

BOOKS

Come in, the water's lovely!

To a five-time marathon runner, how difficult could swimming be? Close to impossible, discovers **Kat Brown**

LEAP IN

by Alexandra Heminsley

240PP, HUTCHINSON, £12.99, EBOOK £8.99



Before #fitspo, #thisgirlcan, #chicksgetfitdone and other inspirational hashtags, Alexandra Heminsley's 2013 bestseller *Running Like a Girl* launched a revolution. Part-memoir, part-instruction manual, it followed her adventures from anxious couch potato to five-time marathon runner and, crucially, a woman who appreciated her body as an instrument rather than ornament. The credit for my own marathon medal, achieved after a life spent quailing at the memory of school cross country, lies squarely with that book.

This sequel begins with Heminsley's rather deflating discovery that her abilities as a runner don't translate into swimming. After losing patience with the running industry's expensive events and mania for

technology, Heminsley breezily joins an open water course in Brighton. "I managed three strokes [of crawl] before having to stop and fall into breaststroke again... This is not meditation, I thought, as another wave slammed mercilessly into my face, forcing me to swallow frothing seawater just to keep an airway free. It's barely survival."

It gets worse: "The waves' power increased the lack of mine... How could this truce with my body, the one I had worked so hard and so long for, now be falling apart? [...] It seemed ridiculous that this same woman who joyfully told others that they could conquer whatever challenge they chose, who had not even been afraid of the ocean a month ago, who cheerfully assumed that this would not be a big deal, was now reduced to this limp, flailing wreck. But I was."

Keeping on with something that you're not immediately good at is a subject Heminsley writes about with flair. As she conquers her nervousness of the water, she is very funny, whether chronicling the "rococo arse shelf of cleavage" that comes from struggling into a wetsuit or how amateur sportsmen intimidate each other ("I wondered whether I really needed lubricant"). Sport is now so goal-obsessed that the sheer pleasure of

it can be ignored, but not here. Part of Heminsley's gift is to plunk you in the middle of each frustration and triumph, which is how she has beguiled so many people into running, and *Leap In's* readers will undoubtedly look at open water a little differently. She overcomes one of her biggest psychological obstacles on a visit to her in-laws in the Lake District, when she swims across the impenetrable darkness of a mountain lake. It's a joy to read about her hard-earned euphoria – particularly from a warm, fully clothed distance. (Her explanation of what those mythical "tarns" are will also give *Swallows and Amazons* fans a thrill.)

Whether or not this book can recruit the reader to strip off and leap in is irrelevant. As with its predecessor, the real point is to see your body as friend rather than foe. Heminsley's year of swimming coincided with a course of IVF, and she credits the calm repetition of front crawl – "I breathe, I push, I pull, I am" – with keeping her mentally together. Before she starts her treatment, she swims the 5km from Kefalonia to Ithaca as a last holiday. In the gulf, she encounters a group of over-achievers who spend their free time swimming the Channel or at Olympic trials, and turn out to be kind friends. They save Heminsley's eyes

"This is not meditation, I thought – it's barely survival"

– swollen from days of seawater leaking in – by teaching her not to press her goggles in too hard.

It's a beautiful piece of writing on finding confidence when confronted with very dark horizons. Infertility is not a subject that spawns much in the way of public discussion beyond telling women that, whenever they have babies, it is too early, too late, or otherwise wrong. Heminsley's description of her treatment, and eventual miscarriage, is clear-eyed. The second part of the book



CHRIS FLOYD/BRITISH LIBRARY/REX SHUTTERSTOCK

will come as a bit of a surprise if you're engrossed in Heminsley's story, but her potted history of swimming is lively and packed with characters, from ancient Egyptian spoons depicting women merrily breaststroking plates to guests at a watery dinner party, to Mariam Saleh Binladen, a Saudi Arabian dentist who last year became the first woman to swim the length of the Thames. There is also practical advice for newbie sea-swimmers on getting past the fear-of-wetsuit stage. And

for Heminsley, there is another adventure beyond the last page: in a recent interview with *Woman's Hour*, she revealed that she is pregnant. The many people she has inspired will give her three cheers.

While this book could do with fewer mentions of its title – exhortations to "leap in" give the feeling of Oprah beetling around in the background with a clipboard – it is another triumph for Heminsley, a champion of sport in the truest sense, and a wonderfully compassionate voice.

