

Lent

Jane Williams

THE MERCIFUL HUMILITY
OF GOD

160pp. Bloomsbury Continuum.
Paperback, £9.99.

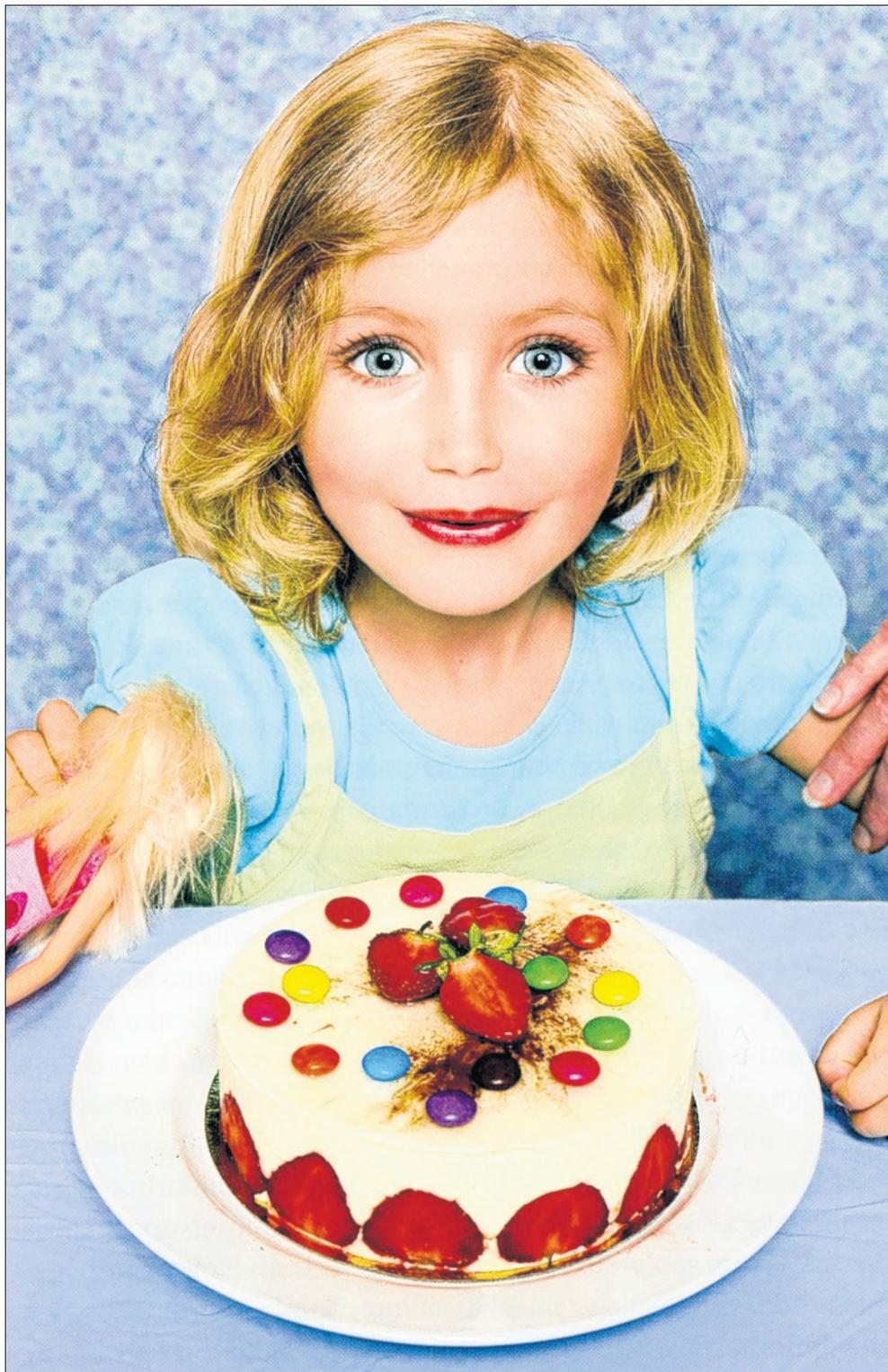
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Jane Williams's Lent book is intended to accompany the reader from Ash Wednesday's reminder of death to the celebration of Easter forty days later, following Jesus's path from his baptism and temptations in the desert, through his calling of disciples and his teaching, to his passion and crucifixion. The reader, whether an informed Christian or not, is given a simple but often striking presentation of what Christians believe about Christ, who was both expected and radically surprising, and thus about God: the book is a fresh, lively, and orthodox answer to the ancient question *Cur deus homo?*: why did God become man? The narrative is firmly anchored to Scripture – passages from the Old and the New Testaments illuminate each other – and is accompanied, in each of five chapters, by a brief account of an exemplary Christian whose life and/or writings are meant to illustrate the stage in Christ's life just described.

