

Hardcover: US

A fervent plea to renew an old idea

Leading historian and thinker Tony Judt explains how returning to social democracy can counter today's social ills

BY DWIGHT GARNER
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The British historian Tony Judt is dying, slowly and painfully, from a variant of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. He has written matter-of-factly about his condition — he is now, essentially, a quadriplegic — in *The New York Review of Books*. At some point he will be able to communicate only by blinking an eye. For now he is dictating his words to assistants.

Best known for his book *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (2005), Judt has long been an engaged and unpredictable intellectual of the left, one who is sometimes given to controversial opinions. Judt, who is Jewish, has argued, for example, that Israel is an "anachronism" that should convert "from a Jewish state to a binational one" including Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. His prose tends to be as biting as his ideas.

Judt's new book, *Ill Fares the Land*, is a slim and penetrating work, a dying man's sense of a dying idea: the notion that the state can play a significant role in its citizens' lives without imperiling their liberties. It makes sense that this book arrives now, not merely during the hideous endgame of the national health-care debate but during mud season; this book's bleak assessment of the selfishness and materialism that have taken root in Western societies will stick to your feet and muddy your floors.

But *Ill Fares the Land* is also optimistic, raw and patriotic in its sense of what countries like the US and UK have meant — and can continue to mean — to their people and to the world.

Ill Fares the Land gets off to a distressing start. Judt tells us, right off the bat, that his book was "written for young people." Which is something you never want to hear, really. It suggests that we may be in for a graduation speech. And Judt does occasionally serve microwavable brunch-time banalities. ("Young people must not abandon faith in our political institutions," etc.) But these soggy bits are rare.

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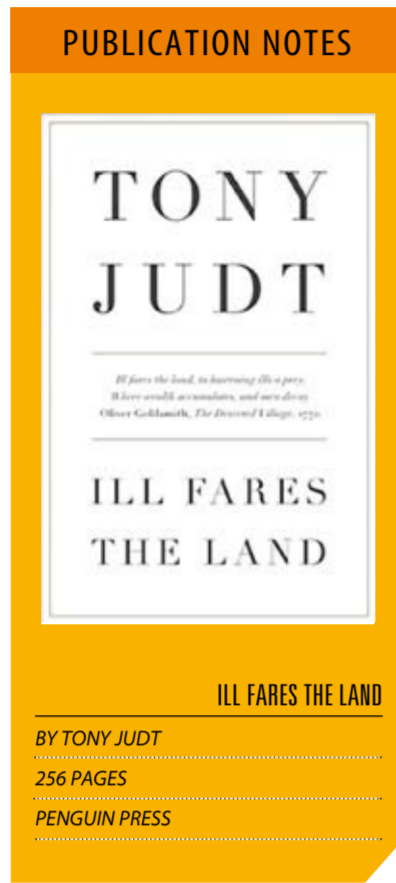
— Tony Judt, historian

Instead he is persuasive about the disillusionment that smart, idealistic young people feel today. They do need a talking-to. "The last time a cohort of young people expressed comparable frustration at the emptiness of their lives and the dispiriting purposelessness of their world was in the 1920s," he writes. "It is not by chance that historians speak of a 'lost generation.'" Judt does not talk down to these imagined young people; he talks up to them, and the effect is bracing.

Judt surveys the political and intellectual landscape in Britain and the US since the 1980s, the Reagan-Thatcher era, and he worries about an increasing and "uncritical adulation of wealth for its own sake." What matters, he writes, "is not how affluent a country is but how unequal it is," and he sees growing and destabilizing inequality almost everywhere. He reminds us that the word "public" — in terms of what a government can provide for the majority of its people — was not always a term of opprobrium in the national lexicon.

Wistfully, Judt cites some of the achievements of the Democratic-led Congresses of the 1960s, achievements that would be nearly impossible in today's political climate: "food stamps, Medicare, the Civil Rights Act, Medicaid, Head Start, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting."

