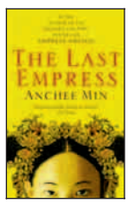
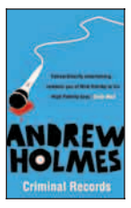
Paperbacks

FICTION James Kidd



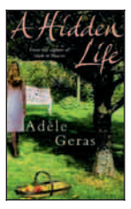
The Last Empress
by Anchee Min
Bloomsbury, HK$128
★★½☆☆

The Last Empress completes the second half of Anchee Min's epic fictionalised account of Tzu Hsi, the often reviled concubine-turned-empress who ruled 19th-century China during the dying days of the Qing dynasty. The first part, *Empress Orchid*, suggested the usual portrayal of Tzu Hsi as a callous, sex-crazed, outmoded spendthrift was a tad unfair, a caricature founded on rumour and misogyny at home and abroad. In this follow-up, Min turns her slightly wooden prose towards the empress' final years. Having ended part one with the death of Emperor Hsien Feng, part two begins with the death of Tzu's mother. With a young son (Tung Chih) to look after, she has little time for grief because she is forced to rule during one of China's most turbulent periods, featuring distractions including the opium wars, invasions by Japan, Britain and America, corruption and the threat of political coups. When Tung Chih dies early of venereal disease, the empress is blamed for his death. This early example of choosing a scapegoat leads to many more as China is assailed by riots, famine, accusations of dictatorship and the Boxer Rebellion. Whether Min's account stands up to a historian's scrutiny is for a historian to scrutinise. *The Last Empress* is readable and enjoyable enough.



Criminal Records
by Andrew Holmes
Hodder & Stoughton, HK$128
★★★☆☆

The comic crime caper is a ticklish novel to pull off. Christopher Brookmyre has done a decent job in recent years but for my money the modern master is Kinky Friedman, the country-singing detective who solves tightly plotted murders while snorting Chandleresque one-liners for breakfast: "There was something green in his pocket, and it wasn't Kermit the Frog." Andrew Holmes may not be in this league, but his venture into the mystery-with-laughs has much to recommend it. Charlie Watson is that staple of much British popular fiction, the young, married father heading towards middle age and mourning the death of his youth. A suburban boy born and bred, he owns the Cheesy Vinyl Roadshow, which enables him to torture wedding guests with records like *Take My Breath Away*. When his brother Leo calls saying he has something important to reveal it hardly breaks the tedium. When Leo is killed on the way over, Charlie is sucked into the strange case of a missing dog. For while he knew Leo was a Tom Waits impersonator he had not a clue he was also a private detective. Filled with all manner of obscure pop-culture references, *Criminal Records* is the charming, if slightly dorky, lovechild of Nick Hornby and Arthur Conan Doyle.



A Hidden Life
by Adele Geras
Orion, HK$112
★★½☆☆

Best known for her children's books, Adele Geras has, in recent years, turned her attention to the adult market. If that phrase makes you think of X-rated couplings and top-shelf acrobatics, then shame on you. Geras writes polite-ish romantic sagas, featuring heroines and heroes called Hester (a ballerina), Hugo (a choreographer) and Leonora (the daughter of an Edwardian painter). True, a clenched buttock might occasionally heave into view, but it is artistically justified. Geras' fourth mature work, *A Hidden Life* tells the story of a contested inheritance. Constance Barrington dies leaving an enormous estate behind her. Unbeknown to her family she has changed her will, throwing her grasping relatives into all manner of feuds. There is plenty for the Geras faithful to enjoy: scenes of kissing by the Seine; characters who say, "Goody-goody"; others who exclaim, "Gosh, I hope it is jewels!". Readers of a nervous disposition should be warned: there is an occasional four-letter word. In one scene, the charming Ellie renders the hapless Matt drunk then ruthlessly pushes her breasts in his face. "He opened his phone," Geras writes, "trying to ignore his erection." One of those new i-Phones, I'll bet. *A Hidden Life* is good old-fashioned fun, with a hint of something throbbing.

