There shall be **Instagram and Donald Trump**

Twenty years on, the predictions in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest are coming true, says *Duncan White*

ack in the autumn of 1995, booksellers, editors, reviewers and writers began receiving enigmatic the publisher Little, Brown. With each postcard more letters of the title of a mysterious new book were disclosed, accompanied by wildly hubristic claims. This new novel was. apparently, a masterpiece. Rumours circulated about a book of improbable vastness and impossible brilliance.

The postcards did not lie. The publication of *Infinite Jest* on February 1 1996 turned David Foster Wallace, 34, into a literary rock star. The reviews were adulatory and even the caveats ("too long", "too playful", "too smart") were flecked with praise. One review dubbed it the Grunge American Novel and fans queued to hear Wallace read from it in Manhattan bookstores. By the end of the following month, *Infinite Jest* had already been through six printings. Wallace had written a book that changed

So, on its 20th birthday, how does *Infinite Jest* hold up? Does it have relevance to a generation to

Telegraph bookshop

Anna Pavord explores the different ways we've

responded to the land. In the 18th century, artists

started to paint England, and there was an influx of

While painters painted and writers wrote, a band

of agricultural improvers published remarkable

whom the early Nineties must

seem impossibly remote? Wallace wrote when mobile phones were a rarity and the internet - at least in the way we use it now – was in its infancy. Ít was a novel written amid the economic abundance of the Clinton years. with the Cold War won and nothing to do but watch MTV.

But Infinite Jest was more than just a novel of its time. Wallace set it in the near future, turning it into a riotous satire of where he thought America was headed

The bulk of the action takes place in what seems to be 2009: it is not entirely clear because calendar years have been sold off to the highest bidder so they can advertise their products "revenue-enhancing subsidised Γime"). So we have the Year of the Whopper, the Year of the Trial Size Dove Bar and the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.

Wallace gleefully trades in this kind of excess. The United States has forced Canada and Mexico to join it in forming a new superstate (acronym: Onan): the northern half of New England has peen turned into a giant dump: feral hamsters roam the land; commercialism is rampant: and even the Statue of Liberty is a

Landskipping: Painters, Ploughmen

and Places by Anna Pavord

kind of hoarding, holding up a burger instead of her torch.

The plot centres on a missing film so entertaining that it is impossible to tear yourself away from it. To watch it is a death sentence. One group trying to find the film are wheelchair-bound Quebecois separatists who want to use it as a terrorist weapon. Much of the novel takes place between a tennis academy and a halfway house. It is not a novel that lends

Wallace's near future is now our near past, and amid the deliberate absurdity there are moments of uncanny prescience on his part. Even some of the absurd stuff isn't that far off the money. For example, in the world of *Infinite Jest*, Rush Limbaugh, the preposterous radio host, becomes President. There's no way an aggressive, narcissistic populist, drunk on his own ombast, could get anywhere near the presidency, right?

hat Wallace anticipated most acutely was the way in which technology would change the way we consume entertainment. With the 'teleputer", he envisioned the way computers, televisions and phones would merge, even if he did not realise that this device would eventually fit into the palm of your hand as a smartphone.

He also predicted the way technology would allow consumers to start taking greater control of what they watched - the InterLace system, which allows users to download TV shows and movies, is a forerunner of streaming services such as Netflix. In *Infinite Jest* this precipitates the extinction of TV dvertising; in reality, no such luck.

The other major technological dvance he anticipated was video calling through apps such as Skype. In the novel, however, videophony" ends up being a transitory fad because it turns out to be too stressful: "Callers now found they had to compose the same sort of earnest, slightly overintense listener's expression they had to compose for in-person exchanges. Those callers who out

of unconscious habit succumbed

to fuguelike doodling or pants-

crease-adjustment now came off

looking rude, absent-minded, or

childishly self-absorbed." Furthermore, people are vain and video calling makes them self-conscious, so in the world of the novel people start speaking through digitally enhanced avatars of themselves or, more simply, through masks. We are not too far away from the world of Instagram

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peaks of the Scottish Highlands, this is an

passion and deep understanding

filters and those scary apps designed to beautify your selfies. This is the stuff that makes

Wallace so insistently interesting it is not just certain technologies he predicted but also how these would usher in new anxieties. He was rightly scentical about digital utopianism. In that lies his boldest prediction: that, in a time when much discourse is distilled into 140 characters, some still reach for the company of a 1.000-page book

LANDSKIPPING

ANNA PAVORD



A novel about John Lennon is transformed by the author's musical voice. By Carole Mansur

BEATLEBONE

written and read by Kevin Barry

CHILDREN'S FICTION

mischief and

Flambards has written

country air

The author of the

her best book yet,

argues Emily Bearn

Love rats.



6HRS 45MINS. WHOLESTORY CD £18.37, CANONGATE/ DOWNLOAD £10.93

evin Barry's potently atmospheric novel about John Lennon is "the story of his strangest trip". The often very funny account of a journey made in 1978, when Lennon was 37, to his private islet off the west coast of Ireland, it also travels in an unsettling direction into the mind of a stalled songwriter. A devotee of primal scream therapy, Lennon seeks to reignite the creative engines by howling out his past. The courtship of his parents, both of whom deserted him, and even the routes of Merseyside buses, are conjured up against a melancholy landscape of blue-bleak hills.

His local bagman, his Sancho Panza, is Cornelius O'Grady, the hook in a work of symphonic ambition. O'Grady talks broad Irish, and his voice, "deep and trustworthy like a newscaster" reliably punctures Lennon's pretensions and paranoia. The son of the soil relishes twangy country music and loves black pudding: Lennon ruminates about his macrobiotic diet.