The idea, since Christ is encountered (only) by people one by one, is to connect readers with models of Christian response they may have known little or nothing about. St Augustine, in relation to temptation, to the discovery of humility and to conversion, is an obvious choice. Julian of Norwich, St Francis, and St Teresa of Avila have in common a conversion experience associated both with illness and with an intense perception of the suffering of Christ on the cross, but are somewhat arbitrarily placed here: the centuries in which Julian's *Revelations* were scarcely known are compared to the thirty years of Jesus's obscure growth to maturity. The culminating chapter on the Resurrection has Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, representing the Christian reversal of worldly values, and human, informed by divine, love for the vulnerable.

An occasional chattiness of tone, unnecessary because Williams's prose is straightforward, and a reflex feminism, jar a little, as does her fixation on power as the worst of sins. Rather clunky questions for group discussion conclude each chapter. But there is nourishing food for thought in these engaging essays, including a brave explanation of the mystery of the Trinity, and a serious case for the essential unity, for reflection and thanksgiving, of Christ's life, death and resurrection. The title, unlike almost all of the book, is, perhaps deliberately, hard to understand.

LUCY BECKETT



“Little Dolls”, 2004 – 2006, Alain Delorme; reproduced from *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary art and the drive to waste* by Amanda Boetzkes (264pp. MIT. £27 (\$US 36). 978 0 262 03933 8)

Comedy

Helen Davies and Sarah Illott, editors
COMEDY AND THE POLITICS OF
REPRESENTATION

Mocking the weak
278pp. Palgrave Macmillan. £79.99.
978 3 319 90505 1

Comedy and the Politics of Representation, edited by Helen Davies and Sarah Illott, must be commended for its excellent timing. Comedians, such as Stephen Colbert and Trevor Noah in America, have recently taken on the mantle of politicians, addressing global audiences with undiluted political messages, while others have become politicians themselves: Jón Gnarr was mayor of Reykjavík, Beppe Grillo founded the Five Star Movement, now Italy's largest political party. Meanwhile, politicians increasingly behave like comedians. The performances of populist politicians such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage are outrageous, mocking, inconsistent

– hallmarks of the traditional freedom permitted to jesters and satirists.

In fourteen essays, the book explores how comedy is related to “politics” in the widest sense. How does comedy reinforce or subvert social power relations? Does it contribute to or contest the creation of cultural identities? Most contributions look at British comedy past and present, with some enlightening excursions to the United States, Slovenia and Italy. The central argument of the book is that comedy typically “mocks the weak”, rather than challenge the strong. Despite the widely held belief – dating back to classical comedy – that comedy should “punch up” not “punch down”, most contributors argue that comedy is neither subversive nor very critical. This critique extends to acclaimed television shows such as *Shameless* and *Little Britain*, which are exposed, in the volume's most critical essay, as mockery of the working class. In classical cultural studies vein, most subversion is found in seemingly “light” popular forms, such as Italian Christmas

comedy or the sitcom roles of June Whitfield (particularly as “mother” in *Absolutely Fabulous*).

