

REVIEW

## Winning the peace

The petty squabbles of conflict resolution bring humour to a tough topic, says **Jane Graham**



**I**n his first, well received, satirical novel *The House of Journalists*, campaigner/reporter Tim Finch exploited his intimate knowledge of the refugee experience to create an insider's fiction more illuminating than any of his justly admired factual accounts. I don't know if he spent his years garnering plaudits for his work as director of the Refugee Council and senior political journalist at the BBC secretly nurturing a literary desire, but I'm grateful he found the time. Many contemporary British news journalists have ventured into novel territory, but while I enjoyed Kirsty Wark's *The House by the Loch* and acknowledge that Frank Gardner's thrillers are bestsellers, Finch been particularly successful in channeling his understanding of current affairs into fiction as successfully as any I can think of. With his second novel, *Peace Talks*, he has surpassed the achievement of his excellent debut to create something insightful, emotionally resonant and unexpectedly poetic.

At the centre of *Peace Talks* is Edvard Behrens, a highly respected diplomat who specialises in international peace negotiations. He has been sent to a hotel in the Tyrol to arbitrate a deal between two warring Middle Eastern factions and fills his day easing them masterfully towards an agreement, while his evenings are spent making small talk with colleagues and devouring his balcony view of "rooftops, snowfields, forest and mountains, twilight by a sky that is a deepening blue and orange bruise".

The engagingly informal prose – his account is a one-sided conversation with his wife Anna – slips smoothly from matter-of-fact descriptions of wartime atrocities to authoritative chronicles of tippy-toed arbitration to tender reminiscences of his time with the absent Anna. The infantile pettiness which characterises his mediation meetings is often very funny (there is a hint of Monty Python and Chris Morris in the points-scoring squabbles over the angles of the window blinds); that it doesn't jar with what increasingly becomes a profound rumination on memory, loss, and the agony of grief is a mark of Finch's management of tone.

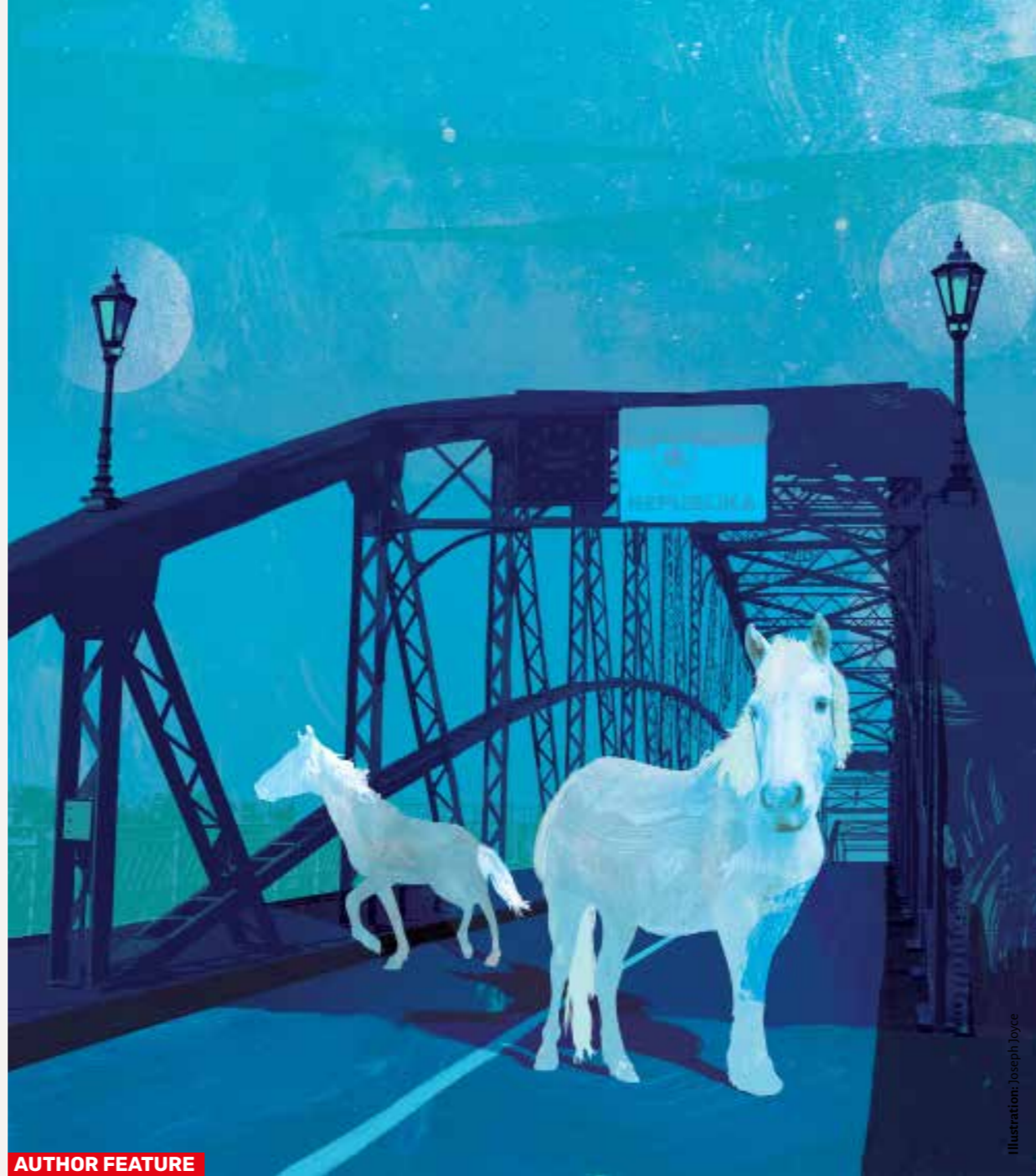
The novel is full of terrible details of brutality in battle, in love and in death. Yet it is constantly a pleasure to read. And unusually and best of all, it doesn't blow it in the denouement. It never over-explains, or exhausts its own metaphors, or enforces a false sense of closure. In fact the final few pages are a brilliant coincidental summation of the shock-and-adapt reality we're all living in right now. We could all do with reading it.

