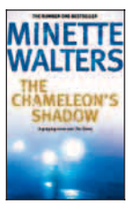
Paperbacks

FICTION James Kidd

The Falling Man
by Don DeLillo
Macmillan, HK$128
★★★½☆

The Falling Man begins in New York on September 11, minutes after the first tower falls. A dust-encrusted Keith Neudecker staggers out of the second tower and into the "stunned distance". Here beginneth the aftermath. Washing up at the apartment of his estranged wife, Leanne, and son, Justin, Keith finds that his relationships, like the world itself, have been re-aligned by the terror attack. As he attempts to piece body and soul together he meets Florence, another survivor, whose briefcase Keith picked up as he made the slow, torturous descent to safety. Descents of one sort or another haunt the rest of the novel. DeLillo's characters spiral downwards through a kind of suspended inertia, an effect evoked brilliantly by his time-slipping, fragmentary narrative. If some segments fail to convince (the wooden conversations between Leanne and her mother), others exert unusual power: the story of Hammad, one of the 19 bombers, and above all the scenes of the disaster. "The dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble, on the rooftops. Nearby, in the breezes that carried from the river. They were settled in ash and drizzled on windows all along the streets." Full of brilliant sentences, *The Falling Man* is a memorial and a demand for remembrance.



The Chameleon's Shadow
by Minette Walters
Pan Macmillan, HK$112
★★★½☆

Like Patricia Highsmith, Minette Walters writes intelligent psychological thrillers with the stress on psycho. *The Sculptress*, *The Ice House*, *The Shape of Snakes*: each is set in a recognisable place that makes the world that bit more unsettling. *The Chameleon's Shadow* cements Walters' reputation as one of Britain's best and most distinctive writers. Charles Acland is a lieutenant in the British Army fighting in Iraq. Or rather he was. He awakes in England to find his face and body have been ravaged by a roadside bomb. Badly disfigured, Acland seems to undergo a personality change overnight, morphing from war hero to vengeful, raging outsider with a particular grudge against women. Driven by this uncontrollable rage he lashes out physically and verbally: he tries to strangle his fiancée Jen, then beats up a Muslim man in a pub. When three gay men are found murdered nearby, Acland is the prime suspect. It is ironic, to say the least, that his best hope of salvation is a woman – and a weightlifting lesbian at that – who takes his side. Walters offers an acute, occasionally high-minded exploration of violence and prejudice, all wrapped up in a murder mystery that keeps you guessing until the last page.

Sword Song
by Bernard Cornwell
HarperCollins, HK$112
★★★☆☆

Sean Bean was the ideal choice to play Bernard Cornwell's most famous creation, the British soldier Richard Sharpe. Bean almost has "I am a no-nonsense testosterone machine" tattooed across his hairy knuckles. When he turned up in *The Lord of the Rings*, I half expected him to refuse the mission saying: "All this fuss over a hairy midget and a girly ring?" Part four of Cornwell's Saxon Series, *Sword Song* is possibly the author's most masculine story to date. It may also be his most hairy. Set in a divided Britain during the ninth century, this is a time when men are real men – and so are most of the women. Our hero is Uhtred Ragnarson. When a man's name sounds like a grunt you know he is a tough nut and Uhtred (part Viking, part Northumbrian Hell's Angel) is one hard pistachio. Here he comes over all Macbeth. Told by a dead seer he is to be king of Mercia, Uhtred is torn between ambition and his oath to King Alfred, who has the thankless task of uniting England. There are battles, plots, violence and lots of violent battles. And I mean lots. This is a world, let it not be forgotten, where this sentence exists: "A poet should have written the tale of that fight. That is what poets are for." *Sword Song* is enjoyable, macho stuff.

