

best-sellers

NEW YORK TIMES

NON-FICTION

- THE AUDACITY OF HOPE** by Barack Obama
An Illinois junior senator proposes that Americans move beyond their political divisions.
- THE INNOCENT MAN** by John Grisham
Grisham's first non-fiction book examines the case of a man sentenced to death for a crime he didn't commit.
- CULTURE WARRIOR** by Bill O'Reilly
The host of *The O'Reilly Factor* describes a culture war between traditionalists and secular progressives.
- MARLEY & ME** by John Grogan
A newspaper columnist and his wife learn some life lessons from their neurotic dog.
- PALESTINE: PEACE NOT APARTHEID** by Jimmy Carter
The former president calls for revitalising the peace process.
- I FEEL BAD ABOUT MY NECK** by Nora Ephron
A witty look at ageing from the novelist and screenwriter of *When Harry Met Sally*.
- I LIKE YOU** by Amy Sedaris
An actress' wacky approach to entertaining.
- THE GOD DELUSION** by Richard Dawkins
An Oxford scientist asserts that belief in God is irrational and that religion has done great harm in the world.
- THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE THUNDERBOLT KID** by Bill Bryson
A memoir of growing up in mid-America at mid-century by the author of *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.
- THE WORLD IS FLAT** by Thomas L. Friedman
A columnist analyses 21st-century economics and foreign policy.

FICTION

- FOR ONE MORE DAY** by Mitch Albom
A troubled man gets a last chance to reconnect and restore his relationship with his dead mother.
- NEXT** by Michael Crichton
The author of *Jurassic Park* describes a not-too-distant future when genetic engineering runs amok.
- CROSS** by James Patterson
Alex Cross, retired from the FBI, has a chance to track a rapist who may have murdered his wife.
- DEAR JOHN** by Nicholas Sparks
An unlikely romance between a soldier and an idealistic young woman is tested in the aftermath of September 11.
- TREASURE OF KHAN** by Clive Cussler and Dirk Cussler
In his 19th adventure, Dirk Pitt confronts a murderous Mongolian tycoon who manipulates the oil market and knows the secret of Genghis Khan.
- HANNIBAL RISING** by Thomas Harris
The childhood and adolescence of Hannibal Lecter shed light on how he became "death's prodigy".
- BROTHER ODD** by Dean Koontz
With his ability to see the spirits of the dead, Odd Thomas, a character in two previous Koontz novels, heads off a catastrophe at a monastery.
- NATURE GIRL** by Carl Hiaasen
A single mother takes revenge on her lecherous ex-boss and an annoying telemarketer in the Florida Keys.
- WILD FIRE** by Nelson DeMille
Detective John Corey and his wife, an FBI agent, help to foil a nuclear plot against the US.
- LISEY'S STORY** by Stephen King
A widow's journey through grief after the death of her husband, a famous novelist with terrible memories.

US hardback best-sellers list, published December 17

THE SUNDAY TIMES

NON-FICTION

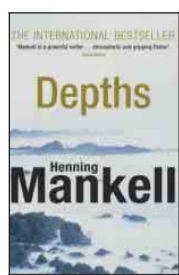
- THE DANGEROUS BOOK FOR BOYS** by Conn Iggulden and Hal Iggulden
A tongue-in-cheek manual for boys of all ages.
- THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER** by Peter Kay
The humorous autobiography of a popular British comedian.
- IQ: THE BOOK OF GENERAL IGNORANCE** by Stephen Fry
Compendium of popular misconceptions, misunderstandings and common mistakes culled from the hit BBC show.
- AND ANOTHER THING ... THE WORLD ACCORDING TO CLARKSON: VOLUME 2** by Jeremy Clarkson
The straight-talking commentator and broadcaster puts his own spin on things.
- DIARIES 1969-1979: THE PYTHON YEARS** by Michael Palin
The ex-Python on everything about the Monty Python journey, from dead parrots to John Cleese.
- PLANET EARTH: A FRESH LOOK AT A SPECTACULAR WORLD** by Alastair Fothergill
Portrait of the planet to accompany the BBC television series.
- THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO CHRIS MOYLES** by Chris Moyles
A radio DJ muses on life and his rise to the top of the business.
- HUMBLE PIE** by Gordon Ramsay
The controversial celebrity chef tells of trials and tribulations.
- MUSTN'T GRUMBLE** by Terry Wogan
An autobiography by one of Britain's best-known broadcasters.
- TOO MUCH, TOO YOUNG** by Kerry Katona
I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here winner tells her story.

