

BOOKS REVIEWS

‘No real Elfland values or architecture left..’

M John Harrison's stories are weird, wonderful – and deserving of a much wider audience, says Tim Martin

YOU SHOULD COME WITH ME NOW by M John Harrison 272pp, Comma Press, £9.99, ebook £4.35

In one of the stories in M John Harrison's latest collection, a character takes a train from Waterloo Station in London and travels through the "transition zone" to an anachronistic, vaguely Slavic country that sits where the North Sea once was. This eastern territory is a place of "wars and famines", rustic and surreal, with a landscape that Harrison describes in minute and lucid detail: "Thin terraces, irrigated by a stream or a well with its pony in harness. Dry willows. An abandoned car washed across from our side of things and already becoming part of the landscape." The title of the story, referring to the place's rather pretty name, is "In Autotelia".

Something autotelic is something self-contained and self-feeding; something that finds purpose or meaning in itself alone. It's a useful word to have in mind when approaching Harrison, a quiet giant of British writing whose work has consistently, and deliberately, stayed too weird for the mainstream of any genre. His early fiction, from *The Centauri Device* to the far-future Viriconium books, published in the avant-garde sci-fi scene of the Seventies, twisted well-worn genre materials into symbolist nightmares and bleak comedies of the absurd. He returned to the territory in the early 2000s with *Light*, the first in his Kefahuchi Tract trilogy, which alternated vignettes of modern urban despair with a space saga set at the horizon of a collapsing reality. Much of his work, though, is set closer to what we might, with substantial misgiving, call the real world. The best known is *Climbers* (1989), a novel about rock climbing in the Peak District, which evoked the landscape in language so stripped and metaphysically precise that it seemed an alien planet itself. This newest book, published

without fanfare by the small Comma Press, contains stories that move between modern London and shadow-world capitals, between the English seaside and the spacefaring future. In "Cicisbeo", a London husband retreats into the family attic for months of mysterious DIY. When the house collapses, we get a brief glimpse of the "transparent but luminous" tunnel he's dug through the night sky: "Travelling north towards the river, it rose steeply until, at perhaps a thousand feet, it linked up with a complex of similar tunnels all across London." In "Not All Men", a woman claims to have spent weeks stalking her ex-partner through the capital, but he doesn't recognise the stream of photos and surveillance videos she provides: "Dirty people, looking up at the walls like that without moving," he complains. "None of them look like me. They're older, they're younger, some of them are obviously women."

None of these pieces is directly allegorical – I suspect Harrison would find that crass, or certainly too easy – but many are imprinted with his interests in contemporary affairs, anarchic politics and cultural or literary theory. In "Psychoarchaeology", dead royals are being dug up from car parks all over Britain: "At best they're a geological resource, not perhaps as valuable as coal, but more easily available and each containing enough energy to power a couple of careers, a biography, an MA course, a BBC Four series." In several short fictions, 21st-century visitors encounter Elfland, dilapidated and Tolkienesque, where an obese King is wheeled around on "a reinforced composite and titanium gurney" and real-estate buyers look down their noses at the Queen's palace: "No real Elfland values or architecture left... They also had a really quite smelly chihuahua, always gazing up at you."

The stories are tied together by a bleak humour, a sense of disquiet about the reliability of things, but most of all by Harrison's extraordinarily flexible prose. It's restrained and luminous: an anorexic woman, for instance, "had the drawn yet peaceful face of a bog-burial, as if she had been killed but had got over it". Like certain drugs, too, it has a pronounced halo effect; one finishes even the most cryptic stories feeling off-balance, metaphysically queasy, perhaps transfigured. It's strong stuff, but there's nothing else like it.

Notes from many small islands

A trip around the periphery of Britain, from Scilly to Eigg, leaves Michael Kerr with some surprising discoveries

ISLANDER by Patrick Barkham 368pp, Granta, £20, ebook £9.50

During Northern Ireland's inadequately named Troubles, I sometimes heard people of my parents' generation, sickened by the violence, say that they were minded "to leave Ireland and go up a tree". We lived on the Causeway Coast, so one of the nearest bolt holes would have been the seabird stronghold of Rathlin

Island, nine miles from Ballycastle across the Sloc na Mara, "the swallow (or gulp) of the sea". Rathlin has no trees worth climbing, but it is, Patrick Barkham has recently been assured, too small to tolerate a sectarian divide. One of its long-term residents, a woman in her 80s, told him: "I don't know who my family vote for in any election because we don't discuss it. Catholic or Protestant or Mohammedan, they don't care on Rathlin."

