

Intruder in the dust

Carla Carlisle finds this account of her native Deep South heartfelt, but somewhat lopsided

Travel Deep South

Paul Theroux
(Hamish Hamilton, £20 *£18)

FOR half a century, Paul Theroux has wandered around the world, writing about the torments of the road as much as the spirit of places. As one of his sedentary readers, I've been grateful to go with him without incurring a single tick bite.

Deep South is Mr Theroux's 10th travel book. Now aged 74, the hassle of passports, messy money and phrasebooks is over. Totalitarian regimes in airports, with their questioning and stripping, are an indignity too far. He's back in the Mother Country now and all he has to do is amble across his Cape Cod front yard and fasten his seat belt.

Of course, no travel writer worth his notebooks is interested in the interstate-highway monoculture of Ramada Inns and Red Lobsters, certainly not Mr Theroux, who sets out to find the Deep South, with its own past and mythology. No big cities like Atlanta, Nashville and Memphis for him—he sticks to back roads as though the only voice on his SatNav is William Faulkner's wisest character, Ian McCaslin: 'To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi.'

Southerners believe that the Deep South ended with the violent birth of the New South. On his journey, Mr Theroux discovers that the New South is dead, too, killed by the outsourcing of all those hopeful industries and non-union factories that sent their business abroad. If there is a heart to this book, this is it; all the huge achievements—the end of Jim Crow, the Voting Rights Act, the election of a black president—don't mean a thing if there are no jobs.

Mr Theroux tells a dark and meaningful story. The textile mills



A lot of gas stations in the Deep South are now owned by Indians

‘The huge achievements don't mean a thing if there are no jobs’

that once thrived have gone to China and Mexico so that Americans can buy cheaper towels at Walmart, the gargantuan chain that killed the Main Streets that used to be the heart of town communities.

It's not just towels that no longer say 'Made in USA'. In the 1990s, millions of acres of cotton (now grown in China) and soybeans (grown on cleared land in the Amazon rainforest) were replaced by catfish farms. The Mississippi Delta became a vast inland sea. Now, that's gone too. You want catfish and hushpuppies? The catfish comes from Vietnam.

There are other revelations, too. Seventy percent of those roadside motels that line backroads are now owned by Indians. All the motels where Mr Theroux spends his nights are owned by Patels, from Surain in Gujarat. The same extended families that operate convenience stores in Britain own the motels and gas stations in the Deep South.

The author doesn't object to the Patels settling in America. His

fury is aimed at former President Clinton for signing the free-trade agreement that he believes led to the exodus of manufacturing—the last nail in the South's coffin. He's outraged that the Clinton Foundation, based in Arkansas, pours millions into Africa, but has never put a dime into Arkansas. He also has it in for Bill Gates, who attacks poverty in Africa, but is blind to the destitution in his homeland.

Mr Theroux observes that the poverty in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, the Black Belt of Alabama, the Ozarks of Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta is more grave than what he witnessed in the distressed parts of Africa and Asia.

At times, I wanted to holler 'Lighten up, Ole Fellow. Find a juke joint, sit down with a cold beer and listen to the Blues'. When he is served fried chicken, corn bread, okra, field peas and fried green tomatoes, my mouth waters, but his never does.

I don't blame Mr Theroux for wanting to make up for the mountains of books by white southern writers by only spending time with black southerners, but it makes his journey culturally and racially lopsided. This is a book worth reading, but I don't think Mr Theroux went home a wiser or happier man. As they say in my Deep South, 'you can take a donkey travelling, but it won't come back a horse'.

Fiction

The Oligarch

Joseph Clyde
(Gibson Square, £8.99 *£8.54)

IT WILL not give away the plot of this thriller too much to say that it's about a Russian billionaire oligarch and his drugs-and-sex-obsessed son living in London and a possible plot to assassinate a Russian president (unnamed), who has recently deployed military force in the Crimea and Ukraine. The background is right up to the minute and wholly plausible, albeit deeply shocking.

It was said that Frederick Forsyth's best-selling *The Day of the Jackal* (1971) was initially turned down by a number of publishers on the grounds that everyone would have known from the beginning that the plot (to assassinate Gen de Gaulle) was going to fail.

I have no idea if this argument was used against *The Oligarch*, but, if so, it would have been an equally inappropriate response: this is a totally gripping and enthralling tale of intrigue and double-crossing, made all the more readable by the racy and convincing dialogue.

If it has a fault, it's perhaps that, by the end, the layers of subterfuge have become so complex that the reader risks being as confused as the protagonists in the story. The hero himself—a former MI5 officer—is deceiving his wife as well as his opponents. Everyone is even more devious than they appear.

When so many different identities are concealed, it's no surprise to learn that the author's own name—Joseph Clyde—is a pseudonym or *nom de plume*. In real life, I remember him (from my own days as a diplomat) under his proper name as a particularly creative colleague who had a very considerable grasp of political and intelligence matters. He deploys his experience and talents to the full in this book, which is, for once, as 'unputdownable' as the cover claims.