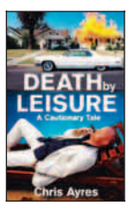
NON-FICTION Charmaine Chan

The End of Food
by Paul Roberts
Bloomsbury, HK$208
★★★★☆

Mad cow disease in Canada, salmonella-tainted tomatoes in the US, bird flu in Hong Kong. Adding to the indigestion such news may cause are reports about spiralling food prices and shortages. But while millions of people starve, millions more suffer the consequences of over-consumption in the form of obesity, heart disease and diabetes. Clearly Paul Roberts was not short of ingredients to fill his latest doom-ridden book about the state of the world. *The End of Food*, which follows *The End of Oil*, characterises the parlous situation as an economic problem made worse by supply and demand instability. In chronicling the way food is made, marketed, consumed and regarded, Roberts shows how the modern food system of high-volume, low-cost production has sabotaged itself in forcing poultry producers to raise ever-larger chickens faster (at the cost of taste) and farmers to increase grain yield with new hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, fostering diminishing returns. Readers may come away feeling they have consumed too much. But the book, which champions less meat eating (animal farming is energy inefficient, among other negatives), should be a part of any responsible consumer's diet.

Ronnie
by Ronnie Wood
Pan, HK$144
★★★☆☆

Ronnie Wood's story starts and ends predictably: a poor childhood (his parents were "water gypsies" in West London) and a sober reflection on his rock 'n' roll years, with all the expected excesses. Alcohol makes its appearance early in life and follows him tenaciously through the decades: on the day of the funeral of a childhood sweetheart, killed while driving to one of his early gigs, he winds up drunk at a pub and discovers the numbing effects of alcohol. Open, warm and in its own way charming – even when he is recounting abominable behaviour – Wood's autobiography confirms that art is as important to him as music and that he has always skirted the penumbra of superstar groups. With Keith Richards, he says, he has played the roles of "little brother" and "the new boy" for 40 years. The deaths of acquaintances and tales of drug use punctuate many a chapter, as do accounts of relationships brief and long term. One involves Pattie Boyd (then married to George Harrison and later Eric Clapton), who was part of a wife swap in a foursome including Wood's first wife, Krissie. Wood's love for second wife Jo (the only spouse on the Rolling Stones payroll) and many friendships help paint a picture of a decent lad moulded by an extraordinary life.



Death by Leisure
by Chris Ayres
John Murray, HK$208
★★★½☆

Death by Leisure has a predictable air about it but that matters little when, by the end of chapter one, you are already rooting for its author. Chris Ayres is an Englishman in Los Angeles who makes the most of the cultural disparities to pack his jokes. Unused to an "unchanging, untroubled sky", the self-deprecating journalist sets the scene by baking by the pool fully clothed beside a bikini-clad babe. He lacks muscle tone, skin pigment and perfect teeth – flaws magnified when he is surrounded by perfect specimens, male and female. But that doesn't stop him going on the pull, even if he can't afford the dates and must resort to exaggerating his stint in Iraq as an "embed" (the experience led to his first book, *War Reporting for Cowards*, which is to be made into a movie). Trying to impress his editors (he is now the West Coast correspondent for *The Times)* and the girl by the pool he resorts to eBay to secure US$500 tickets to a Michael Jackson Neverland bash. But he ends up without the girl or the story. His attempts to overindulge LA style provide rich fodder for a more-ish book you'll want to finish in one sitting.

John Man has turned his life-long passion into a biographical series unravelling the mysteries of the Mongolian leader, writes **Lijia Zhang**