For his last book, *Coastlines*, Barkham beat the bounds of the National Trust's seaside holdings. In *Islander: A Journey Around Our Archipelago*, he heads offshore. Inspired by a DH Lawrence short story about a rich idealist seeking peace on successively smaller islands, he travels through 11 outposts of the British Isles, moving from large to medium to tiny, in pursuit of "the essence of what it is to be an islander". By his side during these journeys, taking him everywhere from the well-chronicled St Kilda to the unsung Ray Island in Essex, is the shade of the man on whom Lawrence's character was based, the writer Edward Montague Compton Mackenzie – Monty, as Barkham settles early to calling him.

Besides being the author of the comic novel *Whisky Galore*, about islanders salvaging thousands of bottles from a shipwreck, and numerous other works that Barkham finds "a cure for insomnia", Mackenzie was besotted with islands. Having lived on Capri, Aegean islands and a South

Seas atoll, he leased two Channel Islands before moving on to the Hebrides, first as owner of the Shiants, then as a resident of Barra. Hovering in the background of Barkham's book is a recent development in which the people of an island that has long been a member of a grand continental club voted to leave it. That development is mentioned only obliquely: "When the mainland or mainstream is in crisis, people look to the periphery for escape or inspiration. Many of us are looking there right now." The book, then, is partly an account of islands as they were seen by Monty, partly one of islands as they appear to Barkham and partly an inquiry into what islands and their inhabitants might



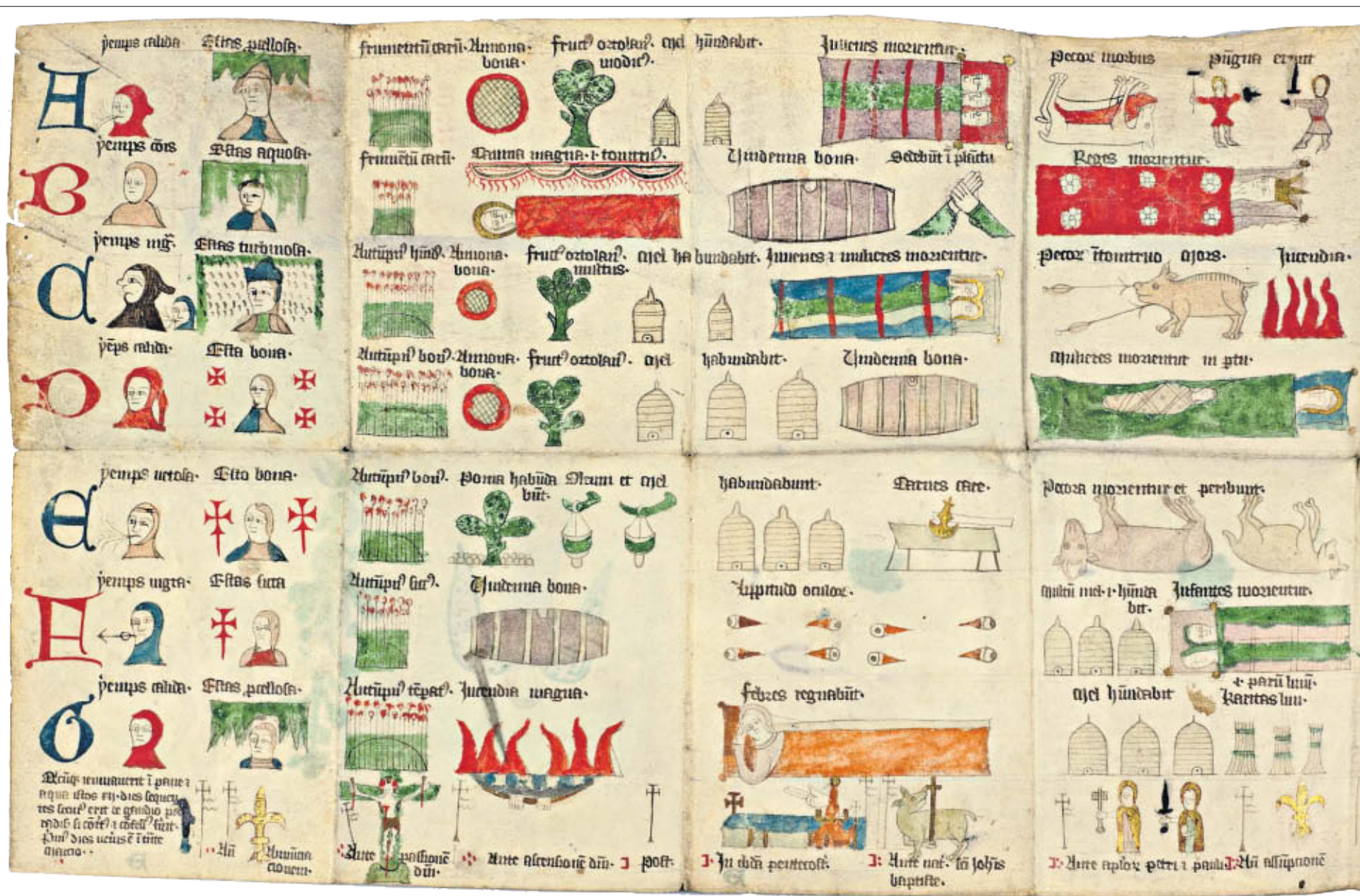
SPLENDID ISOLATION The remote island of Eigg in the Scottish Hebrides

