BOOKS

What a piece of work is a man

David Szalay's novel about masculinity trains a high-powered microscope on modern life, says *Duncan White*

ALL THAT MAN IS
by David Szalay

448PP, JONATHAN CAPE, £14.99, EBOOK £9.99

★★★★★

In his new book David Szalay tells nine stories about nine different men of six different nationalities in settings that sweep across 13 different countries, and he has the temerity to call it a novel. Well, not so much temerity as audacity – because Szalay actually pulls it off. As the stories accumulate, the larger structure emerges and you realise that this is a novel, albeit an odd one, and that Szalay might have found in *All that Man Is* the perfect vehicle for his particular talent.

That talent is noticing. Like John Updike, he not only perceives the banal, everyday world in an acute and photographic way but he can also translate it into high-definition prose. Szalay is in pursuit of the feel of a specific moment, whether that feel is lyrical or mundane. It is one of the many ironies of his work that it brings a sensory richness to the bleak and the drab.

All that Man Is, with its nine distinct stories, is a showcase for Szalay's virtuosic range. The story matters, but what matters more is the way it's told. Plot, grand ideas and even sustained character development come second to the evocation of the most transitory moments of lived experience. A character does not just smoke a cigarette but "sucks hungrily on a duty free Marlboro light". Another does not simply fill up his car with diesel but with "V-Power Nitro+". Two obese English tourists drink from "sweating plastic tankards of Magners". A young man on the pull daubs himself in preparation with "Ermenegildo Zegna Uomo" cologne from a sample sachet he has peeled off a magazine. This heightened specificity gives you insight: it matters to Szalay that a character would drink a *melon*-flavoured Bacardi Breezer.

This stylistic unity, though, would not be enough to justify calling a collection of stories a novel. But there is more substantive connective tissue. In each story the central character is slightly older than the central character from the previous story: we begin with a 17-year-old inter-railing around Europe in the summer before going up to Oxford and end with a 73-year-old retired civil servant, depressed and lonely, in his second home in the Italian town of Argenta.

The civil servant turns out to be the teenager's grandfather, but these are the only two characters directly connected to each other. In between we meet a French slacker on the pull in Cyprus; a Hungarian working as "muscle" for an acquaintance who pimps his girlfriend in Park Lane hotels; a Belgian scholar of medieval history driving across Europe to meet his Polish girlfriend; a Danish hack flying to Malaga to confront a minister about his affair; an English estate agent trying to make fast money from Alpine chalets; a Scottish alcoholic falling apart in Croatia; and a suicidal Russian oligarch on his yacht in the Mediterranean.

What you end up with is a book about ageing in which time, paradoxically, is static. The last story occurs just a couple of months after the end of the first story but we have, in a way, lived a lifetime. For all their differences in age, nationality and wealth, these men share a thwarted, disabling desire that comes, in large part, from anxieties about their own standing. Modern masculinity, scrabbling after sex and status, does not come out of *All that Man Is* looking particularly hale and hearty.

The novel's self-conscious cosmopolitanism reflects the life of its author. Szalay (the second "a" is pronounced more like an "o") was born in Montreal in 1974 to a Hungarian father and a Canadian mother. While he was still a baby, the family moved to Beirut, where civil war broke out, so they sought shelter in London. After reading English at Oxford, Szalay wrote a novel, which failed to get published; he then tried his hand at a number of jobs, including media sales. He moved to Brussels, where he earned a living by obsessive online gambling on horse racing but gave that up when he lost all his profits – £25,000 – within the space of a few weeks.

> **It matters to Szalay if a man chooses V-Power Nitro over regular diesel**

In 2008, he finally got his publishing break with *London and the South East*, an extraordinary first novel that reads like an episode of *The Office* scripted by Martin Amis and shot by Michael Haneke. Unsparingly, it depicts the seediness of Paul Rainey, a telesales manager whose fragile vanity is sustained by a liquid diet of Ayingerbrau lager. Set amid London's strip-lit offices, supermarket warehouses, tatty pubs and snooker halls, it is a novel of desperation and delusion that also manages to be extremely funny. Within it are some of the most vivid depictions in the history of English letters of what it feels like to commute both drunk and hung-over. It earned critical admiration and a Betty Trask award.

