

Beneath the mask of history

EXCESSES

LUCID

A memoir of an extreme decade in an extreme generation

LUCY HOLDEN

336pp. Gallery UK. £12.99.

After a particularly wild night out, Lucy Holden wakes up in a Victorian nightgown lying next to a plumber called Polly. It becomes clear that Polly rescued Holden after spotting her slumped at a bus stop, taking her home with her, and that Holden - who couldn't "stand the idea of being alone even in unconsciousness" - crawled into the strange woman's bed. The two strike up a touching friendship, but it is only later, after she is "thrown off [her] escalator life" by the Covid pandemic and enters therapy, that Holden reflects on how broken she must have been at the time.

Lucid promises to be "a memoir of an extreme decade in an extreme generation", and Holden's tales of her twenties, spent ricocheting between misogynistic boyfriends and precarious housing arrangements, will no doubt strike many as extreme. As a young journalist in London scrabbling to find her feet in a cut-throat industry, Holden was by her own admission a "chain-smoking, fast-drinking, frantically writing, exhausted socialite defined by [her] relationships". She describes a culture where people take "prescription drugs to cope with the effects of recreational ones". It seems that working in news is just as desensitizing as the drugs: when she spots a man about to jump off a bridge, Holden's first reaction is to call her editor with the scoop.

It is little wonder, then, that "London felt like a violent place to be young". At the heart of this violence seems to be the deep-seated and pernicious sense of competition - ingrained by the UK education system and exacerbated by a job market crowded with overqualified graduates - that pits millennials against each other in everything from professional relationships to friendships and romantic partnerships. Even the practice of hot-desking "added a layer of anxious impermanence to our existence each morning as we scanned offices for where that existence was supposed to take place". Guiltier still are the landlords and an unaffordable housing market: "we were the generation constantly told we'd never own a house ... so threw our pay cheques at fashionable consumerism instead".

Lucid might be strong on diagnosing structural problems, but Holden's grasp on her own privilege is less certain. Stories of splurging her student loan on a puppy to console herself after breaking up with a

city lawyer, dismissing a month's skiing in Méribel as "repetitive as", and using war metaphors to contextualize her experiences make for uncomfortable reading. References to the pandemic - during which Holden retreats to the middle-class comfort of her parents' home in Bath - as a "new war" are especially jarring. But while the book sometimes lacks self-awareness, on the whole Holden dissects her experiences with honesty and humour, and handles traumatic subjects, such as domestic abuse and sexual assault, with courage and sensitivity.

Esmé O'Keeffe

EQUALS

URSULA

MARIA FIRMINA DOS REIS

Translated by Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey
212pp. Tagus. Paperback, £19.95.

"Dear reader, the book I here present to you is humble, insignificant, and will certainly meet with the cold indifference of some and the mocking scorn of others." Although the opening of Maria Firmina dos Reis's abolitionist novel *Ursula* (1859) might now be interpreted as a rhetorical strategy, for a long time it was taken literally.

The daughter of a freedwoman, Reis was born in 1822 and spent her life in the northern Brazilian state of Maranhão. She died almost a century later, in 1917, leaving behind a diverse body of work. Yet, as Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey notes in her introduction to this volume, "despite her literary and cultural production ... at the time of her death [Reis] was all but forgotten". It is, she argues, thanks to modern, revisionist scholarship that Reis now stands as "a pioneer among Black writers of the Americas".

From the opening, in which "cool dewdrops hang from tiny trembling leaves" while an enslaved man saves a white man's life, *Ursula* entwines motifs of Romanticism (Reis refers directly to Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Mauritius-set *Paul et Virginie*, 1788) with a message of racial equality and fraternity rooted in Christianity. The narrative follows Ursula, the white daughter of a plantation owner, as she falls in love with (and is ultimately separated from) Tancredo, the traveller who is saved at the beginning of the book, and whose romantic history is inauspicious. Fernando, Tancredo's love rival, who enters midway through, is revealed to be Ursula's estranged and violent relative: he proves to be the pair's undoing.

Alongside this main plot runs another, principally concerning Susana and Tulio, who are enslaved. Reis portrays both sympa-

thetically, Susana maternally taking Tulio under her wing. One of the strengths of the novel lies in its depiction of the bonds forged by those who were trafficked from Africa or born unfree in Brazil. However, while the two plots intersect powerfully at points, the suggestion in the book's blurb that they are of equal prominence is overplayed.

Pinto-Bailey's introduction is detailed and accessible, and her translation solid, notwithstanding the odd infelicity. What adds greatly to the value of this edition is the inclusion of "The Slave Woman", a short story by Reis from 1887. Here, the author can be found in full flow, leaving no doubt as to what readers should make of "the cancerous corruption that is destroying [society]".

