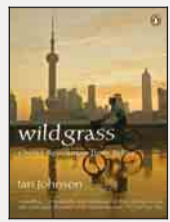


paperbacks

Compiled by Diana McPartlin



Wild Grass: China's Revolution from Below
by Ian Johnson
Penguin \$108
★★★★★

This time last year Ian Johnson was praised around the world for writing one of the best books on China in years. Since then, *Wild Grass* has, inexplicably, slipped through the cracks of public notice – hence the release of this paperback three months ahead of schedule. Many China-watchers argue that the booming economy will give mainlanders the money and education to demand civil liberties. After years as the *Wall Street Journal's* China correspondent, Johnson knew the worst way to get that story was through the Beijing government. With fluent Putonghua, he spoke to people around the country who had used the nascent legal system to take on officials: a self-educated lawyer jailed for defending over-taxed farmers, an architect who challenged corrupt officials for demolishing *hutongs* (courtyard houses) in Beijing and a woman fighting to prove her mother, a Falun Gong member, didn't die of natural causes.
Alister McMillan



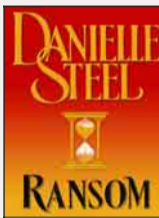
Breathe
by Anne-Sophie Brasme
Phoenix \$105
★★★★☆

This beautiful and brutal novella is about a teenager's obsession with another girl. It opens with the narrator confessing to murder and describing the events leading to the crime. The girls are best friends at school, but it becomes an abusive relationship from which neither can free herself. The book also explores the nature of addiction – the victim knows she has to give up the object of her desire yet lacks the strength. As murder is the only solution she can find, she feels no regret. Anne-Sophie Brasme, who was born in 1984 in Paris, caused a sensation in France with this debut. A teenager when she wrote it, she captures the morbidity and self-centredness of adolescence, and keeps the reader hooked until the chilling end.



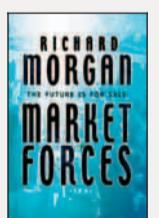
Frankenstein
by Dean Koontz and Kevin J. Anderson
Bantam \$62
★★★★☆

In the mountains of Tibet, the enigmatic Deucalion lives among Buddhist monks. He is more than 200 years old and used to be the monster in a freak show. He would first sit with the handsome side of his face turned to the audience, then turn to reveal the ruined side – scarred by primitive surgery all the way down his body. A letter arrives from an old friend in New Orleans and Deucalion announces he must leave. Before he goes, an old monk tattoos his face to cover the scars. In New Orleans, detectives Carson O'Connor and Michael Maddison find a dead woman with her hands cut off in the City Park lagoon. It's the sixth killing in a few weeks. Others have had ears, feet, or other body parts removed. Then, there's Roy Pribeaux, determined to find the perfect woman – even if it has to be one piece at a time.



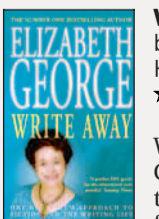
Ransom
by Danielle Steel
Dell \$62
★★★★☆

This thriller is far from Steel's usual romantic fare. The plot works well enough, but the characters are bland and she repeats herself. Peter Morgan is faced with an awful choice: kidnap somebody else's children and demand a ransom or his own children will be murdered – this, after he's just been released from prison after serving four years for cocaine possession. He's not a hardened criminal, just a guy who's down on his luck. Unknown to Peter, the target of the ransom demand has no money. Fernanda Barnes' husband made millions during the dotcom boom, but lost it all and killed himself. Now, she has nothing but debts. Peter and a team of ex-cons plan to kidnap her children – but he isn't sure he's got the guts to go through with it.



Market Forces
by Richard Morgan
Gollancz \$90
★★★★☆

Road rage has a new meaning in the year 2049. Executives (or "zek-tivs") challenge each other to car races as a way to get ahead in the company. If your opponent is still alive after you've rammed them off the road, it's perfectly acceptable to shoot them. In this violent world, Chris Faulkner is an enigma. He's a brilliant driver, but has been known to have "sentiment attacks". Once after winning a race, he pulled a colleague from her car and took her to hospital. He's just started a new job at Shorn Associates, the most morally bankrupt firm on the block. His colleagues are worried that he's too soft. For all the speed of the drivers, the story doesn't move quickly. Car chases aren't as exciting on the page as they are on screen. And Faulkner's motivation isn't clear. If he's averse to violence, why take the job in the first place?



