

Hardcover: UK

CD reviews

Swept under the carpet

Geoffrey Robertson delivers a devastating inquiry into the Vatican's handling of child abuse

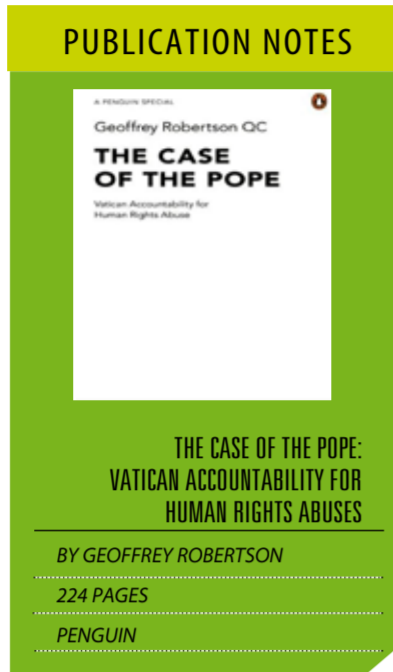
BY TERRY EAGLETON
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

The first child sex scandal in the Catholic church took place in 153AD, long before there was a "gay culture" or Jewish journalists for bishops to blame it on. By the 1960s, the problem had become so dire that a cleric responsible for the care of "erring" priests wrote to the Vatican suggesting that it acquire a Caribbean island to put them on.

What has made a bad situation worse, as the eminent lawyer Geoffrey Robertson argues in this coolly devastating inquiry, is canon law — the church's own arcane, highly secretive legal system, which deals with alleged child abusers in a disarmingly mild manner rather than handing them over to the police. Its "penalties" for raping children include such draconian measures as warnings, rebukes, extra prayers, counseling and a few months on retreat. It is even possible to interpret canon law as claiming that a valid defense for pedophile offences is pedophilia. Since child abusers are supposedly incapable of controlling their sexual urges, this can be used in their defense. It is rather like pleading not guilty to stealing from a supermarket on the grounds that one is a shoplifter. One blindingly simple reason for the huge amount of child abuse in the Catholic church (on one estimate, up to 9 percent of clerics are implicated) is that the perpetrators know they will almost certainly get away with it.

For almost a quarter of a century, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the man who is now Pope, was in supreme command of this parallel system of justice — a system deliberately hidden from the public, police and parliaments and run, so Robertson maintains, in defiance of international law. Those who imagine that the Vatican has recently agreed to cooperate with the police, he points out, have simply fallen for one of its cynical public relations exercises. In the so-called "New Norms" published by Pope Benedict this year, there is still no instruction to report suspected offenders to the civil authorities, and attempting to ordain a woman is deemed to be as serious an offence as sodomizing a child. There have, however, been some changes: victims of child abuse are now allowed to report the matter up to the age of 38 rather than 28. As Robertson wryly comments, Jesus declares that child molesters deserve to be drowned in the depths of the sea, not hidden in the depths of the Holy See.

How can Ratzinger get away with it? One mightily important reason, examined in detail in this book, is because he is supposedly a head of state. The Vatican describes itself on its Web site as an "absolute monarchy," which means that the Pope is immune from being sued or prosecuted. It also means that as the only body in the world with "non-member state" status at the UN, the Catholic church has a global platform for pursuing its goals of diminishing women, demonizing homosexuals, obstructing the use of



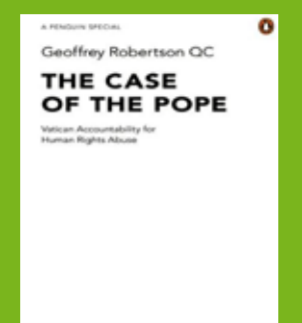
condoms to prevent AIDS and refusing to allow abortion even to save the life of the mother. Neither is it slow to use veiled threats of excommunication to bend Catholic politicians throughout the world to its will. If Pope Benedict were to air some of his troglodytic views with full public force, Robertson suggests, the UK ministry of the interior would have been forced to refuse him entry into Britain.

