Comfort and joy

Hilary Mantel, Rowan Williams, Elif Shafak, Michael Morpurgo and more on the cultural artefacts and pursuits that bring them solace in dark times.

BY NEW STATESMAN

Hilary Mantel

Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels are Downton Abbey for the intelligent

If you feel you want bracing, rather than soothing, you might read or reread Ivy Compton-Burnett – if you enjoy her, there are 19 novels to go at. I first tried to read her when I was in my twenties and dropped back, baffled and a little repelled by her style. But ten years later I tried again and it was like arriving home. I hope that was because I had started writing myself, and admired the remorseless tick-tock of her dialogue – and not because I had become more like her grim and merciless characters. I have been reading her on a loop ever since.

I don't mind which book I pick up. They are all the much the same: late Victorian family, usually multi-generational, meet at meals in a decaying country house; at breakfast, luncheon, tea and supper, they wrangle each other. There will be one or
breakfast, luncheon, tea and supper, they evince each other. There will be one or more tyrants, one or more natural victims, a peacemaker, someone naive, someone sententious, and a few visiting gossips to stir the pot. There will be a chorus of servants, whose peevish and comic world is an inverted version of the one upstairs.

In short, it's Downton Abbey, but for the intelligent. The plots are preposterous, leaving poisoning and incest to lie between the lines. Perhaps that's one reason I enjoy them — I don't have to watch the author wasting her gifts on plotting. You can guess what will happen, in broad outline, but sentence by sentence you stare at the page and blink: "Did she really say that?"

It's not always easy to get hold of the books — there are a few recent editions, even some audiobooks, otherwise you must buy them used, and exercise patience when the pages fall out. She was badly published in her lifetime and since, so those with an eye for detail can do a bit of bookbinding and proof reading along the way. My great wish is to form a fan club, so that we can dine together — in brighter days — and cheer each other on with sneery epigrams and obscure veiled insults. Manservant and Maidservant or A House and Its Head are good places to start.

Another distant world in which to cocoon is Anthony Powell’s. The 12 volumes of A Dance to The Music of Time have just been reissued by Penguin. But sometimes I need to escape the smell of ink and paper, and perfumery is an art that lifts the mood. So I am gathering all my scent samples and ends of bottles, and while we are grounded I’m aiming to wear something different every day. There's more to life than the antiseptic.

Michael Morpurgo

Yes, there will be singing about the dark times

Sometimes the great writers do it in a line, or a question, and tell us the answer. Bertolt Brecht once put the question. “In the dark times. Will there also be singing?” And he replied, “Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.”

Sometimes a music hall song asks the same question, differently, but the answer is the same. “Are we downhearted? No! Then let your voices ring, and all together sing: Are we downhearted? No!”

One film and one book, both French, give me cause to sing in the shower, at the top of my voice, loud enough to drive away the most voracious virus.

Film: This is the great Jacques Tati’s Jour de Fête. Set just after the war in a rural village in France, it is the story of a community coming together for a fête and the chaos that follows, mostly caused by Tati, the postie, who is delivering letters on his bicycle all around the village.

I know every frame of this black and white masterpiece of cinema, but every time it is as fresh and charming and funny as the first time I saw it. It is France as I knew it when I went there for my first holiday abroad, when I saw my first baguette, ate my first crepe, heard my first French. It is impossible for me to stop smiling as I watch, and as it finishes not to feel a glow inside that tells me that all’s right with the world, no matter what. Such comfort, such joy.
Book: To read Jean Giono’s L’homme Qui Plantait les Arbres is to be reminded that this Humpty Dumpty world of ours really can be put together again. This is the tale of a young student walking in the high arid hills of Provence, who comes across a shepherd who has made it his life’s work to create a forest there. The shepherd wishes to restore life to a landscape that has been so devastated over the centuries that it is now barely able to sustain life, human or animal; where there are no trees, no birdsong.

He counts out a hundred acorns every evening in his hut, goes out with his sheep every day, and plants his acorns while his sheep graze. The young student returns every few years and witnesses the change wrought by one man. It is so well told that it reads like a documentary. Fable it may be, but it is the most empowering story I know, and gives me hope in the dark times we are living through. We can mend Humpty Dumpty. We must.

I'm going to have a shower now, and sing.

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**Erica Wagner**

I turned away from the news, sat down with my needles and wool

A few weeks ago – in the time Before – I went round to a friend’s house and discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that he’d taken up crochet. The beginnings of something soft and warm lay on the sofa; he found it helpful, he said, to work with the wool in the time he wasn’t writing. The sight was enticing, and reminded me that I am a knitter, though not an accomplished one. I haven’t made anything in a while, I thought to myself. That’s too bad. Then we went out to dinner, and I forgot all about it.

