



**Amy Tan is a musician in a band called The Rock Bottom Remainders. The other members of the band include humorist Dave Barry, author Stephen King and Simpsons creator Matt Groening.**



**Lord Byron's guests at his residence, Newstead Abbey, were offered drinks in goblets he'd had made out of skulls from the Byron family.**

# Books



## BOOKS ON MAO, BISMARCK UP FOR PRIZE

Books about a German general, a Chinese tragedy and a bad-boy Renaissance artist are among six titles nominated for Britain's richest nonfiction book award, the Samuel Johnson Prize. Jonathan Steinberg's *Bismarck: A Life*, Frank Dikotter's *Mao's Great Famine* and Andrew Graham Dixon's *Caravaggio* are short-listed for the £20,000 prize.

## PRATCHETT DEFENDS RIGHT-TO-DIE FILM

Writer Terry Pratchett said that watching a man being helped to die had reaffirmed his support for assisted suicide, while anti-euthanasia groups criticised the BBC televised death as propaganda that could encourage copycat suicides. Pratchett was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease in 2007 and is a vocal supporter of the right to die.



**THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH**  
BY SAUL BELLOW  
DATE: 1953  
PUBLISHER: VIKING PRESS  
536pp

Augie comes on stage with one of literature's most famous opening lines. "I am an American, Chicago born, and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted." It's the "Call me Ishmael" of mid-20th-century American fiction. (For the record, Bellow was born in Canada.)

Or it would be if Ishmael had been more like Tom Jones with a philosophical disposition. With this teeming book Bellow returned a Dickensian richness to the American novel. As he makes his way to a full brimming consciousness of himself, Augie careers through numberless occupations and countless mentors and exemplars, all the while enchanting us with the slapdash American music of his voice. This picaresque novel is an example of bildungsroman, tracing the development of an individual through a series of encounters, occupations and relationships from boyhood to manhood.

**Essential Bellow**  
Dangling Man, Herzog, Humboldt's Gift

# Imagine! The secret life of a princess

MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Staging one's own death or disappearance, or switching identities with someone else: it's not just a premise of witness protection, but it's also the catalyst of classic works like Antonioni's landmark film *The Passenger* and Anthony Minghella's Hitchcockian thriller *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Not to mention a fantasy of anyone who has ever imagined ditching all the emotional baggage and obligations accumulated over the years and starting over, *tabula rasa*.

Now suppose that the individual who has vanished is the most famous woman in the world: Diana, Princess of Wales — superstar, fashion plate, good Samaritan, publicly cheated-on wife (and vice versa), a woman who dragged Britain's monarchy into the modern age and whose marriage, divorce and every move were minutely and relentlessly chronicled by the media.

Suppose Diana did not die in a car crash in Paris in 1997, but sick and tired of her life in the tabloid fishbowl, devised a "little plan" to disappear: while vacationing on a boyfriend's yacht, she would take an early morning swim and never return; the world would assume she had drowned or been eaten by sharks and she would be free to reinvent herself abroad.

This is the hypothesis that Monica Ali sets forth in her potboiler of a new novel, *Untold Story*. For Ali — who was named by *Granta* in 2003 as one of Britain's 20 best young novelists and whose first novel, *Brick Lane*, was on the shortlist for the prestigious Man Booker Prize — it seems like an awfully high-concept, low-brow endeavour, especially given the much-talked-about rollout of the novel in Britain just weeks before the wedding of Diana's son William, when fascination with the royals was hitting another high.

By turning Diana (or, as the author has said, "a fictional character, based on



**UNTOLD STORY**  
BY MONICA ALI  
PUBLISHER: SCRIBNER  
₹1,000

Diana") into a British expat named Lydia, who's hiding out in a small American town, Ali is able to address some of the same questions of identity and exile that animated her earlier work, while reprising her favourite fish-out-of-water theme.

Through diary entries of Lydia's devoted private secretary, Lawrence, the reader learns that the former princess had come to feel "hunted and haunted and desperate", so much so that Lawrence, fearing for her sanity, agreed to help her pull off her vanishing act.

She lived in "a permanent state of crisis", he recalls, "conducted at an unbearable level of scrutiny, in the toxic

and highly flammable stratosphere of fame". Although Lydia worried about the effect her disappearance would have on her two young sons, Lawrence adds, she somehow didn't accept "the loss of her boys as permanent", deluding herself that she could somehow, some way, make contact with them once she'd made a new life for herself in America.

And so, when the former princess leaps off her boyfriend's yacht off the coast of Brazil, Lawrence meets her in a rowboat. He supplies her with fake papers and a passport, and helps her get a little plastic surgery and relocate to America. He had only been able to squirrel away a limited amount of

money for her without attracting attention, and warns her that she will have to get a job and learn to live on a budget.

After a series of moves from one American town to another, Lydia finally settles in a generic hamlet called Kensington, where she becomes friends with three middle-aged women: a bubbly blonde named Amber; a stressed-out, brunette mom named Suzie; and a red-haired, New-Agey realtor named Tevis.

