

BOOKS | JAMES KIDD

Twist in the tales

If the trend for Gothic novels reflected the revolutions of the era, what does our appetite for psychological thrillers say about the fears and complex reality of the 21st century?

If one literary genre has defined the 21st century so far, it is surely the psychological thriller. This owes a great deal to blockbusters such as *Gone Girl* (2012), by Gillian Flynn, and Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* (2015), whose vast global sales were quickly followed by mildly disappointing Hollywood films. These inspired a host of popular imitators, which as well as shamelessly plugging the word "Girl" into their titles, followed a similar formula:

- 1 Suspenseful stories packed with endless twists.
- 2 A crime, although law enforcement tends to be secondary.
- 3 Deceptively ordinary relationships (especially marriage, parenthood and small-town).
- 4 Every psychological state in the medical dictionary (paranoia, amnesia, agoraphobia and alcoholism are especially popular).

Some of the biggest post-Girl hits include Liane Moriarty's 2014 novel *Big Little Lies* (sexual abuse, sexual addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder) and A.J. Finn's 2018 thriller *The Woman in the Window* (shut-ins and Hitchcock obsessions). More recent contenders include Helen Phillips' *The Need* (new-parent anxiety, insomnia),

Tana French's *The Searcher* (fish-out-of-water, small-town, dysfunctional family) and *The Good Samaritan* by Charlotte Parsons, a former columnist for the *South China Morning Post*. Parsons' heroine, Carrie Haverson, has problems interpreting other people's emotions. As her five-year-old daughter, Sofia, notes, "She didn't understand what they were saying with their faces."

This limitation ramps up the red herrings when Sofia goes missing, and Carrie is helped by complete strangers, the good samaritans. But are these samaritans too good to be true? And how is someone like Carrie supposed to tell the difference?

Neither Flynn nor Hawkins invented the form, of course. The modern renaissance was already well under way before they came along – thanks to S.J. Watson's 2011 novel *Before I Go to Sleep* (amnesia, sexual obsession, recluse), Keigo Higashino's 2005 masterpiece *The Devotion of Suspect X* (obsessive love, sexual abuse), and Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy, which, among other things, started the craze for the word "girl".

But we need to rewind further to uncover the psychological thriller's origins. One possible starting point are the Gothic novels of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). These essentially hurled youthful innocents (typically women) into gloomy surroundings populated by dastardly semi-devils who manipulate their overwrought emotions until the boundary separating reality and fantasy is hopelessly blurred.


This premise was refreshed and refined in the 20th century by probably the presiding genius of the form, Patricia Highsmith. In masterpieces such as *Strangers on a Train* (1950) and her series starring charming sociopath Tom Ripley, Highsmith fused Gothic fiction's sense of the uncanny with the crisp plotting of the classic crime novel as practised by Agatha Christie.

Highsmith's major innovation, apart from a wickedly dry sense of humour, was the psychological complexity of her characters, who could seem charming one moment and terrifying the next, or make the craziest idea seem rational and turn the most ordinary situation into a nightmare.

If Gothic novels reflected the revolutions of their time (political, emotional, cultural and religious) and Highsmith the instabilities and upheavals of the Cold War (when so-called heroes behaved like villains and vice versa), what might the current vogue for the psychological thriller say about us?

One entry point is fear. Past generations may have been scared witless by great white sharks or sharp-toothed aliens, the nuclear bomb or Hannibal Lecter, but as novelists such as Parsons understand, nothing is more terrifying – to parents, at least – than the thought of their child being swiped from an everyday setting like a park. Other stories exploit different fears: the break-up of a relationship, the loss of a loved one, a past trauma. One can only imagine what stories will emerge from the coronavirus and quarantine.

