

gathering in the yard outside. I have lost my moment, but am determined not to call for help. The paraffin lamps flicker as the barn doors open to admit a thicket of jostling, tossing black tipped horns.

I slip awkwardly down the ladder. The stalls on either side of the barn are a gauntlet. The only way through is the wet and slippery gutter between them. At any moment one of the animals might back out of its stall and lash out with a hind hoof, or turn sweeping the air with its horns. The sounds of banging buckets, slipping hooves and bovine protest fill the evening. And, tonight, because we are short-handed I have to tie each animal's halter to the ring above its manger. This means climbing up on the rails that separate the stalls, catching hold of the halter while the cows are busily rummaging in their mangers and slipping the rope through the iron ring attached to

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the wall.

There are eight cows and a bull. Each of them has a different temperament. The bull turns a baleful eye on me as I try to tie his halter rope to the ring above his manger. Short horned and wet nosed, his dark eyes are ringed by half circles of blood-tinged white. He looks at me, breathing hard. The air is thick with the smell of cattle and hay and warm mash. Just as I am about to thread the rope through the ring he jerks his head. The rope is torn from my grasp. It hangs between his forelegs. Steam from wide flared nostrils fills the air. Baleful eyes and heavy breathing.

"Just climb down and pick up the rope, you'll be alright. He won't hurt you".

This is not the first time this has happened. I try to reach the halter from the rail. Sensing my fear, he tosses his head in the air and steps back a pace or two well out of reach. We regard each other. I do not have the courage to climb down from my perch and pick up the rope. I'm trapped and he knows it. Just as I am about to capitulate, Dorothy emerges from the gloom, slaps the bull on the rump, picks up the rope and passes it to me. I slip it through the ring and scramble past the beast. Somehow, I manage to get to the door without slipping or being kicked and burst into the icy air.

An early flash back and an early lesson. A prologue to the drama. I search for an image. A thread in a labyrinth? A voyage. A river? There was a river. A black English river, swollen and deceptively quiet.

"That cow what's in calf didn't come in. We'll have to go out and fetch her. We'll lose her if she stays out on a night like this."

Dorothy and my mum hose down the yard, clean out the milk pails unaware of my pounding heart. Life goes on. And, now we will have to go out in the wet and dark to make sure that it does.

We put on our raincoats and balaclavas and set off before the dark settles. Too small to keep up, Dorothy hoists me onto her shoulders where I ride well above the slush in the lane. Clinging to her forehead I can see over the hedgerows. A flock of crows flies low over an adjoining field, cawing to each other. The last light is fading as low clouds scud across the darkening sky. Snow lies in patches on the ground. We turn off the lane and follow a muddy track across a field down to the river. Thin sheets of ice crackle underfoot. An air-raid siren wails in the distance.

We find the heifer wedged fast between a tree trunk and the riverbank. She must

have been grazing next to the river and slipped as part of the bank collapsed and is now trapped. Whether panic has sent her into labour, or her time has come anyway, she is struggling to give birth. The calf has started to emerge. Head and forelegs reach out blindly into the gathering gloom. The earth is opening. There is nothing she can do to help it come away. The tree moves.

Mum clammers down the bank. She takes the halter and holds the heifer's head while Dorothy rolls up her sleeves, grasps the calf's protruding legs and pulls for all she is worth. The sound of rushing water, the cow's bellowing, Dorothy's heaving and grunting fill the air. Knee deep in blood and mud and cow shit; her faced streaked with sweat and blood, she holds on, trying to calm and encourage the animal. "Come on old girl. Just one more push." Suddenly the calf comes loose with a rush of blood and afterbirth. There is no time to draw breath. The river is rising fast.

Somehow Dorothy and mum scramble the calf up the bank between them and lay it in a wheelbarrow. The heifer frees herself and climbs the bank where she stands licking her calf. As we try to collect ourselves the tree lurches, and with a low sucking sound its roots come free, and it crashes into the river, and is swept away.

On the journey back to the farmyard I sit in the wheelbarrow, the calf half in my lap, holding a lantern to light our way. The searchlights from the artillery emplacements are beginning to sweep the sky. The drone of aircraft is in the air.

I know I have seen something amazing. I say nothing of my terror earlier. I am hurried

## New Releases

### The Exchange-Rate Between Love and Money

Thomas Leveritt  
Harvill Secker



The Exchange-Rate Between Love and Money is the debut novel by Thomas Leveritt.

The novel merges the explosive coupling of love and war, which produces a gripping, tense and thoroughly satisfying read.

Set in Sarajevo in 2003, two friends embark upon a life changing experience in post-war Bosnia. There are gritty scenes of terror and daily life in a war-torn country.

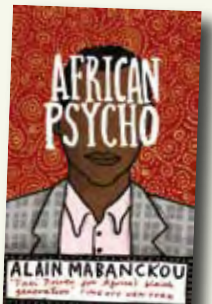
After the war, there are unique business opportunities available during the reconstruction, which provide a backdrop to the complex relationships between the characters.

The novel is made up of many sections, themes of mysticism and politics. Love and war entwine themselves together in order to create a text that climaxes with an action-packed chapter that will leave you in anticipation of what Leveritt will be writing next.

Sam Noakes

### African Psycho

Alain Mabanckou  
Serpent's Tail



African Psycho is the debut of a remarkable new African voice, Alain Mabanckou. It's a story of loneliness and despair,

with the location being called "He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot". Reminiscent of Camus' *The Stranger*, from the onset the tone is set, "I have I have decided to kill Germaine on December 29."

The protagonist, Gregoire, has been abandoned by his parents, shuffled by the state from one foster home to another, and now finds himself alone, a downtrodden labourer, seething with anger at the abject poverty of his city and corruption of government agencies. Taking a dead killer as his phantom mentor, Gregoire vows to overcome his history of petty crime by pulling off a truly memorable murder that will elevate him far above the misery of his surroundings and put him on the map forever.

*African Psycho's* inventive parody brings a post-colonial sense of humour to bear on the consumerism and naked ambition satirised in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*.

Finnegan Durfee