## **Hardcover: US**

## Earth's soul, up for grabs

Margaret Atwood leaves the preaching at the door for 'The Year of the Flood,' a postapocalyptic vision of a ravaged planet

> **BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI** NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The flood referred to by the title of Margaret Atwood's new novel isn't the biblical deluge, sent by God to wipe out wickedness and sin, but a waterless one: an uncommon pandemic that cannot be contained by "biotools and bleach," and that sweeps "through the air as if on wings," burning "through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror and butchery." This flood has killed millions upon millions, and electrical, digital and industrial systems are failing, as their human keepers die.

In *The Year of the Flood* we are transported to a world that is part Hieronymus Bosch, part A Clockwork Orange. "Total breakdown" is upon the land, and a private security firm named CorpsSeCorps has seized power, taking control where the local police forces have collapsed from lack of financing. The Corps people not only use brutal tactics like internal rendition to enforce their will, but they are also conducting sinister experiments, monkeying with human and animal genetics and creating strange new mutant species.

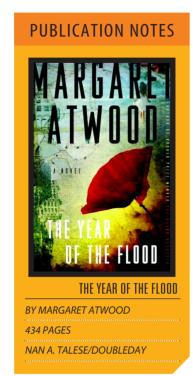
A kind of companion piece to her lumpy 2003 novel, Oryx and Crake, this book takes us back to that postapocalyptic future and it does so with a lot more energy, inventiveness and narrative panache.

Like *Oryx* and the author's 1986 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is another dystopian fantasy that's meant to be a sort of cautionary tale about the wrongs and excesses of our own world — be it antifeminism, denial of global warming, or violence and materialism. But while those earlier books were hobbled by didactic asides and a preachy, moralistic tone, Atwood has loosened up in this volume and given her imagination free rein. Having already mapped out the basic geography of her futuristic world in Oryx, she dispenses here with exposition and focuses on her two heroines' efforts to survive in the wake of the Waterless Flood.

One woman, Toby, has survived inside an upscale spa, where she subsists on supplies from a storeroom and the garden, where they used to grow vegetables for customers' organic salads. She eventually ventures out, journeying back to her parents' old neighborhood to find a rifle she'd buried under some patio stones. Her father had used the rifle to commit suicide, after his wife died of a mysterious illness that consumed all their savings.

Toby later learns that her mother was most likely a guinea pig for a drug company named HelthWyzer that was "seeding folks with illnesses" via souped-up supplement pills — "using them as free lab animals, then collecting on the treatments for those very same illnesses."

After her parents' death, Toby is forced to take a series of demeaning jobs, culminating in her employment at a revolting fast-food chain called SecretBurgers, which is rumored to run human corpses through its



meat grinders. There, she becomes the sexual toy of a violent, piggish manager named Blanco — until she is unexpectedly rescued by a group of demonstrators known as God's Gardeners, a hippielike sect pledged to preserve all animal and plant life. Over the years Toby will rise through the ranks of the Gardeners and eventually become one of their elders.

When she realizes that she is one of the few survivors of the Waterless Flood, Toby wonders why she was chosen: "Why has she been saved alive? Out of the countless millions. Why not someone younger, someone with more optimism and fresher cells? She ought to trust that she's here for a reason — to bear witness, to transmit a message, to salvage at least something from the general wreck. She ought to trust, but she can't."

Among the other people living with God's Gardeners is a girl named Ren, who has been brought there by her mother. Ren will later be taken back to the HelthWyzer compound, where she falls in love with Jimmy — the hero of *Oryx and Crake*, also known as Snowman — who will break her heart by taking up with her best friend. Amanda.

After her biofather is kidnapped, Ren winds up working as a trapeze dancer at a sex club named Scales and Tails — one of her teachers actually recommends it as a good job with health benefits and a dental plan — and it is there, in an isolation room, that Ren will wait out the Waterless Flood.

Although some of the chapters in this book start with annoying passages detailing the Gardeners' ecological credo, Atwood largely refrains from the sort of proselytizing that tarnished her earlier ventures into science fiction. By focusing on her characters and their perilous journeys through a nightmare world, she has succeeded in writing a gripping and visceral book that showcases the pure storytelling talents she displayed with such verve in her 2000 novel, The Blind Assassin.





