

[**HARDCOVER:** UK/US]

History hurts

The danger of knowing too much history is outweighed by the risk of knowing too little

BY **GEORGE WALDEN**
BLOOMBERG

Interest in history is on the rise in books, films and television. Is that necessarily a good thing?

The Balkans, Winston Churchill wrote, had more history than they could consume. Too much history can even become “the gravedigger of the present,” sapping our vital energies with memories of past wounds and losses, as Friedrich Nietzsche said in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*.

Margaret MacMillan borrows Nietzsche’s title, but not his message in her new book, *The Uses and Abuses of History*. For her, understanding the past is vital, even if history is an explosive substance that needs to be handled with care.

A prize-winning historian and the warden of St Antony’s College at the University of Oxford, MacMillan is good on the perpetuation of historical myth. A case in point is the oft-repeated contention, boosted by economist John Maynard Keynes, that the victors’ vindictive treatment of Germany after World War I inevitably led to World War II.

Yet the Germans did, after all, lose the war, and their punishment in practice was never as harsh as critics persist in suggesting, MacMillan reminds us: Germany paid only a fraction of the reparations bill; Adolf Hitler canceled what was left; and in any case it was the Great Depression that really put the screws on the country, sharpening its aggressive mood.

Facing up to uncomfortable historical truths can be painful, as MacMillan notes. Britain’s mismanagement of the Irish question and Rhodesia are good examples, as is Germany’s embrace of the Nazis.

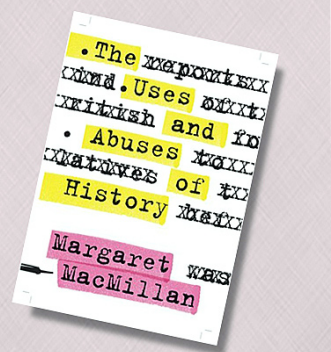
Yet it’s immature to see our past as little more than an accumulation of guilt, she argues. Everything comes down to a balanced view of history, something Russia’s leaders are now upsetting as they seek, little by little, to refurbish Josef Stalin’s reputation, she says.

A similar perversion of history can be seen in Japan, where many a textbook continues to shy away from presenting a true account of the atrocities Japanese troops committed in China in the 1930s and during World War II.

Nationalism is one of history’s greatest enemies, MacMillan argues. The Chinese, she says, would be surprised to learn that Hindu extremists claim to have rediscovered an advanced Indian civilization that preceded China’s. By this account, the Chinese are little more than descendants of Hindu warriors. Equally surprised by this theory would be the followers of Marcus Garvey, who claimed in the 1920s that a black civilization once ruled the world.

The danger of knowing too much history is of course outweighed by the risk of knowing too little. Americans, according to MacMillan, failed to understand the historically formed mentality

Publication Notes



THE USES AND ABUSES OF HISTORY

BY MARGARET MACMILLAN

194 PAGES

PROFILE

of their Cold War opponents, Russia and China (not that it stopped them winning, except in Vietnam). Ignorance of Iraq’s culture was a major factor in some of the catastrophic consequences of the US-led invasion of that country, and MacMillan devotes many pages to a familiar critique of former US president George W. Bush and all his works.

Given this emphasis on the past’s lessons for the present, it’s surprising that MacMillan doesn’t discuss the history behind the rise of terrorism. She rightly accuses some countries of developing grievance cultures, and she chides the Chinese, the Latin Americans and the French Canadians (MacMillan is Canadian) for blaming colonialism for all their woes.

“It is all too easy to rummage through the past and find nothing but a list of grievances,” she writes.

Strangely, MacMillan spares Muslim cultures from this criticism and even comes close to justifying their long-festering resentments.