The conclusion that comedy generally supports rather than challenges the social order is convincing, albeit disheartening. It also casts a new light on the “anti-establishment” aura of today's jester-politicians, who are seen to be usually on the side of the powerful. However, the repeated discovery of sexism, racism, classism and so on, does not always make for exciting reading. It is the wit and originality of the 1930s double act Tommy Handley and Ronald Franklau, for example, that make them worthy of lengthy analysis, not their classist, sexist material full of colonial references. The best contributions in the volume – Rob Hawkes on Stewart Lee, Helen Davies on Victorian comedy and Rosie White on the suburban sitcom – combine a critical look at power dynamics with an eye for the ambiguity, creativity and play that characterizes good comedy. They remind us that while comedy can show us instances of power and inequality, this does not mean that it is *about* them at all.

GISELINDE KUIPERS

Rediscovered

Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas,
editors

ELIZABETH HARROWER
Critical essays

151pp. Sydney University Press.
Paperback, Aus\$40.
978 1 74332 559 9

The works of the Australian novelist Elizabeth Harrower have, until now, received little critical attention. That is partly an effect of their being out of sight for a long time. As Harrower told the *New Yorker* three years ago: “I stopped writing fiction in 1971 or 1972 – a strange decision”. Five decades after this “strange decision”, however, the Melbourne publishing house Text reissued Harrower's four novels, alongside the previously unpublished *In Certain Circles* and her stories – to which this collection of essays, edited by Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas, serves as a fitting critical companion.

Renowned for her “psychological novel” *The Watch Tower* (1966) – which is described here by Michelle de Kretser as “an exemplary study in abuse and entrapment” – Harrower inspires some unsurprisingly personal responses, which make up the first few essays in this collection. De Kretser unabashedly confesses herself to be “riveted” by Harrower's “forensic brilliance” in depicting how the tyrannical Felix Shaw sets about wrecking the lives of the sisters Laura and Clare Vaizey; Fiona McFarlane says Harrower's portrayal of Sydney, where the novel is set, “makes me think of a tour guide who loves a monument but worries her clients will need some convincing”.

As the collection continues, these refreshingly punchy accounts give way to more traditional critical essays. Elizabeth Webby suggests that Harrower's long, nostalgic descriptions of the city, likening it to Montmartre, may well reflect an authorial longing for Paris – but might equally well be something her publishers asked her to add, with a foreign market in mind: “it was an aspect of life in Australia still largely unknown in England”.

Webby's strong study is let down by others, however, such as Nicholas Birns's forced conception of masculinity and tendency towards dramatic generalizations: "But the crisis in Harrower's books is a crisis of masculinity, a crisis of men from which the women in the book suffer".

On the whole, the collection's contributors seem over-conscious of their subject being an only recently "rediscovered" author. Descriptive summaries often take precedence over quotations from the novels themselves. Analysis focuses on plot rather than style. Brigid Rooney, for example, reports that Laura and Clare "struggle with the puzzle of Felix". "What does he want? What's wrong with him? Can he be changed? Laura therefore watches Felix. Her constant watchfulness – her extreme vigilance – becomes itself pathological". Summaries along these lines continue for paragraphs. *Elizabeth Harrower: Critical essays* is a welcome attempt to compensate for a fifty-year silence, but there is much still to be said about this distinctively Australian writer.

ANTONIA CUNDY

iGen

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff

THE CODDLING OF THE
AMERICAN MIND

How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure
352pp. Allen Lane. £20 (US \$28)
978 0 241 30835 6

At the opening of *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff recount a visit to a modern-day oracle, Misoponos, who reveals three truths to them: "what doesn't kill you makes you weaker", "always trust your feelings", and "life is a battle between good people and evil people". Misoponos is fictional, but the authors suggest that these "three Great Untruths" have taken root in universities in the United States, leading to a culture of safe spaces, call-outs and a "newly popular idea that speech is violence". They try to disentangle the origins of these trends among iGen, the generation which has entered college since 2013. Their suggestions include over-protective parenting, increasing rates of teenage anxiety, and the enlargement of the "protective mission" of universities, with students positioning themselves increasingly as consumers.

The authors show how quickly a witch hunt or "polarization cycle" can escalate, with haunting examples of academics and students who have been attacked or threatened. The Princeton professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor called Donald Trump a "racist and sexist megalomaniac" in a commencement speech in 2017. After Fox News published extracts, she was sent multiple threats, including that she would have "a bullet from a .44 Magnum put in [her] head". The authors, in response, are at pains to model rational forms of enquiry. Yet their focus on a few flashpoints says relatively little about day-to-day life on most campuses.