A Moving Sound Self-released

Joanna Wang (王若琳) Joanna and 王若琳 and The **Adult Storybook Sony Music** 







Moving Sound refines its pan-Asian/ Aworld beat sound with Starshine. which was released earlier this month. Everything from African drumming to Chinese opera is thrown into the mix by this five-piece group, led by the husbandand-wife team of producer, singer and multi-instrumentalist Scott Prairie and vocalist and dancer Mia Hsieh (謝韻雅).

Overall the album feels darker and moodier than the group's past two albums, but the songs are accessible and engaging — an approach that has earned the group widespread acclaim and a loyal following.

A droning, almost post-punk, bass groove drives the title track, which is inspired by the concept of incarnation and sets the album's tone. The tune begins with the reedy sound of the *satar* (薩塔琴), a bowed lute associated with traditional Uighur music in western China, and builds up to a set of vocal acrobatics from Hsieh, whose voice soars and glides beautifully at the high range. An ominous-sounding Buddhist chant in the last third of the song sounds incongruous at first, but then fades smoothly into a swirl of melodies that has flavors of Central Asia.

Mixing and matching different ethnic music traditions often runs the risk of falling into cliche or creating a watereddown pastiche. But A Moving Sound's music is fresh and original, particularly in songs like the festive Harvest Song, written by Hsieh and based on a traditional Taiwanese Aboriginal melody and lyrics. The satar and hand percussion lend a touch of exotica. but it's Hsieh's spirited vocal delivery and her backing singers that carry the song.

A Moving Sound offers a refreshing take on Chinese opera in the folkrock-tinged *Dynasty*, with some eerie singing from Hsieh, as well as a joyous rendition of the Taiwanese folk tune Toh De Gong (Ode to the Earth God, 土地公柏). The album showcases solid performances from the band's instrumentalists: Alex Wu (吳政君) on percussion and sax synthesizer: Lo Tang-Hsuan (羅堂軒) on erhu; and Hsieh Hua-chou (謝華洲), who plays guitar and the oud-like zhong ruan (中阮).

Fans of the group in particular will enjoy the accompanying DVD, which has footage from international performances, outtakes from photo shoots and interesting dance and vocal improvisations performed by Hsieh and Prairie. The liner notes provide each

song's backstory, which might ruin the mystery for some. Listen to the CD first and then read the notes later to learn about the mindscape of this one-of-akind group.

- DAVID CHEN

Toanna Wang (王若琳) quickly gained a following last year with her debut album Start From Here, and it's not difficult to see why. This 21-year-old singer's voice — rich, husky and pitch-perfect

— locates her in jazz diva territory. Though Wang is well suited to singing standards, she seems most comfortable with folk and pop rock. She wasted no time in following up her successful debut with a double CD set, Joanna and 王若琳 and *The Adult Storybook*. The two albums could be seen as two sides of the same coin.

The first clearly targets the mainstream with polished rock tunes and feel-good Americana-sounding ballads a la Norah Jones, perhaps the mold Sony Music fancies for Wang. Nonetheless, many of the songs — cowritten with Roger Joseph Manning Jr and recorded with session musicians in Los Angeles — are top notch and tailored to Wang's voice.

Her phrasing is masterful and at times hauntingly beautiful, whether singing in Mandarin or English. Wang deftly navigates the bossa nova beat of *Tikiville*, shows Mando-pop vocalists how a ballad should be done in One Idea (一種念頭) and gives a nod to The Beatles with My Love (我的愛). She taps into Taiwan's affection for Don McLean's Vincent with an admirable rendition of her own.

The singles-oriented, commercial vibe of *Joanna and* 王若琳 is balanced by The Adult Storybook, a concept album, which, despite its flaws, is more interesting and feels more personal. Wang handled all of the songwriting in this collection (written under the pen name New Tokyo Terror), which shows a spark of brilliance in the quirky rocker How I Feel About Businessmen and the beautiful indie-folk tune Palpitation.

Wang seems eager to prove that her chanteuse's voice works outside of conventional pop. She comes up with more whimsical-sounding rockers like His Remedy, which sounds like Wilco when it started moving into art rock.

But at times, it's easy to be seduced by Wang's voice, the slick studio musicians, the pleasing rock aesthetic, the beautifully illustrated storybook liner

notes. On closer inspection, a few stories come across as obtuse and awkward (IGuess I'm Paranoid). Others don't quite take off. Longing for Romance begins with a startling line, "He rolled off her body 'cause he was done, but she didn't care how she felt then and there," but fails to offer much depth in the portrait of the main character.