In fact, he argues, the Vatican's claim to statehood is bogus. It dates from a treaty established between Mussolini and the Holy See, which Robertson believes has no basis in international law. The Vatican has no permanent population, which is a legal requirement of being a state. In fact, since almost all its inhabitants are celibate, it cannot propagate citizens at all other than by unfortunate accident. It is not really a territory, has no jurisdiction over crimes committed in its precincts and depends for all its essential services on the neighboring nation of Italy. Nor does it field a team in the World Cup, surely the most convincing sign of its phonyhood.

"Petty gossip" is how the Pope has described irrefutable evidence of serious crimes. His time as the Vatican official in charge of overseeing priestly discipline was the period when, in Robertson's furiously eloquent words, "tens of thousands of children were bewitched, bugged and bewildered by Catholic priests whilst [Ratzinger's] attention was fixated on 'evil' homosexuals, sinful divorcees, deviate liberation theologians, planners of families and wearers of condoms."

This is a book that combines moral passion with steely forensic precision, enlivened with the odd flash of dry wit. With admirable judiciousness, it even finds it in its heart to praise the charitable work of the Catholic church, as well as reminding us that pedophiles (whom Robertson has defended in court) can be kindly men. It is one of the most formidable demolition jobs one could imagine on a man who has done more to discredit the cause of religion than Rasputin and those discredited US televangelists put together.

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE CASE OF THE POPE:
VATICAN ACCOUNTABILITY FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

BY GEOFFREY ROBERTSON
224 PAGES
PENGUIN



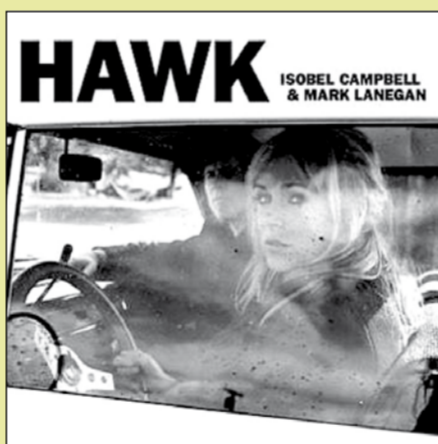
KATY PERRY
Teenage Dream
Capitol



ARCADE FIRE
The Suburbs
Merge



BEST COAST
Crazy For You
Mexican Summer



Isobel Campbell and
Mark Lanegan
Hawk
V2 Records

BY TAYLOR BRIERE
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Before sitting down to listen to Katy Perry's new record, *Teenage Dream*, I had been assured that it was good by several people whose taste in music I respect. One friend summed it up thus: "Irredeemably sticky, but it compels you to keep going back for more, the tack on your fingers be damned."

After hearing the lead track *Teenage Dream*, I thought they might well be right. The song's minimalist, relaxed feel sets off Perry's voice nicely; a few tasteful synth stabs give the chorus the oomph it needs, without going over the top. It's a good song, pleasing to the ears in every way.

The record, however, quickly devolves from there.

It would take a singer of considerable talent and character to lift these songs out of the doldrums created by their cold, lifeless production. While Perry has a decent set of vocal cords, that's not enough, and oftentimes her delivery is deadpan.

While there are a few good moments scattered here and there — *Pearl*, a take on 1990s house, deserves mention — the record as a whole is thin, unimaginative and wobbly.

But where the music fails, the imagery wins, and that's why, ultimately, people are fans of Perry. On the single *California Gurls*, Snoop Dogg, reduced to a caricature of a caricature, lends an aimless verse to the track, failing to convince listeners that he has any vested interest in the project beyond his paycheck. It's hard to believe this is the same man who was at the center of the gangsta rap revolution in the 1990s. Or is it?

This record will sell, but my fingers will remain squeaky clean.

Concept albums are dangerous, and Arcade Fire's *The Suburbs* contains many of the format's telltale faults: songs bleeding into one another; tracks split and labeled as parts (e.g. *Half Light I* and *Half Light II*); and lyrical motifs, in this case critiques of suburban life, repeating over and over again.

Fortunately, however, *The Suburbs* is completely bereft of the pretentiously cringe worthy moments that consign so many other records with grandiose designs to the trash can.

Suburban War opens with a smooth little guitar arpeggio atop which Win Butler sings sadly of the softening of youthful rebellion: "My old friends I can remember when/You cut your hair/I never saw you again." Yet what begins as melancholic reflection quickly accelerates into outright anger as the pounding of tom-toms and a burst of noisy drones signal the beginning of conflict: "You choose your side/I will choose my side."