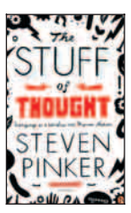
NON-FICTION Charmaine Chan

Waiter Rant
by A. Waiter
John Murray, HK$208
★★½☆☆

It is a sign of the times that John Murray has gone from publishing Byron to printing blogs. This book, which began as www.waiterrant.net, is a 304-page insight into the lot of wait staff. Similar books have sold well, including Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*, but it's hard to believe serving food justifies an entire volume. Then again this subject is familiar to every reader: few won't have eaten in restaurants. That adds to and detracts from the book. We learn little new but may enjoy confirming ways in which waiters exact revenge: for the anonymous protagonist of *Waiter Rant*, a method guaranteed to embarrass ghastly guests involved informing them their credit cards had been rejected; payback for miserly tips was a table next to the toilet. "A. Waiter", whose identity was revealed by Russell Crowe after he wrote a blog on the Australian actor, started serving tables at 30 reckoning, like every one else in his profession, it was a temporary job. Seven years later and still front of house, Steve Dublanica has put his experience to use. Poorly edited and flabby in parts, the book does a bad job of hiding its origins. But it is entertaining and a good reminder of how customers should behave – and what to expect if they don't.

Spanking Goals & Toe Pokes
by Tommy Martin
Proverse Hong Kong, HK$98
★★★☆☆

With the Beijing Olympics upon us and football part of the event, non-native English speakers may find it handy to have *Spanking Goals & Toe Pokes* close to hand. Written by football coach Tommy Martin, who hails from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the slim volume aims to decipher the sometimes opaque language used by football commentators describing play. Many of the 800-plus sayings, however, are not exclusive to the sport, which makes this reference book equally useful in non-football-related situations employing British slang and jargon. Some may even surprise readers whose mother tongue is English. This reviewer can admit to being baffled by "a jinking run", "nutmeg" used as a verb and "a fancy-dan shape", which, rather than coming from the name Dan, may be an abbreviation of dandy, according to several internet sites. The book does not provide the provenance of sayings included, however, which is unfortunate because this would undoubtedly help students of English. Still, there is much to learn from the volume, which borrows language from warfare ("taking scalps") and animal behaviour ("mauling") as well as other types of human activity. If footy's your game but you watch it on mute, this may provide a reason to turn up the volume.



The Stuff of Thought
by Steven Pinker
Penguin, HK$160
★★★☆☆

Religion, according to Steven Pinker, is the root of swearing in English. But because of the secularisation of western culture, profanity has lost its edge to foul language relying on subjects such as sexuality and excretion. In *The Seven Words You Can't Say on Television*, Pinker, a Harvard University psychology professor, demonstrates how taboo terms give an insight into that which evokes the strongest emotions. One of nine chapters in *The Stuff of Thought*, it is probably the one readers will most readily grasp. To his credit though, Pinker tries to cater to a lay audience. In this volume he tackles meaning and underscores how "there is nothing 'mere' about semantics". To illustrate his point he writes about the World Trade Centre attacks, which resulted in a dispute about whether it was one "event" or two. The site's leaseholder, contending it was the latter, argued he should receive US$7 billion in compensation. But the insurers defined it in mental terms, that is, one plot, or US$3.5 billion. Pinker's latest offering is also a continuation of his studies into human nature. This perhaps explains the inclusion in the book's title of "stuff": a woolly word for all occasions.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb's latest work illustrates the limitations in our learning from study and experience, writes **Manreet Sodhi Someshwar**

Beyond belief

Asia Specific

Nassim Nicholas Taleb is jet-lagged and looking to doze off – not a good omen at the start of our meeting. However, he will do the interview first, he says, and haggles for nap time with the manager of the bookshop at which he is scheduled to attend a signing session later. "I can nap like a cat," he says with a grin as he escorts me to a poolside cafe.

With unfailing courtesy he holds the door open and insists I drink something. I settle for jasmine tea. When the waiter asks him whether he will have the same, he shrugs, looks mildly affronted and asks: "Do I look like someone who has tea? I am Arab. Give me coffee!"