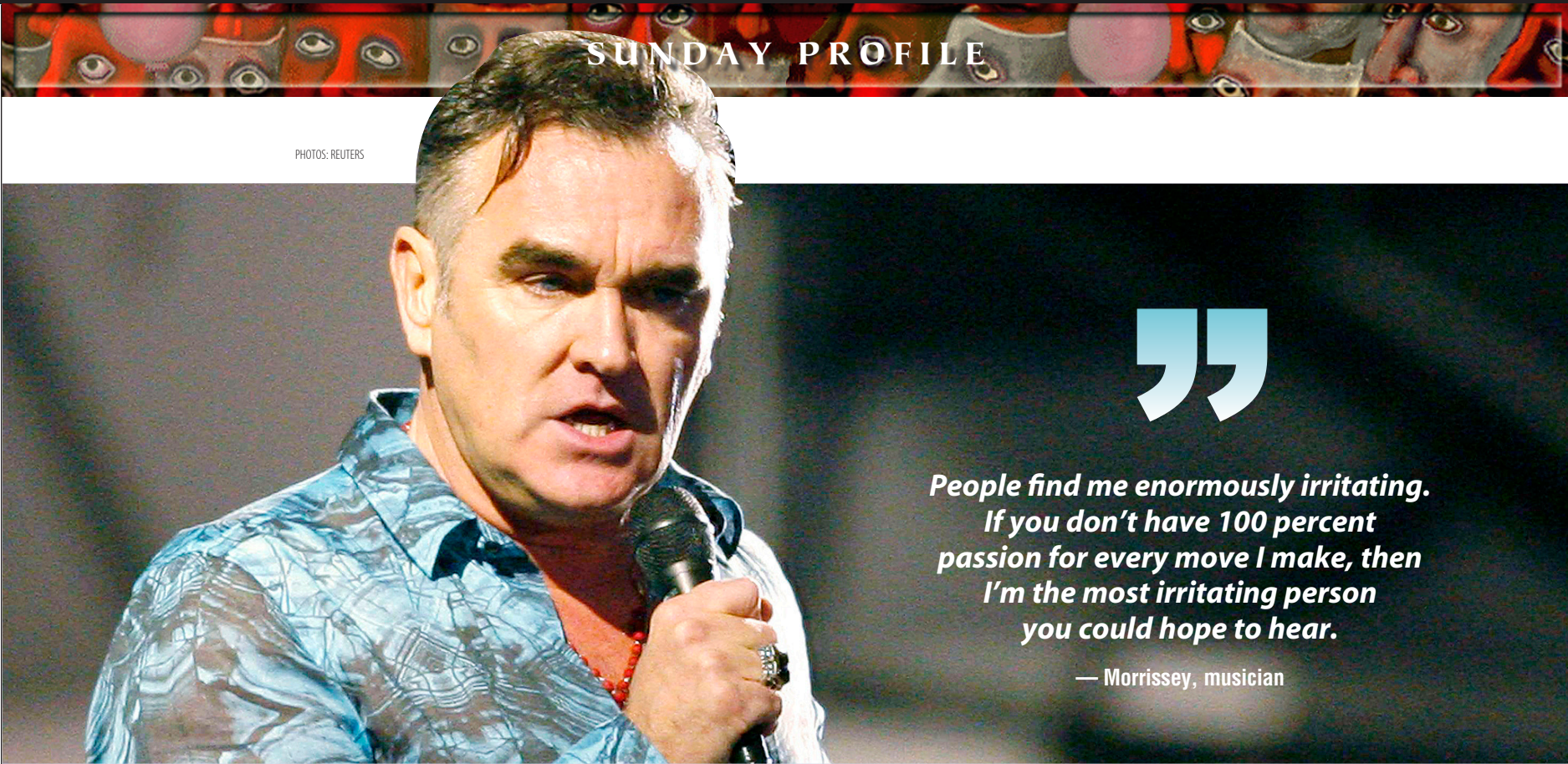
“The Crusades, the defeat of the Moors in Spain, Western imperialism in the 19th century and the evils of the 20th all add up to a dark tale of Muslim humiliation and suffering,” she writes. “Such history keeps followers angry and motivates and attracts new recruits.”

No suggestion here that these cultures carry any responsibility for their own destinies. But what of their oppression of women and attacks on modernity?

Almost every major country and civilization gets whacked in these pages for its misdemeanors. Yet Iran, an ancient, grievance-ridden culture par excellence now led by a semi-crazed president, escapes censure. As for Pakistan — a clear and present danger to the world if ever there was one — it isn’t even mentioned. Surely its tragic history was worth a word.

No one will dissent from MacMillan’s view that history must be prudently handled, but prudence must not mean inconsistency or evasion.