That so many modern thrillers foreground the



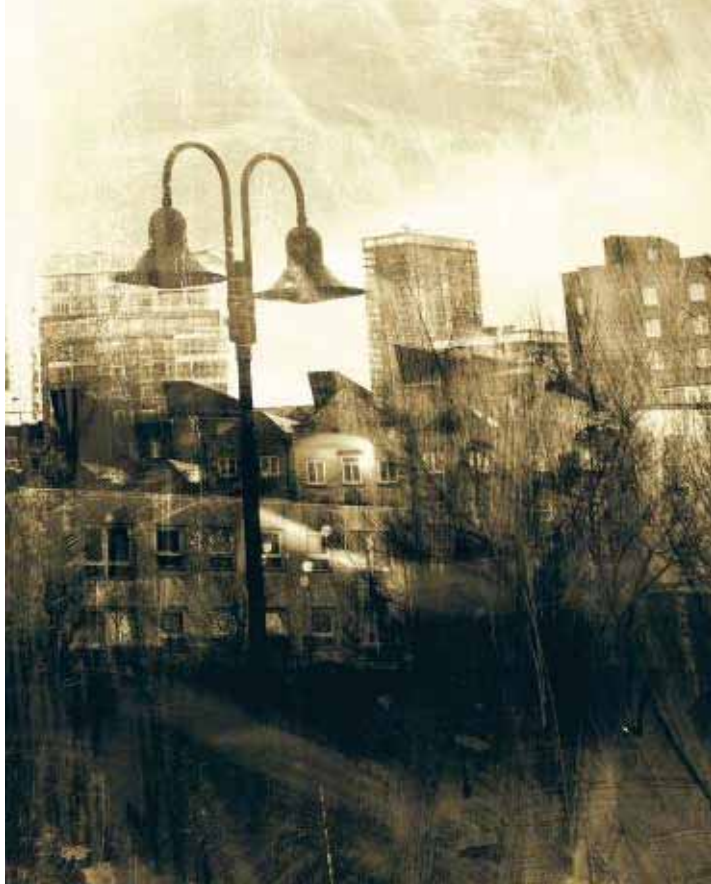
THAT SO MANY MODERN THRILLERS FOREGROUND THE MENTAL HEALTH – OR OTHERWISE – OF THEIR PROTAGONISTS IS INTRIGUING, AND SUGGESTS OUR ANXIETY INCLUDES THE TURMOIL AND CONFUSION OF OUR INNER LIVES AS WELL AS DRAMAS IN THE EXTERNAL WORLD.

mental health – or otherwise – of their protagonists is equally intriguing, and suggests our anxiety includes the turmoil and confusion of our inner lives as well as dramas in the external world. Do the challenges facing Parsons' character, Carrie, reflect a historical moment whose foundations are rocked by technology, virtual reality and artificial intelligence? Or by social media and its distorting effect on identity; the ceaseless rewriting of outmoded definitions of race, gender, sexuality and nationality; and a political landscape self-consciously in thrall to fake news and on-message newspeak.

"It can be difficult to separate dreams from reality," says Detective Chief Inspector Juliet Campbell in *The Good Samaritan*. Where does it leave us when reality participates willingly in the confusion and presents itself as a dream? One moral of these thrillers seems to be: the more we know, or think we know – about our minds, emotions, loved ones and the world around us – the more we seem to be nagged by our own uncertainty, even a sense of our own fictionality.

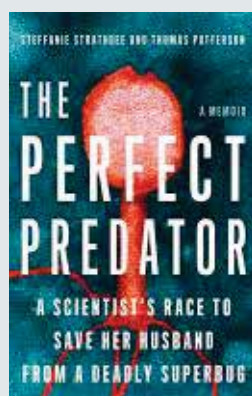
Is there a better example of this ambiguity than the story of A.J. Finn, author of the book behind the upcoming film *The Woman in the Window*? The book's narrator, Anna Fox, is obsessed with psychological thrillers, which leaks into her everyday behaviour. According to a lengthy exposé in *The New Yorker*, Finn has experienced a similar muddle. Finn, whose real name is Daniel Mallory, rose to the top of publishing thanks to fabricated qualifications, endless manipulation and a host of alter egos.