Wang is clearly exploring her talent in a compelling way, and both albums are worth listening to. It will be interesting to see whether the two creative paths of this CD set — commercial pop and more independently-driven songwriting - converge.

— DAVID CHEN

lthough sounding more like a Although sounding more allow (是相) Island Song (島歌) by Tang Hsu (湯旭), a newcomer to the singer-songwriter scene, may well tap into the current that swept the likes of Deserts Chang (張懸) to prominence.

Primarily a guitar and voice album, with a bit of piano and some simple orchestration on a number of tracks, *Island Song* has the stripped-down quality, a sense of serendipity and a certain strain of earnestness that are associated with urban folk artists like The Swell Season, which became a minor cult classic in Taiwan through the movie Once.

Nothing can rival the bold simplicity and kitschy cuteness of Chang's Baby (寶貝), and many of Tang's songs are infused with a similar spirit: saying simple things in simple words. Tang sings mostly about the everyday affections and moods of adolescent life, from evocative expressions of sorrow in the lilting rhythms of the South Seas-inflected title track to the surprisingly down-to-earth and unsentimental Thank You, Mum (媽 謝謝你). Both these tracks rely for their appeal on a strong expressive impulse that while clearly still derivative and tinged with cliche, is powerfully engaged with what is being said.

Occasionally, Tang ventures into pop music territory, with mixed results. The use of a drum machine in Crowd Games (擁擠的遊戲) is intrusive, but the track could easily be made to work with more sophisticated production. The big piano and voice ballad Our Future (我們的未 來) has a cheap Mando-pop veneer, but is saved by its lyrics and, ironically, the unpolished quality of Tang's voice.

Island Song is being marketed as a rough diamond, which may explain some of the rather shabby production values, but there is more to Tang than meets the eye.

**CDs: Taiwan** 

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Faith Map's (信心地圖) release, it On seemed an easy matter to dismiss this messy compilation of wannabe and youthful established artists singing under the umbrella label of New Artist Family (新藝人家族) as a gimmicky charity release that would rapidly disappear from the charts. There is no accounting for musical taste, and the album has held a spot in the right half of the Top 20 for 10 weeks since its debut. Perhaps this is a result of music lovers' generosity. A proportion of the cover price goes to charity, a fact that the marketing for this album plays up heavily.

Faith Map's sales were further boosted by two concerts last week, which reported 4,000 tickets sold and NT\$6 million raised for the victims of Typhoon Morakot. While it is all well and good to see the pop music industry digging deep, it's a shame that the music is so unutterably uninteresting.

All the right studio effects are there, but the total lack of structure in the selection of tracks accentuates the indifference of the individual contributors. The vague over-arching theme of following the path of faith to a better place, and generally believing in goodness, and love and such gooey sentiment is fine, but after listening to what the young artists have to offer, al that's left is a feeling of despair.

Even the more experienced musicians don't pass muster. FIR (飛兒樂團) member Acing (阿沁) — real name Real Huang (黃 漢青) — turns up with the truly terrible I Need to Pray, which makes up for a lack of conviction with a big drum kit and cliched rock riffs when what was needed was a little more soul-searching.

Typhoon by Brit-pop band Transition is thrown in to add an international flavor, but sounds totally out of place. Then there's the half-hearted rap number My Savior by Green Tea (綠茶). And on, and on.

There are some tolerable tracks, such as Niao Er's (鳥兒) 17km of Coastline (宅 公里海岸線) with its stripped-down cello, and a passionate duet by JJ & Sun (何 耀珊/林俊傑) with elements of a Chinese orchestra, but these aren't enough to buy the album for any reason other than charity.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

## **Hardcover: UK**

## Nick Cave's 'Bunny Munro': all mouth and trousers

The misogynistic, cocaine-fueled protagonist of Nick Cave's dark novel is a scarily real send-up of contemporary Britain's uber-lad culture

BY SEAN O'HAGAN THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

According to Nick Cave, the two main influences for The Death of Bunny Munro, his second novel, are the Gospel According to St Mark and the Scum Manifesto by militant feminist Valerie Solanas, a woman perhaps more famous for shooting Andy Warhol. "The male," wrote Solanas, founder of the Society for Cutting up Men, "is completely egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, or love, friendship, affection of tenderness ... he is a half-dead, unresponsive lump, incapable of giving or receiving pleasure or happiness. Cave's fictional antihero, Bunny Munro, is Solanas' misogynistic Everyman made frighteningly, absurdly, hilariously real. Like one of Martin Amis' early characters — Keith Talent, say, from *London Fields* — Bunny is an antihero of epic proportions, a booze-addled,

nicotine-stained, cocaine-fuelled monster constantly in search of priapic adventure. Or what he, in a moment of not untypical lyrical invention, calls "the fucking Valhalla of all vaginas.'

