

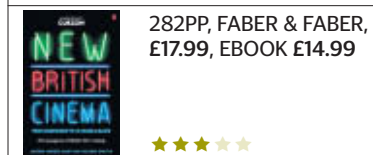
BOOKS

Our very own golden age

We are living through a boom in the British film industry, says *Tim Robey*, particularly for female directors

NEW BRITISH CINEMA

by Jason Wood and Ian Haydn Smith



282PP, FABER & FABER, £17.99, EBOOK £14.99

★★★★★

A collaboration between Faber and the film company Curzon, *New British Cinema* makes the point, almost by its existence, that we live in a revitalised moment for home-grown film-making. Every 12 months throw out their share of British success stories, but if you were to date this brave new dawn to a single year, it might have to be 2009, when an unusual number of important British debuts graced our cinemas.

Ben Wheatley made his mark with *Down Terrace*, the wickedly lugubrious tale of a Brighton crime family, and Peter Strickland

won immediate critical praise with his *Katalin Varga*, shot in Romania.

Though the following films go unmentioned in these pages, the same year gave us Armando Iannucci's *In the Loop*, Duncan Jones's *Moon*, Sam Taylor-Wood's *Nowhere Boy* and Eran Creevey's *Shifty*. Andrea Arnold turned in her second feature, *Fish Tank*, following 2006's *Red Road* and her Oscar-winning short film, *Wasp*. In fairness, 2009 was no freak: the year before, Steve McQueen crossed over from gallery work to features with his Bobby Sands portrait, *Hunger*, and the year after saw the emergence of Richard Ayoade (*Submarine*), Gareth Edwards (*Monsters*) and Clio Barnard (*The Arbor*).

These and other film-makers have provided the British film industry with a sudden, bubbling talent pool the likes of which we haven't seen for at least a generation. And it's not some hive-mind collective or film-studies invasion force. They've all come to film-making from different backgrounds and with clearly divergent career goals. The likes of Edwards (*Godzilla*), Jones (*Source Code*), Taylor-Wood (*Fifty Shades of Grey*) and Rupert Wyatt (*The Escapist*, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*) have taken high-profile Hollywood assignments off the back of these calling cards. Whether or not this disqualified them from inclusion, you won't find that group interviewed here, nor Arnold, nor Andrew Haigh (*Weekend, 45 Years*).

A preface by the two authors explains that some of the film-



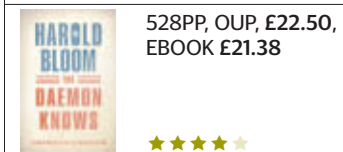
FRANÇOIS DUHAMEL

Who's who in the American sublime

Harold Bloom is a vocal champion of literary greatness in the face of cultural dumbing down. *Duncan White* welcomes his latest outing

THE DAEMON KNOWS: LITERARY GREATNESS AND THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

by Harold Bloom



528PP, OUP, £22.50, EBOOK £21.38

★★★★★

According to Harold Bloom, nobody can read good books any more because we were raised by computers and then indoctrinated by the "academic rabble" to deride great writers rather than cherish them. What kind of culture values Stephen King ("immensely inadequate") and forces its children to read JK Rowling ("dreadful")? Clearly we're all going to Hogwarts in a handcart.

Bloom has been warning of the impending end for quite a while now. In *The Western Canon* (1994), he made his most strident case for the Great Books, even going so far as to list which writers had made the cut. The tone, however, was not defiant but elegiac: literature was dying out and his canon was a list of species facing extinction.

The problem is that Bloom's own popularity appears to undermine his argument. He has continued to rail against the dumbing down of the American reader in a series of fat, handsomely produced

books that, in his words, reach an "enormous general readership" in an "incredible number of translations". If readers are buying books about literature, then you would think one or two are still reading it.

So what is Bloom's appeal? Why do so many people like to be rather imperiously told what books they should read? There is the reassurance of expertise: Bloom can recommend a poet like a maître d' steering you away from the plonk.

There is also a snobbish complicity: it is reassuring to be among the Bloomian Elect while the grubby masses read Harry Potter. Like Uncle Monty (*Withnail & I*), he cosily assures us that we are one of the last islands of beauty in the world.

Back in the Fifties and Sixties, Bloom was a young scholar at Yale taking the good fight to T S Eliot and the New Critics on behalf of the Romantic poets they so derided. Then, in 1973, he published *The Anxiety of Influence*, a seminal book that, drawing on Freud, explored the ways poets engage with their precursors. Bloom's theory was a way of defining literary merit: only the best could avoid becoming derivative.

The irony was that his subsequent books were derivative of *The Anxiety of Influence*, venturing deeper into the jungle of jargon he had created (agon, askesis, clinamen, and so on). As Christopher Ricks put it in 1976: "Bloom had an idea; now

the idea has him." When Bloom emerged into the sunlight, he had reinvented himself as a writer for a general readership and, with *The Book of J* (1990), *The Western Canon* (1994), *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human* (1998) and *How to Read and Why* (2000), became America's most famous living literary critic.

With *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*, Bloom is back to the ranking and rating. He has picked 12 writers who, he argues, "created the American Sublime", and explains his choices with the bombast and brio of Brian Blessed picking his fantasy football team. The selected writers hold in common "receptivity to daemonic

What kind of culture forces its children to read JK Rowling?

influx", with the daemon being defined as the "god within" or "the poet-in-the-poet". In essence, it is a metaphor for inspiration, the source of which, in Bloom's account, remains unknowable.

So, who belongs to the Fellowship of the Bloom? Whitman, Melville, Emerson, Dickinson, Hawthorne, James, Twain, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Faulkner and Crane. Only Eliot is included reluctantly, the rest are Bloom's American favourites. These dozen are then paired off; sometimes the pairings are

productive (Hawthorne and James, especially), sometimes less so. Twain and Frost are bundled together because their popularity makes them "national" writers, but when it comes down to it Bloom really wants to talk about Frost and Wordsworth and not so much about Twain at all.

There are the same old virtues and the same old vices. Bloom is as enraptured as ever by the "aesthetic power" of the books he loves and quotes lavishly to support his appreciations. He also remains maddeningly repetitious (both of his earlier works and within this one) and prone to inadvertent silliness: he is always describing his writers as titans, giants, seers and sages (Melville even gets promoted to "titanic sage" at one point). When he starts calling Dickinson poems "gnomes" (rhetorical term, I know), it all gets a bit much.

The problem (if you find it such) is that Bloom is, in his words, an "experiential and personalising literary critic" who "no longer believes in any historicising" (a claim that is just crying out to be historicised). Poems, he argues, should have no context other than themselves and their genealogy in other poetry. That means it's just you, Bloom and his subjective judgments, and so everything rests on how digestible you find his idiosyncratic style.

It gets pretty rich. As a sample of a typical Bloomian sentence, here he is responding to the Whitman poem "As Adam Early in the Morning": "This compressed

epitome of Whitman's aesthetic eminence intimates Walt as Hermetic God-Man, Adam, and American Christ, and makes of us so many doubting Thomases." Bloom loves to slap these Big Concepts down without much explanation, and if this wasn't disorienting enough, his close readings, too, often digress into reminiscences of old chums or rants about the "ideologues" of the academy, before eventually circulating back.

In *The Daemon Knows*, he is at his best when he is most direct. In writing about the last chapters of *Moby Dick*, with Ahab in pursuit of his quarry, Bloom's grandiose register fits the subject. Perhaps nobody alive knows Hart Crane's poetry more intimately, and the section on Dickinson is also enlightening on her relationship with Shakespeare's work (despite one long digression about the *Bhagavad Gita*, Yeats and Eliot).

In interviews, Bloom has said that *The Daemon Knows* took him four years to write as hospitalisations interrupted his work and, like his 2011 book *The Anatomy of Influence*, it is reflective in tone. He has just turned 85 and concedes that this is "probably my penultimate book".

There is nothing radical or new in it. It will not win over the sceptics, nor will it disappoint the disciples: it is simply more Bloom. And however one feels about that, at least the death of literature has been deferred once more.

makers (I'm guessing Arnold and Haigh, at least) were approached but politely declined, "preferring to let their work speak for itself".

Beyond these lacunae, there are a few editorial oddities. The chapter on Wheatley, given his growing position as a cult hero after *Kill List*, *Sightseers* and *A Field in England*, is peculiarly brief – his Q&A gets barely more than two pages, right after the 18 deservedly allocated to Strickland. Jonathan Glazer, despite the astonishing achievement of *Under the Skin*, is another disappointingly skimpy entry.

Still, it's to the authors' credit

The authors have asked questions that film students will find instructive

that they've given just-discovered artists as much of a showing here as bigger names, and asked questions about funding strategies and aesthetic approaches that film students across the country are certain to find instructive.

Hong Khaou, for instance, turned to Film London's Microwave scheme to fund 2014's delicate Ben Whishaw drama *Lilting*, while Harry MacQueen raised a microbudget of £10,000 from his own pocket to finance the bittersweet two-hander *Hinterland* of the same year.

Next to the achievement of Steve McQueen with the world-beating *12 Years a Slave*, *Hinterland*

World-beating: Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*

may sound like small fry, but bringing these more hand-crafted, fully independent ventures into the fold will be a beacon of encouragement to many pursuing their own paths from scratch.

Meanwhile, there's a lot of considered insight to be gleaned from Lenny Abrahamson, the invaluable Irish director whose four films to date – *Adam and Paul*, *Garage*, *What Richard Did* and *Frank* – constitute as rich a body of work as any addressed here.

The single most heartening component, both of this book and the climate it's describing, is the prevalence of female voices. With all due respect to the likes of Sally Potter and Gurinder Chadha, British cinema has traditionally been an unrepentant boys' club, with occasional brilliant, rude intrusions from a Lynne Ramsay (*We Need to Talk About Kevin*) or an Arnold to keep everyone on their toes.

Now the doors have been flung wide open, and in charge Barnard, Carol Morley (*The Falling*), Amma Asante (*Belle*), Joanna Hogg (*Archipelago*), D R Hood (*Wreckers*) and Sally El Hosaini (*My Brother the Devil*) to shake things up, hopefully for good.

Any British film industry capable of producing a piece of work with the vast heart, integrity and social intelligence of Barnard's *The Selfish Giant* is worth fighting at all costs to keep vital and intact, against every chip endangered funding wants to take out of it.



To order this book from the Telegraph for £15.99 plus £1.99 p&p, call 0844 871 1515

'MAGNIFICENT PRODUCTION' Worcester News
'A SIDE-SPLITTING SELL-OUT' Best of Windsor
'HILARIOUS & POIGNANT' Essential Surrey

JAMES FOX JACK FOX

A BRAND NEW COMEDY
BASED ON THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

DEAR LUPIN

by ROGER MORTIMER and CHARLIE MORTIMER
scripted by MICHAEL SIMKINS directed by PHILIP FRANKS

APOLLO THEATRE | 30 JUL – 19 SEP 2015
DearLupinOnStage.com

KEN FOLLETT
THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

EDGE OF ETERNITY

FIVE FAMILIES.
THREE DECADES.
ONE EXTRAORDINARY ERA.

THE MUST-READ NOVEL OF THE SUMMER

Available at your local Waterstones or online at Waterstones.com

PAN



To order this book from the Telegraph for £18.50 plus £1.99 p&p, call 0844 871 1515