

# Review of reviews: Books

## Book of the week

### Wear and Tear

by Tracy Tynan

Duckworth 320pp £18.99

The Week Bookshop £16.99

Tracy Tynan is the offspring of two of the mid-20th century's most notorious literary celebrities, said Dominic Maxwell in *The Times*. Her father, Kenneth Tynan (1927-1980), was a "dashing brilliant theatre critic" and the first man to say the F-word on British TV. Her mother, Elaine Dundy (1921-2008), was an equally sharp-witted American novelist best known for her 1958 bestseller *The Dud Avocado*. In *Wear and Tear*, their daughter describes being raised by the "Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald of the 1950s". Though envying-provoking in certain respects (a stream of celebrities passed through the family's Mayfair apartment), Tracy's upbringing was mostly hellish. Her parents' marriage (which ended in divorce when she was 13) was a "typhoon of glamour, sex and neglect". Tracy would fall asleep listening to their "epic fights". In this "thoroughly readable" and "level-headed" memoir, she paints a "vivid" picture of her tempestuous childhood.

Being Kenneth Tynan's daughter was difficult for another reason, said Lynn Barber in *The Sunday Times*: all Tracy's friends



Tracy and "the dashing brilliant" Kenneth Tynan

assumed that she must be "an easy lay". In fact, she suffered from vaginismus, and didn't lose her virginity until she was 20. The condition may, she concedes, have been a reaction to her parents' licentiousness: both had multiple affairs, and her father was famously obsessed with sadomasochism. (He made no attempt to hide his predilections from his daughter: as a treat for her 21st birthday, he arranged a private screening of *Deep Throat*.) Though *Wear and Tear* is often interesting, Tracy's obsession with clothes (she became a successful costume designer) gets in the way: each chapter begins

with a description of a significant garment, such as a Cuban shirt belonging to her father, or the outfit she wore to his funeral. While her love of fashion must have helped her professionally, it's a "handicap when it comes to building narrative tension".

I disagree, said Kate Kellaway in *The Observer*: though I too initially feared that the clothing conceit would prove a "contrivance", I came to appreciate its "important and poignant purpose". Its role is to "dress up" a stark narrative, giving the book an "ostensible focus" that is "less painful than an unmediated consideration of her parents". Above all, what Tracy achieves in *Wear and Tear* is to make us marvel at her own survival. She emerges as "poised, resilient and sympathetic" – a stark counterpoint to her "rotten" parents.

## Grief Works

by Julia Samuel

Penguin 304pp £14.99

The Week Bookshop £12.99

"The Victorians were terrible at sex, but good at death and dying," said Helen Davies in *The Sunday Times*. "We are the other way round." In *Grief Works*, the psychologist and bereavement counsellor Julia Samuel (pictured) has "distilled the wisdom of her 25-year career" to create a "rigorous" study of the grieving process that doubles as an unusually "profound" self-help book. Samuel's central message is that "grief takes time", said Cressida Connolly in *The Spectator*. It's something that cannot be circumvented: "you have to go through it to get out the other side". At least 15% of all psychological disorders, it has been estimated, have unresolved grief as their source (and it's "surely at the root of countless cases of insomnia and alcoholism besides"). All the same, some things do make a difference, and "what seems to help the most is allowing the bereaved to talk". Among the various tips that Samuel offers to friends of the grieving are: do practical things, such as taking round food; be persistent, as "grief can manifest as grumpiness"; and "don't tell them to buck up and get over it".

Grief, Samuel writes, is the antithesis of our culture's belief that "we can fix just about anything and make it better". Paradoxically, it is this insistence on acknowledging "what cannot be fixed" that gives her book a "real chance of helping", said Kate Kellaway in *The Observer*. "She does not – hurrah! – believe in 'closure'. Nor does she feel denial is always unhelpful." I have just one quibble with this "indispensable survey": Samuel was born into the Guinness family, and was a friend of Princess Diana. Understandably, she doesn't play up her connections, but it would have been "fascinating" to get her view on the "national outpouring of grief (if that is what it was) after Diana's death".



## Novel of the week

### A Natural

by Ross Raisin

Jonathan Cape 352pp £14.99

The Week Bookshop £12.99

Tom Pearman, the protagonist of Ross Raisin's third novel, is a footballer newly signed to a League Two club. From the start, he's an awkward, isolated figure – mainly, it seems, because of his shyness. But it soon becomes clear that "something else is in play", said Jude Rogers in *The Guardian*. As is hinted at by his "sexualised" observations of fellow players, "Tom is gay, though in deep denial". *A Natural* is a "sophisticated" work of "immaculate restraint". "Not since Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* has there been a better exploration of conflicted male sexuality."

This is a "daring" and "powerful" look at the last taboo in football, said Sam Kitchener in *The Daily Telegraph*. However, it is limited by the fact that footballers are, by their nature, fairly "unimaginative characters". At times, inevitably, it's a "drab read". I disagree, said Chris Power in the *New Statesman*: both the club and its players are "intensely, compellingly imagined". At once "extremely skilled" and "intensely involving", *A Natural* is a football novel that non-fans can enjoy.

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