That this one-time clothes horse, jet-setter and avid follower of herself in the media would settle into an anonymous, small-town life — saving pennies, doing boring errands, treating herself to some celebrity magazines when she's depressed — is hard to believe. It's even harder to believe that the once moody, impetuous princess has become a predictable, suburban matron, who tells her boyfriend that she'd "do just about anything not to rock the boat". It's as if the former princess had not only dyed her hair brown and had a little work done on her famous face, but had undergone a drastic personality transplant as well.

By cutting back and forth among glimpses of Lydia's current life in America, flashbacks supplied by Lawrence's diaries and scenes involving a predatory photographer (appropriately named Grabowski) who is hot on Lydia's trail, Ali builds tension as slickly as any thriller screenwriter: we find ourselves avidly rooting for Lydia to elude her stalker and somehow to hold on to the normal life she has made for herself in Kensington.

But if the narrative machinery expertly grinds out suspense, the details Ali feeds into that machine are ridiculously contrived.

In the end Ali manages to orchestrate a dramatic conclusion that's nifty, if pretty predictable. But it's a conclusion, it must be said, that's a lot more satisfying than much of the rest of this implausible and preposterously gimmicky novel.

The New York Times

## Life in the time of an epidemic

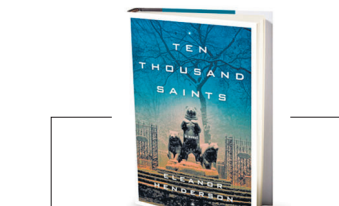
STACEY D'ERASMO

The ambition of *Ten Thousand Saints*, Eleanor Henderson's debut novel about a group of unambitious lost souls, is beautiful. In nearly 400 pages, Henderson does not hold back once: she writes the hell out of every moment, every scene, every perspective, every fleeting impression, every impulse and desire and bit of emotional detritus. She is never ironic or overwhelmed; her preferred mode is fierce, devoted and elegiac.

The book follows a group of friends and lovers, parents and children, from 1987 until 2006, winding its way not only through Vermont and New York's East Village, but also through the straight-edge music scene and the early days of the Aids epidemic. The novel begins on a high school football field in New England and ends 20 years later at one of the last shows at CBGB, just before it closes.

The knot of intimacy at the center of *Ten Thousand Saints* is the friendship between Teddy McNicholas and Jude Keffy-Horn. Teenagers when the book begins, they specialise in petty theft, hanging out and skipping school. They not only smoke pot, they also huff turpentine and, later, Freon from an office building's air-conditioner. They are somewhat worse than bad — they are, one can already see, on their way down to tiny, numb lives in the middle of nowhere. Their parents are similarly ill equipped to deal with life, being themselves old-school stoners who do as little as possible to get by.

And then something happens, something unexpected and definitive, that



**TEN THOUSAND SAINTS**  
BY ELEANOR HENDERSON  
PUBLISHER: ECCO/HARPERCOLLINS  
380pp

propels Jude out of Vermont and down to New York to live with his father, Les, an East Village pot dealer and a pretty nice guy whose idea of paternal authority is to mandate that his kid can smoke only weed grown by Les. Since Jude, who is adopted, is probably already suffering from the lifelong effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, one does tend to wonder if Les has the sense god gave a piece of lint, but whatever: Henderson is less interested in scolding these spacey parents than in showing what might produce a fervent commitment to a world as rigorous and rule-governed as the straight-edge music scene.

Teddy's older brother, Johnny, is a guru in that scene, and he quickly becomes Jude's guru as well, initiating him into a life of no drugs, no sex, no meat, no worldly possessions, and a fanatic devotion to concerts that feature a lot of body-slammng among "shirtless New York hardcore boys" and music played very, very, very loud.

(The homoerotic core of hardcore is just one of the fascinating cultural threads Henderson unwinds here.) Johnny, a tattoo artist, is muscular, highly tattooed himself and prone to thoughts like, "A true *sannyasi* neither hates nor desires." Troubled, lonely, dyslexic, drop-out Jude falls hard for his routine.

Among many other things, Henderson is exploring what might cause a conversion experience, and what that conversion might do to a raggedy, overwhelmed, many-seamed, modern family. The difference between the stoned parents and the turpentine-huffing kids who go clean isn't, actually, one of sober versus altered states; it has more to do with those who seek intensity and those who shield themselves from it.

Les, who likes to kick back with a full bong and the *Times* crossword puzzle, can't understand what sends his son slamming between extremes. Of the new, straight-edge Jude, he thinks, "Surely this turbulent little reverend with the military haircut was not Les's flesh and blood."

The novel stumbles in places with its overintense descriptions of everything in sight — the interior design of a Japanese restaurant, the provenance of a Dodge A100 van — and with a suspiciously 11th-hour rescue by a previously little-seen character.