Sink or swim: Alexandra Heminsley



To order this book from the Telegraph for £10.99 plus £1.99 p&p call 0844 871 1515

Severed heads in snow and honey

A tale of Ottoman oppression in Albania is a potent allegory about Enver Hoxha, says **Robert Eustace**

THE TRAITOR'S NICHE

by Ismail Kadare, tr John Hodgson

208PP, HARVILL SECKER, £16.99, EBOOK £8.99



Ismail Kadare's *The Traitor's Niche*, written in Tirana between 1974 and 1978, is the latest in a series of three loosely interlinked novels about the Ottoman past of the great Albanian writer's homeland (along with *The Three Arched Bridge* and *The Palace of Dreams*) to receive a crisp English translation from John Hodgson. It recalls all the unfamiliarity, sumptuousness and cruel luxury that led to the fetishisation of the East by European orientalists; a world where armies march with scarecrows, accompanied by officers to interpret dreams and followed by wizards employed by the civil service to curse the very earth of rebellious provinces and, in rumour at least, silence the rancour of their resentful dead.

The novel's action follows the downfall of the rebellious Ali Pasha of Ioannina, called the "Mahometan Buonaparte" by Byron, who visited his court in 1809. As Ali Pasha's attempt to raise Albania to fight for independence fails, undermined by his cruelty and ambition, the focus falls on the person of Tundj Hata, the imperial courier who transports the heads of the sultan's rebellious subjects,

packed in snow and preserved with honey, to be displayed in Constantinople in a stone niche in the main square – the Traitor's Niche. Alongside Hata appear other civil servants (whose mission is to maintain the Niche itself and to scour Ali's estates after the army has departed), as well as the favoured Hurshid Pasha, the



Despot: Ali Pasha (1740-1822)

sultan's general, fixated on his own vulnerability.

Although on the surface this is a dramatic and deeply compelling historical novel, its scope is wider. At heart, what Kadare seeks to demonstrate is the terrible nature of a world in which every human element is suborned to the state. This he examines on every level, from the newly married keeper of the Niche, made impotent by his own obsequiousness, mentally tallying the wives of the dead pashas whose heads he oversees, to

the grey sack-clad peasants of the north-western plains that Hata passes through, punished by centuries-old edicts that their homeland should be "reduced to terrain", their language, calendar and religion all extinguished. This is enforced until all the peasants have is the spectacle of the heads Hata stops to display, which are "their literature, theatre, art, philosophy and perhaps love". Eventually the heads even come to separate the seasons, "the head of the second snowfall... the head of the gales". Not even the great are immune; all of the Ali Pasha's pride disintegrates at the chilling words of his sultan, "I will turn you to ash, ash, ash..."

Some controversy seems to surround Kadare's relationship with Enver Hoxha's regime before he claimed political asylum in France in 1990. Although, by Kadare's own admission, he never attempted to be an Albanian Solzhenitsyn (dissidence being a position no one could occupy "even for a few days, without facing the firing squad"), this book's sister work, *The Palace of Dreams*, only appeared in print when smuggled in alongside a separate prose collection that had already passed the censors.

Kadare has said that he believes, "dictatorship and authentic literature are incompatible". The writer is the natural enemy of dictatorship and this extraordinary novel, though tempered and surreal, is an unquestionably defiant one. It balks at the sultan's edict that his upstart people should be glad, "to eat in peace the bread of slavery". Its most compelling image, as potent as that of any writer of the Cold War era, is of one of Hata's peasants, stripped of his own history and homeland, who is found having clawed himself almost to death in his struggle to compose a ballad and draw the language, repressed for a lifetime, from his own throat.

Kadare well deserves his growing European audience.

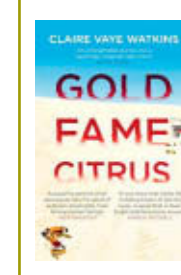


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352PP, RIVERRUN, £8.99
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432PP, VINTAGE, £10.99
★★★★

ON THE WILDER SHORES OF LOVE

by Lesley Blanch, ed Georgia de Chamberet

Blanch – author, traveller and artist – died in 2007, aged 103, having never for an instant ceased to be the star of her own life. She wrote 12 books on subjects from empires to courtesans, with a sensibility so distinctive that all were essentially autobiographical. This anthology is a delicious, readable monument to her.