He tells me he grew up watching Bollywood films in Lebanon; his maid would ferry him to one every weekend and he remembers it as one big medley of lost siblings, sniffles, siblings re-uniting and smiles. Suddenly, he asks: "Do I look like Salman Rushdie?" As I examine the similarly goateed face, he scrolls down his BlackBerry and shows me a picture: Rushdie and Taleb are seated side by side at a table and yes, I admit, there does seem to be a resemblance.

"Everyone in India mistook me for Rushdie," he says, beaming. I refrain from a discussion about how, in his native India, Rushdie the prodigal son is equally revered and reviled.

Coffee arrives and again Taleb plays the solicitous host, serving me first. "What do you call milk in Hindi?" He is curious about everything. I try to steer him towards his second book, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Published last year, it is a best-seller, like his first book, *Fooled by Randomness*. Taleb's essential premise is that the world is intrinsically unknowable and therefore difficult to forecast with certainty. Before the discovery of black swans in Australia the theory that all swans were white was inviolate. It took one black bird to blow the theory apart. Taleb posits that similarly any other theory about the world is susceptible to the black swan, the unexpected event.

"My books are not business books," he says. To illustrate his point, he rifles through the pages of *The Black Swan*, reading aloud from the contents page: *Wax in My Ears, Too Many Millionaires Next Door, The Narrative Fallacy, How to Look for Bird Poop*. "If you were meeting me over dinner, not for a professional reason, how would you like it if I were to start my conversation with you with a contents page? My writing is meant to be like a dinner conversation: it should engage and illuminate, not lecture. I am giving people a reading experience, much like a novel." The book has an anecdotal narrative style, an unusual structure, which has not gone down well with some reviewers. "It was the highest-selling book on Amazon in 2007. Obviously people are enjoying reading it, maybe not reviewing," he says, grinning.

To what does he attribute the book's phenomenal success? "Number one, no editorial interference," he says. "Editors try to commoditise your book; is it business, is it finance, is it self-help!" He shakes his head, banishing the luckless editor to the netherworld. He leans forward, an impish look on his face: "After the success of my first book, they don't try to tell me how to write any more!" He pours himself another cup of coffee. "Another reason is that it is purely authentic – I have been working on it all my life, past 20 years at least. It is a different view of the world. When people read it they know I am not bull****ing, or playing games. This is why they like it."

Because, according to Taleb, the process of forecasting – most of it based on the bell curve – is flawed, how would a trader in Hong Kong, for example, apply his philosophy? After all, traders thrive on forecasting the movement of stocks and markets, movements on which they bet to make money. "To talk about forecasting without knowing the errors of forecasting is the fallacy," Taleb says. "It is important for a trader to realise that forecasting is like astrology: it doesn't work, but it's like therapy."

Perhaps, gauging that I look unconvinced, he extrapolates: "The world is infinitely more complex than what we believe. Americans buy goods from China – Chinese get cash and buy oil from Russia. Russians buy mozzarella from Italy. It raises the price of mozzarella in the US. You see? We live in Extremistan, a place where one observation dominates everything, where winner takes all, black swans proliferate and there's Bill Gates. Human beings used to live in a place called Mediocristan: most events happened in a narrow range of possibilities within the" – he spits it out, his bete noire – "bell curve."

Given that black swan events are by nature unpredictable, how do we prepare for them? "Make forecast errors that are not consequential. If it rains," Taleb shrugs at the gathering greyness, "we go inside, but if we make errors in social security it has implications for generations hence."

Rain looks imminent and my host has started to glance at his watch, so I ask him to sum up his philosophy. "I don't deliver sound bites," he says. "What I try to tell people is how to live in a world we do not understand. Most people push things they don't understand under the rug. Banks are like suckers. They are exposed to risks they don't understand. My book tells how to avoid being a turkey in a world you don't understand."

And? I prompt him. "Go after the Nobel Prize for economics! Nobel in medicine, yes, I can understand. Nobel in physics, yes. So, the first thing you do is remove economists from circulation, lock them up just like you do snake-oil salesmen. Why let economists sell? They have the same record."

He insists on walking me to the lift, even if it eats into his precious nap time. "My third book, *Tinkering*, will be my biggest – it will stand Enlightenment on its head," he says. "It was the Greeks who foisted their top-down approach on the rest of the world. But nature is unpredictable. Snatch control of your destiny through scholastic tinkering. And learn to fail with pride. People who make mistakes are most aware."

