



## Film

Emily Witt  
NOLLYWOOD

The making of a film empire  
128pp. Columbia Global Reports. Paperback,  
£9.99 (US \$14.99).  
978 0 9971264 8 8

“There were a lot of films in Nigeria through the years but none spoke our voice. None recognized our existence as a distinct culture, as a distinct civilization, a distinct aspiration... Nollywood has not sought authentication.” So says a Nigerian producer describing his country’s indigenous film industry in the prologue to Emily Witt’s *Nollywood: The making of a film empire*.

Nollywood is one of the most remarkable cultural developments of recent decades. Churning out 3,000 films per year to an increasingly international audience, its output is surpassed only by Hollywood and Bollywood. Yet serious profits have largely eluded it. The American writer Witt traces the culture, business models and origins of this industry, which began in the 1980s when merchants of blank videotapes realized they could boost sales by putting content on those tapes first. Having salesmen as producers made for poor production values, but the content was revolutionary in its indigenous flavour, centred on family values, spirituality and morality.

Witt travels around Nigeria, speaking to players in an industry that has grown more sophisticated. She attends a glamorous film premiere in Lagos and intersperses each chapter of the book with treatments and quotations from selected films, giving us a flavour of the narratives, such as *Living in Bondage* (1992) in which a man sacrifices his wife to a satanic cult in exchange for wealth. She also visits the set of a movie whose grand ambitions (it employs 200 extras and horses) do not preclude it from the usual logistical hassles. Power outages occur regularly, there are no trailers or toilets, and someone’s lantern accidentally sets a hut on fire.

Nevertheless, films like these are increasingly being shown on the big screen. Witt charts the industry’s evolution from shaky-cam videotape fodder to higher-quality cinema multiplex showings. But the challenges are still huge. How do you make money in a country where piracy is rife and per capita income is low? Nigeria’s 180 million people have just twenty cinemas.

The strength of Witt’s book is her exploration of Nollywood’s attempts to formalize its haphazard business model. At times the strategies are as creative as the movies themselves. Witt interviews successful mobile app developers, ambitious multiplex owners and producers who have resorted to beating up copyright infringers or securing distribution



“Dessert Table, Barretto Point Park, the Bronx”; from *New York Waterways* by Susannah Ray (120pp. Hoxton Mini Press. £17.95/US \$22.95. 978 1 910566 27 5)

agreements via smartphone video instead of paper contracts. What we don’t hear much about are the views of ordinary Nigerian punters, which is a shame. However, it does not detract from what is an insightful and entertaining book about a rapidly evolving industry.

NOO SARO-WIWA

## History

Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, editors  
and translators

SANSOVINO’S VENICE  
392pp. Yale University Press. £25 (US \$35).  
978 0 300 17506 6

Venice in the sixteenth century was viewed throughout Europe as a wonder of the modern world. The beauty and grandeur of its urban environment was enhanced by a surge of palace-building along the Grand Canal by mercantile patricians and by the realization, in Piazza San Marco, of a superlative public space designed to reflect the dignity and consequence of an ancient republic with venerable institutions. The strongest visual impress on the Piazza was made by the Tuscan Jacopo Sansovino, described by a contemporary as “celebrated in sculpture, distinguished in architecture, living in favour with God and man and endowed with splendid gifts”.

*Sansovino’s Venice* is a somewhat misleading title, however, for this English translation of an early guidebook to the city. Its author was in fact the artist’s son Francesco, a highly successful author and publisher. *On the Notable Things Which Are in Venice* (1561) takes the form of a dialogue between a discerning visitor, ready to commend the place itself and its civic government, and a native Venetian, expatiating on everything from the structure of senatorial committees and the significance of the flagpoles outside St Mark’s basilica to the sumptuary laws governing dress styles among different social classes.

The Venetian host encourages his foreign guest to look more closely at artworks by “Messer Titian, that illustrious man”, “Jacopo

Tintoretto, full of wit, full of verve” and Veronese, “recognised as special in his profession”. By this means Francesco Sansovino can extol his father’s achievement in buildings such as the Loggetta, the Biblioteca Marciana and the Mint. In the guidebook’s second section he develops the concept of Venetians as God’s chosen people, victorious over Byzantium and Genoa.