Genghis rides again

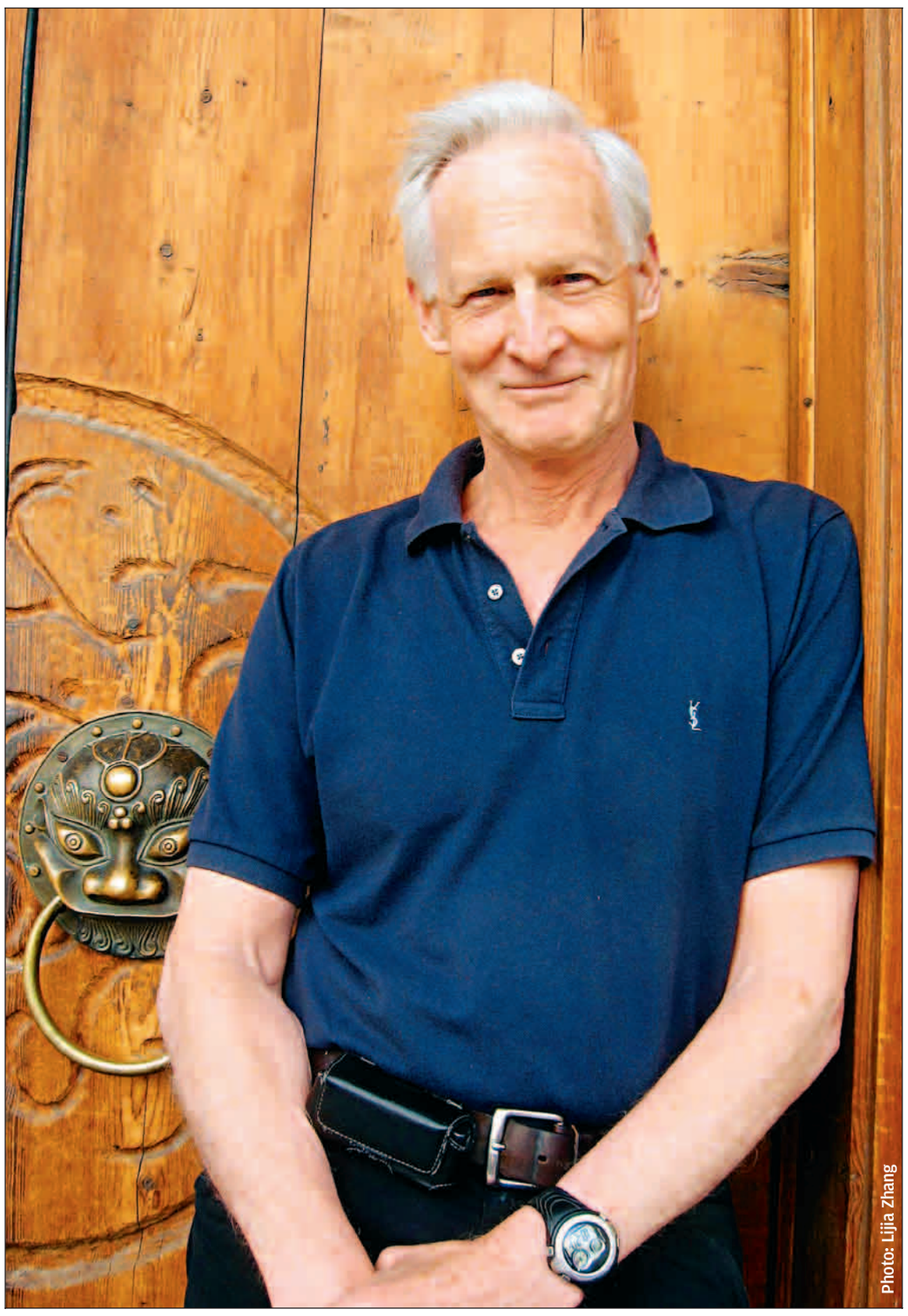


Photo: Lijia Zhang

Asia Specific

Mongolia has fired John Man's imagination since boyhood, when he read about American explorer Roy Chapman Andrews' discovery of dinosaur eggs in the 1920s. "I wanted to travel to somewhere really, really remote. And Mongolia seemed as remote as I could hope for," says Man, relaxing in a Mongolian bar in Beijing where throat singing hums in the background. The London-based Genghis Khan biographer, a guest at this year's Hong Kong Literary Festival, is in China to research his next book, *Xanadu: In the Footsteps of Marco Polo*.

In Man's youth, however, venturing to Mongolia wasn't easy because the country, a Soviet satellite, was closed to outsiders. There was a flicker of hope in the 60s, with excited campus talk of an expedition to the grasslands that arose as he took a postgraduate course in history and philosophy of science at Oxford University. To prepare for the trip he signed up to learn Mongolian at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, one of the few places in the world that offered the language. And although the expedition never took place, the fascination with the country stayed with him.

