

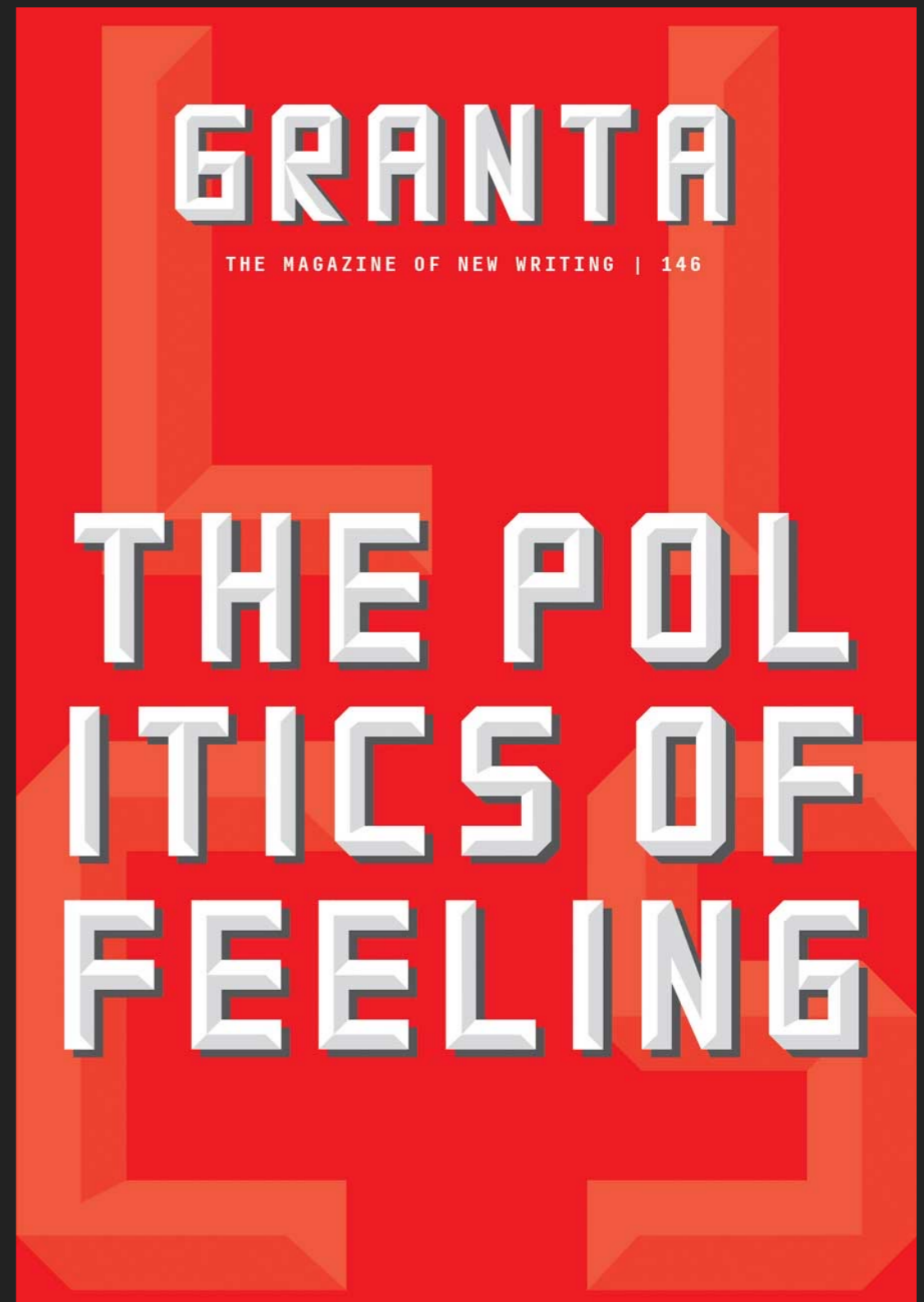


BREXIT LITERATURE, COVID FICTION: CRISIS WRITING IN THE UK

Cécile Beaufile
Sorbonne Université (EA VALE)

« BREXIT MEANS BREXIT » (GOVT TO PUBLISHERS' ASSOCIATION (JULY 2016))

- ▶ « It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature. » Ali Smith, *Autumn*, p. 3.
- ▶ Fewer sales in literary fiction 2015-2018 (Arts Council Report 2018)
- ▶ Rise in the self-help category (+20% in 2018, Nielsen BookScan)
- "They want something that's safe and familiar, something where they know nothing nasty is going to happen" (interview of Paul Sweetman, bookseller, *Guardian*, 09/03/2019)



1. WRITING RUPTURE

- ▶ BrexLit « fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal. »