Not a vademecum in the modern sense – there are no suggested itineraries or route maps – this is essentially a guide to Venice’s exceptionalism and pre-eminence in different areas. In an appendix, the translators have added a valuable section on the building of Venetian palaces from another Sansovino publication. Their annotation of the principal text is exemplary, they have caught the tone of the Italian original to perfection and the whole book, liberally illustrated, enriches our perspective of Renaissance *Serenissima*.

JONATHAN KEATES

## Fiction

Jonathan Tulloch  
LARKINLAND

268pp. Seren. Paperback, £9.99.  
978 1 78172 395 1

*Larkinland* might sound like a theme park for misanthropes and librarians, but don’t be fooled: it is a fun place to spend a few hours, and well worth the entry price. Jonathan Tulloch’s new novel is full of wit, smart observation and, yes, Philip Larkin. Set in 1950s Hull, a place “beached on the mudflats at the end of the railway line, like a brick seal with a woodbine in its gob”, *Larkinland* weaves a delightfully dour tapestry from the cloth of Larkin’s poetry (liberally quoted throughout).

The novel opens with the Larkin-surrogate Arthur Merryweather, a bespectacled librarian and aspiring poet, moving into a room “that would flatter a coffin”: his landlady tells him, “this was Mr. Bleaney’s room”, an insurance salesman who has recently vanished, leaving only an eddy of rumour in his wake. Three deftly connected narratives play out from this

desolate room, as Merryweather is drawn into a mysterious spate of petty thefts across the city, a stunted romance with his assistant librarian, and the fate of the enigmatic Bleaney. Connecting all three are an assortment of local worthies and oddballs who drift in and out of each narrative, from the local hoodlum Titch Thomas to the absurd lodger Teesdale, a fur salesman of Dickensian proportions who hopes to make his fortune harvesting the coats of giant hamsters.

For all the characters present though, it is the perennially absent Bleaney who haunts Merryweather’s imagination, a ghost slowly becoming his muse. Bleaney is further entwined with Merryweather’s life by the realization that they are body doubles (leading to an inevitable case of mistaken identity). Thus, in a playful triangulation, Larkin, the character he immortalized in his poem (Bleaney) and their fictional double (Merryweather) conflate, each a part or version of the other. At times, the cleverness of this parallel can feel clumsy; “aren’t you frightened of becoming just like your Mr. Bleaney?” Merryweather is asked. But it helps that Tulloch is an excellent author of dialogue, has an ear well tuned to comic timing and a relish for pithy phrasing (a naked bulb burns “Gestapo-bright”; the overweening landlady moves “soundless as a draft”). It is these qualities that make *Larkinland* such an enjoyable guide through the grey-ness, the class anxieties and attendant social comedy of post-war Britain.

FRANK LAWTON

## Letters

Marcel Proust

LETTERS TO THE LADY UPSTAIRS

Translated by Lydia Davis, and edited by  
Estelle Gaudry and Jean-Yves Tadié  
112pp. Fourth Estate. £10.  
978 0 00 826289 1

Nearly as famous as Marcel Proust’s madeleine is his cork-lined bedroom at 102 Boulevard Haussmann, where he lay in bed and wrote most of *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. Proust moved there provisionally in late 1906, and left in 1919, only three years before his death. The cork bark was to sound-proof the room – constantly ill, Proust suffered intensely from noise and other pollution.

*Letters to the Lady Upstairs* gives us an oblique portrait of this closeted life. It is a collection of just twenty-six notes, which Proust sent to his upstairs neighbour Marie Williams: a Frenchwoman married to an American dentist, whose dental practice was directly above Proust’s head. Lacking Mme Williams’s replies, the correspondence seems peculiarly one-sided, she the Echo to Proust’s Narcissus; all the more poignantly so since she committed suicide in 1931. The letters, in that light, seem saturated in loss and absence, not neighbourliness.

The letters are carefully annotated and given a foreword by Jean-Yves Tadié, the editor of the definitive four-volume *Pléiade* Proust. He enumerates the themes and central characters – noise, illness, flowers, memory, music, Mrs Williams’s son, the First World War, Proust’s brother and Clary, their oft-mentioned mutual friend, himself ill and blind. There is a substantial translator’s afterword by Lydia Davis, discussing the layout of Proust’s apartment, as well as his idiosyncratic style and syntax. Sandwiched between them, the letters seem wispy and frail, like