

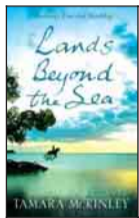
Paperbacks

FICTION Charmaine Chan



Resurrection
by Tucker Malarkey
Riverhead Books, HK\$112
★★★★☆

This isn't another *Da Vinci Code*, but it should absorb readers interested in alternative religious views of early Christianity. Although the story and its main characters are fictional, the novel centres on the Nag Hammadi gospels discovered accidentally at the end of the second world war in Egypt. Containing the words of several overlooked apostles, they fascinated author Tucker Malarkey so much that she fashioned a tale of love and murder around real historical, archaeological and biblical material to resurrect a story, she says, "of great faith". Her protagonist is Gemma Bastian, a nurse in London who receives word in 1947 of the death of her father, a famous archaeologist whose mysterious passing takes place after he confirms the gospels' existence. For closure, she heads for Cairo, where she stays with a good friend of her father, Professor David Lazar. Slowly, she realises the shocking implications for Christianity in her father's work, which she believes led to his death. Bastian's investigation into his final project – which takes place while she is pulled romantically towards Lazar's two sons – will hold the attention of readers to the end. And there they'll find a chapter titled Who Is Real that will probably entice further reading on the subject.



Lands Beyond the Sea
by Tamara McKinley
Hodder, HK\$115
★★★★☆

"This is a work of fiction and should not be regarded as anything more," Tamara McKinley warns readers at the start of her novel about the discovery of Australia. True figures, she says, include Captain James Cook, Joseph Banks and others. Her caveat is welcome considering much of the book involves invented characters. The prologue, which takes readers back 50,000 years, is situated in Kakadu, but the story begins in Cornwall in 1768 and the last entry derives from Sydney Cove in 1793. Readers who find it odd that McKinley has ancient Aborigines saying things to each other like, "You would do well to hurry" must remind themselves that *Lands Beyond the Sea* is creative writing that seeks to entertain rather than edify. The tale centres on Jonathan Cadwallader, who leaves England and his beloved Susan Penhalligan to sail on the *Endeavour*. He promises to return, but she marries another, having heard nothing from Cadwallader for three years. Other fictional characters include Billy Penhalligan, Susan's convict brother, and "the Aborigine", whose "existence is threatened by a terrifying white invasion", as the cover blurb explains. McKinley has made an effort with description and plot, but her novel is blighted by the way it employs the past.



School's Out
by Christophe Dufosse
Penguin, HK\$112
★★★★☆

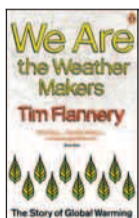
The title and cover of *School's Out* don't do the book justice. Then again, neither does the translation, which uses big words where little ones would do – unless the original in French was equally affected. Christophe Dufosse's debut novel is no typical teenage-angst narrative filled with hormone-charged students facing crossroads in life (which its name and cover art of pupils in regulation skirts and stilettoes seem to imply). It's a thriller in which 13-year-olds are responsible for the suicides of two teachers, the murder of one child and the disfigurement of another. Their class, 9F, is unfortunately the one Pierre Hoffman is assigned to after his friend and fellow teacher Eric Capadis is found dying in the school yard, having apparently thrown himself out a window. Pierre quickly senses that something is out of place when he analyses Capadis' course book and concludes that "he had hurried through his syllabus as through he were racing against the clock". But Dufosse isn't consistently successful in the way he manages menace. Tension is sometimes released rather than augmented by descriptions to round out Hoffman's character. Still, readers chilled by the idea of juvenile crime won't be disappointed by the ending.

NON-FICTION Tim Cribb



Watching the Flag Come Down - An Englishwoman in Hong Kong 1987-97
by Susanna Hoe
Holo Books, HK\$198
★★★★☆

A timely title for the 10th anniversary of the handover, Britain's return of its Hong Kong colony to the sovereignty of China is the subject of *Watching the Flag Come Down*. Susanna Hoe's account of her experiences, initially written as a "Letter from Hong Kong" series she sent to a provincial newspaper back home, is a curious chronicle of its time. Hoe and her husband, Derek Roebuck, who taught at City University, were active in the area of women's rights, particularly among those trapped at the bottom of Hong Kong's patriarchal society. They were also concerned about the miserable lot of the city's Filipinos. *Watching the Flag Come Down*, available at Bookazine shops, hints at what might have been. The index is a veritable who's who of women in Hong Kong political life, such as Christine Loh, Cyd Ho, Selina Chow, Emily Lau, Rita Fan, Miriam Lau, Chan Yuen-han, Margaret Ng and Anna Wu. In the decade covered by Hoe, a framework to promote equality and curb discrimination was put in place by the women's movement. The shame is that there's so little to show for it 10 years on.