Write Away
by Elizabeth George
Hodder \$119
★★★★☆

What she lacks in literary style, Elizabeth George makes up for in the ability to tell a good story. Here, she takes a break from crime fiction to explain how she approaches her craft. As with most writing guides, she begins with the importance of creating strong characters. Less obviously, she shows that landscape and setting are important in creating the tone, building character and driving the plot. Dialogue is about people speaking, but conversation in novels always has a purpose. Suspense is one of the most misunderstood elements of fiction. The key to leaving readers keen to know what's going to happen next is making them care about characters. George says she gets ideas from everywhere: newspapers, personal experiences and gossip. She illustrates her points with lengthy extracts from her own and other novels, along with samples from her journal.

Joshua Samuel Brown was delighted to find his name in Michael Palin's latest book. He explains how he came to translate *I'm a Lumberjack* for a Mosuo tribe on the mainland



Michael Palin with Yang Erche Namu (left) and on his travels (above and below). Joshua Samuel Brown (right) was awestruck to meet his hero. Photos: Joshua Samuel Brown/May Tse



The fool Monty

asia specific

Being paid to write about someone you've idolised since childhood is nice work if you can get it. But when you're killing time in an overpriced Hong Kong bookstore by thumbing through a copy of said celebrity's latest tome and discover that he's written about you... well, that's one hell of a peacock feather in the old ego fedora.

I'd almost forgotten about the three days spent tagging along with Michael Palin, world renowned explorer, author, and one-sixth of the most influential comedy troupe in the universe. (Perhaps "almost forgotten" isn't quite right. "Had only recently been forced to stop bringing it up in conversation" would be more accurate.)

In winter 2003, I was on an assignment for this paper, following mainland model, singer and author Yang Erche Namu as she headed back to her ancestral home of Lake Lugu on the border of Sichuan and Yunnan. She was playing tour guide to a BBC film crew, and I was to accompany her for three days to do an article on the real Namu.

We were on the plane, somewhere between Kunming and Lijiang, when Namu mentioned casually that we'd be travelling with Michael Palin. She knew he'd been in some movies and travel shows, but Chinese tastes in the early 1970s ran more towards Maoist agitprop than British comedy.

She had no reason to know Palin's reputation with many westerners my age. I was stunned, then flummoxed, and finally blown away by the realisation that I'd be travelling alongside one of my heroes.

Palin was in China working on *Himalaya*, his latest travel documentary. It's in the book of the same title that I found myself mentioned a year later. Palin describes our initial meeting on page 185:

"Joshua, a Beijing-based American journalist, is following her [Namu] around. She introduces him with an airy wave of the hand. 'He's doing a story on the real Namu,' she

says, without much enthusiasm." Kindly, he makes no mention of the complete star-struck ass I'd made of myself on our first encounter. My inner monologue was solid as I walked down Lijiang's cobblestone street to the restaurant where we were meeting Palin. It went something like this:

"Big grin... Say 'Mr Palin, Joshua Brown. Big fan of your work. I'm writing an article for the Hong Kong press.' Extend hand, wait for response... And, for god's sake, don't quote Python bits."

When I got to the restaurant, Palin had a table to himself and was finishing breakfast with one hand and writing in a journal with another. Namu made the introduction.

"Michael, darling, this is Josh Brown, he's writing an article on me."

"Hello. So nice to meet you," he said, extending a hand. "Do you prefer Josh or Joshua?" It was here that my script crumbled.

"Erik?" I said. "Do you think I'm handsome?"

"Why, yes, I suppose," replied Palin. "In a manly way, of course."

Sadly, I am not making this up. But Palin is no stranger to dealing with mystified geeks, and quickly put me at ease by being, well, Michael Palin. He's a down-to-earth individual. We got to chatting about travel and the ethics of travel writing.

"Aren't some places better left undiscovered?" I asked. "Possibly," he answered. Palin has that gift essential to successful journalists, politicians and psychotherapists – the ability to appear sincerely interested in people. I'm sure it was no act when he spoke to me. Palin seemed genuinely interested in

talking, especially when it came to life in China. He actually used some of our conversation in his book. To wit:

"We talk at breakfast about the strength of superstition in modern China. Joshua lives on the fourth floor of his building in Beijing, because the number four is considered unlucky and so the apartment is correspondingly cheap."

Of course, with time, certain details get mixed up. When we met I didn't actually live either in Beijing or in a fourth floor apartment, but was merely relating an anecdote about Chinese numerological superstition using past experience as an example.