French writer Annie Ernaux is equally compelled by memory, having virtually created a genre in her mixture of mind/body memoir and storytelling (it sounds obvious now, but Ernaux was mastering this approach decades before Eimear McBride or Sinéad Gleeson came along). *A Girl's Story* sees her return to a formative teenage summer, when she lost her virginity in a rather commonplace experience shared by millions of teenage girls who, like her, are likely to have avoided its recollection ever since. Ernaux finally turns to face it – the embarrassment of her naive trust in an older man, her eager capitulation to him, her shock in being suddenly casually supplanted. With a peculiar combination of scholarly consideration and maternal affection she acknowledges that discarded 18-year-old's place in the make-up of the woman she has become. Few living writers have exploited this form as effectively; Ernaux does for the internal memory what Svetlana Alexievich has done for the social memory. Quite a feat.

@Janeannie

*Peace Talks* by Tim Finch is out now (Bloomsbury, £16.99)

*A Girl's Story* by Annie Ernaux is out now (Fitzcarraldo, £10.99)



AUTHOR FEATURE

Illustration: Joseph Joyce

## Imagination station

Guarding a historically disputed bridge was an irresistible prospect for **Jessica Anthony**. It was slow and boring – a bit like writing a novel

**S**omething that never changes for novelists is the requirement for long periods of silence to focus and write. In 2017, I was working on my novel *Enter the Aardvark* and decided to leave the US for a bit, in the hope of finding some quiet and clarity. I'd spent a year living in Prague, teaching English to Czech businessmen in northern Bohemia, and thought I might return to Eastern Europe. I found an interesting proposition online from a place called the Bridge Guard Foundation, in which applicants were invited to come to Slovakia to guard a bridge with their art. I was intrigued. The bridge is an immense 500-metre steel arch bridge

called the Mária Valéria, joining the towns of Štúrovo, Slovakia and Esztergom, Hungary. An explosion destroyed one of its piers at the end of World War 1. The bridge was rebuilt, but Nazis bombed the middle of it in World War 2 and it was left that way, obliterated, for 60 years. When the bridge was finally rebuilt in 2001, the Bridge Guard Foundation was established. Artists now come to Štúrovo and live in an apartment just beneath the bridge for a three to six-month stint, to create with the concept of bridging in mind. The idea is simple: the act of creation guards against further violence to the bridge. It prevents fascism.