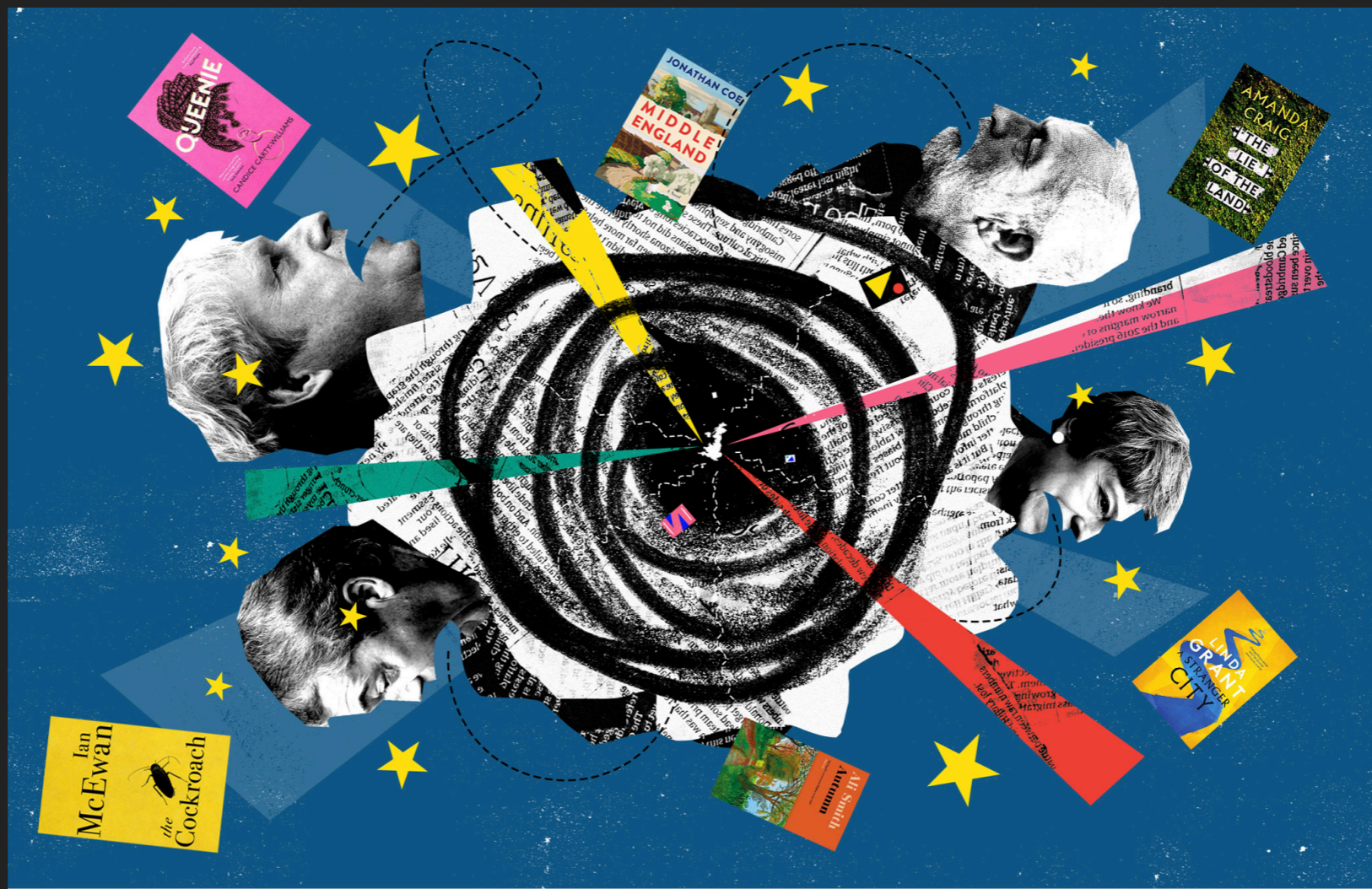
Kristian Shaw, « BrexLit », in *Brexit and Literature*, R. Eagleton (ed.). Routledge, 2018, p. 18.

- ▶ « postmillennial British novels do not only reflect existing conceptions of climate crisis, but also participate in the construction of new narratives, providing alternatives and new ways of making sense of crisis. Consequently, **climate crisis might be said to pose a challenge to the cultural imagination as well** - so much so that some scholars have even suggested that climate crisis itself is a crisis of the imagination. »

Astrid Bracke, *Climate Crisis and the 21st-century British Novel*, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 4 (emphasis mine)

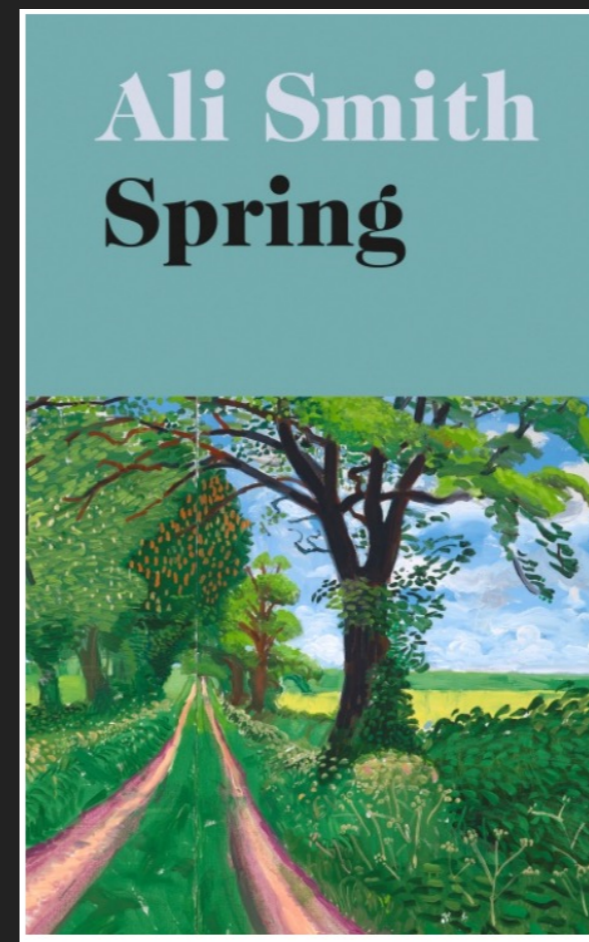
WRITING AS IT HAPPENS: THE POLITICS OF IMMEDIACY

- Zadie Smith, "Fences: a Brexit Diary"
- Ian McEwan: "Everything is changed utterly[...].The country you live in, the parliamentary democracy that ruled it, for good or bad, has been trumped by a plebiscite of dubious purpose and unacknowledged status". (*Guardian*, 06/07/2016)



Nate Kitch
for
Penguin,
2020

« HERE'S AN OLD STORY SO NEW THAT IT'S STILL IN THE MIDDLE OF HAPPENING, WRITING ITSELF RIGHT NOW WITH NO KNOWLEDGE OF WHERE OR HOW IT'LL END » (ALI SMITH, *AUTUMN*, P. 181)



2. THE PUBLISHING TRADE ADAPTS (OR DOES IT?)

- ▶ General fiction: 26,6% of the book market (Dec. 2022, Nielsen)
- ▶ UK book orders from the EU are down by around 43% since Covid-19 and Brexit, (freight forwarding firm Unsworth to the IPG International Publishing Forum, March 2021)
- ▶ The dominant genre: nature writing with record sales in 2019 (up 485% in volume/2018. Nielsen)
- ▶ As of 2023: delicate times ahead for indie literary publishers (Sandstone Press liquidation summer 2023)

A WATERSHED MOMENT: THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND PUBLISHING

► September 2020, taking stock at the Frankfurt Book Fair

"The trend for memoir paired with another genre is not going away. [...] In the vein of *The Salt Path* and *H is for Hawk*, there is still plenty of inspiring, other subject-led memoir. People have been going outside and enjoying nature and I think it's no coincidence there is a lot of nature writing right now. Agents are trying to bring new voices into those established genres, like nature writing and science to a certain extent."