be able to teach mainlanders. It's an illuminating and instructive 'tour d'horizon', one that could be read with profit by MSPs currently considering a Bill designed to ensure a sustainable future for Scotland's islands. Snappy, too: Scilly is memorably summed up as "a small archipelago mostly owned by the Duchy of Cornwall; struggling to make its way in the modern world, permanently obscured by forecasters' bottoms on the weather map of Britain." Having written in previous books about butterflies (a passion Mackenzie shared) and badgers, Barkham is, predictably, strong on the flora and fauna. But he is equally good on the

people, drawing out their own tales of island life as well as those maintained over generations by oral tradition. As Lawrence put it in that short story, on an island "the past is vastly alive, and the future is not separated off". For residents of the Isle of Man, who bridle at the phrase "tax haven", the future embraces digital or cryptocurrencies (such as Bitcoin), which can be developed more quickly when you are outside both the UK and the EU and can make your own rules. For the islanders of Eigg, who famously bought out a dictatorial landlord, the priority is power to run the fridges and freezers they could never have before, provided by a green electricity grid drawing on wind, streams and sun. Having hugely enjoyed *Coastlines* despite its profusion of dangles (misattached or unattached particles), I should say that I noticed none in *Islander* – though there is a sentence in which "A snipe zigzags up from the long grass, as if fired from a loose canon [sic]".

Barkham's outings on the islands themselves would be easier to follow if the map that opens each chapter had place names and features and not just an outline. And, as at least one resident has already pointed out, Orkney, the northernmost outpost featured, has been left off the map at the front. Ah, the perils of life on the periphery...

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EXHIBITIONS DESIGNING ENGLISH

This almanac made in late-14th-century Worcestershire can predict when battles will occur, crops will fail, honey will be abundant, kings will die and women will go into labour (or so it claims). It is to be found in *Designing English* (Bodleian Libraries, £30) by Daniel Wakelin, a study of early English literature that traces the evolution of page design over a period of 800 years, from the Anglo-Saxon era to the early Tudors.

Illustrated with over 90 magnificent images – from Latin gospels to hunting manuals – the book examines the craft of scribes, painters and engravers, and considers how the techniques they developed we now take for granted in the modern world. The book accompanies an exhibition of the same name at the Weston Library in Oxford, on until April 22. bodleian.ox.ac.uk

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The Birthday Party at the Harold Pinter Theatre

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"There have been some fantastic West End Pinter revivals over the past few years, but to borrow a line from another Harold, in that famous Macmillan speech of 1957, we've never had it so good" - *The Telegraph*

Following critically-acclaimed productions of *Betrayal* and *Old Times*, Ian Rickson reunites with Sonia Friedman Productions to direct a major new revival of Harold Pinter's brilliantly mysterious dark-comic masterpiece, *The Birthday Party*.

Starring in Pinter's comedy of menace are Toby Jones (*The Play What I Wrote, Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, Sherlock, Atomic Blonde*), Stephen Mangan (*The Norman Conquests, Jeeves and Wooster, Episodes*), Zoë Wanamaker CBE (*Harlequinade, Passion Play, My Family*), Pearl Mackie (*Doctor Who, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*), Tom Vaughan-Lawlor (*All My Sons, Peaky Blinders, The Infiltrator*) and Peter Wight (*Hamlet, Electra, Atonement*).

Stanley Webber is the only lodger at Meg and Petey Boles' sleepy seaside boarding house. The unsettling arrival of enigmatic strangers Goldberg and McCann disrupts the humdrum lives of the inhabitants and their friend Lulu, and mundanity soon becomes menace when a seemingly innocent birthday party turns into a disturbing nightmare. Truth and alliances hastily shift in Pinter's landmark play about the absurd terrors of the everyday.

Ian Rickson's new production of *The Birthday Party* is designed by the Quay Brothers, with lighting by Hugh Vanstone, sound by Simon Baker, music by Stephen Warbeck and casting by Amy Ball.

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