Some of these programs are endangered, he writes, thanks to an unhealthy suspicion of our public



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TONY JUDT

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
His weak accompaniment, and his disease
Oblivion's Galleon, For Decayed Kings: 1770*

ILL FARES THE LAND

BY TONY JUDT

256 PAGES

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authorities that has been "elevated to a cult by Know Nothings, States' Rightists, anti-tax campaigners and — most recently — the radio talk show demagogues of the Republican Right." About the absurdities of anti-tax campaigners, he observes that the notion that taxes might "be a contribution to the provision of collective goods that individuals could never afford in isolation (roads, firemen, policemen, schools, lamp posts, post offices, not to mention soldiers, warships and weapons) is rarely considered."

Oddly enough, Judt writes, the left and right have swapped political modes. The right has become radicalized, abandoning the "social moderation which served it so well from Disraeli to Heath, from Theodore Roosevelt to Nelson Rockefeller." It's the left that now has something to conserve, "the institutions, legislation, services and rights that we have inherited from the great age of 20th-century reform."

What caused this dire loss of faith in our government and leaders? Judt spreads the blame around. He criticizes the narcissistic left of the 1960s, which was largely uninterested in social justice. "What united the 60s generation was not the interest of all, but the needs and rights of each," he writes. He blames that generation's political leaders too. What the baby-boomer politicians have in common, he notes, is "the enthusiasm that they fail to inspire in the electors of their respective countries."

He surveys an earlier and "superior class of statesmen," who, regardless of its members' political leanings, "represented a political class deeply sensitive to its moral and social responsibilities." Politically speaking, he declares, "ours is an age of the pygmies."

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the West missed an opportunity to reshape the world. "Instead," Judt writes, "we sat back and congratulated ourselves upon having won the Cold War: a sure way to lose the peace." Here is his historical judgment: "The years from 1989 to 2009 were consumed by locusts."

Judt doesn't spare today's intellectuals, who "have shown remarkably little informed interest in the nitty-gritty of public policy, preferring to intervene or protest on ethically defined topics where the choices seem clearer." He fears we will be "further disappointed" by US President Barack Obama and other politicians. He is even more concerned that callow politicians like Sarah Palin "can only benefit from rising confusion and anxiety in the face of apparently unmanageable change."

If *Ill Fares the Land* sometimes reads like a graduation speech, then it is the Platonic ideal of one — concise, hardheaded, severe in its moral arguments. "We must revisit the ways in which our grandparents' generation handled comparable challenges and threats," Judt argues, noting that "social democracy in Europe, the New Deal and the Great Society" were among those rational responses.

It is "incumbent upon us to reconceive the role of government," Judt admonishes his audience. "If we do not, others will."



The Peppermints (薄荷菓)

Banished (流放地)

myspace.com/twpeppermints

Having been together for more than a decade — practically an eternity for a Taiwanese indie band — the Peppermints (薄荷菓) are showing their age, and in a good way. Their third and latest release, *Banished* (流放地), is a solid album of guitar-driven rock that dwells on a brooding fascination with mental illness.

Lead singer Shine Lin (林倩) says she drew from a personal crisis in writing the lyrics for *Banished*. She spent time in a psychiatric hospital last year to receive treatment for severe depression, and says "80 percent" of the experience informs the album's 10 tracks.

Don't let the heavy-handed song titles turn you off. *Someone in My Brain* (腦海裡的小人) has a sedate, dreamy groove and is convincing for Lin's detached vocal delivery and the mellow harmonies.

On *Claustrophobia*, which is about a suffocating train ride on the Taipei MRT, the band's catchy, electric guitar-drenched hooks bring to mind Sonic Youth and The Breeders. The track ends with some playful sound effects by artist and musician Yalin Wu (吳亞林).

Lin's whispery sweet voice sounds both vulnerable and unaffected on *For the Dead*, a hidden track on the CD and one of the album's better songs. She sings with pitch-perfect execution, and the band benefited from having the vocals mixed by indie-folk musician and producer Ze Hwang (黃小輯).

Although it doesn't appear obvious, the band says *Banished* is also dedicated to "society's disadvantaged." Lin and drummer Zheng Gae-tan (鄭凱同) served as activists in the controversial campaign to preserve the Losheng Sanatorium (樂生療養院), a home for sufferers of Hansen's disease that is being torn down by the Taipei County government, and have been outspoken supporters of Aboriginal laborers' rights.