FICTION

- TREASURE OF KHAN** by Clive Cussler and Dirk Cussler
In his 19th adventure, Dirk Pitt confronts a murderous Mongolian tycoon who manipulates the oil market and knows the secret of Genghis Khan.
- CLOSE** by Martina Cole
A tale of a gutsy mother and her two sons, set in gangland London.
- RECOIL** by Andy McNab
Secret operative Nick Stone wants a quiet life, but is forced back into action in Africa when his private life disintegrates.
- THE NAMING OF THE DEAD** by Ian Rankin
Detective Inspector John Rebus is on the trail of a serial killer as 68 leaders gather in Scotland.
- NEXT** by Michael Crichton
The author of *Jurassic Park* describes a not-too-distant future when genetic engineering runs amok.
- LISEY'S STORY** by Stephen King
A widow's journey through grief after the death of her husband, a famous novelist with terrible memories.
- WHITETHORN WOODS** by Maeve Binchy
The inhabitants of an Irish town have divided opinions about a new bypass.
- CHART THROB** by Ben Elton
Comic satire set in the world of modern television talent shows.
- THE SECRET OF CRICKLEY HALL** by James Herbert
Supernatural goings-on in a Devon seaside village.
- CROSS** by James Patterson
When a series of brutal rapes is committed across Washington, Alex Cross has his work cut out.

British hardback best-sellers list, published December 17

CRIME FICTION



Depths by Henning Mankell
Harvill Secker, HK\$272
★★★★☆
Sue Green

Swede Henning Mankell is long-established in his home country as a best-selling crime writer. But he's relatively new to English readers and his publishers have done him no favours by releasing his thoughtful and unsettling Inspector Wallender detective series out of sequence.

Now we have the benefit of a relatively new Mankell, released in English within two years of its publication in Sweden – a turnaround that says much about how well received he has been internationally.

While *Depths* could be broadly

defined as crime fiction – violence, murder and attempted murder are central themes – it's a far remove from conventional detective fiction. But many of the elements are integral to both – cruelty, obsession, madness, a protagonist with darkness at his core.

Lars Tobiasson-Svartman is a naval engineer, a hydrographic surveyor who uses a sounding lead to measure the ocean depths. In mid-October 1914, just two months into the first world war, he's assigned to a destroyer that will carry him to a rendezvous with a gunboat and a secret mission – to make depth soundings of the shipping channels linked to the approaches to Stockholm in the hope of finding alternative routes for the navy.

One evening from the deck of the gunboat he sees a flash of light from a skerry, Halskar, a barren, rocky island at the edge of the open sea. Next morning he rows to it and lands, but finds nothing. Yet he's drawn back and on his next dawn visit meets a woman,

Sara Fredrika, who lives there alone in a rough cottage. Tobiasson-Svartman cannot stop thinking about her.

He is, we are told, very much in love with his wife Kristina Tacker. He dreams of her, smelling her scent filling his cabin. Yet we already know this romantic notion is an illusion – *Depths* opens with a short chapter set 23 years later, in which Kristina escapes briefly from the asylum in which she has been locked for 22 of those years. From the moment Tobiasson-Svartman sees Sara he wants to be with her. His letters to Kristina become fantasy, "empty poetry" – something, or rather, someone, has come between them.

But he's described Kristina as "the invisible lid he used to cover the abyss". Fascinated by measurement, constantly making mental calculations, he lives an orderly life in the Stockholm flat where she nightly dusts her collection of china. He is, writes Wallender, "a person who constantly measured distances and depths, both in external

reality and in the oceans inside him that were as yet uncharted."

But as Tobiasson-Svartman's obsession with Sara develops, and he spends a night with her on the skerry and promises to return for her when his mission is complete, the lid on the abyss within begins to lift.