But then the tide of After began to creep towards the shore, and I found myself passing Fabrications, Barley Massey’s lovely craft shop in Broadway Market, east London. I still had needles; I knew I had a pattern for a simple scarf tucked away. I bought four skeins of yarn – isn’t that a delicious word, “skein”? – from West Yorkshire Spinners and walked home through streets increasingly quiet, listening to the whoosh of bicycle wheels, birdsong, the footsteps of my fellow pedestrians. I noticed I was already starting to swerve away from walkers moving towards me.

So I turned away from Twitter, away from the news, sat down with my needles and my wool, my paper pattern photocopied years ago. Casting on: the repetitive loop of the textured strands through my fingers (dry from so much washing), a stitch and a stitch and a stitch. I felt clumsy when I started, but soon enough my hands remembered what to do.

And then: maybe I could add something into the mix, something that would remind me what human beings could achieve despite all. Three cheers for the BBC and for Andrew Luck-Baker, producers of Kevin Fong’s incredible 13 Minutes to the Moon, surely one of the best podcasts released in recent years. With astonishing timing, the second series is running now. Last year the first series was devoted to the Moon landings in 1969; now Fong has turned his attention to Apollo 13, the “successful failure” that was perhaps Nasa’s most extraordinary mission.

A quick recap, in case you’re unaware: the mission launched in April 1970, less than a year after the Moon landings, commanded by Jim Lovell with Fred Haise and Jack Swigert as crewmates. Having been just a few minutes away from disaster, the story is a reminder that we areRemarkably, Apollo 13 was the only mission in the Apollo program to spend more time on Earth than on the Moon. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, it couldn’t have been more fitting that the Apollo 13 story is now the subject of a popular podcast.
Swigert. On their way to the Moon an oxygen tank exploded, threatening men and mission: all got home safely. Those last four words hardly begin to do justice to the effort required to achieve this, and I don’t know about you, but I think it’s a fine time to be thinking about a group of people working together to solve an incredibly hard problem in record time. This is brilliant stuff. Houston, we’ve had a problem. My needles click quietly, a pattern emerges, and the blue dot of Earth hangs in space, our blessed and only home.

The Shawshank Redemption: “staying human in the midst of chaos is the challenge of our times.” Credit: Pictorial Press LTD/ Alamy

Musa Okwonga

The Shawshank Redemption celebrates resilience and friendship

The film that most comforts me is The Shawshank Redemption. It’s become famous as one of the most-hired rental videos of all time, back when home rental was still a thing, but I was lucky enough to see it in the cinema. This film is two-and-a-half hours long and it was so emotionally overwhelming that there was a 90-minute section in the middle where no one in the entire auditorium made a sound.

If this film were food, it would be a bar of dark chocolate: you can’t consume it too quickly, you need to savour each piece with care. I didn’t simply watch The Shawshank Redemption, I absorbed it. I think it resonated so much with me because it celebrates the three themes that I would go on to value the most in life: friendship, community and resilience. Most of all, I think of how the heroes of this film go through unimaginable suffering, yet still manage to retain their humanity. Staying human in the midst of chaos is the defining challenge of our times, and this film is the epitome of that.

My favourite song of all time is Curtis Mayfield’s “Move On Up” – the extended version – and this film fully embodies the spirit of that music. The Shawshank Redemption fully acknowledges how brutal our world can get, yet it still somehow yearns for more, and in doing so it surges beyond what anyone thought possible. The ending of this film is one of the most uplifting things I have ever witnessed; and these closing moments, which see hope rewarded, seem more important than ever.
Rowan Williams

My colleagues and I winced with recognition at The West Wing

About 15 or 16 years ago, a friend sent me a DVD of the first series of The West Wing; in a very short time, I had become an addict and had introduced it to my colleagues as well. In a very small way, we could all recognise (and wince with the recognition) something of what it was to work as a highly pressured team in the public eye, making all our mistakes in the glare of the spotlights and regularly balancing the moral costs of what looked like unavoidable compromises. I worked steadily through the whole seven series over the years that followed. The West Wing became one of my regular "default" choices for an unoccupied evening and is still my favourite comfort viewing.

It's not that it's perfect. The criticisms that it is too smugly liberal, with one-dimensional representations of opponents, or that it turns to melodramatic crisis when the main narrative is drifting, or that it too regularly descends into sentimental edification of a very North American kind (no The Thick of It cynicism here) are not without substance. But overall it does an astonishing job of presenting a diverse and flawed group of intelligent people seriously trying to be good in public; an active and struggling moral community at the centre of a global power.