The unsettling mood of the album is carried by macabre tunes like *Bala Bala Party* (肢解派對), which was inspired by a grizzly murder in Japan. But one has to wonder if the band is pushing too hard in songs like *Deja Vu* (既視感), where Lin sings in English, "maybe I need a favor/a favor of someone/ pushing me to commit suicide."

— DAVID CHEN



Windmill (風籬坊)

Demo II (Demo 乙)

White Wabbit Records

ON paper, Windmill (風籬坊) sounds like the typical Taiwanese indie band. Its sound is full of references to Brit-pop, post-punk, post-rock and Neil Young, among a laundry list of alternative rock subgenres.

But what sets this trio apart is how it puts these elements together. Windmill's latest release, *Demo II* (Demo 乙), is a five-song EP that is unabashedly Western rock delivered with a uniquely Taiwanese soul.

A running joke within the band is that lead singer and guitarist Chris Lin (林育祥) started writing the band's lyrics in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese) because his voice tended to stray off key when singing in Mandarin.

You get that sense from the EP's only non-Hoklo track, *Zhu Feng Lan Yu* (竹風蘭雨). It's not that Lin doesn't sing well in Mandarin — he offers a fine performance on this number — rather he sounds more at home and thus more convincing in Hoklo.

The music and lyrics, included with Mandarin translations in the liner notes, play like a sound track to an indie movie for 20- and 30-somethings in Taiwan.

On 1982 (民國年一), which has a catchy vocal refrain and nicely textured guitar tones, Lin waxes nostalgic about the innocence of childhood and growing up on the east coast. *Summer's End* touches upon youthful rebellion and coming of age, driven by a rousing guitar and bass groove that borrows from Joy Division.

Though Windmill is probably best known for being the rare indie band that sings mostly in Hoklo, this is only half of the equation when it comes to the band's appeal. Its three members have established a strong rapport for having only formed in 2007 and come across as seasoned musicians.

Lin is a solid guitarist who uses distortion and tone tastefully, while drummer Chen Tai-yuan (陳泰元), who also plays with the Bearbabs (熊寶貝樂團), and bassist Sky Tai (戴杏芳), a veteran of the scene as a member of Bad Daughter (壞女兒), make up a nimble but always tight rhythm section.

Because it leans more toward shoegazer rock, Windmill might be overlooked for younger and more flamboyant groups in the scene like garage rockers The White Eyes (白目樂隊) or electro-rock band Go Chic.

But the band is carving out a niche worthy of attention.

— DAVID CHEN



Rainie Yang (楊丞琳)

Rainie & Love (雨愛)

Sony Music

Rainie Yang (楊丞琳) has come a long way, evolving from her girl-next-door role in the landmark idol soap opera *The Meteor Garden* (流星花園) into the majestic Queen of Cute, one of the most intriguing up-and-coming stars in the Mando-pop industry.

Granted, Yang has never been considered a top-flight singer or thespian. And *Rainie & Love* lacks the haunting heartache or the raw emotions Yang displayed in the theme song *Little Jasmine* (小茉莉) for the movie *Spider Lilies* (刺青). But on this, her fifth studio album, Yang nevertheless demonstrates the tenacity of a well-rounded entertainer in the mold of Jolin Tsai (蔡依林).

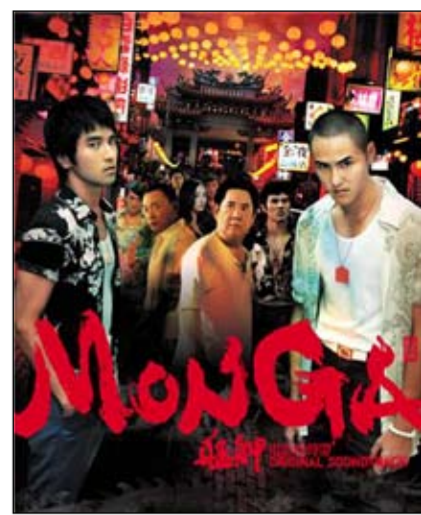
Though the album is in part a blatant advertising tie-in (it contains three theme songs from her current idol soap drama *Hi My Sweetheart* (海派甜心)), *Rainie & Love* also displays Yang's growing range by tackling an array of musical styles including ballads, rock, hip-hop and trance.