Franklin Nelson

INTERNS

THE ISLAND OF EXTRAORDINARY CAPTIVES SIMON PARKIN

475pp. Sceptre. £25.

When Britain finally declared war on Germany in September 1939, it was without much of the moral clarity that the ensuing conflict later took on in collective memory as a crusade against Nazism. Instead, to many commentators in Britain, the Second World War raised what E.M. Forster called the "hideous dilemma" that war against totalitarian regimes would necessitate the adoption of totalitarian methods. In no area did this dilemma manifest itself more clearly than in the treatment of "enemy aliens": people of German or Austrian nationality in Britain, many of whom were refugees but who became, following the German invasion of Norway in the spring of 1940, the focus of a "fifth column panic". In response, tens of thousands of people - many of them Jewish victims of Nazi persecution, many of them active and courageous opponents of Nazism - were deported or abruptly sent to internment camps. They would remain there until the government responded to calls for more proportionate and humane treatment of internees through the adoption of a policy of phased releases.

Simon Parkin's new book retells this familiar story with a focus on one camp in particular, the celebrated "Hutchinson camp" on the Isle of Man that briefly held an extraordinary roll-call of émigré artists, writers and intellectuals. Faced with the prospect of seemingly indefinite detention, this captive intelligentsia organized a programme of lectures, performances and exhibitions that transformed the camp into what one prisoner called "a nucleus of an almost

bygone humanism and culture". This in turn gave the opportunity of a lifetime to a young would-be art student named Peter Fleischmann, for whom confinement in this outpost of the European artistic avant-garde was the first step towards postwar renown as the artist and teacher Peter Midgley.

Parkin recounts Fleischmann's experiences in a brisk, vivid narrative which at times leans too heavily on the singularity of the inmates at Hutchinson in making its argument against indiscriminate internment. The policy was no less outrageous in the cases of the shopkeepers, tool-makers and travelling salesmen who also populated the camp than it was in those of the intellectual elite. Nonetheless, Parkin's success in bringing this shabby corner of Britain's wartime history to life is of more than historical interest: for the thousands of people currently consigned every year to the United Kingdom's immigration detention system, the warning at the close of the book from former Hutchinson internee Claus (later Lord) Moser, that "it could happen again", is already being borne out. Forster would despair.

Stuart Middleton

PROTESTS

REFUSAL TO EAT

A century of prison hunger strikes

NAYAN SHAH

384pp. University of California Press. £24 (US \$29.95).

Refusal to Eat: A century of prison hunger strikes begins with the struggle for women's suffrage in Britain and ends with the policing of modern-day borders and terrorism, taking in anti-imperialist movements in India, Ireland and South Africa along the way. Nayan Shah argues that in each of these vastly different cases the hunger strike "summons both allies and adversaries to gather at the precipice of life and death". From the vantage point of this precipice, Shah charts wider histories of imprisonment, state power and unrest.

Hunger strikes are especially fascinating when those stuck in the middle are obliged to take sides. In 2014, a naval nurse was fired for refusing to force-feed hunger-striking prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. The incident shone a spotlight on the uneasy position prison medics occupy: bound by oath to serve their patients, but also accountable to, and paid by, their patients' captors. Families similarly face a dilemma when deciding whether to authorize life-saving treatment once those on strike are too weak to speak for themselves.

Shah is at his best when discussing the tactical decisions made by



"Black Lava Bridge, Hana Coast No. 2" by Georgia O'Keeffe, 1939; from *Georgia O'Keeffe, Photographer* by Lisa Volpe (288pp. Yale. £40.)

strikers. Nelson Mandela, writing about his own hunger strikes on Robben Island, noted that unless the protest is communicated to the outside world, those on strike "will simply starve themselves to death and no one will know". The South African anti-apartheid movement provided a model for such communication in the face of divide-and-rule detention and strict media censorship. The movement enlisted catering workers to smuggle notes to detainees, while spreading news about strikes beyond prison walls through unofficial newspapers and international solidarity networks.

However, Shah also tends to get bogged down in the harrowing details of specific stories. Perhaps this is deliberate: he notes that the hunger strike is powerful because it appeals to the kind of individualized narrative that liberal societies value. Oddly, though, the effect can be hazy. There is the case of one Cambodian hunger striker who, after seeking refugee status in Australia, attempted suicide, was transferred to hospital, "diagnosed as a danger to herself and kept in a locked ward". But it is difficult to understand how - if it all - she or the wider movement leveraged her ordeal. Of the three women who took part in the strike, one "left for Austria", but "it is not known whether the other two were freed or deported". Such incomplete pic-