(Kirty Topiwala, publisher at Hodder, interviewed in *The Bookseller*, September 2020)

TRENDS: 'COZY' TEXTS VS MASS EXTINCTION

- ▶ Post 2021: falling back from the previous records
- ▶ Predicted fastsellers (from the March 2023 London Book Fair)

The Time of the Fire

Emma Kavanagh

“Urgent and timely” speculative eco-thriller, set over one day against the backdrop of a devastating California wildfire, exploring the concept of family, nature versus nurture and power imbalances between the corporate and the natural world.

Agent Camilla Bolton

Rights UK and Commonwealth (Orion)

Fifteen Wild Decembers

Karen Powell

Evocative and affecting second novel re-imagining the life of Emily Brontë and exploring the power of imagination, nature and sisterhood.

Agent Sian Ellis-Martin

Rights UK (Europa)

Life at the Limit

Alex Riley

Science journalist Riley’s story of how nature has learned not only to adapt to, but thrive in, some of the most extreme places on the planet.

Agent Carrie Plitt

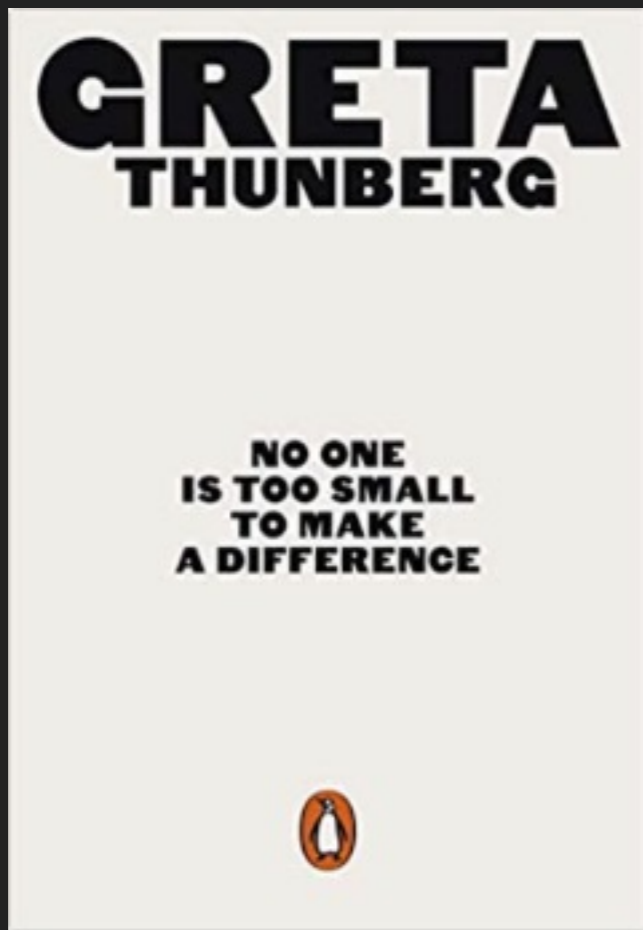
Rights UK (Atlantic)

THE NEXT WAVE: NEW ACQUISITIONS

- ▶ *Hucklebrook*, James Aldred « The Wainwright Prize winner's lyrical, remarkable tale of Hucklebrook, a piece of woodland in the New Forest, told over the course of a year. » (rights bought by Transworld in Oct. 2023)
- ▶ *Myths of Geography*, Paul Richardson « From continents to borders to nations, Richardson breaks down mythical and imagined geographies and explains how they influence our perception of the world. » (rights bought by Bridge Street in Oct. 2023)
- ▶ *The Accidental Garden*, Richard Mabey (rights bought by Profile in Oct. 2023)
- ▶ N.B.: a wave of country mystery novels (notably set in the Cotswolds, Kent and Cumbria)

Nature writing and literary prizes: the exception

- ▶ General fiction: 26,6% of the book market (Dec. 2022, Nielsen)
- ▶ Nature writing: record sales in 2019 (up 485% in volume/2018. Nielsen)
- ▶ The bestsellers:



THE NAN SHEPHERD PRIZE

From the Prize webpage

“Considering the world through nature, of which we are an integral part, feels like the most natural thing.”

THE
NAN
SHEPHERD
PRIZE



About Nan Shepherd

The Nan Shepherd Prize is named in honour of the great nature writer, novelist and poet, whose works include the masterpiece *The Living Mountain*, about her journeys into the Cairngorm mountains of Scotland.



Anna (Nan) Shepherd was born in 1893 and died in 1981. Closely attached to Aberdeen and her native Deeside, she graduated from her home university in 1915 and for the next forty-one years worked as a lecturer in English. An enthusiastic gardener and hill-walker, she made many visits to the Cairngorms with students and friends. She also travelled further afield – to Norway, France, Italy, Greece and South Africa –

but always returned to the house where she was raised and where she lived almost all of her adult life, in the village of West Cults, three miles from Aberdeen on North Deeside. To honour her legacy, in 2016, Nan Shepherd’s face was added to the Royal Bank of Scotland five-pound note.

-
- ▶ 2019: Prize launched by Caroline Clarke (Rights Manager) and Megan Reid (Assistant Editor), for Canongate.
 - ▶ The prize: a book deal with Canongate, editorial mentoring, agent representation and a £10,000 advance.
 - ▶ The conditions: self-identification as 'underrepresented in nature writing'
 - ▶ A partnership with the Nan Shepherd Estate and Aberdeen University

THE 2023 EDITION WINNER



Alycia Pirmohamed is a Canadian-born poet based in Scotland. She is the author of the pamphlets *Hinge* and *Faces that Fled the Wind*, as well as the collaborative pamphlet *Second Memory*, co-authored by Pratyusha. Her debut poetry collection, *Another Way to Split Water*, was published by Polygon (UK) and YesYes Books (US). She is the recipient of several awards, including a Pushcart Prize, the 2019 CBC Poetry Prize and the 2020 Edwin Morgan Poetry Award.