The dial might go to 11, but keeping it there for 400 pages can be tough on even the most sympathetic reader. But if these are flaws, they are the flaws of not knowing quite when to stop, of never wanting to stop, of being able to play all night, of, no, wait, you just have to hear this one. The New York Times

## Religious text, retold

SUCHITRA CHAKRAVARTI SHEKARY

Mani Rao, author of eight books on poetry is back with her latest, radical translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

In this bold, rendition, Rao cuts past conventions, uses language innovatively and at the same time doesn't digress from the Sanskrit original. The *Gita's* traditions, she reveals, are "anyways made up of interpretations and translations and that's what makes it so interesting. While Gandhi saw non-violence, Tilak quoted from it for his version of violence. It's a rich, multi-dimensional text that sustains", she says.

So what led Rao to do this in the first place? "I was reading the *Gita* closely anyway out of my own personal interest. As a child I had only memorised only a handful of the usual *shlokas* but I found reading the whole *Gita* in Sanskrit was quite a different experience."

With numerous translations in the market, Rao felt the need for one that went beyond the literal and had a bit of radicalism in it. "I wasn't satisfied with the other translations I was finding out there because they did not meet my experience of the *Gita* as a dramatic poem. That gap was what really inspired me to do it this way."

This contemporary, easy read was a conscious decision says the poet.

"The history of *Gita* itself is a layered history of interpretations."

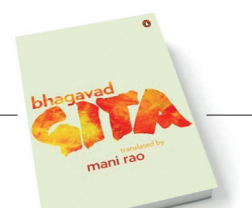
She adds, "It has so many different positions and has been used on so many different platforms. But there was a whole nervousness about it because it is the holy book," she reveals.

So how did she deal with it? "I loved it and felt very relaxed about it because what I was going to do is not going to change the *Gita* or pose a threat to it!" she exclaims.

Having lived all over the world and presently a PhD student in the US, Rao felt her Indianness is what gave her liberty to tackle the subject. "It's because I am from India," she reiterates. "I'm in a peculiar position where I am able to see what is happening from a distance, and at the same time, I feel strongly as a part of the tradition. I have the confidence to take that step."

Rao's contemporary musicality and attention to detail is what her poetry is all about. She says, "A poem is something that should happen through *shruti* and through rhythm." And Rao sure has that perfect timing in her latest endeavour.

Mani Rao was in town to release *Bhagavad Gita* as part of Toto Funds The Arts.



**BHAGAVAD GITA**  
BY MANI RAO  
PUBLISHER: PENGUIN BOOKS  
184pp



## BRIDGET JONES

Bridget Jones, is a character created by Helen Fielding, in her Bridget Jones series.

She was played by Renee Zellweger (pictured) in the films. She is a single, thirty-three-year-old woman who has a monotonous life. She has some bad habits — smoking and drinking too much — but she annually writes her New Year's resolutions in her diary, determined to stop smoking, drink no more than fourteen alcohol units a week, and eat more pulses. In the two novels and screen adaptations, Bridget's mother is bored with her life as a housewife in the country and leaves Bridget's father. Bridget repeatedly flirts with her boss, Daniel Cleaver. A successful barrister named Mark Darcy also keeps popping into Bridget's life, being extremely awkward, and sometimes coming off a bit rude. After Bridget and Mark reach an understanding of each other and find a sort of happiness together, she gains some self-esteem and cuts down on her cigarette consumption. However, Bridget's obsession with self-help books plus several misunderstandings cannot keep the couple together forever.



## NYT BESTSELLER

PAPERBACK FICTION

- THE HELP, by Kathryn Stockett
- HIT LIST, by Laurell K. Hamilton
- WATER FOR ELEPHANTS, by Sara Gruen
- STATE OF WONDER, by Ann Patchett
- THE KINGDOM, by Clive Cussler with Grant Blackwood

PAPERBACK NON-FICTION

- HEAVEN IS FOR REAL, by Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent
- IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS, by Erik Larson
- MY HORIZONTAL LIFE, by Chelsea Handler
- BOSSYPANTS, by Tina Fey
- UNBROKEN, by Laura Hillenbrand



## EMILY BRONTË

Emily Jane Brontë (July 1818 – 19 December 1848) was an English novelist and poet, now best remembered for her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, a classic of English literature. Emily was the second eldest of the three surviving Brontë sisters, between Charlotte and Anne. She published under the pen name Ellis Bell.

In 1847, Emily published her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, as two volumes of a three-volume set (the last volume being *Agnes Grey* by her sister Anne). Its innovative structure somewhat puzzled critics.

Although it received mixed reviews when it first came out, and was often condemned for its portrayal of amoral passion, the book subsequently became an English literary classic. In 1850, Charlotte edited and published *Wuthering Heights* as a stand-alone novel and under Emily's real name.

She died on December 19, 1848 at about two in the afternoon. She was interred in the Church of St. Michael and All Angels family vault, Haworth, West Yorkshire.