Tobiasson-Svartman is a damaged and at heart violent and ruthless man, whose childhood with unhappy parents has left him with an emptiness he hopes his marriage and his job, his search for the ultimate depth, will fill.

"In his heart of hearts he was looking for ... a place where the sounding lead never reached the bottom: a point where the sounding line ceased to be a technical instrument and was transformed into a poetic tool."

With *Depths* Mankell has created a richly atmospheric tale, one that owes as much to the weather and geography of Sweden – the fog, the cruel winters, isolated archipelagos, the barren

skerries – as to its flawed characters. A journey to an archipelago during which he rowed himself through the fog inspired it. "Later, when the weather had cleared up and everything seemed reminiscent of a curious dream, this story was born," he writes in his afterword.

He places the disintegrating Tobiasson-Svartman within this harsh environment, as war rages ever closer and men die on board ship or are pulled dead from the sea. At times his vivid descriptions and references to the hydrographer's internal search for meaning in measurement border on the heavy-handed. And Tobiasson-Svartman is so unpleasant, so cruel to both people and animals, that it's hard to muster sympathy for his plight.

Nonetheless, *Depths* is a powerful and disturbing story, which shows the importance of publishing in translation, making the works of talented writers such as Mankell available beyond their language of origin.



Today's Shanghai is a world away from the city where Eileen Chang was born in 1920

CHINA

Love in a Fallen City by Eileen Chang
New York Review of Books, HK\$117
★★★★☆
Zhang Lijia



Love in a Fallen City is a collection of six novellas by charismatic writer Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing). First published in the 1930s and 40s in China, her stories are about love, longing, troubled family lives and political and sexual ambiguity against the background of social constraints or upheavals.

In her own words, she only tried to describe "the little things that happen between men and women".

Little things they may be, but they're sharply observed, psychologically fraught, full of intrigue, and expressed with Chang's trademark poise.

Love in a Fallen City is Chang's most popular work. A handsome couple, Fan Liuyuan, a playboy who grew up in England, and Bai Liusu, a divorcee stuck in the household dominated by her father's extended family in Shanghai, meet and are drawn to each other. They begin a game of hide and seek, each with their own agenda:

he, to regain his Chinese identity; she, to remarry. It's war that pushes them together and perfects their love.

Most of Chang's novels don't have such happy endings. In *Golden Cangue*, Chang portrays a resentful wife whose own chances of happiness are repeatedly destroyed by her oppressive mother and disabled husband. Consumed by bitterness she becomes a monster, finding her only comfort in opium.

Chang was born in Shanghai in 1920 to an aristocratic family: her great-grandfather, Li Hongzhang, was a minister during the Qing dynasty. In the shadow of an unhappy marriage between her traditional father and sophisticated, England-educated mother, she found solace in writing. While still in her 20s she rose to fame with her short fictions, the heart of her oeuvre, although she produced witty essays and novels, too.

Her life story could well belong to one of her own characters. At 24, she married a talented scholar, Japanese sympathiser and, worse still – for her – a womaniser. But, in love, she tolerated his infidelities until he left her for a young nurse. After the outbreak of war, Chang fled to Hong Kong and, later, to the US, where she settled and continued writing, living a reclusive life until, in September 1995, she was found dead alone in her apartment. By then, a revival of interest in her early works had won her followers throughout the Chinese-speaking world.

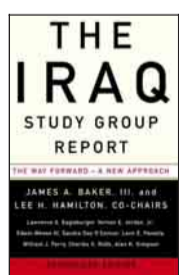
Having first read Chang's works in the mid-1980s as a factory worker in Nanjing seeking an escape through reading and writing, I was immediately fascinated by her characters. Well-drawn, complex and often desperate, they differ dramatically from the so-called "tall, big and perfect" characters of revolutionary literature or the one-dimensional protagonists in the "scare literature" of the time where heroes were all victims without any moral ambiguity.

A forerunner of Chinese modernist writing, Chang's prose is sharp and imaginative. In *Red Rose and White Rose*, the story of a man's relationship with his wife and mistress, she writes: "Marry a red rose and eventually she'll become a mosquito blood-blob smeared on the wall, at which point the white one turns into 'moonlight in front of my bed'. Marry a white rose, and in time she'll become a gummy rice-grain stuck to your clothes; the red one, by then, is a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart."