Of course it's a wish-fulfilment fantasy (don't even think about how it compares with the reality of the actual West Wing today); but it is witty, eventful, informative (I derive most of my limited knowledge of the US constitution from it) and, yes, inspiring.

It declares that public service can in spite of everything be a moral enterprise, while also demonstrating that compromise and failure are around every corner.

It might be true – we shall see – that the present crisis will at last shake the lazy assumptions of our cheapened political culture. If we can be made to ask how we reintroduce adequately serious discussion of how we make a secure and durable social home through our political debates, we could do a lot worse than turn to President Bartlet and his team for a few starters for ten, as we sit trying to make sense of our isolation and what has created it.

Jonathan Coe

When the going gets tough, you have to go back to childhood

My routine comfort reads would include favourite novelists such as Fielding, Dickens, Rosamund Lehmann or Flann O'Brien. But extreme times call for more extreme measures, which means that when the going really gets tough, you have to go back to childhood: to those books which return you to a time when those of us blessed – or cursed – with a happy childhood could swaddle themselves in the comfort blanket of reading, and for a few happy, solitary hours the world would seem an entirely safe and benign place.

The books from those days that I recall most fondly are the Jennings novels of Roald Dahl, with his compelling plots and lovely prose. Such moments are the
Anthony Buckeridge. The boarding school world they described was very remote from my own experience, but the boys and teachers at the school seemed instantly relatable. I also found them howlingly funny.

Unsurprisingly, Buckeridge’s stories, the first of which was published in 1950, did not touch upon the politics of private schooling (he was actually a supporter of state education), but used the boys’ sense of comfortable enclosure at Linbury Court Preparatory School as the basis for comedy, just as Dick Clement and Ian Le Frenais, the writers of the 1970s sitcom Porridge, did with Slade Prison. Linbury Court is a self-isolating community, and while there are occasional trips to the surrounding villages and provincial towns, there is little sense of the outside world encroaching.

It’s this, I think, that makes the books so reassuring: the boarding school (stripped of its social and political context) as safe space, where the worst deprivation you can expect is detention. And there is the added bonus of two great comedy double acts: extrovert Jennings and thoughtful, anxious Darbishire (that was me), and even better, the two main teachers: blowhard Mr Wilkins, all hot air and bluster, and calm, competent, unflappable Mr Carter. Buckeridge presents a sort of British two-party political system in microcosm – and I know which one I would rather have as prime minister right now.

Melissa Harrison

Watch the outside world change. Do it every day, without fail

Ours is a breathtakingly beautiful world, full of beauty and kindness. Small acts can bring it close, and help us connect to what will sustain us. At this time of year, I plant seeds. I don’t have a greenhouse, so I use a windowsill propagator: a long, narrow tray filled with water, with a special felt mat and six pots. Each seedling is never anything less than a tiny miracle, as well as an investment in the future. Caring for them is an act of hope, and a lesson in resilience.

The same goes for my two seed feeders. Beyond the glass the birds are busy building nests, and the dawn chorus and evening chorus grow louder and more joyful every day. Throw open your windows and listen. Spring rushes on regardless, a wave of life and blossom and birdsong that is building now and soon will crash across city and countryside alike in a foam of cow parsley and sunshine and butterflies. Notice the changing weather. Watch the outside world change; do this every day, without fail. You need this medicine more than you know.

Indoors, there is great joy to be found on social media. I’ve learned not to use it as a news source or as a forum for serious discussion, but simply as a way to connect with people. On Twitter I look for humour, creativity and kindness. I use Instagram like a periscope to peep into the lives of people in other countries who I’ll never meet, or even talk to: two Alaskans who live off-grid in a snowbound cabin with their cat; a Japanese couple with a toddler who are restoring a traditional rural house; a street photographer in Irkutsk. The app lets me translate their captions, if I want; but mostly I just like to look at their photos and remind myself how big the world is, and how fascinating: “crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural” as the poet Louis MacNeice so memorably wrote.

There is great comfort in music, as opposed to rolling news. Right now, Sam Lee’s new album, Old Wow, is exactly what I need. The fertile ground of traditional folk
Mark Haddon

Autechre’s electronica seems, in some obscure way, to be about me

I have recurring dark periods in my life thanks to a long-term mood disorder and lamotrigine sometimes failing to pull its weight. I would love to show off by saying that I respond by returning yet again to Proust in the Scott Moncrieff translation or by watching Yasujirō Ozu’s Tokyo Story for the 27th time, but I can’t read anything in that state and I am too agitated to get through an entire film. What I need is music, turned up loud. And very specific music, too. There was a period of over a year when I was frightened about dying from the moment I woke up until the moment I went to sleep (a story for another time) during which I could listen only to the Indigo Girls or Mozart – except the Requiem in D Minor, obviously, on account of it being a mass for the dead that Mozart feared he was writing for his own funeral, and which he left unfinished on account of dying in the middle of writing it.