Man was born in Kent to affluent middle-class parents he described as "big people in a small place" who never travelled much. He went to a prestigious public school and then Oxford to study German and French. When he had to face the real world, he went for journalism before becoming an editor with Time-Life Books. The publication of *Alpha Beta* and *The Gutenberg Revolution* established him as a writer.

The mid-90s saw growing interest in Mongolia as it opened its doors in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. One editor suggested Man write a book about the Mongol empire, the largest land empire in history, stretching from China to Eastern Europe. Although tempted, he felt it would have to be original or enormous. He decided to write about the Gobi Desert. In 1998, the research for *Gobi: Tracking the Desert*, finally took him to Mongolia.

He wasn't disappointed. "I do think the west somehow has a romantic notion about Mongolia, not without cause: it is probably the only place in the world where pastoral-nomadic culture still exists," says Man. "The people are so tough and resourceful and the landscape is so picturesque, all wonderfully appealing."

As he travelled across the steppe he realised that to understand the country he had to understand one man in particular: Genghis Khan. "It was he who founded the nation; united different tribes and gave Mongolians their identity," adds Man, whose attempts to solve the mysteries surrounding his death – how and where he died, how and where he was buried – gave the focus to his biography *Genghis Khan: Life, Death and Resurrection*. An exhilarating blend of travel and history, it became a best-seller and has been translated into 18 languages, including Chinese.

Alus, the bar owner, hails from Inner Mongolia; he keenly seeks Man's autograph and presents him with Mongolian vodka. Alus says: "I'd much prefer to read a Genghis biography by a westerner who is free from political baggage. For us Mongolians, Genghis is like a god."

As he converses in Mongolian with Alus, Man, handsome and athletically built, could well be a heroic character from the Great Game, perhaps recalling those British officers who ventured into Central Asia as the British and Russians vied for control of the middle of the continent throughout much of the 19th century. "That is surely what I would have done if I'd been born 100 years earlier," he says with a smile.

> After Genghis, it was natural for me to write a biography of his grandson ... who remade China
>
> **John Man (above)**

But Man doesn't want to be placed among the dying breed of "well-educated British gentlemen travellers". As he puts it: "Britain does boast the finest travel literature in the world, probably thanks to colonial tradition. But many of the travel writers are ego-eccentrics. As for myself, I don't seek exotic locations or adventures. I love travelling for a purpose. When I describe my personal experience in a book, it is because I see it as an effective way to enlighten my subject." It is his personal touch that brings his subjects to life and makes history accessible. Man has been a full-time writer since giving up his editor's job more than two decades ago. "I had a happy childhood, which makes me perfectly happy to take risks. Things don't always work out. But I just have an underlying faith that they will if you follow your passion," he says. "Writing is a huge privilege – imagine being paid to research these subjects!"

Man is about to set off with a Chinese archaeologist to explore Xanadu, Kublai Khan's summer palace, in today's Inner Mongolia, where Marco Polo met the Mongol king. Xanadu was immortalised by two lines of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry: "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree …"

Like Man's other major works, his new book seems to have sprung from the same fascination. "After Genghis, it was natural for me to write a biography of his grandson, the man who remade China. As for the Great Wall, it was the consequence of conflict between the nomads and the settled people. In *The Great Wall* I tried to look at the Great Wall from the other side – from Mongolia."

And after Xanadu?

"Genghis again!" says Man, who reveals his next study of the man will employ modern leadership theory to analyse his rise and achievements. "There have always been mysteries about Genghis," he says. "The greatest mystery to me is his character: how this man born with nothing, who inherited nothing, could have achieved so greatly and become such a great leader."

Lijia Zhang is the author of *Socialism is Great!*

Zane Grey disciple hangs up his spurs

Connie Ogle

"I just wanted to write the story I want to write," Leif Enger says. "It was one that had a hold on me throughout my childhood, when I used to read Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour."