Available in English for the first time, this is an immensely enjoyable collection. Now in middle age, having fallen in love, married, and in the midst of divorce, I once again marvel at Chang's perceptions and insights into the human mind. Shanghai, today a symbol of China's modernity, is far removed from the town that provided the setting for many of Chang's stories. Her works still dazzle because the little things that happen between men and women don't change much, after all.

reading into ...

NON-FICTION



The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward – A New Approach by The Iraq Study Group, James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton
Vintage, HK\$85
★★★★☆
Patrick T. Reardon

The Iraq Study Group Report is one of the darkest and gloomiest public documents ever written. In part, that's because of the literary style. Rather than tiptoe around negative facts, the commission members make their points with the simplest of declarative sentences.

Of course, it's also because the report is an analysis of a bad situation that's getting worse.

By contrast, *The 9/11 Commission Report* two years ago was an effort to tell the story of how and why the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington happened. It was structured as a narrative with dramatic drive and emphasis, by turns poignant, chilling, fascinating and instructive. It read like a novel.

Like the 9/11 report, *The Iraq Study Group Report* was an instant best-seller, but how long the 142-page document stays there remains to be seen. It's not a page-turner, and those simple, dark declarative sentences, which come like hammer blows on every page, make it the antithesis of a fun read. Here are some examples:

Page ix: "There is no magic formula to solve the problems of Iraq."

Page xiii: "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating."

Page 1: "There is no guarantee for success in Iraq."

Page 3: "Violence is increasing in scope, complexity, and lethality."

Page 5: "Criminality also makes daily life unbearable for many Iraqis."

Page 8: "The Iraqi army is making fitful progress towards becoming a reliable and disciplined fighting force loyal to the national government."

Page 9: "Iraqi police cannot control crime, and they routinely engage in sectarian violence, including the unnecessary detention, torture, and targeted execution of Sunni Arab civilians."

Page 19: "Militias are currently seen as legitimate vehicles of political action."

Page 20: "The Iraqi government is not effectively providing its people with basic services: electricity, drinking water, sewage, health care, and education."

Page 23: "Problems with oil production are caused by lack of security, lack of investment, and lack of technical capacity ... Corruption is also debilitating. Experts estimate that 150,000 to 200,000 – perhaps as many as 500,000 – barrels of oil per day are being stolen."

Page 25: "Congress has little appetite for appropriating more funds for reconstruction."

Page 33: "If the situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate, the consequences could be severe for Iraq, the United States, the region, and the world."

Page 38: "US policy is not working, as the level of violence in Iraq is rising and the government is not advancing national reconciliation."

Chicago Tribune

POETRY



Dante's Inferno translated by Sean O'Brien
Picador, HK\$240
★★★★☆
Jamie McKendrick

Sean O'Brien is surely right to claim *Dante's Inferno* "is the most frequently translated poem in the western tradition". His version, arriving just months after Robin Kirkpatrick's *The Divine Comedy* (Penguin, HK\$125), is further confirmation. Both employ blank verse. Otherwise, the translations could not be more dissimilar. The only thing that reads identically in both versions is the beautiful line describing the foul Harpies "who drove the Trojans from the Strophades".

Although the Italian "hendecasyllable" line is often much longer than 11 syllables, as adjacent vowels don't count, the pentameter would seem the natural English choice for Dante, and has been employed again and again in translations. Dante's metre, though, secures very different effects: its unstressed final syllable, combined with its interlocking rhyme-scheme, the terza rima, gives it the capacity for greater forward propulsion and pace. That's a useful attribute in a poem so shaped by continuous walking, climbing, wading, sailing and flying.

Kirkpatrick's translation is the odder, the riskier of the two. His treatment is surprisingly free and improvisatory, though always prompted by a strong sense of the original. Lines such as "Our tread now fell/ on voided nothings only seeming

men" make something inventive and strange out of the iambic beat.

