

Softcover: US

Cricket – it's so very American

Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* is regarded by many as the best thing that's happened to US fiction in a decade

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Many books you forget, and a few you remember. Whenever I encounter the second happy circumstance, it's because the writer represents for me a fresh way of feeling, becomes a new intoxicant I immediately know I can rely on. Joseph O'Neill's remarkable novel *Netherland* marks the addition of a welcome newcomer to this very special list.

What such choice items have in common isn't their subject matter but their tone of voice. The style, as Flaubert so rightly said, is the man.

It's hard, nevertheless, to pin down this book's style, and O'Neill's essential mode of being. It's whimsical, eclectic, rich in detail, self-communing, and not infrequently sad, but it's also rather elusive.

The novel has two themes. One is the frail marriage of the narrator, Hans van den Broek, a 1.96m-tall financial analyst living in New York but brought up largely in Holland. The other is cricket, played in and around New York in a variety of overgrown, neglected parks by immigrants from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

These determined amateurs are held together by a charismatic Trinidadian, Chuck Ramkissoon, a man with fingers in many pies, and a dreamer who envisages cricket becoming once again what he insists it was in the days of the founding fathers, a loved and widely played American game.

O'Neill's narrative method involves looping from one topic to the next, a man remembering his past who's happy to allow one thing to remind him of another. The result is an accumulation of episodes. The novel thus moves from life in Manhattan's Chelsea Hotel (where the narrator retreats after his lawyer wife has left for London with their son following the Sept. 11 attacks) to upstate New York, Arizona, Trinidad, London, Tamil Nadu and The Hague.

It's Hans' fascination with Ramkissoon that holds the story together. He's likely to become one of the keynote characters of modern literature. He allows Hans to learn to drive in his car while using the exercise to make some apparently innocent social calls. He shows him corners of New York that few readers will know, and above all plans, with his Russian backer, a vast arena that will forever catapult cricket into the American national consciousness. His motto is "Think fantastic."

He turns out, however, also to be running an illegal Caribbean-style lottery ("People are desperate for something special") and to be dabbling, with his Russian partner, in at times brutal property deals. He also knows a lot about birds, and has a wife and mistress whose co-existence he manages with aplomb. But his wide-ranging knowledge and comic potential are underpinned (like Falstaff's) with something ruthless, almost mindless. "Look beneath Chuck's surface?" comments Hans. "For what?" The novel opens with the police fishing Ramkissoon's rotting body out of a New York canal.

The amiable game of cricket, symbolic of men's ability to abide by civilized if arcane rules, also weaves its way through this book. Rooted in nature — turf, humidity, recent rainfall — it's presented as a mysterious ritual capable of bringing disparate kinds of men together. "What's the first thing that happens when Pakistan and India make peace?" asks the ostentatious polymath. "They play a cricket match."

Many critics — and this book has been very widely praised — point to similarities between Ramkissoon, at once generous, ambitious and irredeemably hollow, and Scott Fitzgerald's



Gatsby. Asked about this, O'Neill said he noticed the affinity halfway through writing, but decided to carry on anyway. The comparison has hardly harmed *Netherland*, regarded by many as the best thing that's happened to US fiction in a decade. In an interview not long after publication, US President Obama remarked that he was reading it.

And if style is indeed the essence of the best writing, this book aims for the heights. The story ends on the London Eye, a "glorious spray of radiuses," where at sunset "Phoebus is up to his oldest and best tricks." Phrases such as "existentialist gunslingers" abound, while the oddity of much of New York is everywhere displayed. Of Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Field, O'Neill comments: "If a troupe of Mongolian horsemen had appeared in the distance I would not have been shocked."

Nostalgia, comedy and melancholy mix in this novel, as in the work of many stylists — Evelyn Waugh and the less consistent John Banville come to mind. As for the book's doubling-back, episodic structure, this may be a way of incorporating a range of personal memories. O'Neill, like his narrator, was brought up largely in the Netherlands, trained as a lawyer, and has worked (and currently lives) in New York. But all writers quarry their material where they can, and few are blessed with the power of genuine invention.