So Brave, Young, and Handsome appears seven years after Enger's magnificent debut *Peace Like a River* and like *Peace*, it involves a thrilling journey into the heart of western mythology. Enger, who lives in Minnesota, recreates the fading romance of the west in 1915, when struggling author Monte Becket meets Glendon Hale, a retired outlaw who dreams of finding the wife he abandoned when he went to Mexico decades earlier and teams up with Becket to track her.

Along the way they cross paths with Charles Siringo, a crafty former Pinkerton agent with Terminator-like persistence and Hood Roberts, a budding young outlaw who longs for the good old days and plans to sign on at the Hundred and One, an Oklahoma ranch that runs western shows.

However, as much as Enger enjoys westerns – particularly the works of Charles Portis and Larry McMurtry – he doesn't think his next book will be about cowboys or horses or lonesome journeys. But

Leif Enger's second novel is another voyage into western mythology and lonesome journeys. Photo: Robin Enger

you never know where research will lead him. "Research is a loose term for me. It means whatever I'm interested in that day."

With the western, he says, "It's the freedom, the sense that this was a place you could go to get a fresh start. In the early 1900s, if you were failing in your personal or professional life, you could get on a train and get a new name and a new history and nobody knew who you were. Sometimes the past would catch up with you but not always. Nobody was watching. It's so appealing, maybe even more so now, when we've got cameras on the freeways.

"What we think of as the Wild West was dead by 1915. The real Hundred and One ranch did last until the mid-30s … The Hundred and One really defined what the west had been. It gave us western mythology. Most of the early westerns were filmed there or in California by Hundred and One personnel. It was a terrific place: huge, involved with movie-making and oil drilling and not immune from controversy.

"One act [in a Wild West show] was called The Great Buffalo Shoot and they brought in old Geronimo, who was retired from his raiding days, and he shot a buffalo from the seat of what they called a locomobile. They billed it as Geronimo's Last Buffalo. Nobody knew it was really his first buffalo because the Apache didn't hunt buffalo," Enger says.

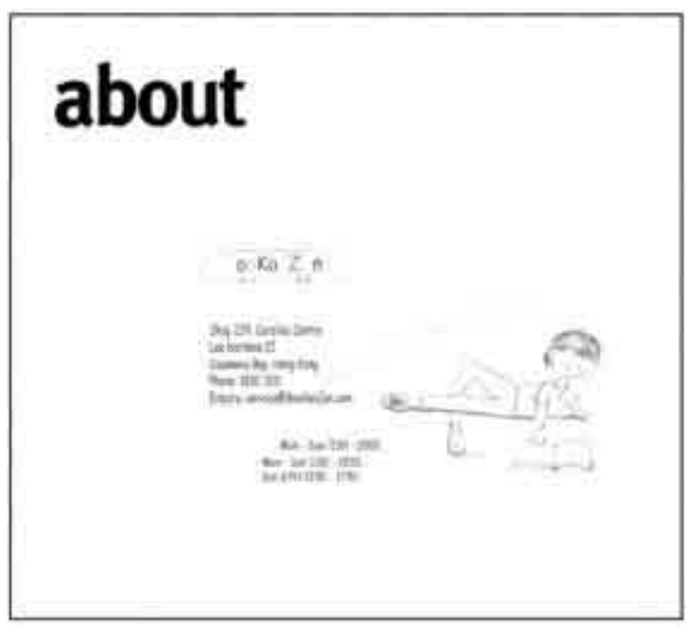
Why was the latest book so long in the gestation?

"I had some of these characters in my mind for a long time. Glendon Hale I wanted to write about for the past 20 years, the ageing outlaw looking for redemption in the modern age.

"I tried to write it as a straight-up western told by a western voice, but I'm not a western guy. I didn't grow up in Texas or Oklahoma or Colorado. I needed a Midwestern voice," he says.

"A lot of people say they like my books because they can give them to their kids or their parents. I sort of shoot for that.

"I rarely read a book that I wouldn't give to everybody I know. I don't want to write for a small sliver of clever people. Maybe my goal is to write for anyone who likes a good story. Or maybe I just want a wide audience."

McClatchy-Tribune

***So Brave, Young, and Handsome* (Quercus, HK$176)**