The circle of authenticity and fabrication has now been completed by the announcement that his life story is being adapted by writer and director Janicza Bravo for a Netflix series, starring Jake Gyllenhaal. Truth, so the cliché goes, is stranger than fiction. What is stranger still is when terms like truth and fiction cease to apply. It will be fascinating to see whether Finn recycles these layers of life-as-art-as-life-as-art in his next thriller. ■



Non-fiction

BY CHARMAINE CHAN

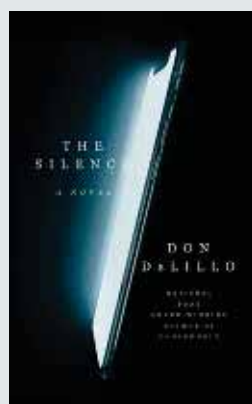


The Perfect Predator
By **Steffanie Strathdee**
and **Thomas Patterson**
Hachette Books

The coronavirus pandemic will surely result in a slew of medical thrillers with microbes as villains. But truth is stranger than fiction in the case of *The Perfect Predator*, released last year and already available in a paperback reprint. Epidemiologist Steffanie Strathdee tells of her "race to save her husband from a deadly superbug". More important, the book sounds the clarion call about a catastrophe around the corner: antimicrobial resistance, a problem that so concerned father of antibiotics Alexander Fleming that he wrote: "The thoughtless person playing with penicillin is morally responsible for the death of the

man who finally succumbs to infection with the penicillin-resistant organism." Strathdee and husband, Thomas Patterson, an evolutionary sociobiologist, learned what that meant a few years ago when he was infected by "the worst bacteria on the planet", *Acinetobacter baumannii*, picked up while the couple were on holiday in Egypt. When all antibiotics failed, and after several near death experiences, a desperate Strathdee suggested century-old phage therapy, which employs viruses to combat undesirable bacteria and that she vaguely remembered from her days as an undergraduate. Hong Kong-born Margaret Chan Fung Fu-chun, former WHO director general, is quoted in the book warning that we are on the cusp of a post-antibiotic era. Its implications are terrifying.

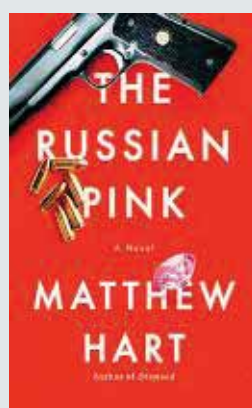
Fiction



The Silence
By **Don DeLillo**
Scribner

With Covid-19 in our midst, thoughts of doom inevitably accompany signs of peakiness, however slight the sensation of being out of sorts. *The Silence* seeks to capture similar feelings of anxiety, resulting from a shutdown, although, in Don DeLillo's apocalypse, set in 2022, it is technology that succumbs to an unwelcome agent (possibly Chinese). Completed just before the pandemic spread fear to all corners, the American master's novella is a thriller of sorts. But readers will experience, at most, mild trepidation – from scenes such as "the march through airport terminals, the face masks, the city streets emptied

out". Partly to blame is the disconnection readers may feel from the characters, who inhabit bubbles that isolate through language. Three people (a retired physics professor, her husband and one of her former students) are waiting in a New York apartment for play to begin on Super Bowl Sunday. They are to be joined by a couple flying in from Paris. When all systems collapse, images on the television begin to shake, computers turn grey and the plane carrying the guests crash-lands, although husband and wife walk away with minimal injuries (and have life-affirming sex in a toilet before making their way to the gathering). Fans of DeLillo will recognise his knack for the surreal; others will want real tension.



The Russian Pink
By **Matthew Hart**
Pegasus Books

Author Matthew Hart lost me with this description: "Not only beautiful but smart too." The object of his gaze is, you guessed it, a female character named (you have to laugh) Honey Li. Her father is a Harvard mathematician, which might explain how she's able to write an algorithm calculating the true worth of diamonds. The identity of the owner adds to the value (think of Elizabeth Taylor's Cartier gem). Cliché and sexism aside, *The Russian Pink* is a brisk, sometimes convoluted, thriller with timely selling points: Honey is the wife of Harry Nash, an unscrupulous US presidential candidate involved in a scam centred on a

Russian pink gem extracted from Angola. When the diamond, estimated to be worth more than US\$1 billion, enters the US and is seen adorning Honey's neck, ex-CIA agent-turned-US Treasury investigator Alex Turner has to tread with utmost care. Alex, a former diamond smuggler, has several pressure points, the most vulnerable being his daughter, who becomes a target. Hart's rock-solid facts add delicious heft to a tale of greed and murder: he is also the author of *Diamond: The History of a Cold-Blooded Love Affair* (2002). So when there's mention of a Hong Kong billionaire having spent US\$30 million on a 16-carat pink, you wonder who that might be. Then you check your own prejudices and imagine a female buyer. She's plain smart.