The novel's action — and quite a lot does actually happen — takes place between 2003 and 2005. Political events don't figure prominently, obscured by more pressing local concerns. But the New York weather, and events such as the power outages of August 2003, are prominent, as are the moods of the Hudson River and the topography of Brooklyn.

Is it all symbolic, you inevitably ask yourself — the adult waif who wanders about the Chelsea Hotel complete with angel's wings, the woman who wants to be beaten with a belt, the inflated figure of Ronald McDonald keeling over in the Thanksgiving Day streets? If it is, it's because modern lives viewed as fragments can appear so pointless and sad, only to be redeemed (if at all) by a grand project such as a cricket arena or a marriage sustained against all the odds.

These may not be original ideas, but they're nonetheless marvelously encapsulated in this vivid, endearing, yet strangely cool new novel.

Softcover: UK

A father's suicide turned into fiction

David Vann's extraordinary reworking of his dad's suicide makes a ground-breaking piece of fiction

BY ALEXANDER LINKLATER
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

Before reading David Vann's book, there are three things you should know. The first and most important is that, though this is a work of fiction, the suicide of the title was a real one. The somber US edition makes this explicit, up front, in a note on its inside flap. The UK edition, however, omits that note. Vann's dedication remains — "For My Father, James Edwin Vann, 1940-1980" — but it is now left to the author's acknowledgements at the end to remove any ambiguity over the fact that his father killed himself.

For sure, it would be an odd reader who had not already come to this conclusion, but it needs to be stated from the outset. There must be no ambiguity, because unless this is clear, the far more profound and shocking ways in which Vann goes on to break with actuality may be muddled and diminished.

The second thing you need to know is that this is a collection of

stories and not a single narrative. There are several incongruities in the way the UK edition of *Legend of a Suicide* has been published — packaged between whimsical covers that present Vann's jagged, desperate act of existential mastery as if it were a flight of magical realism, describing his howl in the dark as a "tender story of loss, survival and disillusioned love." But there is a more serious distortion. Inside this edition, Vann's series of five short stories — and one long one — is made to appear as if merged into a continuous novel, with numbered chapter headings.

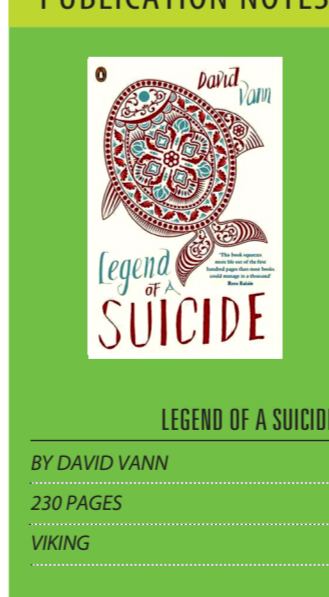
This has presumably been done on the assumption that British readers are less likely to buy collections of short stories. The result, however, damages Vann's endeavor, which is to change, from one story to the next, not just perspectives, but events themselves. His fictional alter ego, Roy, is present throughout the book, but in radically altered circumstances. The blurb on the cover says that

Roy's father kills himself on the deck of his boat, which is weirdly misleading. This happens in one story, but not in another.

There is no single death. Though all the stories are connected, there is no single story. The power of Vann's "legend" emerges from the way a real-world event is imagined, changed and re-imagined as if it were taking place over and over again, in parallel but contradictory worlds.

Then there is the third thing you need to know which is, rather, something you must not know. As this book re-imagines its central death, an event occurs that utterly transforms the encounter between protagonist, father, author and reader. Do not let anyone tell you what this event is before you start. To know what happens in advance would be to spoil not just a narrative surprise in a heart-thumping tale, but the entire apparatus Vann has constructed to wrench out the dreadful and meaningless facts of existence, to master them, and, in a violent act

PUBLICATION NOTES



of fictional transmogrification, to reconfigure them as something not less, but more real.