There are noticeable gaps. There is little mention of the \$1.5 trillion debt owed collectively by graduates in the US, the precarious nature of academic employment, or deeper sources of anxiety, from low job prospects for graduates to climate change. This study is also

trapped in a college bubble, focusing on those young people "who are competing for places at selective colleges" and ignoring the mental health or political inclinations of the 60 per cent of Americans who do not enter higher education.

Lukianoff and Haidt note a "quirk about American politics", that a majority of white Americans born between 1950 and 1954 vote Democrat, unlike those born just before or afterwards. They suggest that the events of 1968 shaped a generation. Perhaps iGen, similarly, are responding attentively to their own times. This study focuses on what it calls (rather patronizingly) "young people today", but it does not include their voices. The authors thus resemble the exasperated parents in many 1950s films, who cannot understand that their children may have plenty of cause to rebel.

TOM SPERLINGER

Uruguayan fiction

Mario Benedetti

SPRINGTIME IN A BROKEN
MIRROR

Translated by Nick Caistor
304pp. Penguin Classics. Paperback, £10.99.
978 0 241 32720 3

First published in 1982, *Springtime in a Broken Mirror* tells of the lives of exiles and political prisoners during the last Uruguayan dictatorship. Focusing on the family of Santiago, a left-wing militant held in the infamous Libertad (Freedom) jail after the 1973 coup, the novel comprises interconnected vignettes, from different viewpoints and in distinctive voices.

We read Santiago's letters and interior monologues about his incarceration, marked in particular by the pain of enforced distance from loved ones, but also by the difficulties of adapting to prison routine. This is by no means a heroic portrait of political resistance. Santiago reflects on the violence of militancy, and there is criticism of the machismo of the Left. His family has been forced to flee to Buenos Aires. Graciela, his wife, has to cope with what might be called the "banality of exile": seeking normality in a foreign country, while increasingly convinced that her marriage is finished.

Orality and humour are prominent in Benedetti's works. The chapters dedicated to Beatriz, the couple's young daughter, are full of meaningful misapprehensions, with the childish perspective highlighting the sadness of separation and absurdity of contemporary politics. Santiago's father, Don Rafael, examines the older generation's experience of dictatorship, and considers remedies for the pain of exile – integration into a new society, the forming of new relationships – as well as the troubles of "dis-exile", a term Benedetti coined to sum up the problems of a subsequent return to one's own country.

Benedetti's political beliefs made him persona non grata first in Uruguay and then in Argentina. Italicized sections include his own first-person testimony, as well as stories he heard, some tragic, some heart-warming, from others forced out of their homes. He recounts, in blackly comic terms, an invitation to depart issued by the Peruvian authorities, and the apologetic attitude of police officers tasked with his removal. A warmer welcome for left-

wing Latin American exiles is found in Cuba, while thousands of Cubans are attempting to leave.

Nick Caistor's skilful translation captures the puns and wordplay of the original, and a few carefully chosen footnotes explain local political references. Some terms are rendered in such a way as to emphasize their continued relevance today: the torture known as the *submarino* is called "waterboarding", Santiago's sufferings foreshadowing the horrors of Guantánamo. Mario Benedetti saw himself firstly as a poet, and he is less well known to anglophone readers than is his compatriot Eduardo Galeano. As in his novel *La tregua* (*The Truce*, 1960), *Springtime in a Broken Mirror* demonstrates his ear for dialogue, his wry sense of humour and the tenderness of his characterizations.

BEN BOLLIG

Backlash

John Herrmann

FOREIGN BORN

Edited by Ross Tangedal
290pp. Hastings College Press.
Paperback, £15.30 (US \$14.30).
978 1 942885 64 4

John Herrmann was part of the American artistic community in 1920s Paris, a friend of Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. His first novel, *What Happens*, was banned in America for obscenity in 1926, and in 1948 he fled to Mexico after the FBI placed him under investigation for his activities in the Communist underground. It is for such eye-catching biographical detail that he is best known. This timely (first) publication of *Foreign Born* – a novel exploring the anti-German backlash in the American Midwest during the First World War – however, shifts the focus back to his writing.