M Peyton's publisher

what you expect" - but Peyton fans

always expect a spirited heroine

and a breath of country air. Most of her early books are about girls

with ponies, and her successful

orphaned heiress sent to live with

a tyrannical uncle who fritters the

family fortune on horses and port.

Peyton is 86, and her imagination

Wild Lily is set in the Twenties

frowning fortress" of a house with

10 kitchen staff and a dining room

"gloriously rich" Sylvester family

and Lily, the 13-year-old daughter

of Lockwood's head gardener, is in

love with Antony, Mr Sylvester's

feckless 17-year-old son. While

widowed father, Antony spends

his holidays from Eton roaring

about the countryside in his two

seater plane, "Go carefully with

the Sylvesters," the other boys in

Lily cooks and chars for her

is still working its spell.

in Lockwood Hall, a "great

that seats 40. It is home to the

Flambards quartet features an

describes her latest book as

"an ode to life never being

Barry conveys Lennon's haughty, languid air. and his cadences, often marked by the heavy tread of expletives, without troubling to mimic his accent. His Lennon is a reimagining rather than a copy. Not that Barry can't do Scouse, as a talking seal, in the most surreal scene, proves. He has, it turns out, lived in

Liverpool. In a kind of bonus track an interlude of calm after the rants, he veers into a documentary about his own life. He tells how, as a teenager, he was obsessed by Under Milk Wood. Dylan Thomas's play for voices, read on the radio by Richard Burton. Its echoes can be heard in the small-town manners of O'Grady and his neighbours. and in Barry's utterly mesmerising narration, which emphasises the musicality of his prose. He speaks slowly, pausing often for his startlingly fresh images - sheep are bedraggled teddy boys, for example - to resonate. Barry is breathier than Burton, though; a whisperer, luring listeners who, as he puts it, "read with their ears".

the village are warned, and as the

in a pyre of fraud and murder, one

wishes our smitten heroine would

Peyton wrote her first novel

decided to become a writer, I just

was one," she once said - and her

confidence has been borne out

in 70-odd novels, distinguished

by their spare, sharp-eyed prose.

And she is getting sharper. At

the heart of her latest book lies

something faintly Muriel Sparkish

plenty of mischief, but few likeable

characters. One longs for one of

but by the end of the book even

a place at Balliol, has turned to

Peyton offers a moral

Antony's friends to show his steel,

the hard-working Simon, who gets

'gambling" and "driving fast cars"

framework, but none of the neat

are seldom redeemed. "I'm a rat,"

WHSmith

says Antony – and KM Peyton is

particularly good on those

resolutions that some younger

readers might expect: virtue is

when she was nine. "I never

heed the same advice.

family's reputation disintegrates

Paperbacks

IN THE FAMILY WAY by Jane Robinson Less than two generations ago, illegitimacy was the ultimate stigma. Before the Sixties, unmarried mothers were expected to relinquish their babies: many underwent illegal abortions. In compiling this compassionate history. Robinson interviewed 100 320PP. people still damaged by being PENGUIN. or bearing an illegitimate child between the First World War £9.99 and the Swinging Sixties.



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This ambitious debut fictionalises the life of Lev Termen, the "Russian Edison". who invented that strangest musical instrument, the theremin. Sent to New York, he was then denounced as a traitor on his return to the Soviet Union. There are some extraordinary stories and New York's art deco sheen is deftly evoked, but the characters never quite come to life.



418PP. JOHN MURRAY, £9.99



Jeremy Hutchinson was the greatest criminal barrister of the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties. Sketches of the trials of Lady Chatterley's Lover and Christine Keeler, among many others, make this not just a celebration of a brilliant legal career but also a history of

changing mores in Britain.



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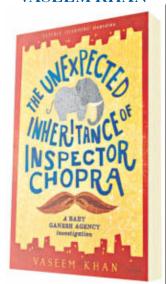


Pick of the week

WILD LILY

339PP, DAVID FICKLING. £10.99, EBOOK £7.91

THE UNEXPECTED INHERITANCE OF INSPECTOR CHOPRA - VASEEM KHAN



This week's choice is The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra, the first in an exciting new series of detective stories set in Mumbai. Vaseem Khan spoke to The Telegraph:

Can you outline the plot of The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra.

It's a murder mystery set in Mumbai, India, and follows honest policeman Ashwin Chopra, who is forced into early retirement. On his last day in the office, he is confronted by the dead body of a local boy. Chopra realise that his seniors don't want the boy's death to be investigated, mystery on his own. He is aided in his endeavour by a one-year-old baby elephant amed Ganesha, sent to him by his mysterious and longlost uncle.

and so he sets off to solve the

of Inspector Chopra and his elephant.

onest man, in an environment where bribery and corruption are prevalent He possesses an innate sense of justice and cares deeply his country. Globalisation is changing the India he knows and, like many Indians, he is ambivalent about these for 'old India', her traditions

Tell us about the characters

Chopra is an unscrupulously

about the social ills that plagu changes – he retains nostalgia

and history, but is not blind to her myriad problems such as poverty and caste prejudice. Elephants make great crime ighters. They are supremely intelligent creatures, one of just a few classified as being self-aware"; they possess excellent memories and they display complex emotions much of the charm in my series lies in the relationship that between Chopra, his wife Poppy and the infant elephant.

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NEXT WEEK: The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro

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THE UNEXPECTED INHERITANCE OF **INSPECTOR CHOPRA - VASEEM KHAN**

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that land was managed and farmed, showing

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