Last year I had a triple heart bypass. I was unexpectedly cheerful throughout the whole experience, but I did need music to keep me company during a few long nights directly after the operation, particularly when a lung collapsed and when I was running low on morphine. Two albums became very good friends indeed. The first was the four-disc NTS Sessions by Autechre – long unfurling tracks of left-field, doggedly uncommercial electronica partly written by virtual machines.

I’m 95 per cent sure it’s not your cup of tea but I find it gripping, seductive and often sublime. Because it is created entirely on a computer it has no acoustic and conjures up no studio, no concert hall, no room of any kind. It seems to occupy a place outside the physical world: I would drift off and picture craft of prodigious size moving slowly through deep space. Given that I, too, occupied a place just outside the physical world at that point the music seemed, in some obscure way, to be about me.

The second album was The Appearance of Colour, a melodic, mostly instrumental record by viola player and arranger John Metcalfe. It’s like Max Richter but more interesting, the kind of thing you might hear on Radio 3’s Late Junction while driving through the night and think, “I need that in my life.” Both albums have since become the music I turn to most often when in need of reassurance. Partly because of their intrinsic wonderfulness, and partly because my hospital experience has amplified them with a fuzzy morphine glow, which is, I have to say, not unpleasant.

Olivia Laing

David Bowie is my patron saint of quarantine

At a low ebb last week, my friend Philip sent me a photo of David Bowie, shot from behind, in a tight black sweater, his orange hair slicked back, drawing a circle on a wall. Above it, the word ISOLAR in blocky red letters. There he is, the patron saint of quarantine. Bowie’s been rocking my bedroom world since I was barely even a
teenager, singing along to “The Bewlay Brothers” in the isolation machine of the English suburbs. Back then, it seemed as if he was way ahead of the rest of us, broadcasting from an alternate station, a galaxy adrift. Now, in the Plague Year of our Lord 2020, it’s a comfort to find him already here, the alien from The Man Who Fell To Earth, passing his isolation days playing ping-pong in a bunker with forest wallpaper, beneath a gloomy chandelier.

So many of his songs are about being stuck, out much further than you thought and unable to find a way home. It’s that note I want to hear now, an alien calling to his own kind. But when I listen to him, it’s peopled memories that come flooding in. Watching Labyrinth with my sister, entranced by Bowie’s lonely, sexy goblin king. Driving through the Bronx with my friend Joseph late one spring night, listening to “Heroes”. We crested over the bridge into Manhattan feeling truly exultant, as if we owned the world.

I don’t feel like that now, but I’ve just watched a video of Bowie on YouTube singing “I Got You Babe” with Marianne Faithfull. She’s dressed as nun, and he’s in fishnets, feathers and red latex. He looks feral and serpentine, bone-thin, and he can’t stop laughing, maybe because he was high and maybe because he relished the ridiculous, magnificent spectacle he was making. It’s done me a power of good to see him prancing about: a light entertainer in the sense of someone who upends gravity, who keeps you afloat.

Derek Owusu

At one point in life, Notting Hill was my therapy

There was a time in my twenties when I couldn’t fall asleep without having Notting Hill playing in the background. I can’t remember who introduced it to me, or why I decided to watch it, but at this point it feels like I’ve been watching it my entire life. It’s my go-to movie for recommendations, and even when nobody has asked, I’ll wheel it out, describing in detail why it is the closest we will ever get to the perfect romcom.

What the movie means to me has changed over the years. For a long time, I thought it was the blueprint for an ideal love story: all about waiting in bookshops to meet your perfect partner. Of course, I believed I had all the awkward charm of William Thacker. But it was also a way for me to do something I often wasn’t able to – feel happy for someone else’s happiness. At that time in my life, living in a consistent low, Notting Hill was therapy – Thacker was the friend I always wanted to be and Spike, in his briefs, was the vehicle to restore faith in humanity.

I still watch Notting Hill when I need cheering up, when I need to “adios” pessimism, but it’s no longer just the love or humour or Henry James references that create that comforting glow. Now, it’s the film’s knowledge that there are always second chances, that there’s no such thing as being completely hopeless when you have loving people around you.
Eimear McBride

A spot of distraction does the brain good. Enter the jigsaw puzzle

I don’t have any hobbies and, like most workaholics, work is pretty much all the comfort and joy I’m after. That said, every once in a while, it does become abundantly clear that a spot of distraction might do the brain good and so, enter the jigsaw puzzle. Nothing fancy. None of that 3D business. Just the plain old cardboard-backed variety, preferably around a thousand pieces and, hopefully, with a reasonably interesting picture on the front. My first choice is for maps with lots of fiddly lines and symbols, after that old movies or Doctor Who images. Then, maybe, historical scenes – if you’re willing to accept Cold War Steve’s excellent “Hellscape” jigsaw as a “historical scene”. And I am.