The judges

- Jason Allen-Paisant
- Caro Clarke
- Helena Gonda
- Peggy Hughes
- Claire Ratinon

3. THE COUNTRY AND (GETTING OUT OF) THE CITY

► Pastoral and post-pastoral

Screen capture from
2018 (id. next slide)



Melissa Harrison  @M_Z_Harrison · 7 mars

Back in 2015, when the world was a very different place, I started writing about a young girl in the febrile interwar years, caught between helplessness and a frightening kind of power. ALL AMONG THE BARLEY became a book about the present, not just the past. Out in paperback now.

[Traduire le Tweet](#)



The back cover of the book features several accolades:

- 'BOOK OF THE YEAR' NEW STATESMAN
- 'BOOK OF THE YEAR' IRISH TIMES
- 'BOOK OF THE YEAR' OBSERVER
- 'BOOK OF THE YEAR' BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE

Key quotes include:

- The fields were eternal, our life the only way of things, and I would do whatever was required of me to protect it.*
- 'As potent and irresistible as a magic spell'* GUARDIAN
- 'An astonishingly good evocation of rural England in the 1930s ... With this novel she's done what I've long suspected she would: she's written a masterpiece'* JON MCGREGOR
- 'Extraordinarily of the moment'* OBSERVER
- 'A deeply atmospheric work, steeped in the rhythms and traditions of the English countryside ... Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Charlotte Brontë's Shirley often came to my mind'* FINANCIAL TIMES
- 'A heartbreaker of a book'* PSYCHOLOGIES

The front cover features the title 'ALL AMONG THE BARLEY' by MELISSA HARRISON, with a quote: *'IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET' THE TIMES*. Other accolades on the front cover include: *'A MASTERPIECE' JON MCGREGOR*, *'ASTONISHING' GUARDIAN*, and *'STARTLING' FINANCIAL TIMES*.



Robert Macfarlane [@RobGMacfarlane](#) · Sep 27

Word of the day: "grävlingssommar" - literally 'badger-summer' (Swedish); a period of unseasonable warmth in autumn; a hot spell falling after the autumn equinox. Aka 'second summer' & 'summer of ferns' (An hanv c'hraden; Brittany). What other names are there in other cultures?



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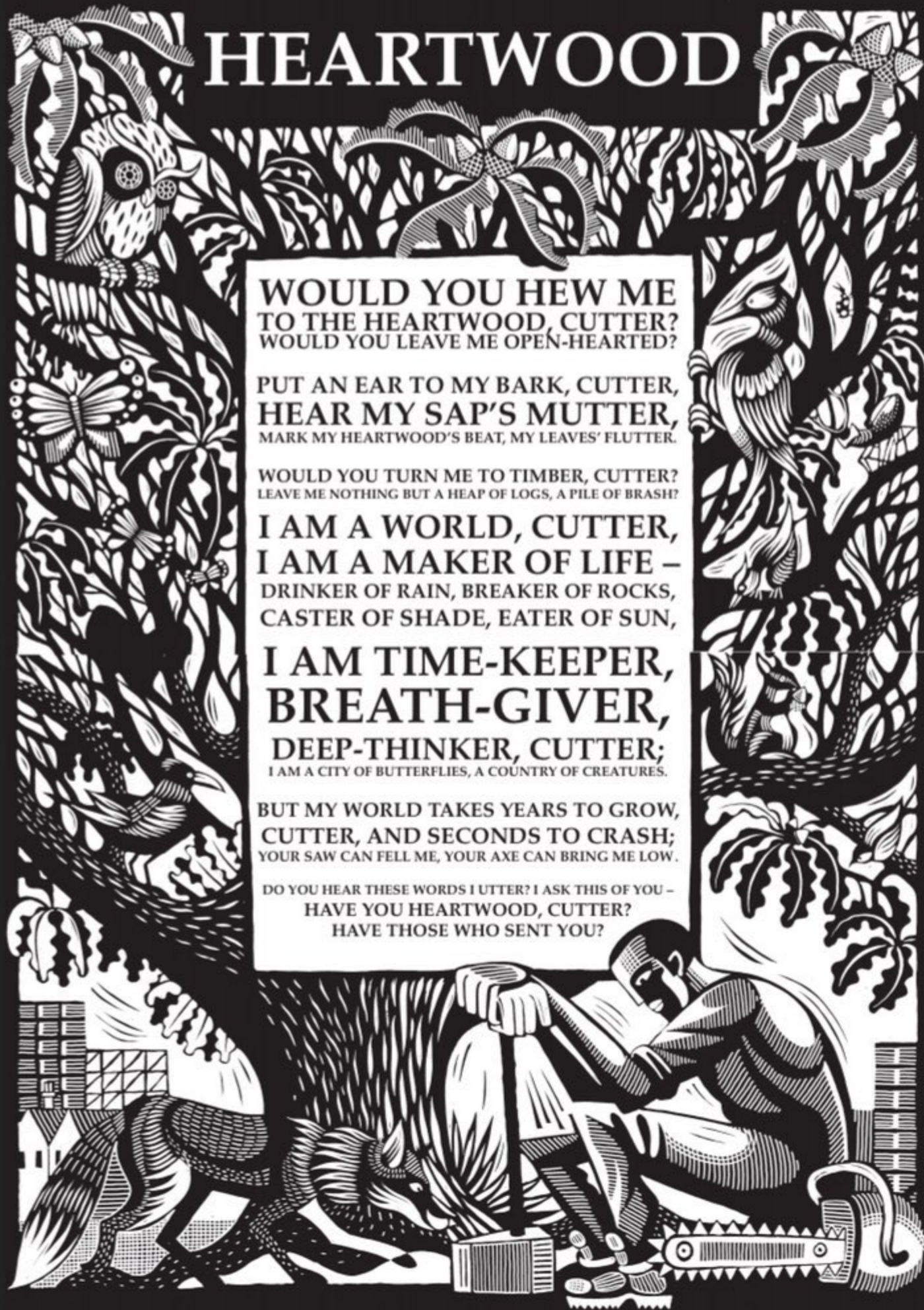


Robert Macfarlane [@RobGMacfarlane](#) · Sep 7

Cross-hatched hagstone, and etched magnesium plates of some of [@StanleyDonwood](#)'s images for Ness, a book we're working on together. Preparing to print soon on a Heidelberg Platen press.



