

## Paperbacks

## FICTION Charmaine Chan



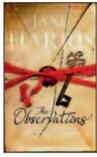
**Next**  
by Michael Crichton  
Harper, HK\$115  
★★★★☆

Michael Crichton has an axe to grind about biotechnology, and it shows. But in case readers don't get it after reading *Next*, he includes an essay to explain why gene patents are "unnecessary, unwise and harmful", why it's absurd that people lose rights to their tissue once they've parted with it and why it's insidious that many science professors have corporate ties. These issues and more surface in the novel, which ties the narrative in long, short and knotted threads and leaves little room for character development. The plot centres on the sale of tissue from a former cancer patient without his permission (action a court rules is justified even though the man won't get a cent from the results of the university research using his cells). There's also a drug addict who inhales a retrovirus being tested on rats to hasten their maturity, a transgenic ape in Sumatra that speaks Dutch, English and French, and a sentient parrot in France that helps a child with homework. Oh, and there's something at the start about stolen embryos and a Russian prostitute. Crichton, author of *The Andromeda Strain*, should have stopped when he was ahead. *Next* shows why more can be less.



**Naked to the Hangman**  
by Andrew Taylor  
Hodder, HK\$115  
★★★★☆

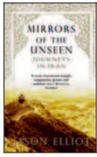
Crime novels these days are often served to readers in conveyor-belt style, with parts assembled on a tried and tested framework. However, Andrew Taylor's *Naked to the Hangman*, the eighth in the series, has a quality that lifts it above competitors in the genre. Part of the book's charm is the setting – a fictional Anglo-Welsh town in the 1950s – and the characters, including Richard Thornhill. The Lydmouth detective, it turns out, has a past not even his wife knows about. The skeletons in his closet date from 1948, when Thornhill was posted to Palestine at the end of the British Mandate. There, he fell in with a dodgy policeman called Jock and witnessed crimes that sent him over the edge and back home. When Jock is found dead in Lydmouth, Thornhill becomes a suspect. Despite this being the hook, much else takes place to fasten readers' attention: Thornhill's daughter plays detective; the town prepares for a dance that underscores the fickle yearnings of adolescence; and a purse goes missing, highlighting the prejudices of established residents. So rich are the Lydmouth incidents that the chapters on Palestine seem undeveloped by comparison. But still they tempt readers on, making fans of first-timers to the series and maintaining the brand for others.



**The Observations**  
by Jane Harris  
Penguin, HK\$112  
★★★★☆

First-time author Jane Harris deserved to be shortlisted for the Orange Prize for fiction this year for several reasons, not least because her period novel features such a distinctive protagonist. Mouthy 15-year-old harlot Bessy Buckley endears because she's naughty, duplicitous, damaged and funny. The 19th-century tart with a heart is also a semi-literate teen who thinks on her feet and hopes for the best. When the book opens she's on her way to Edinburgh to seek employment when a woman she meets hires her as a maid because she can write. Within no time, however, Bessy senses that her boss, Arabella, is mentally imbalanced, especially when she's asked to document in detail her working day. The reason, she soon discovers, is a social experiment being conducted on maids at the castle that Arabella is recording under the title *Observations on the Habit and Nature of the Domestic Class*. Bessy is so incensed by her description that she plots to scare Arabella with ghostly messages and sounds. But her plan works too well and invites the past to the fore with violent consequences. Pitch perfect, funny and sad, *The Observations* is a novel readers will feel privileged to have read.

## NON-FICTION Tim Cribb



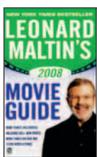
**Mirrors of the Unseen - Journeys in Iran**  
by Jason Elliot  
Picador HK\$144  
★★★★☆

A timely book to help dispel some of the tension surrounding Iran, *Mirrors of the Unseen* is part travelogue, part inquiry into the spirituality of Islam as manifest in the art and architecture of the land once known as Persia. Elliot combines several journeys in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Iran was more welcoming to tourists. That he speaks Farsi opens the way for an interesting if controversial take on Iran today. His harshest critics consider him patronising; others commend his challenge to ill-informed western prejudices. One deems his choice of Robert Byron's 1933 classic *The Road to Oxiana* as misplaced; another applauds his boldness in rubbishing generations of scholarship. Elliot writes passionately about the origins and history of Islamic art and the inherent spirituality in what has largely been dismissed as purely decorative. He finds a divine presence in the geometry of architecture and the proportion of calligraphy. His title comes from the Persian belief that the visible world is an imperfect mirror of a hidden reality of perfection that writer Rory Maclean says provides nourishment for the soul. For a glimpse of modern Iran without the political obsession, Elliot is an enlightening guide.