However, since my eight-year-old daughter has taken to joining me in this grand appropriation of the not-very-big dining table, there have also been a lot of kittens in sweetshops, kittens in gardens, Roald Dahl characters – alas – and unicorns rampaging through waterfalls. But I think she would agree that our greatest combined achievement to date has been the thousand-piece “Beano: Past & Present” puzzle I picked up second-hand on Ebay.

Once you’re in “the zone” though, it doesn’t really matter what the picture is – but, Dear Ravensburger, do spare us any commemorative Corona-Cummings 500-pieceers once the lockdown is over. I’ll happily admit that jigsaw making is, by its very nature, a simple pleasure, all of which resides in the brain being afforded the satisfaction of solving a reliably solvable problem. But sometimes, and especially when the world is mad around you, having to do nothing more than search out the perfect piece to make the big picture complete is very comforting indeed.

Elif Shafak

When stuck between extremes, I turn to the gothic

In this moment of deep uncertainty and collective angst, perhaps the worst we can do to ourselves is to gravitate towards one of two extremes. We either find ourselves constantly thinking, reading, talking about coronavirus and then it becomes so heavy, all the news pouring in, day in day out, that we can’t even think
straight any more. It affects our mood, this state of panic, and it affects the people around us. We get more stressed, depressed, listless.

Or else, we swing to the other extreme, forcing ourselves into casual and cheerful indifference. This, too, is problematic. When a virus is killing the most vulnerable and in so many countries across the world we have the worst populist rulers, we cannot simply close the door on the outside world and retreat into a herb garden to grow rosemary and oregano. We cannot be numb to the pain of others.

But don’t get me wrong. They do matter enormously, the rosemary and the oregano, the seemingly small things in life that give us joy and pleasure and a sense of lightness. So the question I’m asking is: how to find the right balance? How do we remain connected to our fellow human beings, acknowledge the gloom, keep following the news, contribute to society and help others, while at the same time preserving and appreciating those “mundane” pleasures in life – the scent of a flower, the taste of the first coffee of the day. How can we hold in our minds the light and the dark at the same time?

Ever since my early youth I have been very interested in gothic literature, music and culture. In the Kingdom of Gothic dialectical oppositions constantly mix and communicate with each other – happiness and melancholy, imagination and realism, hope and despondency, beauty and decay. For me Borges, Márquez, Calvino – but also Shelley, Poe, Lovecraft – are a good antidote. Likewise, Arendt, Benjamin, Adorno. And then Dostoevsky or Anna Akhmatova. They are very different but all share the same remarkable capacity to embody in their writing striking contrasts.

I also listen to gothic metal, industrial metal, pagan metal, progressive metal and metalcore, usually on repeat and at a loud volume, and in all these genres, again, opposite sentiments are brilliantly interwoven. At a time like this, rather than veering towards an out-and-out-gloom or an out-and-out-cheer, I guess I search for cultural works that manage to combine both emotions, and that’s why, again and again, I return to the Land of Gothic.

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**Simon Callow**

**As a child, music seemed like magic to me. It still has that power**

In the end, for me, in grief, or hardship, or rage, it is always music that transmutes those emotions and takes away their destructive power. I am not a musician, have never played an instrument; I am indeed the only child in history who begged his mother for piano lessons but was refused. My sense of pitch is suspect. But music is central to my life.

My grandmother, who had perfect pitch, had been a very fine professional singer. She had a huge collection of battered shellac records from the golden age of recording, and from these, at a very early age, I learned about music and its power to take one into other worlds, worlds in which one could lose oneself, but also worlds which offered glimpses of a better state of being. I was an unhappy, frustrated child in many ways, and I quickly discovered that in those discs of my grandmother’s I had at my disposal a secret power, a magic wand, or perhaps a flying carpet on which to escape the realities of daily life. It has never lost that power for me.
Sometimes the pieces in question were pictorial in some way – I especially recollect coming upon Sibelius’s great tone poem *The Swan of Tuonela*, which describes the journey of a swan across the waters of the Finnish realm of the dead. The penumbra of sound – gruff basses and high-lying violins – that underpins the cor anglais’ exalted song takes one into a mysterious and sublime universe. But equally, abstract music, with its mathematical patterns and harmonic organisation, liberates the mind from the world of facts into a place of great clarity. I doubt that the emotions provoked by any catastrophe one might encounter in the real world could survive exposure to the *Goldberg Variations*.