GOLD FAME CITRUS

by Claire Vaye Watkins

Named after the three things that have drawn people to California, Watkins's novel is like Cormac McCarthy's apocalyptic *The Road*, but with female characters centre stage as Lux takes her daughter across a dystopian, near-future America. The style is gnarled: "blood-glutted" recurs; a mouth is called "a salivawebbed maw". It's atmospheric, but the structure doesn't quite work.

JUMPIN' JACK FLASH

by Keiron Pim

Fast-talker, gambler, autodidact, provocateur, an intimate of the Rolling Stones and the Krays, animating force behind the film *Performance*, David Litvinoff was one of the great mythic characters of Sixties London, a ghostly figure linking crime, the aristocracy, pop music and the gay demi-monde. This superb first biography is a revelation.

Telegraph bookshop

Keeping On Keeping On

by Alan Bennett

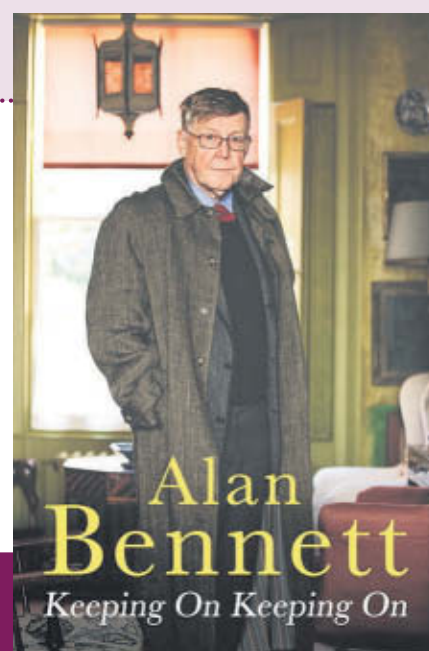
Alan Bennett's third collection of prose, *Keeping On Keeping On*, follows in the footsteps of the phenomenally successful *Writing Home* and *Untold Stories*, which were published 10 years apart.

This latest collection contains Bennett's peerless diaries from 2005 to 2015, which reflect on a decade that saw four premieres at the National Theatre (*The Habit of Art*, *People*, *Hymn* and *Cocktail Sticks*), a West End double-bill transfer, and films *The History Boys* and *The Lady in the Van*. There's a provocative sermon on private education given before the

University at King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and 'Baffled at a Bookcase' offers a passionate defence of the public library. The book includes *Denmark Hill*, a darkly comic radio play set in suburban south London, as well as Bennett's reflections on a quarter of a century's collaboration with Nicholas Hytner. This is an engaging, humane, sharp, funny and unforgettable record of life according to the inimitable Alan Bennett.

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Pick of the week

CRISIS – FRANK GARDNER

This week's choice is Crisis by Frank Gardner, in which MI6 takes on the ruthless leader of a drugs cartel, thirsting to unleash international chaos. Here, Luke Carlton reflects on his career as he heads to Colombia to investigate the brutal murder of a British national.

By the age of thirty-two he had already watched too many of his mates loaded onto helicopters in body bags, the dust and grit of southern Afghanistan following them up into the air in a departing spiral. He needed to find a second career, something that kept him on his toes but with rather less chance of getting slotted. It was the ad

in the Globe & Laurel, the Corps journal of the Royal Marines, both serving and retired, that caught his attention. "Missing the action?" it read. "Bored but fit? Fancy a challenge? Call this number." So he did, encouraged by Elise, who quietly yearned for him to hang up his boots and hand in his uniform.

It had begun with the interviews. Two days of face-to-face evaluations in an assessment centre somewhere in the Home Counties. Then there had been psychometric aptitude tests, the developed vetting, which probed into every aspect of his past, searching for weaknesses, anything that could be exploited by a hostile adversary. Then finally the induction course down at the

Base on the south coast. Surveillance, counter-surveillance, dead-letter drops, agent handling, how to deal with friendly and not-so-friendly foreign intelligence liaison officers, and personal security, both digital and physical. Luke had loved it. In Afghanistan he had had only the briefest glimpse of intelligence work, meeting Taliban informants cultivated by the brigade intelligence cell. But this was different: this was close to home; it felt real; he wanted in.

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NEXT WEEK: *Out of Bounds* by Val McDermid

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