**Big Babies - Or: Why Can't We Just Grow Up?**  
by Michael Bywater  
Granta, HK\$128  
★★★★☆

You buy a home with a mortgage. The mortgage has a variable interest rate – it goes up or down according to the market – with a fixed, usually discounted, rate for the first two years. The fixed rate expires. In the interim, the interest rate has either gone (a) up, or (b) down. Would you think it unfair if (a) occurs? No, you wouldn't. So why, given that (a) has happened, do so many people think the government should pick up the tab and, more importantly, why is anyone taking them seriously? *Big Babies - Or: Why Can't We Just Grow Up?* is pure polemic. Michael Bywater, 53, author of *Lost Worlds*, blames baby boomers, those aged 45 to 60, for the selfish, morose, boorish and infantile world we live in today. Instead of behaving like an adult in expectation of being treated like one, we live in a "Mummyverse". We need to be told hot water is hot and revolving doors revolve, rely on advertising for identity, and live lifestyles rather than lives. Bywater's entirely anecdotal case is an excellent antidote to a world that needs to be told stock prices can go up and down.



**Leonard Maltin's 2008 Movie Guide**  
edited by Leonard Maltin  
Signet, HK\$80  
★★★★☆

In the early 1980s, Australian television discovered the wonders of satellite and began broadcasting US programmes, including *Entertainment Tonight*, a surprisingly smart and gossipy show for pre-Generation X twentysomethings – before dumbing down became the rule and Warhol celebrities took charge. *Entertainment Tonight* movie reviewer Leonard Maltin may not be a patch on the BBC's Barry Norman, but where is Norman now? Certainly not the mini-mogul that the American reviewer has become. This is no Halliwell's film guide, but it is bigger: Maltin's latest movie guide runs to 1,629 pages of often witty and surprisingly intelligent précis covering almost all the films we love, hate and have never seen. Nine editors cover the running times, casts, available formats (DVD, VHS, laser), awards and the views of others before passing judgment – four stars for must-see greatness, and "bomb" for the irredeemably bad, such as the "humiliatingly banal Madonna career-killer" *Dangerous Game*. Foreign films get enough attention, and *Infernal Affairs* gets three stars: "Stylish, character-driven thriller delivers plenty of action while dealing with philosophical notions of morality, identity and loyalty." But in Hong Kong we already know that.

Pham Xuan An was largely vilified for spying on US forces during the Vietnam war, but he's being rehabilitated in print, writes **Greg Torode**

## In from the cold

One would have to dig a long way through the annals of espionage – both fiction and non-fiction – to find a tale quite as extraordinary as that of Pham Xuan An.

His achievements as a spy are merely one aspect of the story. Spying for then-North Vietnam in its long struggle against the American-backed South, An infiltrated the US and Vietnamese military, intelligence and journalistic establishments. His information and assessments for Hanoi shaped the war and its key battles, from its earliest days to its dramatic end in 1975.

A skilled charmer, his easy manner won him access to figures that included William Colby, chief of the CIA's Saigon station. Shortly after secretly joining the Vietnamese Communist Party in the mid-1950s, it was another CIA Asian veteran and presidential adviser, Edward Lansdale, who helped An with his big break: the chance to study journalism in California.

Equipped with reporting talent and a warmth and understanding towards the Americans and their culture, An spent much of the later part of the war as a staff correspondent for *Time* magazine – the only Vietnamese to reach such a position in the American press. As dozens of leading American reporters flocked to his side for crumbs of insight over coffee in Saigon's Cafe Givral, An was working for Hanoi, feeding covert reports to handlers hidden in underground tunnels in Cu Chi, outside Saigon.

But there's another side to the tale. As stories of An's real work and betrayals grew in the years after the war, remarkably so did understanding and tolerance of his actions in the minds of many former American and South Vietnamese colleagues and sources, including such celebrated reporter-authors as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan.

In 2003, towards the end of his life, An was even invited by the US consul-general in Ho Chi Minh City aboard the USS Vandegrift, the first US warship to visit since the fall of Saigon.