**John Burnside**

*As a child, music seemed like magic to me. It still has that power*

In a TV interview from 1971, Pier Paolo Pasolini is asked if reading the New Testament brings “a Marxist like you” consolation. It seems a fair question in light of his film *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, but Pasolini hesitates for a long moment, even reiterating the question, with an air of what looks like dismay. Finally, with restrained theatricality, he replies that, as an artist, consolation is not what he is after. What interests him, in fact, is something *un po’ miracolo* (a little miraculous).

So far, so good; and the interview is about to move on, when its subject launches into a sudden critique of the very concept of consolation, insisting that, where it is applied to the gospels, he completely rejects the notion. The gospel, he says, is an intellectual edifice, which “fills, reintegrates [and] regenerates” its readers. What use, on the other hand, is consolation?

Much like Pasolini, I have never looked to any work, whether it be gospel or art, for consolation, but there is something about *The Gospel According to St Matthew* – a re-affirmation, a sense of restoration, or reconnection – that has always struck me as unusually just. What it does, for me, is to make a small but significant enough correction to orthodoxy itself, so that, while it cannot console, it does correct a specific flaw in the fabric of what had seemed common knowledge. In fact, viewing it now, I sense an attempt to restore the original Jesus, a wholly radical and charismatic political activist whose every word and action on screen is a challenge to orthodox interpretation.

This comes not so much from the writing, which stays loyal to the original, as from Pasolini’s inventive use of music, his glorious sense of chiaroscuro, and his magical ability to film vast spaces and the way he allows his camera to linger, for just that moment shy of too long, on his actors’ faces. The combination of these techniques and a text that, until now, has been taken for granted, makes for a film that assiduously interrogates the assumptions that not only believers, but all of us make about the figure of Jesus.

What the film does, in short, is to demand that we think again, not only about Matthew’s version of Jesus’ life, but about all the stories that orthodoxies appropriate, remould and feed to us in forms that they find useful. In such a radical reinterpretation as Pasolini’s we begin to take back the stories, not to be consoled, but for the sake of a richer apprehension of the world, as lived fabric and *un po’ miracolo*. 
Megan Nolan

I keep going back to Stars Hollow, the dreamy town from Gilmore Girls

I first watched Gilmore Girls in my sick bed with my mother when I was a teenager. I was ill with nerves about exams and the future and cultivated a semi-authentic, semi-regular stomach complaint which meant I could dosis off a few times a month. My mother would make us tea and buttered toast and put on E4 and we’d sink happily into the cozy chatter of Stars Hollow, Connecticut (Connecticut already a mythical place to me by virtue of being where the Babysitter’s Club books were set).

Gilmore Girls is a low-stakes dramedy about a mother, Lorelai, who gave birth to her daughter, Rory, at 16. Lorelai exited the confines of her prissy patrician upbringing when she got pregnant, but re-enters her parents’ life out of financial necessity when her brainbox daughter needs her private school tuition fees paid. I have watched the seven series approximately a dozen times, and am in the middle of my latest re-viewing right now. Things go wrong in Stars Hollow, but manageably. There are heart attacks and infidelities and terrible family arguments and crying jags but they are generally cushioned by a swift cut to another reassuring scene in the diner, or with one of the town’s zany characters.

That’s the reason I come back to it over and over again: that dreamily suffocating town. I never really had much of a community when I was a kid – once my parents split up I moved house a dozen times, until I was nearly an adult. The idea of a place where everyone on the street outside your house knows and loves you and is proud of you was alien and intoxicating. I was 16, like Rory, when I started watching Gilmore Girls, and now I’m nearing Lorelai’s age. More or less all I do is move around, evade community, seek novelty, which is why I’m still so comforted by it, enraptured by the strange idea of people being able to bear witness to your whole existence.

Nadifa Mohamed

Gardeners’ World offers 29 minutes of televisual sedation

Spring is here and Gardeners’ World has returned to our screens, Monty Don and his placid Labradors offering us 29 minutes of televisual sedation. There are no hard edges or loud noises in Monty’s world – just the buzz of bees, the scrape of shovels, and the tinkle of suburban fountains. The seasons turn in a neat and predictable way, each offering new shades of beauty and little lessons in how to survive.

The winter is always a trial for me and other vitamin D-deficient souls, and I look forward (with a kind of desperation) to the first flowering of spring. My camera roll is full of magnolia buds in varying states of release, and streets strewn with the confetti of pink blossoms. But this year, my enjoyment of it all feels misplaced and almost tragic. The world still turns, but our own place in it seems less secure.