John Ure

Interior design

Robert Kime

Alastair Langlands
(Frances Lincoln, £40 *£36)

FOR ANYONE tired of minimalist restraint in decoration, a delicious tonic has arrived in the form of this new book dedicated to the work of Robert Kime. It features 12 houses beautifully photographed by Tessa Traeger, James Mortimer, Fritz von der Schulenburg, Christopher Simon Sykes and others, which together form a compact visual encyclopaedia of comfortable good taste. They illustrate the well-judged balance of simplicity and richness that is the real art of the great interior.

Mr Kime creates rooms that read like still-life paintings, in which strong colour and pattern play vital parts. He has a keen sense of the past—he studied medieval history at Worcester College, Oxford,



Robert Kime reclines in an Art Deco velvet chair in his library

and supported himself as an undergraduate by selling antiques.

We learn of the homes in Wiltshire, Ireland and Provence that he created with his late wife, Helen, and of the select commissions on which he has

worked. Alastair Langlands tells his story with admirable clarity, much of it in the form of extended captions.

There are many surprises, including Mr Kime's own modest-looking holiday cottage in Ireland,

of which the author writes 'Robert approached the decoration and furnishing... in the same way he would a palace' and in which each room is more beguiling than the last.

Dream-like Swangrove Lodge was decorated and furnished—on the insistence of his client, the Duke of Beaufort—with an 'air of mellowness inclining to extinction'.

At Clarence House, the most elegant of occupied Royal residences, Mr Kime deftly helped The Prince of Wales to re-group furniture and paintings he had inherited from Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, and introduced new colours and fabrics. Yet, everything somehow feels as if it has always been thus.

One of his greatest triumphs is the drawing room at South Wraxall Manor, with its glorious plasterwork ceiling and richly carved chimneypiece. Here, again, texture, pattern and provenance contribute to a feeling of mellow, elegant comfort.

Jeremy Musson

Memoir

My Life with Wagner

Christian Thielemann
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson,
£25 *£22.50)

'I WAS positively knocked backwards by Wagner,' writes the conductor Christian Thielemann of a youthful experience, 'and I knew this is it. This is what you must do.' The newly translated *My Life with Wagner*—part memoir, part reflection, part analysis—explores the fascination the composer holds for the man often cited as the foremost interpreter of his music today.

In one broad but illuminating sweep, Mr Thielemann surveys everything from Wagner's distinctive use of orchestration to the schemas of his operas; from the approach of different conductors to the Wagnerian Walhalla of Bayreuth, of which the author was appointed Music Director in June.

His description of what makes this house, which opened in 1876, different from any other, its working methods and the specific

challenges posed by the famously covered orchestra pit—'the mystic abyss'—make fascinating reading.

No account of Wagner can escape the subject of the composer's anti-Semitism. The familiar arguments here reach a predictable conclusion. 'I can't hold Richard Wagner musically responsible, for the misuse of his works by the Nazis.'

Mr Thielemann's skill lies in conveying the power of music in words. His description of *Lohengrin* as 'the purest eroticism expressed as sound', explaining how the different 'amalgamations' of instruments create 'shivers of delight', would surely pique the curiosity of one yet to dip a toe into Wagnerian soundwaves.

Yet, gripping though this may be as an introduction to the composer, it's principally as an insight into the multifaceted art of the conductor that I would recommend this book. To anyone who has ever asked 'What does a conductor actually do?', it offers a fine response.

Teresa Levonian Cole ➤

TINSMITHS

timeless furnishings

WWW.TINSMITHS.CO.UK
HIGH STREET LEDBURY 01531 632083

A Spool of Blue Thread

Anne Tyler
(Knopf, £18.99 *£14.99)

This is Anne Tyler's 20th novel and reputedly her last. Should she go into retirement with a Booker Prize under one arm? The very idea would provoke a groan from some readers; for others, it's an appropriate accolade for a master of the American family saga.

Here, she invites the reader to the Baltimore home of the Whitshank family, setting the scene for three generations of domestic drama. The critical snobbery towards her is similar to that which distinguishes 'art' from 'craft'. The Whitshank house is impeccably well crafted, so much so that you could walk in through the impressive porch, make yourself a sandwich in the kitchen and have a nap in one of the bedrooms.

If solidity of construction was the thing, this novel would win hands down. Its poise and skill have earned it a place on the shortlist, but it lacks the punch to become a winner. *Matilda Bathurst*

A Brief History of Seven Killings

Marlon James
(Oneworld, £8.99 *£8.54)

Based on the attempted assassination of Bob Marley, Marlon James's story is told in many voices, from local patois to savvy New Yorker and even quasi-colonial English—the cast of main characters totals about 75.

Jamaica was a violent and dangerous place in the 1970s; the grand, sweeping narrative embraces crime lords, drugs barons, CIA agents and innocent bystanders. A kind of *Wolf Hall de nos jours*, the style takes some getting used to.