David Vann is a young American author whose first book was a memoir, *A Mile Down*, about how

a boat he had built sank in the Caribbean, in a peculiar echo of previous family accidents. He might also, here, have written a memoir of his father's suicide, but such a memoir, however direct, however honest, however lacerating, could never have reached the psychological depth, the real-world knowledge, of the fiction that he has produced instead.

With his opening story, *Ichthyology*, Vann unveils Roy's Alaskan family background, some of his father's failures, one account of the suicide, and inserts an eerily symbolic description of silver-dollar fish sucking out the eyes of an iridescent shark. The details feel acutely true, both literally and emotionally, but apart from the one biographical fact you know about Vann, you have no idea precisely what has been recorded and what has been invented. The feeling of memoir metamorphosing into fiction cooos an entire sense of reality as Roy investigates his mother and father, their divorce, his stepmother and his father's

infidelities. Roy explains himself with a taut and quivering emotional control that at first merely hints of, and only occasionally lurches into, the psychological wilderness surrounding everything.

And then in the central story of the book, *Sukkwan Island*, that wilderness opens up. A 13-year-old Roy is taken to a remote Alaskan hut by his father and it becomes clear that the father is using the son in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to rebuild his life and stave off the encroaching dark. Roy listens in the night as his father weeps, cringes, confesses his sexual cravings, jabbars his delusions, begs his son for forgiveness. Roy does not have the mental equipment to interpret this, nor is there another soul for miles around. Psychological and physical survival become the same thing.

Without striking any hysterical notes, Vann's writing gradually marks out a score of unholy human pain. There are hints of Hemingway in the control of the style, but the tide and undertow

of its meaning are Dostoevskian. Father and son cannot leave this place. You, the reader, will not be able to leave it either.

Vann inhabits and possesses his father's shame-diseased, dying, subjective experience, claiming it — appallingly — as his own. You draw breath at the daring of it. The stakes are high. There is no border here between external and internal realities; this is a book that must already have changed things in the author's world. What of Vann's family? What of his mother? What of the other women in his father's life, whom he evokes and implicates and hands over for judgment? Are they also his to possess?

Vann's legend is, at once, the truest memoir and the purest fiction. You need to know it is based on facts to understand just how far he has gone in creating a new reality. But you also need to remain ignorant of the fictional surprise he has in store, so that it can hit you with the full force of new knowledge. Nothing quite like this book has been written before.



Left: Penpower's Super ScanEYE is a Chinese-English and English-Chinese dictionary that scans and stores text and displays the definition on a built-in screen.



Right: Mini ScanEYE II is a pen-shaped scanner that digitizes printed Chinese or English text and is used in conjunction with a dictionary and translation software.

Put away that Chinese dictionary, says Penpower Technology Ltd (蒙恬科技). One of the Taiwanese company's products — Mini ScanEYE II — can save you some time when looking up that pesky Chinese character.

This device is a pen-shaped scanner that connects to your computer via USB cable. It scans and digitizes printed text, which then can be used with the accompanying Chinese-English and English-Chinese dictionary software.

Mini ScanEYE comes in handy for those struggling through a newspaper article or book written in Chinese. It saves readers the headache of looking up an unfamiliar word, which can be a timely process for non-native speakers as Chinese characters are not written phonetically.

Using Mini ScanEYE is simple enough — swipe the device over the printed text, and it shows up on your screen, in the program of your choice. The device and software use optical character recognition technology, or OCR technology, to scan and read text.

The manual suggests using Mini ScanEYE with a word processor such as Wordpad or Microsoft Word. Once the text appears, you can check the definition by placing the mouse cursor

over the word and selecting the "translation" button from a popup screen. A balloon displays the definition in English or Chinese, a function similar to Dr Eye, a popular dictionary program in Taiwan for Microsoft Windows. There is also a "voice" button that plays pre-recorded pronunciations for each word.