So I have returned to Monty Don and his guru-like control of the elements. Without saying it explicitly, Monty instills the disciplines of hope, perseverance and creativity. He has spoken about how gardening has provided him with comfort through his lifelong bouts of depression, and rather than the blind, sanitized world I had once thought he represented, I now understand that many of the gardeners on the show have carved out little Edens for themselves beyond the reach of other
difficulties in their lives. We dig, sow, water, feed, and prune not for now but for the future – and not just for ourselves but for others, too. At a time when nations are turning inwards and hunkering down, it is easy to forget that the privilege of our existence is down to those ancestors who kept on planting and harvesting, come rain, storm or plague; and that whatever language or culture we call our own, we are all children of the soil.

Jude Rogers

We never thought our family film club would ground our lives – but now, it does

Back in January, which feels around 3,000 years ago, our family of three (Mum, Dad and five-year-old E) began a new weekly institution: Film Club.

The first rule of Film Club: you do talk about Film Club. The second rule of Film Club: it happens every Friday after school, and we eat an old-fashioned tea during it, in front of the telly. The third rule: parents put their phones away. The fourth: we take turns picking films.

This means Mum and Dad delve into our childhoods on dusty old DVDs. E prefers things that look like migraine-inducing on Netflix, although we gently discourage them through acts of subtle mind-manipulation (The Lego Ninjago Movie somehow slipped through the net).

Afterwards, we score the films on a sheet which then stays stuck on our fridge (spot the critic in the family). E has scored 10 for every film so far. The highest points altogether went to Pixar’s Inside Out, a film about a child’s emotions, rendered as bright cartoon characters. We watched this in mid-February when life still felt normal. E loved Anger’s fiery head. I saw a fellow indie girl in Sadness. E laughed at his Dad for crying at the end.

Next highest was The Wizard Of Oz (mine), which E loved best of all. We then read the book at bedtime, and E insisted on dressing as the Scarecrow for World Book Day in early March. I took a picture of him in the garden that morning, wools in different colours masquerading as hay, streaming out of his old hat and shirt-sleeves. It felt weird to be sending him in by then. When he came home, we calmed down by eating fried chicken, inappropriately, in front of Chicken Run.

Now we’re at home all the time, the thread that started our year provides us with comfort, continuity and escapism, all pulled together. Ninety minutes away from a constantly refreshing phone screen also feels particularly blissful right now, as does connecting two adults’ childhood memories with our son’s peculiar present. We’ve also watched The Never-Ending Story, E.T., Wall-E and Lego Batman (much better), the three of us snuggled up on the sofa, sharing stories we love, whizzbang moments that make us laugh, and chips.

We never thought Film Club would provide a grounding rhythm to our lives as our lives changed beyond all comprehension. We do know, though, that at 4.30 every Friday, we’ll have other worlds arriving – more precious than ever – into ours.

Ryan Gilbey
One book sent me spinning off into Beatles heaven

The gods of comfort reading were smiling kindly on me during my week of self-isolation last month: in the post arrived a review copy of Craig Brown’s magnificent new book One, Two, Three, Four: The Beatles in Time. There will be enough written elsewhere about its witty prose, evocative mosaic structure and granular detail; the book is everything (wistful, imaginative, passionate) that Danny Boyle’s Beatles film Yesterday should have been but manifestly was not. At more than 600 pages long, it is also as lush and layered as a jumbo box of chocolates. The effect it has had is to send me spinning off into Beatles heaven. Not that their music has ever been far from my life. I remember, at the age of 10, reacting to my father’s ceaseless disparagement of my favourite band, Adam and the Ants, by yelling, “Well, this is what I think of your Beatles!”—and spitting on the floor in front of him. Looking back, I think that counts as my first review.

I came around quickly to their genius. What Brown’s book has reminded me, though, is how often, even as an adult, I have underestimated the early, poppy material, the pre-Sgt Pepper years. It has reacquainted me with those numbers that feel as familiar, and therefore as easy to overlook, as my own heartbeat. “She Loves You” and “You’re Going to Lose That Girl” have done their bit to keep my spirits up; so, too, has “I Want to Hold Your Hand”, despite the unwelcome connotations it has acquired in this age of social distancing. From there, it has been a natural progression to the zesty films the group made with Richard Lester (A Hard Day’s Night, Help!) and to YouTube for the magisterial Ed Sullivan Show performances, or John and Yoko on The Dick Cavett Show. I even broke my “No James Corden” rule and watched the extended episode of “Carpool Karaoke”, which takes Paul McCartney back to his childhood home in Liverpool. Please don’t think I was crying: I just got some hand sanitiser in my eye.