He sees me off, tipping his head in a gracious bow. Like his books, Taleb is entertaining and opinionated.

Photo: SCMP

My writing is meant to be like a dinner conversation: it should engage and illuminate, not lecture

Hi-tech shorthand the way of the future

Carlin Romano

In the 18th century, America's book business called Philadelphia home. Mathew Carey invented the American publishing house. Benjamin Franklin towered as America's printer. Charles Brockden Brown started the American novel on its way.

And then, history tells us, New York stole the book industry, reducing Washington Square's Publishers' Row to memory lane.

There is exactly one national magazine in the US, titled *Book Business*, explaining the mechanics of a rapidly changing US$37.7 billion industry to an elite circulation of 12,100 subscribers. And it is not located at One Fifth Avenue or some similarly chi-chi address in Manhattan.

"When they say, 'Oh, are you in New York?'" says editor-in-chief Noelle Skodzinski, "and I say, 'No, Philadelphia,' they're kind of surprised, thinking that a magazine about publishing would ideally be located in New York. But it doesn't cause a problem and we certainly don't get any flak from it."

"Lots of people probably don't realise we aren't in New York," jokes associate editor Matthew Steinmetz. "*Book Business* – that brand – just screams 'New York!' People think you're there. But in this digital age information transfers so fast there is much less face-to-face. It almost doesn't matter where you are."

But it does in a city whose engagement with printing dates back to 1685. And it especially matters to *Book Business*' parent, the North American Publishing Company, which runs 16 trade magazines: 2008 is its golden anniversary year.

The company began in 1958 when Irvin J. Borowski announced its arrival with *Printing Impressions*, still the leading magazine for commercial printers. This year is also the 10th anniversary of the magazine begun by group publisher Mark Hertzog in 1998 as *Book Tech*.

"Printing and publishing is our core," says Hertzog, 54, a 20-year company veteran. "We're the largest magazine publisher for the graphic arts industry."

Book Tech, he says, originally focused on book manufacture and production. But in February 2006, Hertzog and Skodzinski re-branded it as *Book Business*, which is published 10 times a year and broadened coverage to every aspect of the field, except those ruled by its trade rival, *Publishers Weekly*: reviews and book chit-chat.

"We realised there was a niche in the market not being filled," says Hertzog. He saw a lack of "real information on technology and business practices, even as digital readers and print-on-demand [POD] shook up the field.

"There wasn't a need in the past," Hertzog surmises, "because book publishing was, and still is, such a steeped-in-tradition industry. There are still typesetters in the book industry – they don't exist anywhere else."

Technology providers told him that if they could just catch the ear of publishers, they could help the company "leap-frog several generations of technology".

Skodzinski and managing editor Janet Spavlik agree that technological pressure on book publishing has made it an ideal time for *Book Tech*'s re-branding. Articles have included *E-Books: Have They Finally Arrived?*; *156 Tips for Improving Your Book Publishing Business*; and *Random House: The Best Book Publishing Company to Work For*. Skodzinski, Spavlik and Hertzog all point to POD as an instance of established industry habits under siege.

POD, Spavlik says, means "the book is printed when the order is received". In old-fashioned publishing, the house guesses how many copies of a book it can sell, prints them, then prays.

Hertzog describes the system as "inefficient". Most book buyers have encountered two upshots of it: "out-of-print" books a publisher can no longer supply and "remainders", or extra copies available cheaply when a publisher overestimates demand.

POD may scuttle the very notion of "out of print", Hertzog says. For a publisher with good POD, no book is ever out of print, it just hasn't been printed yet. Similarly, remainders may disappear along with bad publisher guesses. "[POD] really has turned the model upside down," he says. "You can basically publish a book for zero money and not print one until you sell it. It can reduce inventory to zero."

But some associations have persisted. "There's definitely a stigma attached," says Spavlik. "When people hear 'POD' they do think of a lesser-quality book."

Technology could overhaul the tradition-bound book industry, eliminating chance from publishers' business plans. Photo: NYT

McClatchy-Tribune