An didn't live long enough to see his son, Hoang An, serving as a translator for Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet while he hosted his US counterpart George W. Bush during a visit in November last year. After long post-war years treating their star agent with mistrust given his links to the US, Hanoi, too, has embraced his legacy.

US historian Larry Berman has done a readable job uncovering the shades and nuances of An's life in his recently released biography, *Perfect Spy - the Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An*. His story naturally carries a heavy American overlay, largely of redemption and reconciliation.



Photo: Courtesy Le Minh and Ted Thai

## Asia Specific

He has left plenty of room for more dispassionate accounts. Berman speaks of meeting An during repeated visits to Ho Chi Minh City in the last years of his life, talking for hours surrounded by pets in the shaded recesses of his villa or at the now state-owned Cafe Givral. An's worsening emphysema – the communist spy enjoyed his packs of Lucky Strikes – added urgency to the task.

"One of his most striking qualities was just how easy he was to talk to," says Berman. "An was a great conversationalist ... he could joke, he had this tremendous knowledge of history. He had a great, sharp wit and, unlike a lot of Vietnamese, he could relate to Americans very quickly."

Berman acknowledges the internal tensions faced by a biographer attempting to probe the psyche of a man who lived with deception as a way of life. In the back of his mind, Berman says he always wondered whether An was simply "spinning me".

"I was very conscious of walking a line doing this kind of story ... I knew there were things he probably could never tell me," says Berman. "As a biographer, you can only get as much information as you

can and tell the person's story as faithfully as possible and then it is up to the reader to decide."

"It was a vastly different project to anything else I've done," says Berman, the author of three other Vietnam works, including the respected history *No Peace, No Honour: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam*.

Unlike more detached works, an obvious warmth comes through in this book, as Berman, like so many before him, is struck by An's intelligence and humanity. "Yes, in short, I liked him," he says.

But there were times when the "walls would come down". Despite repeated questioning, Berman says An never came to terms with his role and the deaths that it lay behind. When pushed about the violent battles he helped plot and the thousands of deaths that resulted, he tells Berman that he never knowingly killed anyone.

An's tensions dominate the book. Remarkably, Berman insists, An played it straight as a reporter, not giving in to any temptation to mislead his colleagues in his extensive cafe briefings or write loaded stories for publication. "He knew he had to be as good a reporter as possible because if he didn't, he was dead," says Berman. "It was that simple ... he realised that choice and dealt with that very early on."

An may have been a good reporter, but he excelled at his real job, the "lone wolf" agent, referring to his dark trade as a "profession".

He studied it, absorbing its risks and demands. An talks of two sacred taboos of spying: getting caught and not properly concealing information and sources. Amid the baggage of reconciliation, some of the most striking parts of the book are the operational details, known to fans of the espionage genre as "tradecraft".

Rather than risk regular meetings with his handlers at Cu Chi, An would hide film of his

His reports for Hanoi allowed them to cope with US helicopter assaults and air power. Hanoi's military mastermind, General Vo Nguyen Giap, once declared that An's reports were like "being in the US war room".

Then came the Tet Offensive of 1968, when communist forces attacked major towns and cities across the South, even briefly occupying the US embassy in downtown Saigon.

It was a military defeat for the north, but a political watershed that split a horrified US.

For weeks in advance, An moved around Saigon, checking out potential targets, from wharves to fuel installations. He then covered the resulting violence for *Time*.

Two years later, his information helped northern forces intercept a major push by southern troops in Laos, operating without US assistance for the first time. About 10,000 southern soldiers died and the US lost more than 100 helicopters trying to rescue them.

Berman paints An as an intense nationalist who, despite his genuine liking of Americans and his many friends, saw the need to defend his country. He says An was never a "hard-core" party man, and he eventually wanted to return to journalism in a Vietnam at peace.

"I saw in him a sadness at how things worked out," he says. "He was a very intelligent man."

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**Perfect Spy** by Larry Berman (Collins, HK\$208)

## Pham Xuan An knew he had to be as good a reporter as possible because if he didn't, he was dead

Larry Berman, biographer

strategic assessments and reports in homemade spring rolls, slipping them to a woman street hawk, who acted as his courier. He wrote his reports in his study late in the evening, his villa guarded by his German shepherds.

Berman is also strong on details about the disturbing value of An's work. In the early 1960s, he obtained extensive documents and briefings from the South Vietnamese about how their US advisers were preparing to combat communist guerrillas.