I was "Forty-one." Every day, I would get up and write, then cross the bridge into Hungary. I took notes in the Bridge Guard Diary, a leather-bound book which is full of sketches, photos, and journals from the 40 previous guards. But guarding a bridge in Slovakia, it turns out, is much like novel-writing in that it is long, slow, and fairly boring work, and by the end of my first month, my diary entries began to read suspiciously like fiction:

Day 3: Cloudy, 72. Tourist season has begun. A fleet of flatbed riverboats with names like 'Crystal

Mozart' and 'Crystal Bach' and 'Crystal Mahler' have regularly appeared, gliding under the bridge en route from Budapest to Vienna. The passengers, predominantly white-haired octogenarians, stand on the decks and snap photos of the bridge with their novel-sized iPhones. They currently pose no threat. TBD.

Day 9: Sunny, 88. Across the bridge, have discovered secret narrow pathway up to the basilica in Esztergom which locals, I have learned, call the macska út, or 'cat steps'. Excellent vantage from these steps, prime guarding spot, but makes me realise that I have not seen a cat in either Štúrovo or Esztergom. Where are the cats, and are they involved?

Day 15: Sunny, 85. Fixed the bicycle! Crossed the bridge but there were too many tourists on it to pedal quickly. Learned that bicycle breaks if not pedaled quickly. Walked home forlorn. Saw three-legged dog begging outside one of Štúrovo's three Mexican restaurants. Mysteriously on point. Where are the cats?

Day 22: Too sunny. 104. Bridge intact, or so I must believe. It is far too hot to leave my flat and find out. Will stay inside and read *On Chesil Beach*. Again. Note: when guarding a bridge in Slovakia, BRING SEVERAL NOVELS.

Later that night: Awoke at 3am to terrifying thudding sounds! Followed sounds to the bathroom and peeked out the window where I witnessed two wild horses eating a car! First thought not for safety of self but safety of bridge! Raced outside, but there it stood, intact in the moonlight. Returned to flat to find horses gone. Figment of imagination?

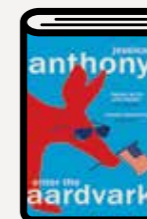
By month two, I had abandoned my weather reports, and the diary had, like it or not, become a place of play and invention. I also, for some reason, had begun to talk to myself in the second person. Perhaps because my novel was being written in the second person? Who knows! It was almost as though boredom of the daily grind of bridge-guarding was forcing me to write about the world as I best understand it, through story:

Day 40: A big day! Two Chinese tourists taking selfies climbed on to the railing and became unsteady and almost fell into the Danube! No, that didn't happen. They walked by you and laughed at your broken bicycle.

Perhaps there is something to be said about the connection between boredom and the imagination. After all, under my watch these Bridge Guard Diary stories did their job, and prevented any violence from coming to the Mária Valéria Bridge. As I write this, suddenly confined in my office due to a global pandemic, missing friends and family, I think about the silence I once sought out a bit differently: no matter how bored or alone we believe ourselves to be, so long as we can imagine, we will never be lonely. Is there any better company than fiction?

I finished writing my novel, *Enter the Aardvark*, that summer, and when my time was up, gladly handed my keys to "Forty-Two".

*Enter the Aardvark* by Jessica Anthony is out now (Transworld, £12.99)



Stefanie Naumann and Tadeusz Haska

### Top 5 books on languages

#### 01 **Fluent Forever: How to Learn Any Language Fast and Never Forget It** by Gabriel Wyner

Wyner teaches you how to retrain your ears and tongue to pronounce foreign sounds properly and connect them to imagery. This book is full of fun brain hacks to help you think in another language.

#### 02 **The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language** by Steven Pinker

This classic, award-winning book by one of the world's most influential linguists contains everything you wanted to know about language in an accessible and entertaining way.

#### 03 **What Language Is (And What It Isn't and What It Could Be)** by John McWhorter

A celebration of all languages, this engaging book explores how languages across the globe have evolved. It is full of amazing tidbits about the wonders of human linguistic expression.

#### 04 **Speaking American: How Y'all, Youse, and You Guys Talk** by Josh Katz

Did you know that different regions of the US often have different words for the same item? The charming maps in this book are great fun to see what these regional distinctions reveal about language and the people who speak it.

#### 05 **How Languages Saved Me: A Polish Story of Survival** by Tadeusz Haska and Stefanie Naumann

Orphaned in Poland at the age of 13, Tadeusz 'Tad' Haska survived World War 2 on the run, escaped jail by the Soviet secret police, and launched an elaborate plan to smuggle his wife in a coffin on an all-male ship. Discover how Tad's knowledge of nine languages helped him survive in the face of unspeakable adversity.

*How Languages Saved Me: A Polish Story of Survival* by Stefanie Naumann and Tadeusz Haska (Koehler, £12.95). The audiobook is available on audible.com