Rococo, which features a monstrously plodding and bassy synth riff, mocks the impotence of urban youths with venom: "Let's go downtown and talk to the modern kids/They will eat right out of your hand/Using big words that they don't understand."

And *Month of May* is pure power chord rock, a call to arms for disaffected youths: "So much pain for someone so young/I know it's heavy, I know it ain't light/But how you gonna lift it with your arms folded tight?"

The Suburbs is an album studded with gems and whose intensity, even during its quietest moments, never wanes.

Following the buzz generated by a flurry of EPs, singles and shows, the release of Best Coast's debut album was one of the more hotly anticipated events of this year, at least in indie rock circles.

It's easy to understand why. The band has a special talent for writing simple, straightforward songs that rock in a way reminiscent of Nirvana at its poppiest. Bobb Bruno's guitars lay a grungy foundation and Bethany Cosentino's voice is a dead ringer for Liz Phair, which isn't a bad thing.

Crazy for You is an exemplar of this formula at work: two chords, a heavy dose of fuzz and powerful vocals that sound stark even when drenched in reverb.

Bratty B is another winner, with sludgy guitar chords, this time accompanied by a chirpy, simple lead guitar that, with a little vocal layering thrown into the mix, manages to sound exceptionally rich.

The lyrics, however, are so juvenile that they immediately put critics who praise the band on the defensive, and several reasons have been offered up as to just why they are so bad. My favorite so far is that the words are deceptively simple, and that lines like "Last night I went out with this guy/This guy he was nice and cute/But he wasn't you" convey hidden meaning.

They don't. The lyrics really are bad — that is part of their charm, at times. Besides, Cosentino's voice is at its best when it's functioning as another instrument, when it's soothing and ahhhing and rubbing up sexy against a wall of guitar.

It all works together to create a mood that is singular, but with lines like "I wish he was my boyfriend/I'd love him till the very end," it's easy to see how, for some, that mood may be one of irritation.

Still, the record makes an excellent purchase, provided you're not the sort who values clever lyrics.

The pairing of Mark Lanegan of Screaming Trees fame, who possesses a gravelly, I'm-thinking-about-my-next-cigarette-even-while-smoking-this-one voice, and Isobel Campbell, of Belle and Sebastian fame, whose voice is as "pure as the fresh driven snow," to borrow a line from her former band, is a sweet yet dirty combo.

On *You Won't See Me Down Again*, their third studio album, the pair run through a set of rootsy rock and ballads that references country, soul, folk and blues. They aren't trying to break any new ground. The focus is on songwriting — ways to frame their voices that build effective songs. And at this, they succeed.

Though the album has its share of quality rock 'n' roll, as on the delightfully bluesy title track *Hawk*, it sounds particularly good when the songs take a more mellow turn.

Eyes of Green is a Sunday morning song, lovely and lazy, built upon a playful melody, with down-home violin lolling about and calling to mind endless fields.

Cool Water is the standout track, with a delicate finger picked guitar that meshes well with the sound of a walking slap-bass and the pair's voices. It's the sort of song that makes you want to walk out into the woods and find yourself a quiet river to dip your feet in.

There are a few tracks that miss the mark. Rocker *Get Behind Me*, as well as album closer *Lately*, for instance, both run a little too long. And although *Sunrise* is a lovely track, it sounds a bit too close to Nancy Sinatra's version of *Bang Bang* for comfort.

The record is nonetheless solid, and anyone with a hankering for well-constructed songs sung with character should give *You Won't See Me Down Again* a spin.

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One leap forward, two leaps back

Frank Dikotter lifts the lid on the horrors of Mao Zedong's disastrous Great Leap Forward

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Last week saw the UK publication of Frank Dikotter's *Mao's Great Famine*. It was a significant event, notably in relation to the author's positioning of himself as a modern historian of China. Up until now he's written largely about the republican era (1912-1949), and has become a major authority on the period. Here, though, he launches himself into the communist era, a period that already boasts many experts.

It's arguable, however, that this new work is also a different kind of book. Whereas his earlier publications were essentially unexpected and eclectic, fireworks that sought to challenge traditional perceptions, this new book is comprehensive, wide-ranging and almost magisterial in tone.