Much of the often eye-wateringly brutal action is based on true stories, although fictional names and euphemisms add an unnecessarily coy nuance. Ambitious and accomplished, but the complexity is sometimes too clunky. An outside bet. *Rupert Uloth*

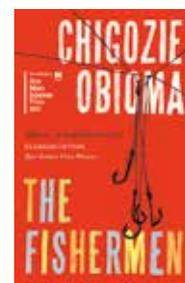
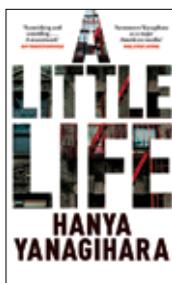
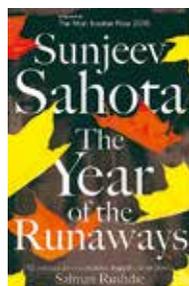
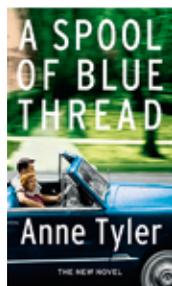
The Year of the Runaways

Sunjeev Sahota
(Picador, £14.99 *£12.99)

Sunjeev Sahota's first novel, *Ours are the Streets* (2011), confronted

Place your Booker bets

'Terrific arguments... violent but friendly' was the judges' consensus. We assess the six titles shortlisted for this year's Man Booker Prize



the issue of Islamic radicalism in Britain, a debut that won him a place on Granta's decennial list of Best Young Novelists. The list has a habit of predicting the next big names, so it's not surprising that his ambitious new novel has made the Booker shortlist. Whether it's a winner, however, is doubtful.

The plot follows the lives of a group of Indian migrants living together in Sheffield, struggling to find work and attempting to preserve their cultural identity. Although the subject matter is undeniably significant, the treatment is, occasionally, a little saccharine. Characters strive to break free from the caste system; our heroine is pure of heart, yet compromised by circumstance. It's an important book, but not one that demands a second reading. *Matilda Bathurst*

A Little Life

Hanya Yanagihara
(Picador, £16.99 *£14.99)

It didn't seem promising: unpronounceable author's name, Booker

shortlisted, 720 pages long. How wrong you can be. The saga follows four college classmates from teenage to middle age. Haitian JB, a painter; Scandinavian Willem, an actor; rich boy Malcolm, an architect; and damaged founding Jude (named after the patron saint of lost causes), a lawyer. All become wildly successful.

The epic is gripping, its format pioneering and the prose at once clear, unaffected and poetic. The characters are finely drawn, as is New York, its galleries, A-listers and parties. Apart from a handful of truly evil men, the rest are gentle, kind and thoughtful. Many are often in despair, but remain true. *A Little Life* is melancholic and tragic, yet lifts the spirits and hopes. If it doesn't win the prize, I'll be seriously annoyed. *Leslie Geddes-Brown*

Satin Island

Tom McCarthy
(Jonathan Cape, £16.99 *£14.99)
When Tom McCarthy's *C* was shortlisted in 2010, our reviewer wrote 'Oh, dear. Pretentious... Action

that goes nowhere... hard work, but not rewarding'. *Plus ça change*. His latest novel has no character development, plot, speech quotation marks, beginning or end. It's a stream of consciousness full of allusions, borrowings and repetitions from an author who wants no truck with convention, but is, perhaps, too clever to win.

Chapters divided into numbered sections are narrated by U, a disillusioned 'corporate ethnographer' charged with preparing a Great Report by a man of 'visionary vagueness' who's recently won the Koob-Sassen Project contract. Neither U nor I can tell you anything much more about all this.

Recurring metaphors create patterns and spills: an oil leak, a man dropping from a sabotaged parachute, spreading cancer cells, streams of ferry passengers. But, despite brilliant visual imagery and enjoyable riffs, I'm afraid I just got bored—with the going nowhere and the predictable themes of contemporary corporate life. Like U, I felt 'suspended between two types of meaninglessness'. *Mary Miers*

The Fishermen

Chigozie Obioma
(Pushkin Press, £14.99 *£13.49)

Narrated by nine-year-old Benjamin, this debut novel charts the heartbreaking decline of a post-Colonial Nigerian family. A patriarchal father, whose ambition for his four sons plays on the timeless theme of hubris, makes way for the tragedies that follow.

When the father moves away, the brothers enjoy their freedom and, soon, fishing replaces study and anarchy reigns. One day, the boys encounter a prophetic madman, who tells the eldest that he will be killed by one of his brothers. So unfolds a story of wretchedness and redemption—themes that seem to transcend the characters to comment on the whole of Africa, with its many contradictions.

Chigozie Obioma has rightly been compared to Chinua Achebe and this original, beautiful novel sets him up as one of this generation's great voices in African literature. *Geoff Heath-Taylor*