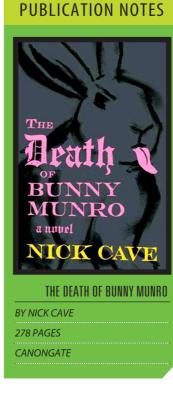
That this sacredly profane organ belongs, in Bunny's incessantly fevered imagination, to the pop singer Avril Lavigne only fuels his chronic sexual addiction. It is her thrusting crotch that he continually conjures up, alongside that of the only slightly less suggestive Kylie Minogue, as he cruises the seaside towns of England's south coast peddling beauty products - "hands shit, face shit, body shit, hair shit" — from the boot of his yellow Fiat Punto.

His attempts to bed virtually every woman who answers the door to him make for a series of often hilarious, sometimes excruciating and, in one instance, shocking interludes in a novel that cloaks its essentially tragic thrust beneath a darkly comic surface.

Cave, now a renowned screenwriter as well as songwriter — he wrote the script for John Hillcoat's critically acclaimed 2005 outback epic, The Proposition — has some pedigree as a writer of fiction. His first novel, And the Ass Saw the Angel, published in 1989, adhered to the deep southern Gothic strain that also attended his songwriting then.

Having long since written Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner out of his system, Cave's prose, like his songs, has become more taut and tender in the intervening years, less in thrall to its influences and to his own dark and brooding onstage persona. Recently, he has been reading Bellow and Updike as well as, intriguingly, Bret Easton Ellis, another writer who, like Cave, has often been castigated for his supposed misogyny. It shows.

As the novel shifts in tone from darkly comic to nightmarish, you sometimes wonder, as is often



the case with Easton Ellis, about the psychological well-being of its author. Cave, though, as many of his more willfully melodramatic songs suggest, has always tended towards the extreme in order to ram home a point. (He once began a song with the line: "I stuck a six-inch gold blade in the head of a girl," and has recently recorded another called *No Pussy Blues*.)

In this case, his target is the uber-lad culture of contemporary Britain, of which Bunny Munro is an extreme, but always credible, example. Cave satirizes that reductive strain of warped maleness with some glee and an undercurrent of comic disgust, but The Death of Bunny Munro is essentially a tragic tale; a novel that is by turns sick and funny, and sometimes both simultaneously, but that moves inexorably, determinedly, towards its terrible end.

The novel's three-part structure — the subtitles are

Cocksman, Salesman and Deadman — also adheres to the tragic mode even as it sends it up. The hapless protagonist is, as the title warns us, living on borrowed time and seems, somewhere deep down in his overloaded psyche, to be acutely aware of his imminent demise. The narrative begins with the line: "'I am damned,' thinks Bunny Munro in a sudden moment of self-awareness reserved for those who are soon to die." Bunny, in short, is a dead

man walking. The book's still center, though, and its one redeemable character, is Bunny Munro Junior, a child who hero-worships his errant father while grieving for his mother, who is driven to suicide in the book's opening chapter by her husband's incapacity for tenderness, empathy or love. Cave deploys pitch-black humor and a scabrous tone throughout, as signifiers of Bunny Senior's monumental self-delusion. Like

the Gospel of St Mark, this is a narrative that, for all its frantic hurly-burly, is only ever heading towards a foregone, and sacrificially violent, conclusion. Bunny Munro must die, one senses, so that his only-begotten son may live beyond his blighting shadow.

It is not often one reads a novel that includes the names of a pair of famous female pop stars in its acknowledgments. "I would like to thank Kylie Minogue and Avril Lavigne," writes Cave, "with love, respect and apologies. Minogue, a friend of Cave's with whom he has duetted in the past, will undoubtedly forgive him, but one cannot help but wonder what Lavigne will make of such a twisted tale, and one that utilizes her — or, to be more precise, her vagina — as a symbol of impossible, unquenchable and terminally dysfunctional male sexual desire. Whatever, the late Valerie Solanas would almost certainly have approved.