10 34 219



HEARTWOOD

WOULD YOU HEW ME
TO THE HEARTWOOD, CUTTER?
WOULD YOU LEAVE ME OPEN-HEARTED?

PUT AN EAR TO MY BARK, CUTTER,
HEAR MY SAP'S MUTTER,
MARK MY HEARTWOOD'S BEAT, MY LEAVES' FLUTTER.

WOULD YOU TURN ME TO TIMBER, CUTTER?
LEAVE ME NOTHING BUT A HEAP OF LOGS, A PILE OF BRASH?

I AM A WORLD, CUTTER,
I AM A MAKER OF LIFE -
DRINKER OF RAIN, BREAKER OF ROCKS,
CASTER OF SHADE, EATER OF SUN,

I AM TIME-KEEPER,
BREATH-GIVER,
DEEP-THINKER, CUTTER;
I AM A CITY OF BUTTERFLIES, A COUNTRY OF CREATURES.

BUT MY WORLD TAKES YEARS TO GROW,
CUTTER, AND SECONDS TO CRASH;
YOUR SAW CAN FELL ME, YOUR AXE CAN BRING ME LOW.

DO YOU HEAR THESE WORDS I UTTER? I ASK THIS OF YOU -
HAVE YOU HEARTWOOD, CUTTER?
HAVE THOSE WHO SENT YOU?

CRISES AND CARE



“This neglect of human life – this abandonment of care, ethics and plain old common sense at the altar of profit – feels all too familiar. It is a tale carved into my bones, gouged from the flesh of those who made me.”

Farrell, Marchelle. *Uprooting: From the Caribbean to the Countryside – Finding Home in an English Country Garden* (p. 69). Canongate Books.

“I had endured the harm as a patient, but attack came on my medical career too. Way into the processes of applying for both permanent residency and specialty training as a psychiatrist, the Home Office suddenly changed the visa rights and requirements for foreign doctors in the UK.”

Id. p. 129.

4. THE NEW 'STATE OF THE NATION'

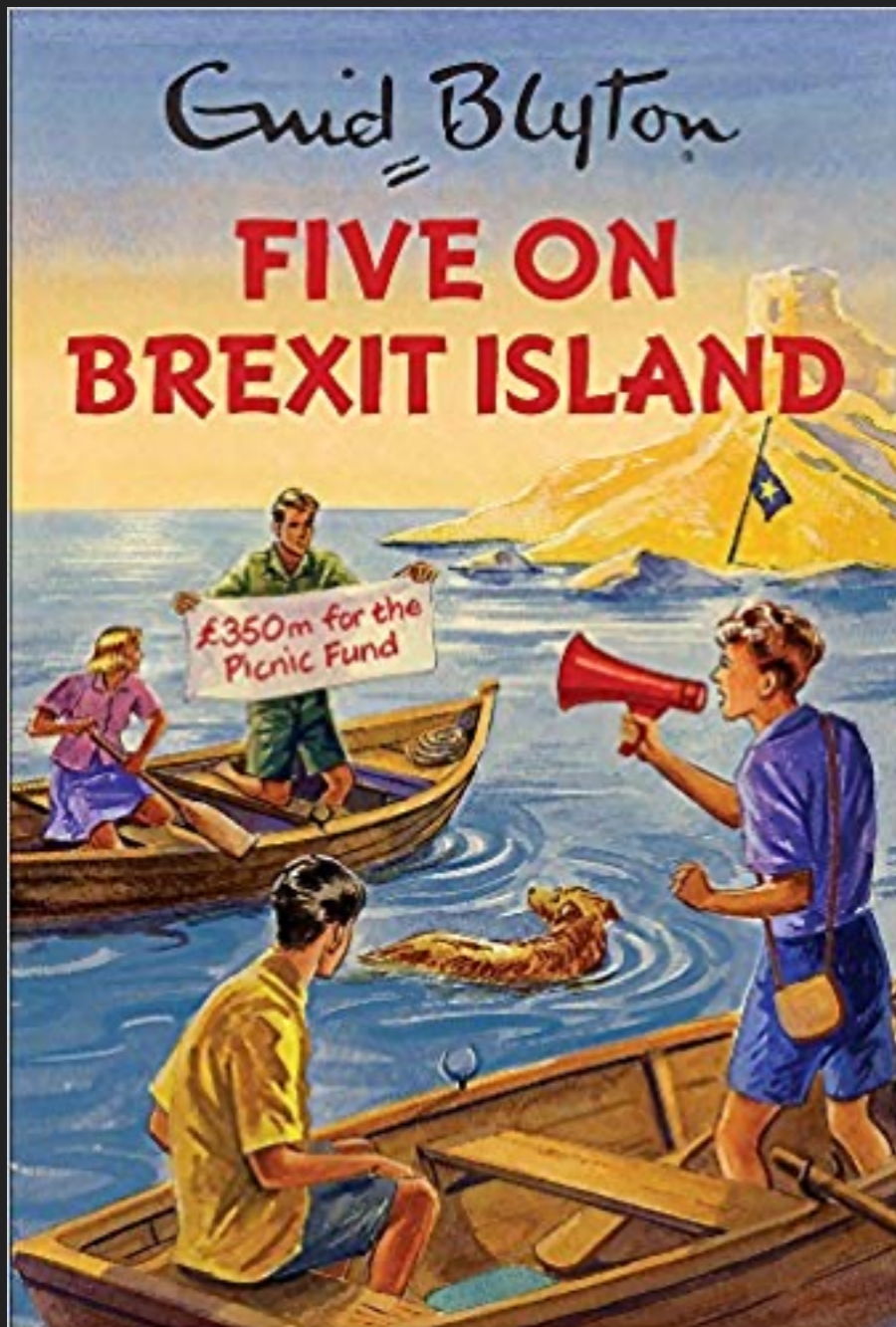
We closed the borders, folks, we nailed it.
No trees, no plants, no immigrants.
No foreign nurses, no Doctors; we smashed it.
We took control of our affaires. No fresh air.
No birds, no bees, no HIV, no Poles, no pollen.
No pandas, no polar bears, no ice, no dice.
No rainforests, no foraging, no France.



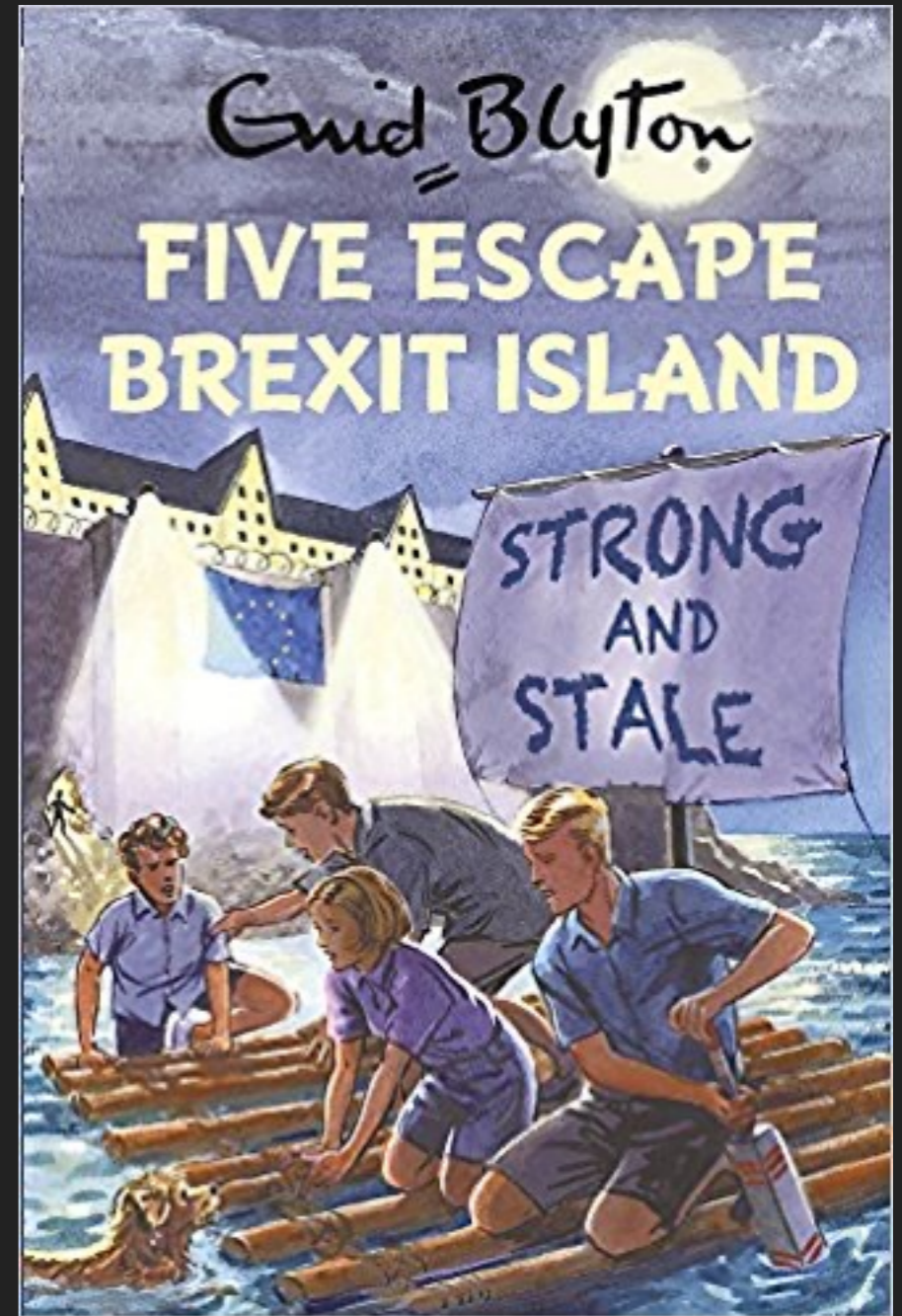
Jackie Kay, "Extinction", May 2015

SATIRES

BRUNO VINCENT, *FIVE ON BREXIT ISLAND* (2016), *FIVE ESCAPE BREXIT ISLAND* (QUERCUS, 2026 & 2017)



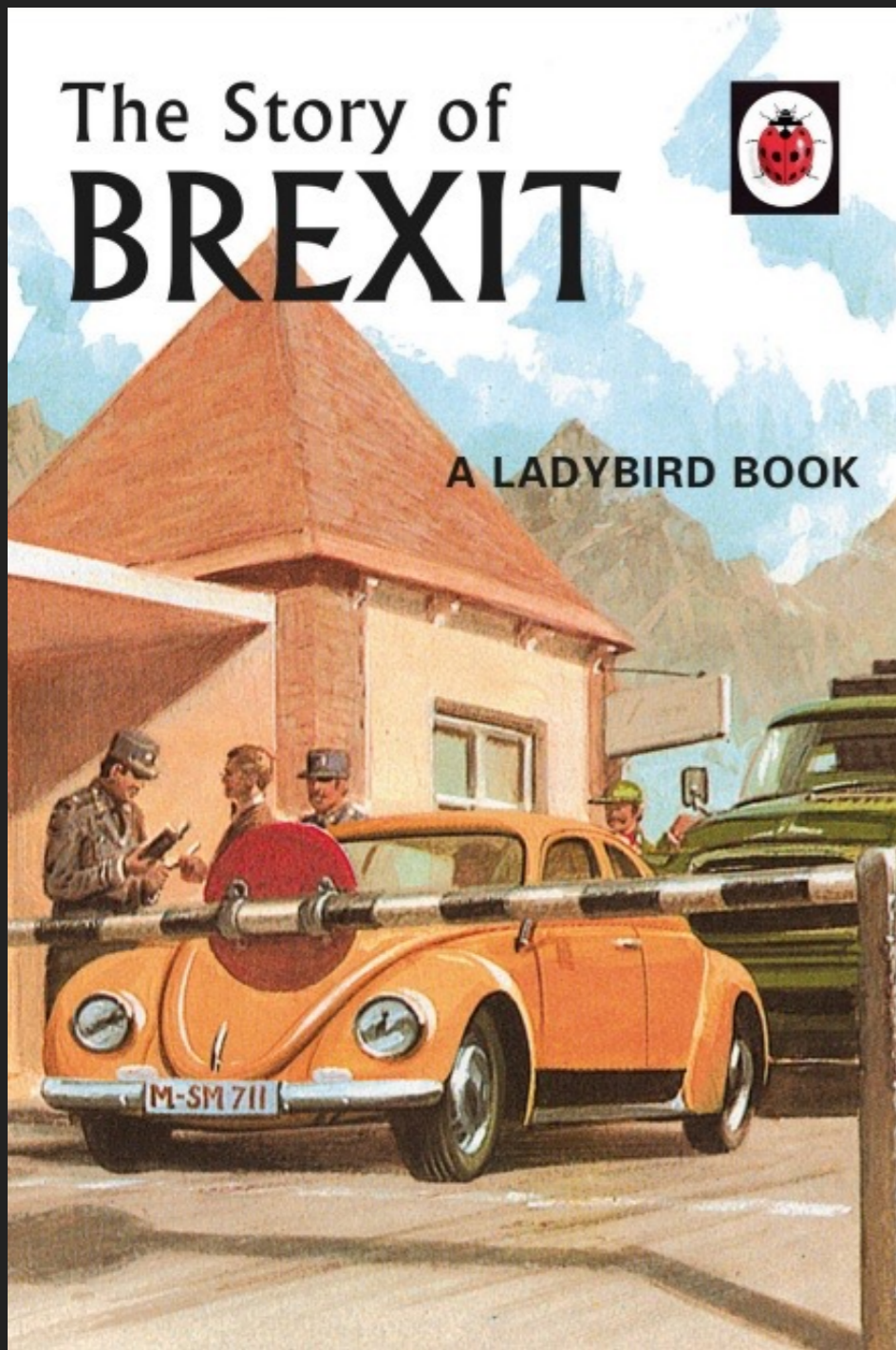
"George is firmly a 'remainer,' whilst Julian, who is in the 'Brexit' camp, is tolerated on the grounds that Anne cannot bear to go camping without him. (Timmy, largely apolitical but not keen on cats or rabbits, joins them too.)" (Quercus PR blurb)



The Story of **BREXIT**



A LADYBIRD BOOK



The day after the referendum, Helen woke to discover that she shared her country with millions of simply awful people she had never met who thought the exact opposite of her about most things.

Helen wonders if there could be a referendum on those people leaving instead.

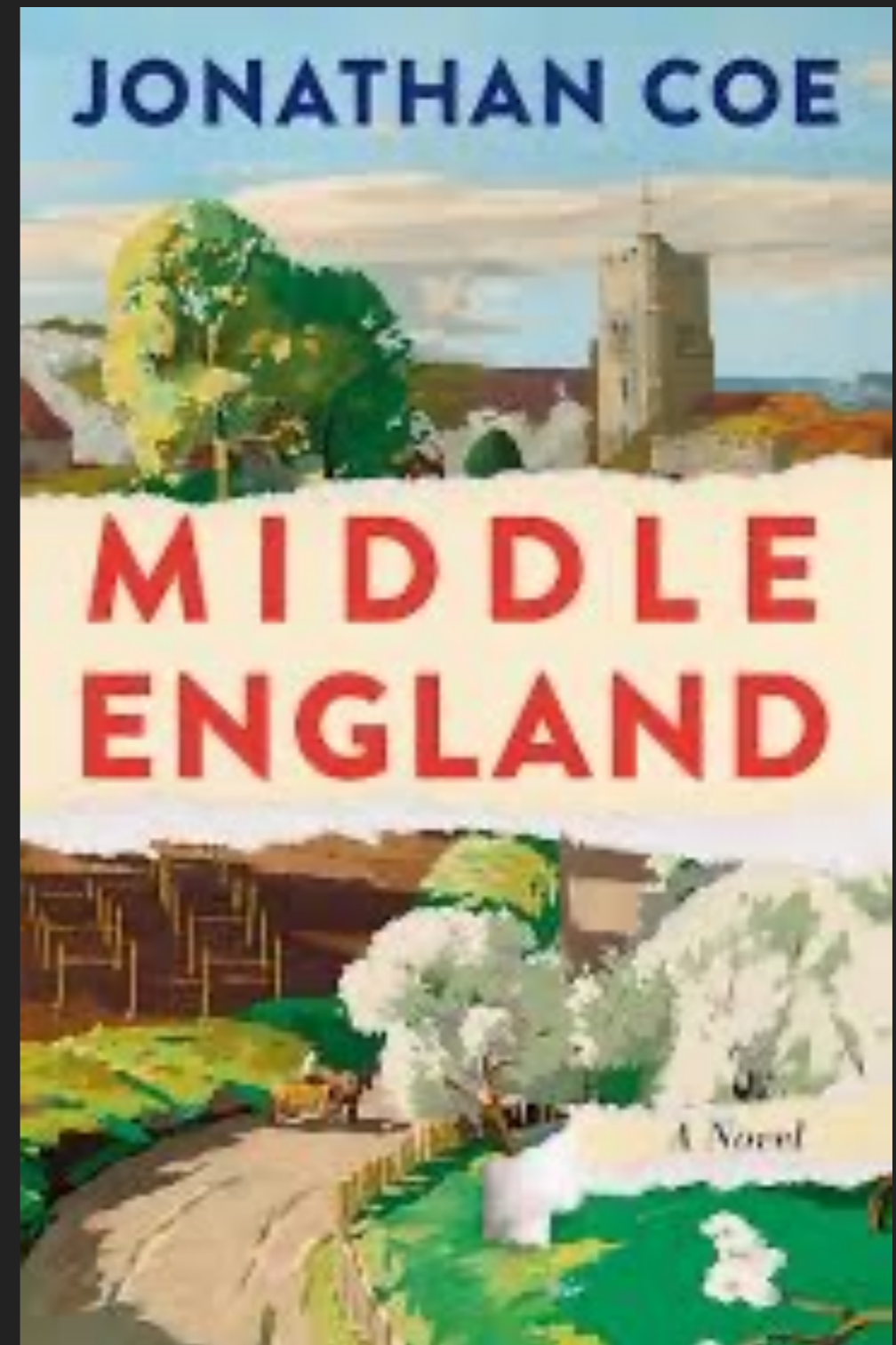


Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris.
Ladybird books for grown-ups

Adieu to old England, adieu
And adieu to some hundreds of
pounds
If the world had been ended when
I had been young
My sorrows I'd never have known

(Shirley Collins song, 1974)

Jonathan Coe, *Middle England*,
2018



MULTIPLE TARGETS

Frustrated, Doug tried a different tack. 'Look, supposing the people vote for Brexit and we -' 'Excuse me,' Nigel said. 'I have to interrupt you there. Supposing the people vote for what?' 'Brexit.' Nigel looked at him in astonishment. 'How on earth did you come up with that word?' **'Isn't that what people are calling it?' 'I thought it was called Brixit.'**

J. Coe. *Middle England* (p. 265).

'Jeremy Corbyn?' 'Yes. Where does he fit into this?' 'We don't talk about Jeremy.' 'Why not?' 'Why not? Because he's a Marxist. A Marxist, a Leninist, a Trotskyist and a Communist. A Maoist, a Bolshevik, an anarchist and a Leftist. A radical socialist, an anti-capitalist, an anti-royalist and a pro-terrorist.' (p. 267).

Twenty years earlier he had published the novel which had won the Booker Prize and made his reputation: *The Twilight of Otters*, a slender volume made up partly of memoir, partly of fiction, which had somehow caught the spirit of its time. (p. 26).

RETHINKING THE COLLECTIVE

Ian
McEwan

the
Cockroach

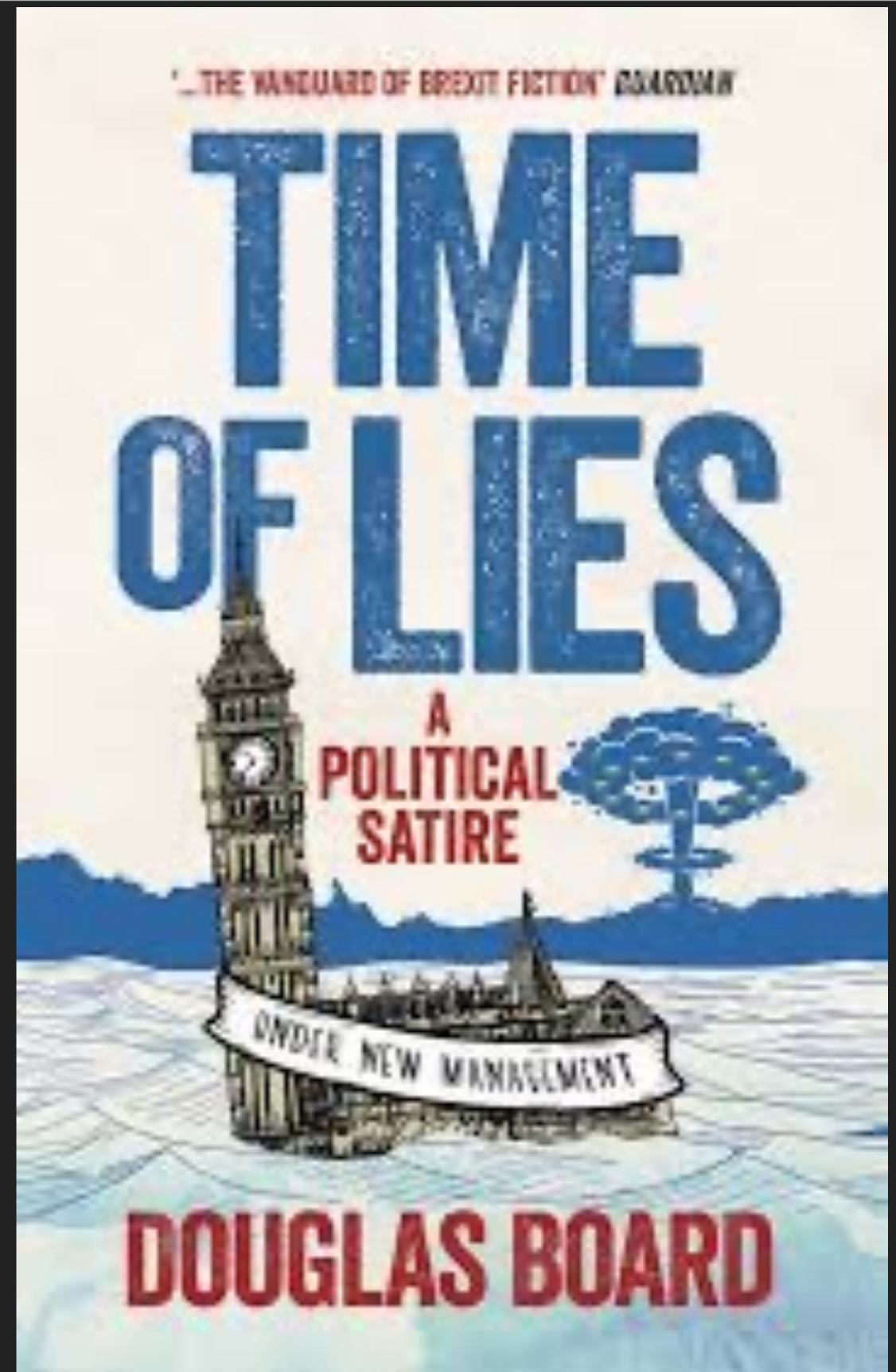


5. WRITING THE FUTURE: DYSTOPIAN IMAGININGS

- ▶ Mark Billingham, *Love Like Blood* (2017)



DOUGLAS
BOARD, *TIME OF
LIES*, A POLITICAL
SATIRE (2017)



OPENING UP THE CANON: THE 2023 BOOKER PRIZE SHORTLIST