## Always scribble, scribble, eh, Ms Oates?

## Katy Guest

Joyce Carol Oates says her favourite character from her new novel is Herschel, the taciturn and illiterate brother of the female lead. "In real life I'd probably be afraid of him," she says. "But as a character in a novel ... he's primitive, insightful. Then he kind of disappears." She says Herschel is a character she finds herself writing again and again.

*The Gravedigger's Daughter* is her 35th novel. That's if you don't count the dozen or so she has written under the pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly, or the eight novellas, 30 short story collections, eight plays and various essays, children's books and poetry.

Since she started writing at the age of 14, on a typewriter given to her by her grandmother, Oates has achieved a reputation for quality, quantity and controversy. Her novel *Them* won the National Book Award in 1970, and she has since won a series of prizes and become an Oprah's Book Club favourite as well as a Princeton academic. She has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize three times.

"Every single Oates novel I've read has added to my conviction that she is a genius," a reviewer wrote in *The Independent on Sunday*. Another, in the *Telegraph*, called her writing "consistently brilliant,

abundantly gifted with acuity, penetration, sympathy and humour ... The only complaint that may be made against her work is that there is rather a lot of it. Can she ... be persuaded to write less prolifically?"

To Truman Capote, she was "the most loathsome creature in America – a joke monster who ought to be beheaded in a public auditorium". Her friend John Updike says she has been subjected to "some of the harshest scoldings ever administered to a major talent."

In a quiet backstage room at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Oates is clearly above criticisms. "Well, critics have to be critical of something," she says with a shrug. "If they weren't critical of that they'd have to be critical of something else."

By which she means her output. Updike has said that he and Oates are "blue collar writers" – and she agrees with the description. "Yeah, John and I are both from the same kind of background. We work every day. That's true."

Her biggest worry isn't about the critics or the controversies, but about continuing to work. The latest novel was "such a burden", she says. "I would worry if I was strong enough to do it. I would think, 'What if I just gave up and I got sick?'"

Later, she returns to the subject. "I think everyone has one major

weakness that he or she is afraid of, and mine is that I won't be well."

If Oates is aloof from her detractors, she's equally calm about those who praise her. A quote from the back of her novel *Black Girl White Girl*, credited to *The Sunday Times*, calls her: "One of the female frontrunners for the title of Great American Novelist."

It's not a title she aspires to. "I don't think that way at all. I don't have any friends who think that way. It's an older generation. Norman Mailer felt that way. But he's about 85."

Oates says there are now so many ways of writing that the title is meaningless. "Toni Morrison's a great novelist, but nobody would say she's the Great American Novelist because she doesn't write about the kind of things that, say, Philip Roth writes about. Philip Roth could never be the Great American Novelist because he writes about Jews, mainly in New Jersey. He's not writing about New York or the Midwest or anything. And I'm sure Philip Roth himself would say that."

Oates, by contrast, writes about pretty much everything. Another criticism levelled at her concerns the theme of violence against women that recurs in her novels. "I'm very sympathetic with victims," she once said, in response such criticism. Her latest novel is



Joyce Carol Oates. Photo: AFP

no exception. The gravedigger's daughter of the title is Rebecca Schwart, of an immigrant family from Nazi Germany. She changes her name and her identity throughout the novel to become more all-American, and is abused by one man after another, but it's her father who defines her. Oates began writing the novel after unearthing a piece of her own family

history. The gravedigger's daughter was her grandmother – the one who first encouraged her to write.

"It's interesting," she says. "None of us really thinks about our parents or grandparents as being people. When you think about your own mother being your own age, you realise that you come in at a certain point, but their lives before that have been interesting. And I'm always interested in the life of an older family member because our ancestors' lives were much harder than ours. Our lives are easy compared to the past."

It's "a good curiosity", she says. Again, she refers to Herschel, and why men like him should keep appearing in her novels. "Writers often find that we write about people we're intimidated by," she says. "Many writers are sad, bookish people who are comfortable writing. But as a writer you have access to people. It's your job as a mediator to respect those people – not to ridicule them."

Forget prizes and adoration from the critics, Oates knows why she writes. "A novel should extend sympathy," she says. "That's what a writer should try to do."

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**The Independent**

**The Gravedigger's Daughter** by Joyce Carol Oates (Fourth Estate, HK\$216)