances. He is universally known as

"BHL" and journalists love to tease him with such headlines as "God is Dead, but my Hair is Perfect".

His public pronouncements—in support of Salman Rushdie or castigating the west for its inertia over Bosnia—are often admirable. But, as he has drifted further away from real philosophy, he has more than a hint of the *poseur* about him. If he took himself less seriously he might avoid the attentions of the man who is fond of smacking cream pies in the faces of France's most pompous celebrities.

But BHL's vanity, which does no real harm, is what gives an extra vitality and a personal style to his prose. If it sometimes makes *Adventures on the Freedom Road* read like an ego-trip, it is entirely appropriate—for the book takes us on a whistle-stop tour of some of the most inflated egos of recent French history.

Lévy dates the birth of the modern French intellectual to the time of Zola and his championship of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. The repercussions of that famous miscarriage of justice—which may seem safely historical on this side of the Channel—are echoing still. Only last month did the French Army *officially* admit Dreyfus was innocent of treason.

Zola was a major inspiration for the 20th-century French notion of the *écrivain engagé*. The divisions that separated the Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusard camps have been carried on, as Lévy amply demonstrates, in the arguments between left and right throughout the intervening 100 years. His book features a dazzling cast of characters—from Artaud and Breton to Sartre and Camus and beyond—who laid creative writing aside and took up their pens to write "for the good of the cause".

Lévy is one of their number. If he is kinder to the glamorous figures of Malraux and Camus it is, touchingly, because he sees himself in them. He gives poor old Sartre a much rougher time; having damned him convincingly, he tosses in a few words of faint praise to finish the job.

The book began life as a television series, which had the advantage of copious archive footage and interviews with witnesses. Reading this massively expanded version, it is easy to get lost as Lévy talks familiarly of "our intellectuals", such as Drieu La Rochelle and Alain. So we must be grateful to the translator Richard Veasey for his conscientious footnotes and sympathetic editing.

Sartre's protégé Olivier Todd once questioned the competence of literary intellectuals in matters of politics but it will be ever thus. Infected by the cult of the man of action, Lévy presents it all as something of a boy's game, and the very few women get cursory treatment. He thus pays quiet testimony to the casual misogyny more deeply ingrained than any ideology in French life and thought.