A faster way to look up words is to use the included Penpower Translator software, which has Chinese-English and English-Chinese dictionaries in both simplified and traditional characters. It instantly displays the definition, with the Zhuyin Fuhao (注音符号) (commonly known as bopomofo) pronunciation, as you scan in the text. There is also a "sentence translation" function comparable to online services like Google Translate or Yahoo! Babel Fish.

While a great idea in concept, Mini ScanEYE is a mixed bag. Inevitably, some characters won't scan properly, which requires fiddling with the software to find the correct word. The pen's scanner tip, which is about 3mm wide, can't scan large font text such as newspaper headlines.

To access or tweak many of the Mini ScanEYE's features, there is an awkward user

interface. The dictionary is mediocre (Dr Eye once again comes to mind), and appears to favor learners of English.

Mini ScanEYE's need for a USB connection keeps you tethered to a computer, which might feel cumbersome for some.

Penpower does have a wireless version, Super ScanEYE, which has a built-in 1-inch screen and runs on AAA batteries, but its frustrating menu design takes some time to learn. Super ScanEYE also appears to favor learners of English over Mandarin learners; the pen does not display either the Hanyu Pinyin (汉语拼音) or Zhuyin Fuhao pronunciation.

Although Mini ScanEYE and Super ScanEYE are marketed as tools for beginner Chinese learners, they seem more suited to intermediate and advanced students. Consider these products if you spend a lot of time reading printed text and can make do with rough definitions, and more importantly, if you're willing to spend between around NT\$4,000 for Mini ScanEYE or NT\$6,200 for Super ScanEYE. Mini ScanEYE is available for Microsoft Windows only.

On the Net: pce.penpowerinc.com

— BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER



WorldCard Ultra for Windows and WorldCard Mac for Macintosh digitize business cards for busy professionals who need to manage a lot of contacts.



Entrepreneurs and networking professionals will appreciate Penpower's WorldCard, a mini-scanner and software built especially for digitizing business cards.

WorldCard, which has won a string of accolades including the prestigious iF and Red Dot product design awards, takes away some of the monotony of typing contact information into your computer or mobile phone.

The WorldCard system uses optical character recognition technology, or OCR technology, to scan business cards and extract the information to create a personal contact database that can be searched or converted into different formats.

The device is easy to use — just plug it into a USB port and start inserting business cards, which scan in under five seconds. All of the information, such as person's name, company, address, mobile phone and e-mail, gets stored in the accompanying WorldCard software, which organizes and exports data to a wide range of formats, including Microsoft Outlook

and Entourage.

The stylish, palm-sized WorldCard scanner easily fits into a laptop case. The design is also operator-friendly. There's no need to lift lids and align a business card as you would with a regular sized scanner or copy machine — simply slide it into the automatic feeder slot.

The WorldCard software does an impressive job in accurately capturing contact data. But OCR technology is far from perfect, so expect occasional mistakes, such as spelling errors resulting from unsuccessful scans. The software handles multiple languages with little fuss — I scanned a double-sided card, with one side in Chinese and the other in English, with no problems. The contact information showed up 100 percent accurate in both languages.

WorldCard has a straightforward and intuitive interface, and makes for a very usable contact organizer on its own. It's easy to divide and categorize your contact into separate lists, and the search function is snappy and works well.

The software also sports a few simple but

nifty features. You can view a scanned image of each business card, which is stored as part of the contact information; there's a one-click button to sync WorldCard contacts with Microsoft Outlook; a right-click option takes you directly to a contact's address in Google Maps.

Overall, WorldCard offers a quick way to store contact information, and is worth considering if you collect a lot of business cards and spend a lot of time managing an address book. There are two versions of the device: Ultra for Microsoft Windows, which comes in black, and a slightly pricier model in white for Mac.

For those who want the convenience without any bulk, Penpower has also just released WorldCard Mobile for iPhone 3GS, which uses the built-in camera as a scanner for business cards. The English version hasn't been released yet, but the Chinese version is now available on iTunes for US\$19.99.

On the Net: worldcard.penpowerinc.com

— BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER