

# madness lies

**I AM LIVELY**

**THE STORM AT THE DOOR**  
STEFAN MERRILL BLOCK  
Paper £12.99  
Hardcover £9.99 pp342

This second novel by an acclaimed young American writer has at its heart an evocation of mental illness that pulls off the difficult trick of avoiding both false uplift and stultifying depression. It is New England in the early 1960s, and Frederick Merrill — based on the author's own grandfather — is a man driven to extremes. "Sometimes," he writes in his journal, "I was under the world, a cockroach-man scuttling beneath stones in filth, scrambling from the light. Or else I was above the world, as certain and mighty as a fundamental force." Career and family are crushed beneath the weight of Frederick's sadness/mania. He takes to self-destructive boozing and womanising. One night, after he exposes himself by the local highway, the police are called and his wife agrees to have him committed to a mental hospital.

Block brings an intelligent imagination to bear on the portrayal of Frederick's predicament. A sensitive man, Frederick knows that there is something wrong with him, but also knows that the asylum, with its sedative drugs and its rigid, moronically psychoanalytic definitions of illness and cure, is not the place where he will discover what that something is.

Illuminated by Block's supple, precise prose, Frederick's tortured search for meaning, driven by grief at what he has done to his wife Katharine and their young daughters, forms the novel's most important strand. Another is provided by the institution of the asylum. When



Stefan Merrill Block: intelligent imagination

in his obtuse villainy, and a subplot involving his affair with a young assistant who has befriended Frederick remains thin and undermotivated.

Beyond that, there is the problem of Frederick's wife, Katharine: her reflections alternate with the story of her husband's ordeal in the asylum, but she remains to the end a somewhat distant and unappealing character, locked inside an immobilising passive-aggression. And there is another, final level of framing: the young "author" himself, through whose eyes we observe an older Katharine, her mind frayed by early Alzheimer's, hesitating over whether to burn her dead husband's journal.

There are a number of problems with this quasi-autobiographical, intergenerational framing — not least the fact that the letter/journal/photograph from the past has become such a numbingly ubiquitous device of "literary fiction". Along with the present tense deployed throughout (a mistake, I suspect), it gives an unfortunately arch veneer to the whole. Scrape that veneer off, though, and you find something genuinely powerful and illuminating in the story of Frederick's mind.

Frederick knows that there is something wrong with him

Available at the Sunday Times Bookshop price of £11.69 (inc p&hp) and £9.99 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135

# In league with evil

A barbaric history is revisited in an impressive novel about the brutal leader of the Lodz ghetto who collaborated with the Nazis

**TOM DEVESON**

**THE EMPEROR OF LIES**  
by STEVE SEM-SANDBERG  
Faber £14.99/ebook £12.99 pp672

In 1940, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the bullying "leader" of the Lodz ghetto, made a dreadful pact with Nazi power. His community would produce goods for the German war machine in return for minimal food and welfare. The horrific twist on *Arbeit macht frei* (work sets you free) didn't save him or them from Auschwitz. Thirty years ago, the American novelist Leslie Epstein turned the story into an extended moral fable in *King of the Jews*; Primo Levi wrote an unforgettable 10-page chapter about the event in *Moments of Reprieve*. Now, in this vast and impressive book, the Swedish novelist Steve Sem-Sandberg revisits these five years of barbaric history.

The chronology from April 1940 to January 1945 is handled with great skill, sometimes repeating or looping back on itself. Sem-Sandberg uses maps, official proclamations and speeches, photographs, news summaries and documentary lists and inventories, along with interlocking sets of family, household and workplace stories, many of which end unresolved as people are killed or deported or just disappear. The appendix has a huge cast-list of real and imaginary characters and a glossary of Polish, Yiddish, German and Hebrew phrases. As one woman says of the

linguistic jumble: "It's like living in a swarm of bees."

Rumkowski himself is a formidable paradox. Sem-Sandberg gives him depth by showing that he shares feelings with all of us — recurrent dreams of an uncertain self, memories of childhood fears, a love of stories. At the same time, he behaves inhumanly, seeing his fellow Jews as a "loathsome black mass", sexually abusing boys and girls in an orphanage, appeasing the Nazi monster by "thinking like a monster" and — most notoriously — urging the residents of the ghetto to give up their children and the old and sick so that others may survive. He preaches "order and discipline" in the middle of chaos.

The book is immeasurably strengthened by its multiple points of view. There is Adam, an unskilled labourer, who tries and fails to protect his deranged sister and then hides from the Germans, fevered and hallucinating and uncontrollably squirting diarrhoea; Rosa, a nursery nurse, urgently trying to recall the names and fates of the children once in her care; Samstag, the violent and unruly orphan who becomes a violent, unruly policeman; Rumkowski's adopted son wishing he might escape the "hateful wheedling paternal voice"; Biebow, the drunken head of the German civilian organisation, unsuccessfully fighting off the SS; and numerous others, all convincing.

Some images derive their force from their bleak naturalistic precision. It is not easy to move on after reading of a crowd of deportees waiting in a "great deep roar of rain" or of a group of orphans with mouths "black and sticky" after eating grass. Yet more



A dreadful pact: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, with white hair, reports to Himmler, seated left in car

**Brief lives**

The Emperor of Lies is Steve Sem-Sandberg's first novel to be published in Britain, but he already has a well-established reputation for his historical novels in his native Sweden, among them his fictionalised portraits of the German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, and Milena Jesenska, the Jewish Czech writer who died in Ravensbruck.



terrible pictures demand that we acknowledge their stark truth: squealing babies tossed from a hospital window to be skewered on a bayonet by a soldier with bright blond hair; a ditch full of raw sewage and worn-out shoes; Samstag's swollen, stinking, insect-crawling corpse.