The book is published in the US under the title ‘Dangerous Games.’



Morrissey: the man behind the miserable mask

The singer once railed against dinosaur rock ‘n’ roll stars — now, at 50, he has joined their ranks

BY **LEN BROWN**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Recorded 20 years ago, Steven Patrick Morrissey’s throwaway B-side *Get Off the Stage* was a funny, biting attack on the dinosaur rock stars of the early 1990s. “It’s really about the Rolling Stones,” he told me at the time, “people of that ilk who just refuse to die in the physical sense; all these boring old faces ... I don’t understand why they’re still omnipresent, why they have this ubiquitousness.”

Yet on Friday this poet, former Smith and ever-controversial solo artist turned 50 himself, joining, against all grave expectations and protestations, the ever-burgeoning ranks of rock ‘n’ roll’s seniors’ tour.

Feted by artists as diverse as Bono, JK Rowling, Michael Stipe, David Walliams, Noel Gallagher and Rufus Wainwright, the impact of Morrissey’s lyrics on wider popular culture is greater than ever. Following Douglas Coupland’s novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Jo Brand’s latest book is titled *The More You Ignore Me the Closer I Get*. Then there’s the recent, celebrated Swedish vampire movie *Let the Right One In*, not forgetting Keri Koch’s new feature about Morrissey’s extraordinary Latino fan base, *Passions Just Like Mine*.

All are titles stolen from the big-mouthed bard’s own songs; fitting tributes to a man who has spent the last three decades plagiarizing ideas from Warhol and Virginia Woolf, from Patti Smith and Sandie Shaw, from Alan Bennett and George Eliot, from the New York Dolls and Anthony Newley, from the TV soap *Coronation Street* and the *Carry On* films. As a recent two-day Irish symposium on his lyricism showed, international academics now queue up alongside the passionate fans to celebrate Morrissey as a living work of art.

He has, without doubt, extended the subject matter of popular songs more than any artist of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Child murder,

working-class poverty, suicide, soccer hooliganism, mental illness, police corruption, disability, animal cruelty, violence, pedophilia, racism, death, the loss of faith — all have been addressed. Typically and topically, the recent track *Children In Pieces* deals with the abuse of children in schools run by the Roman Catholic church.

I first encountered Morrissey at London’s Venue back in September 1983. Against the post-Falklands backdrop of New Romanticism, unemployment and rampant Thatcherism, Morrissey’s disillusioned but desperately funny lyrics struck a chord. In the summer of 1984, when I was living with my parents in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, following my younger brother’s suicide, the Smiths’ *Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now* seemed to capture the battered spirit of Northern England during the miners’ strike.

On joining the *NME* music paper as a youthful reporter, I followed the Smiths passionately, reporting on their brief involvement with Red Wedge, struggling to capture in words the power and chaos of their 1986 *Queen Is Dead* tour, gradually becoming aware of the internal frictions that would soon destroy this extraordinary band. I was shattered when they split and, given that Morrissey had declared “the Smiths were like a life-support machine to me,” I was also concerned about his future. Like all who had studied his lyrics about mortality and suicide (Shakespeare’s Sister, Stretch Out and Wait, Asleep, Cemetery Gates, Death at One’s Elbow), I feared the collapse of the Smiths might push him over the edge.

Morrissey had talked to me of his fascination with artists who lived fast and died young, notably James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. Many times he reflected on death and even suicide.

“I’m nearly 29,” Morrissey said when his first solo album, *Viva Hate*, came out in 1988. “I’ll be dead in a couple of years ... I have a dramatic, unswayable, unavoidable obsession with death. I can

remember being obsessed with it from the age of eight or nine. I often wondered if it was quite a natural inbuilt emotion for people who are destined to ... take their own lives. I think if there was a magical, beautiful pill that one could take that would retire you from the world ... I would take it.”

And yet he’s still here — and, having never been one for the sex and drugs of rock ‘n’ roll, he looks rather fitter than most of his fellow fifty-something stars.