We Are the Weather Makers - The Story of Global Warming
by Tim Flannery
Penguin, HK\$148
★★★★☆

It has taken a while, but the message has finally sunk in that if world leaders don't act – and soon – to curb global warming, the future looks bleak. Australian scientist Tim Flannery has been at the forefront of efforts to convince decision-makers of the need to act in the face of environmental crisis. *We Are the Weather Makers* is the slimmed down and updated edition of last year's best-seller, *The Weather Makers*. Now that politicians have realised that voters want action on climate change, it will probably be the sleeper issue wherever elections are held. Commentators point to Al Gore as a likely Democratic Party candidate for the 2008 US presidential elections, riding the wave of concern about global warming with his film *An Inconvenient Truth*. The top levels of the US bureaucracy now realise the need for action and are preparing for the next presidency, having given up trying to explain the need for urgency to George W. Bush. But Flannery has moved past the politicians to appeal directly to the individual. *We Are the Weather Makers* says that lowering household consumption of electricity is a good place to start. Must the air conditioner be set on freezing?



The Year of Magical Thinking
by Joan Didion
Vintage, HK\$112
★★★★★

American essayist Joan Didion's husband of 40 years, writer John Gregory Dunne, stopped talking mid-conversation and slumped dead from a massive heart attack. "You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends," she writes. For a long time, she couldn't throw away his shoes because she thought he might need them. Didion is a rational thinker, self-controlled and scornful of self-pity. But she found herself "thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome". *The Year of Magical Thinking* is about loss, grief and sorrow – and "grief turns out to be a place none of us knows until we reach it". Another essayist, Gore Vidal, wrote years after the death of his partner of 25 years, Howard Austen, that time doesn't lessen the pain, but is "a constant reminder of things lost and gone for good". Didion writes about the insanity of giving meaning to death, and the "what ifs" she imagines might have changed events. *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a superb piece of writing, is a devastating story, intensely personal yet universal.

Romance is dead? Not for these millions of readers, writes **Sue Green**

Love for sale

She's emancipated, independent and career driven, yet the modern woman still wants to snuggle up with a romance novel, just as her mother and grandmother did before her. And publishers are more than happy to oblige.

Romantic fiction giant Harlequin Enterprises, parent company to imprints such as Mills & Boon and Silhouette, sold 131 million books in 2005, prompting British publisher Headline to launch its own romance imprint.

Little Black Dress targets "a new generation of romance readers" with short contemporary stories in a paperback format that are "perfect for the handbag or the bath".

Toronto-based Harlequin, which acquired British publisher Mills & Boon in 1971, is doing big business: more than 115 titles a month, published in 24 languages and 95 international markets; more than 1,300 authors in its stable; 5.22 billion books shipped since its inception in 1949.

Harlequin's imprints range from the traditional, such as medical and tender romance, to intrigue, sensual ("hot, sizzling romance") and desire ("daring and provocative"). In 2000, it moved into the online market (its eHarlequin.com site offering online book serials) and is now starting to supply books to mobile phones.

There are others in the field, including boundary-pushing publishers such as Black Lace, which bills its explicit stories as "erotic fiction written for women by women".

Is there room for another imprint? Absolutely, says Little Black Dress editor Catherine Cobain. "When you think of romance, you think of Harlequin and Mills & Boon and that well established, slightly old-fashioned romance," she says. "We wanted to do something young and sparkly that looks like it will be good entertainment, aiming for the twentysomething and thirtysomething market, up to about 35.

"We wanted to think about how to bring things to people in an easily accessible way... it's Tuesday night and I'm tired and on my way home and I want to pick up this fun, escapist read and read it in one night. It's the equivalent of getting a box of chocolates and eating them all in one go. It's not going to change your life."

Cobain says the new imprint is being bombarded with unsolicited manuscripts, with young writers



Photo: AFP

attracted by the freedom offered by its lack of rules. "We wanted it to have a romantic theme and within that they can do whatever they like. The best way to kill something fresh is to say, 'You can't do this and this and this'."

That's a point of difference from the Harlequin imprints, which issue guidelines for writers covering everything from how much sex is appropriate to settings, character ages and even the way characters are described.

That hasn't been a problem for Australian Valerie Parv, one of the Harlequin "five-star club legends", who has sold more than 25 million copies of her 60 novels. Parv, a former non-fiction writer who tired of churning out titles such as *Think Slim, Be Trim* and *All About Swimming Pools*, pitches to the imprints that interest her – mostly romantic suspense. "You still know they're going to get

together, so the suspense adds an extra element," she says.

Parv is a self-confessed romantic who married a crocodile hunter and, 35 years on, is still happily married. She says there's definitely a place for romantic fiction in the 21st century. "I think what it's got to offer is what it always had, which is time out," she says. "We're even more time poor than we were. We're more stressed and harried than we were.

"More women live alone, by choice or perhaps they have high standards that aren't met. The romantic novel offers something they don't have in real life and may not want if they could. They have a good idea of what's fantasy and what's real life."

Cobain says a lot of people have set ideas about romantic fiction. "But at the end of the day 99 per cent of novels have some romantic element to them. It's

just something that people like reading. It's relevant because it's always going to be an important part of human life. But it's not the old-fashioned clasping couples on the front."

In Britain, Little Black Dress books are sold from dump bins near magazine stands. The imprint sees its rivals as not just other books but glamour magazines.