The 25-year-old is capable of conveying more nuanced and mature emotions than her girlish image suggests. The irrefutable highlight is Yang's duet *In Your Eyes* with Mando-pop heartthrob Alan Luo (羅志祥). In this up-tempo, light-hearted ode to the bliss of love, Yang and Luo display a wink-and-smile chemistry that makes this delightful track a strong contender as a future KTV hit.

The Battle of Youth (青春鬥), a dance number that echoes the catchiness of Tsai's *Love's 36 Tricks* (愛情36計), is an energetic rattle-rouser that celebrates how love keeps a person young.

The second half of the album targets a completely different demographic with the bubble-gum throwaway dance track *That Would Just Kill Me* (要我的命) and the half-baked ballad *Second Romance* (二度戀愛).

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG



Various artists (合輯)

Monga Original Sound Track (貓神原聲帶)

Sony Music

The blockbuster movie of the year also comes with an envelope-pushing original sound track, an extravagant double CD plus a DVD with behind-the-scenes footage that assembles the hippest names in Mando-pop.

Golden-Melody winning producer/singer-songwriter Sandee Chan (陳珊妮) guided this ambitious project with superb aplomb. The box set's tracks are mostly original compositions interpreted as theme songs with vocals on the first CD and then again in instrumental renditions on the second CD.

Staying true to her aesthetics, Chan's sound track is artsy, romantic and atmospheric without being bombastic. It's a revisionist musical take on a 1980s gangster fable heavily drenched in nostalgia and retro chic.

The CD with the theme songs boasts a to-die-for roster of the hottest names in Taiwan's entertainment industry. Indie singer-songwriter Deserts Chang (張懸) delivers the poignant *I Think You Have To* (我想你要走了), an understated, mournful ode to a lover who's about to leave. Sandee Chan's hypnotic vocals drive the atmospheric *Once*, a jazzy string-led gem with background vocals provided by the movie's star Ethan Ruan (阮經天). The undisputed highlight is the Brit-rock infused *Tonight Tonight*, performed by the movie's two leading men, Mark Chao (趙又廷) and Ruan.

The actors, who aren't trained singers, deliver assured and firm vocals for a surprisingly effective theme song that's riveting enough to be the centerpiece of the CD. Mando-pop songstress Tanya Chua (蔡健雅) contributes her new composition *You Come to My Head*, a moody and entrancing ballad about how love can make people override their better judgment, to the CD.

The second CD of instrumental versions of the theme songs written by producer Chan, is performed by the Asia Philharmonic Orchestra, Beijing. Two delightful bonus tracks here are *A Shiver in Silence*, a tune written by Sodagreen's (蘇打綠) front man Wu Ching-feng (吳青峰), and *The Love Affair That Never Happened*, a guitar instrumental performed by supporting actor Rhyddian Vaughan (顧小岳).

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG

Hardcover: UK

Glutton fights global warming

Ian McEwan's epicurean protagonist exemplifies the problem of excess that is devouring our resources

BY HEPHZIBAH ANDERSON
BLOOMSBURG

To take global warming seriously would mean thinking about it all the time, says a character in Ian McEwan's new novel. And that's impossible, she adds: "Daily life would not allow it."

Happily for skeptics and believers alike, *Solar* is serious only in a Charlie Chaplinesque way. It's a farce with a somber message — a satirical parable of human nature in all its entertaining, doomed folly.

The story pivots on a freak accident that catapults a tubby physicist, Michael Beard, to the forefront of the race to find a sustainable energy source. Pursuing this worthy goal in the run-up to the 2009 Copenhagen summit on climate change, the balding British boffin will clock thousands of air miles and resort to intellectual property theft and worse.

