



the son, who inflicts them on his own daughter, Henrietta. The Forges are a great advert for Philip Larkin's dictum about exactly what your mum and dad do to you. Henry James called Tolstoy a writer of "loose, baggy monsters"; Morgan's novel is certainly loose and baggy at times, and the richness of her prose can make it hard to digest, but it really is a monstrously good book.

There is, as Henry James maybe didn't say, more than one way to skin a cat. If Morgan shows what can be done by piling it on, Elizabeth Strout shows the merits of cutting back. **My Name Is Lucy Barton** (Viking, £12.99) is written in clean, crisp sentences and comes in at under 200 pages but grapples just as convincingly with the legacy of childhood abuse. The titular character writes about a time when she is laid up in hospital in New York and her estranged mother comes to visit. Their tentative conversations bring back memories of Lucy's bleak, impoverished upbringing in rural Illinois, some of which make you wonder whether the most effective path to resolution might be defenestration. Strout, though, shows the complexity of the familial ties that bind. This physically slight book packs an unexpected emotional punch.

Another brilliant exploration of a mother-daughter relationship is Deborah Levy's strange and beguiling **Hot Milk** (Hamish Hamilton, £12.99), which reads like a lucid dream. Sofia escorts her ailing mother (whose fluctuating symptoms might well be fake) to a town in southern Spain where she is treated by Gomez, an eccentric doctor (who might well be a quack). Meanwhile, Sofia restarts the life that caring for her mother had stalled.

Both Ottessa Moshfegh, in her debut novel **Eileen** (Vintage, £8.99), and Nell Zink, in **Nicotine** (Fourth Estate, £14.99), begin with daughters caring for their fathers. Actually, "caring" is probably not the *mot juste* for the eponymous heroine of **Eileen** – nor, in fact, is "heroine". She is an unpleasant woman, full of hatred for her unhinged, alcoholic father, and addicted to laxatives and his porn collection. She stalks one of the guards at the boys' prison where she works, and there is a strong implication that she has committed a fairly appalling crime.

The father's death in **Nicotine** releases a series of family secrets, not least of which is his possession of a house in New Jersey. This interests Penny, his soon-to-be-homeless daughter, who goes there, discovers that it has been squatted by anarchists – and decides to move in. Zink's third novel is properly bonkers: Penny's

father was a shaman, her mother seems to be in love with her half-brother, and that brother is possibly a psychopath. Again, what more could you want?

Well, there is more if you want it. Ali Smith's **Autumn** (Hamish Hamilton, £16.99) is a delight, a typically weird and witty novel that is billed as the first part of a seasonal quartet. David Szalay got some of the critical recognition his formidable talent deserves for **All that Man Is** (Jonathan Cape, £14.99) and Han Kang followed **The Vegetarian**, which won the latest Man Booker International Prize, with **Human Acts** (Portobello, £18.99), a novel about the 1980 Gwangju uprising in South Korea.

Some of the grand old men of literature stepped out, too. Don DeLillo's lyrical **Zero K** (Picador, £16.99) is about a son trying to come to terms with his billionaire father's mission to be cryogenically frozen; JM

## BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS

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Coetzee's **The Schooldays of Jesus** (Harvill Secker, £17.99) is about a father trying to come to terms with his adopted son's interest in metaphysical dance.

Both are pretty impenetrable, yet seductive in their strangeness. Julian Barnes remains on fine form with the elegant **The Noise of Time** (Jonathan Cape, £14.99) a fictional memoir of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich battling for his integrity under Stalin.

Final mention goes to Eimear McBride's **The Lesser Bohemians** (Faber, £16.99), the story of Eily, an aspiring young Irish actress arriving in Nineties London. In many ways it defies our seasonal theme of family dysfunction, being not about the confines of the coop but the pleasure of flying it. But with its fragmented, impressionistic sentences, it enters into the Christmas spirit in another way: it is like reading a very good book while very drunk.

### FICTION

# My family and other animals

The year's finest novels proved that there is no better subject for fiction than dysfunctional relations, says **Duncan White**

Tolstoy had it right. "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," he wrote in *Anna Karenina*. Which is one way of saying that nobody is interested in a fat novel about a perfectly balanced family unit. In a year of half-truths, post-truths and downright lies, this at least remains incontestable: few

subjects are more suited to fiction than family dysfunction. Novelists in 2016 offered up appalling, needy or absent parents, manipulative or feckless children, a smattering of incest – and one vengeful foetus.