Rachel Cooke

It’s not easy to read at the moment – unless you’re reading Sherlock Holmes

It’s not easy to read at the moment, whatever people say about this being the time for Middlemarch. When the lockdown began, I’d just started a new novel about the legacy of public school life, English Monsters by James Scudamore. But I haven’t felt much like picking it up since. My brain slips and slides, like stockinged feet on a polished floor; the words will not quite adhere to my eyes. I want neither novelty, nor heft. What I long for is familiarity, relative brevity and, above all, a certain sense of harmony.

And so it is that I find myself opening my beloved old edition of Sherlock Holmes: a facsimile of the stories as they appeared originally in the Strand Magazine with illustrations by Sidney Paget—a book that was given to me by father when I was nine, and at the peak of my obsession with the great detective. Unsuspecting visitors to our house would then often be asked by the small and precocious me if they would like to hear a reading of one of Conan Doyle’s stories—and sometimes, if my dad was not there to shoo me away, I would get lucky. An audience! But which story to pick? Their titles were, and are, unimprovably: A Scandal in Bohemia; The Five Orange Pips; The Man With the Twisted Lip.

My favourite was the one Conan Doyle thought the finest he ever wrote: The
Adventure of the Speckled Band. As a child, I could stare for minutes at a time at Paget’s drawing of Holmes raising his cane on catching sight of the murder weapon – and I find, now, that this is still the case. Paget’s Holmes looks like Basil Rathbone, who would play him on screen in the 1940s, and there’s something of Walter Sickert’s Camden Town paintings about the bedroom in which, one knee resting on a counterpane, he performs this daring act of velocity. “Holmes lashed furiously,” reads the caption – words that I found thrilling as a girl, and still find quite sexy now.

In Baker Street, where our hero and his friend Dr Watson have their bachelor pad, a young woman called Helen Stoner arrives. She is terrified. She believes that her stepfather, Sir Grimsby Roylott, may be trying to kill her. Holmes, struck by her conviction, takes the case and soon solves it (no spoilers here, though if you haven’t read *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, I wonder what you’ve been doing with your life). *The Speckled Band* is a locked room mystery, and it comes with that sub-genre’s attendant satisfactions: total bafflement, swiftly followed by absolute resolution. It may be chilling at points, but in the end it could not be more comforting if it tried. Reading it for the 20th (or maybe the 30th) time after the full horror show of the evening news the other night, it worked on me like a balm: a calamity averted, order restored in as long as it takes for a thin, wiry man with a “high-nosed face, penetrating eyes and angular shoulders” to leap unhesitatingly from his hiding place, and attack.

Antonia Quirke

As a child, music seemed like magic to me. It still has that power

I’ve always loved the horror actor Peter Cushing, especially since I read that when his wife Helen met him, in 1942, backstage at a provincial theatre where they were both struggling actors, he was basically wearing rags. Holes in his shoes, a tattered canvas bag slung across his back. Thin, with those pale, egg-shell eyes. Like a Durer sketch. She said that he smelled vaguely of tobacco and lavender water.

Lifelong bird-lover Cushing’s appearance on a 1972 edition of BBC Radio’s *Sounds Natural* (“Presenter Derek Jones meets celebrities with a love of the British countryside and wildlife”) is something I’ve turned to for as long as I can remember – I used to have a recording of it on a cassette tape as a teenager. And now, stuck indoors looking at the birds on spring trees suddenly green as a fable, it has extra lure and poignancy.

Famously kind and gentlemanly, Cushing was 58 at the time of recording, still appearing in Hammer Horror films, and very recently bereaved. He speaks with a caressive, drifting softness, almost as though Jones is interrupting him praying. We hear about his contented years with Helen (“home with her was something... out of this world”). About life in Whitstable, where their house nosed the sand. The birds in his garden and on the beach beyond obsessed Cushing. Heron and bartall godwit. Oystercatcher, little stint, whimbrel.

The actor’s voice sounds increasingly antique, and almost somnambulant; a little bit of lost music for the English language. Of the song of the curlew, Cushing notes; “It’s... almost as if it’s saying, ’it’s alright, it’s alright, it’s alright’.” That wonderful solitude.” When Cushing forms the words “it’s alright” he takes on entirely the mournful but solacing tone of the creature – it’s a stunning impression, capturing
Through the whole, marvellous half-hour recording – as Cushing describes missing rooks when he’s abroad, or running a mile and a half to rescue a red shank with a cockle ruinously clamped on its beak – I keep thinking to myself: this tender person made British horror. Those delicate hands – as Professor Van Helsing – so sincerely striking a prop stake through a heart with a mallet! To Cushing, it might as well have been King Lear. We two alone must sing like birds i’ the cage.