Beard is a Falstaffian character, both in his gluttonous appetites and his implausibility. While in his 20s, he wrote a paper that led to a Nobel Prize for his contribution to quantum theory, the "Beard-Einstein Conflation." He has been resting on his wilted laurels ever since.

The novel opens in 2000; Beard is 53. His professional life has become a swirl of lecture junkies, media punditry and state-funded sinecures. His private life is what consumes most of his energy. Unaccountably attractive to women, he's five years into his fifth marriage

— time enough to have crammed in 11 affairs. Then his wife retaliates by bedding their builder.

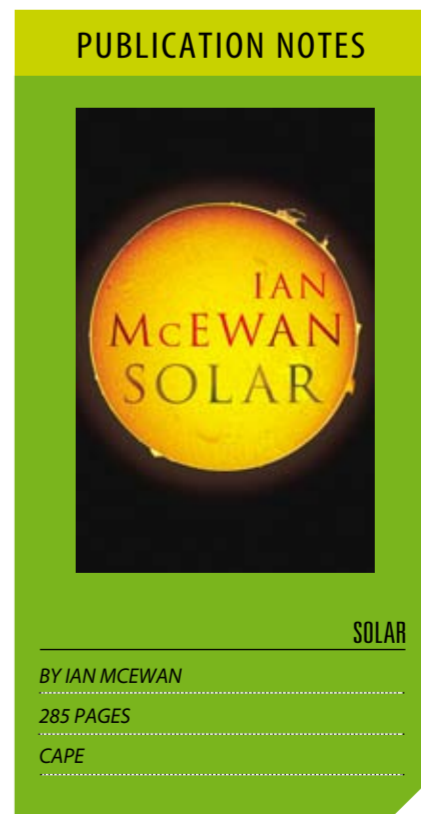
Beard, irritated by his own jealousy, agrees to join an Arctic expedition to witness the effects of global warming first-hand. The trip, similar to one McEwan took, morphs into a running joke, as Beard finds himself the only scientist among a bunch of artists.

In the few daylight hours available near the North Pole, a sculptor named Jesus hews polar bears out of ice; others perform experimental sound works. One moment of surreal slapstick involves Beard's frozen genitals and a stick of lip balm.

Things take a darker turn when Beard returns to London. A violent death, divorce, perjury — all occur within a few pages. In middle of all this, he glimpses a bright future in a pile of scientific notes. Someone else's notes.

Fast-forward to 2005. Beard has turned into a global-warming evangelist, certain that only his system of artificial photosynthesis can avert an energy crisis. He's also fighting the urge to get hitched for a sixth time.

His appetite for women is surpassed only by his gluttony. McEwan chronicles each mini-bar raid with a skinny man's faint revulsion. The delights of salt-and-vinegar potato chips are described in sensual detail. The gastro porn continues with stacks of chicken and



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BY IAN MCEWAN

285 PAGES

CAPE

steak, all wrapped in bacon, topped with cheese and served alongside jacket potatoes "impregnated with butter and cream cheese."

Beard is incapable of self-restraint or exercise. Nor, for all his rationality, can

he shake the notion that this might one day change. From the squishy comfort of a queen-sized bed, he fantasizes about kicking fried foods and taking up tennis. "Human imperfection was a large subject," he later muses.

McEwan anatomizes each of Beard's failings, from lust to tardiness. Meantime, the comedy keeps coming. Beard falls afoul of a feminist academic, and the tabloid press dubs him a eugenicist. His business partner frets that the world might not be heating up after all. Beard reassures him.

"It's a catastrophe," he says. "Relax!" If only they could. In the final stretch, lawyers, two of Beard's lovers and one angry ex-con — not to mention his own porcine body — look poised to catch up with the Nobelist as he gathers investors and journalists to watch him electrify a small town in New Mexico with his artificial photosynthesis plant.

The novel is partly a love letter to science, and McEwan refers to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and "coincident M2-branes." Even a highway runs "straight as a Euclidean line."

Yet Beard's orb-shaped body tells the story of our polluted planet more vividly than any amount of well-explained physics. Though the scientist's mind may hold the answer to our predicament, his flabby flesh embodies what we really need to overcome: our own natures.