

The Last Slave Market, By Alastair Hazell Bereft, By Chris Womersley The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness, By Lila Azam Zanganeh America Oacifica, By Anna North The Magic of Reality, By Richard Dawkins

Paperback reviews of the week

Lesley McDowell

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The Last Slave Market, By Alastair Hazell

Constable £8.99

This grim but spellbinding account of an unassuming Scotsman, Sir John Kirk, unfairly maligned by his one-time boss and Victorian hero, the explorer David Livingstone, is another eye-opening chapter in Britain's long relationship with Africa. Instead of concentrating, as most histories of slavery do, on the west coast of Africa, Hazell looks to the east coast, which continued trading long after anti-slavery legislation was passed.

Three years after Kirk returned to Britain from his expedition accompanying Livingstone along the Zambesi, he became medical officer in Zanzibar, the main port for the slave trade, taking his new wife, Nelly, with him (she couldn't leave the ship, so appalled was she by the horrors facing her on their arrival), and somehow raising a family in the disease-ridden town (in 1869, cholera killed 7,000 people in one month). Slave trading in East Africa was different, Kirk observed, with slaves often sent to be servants in the well-off homes of Arabian or Turkish families. The practice mirrored the exchanges of individuals between African tribes in the area.

Which doesn't lessen the horror of it, but after Henry Morton Stanley "rescued" the stranded David Livingstone and blamed Kirk for much of the explorer's trouble, Kirk had difficulty being listened to about the problem. It says much for him that he persevered, listing numbers of those trafficked for his superiors in London, and pushing local powerhouses such as Sultan Barghash into giving up the trade. Hazell tells his dreadful story with just the right mix of pace and detail, to keep you hooked.

Bereft, By Chris Womersley

Quercus £7.99

Chris Womersley's novel begins like a classic crime yarn, with the rape and murder of a young girl in a New South Wales town, apparently by her older brother. He flees the scene and vanishes and is later believed to have lost his life in the First World War.

But this unusual and rewarding tale quickly develops into something else, when the wrongly accused brother, Quinn Walker, reveals himself to be very much alive, and returns to his hometown to clear his name.

Quinn hides in the hills outside the town and is "adopted" by a young orphan girl who is dodging the local sheriff, Quinn's uncle. It is this unlikely relationship – between this traumatised soldier and this needy and yet resilient girl – which is both moving and revealing and which dominates.

The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness, By Lila Azam Zanganeh

Penguin £9.99

This is one of those books that at first looks thoroughly self-indulgent to the point of meaninglessness (who cares what a debut writer has to say about her literary worship of Nabokov?) but whose intellectual playfulness and delicate emotionalism has something lovely to say about words and stories and how they can transform the world ("the Enchanter is a fellow 'who sends planets spinning'"). Zanganeh, an exile like Nabokov himself, but from her parents' homeland of Iran, delights in imagining interviews with the author, and she selects comments from him that reflect a writer's self-consciousness when using another language, and sympathises with his dreams of Russia, a country he can never go back to. It's a mixture of both economy and voluptuousness, a rather lovely tribute.

America Pacifica, By Anna North

Virago £7.99

Once I'd fought my way past the horror of multiple similes in the first few pages, some of them utterly distracting and pointless ("hands so plump they quivered like dreaming dogs". Really? Labradors or poodles?), to the character of Darcy – North's 18-year-old heroine who is searching for her missing mother in a North American landscape ravaged by a new Ice Age – this novel picked up its pace and became appropriately strange and refreshingly unpredictable. North is excellent at creating a sense of dystopian danger while keeping Darcy a recognisably human and real teenager, with classic adolescent concerns – essentially a girl longing for maternal comfort – and resists making her an Ellen Ridley-like Amazon or a crushed victim, shuffling towards her doom.

The Magic of Reality, By Richard Dawkins

Black Swan £8.99

This book might have been intended for younger readers, but some adults could benefit from Dawkins's straightforward explanations of various phenomena (the Sun, rainbows, earthquakes) and simple accounts of natural selection and DNA, too. His premise is that the real magic, the magic of science (as opposed to the magic of myth or religion), is the most fascinating kind, and he works hard to prove it, anticipating questions and easing worries, with enough nods to the great masters, Darwin and Newton, to give readers a sense of history, too. Few could bring together so many different aspects of science and culture and

distil them into something quite so readable and appealing.