

REVIEW



Before the shadows

Chris Deerin is moved by a novel which remembers Syria in happier times before plunging into the horrors of war

The Syrian civil war is now into its eighth punishing year, but has largely vanished from the Brexit-dominated British news. Olga Grjasnowa's extraordinary new novel offers an opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with one of the great tragedies of our time – to remember what that nation once was, why and how the conflict began, and what it has led to: a grotesque waste of human life and a refugee crisis that has posed a complex challenge to Western political empathy. *City of Jasmine* begins on the cusp of the revolution. In Damascus, the young, westernised, well-to-do middle class drink, take drugs, have casual sex, visit smoothie bars, have plastic surgery, use Facebook. They have aspirations, career plans, hopes of starting families of their own.

Amal is a promising actress living in a swish part of the capital city in a flat bought for her by her father. Hammoudi has recently qualified as a surgeon in Paris and has returned – briefly, he thinks – to his parents' home in the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor. His new job in a French hospital requires him to renew his Syrian passport. His French girlfriend waits impatiently for his return.

Both Amal and Hammoudi appear set for the good life. And then the shadow falls. Pro-democracy protesters take to the streets, and the state responds without mercy – cafe society and cocktails are quickly replaced by random arrests, torture and extra-judicial killing. Sectarian paramilitary groups take control of the streets. People flee the country if they can, or hide if they cannot. Existence for our two main characters changes fast and changes hard.

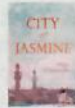
Hammoudi is told he will not be allowed to leave Syria because "the security service has some concerns", and finds himself running a makeshift clinic in his home city, treating the civilian victims of the violence with the increasingly limited equipment and medicine. He watches children die on his operating table. Amal, caught up in the heady early days of the revolution, becomes a target of the security services and is badly beaten. In time, both (along with Amal's boyfriend Youssef) are forced to join the flood of refugees seeking a better life in Europe – risking their lives in the shabby, overcrowded little boats that precariously cross the Mediterranean. I felt that shuddering electric shock of truth laid bare through fiction.

Grjasnowa's measured, undemonstrative writing style (the book is beautifully translated from German by Katy Derbyshire) is central to the novel's success. Terrible events are treated with the same Sally

Rooney-esque matter-of-factness as the more mundane. The reader isn't patronised or manipulated, and the emotional impact is all the greater. Characters come and go and live and die as the novel heads for its masterly, shattering denouement. A significant literary and moral success.

From morals to maths. The latter isn't a subject one associates with humour, so Matt Parker seems either brave or foolish to describe himself as a stand-up mathematician. He's good at what he does, though: *Humble Pi* is an entertaining and often alarming journey through the numerical blunders made over the years by scientists, engineers and politicians, and the consequences. Planes have near-misses, bridges collapse and the world of big data gets a thorough going-over. Maths can be a useful ally in life and we should take the time to better understand it, he argues. Which is both true and, I suspect, for most of us vanishingly unlikely.

@chrisdeerin



City of Jasmine by Olga Grjasnowa, translated by Katy Derbyshire (Oneworld, £12.99)



Humble Pi: A Comedy of Maths Errors by Matt Parker (Allen Lane, £20)



Illustration: Tom Saffill



Milly Johnson

TOP 5 BOOKS ABOUT MOTHERS

01 The Flight of Cornelia Blackwood

By Susan Elliot Wright
This is a fabulous book which sucked me willingly into its pages. It's so powerful – from the dark imagery of crows to the sensitive handling of loss and grief. I felt like a little ship tossed on an ocean of emotion while reading it.

02 The Bad Mother's Handbook

By Kate Long
No two mums are alike, but love is everything is the theme of this wonderful book. A fabulous portrait of motherhood explored through three generations of women.

03 The A to Z of Everything

By Debbie Johnson
Sisters Poppy and Rose haven't spoken for a decade and it's down to an A-to-Z manual from their late mother – written for them – to sort out that problem. I laughed, I cried, I loved it.

04 You Me Everything

By Catherine Isaacs
A difficult subject handled with the lightest of touches. Jess takes her son over to France for the summer to bond with his feckless father. But there is so much more to her motive than initially appears. This book landed a Hollywood deal for good reason.

05 The Hand that First Held Mine

By Maggie O'Farrell
She had me at the title – but then Ms O'Farrell can do no wrong. It's a split timeline tale where the loose ends come together in a beautiful knot. In this one she has deftly tackled how motherhood changes one's perception of the world. And it really does!

The Magnificent Mrs Mayhew by Milly Johnson is out now (Simon & Schuster, £14.99)