It's also highly readable. It's as if in launching himself into this new era the writer has taken the opportunity to become something he wasn't before — a narrative historian covering a large field who will appeal to non-specialists as well as to fellow experts. Dikotter is on the way to becoming a sort of A.J.P. Taylor of modern Chinese history.

This is not to say the book isn't thoroughly researched. The scope of its research is actually one of its major achievements, basing its picture on the author's work in provincial archives only recently opened to scholars. He's also studied in archives in the former Soviet Union and East Germany, two countries closely involved with China at the time. The intelligence bulletins of Taiwan's secret services from the same

period, now held at the Bureau of Investigation in Sincian, Taipei County, are praised for their insight, though Dikotter opts not to rely on them.

Dikotter's general position is already a familiar one in our market-oriented age. To him, command economies are all recipes for disaster. Once grandiose schemes are handed down from above, all the myriad interactions that constitute traditional societies fly out of the window. There are a couple of passages in this book where the old China that was still ticking away in the republican era is evoked with an unmistakable nostalgia.

Every human need was catered for because of the instinct for survival of the poor. Nothing was wasted, every hectare was cultivated to its maximum potential, trade

flourished in every nook and cranny, and beneficial activities, resulting from the satisfaction of human needs for profit, took place on every hand.

With state planning, however, a terrible change took place. A formerly pious people began to cheat, lie, steal, fight among themselves, and sometimes, through no fault of their own, even become witting or unwitting cannibals.

The author never says so bluntly, but the implication of his portrayal is that human nature itself was denied by these Marxist theoreticians, and the result was inefficiency on a massive scale, producing waste, misery, destruction and eventually death. Dikotter tentatively supports estimates that between 1958 and 1962 some 50 million Chinese died of starvation and its related ills, making China's famine nearly as great a killer as World War II.

The immediate cause was Mao Zedong's (毛澤東) Great Leap Forward because it involved massive exports of foodstuffs to subsidize unrealistic economic goals. Vast enterprises such as dams and hastily thought-up industrial projects had to be paid for by foreign loans, and the state's

pride and production targets took precedence over the actual welfare of the people. Cadres had to choose between succoring the peasants and satisfying their superiors with lies about what was happening on the ground, and most opted for the latter.

There's a relentlessness about this book's portrayal of disaster and mismanagement that at times recalls Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005). That book failed to convince this reviewer because of its blanket condemnation of its subject. Dikotter is far more credible as a historian, however, noting for instance that epidemics failed to materialize in the wake of starvation, and crediting the Communist Party with taking efficient measures to isolate incidences as soon as they occurred. Such credit given to an organization he elsewhere sees as responsible for one of the greatest disasters in human history is a sure mark of an objective and fair-minded intelligence. The conclusion, therefore, has to be that this account makes such depressing reading because events really were that terrible.

Even so, this is not a book to look to for gruesome horror

PUBLICATION NOTES



BY FRANK DIKOTTER
421 PAGES
BLOOMSBURY

stories. Instead, Dikotter casts his net widely and describes a whole society, looking in separate chapters at women, the elderly, acts of resistance, violence against perceived rebels, foreign relations, and much more. It's not so much the story of a famine as a depiction of a would-be utopia 10 years after its inauguration, a society already showing multiple signs of being

on the verge of catastrophe. Such planned-from-the-top societies, Dikotter is implicitly saying, will simply never work.

But even 50 million dead didn't convince the authorities in Beijing, and the people of China had to undergo another appalling convulsion in the shape of Mao's Cultural Revolution before the inevitable change of track took place. What's extraordinary is how quickly the benefits of that change have become apparent.

One of the problems with anti-communism is the company you find yourself in — greedy investors, media moguls and evangelical zealots, among others. But Dikotter is surely a man who has no illusions about the shortcomings of unbridled capitalism either. What would be interesting would be to read something from his pen about China today. But he must be too exhausted now to do anything other than breathe a sigh of relief that his recent massive labors are over.

This is a magnificent book that will set new scholarly standards and probably reach a wide readership at the same time. One of Mao's sayings is used as a grimly ironic epigraph: "Revolution is not a dinner party," it reads.