Yet the book is not a mere recitation of crime and evil. There are compound ironies in the fact that Rumkowski wanted to make the authorities acknowledge that "the ghetto was a special place". Sealed off from the outside world, it has its own "hierarchy of privilege". The Archive, where several characters work, contains everything from old prayer books and railway timetables to translations of Theodor Fontane and PG Wodehouse.

Perhaps the book's chief virtue is that it doesn't attempt to resolve these complexities. Within the ghetto there are swindlers and crooks, lovers and musicians; the supposedly efficient Nazis sometimes kill people at random; we witness pain, hunger, injustice and also self-sacrifice, courage and honour. Monumental historical events such as the delayed arrival of the

Red Army take place almost off-stage. Rumkowski and his family are murdered in a footnote. Sem-Sandberg writes that lies were an extension of Rumkowski's whole being, but also quotes his chilling exhortation: "Do not envy me." As Levi wrote of him: "His ambiguity is ours."

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SUNDAY TIMES ONLINE

To read an exclusive extract from *The Emperor of Lies*, go to [thesundaytimes.co.uk/books](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/books)

The writing duo SL Grey, a feisty new talent from South Africa, provide a more comic, if just as dark, slice of horror in *The Mall* (Atlantic £14.99). Wimpy goth Dan and bullying runaway Rhoda slip through the cracks in the endless corridors that lie behind a mall. Chased by a foul-breathed monster, taunted by creepy text messages, they end up in a slanted, wrong version of the shopping centre peopled by ghoulishly macabre imaginings that their creators have clearly had a devilish amount of fun dreaming up. Even without the grisly minds of Grey a mall is bad enough; with them, it becomes the lowest circle of hell.

All available at Bookshop prices (including p&hp) on 0845 271 2135

# Horned, hoofed and not of this world

The weird gets weirder in Alison Flood's science-fiction and fantasy roundup

Some authors expound theories of time travel in their novels: Kim Stanley Robinson, for instance, developed the idea of three braided temporal dimensions in *Galileo's Dream*. The prize-winning American writer Connie Willis takes a different approach in her novel of time-travelling historians, *Blackout* (Gollancz £14.99/ebook £7.99), wisely avoiding going into any detail about the how, and concentrating instead on the why and the where.

Already the recipient of the Nebula award and shortlisted for the Hugo, *Blackout* follows the stories of a group of Oxford academics from 2060. History in the future is no longer a question of studying dry source material: thanks to a time-travel lab, historians can visit an era of their choosing and observe events themselves. Michael is aiming for Dunkirk, Polly wants to experience the London blitz, and Merope to learn about the life of an evacuee child. They watch from the background, bystanders,

aware that — according to the laws of time travel — they cannot affect the course of history. Then they start to notice tiny discrepancies in the actual events compared to their historical records, and they don't seem to be able to find their way home. Whether it's read as a historical novel with science-fiction elements, or science fiction in a historical setting, this is a thoughtful, stirring evocation of daily life during the second world war, as well as a rip-roaring time-travel adventure.

From one prize-winning author to another: three-time Arthur C Clarke winner China Miéville's novel *Embassytown* (Macmillan £17.99/ebook £17.99) is also science fiction, but far removed (in time, space and species) from Willis's. Set on the planet Arika, it tells of that world's natives, "insect-horse-coral-fan things" who hum "polyphonically in reveries that were utterly their own", and of the impending catastrophe brought by humans. Never resorting to the lengthy scene-setting that plagues so much science fiction, Miéville deftly and lucidly draws an improbably plausible picture of a

world on the edge of the universe and facing its end of days.

Sawgamet, the location of Alexi Zentner's debut *Touch* (Chatto £12.99/ebook £13.56), is almost as remote, a logging town in the wilds of Canada at the turn of the 20th century. This is a harsh place of huge forests and black nights, of nine-month winters that "circle like a wolf". It's a place where electricity is soon to take over from the primeval dark, modernity from myth, but where still, for now, the qallu-pilluit, or water witches, have their way, ghosts can be raised and passion burns with real, physical fire. Zentner fills his novel with arresting, unforgettable images, such as the father frozen under the ice, "little more than the width of an axe blade" separating his hands from those of the daughter he dived

after. As dazzling as the snow that fills its pages, *Touch* marks Zentner out as a talent to watch.

A more standard first step into the fantasy arena is taken by Elspeth Cooper in her debut, *Songs of the Earth* (Gollancz £12.99). Following the well-trodden fantasy path of a gifted but lonely protagonist who doesn't know his own strength, it tells of the adventures of Gair, condemned to death for being a witch, as he learns about his powers at a school for the magical. Spice is added by the threat of the veil between Gair's world and that of the "Hidden Kingdom" wearing thin, but sentences such as "Goddess love the boy, he stares damnation in the eye!" go no way towards helping fantasy attain a veneer of cool.

Adam Nevill, on the other hand, shows it's possible to take a tried-and-tested horror cliché — the Blair Witch-esque group of friends lost in the woods — and make it horrifyingly scary again. The British author's third novel, *The Ritual* (Macmillan £12.99/ebook £12.99), is set in the ancient forests of Sweden, where Luke and his friends lose themselves after — big horror no-no — taking a short cut. It could have been tired in less skilful hands, but Nevill sinuously ramps up the tension: the dimming September light, the crooked black house buried in the depths of the forest, the awful dark shape that follows them, horned, hoofed, powerful and hungry. Often horror loses its power when the evil is given a face; in this case, it only gets more disturbing.



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