O'Brien has formidable skill with the pentameter, and gives it a stately, marmoreal quality, emphasised by the way Dante's terza rima are laid out as three-line stanzas, and each canto given a title. Some of the finest moments occur when this disciplined and chiselled line sparks against obdurate matter with grim energy: "The demon Charon, with his eyes like coals,/ Then summons each to take his place aboard/ And clubs the laggards with his dripping oar."

The language is deliberately plain, without being plodding and tuneless. O'Brien often deploys runs of monosyllabic words to impressive effect: "I saw a broad ditch bent into an arc/ And seeming to encompass all the plain./ Just as my guide had told me that it would."

This landscape from Canto XII perfectly prepares the reader for the arrival of the centaur archers, and their leader, Chiron, who takes "An arrow out and with the notch of it/ Brushed back his heavy beard upon his jaws". In both instances, the English does justice to the original.

One testing problem for a translator is the way Dante's poem keeps developing, and each canto extends its voice and voices. *The Wood of the Sticides*, for example, introduces the courtier Pier della Vigna, whose spidery, intricate wordplay is a translator's nightmare. The whole canto is knotted with these ingrown resonances.

What O'Brien has achieved is a compellingly readable version of the whole poem, with a steady incandescence to the language. Any reader with no Italian could do worse than turn to both new translations.

The Independent

NON-FICTION



Crocodile by Lynne Kelly
Allen & Unwin, HK\$215
★★★★☆
David Wilson

As ways of dying go, being drowned by a crocodile must rank as one of the worst. *Crocodile* fascinatingly fills in the blanks about how it feels to be snatched in a crocodile's jaws and narrowly avoid becoming larder fodder.

Rewind to 1985 and environmentalist Val Plumwood was paddling a canoe in Kakadu National Park in northern Australia, perusing rock art. By early afternoon, Plumwood had developed a sense of being watched. "I started paddling back down the channel and hadn't got far when I saw what looked like a stick ahead of me," she writes. "As I was swept towards it I saw eyes and realised it was a crocodile."

Next, a thunderous blow hit the canoe. She paddled furiously but the crocodile followed, bashing against the side. So she decided to try to leap into a tree. "I looked straight into its eyes and it looked straight into mine. It had beautiful golden-flecked eyes. I remember those vividly," she says.

Snapping out of the trance, she waved her arms and screamed – a scare tactic that works with tigers but, apparently, not crocs. As Plumwood jumped to grab the tree, the croc intercepted her and dragged her down for a "death roll".

After an agonising tussle that made her howl with pain, she miraculously managed to throw herself onto a mud bank. Hit by an incredible surge of elation, she still had to crawl through torrential rain to the ranger's station, destined to wind up in intensive care in Darwin for months.

The horror story shows that, no matter how serene they may seem, croc-infested waters are always dangerous, as Kelly stresses.

Kelly is a judicious analyst, as you might expect of the author of *The Skeptic's Guide to the Paranormal*, who's been teaching science, maths and computing for more than 30 years and holds degrees in engineering, education and computing.

True, she lacks the flair of, say, Richard Dawkins – but the absence of wizardry matters little with such a fascinating subject. She gets the job done, presenting a fleshed-out portrait of the low-on-charisma super-predator that has apparently stopped evolving because there's no need: the design works perfectly.

Around since the dinosaurs, the crocodile has survived continental drift, ice ages and what Melbourne zookeeper Jon Birkett brands "the weed called humans".

They could yet become history and, despite their aura of indestructibility, they're on the retreat. Blame factors such as human intrusion and "retaliation" against the threat they pose.

Kelly explores whether, under special circumstances, it's right to cull the predators or not. In Australia, where saltwater crocodiles are swelling in numbers, culling is one answer.

One reason society should refrain from destroying the lot is that, mysteriously, massacring crocs reduces fish stocks. Another is that crocs are so imposing and unusual – you can almost see why Steve Irwin wanted to kiss one on the lips.

Kelly's priceless advice on how to outrun a gator-like monster coming after you? Contrary to popular myth, don't zigzag – that allows your pursuer to gain ground. Instead, just run straight ahead – as fast as you can.

Crocodile is available from www.dymocks.com.au