What’s more, unlike most of his 1980s contemporaries, Morrissey has retained his provocative, spiky quality. Although 90 percent of his worldview can loosely be categorized as radical and of the left — the vegetarianism and animal rights, the celebration of gay and lesbian artists, the hostility to everyone from Thatcher to Bush — his strong views on immigration and the protection of British culture from outside influences continue to cause controversy. And he genuinely seems to thrive on the hostility.

“People find me enormously irritating,” he has told me. “If you don’t have 100 percent passion for every move I make, then I’m the most irritating person you could hope to hear. I know this because people write and tell me ... it’s a tremendous accolade.”

In our numerous encounters over the years, however, he has always been warm and funny — sometimes quiet and shy, but with outbursts of desperate laughter and memorable moments of

Carry On comic timing. When I once asked Morrissey about his famously solitary celibate existence, he responded, “In order to concentrate absolutely and perfectly on everything I had to ... give up sausages.” Physically he has changed; there is no Dorian Gray-style picture in Morrissey’s attic. The working-class face is fuller and more Irish looking, and instead of the pipe-cleaner thin physique he used to display beneath those big girls’ blouses, he now struts the stage like Elvis in Vegas. And having once described his genitals as a “cruel practical joke,” he was willing to parade naked (with his bandmates) on the sleeve of his latest album, *Years of Refusal*, with only a seven-inch single cloaking his manhood.

Morrissey’s detractors would argue that his worldview hasn’t changed much over the last 30 years. They can, with some justification, complain that his lyrics bang on about the same old personal problems.

But if there remains in him an inability to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative, Morrissey has always said he’s just being honest and realistic. “I don’t want to break into a Ralph McTell song; I do feel the light has gone out and that things just get progressively worse in every way ... But it isn’t pessimism at all. If I was a pessimist I wouldn’t get up. I wouldn’t shave, I wouldn’t watch *Batman* at 7.30am. Pessimists don’t do that sort of thing.”

Certainly, no one can accuse him of mellowing. Joe Orton, another of Morrissey’s icons, once declared in *What the Butler Saw* that, “providing one spends the time drugged or drunk, the world is a fine place.”

But if you choose to abstain, like Morrissey, then the path through life isn’t quite so smooth, particularly within the music industry.

“I’ve gone through managers like people go through Shredded Wheat,” he told the novelist Michael Bracewell in 1995. “Nobody looks after you, which is why most groups end up disbanding and most artists end up dead, or on heroin.”

Len Brown’s biography, ‘Meetings With Morrissey,’ is published by Omnibus.

[**HARDCOVER:** US]

Life, from allegro to largo

Repeated motifs reverberate through subtly interlocking stories in celebrated British author Kazuo Ishiguro’s latest work ‘Nocturnes’

BY **CHRISTOPHER TAYLER**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Jorge Luis Borges once described Henry James as a deeply strange artist who appears at first sight “to be no more than a mundane novelist, less colorful than others.”

Much the same could be said about Kazuo Ishiguro, one of the most respected and covertly enigmatic of the British writers who made their names in the 1980s. Ishiguro’s novels can look on the surface like rather bloodless exercises in mainstream good taste, judiciously crafted and Merchant-Ivory-friendly. Yet his voice on the page is oddly elusive (he always uses obliquely characterized first-person narrators); his settings are more dreamlike than they initially seem; and the center of thematic interest in each novel is rarely located where the reader expects to find it. His slightly distant tone also adds extra weirdness to his unpredictable shifts into dark, dry farce, which occur most often in *The Unconsoled*, a vast

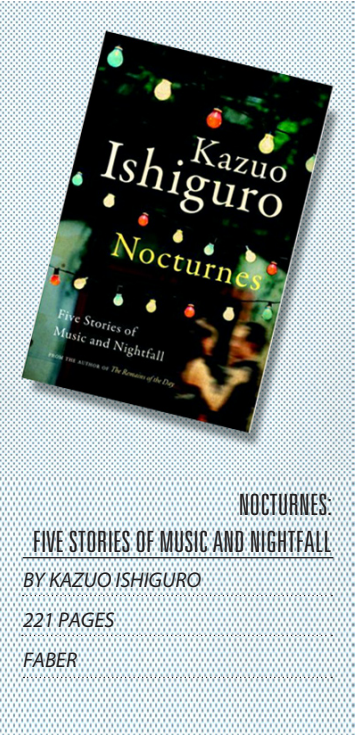
incursion into Kafka’s territory that’s probably the bravest project undertaken by a big-name English writer in recent years.