There is no better chronicler of the modern British family than Zadie Smith. In **Swing Time** (Hamish Hamilton, £18.99), her fifth novel, something terrible appears to have happened to our

unnamed narrator but before we discover what this is, we are whisked back to her childhood on a council estate in north-west London. Her mother – a feminist autodidact who wears a beret and drives "an ostentatiously French 2CV with a CND sticker placed next to the tax disc" – is overbearing; her father, devoted but ineffectual. So our narrator seeks the company of Tracey, a friend from dance class who eats Angel Delight while

watching *Neighbours* on a white leather settee.

The novel recalls Smith's brilliant debut – the narrator attends the same school as *White Teeth*'s Irie Jones – but shows a new range and ambition. She has never written better. Her dialogue is pitch-perfect, her comic timing masterful. But she also delivers a sophisticated commentary on race, gender, class, celebrity and power.

Smith was only three years old in 1978 when Ian McEwan published his first novel, *The Cement Garden*, earning him the nickname Ian Macabre. He has mellowed since that classic of family dysfunction – siblings descend into incest after burying their mother in the cellar – but **Nutshell** (Jonathan Cape, £16.99) his new novel, finds him back on icky form.

"So here I am, upside down in a woman," announces the narrator, a foetus. No ordinary foetus, mind – he has sharpened his intellect on overheard podcasts and Radio Four. Precocious, he eavesdrops and finds his mother Trudy conspiring with her dreadful lover Claude to murder the baby's father. McEwan has tremendous fun with his amniotic Hamlet, imagining

what life is like in the womb, from the pleasures of vicariously drinking wine to the profound unpleasantness of being an *in utero* participant in sexual congress.

Even less regard for taboo and taste is shown in **The Sellout** (Oneworld, £12.99) by Paul Beatty, who won the Man Booker prize for this outrageous satire on American racism. The narrator's father, it transpires, was an unbalanced social scientist who subjected

**There were needy parents, feckless children – and even a vengeful foetus**

his son to a series of alarming experiments to prepare him for the racist world. Our hero ends up in front of the Supreme Court for trying to reintroduce slavery to his Los Angeles neighbourhood and re-segregate the local school. This Swiftian satire hurtles off exhilaratingly from the first sentence and delivers laugh-out-loud jokes, but beneath the playful surface burns the pure flame of righteous rage.

**Flight of fancy: three frames from *The Red Balloon*, one of Italian photographer Paolo Ventura's *Short Stories*, published by Aperture (£45)**

Colson Whitehead's **The Underground Railroad** (Fleet, £14.99), winner of the American National Book Award for Fiction, also confronts racism head on. Caesar, a slave on a plantation in Georgia, tells Cora, another slave, that he has a contact in the underground railroad – the historical network that helped slaves escape – and persuades her to run away with him. What follows is a fantastical picaresque through the dark side of American history, as Whitehead makes the metaphor of the underground railroad literal. Cora flees on actual trains that run through secret tunnels from state to state, each racist in its own way, as she tries to stay ahead of a slave hunter.

The most ambitious novel of the year is undoubtedly CE Morgan's **The Sport of Kings** (Fourth Estate, £16.99), a sweeping Faulknerian epic set in Kentucky over three centuries. It begins with an emblematic moment: a young boy, Henry Forge, tries to escape punishment from his totalitarian paterfamilias. The sins of the father – a spectacularly dedicated racist and misogynist – are handed down to

## Books of the year

Over the next 20 pages, our critics count down their Top 50 for 2016

50

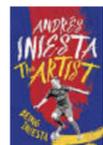
**The Making of Donald Trump**  
by David Cay Johnston



US journalist Johnston shows how the President-elect's journey to the White House was helped by his long-established TV persona, lapped up by a square-eyed nation.

49

**The Artist**  
by Andrés Iniesta



The Barcelona midfielder, hailed as one of football's greatest players, is also one of the most enigmatic. This autobiography goes a long way to demystifying him.

48

**Mistletoe and Murder**  
by Robin Stevens



Schoolgirl high-jinks abound in this whodunit for children, set in Thirties Cambridge. There's a whiff of Agatha Christie as chums Daisy and Holly must hunt down a killer.

47

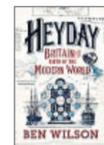
**Lonely Boy**  
by Steve Jones



The Sex Pistols guitarist details his life – an impoverished Sixties childhood, sexual abuse and dalliances with crime – in a way that is both moving and candid.

46

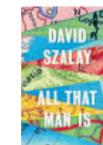
**Heyday**  
by Ben Wilson



This book puts forward the notion that the 1850s – the decade of the Great Exhibition, the first undersea cable and a fivefold increase in GDP – heralded the modern age.

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**All that Man Is**  
by David Szalay



Booker-shortlisted, this novel tells nine stories about nine different men, and puts modern life under the microscope in the process. The result is strange, but very lucid.

Continues on page 6



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