In the following year, he published his second novel, *The Innocent*, a work of historical fiction about a KGB officer who pursues his quarry to a remote psychiatric clinic. The problem is that the man he wants to interrogate has suffered a brain injury during the war that has left him with a rare form of aphasia, the inability to use language. It is a very dutiful book, founded on extensive research and inspired by *The Man With the Shattered World*, a 1972 medical case study written by the Russian neuropsychologist AR Luria, but Szalay has expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with it and you can understand why.

While some critics welcomed *The Innocent* as a radical change of direction, it was a book Szalay had been working on long before *London and the South East* and he was actually moving away from that approach to writing. The source material for *The Innocent* was research, other people's writing; although accomplished, it was second hand. Szalay, however, is at his best when refracting his own lived experience, a writer of his contemporary moment.

This can, of course, be limiting. The weaker passages in *All that Man Is* are the ones drawn from material beyond Szalay's direct knowledge. I am thinking in particular of the story about the suicidal Russian oligarch, which draws on the High Court case brought by Boris Berezovsky against Roman Abramovich in 2012. It is not that Szalay ever lacks imaginative sympathy; it is just that his writing feels most crisp and immediate when it deals with a tangible, familiar world. He knows what it is to hunch into a Ryanair seat, but he has never breakfasted on his own mega-yacht.

Another irony about Szalay is that he seems to find it easier to conjure the immediacy of a time and a place only once he is removed from it. *London and the South East* and *Spring*, his brilliant third novel that appeared in 2011, are both steeped in the British capital but were written in Belgium and Hungary respectively. He is now based in the Hungarian university town of Pécs, and it is from there that he has explored the different corners of Europe depicted in *All that Man Is*. Perhaps removing himself from the places he writes about helps him to erase his own presence from the stories; like Flaubert, he is a scrupulously self-effacing narrator.

Like Flaubert, too, he has little mercy for his characters' pretension and misogyny, their callousness and inflated sense of self-worth. In *All that Man Is*, the winning character is undoubtedly Murray Dundee, the Scottish alcoholic we first met in *London and the South East*, who is evoked in unsparingly repulsive detail. Yet even Murray, at his nadir, is granted a moment of "unfamiliar euphoria" as he watches sunlight break through clouds and turn patches of the sea into "sudden islands of blinding white".

Every character is in crisis, in some crucial way out of sync, yet Szalay grants each a lyrical moment of sensory immersion in the world. It is the resonance of these moments of fleeting transcendence that form the submerged structure of this strange and lucid novel.

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Strange and lucid: David Szalay

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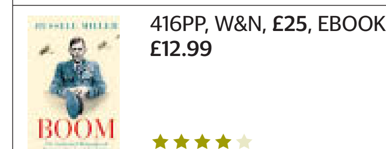
Through adversity to the stars

Sinclair McKay enjoys a colourful biography of 'Boom' Trenchard, father of the Royal Air Force

BOOM
by Russell Miller



416PP, W&N, £25, EBOOK £12.99

★★★★☆

Once, only the gods could send lightning bolts out of the sky to kill a man; soon, computerised drones will be able to hunt down and kill individual targets. Better that than indiscriminately dropping bombs on an entire street, you might argue. But it would be fascinating to hear what Viscount Trenchard – regarded as the "father" of the Royal Air Force – might have thought of drones, and the removal of human agency from bombing.

Not that Trenchard was squeamish; he was a most enthusiastic bomber. From the First World War onwards (the Royal Flying Corps, which he commanded from 1915, regenerated into the RAF in 1918, with Trenchard restyled Chief of the Air Staff), he was roaringly loud in his advocacy of this new kind of conflict: using the fast-evolving technology of flight to swoop over enemy territory and terrorise military and civilians with aerial bombardment. That way, the argument went, wars could be won more quickly, sparing many more lives in the long run.