Several shifts of this kind take place in *Nocturnes*, a carefully arranged sequence of interlocking stories. In *Come Rain or Come Shine*, the narrator is having lunch with an overbearing friend. “Suddenly he began eating again, and I realized with astonishment he was sobbing quietly. I reached across the table and prodded his shoulder, but he just kept shoveling pasta into his mouth without looking up.” (Later, the narrator pretends to be a dog.) For complicated reasons, the title story’s main character sneaks into an empty ballroom and starts trying to remove an award statuette from a roast turkey’s body cavity. A man talking on a phone walks in and stops talking. There’s a pause. “It’s all right,” the man says into his phone. “It’s a man ... I thought for a moment it was something else. But it’s a

man ... That’s all it is, I see it now. It’s just that he’s got a chicken or something on the end of his arm.”

There are five stories in the book; these two — both lightly surreal, both narrated by men being pressured to pull their socks up — come second and fourth in Ishiguro’s set list. *Crooner*, the first story, and *Cellists*, the last, also reflect one another. One features a successful singer late in his career who’s about to get divorced, the other a would-be cellist whose career never started and who’s about to get married. Both are also narrated by jobbing musicians in Italian cafe bands that entertain tourists by playing the theme from *The Godfather*. In other words, the book has a symmetrical structure, with loosely paired stories radiating out from the center. The aim seems to be to remind the reader that each story is only part of the overall design: we’re meant to read them as variations on the same themes and motifs, not as freestanding compositions.

Publication Notes



NOCTURNES:

FIVE STORIES OF MUSIC AND NIGHTFALL

BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

221 PAGES

FABER

The main themes are stated in *Malvern Hills*, the story in the middle of the book, in which an aspiring singer-songwriter encounters a middle-aged couple while grumpily serving tourists in his sister’s cafe. The couple — he thinks they’re German at first, but they turn out to be faintly comically Swiss — are professional musicians who scrape by on restaurant gigs. Tilo, the man, is filled with praise for everything, while Sonja, the woman, is filled with bitterness and anger: their peripatetic life has cut them off from their son. Having done them a bad turn more or less on a whim, the narrator is rewarded with praise and encouragement when they overhear him playing his guitar. But the next time he sees them, Sonja and Tilo have quarreled. Sonja warns the narrator about disappointments to come. He seems unfazed by their unhappiness; we’re left pondering questions about self-centeredness and talent, youth and age,

aspirations and outcomes, with few suggested answers.

Some version of this desexualized triangle — the troubled couple, the outside observer — appears in each of the stories. So, too, do the conundrums concerning life choices and artistic careers. In *Crooner*, the ageing singer is divorcing his wife, whom he loves, in order to stage a comeback: showbiz rules demand it, and if he does it now she’ll be young enough to marry another star. When she appears again in *Nocturnes*, she puts up a spirited defense in an argument about the relative claims of high-minded giftedness and hustling mediocrity. In *Cellists*, by contrast, a self-proclaimed virtuoso turns out never to have learned to play (“The crucial thing was not to damage my gift”). But while some of the stories have Somerset Maugham-like plot hooks, they move delicately around their themes. There are no easy epiphanies, and the concentration on musicians

brings a further layer of ambiguity, since the reader can’t assess the players’ skills or lack thereof.

Like *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro’s most recent novel, *Nocturnes* is mostly written in a deliberately non-vivid, quasi-spoken style, more discursive and less formal than that of his earlier books. The narrators use a lot of phrases along the lines of, “The truth is ...” and, “Okay, I’ve told you before, I’m no stickler ...” and a lot of the idiom is subtly off-key: English isn’t every character’s first language. Patiently ventriloquizing these unpracticed storytellers, Ishiguro leaves the reader in no doubt about his skill at pacing and structuring narratives. There are two very funny scenes in the book, along with some bleak lines of argument, and while many of the stories hinge on artistic talent — the risks and unkindnesses associated with it; who’s got it and who hasn’t — the strong focus on more widespread problems in life makes *Nocturnes* more than a writer’s thoughts on his job.