Foreign Born reflects Herrmann's experiences growing up as the descendant of German immigrants in Lansing, Michigan. It is one of a handful of contemporary works, alongside *One of Ours* by Willa Cather (1922) and *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis (1920), to explore the experiences of German-Americans in the United States during the First World War. But, unlike those novels, in which Germans are peripheral figures in Anglocentric narratives, *Foreign Born* is told from the perspective of a German immigrant.

Ernst Weiman develops his father's shoe store to become one of the most prosperous men in Fairbanks, spurning his German associates in favour of the town's Anglo luminaries. As the war arrives, however, Ernst sides with Germany and, in the atmosphere of heightened patriotism, is ostracized by the American community. After his son, Charley, enlists, Ernst adopts a policy of 100 per cent Americanism. He drapes his shop in American flags and becomes the town's biggest subscriber of Liberty Bonds, exploiting the patriotic zeitgeist to improve business and regain his social position, while privately hoping for a German victory. As the novel progresses, Ernst's views on the war and on Fairbanks's townspeople shift and his social position fluctuates.

It is perhaps because of its frank discussion of xenophobic prejudice, that *Foreign Born* has struggled to find a publisher until now, sixty years after Herrmann's death in 1959.

This edition has been brought about by the efforts of Hastings College Press in Nebraska. Working from a typescript housed at the Harry Ransom Center at Austin, Texas, the editor Ross Tangedal has incorporated amendments outlined in Herrmann's manuscript annotations. However, Herrmann's idiosyncratic spelling of certain words, his choice of dashes over speech marks, and his distinctive – repetitive, declarative, and unadorned – prose style have all been preserved. Sara Kosiba provides an introduction detailing the history of the novel's composition, Herrmann's struggles to find a publisher, and the work's relationship to real-life instances of anti-German xenophobia in his native Lansing.

DAVID RENNIE

Doomed

Stephen Hawking

BRIEF ANSWERS TO THE BIG
QUESTIONS

232pp. John Murray. £14.99.
978 1 473 69598 6

Is there a God? No. Good to have that sorted out. At least, that is the opinion of Stephen Hawking, whose final book, envisioned and mostly completed when he was alive, seeks to tackle unanswerable questions such as this. In writing *Brief Answers to the Big Questions*, Hawking had his populist hat on: he deals with, among other things, artificial intelligence, climate change, alien life, black holes, the future of humanity and the origin of life – all at a lightning pace and with as little scientific jargon as he can manage. The book is more personal than technical, no doubt as a result of how it was composed. Hawking was asked his opinion on all manner of things by all manner of people – including colleagues, tech entrepreneurs and political leaders. He kept a surprisingly large archive of his responses, from which these "answers" are initially drawn.

Hawking is clearly guiding readers not just intellectually – explaining the Big Bang or Relativity – but ideologically as well, trying to bring them round to his own views on the subjects he discusses. He describes himself as an "optimist" many times and attempts to show us the benefits of much of what he discusses. Artificial Intelligence, for example, will bring "greater prosperity and equality", and genetic engineering will eradicate many diseases.

All in all, however, *Brief Answers* is a truly pessimistic book. When discussing the future of Earth he makes it clear that there isn't one. Earth will die, due to irreparable climate change. As to humanity, if anything the outlook is worse. Hawking, optimist or not, is not blind to the faults of our species. Genetic engineering will be misused by the wealthy, and a *Time Machine*-esque world with two types, and tiers, of human being will emerge; this is if the robots do not kill us all. AI will soon reach the point where it is able to make improvements to itself without human intervention; once this is accomplished, we shall be superseded, and in all likelihood found to be a nuisance. Our only hope of survival as a species, according to Hawking's unfortunately rather convincing argument, is to colonize space; otherwise we are all doomed, and, of course, there shall be no God to receive us.

SAMUEL GRAYDON