One of the most enjoyable paradoxes of Russell Miller's engaging biography is that, while instinct tells you that Hugh Montague Trenchard – grunting and bellicose, nicknamed "Boom" on account of his habitual bellowing – must have been an utter horror to deal with, he none the less exerts fascination and occasionally sympathy, too.

Trenchard was born in 1873 and swiftly became the sort of colonial soldier that really shouldn't be brought to the attention of "Rhodes Must Fall" campaigners. From India to South Africa to Nigeria, this truculent, stubborn young adventurer was variously shot and afflicted with tropical illnesses, all the while penetrating deep into unconquered African territory (local resistance was deftly smothered) and rising through the ranks. These early adventures – involving everything from rampaging Boers to poison-tipped darts and sabotaged cooking pots containing swarms of furious bees – are pure Flashman. This life almost killed him many times; shipped back to England, and nearing middle age, Trenchard found his heart was suddenly captured by the new art of flying. He saw in it the future.

Trenchard's real talent was getting things done; he was a whirlwind administrator, a hurricane blowing through bureaucracy. He was the architect of the RAF (even though, paradoxically, he was a little too old and too tall to be a good pilot himself). But there were two vulnerable aspects to his character: the deep shame he felt at his father's bankruptcy and poverty, and his own curious inarticulacy.

His thoughts (as all who worked with him testified) ran too fast, outstripping his words; everyone struggled to interpret what he was saying. None the less, he managed to make people understand; his influence – and the profound loyalty he inspired in younger men – seemed almost telepathic. The same inarticulacy applied to his writing. Across the years, as Trenchard rose in seniority, younger assistants would act as interpreters, writing his speeches for him.

> **T E Lawrence wrote Trenchard adoring letters, begging to serve him as a pilot**

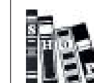
Miller's coverage of the role of flight in the First World War is compelling and illuminating, a long way from the romantic image of dashing young men in biplanes and silk scarves. The pilots knew that death – an agonising plummet from the heights in a burning cockpit – was almost certain. The Germans were much fleeter in their development of fighter aircraft. Any sense that the pilots had an easier war than those in the trenches is an illusion. And through it all, stationed in a chateau in France, Trenchard became ever more resolute in the conviction that his bombers had to attack first and strike hard.

After the war, Trenchard, advancing in years and seemingly the most confirmed of bachelors, proposed to Kitty Boyle, the younger widow of a long-time former friend. Their marriage and doting domestic life illuminated a startlingly tender side to the roaring war horse.

Later in the Twenties, there came a fascinating interlude when Trenchard – jealously shielding his new RAF from government cutbacks, and controversially bombing rebel forces in Iraq – became himself the target of a love-bombing. None other than T E Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia – developed an almighty man-crush on Trenchard and, by extension, on the entire RAF. He begged to be allowed to serve as a pilot and wrote long, adoring letters to Trenchard: "I have for you one of my unreasonable regards... when a letter from you turns up, the border line between my chest and stomach gets suddenly warm".

However, frustratingly, there is little here about Trenchard's turbulent relationship with Hugh Dowding, who, in the Thirties, would become head of Fighter Command and who masterminded victory in the 1940 Battle of Britain. (Dowding had been a protégé of Trenchard in the Twenties and their working relationship got off to a rocky start.) Dowding focused on defence, fighter aircraft and radar: that's how the Battle of Britain was won. But did Trenchard agree with Dowding's many enemies who said that there should have been more emphasis on attack? Miller does not say. This aside, *Boom* gives a magnetic and colourful portrait of the sort of life that could simply never be lived now.

Roaringly loud: Hugh Trenchard (second from right) alongside a De Havilland bomber during the First World War, below



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