Cobain says Headline was receiving good stories too short for its main list and wanted a way to publish them and to foster the careers of young writers. "In publishing, there's a lot of pressure on authors for their first and second books to be their breakthrough books and to follow up that with a book a year later," she says. "We wanted somewhere people could learn their craft."

Parv says the genre has changed so much that her writing career, producing up to three titles

a year, has been "an incredible journey of discovery".

"Erotica has just exploded on the scene," she says, although Parv prefers to create steamy scenes rather than explicit ones. "To me, what isn't said can be more sexy than what is."

Parv, who has just sold a romance story to Amazon shorts, says that e-publishing, which enables readers to buy erotica anonymously, offers the genre chances for growth. "It has freed women to get what they want from their fiction. It's getting into areas we would never have thought such as bondage and S&M."

Parv sees herself as giving readers something that makes them feel good. And over time, that something hasn't changed. "It comes down to 'love is always possible'. And as a species we're hardwired to want that."

Martial artist hits the cutting edge of fiction

Chauncey Mabe

It takes a bold author to attempt the creation of a new category of popular fiction. That's the task crime novelist and tai chi master Arthur Rosenfeld set himself with his ninth novel, *The Cutting Season*.

The story of a Fort Lauderdale surgeon who questions his sanity after a ghost appears claiming to be the reincarnation of a Chinese warrior, *The Cutting Season* tries to bring a traditional Asian martial arts genre, *wu xia*, to US readers.

"The trick is to transliterate and transplant a quintessentially Asian category of fiction to these shores in a way that's compelling and meaningful in more than a chop-socky fashion," says Rosenfeld, a student and teacher of martial arts for more than 30 years. *Wu xia* is a Chinese genre that extends back about 1,000 years. The 15 novels of its foremost modern practitioner, Louis Cha, have sold more than 300 million copies in Asia.

"I hope it's not construed as arrogant when I say I'm creating a new category," says Rosenfeld. "There have been plenty of writers using Asian themes and settings. What they've done is take a western category – the thriller or the historical novel – and set it [in Asia]. I'm trying to do the opposite: take an essentially Asian literary structure and bring it [to the US]."

Rosenfeld sought a new direction in his fiction after a disappointing reaction to his last novel, *Diamond Eye* (2001), a conventional law enforcement thriller featuring a postal inspector living in Miami.

So he began to tinker with

Asia Specific

unpublished manuscripts that he'd written in the early 1990s, attempting to infuse them with the Eastern philosophy he'd learned from the practice of tai chi. "I made some stabs at creating something different and new," he says. "Then it occurred to me that the most influential and fun fiction for me – the thing I'd always enjoyed reading the best – was tales from the east."

At the same time, Rosenfeld, who worked in the pharmaceuticals industry before becoming a full-time author, also wrote a non-fiction book, *The Truth About Chronic Pain*.



The Cutting Season blends his interests, being part medical thriller, part superhero story and part martial arts novel.

"The tai chi I practise and teach isn't the New Age tai chi – not the feel-good tai chi of elderly people in the park," Rosenfeld says. "It's the real, nitty-gritty martial art, which is very hard to find any more, not only here, but also in China."

Rosenfeld, 50, came to martial arts in his early 20s, studying with commercial karate and kung-fu schools he now derides as "strip mall academies". After his initial fascination with being able to win fights in bars, he found himself drawn beyond the kicking and punching to "a succession of more authentic and original Asian arts."

"Eventually, I found the ultimate one, tai chi, which is the one most intimately linked to the deep Asian philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism," he says.

The Cutting Season's narrative displays an impressive knowledge not just of martial arts, but medicine, motorcycles and sword making. It also captures the flavour of contemporary Fort Lauderdale. It's published by YMAA, a niche company specialising in martial arts instructional books. Publisher David Ripianzi says specialised non-fiction is a gamble for a small outfit. "I've always had the fancy to do a novel," says Ripianzi, who recently touted *The Cutting Season* at BookExpo America, the annual convention for book-sellers held in New York. "We talked about it at the conference table over the years."

Ripianzi is so committed to Rosenfeld's new work that he's not

only publishing *The Cutting Season* this summer, he's coming out with a related novel, *The Crocodile and the Crane*, in the autumn, followed by a sequel to *The Cutting Season*.

Ripianzi says that weary conventioners in New York "stopped dead in their tracks" to pick up display copies. Some began reading it on the spot, he says.

Rosenfeld says he turned down a more lucrative offer from a New York publisher, in part because Ripianzi, a fellow martial artist, shares his values and principles.

They agree that the novels should not only entertain, but also convey

subtle lessons. "In the writing, I wrestled with a number of issues," Rosenfeld says. "How to take themes out of a different culture and tweak them in such a way people think it's just another good literary thriller – yet, at the same time, they'll subtly receive a whole different set of messages about the world and culture and traditions."

"My former literary agent took one look at the manuscript for *The Cutting Season* and told me it was the book I was born to write. I don't think he was wrong."

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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