Likewise, my transcript of an early-morning conversation with Palin over tea on the banks of Mother Lake might also have been altered in memory's eldritch fog:

Palin is no stranger to dealing with mystified geeks, and quickly put me at ease by being, well, Michael Palin

MP: You're a funny man, Joshua. I'll get straight to the point... John Cleese, Terry Gilliam and the rest have been talking about reforming Python for another go, but I've been hesitant to agree, what with Graham Chapman still being dead and all.

Me: Go on...
MP: But now that I've seen you in action, I think you'd be just the man... the only man, really, to fill Graham's place.

Me: That makes sense. We're both notorious liars, not to mention alcoholics.

MP: So what do you say, Joshua. Will you do it? Would you... I mean, could you... join our little comedy troupe?

Unfortunately, story deadline was closing fast and I'd just planted tomatoes on the roof.

So, I had to decline Palin's offer. And he, weeping, vowed to never again return to comedy. The fantasy ended after I forced him to retract this vow by hitting him over the head with a large fish.

I do recall clearly the last evening I spent in his company. Palin, having just been serenaded in Mosuo by Namu's brothers, burst loudly into the last song you'd expect to hear in a rural Chinese village lacking phone lines and flush toilets: "I'm a lumberjack and I'm OK, I sleep all night and I work all day."

I translated the ditty into Putonghua as best as I could, but the tribe seemed to lack the cultural reference points to digest lines such as: "I chop down trees, I skip and jump, I like to press wild flowers. I put on women's clothing and hang around in bars."

Perhaps that's why Palin left this incident

out of his book. So, I can't prove that my finest travel anecdote is true.

Still, I'd like to think – in this final recollection of my time with Palin, at least – that I'll one day be proven not a liar.

Should you, dear reader, one day decide to follow in the footsteps of Palin's Himalaya trip, take the time to visit Lake Lugu. While there, you may well be serenaded by wandering troubadours.

Listen closely, and when one of them inserts the words, "I wish I'd been a girlie, just like my dear papa!" into a Mosuo tribal song, you'll know I wrote the truth.

Joshua Samuel Brown is a writer based in Hong Kong

chinese characters

Writers from China's diaspora

Chris Cheng

Just watching animals move fascinates Chris Cheng. "Look at the ibis," he says, sitting under a gum tree in a Sydney park. "The way they're walking around – I love it."

Cheng's career as a children's author focusing on animals has its roots in Sydney's Taronga Zoo. Between 1988 and 1994, he was involved with its travelling zoo or "zoo-mobile" – a van that visited schools with possums, fruit bats and pythons, among other creatures. When he produced a diamond python in one classroom, the teachers promptly left the room. "That was so funny," Cheng says. "That was a hoot."

So too was the day one of his bats started to flap away before realising, too late, that it couldn't fly. It crashed, much to the delight of the children. "Kids are not built with a fear of animals," says the former kindergarten teacher. "They actually learn the fear."

This meant Cheng could let the children get close to the flying foxes "and smell them and find

out about them". Was anyone bitten? "Oh yeah," he says. "I used to get bitten, especially with the snakes – I mean, with my python, Monty. And my flying fox would bite me."

Warming to the theme, Cheng, 45, says his arms were often covered in cuts, scratches and bites. "It's OK," he says. "I'm still alive – none of those injections." He says the attacks were the result of too much travelling and too many strange smells. The creatures always calmed down when they smelled his hand.

Chen started his writing during this spell of close contact with animals. Publishers would send him books for appraisal – particularly to pick up factual errors. A common error was the phrase "birds and animals" – a false distinction, he says. Then publishers suggested he try writing himself.

The result was the *Eyespy Book of Night Creatures*. Published in 1990, the book's front cover displays one of Cheng's zoo-mobile stars, Dingbat, hanging upside down, all ginger fur and incisors. Inside, the

reader encounters 15 nocturnal Australian animals, ranging from mice to quolls (which look like spotted cats).

A cascade of cheeky animal-centred children's books followed. *Zoo You Later* spills the beans on zoo animals that like to explore. An orang-utan, for instance, climbs over "a hot-wire system" to roam the zoo grounds; a python breaks out with the help of a human accomplice; a lion thrill it can walk on water.

Zoo You Later is a riot, but the book Cheng regards as "a real hit" is *Party Animals*. It showcases creatures that he considers "stunningly beautiful". Opening the book, Cheng flips through the pages in search of what he considers to be the world's most gorgeous creature: a South American monkey called the Red Uakari, which is described as looking unwell.

Cheng, who oozes vitality, lives close to the heart of the city in Newtown because, he says, he loves the buzz. Since 2002, the thrill seeker has been married to a Hungarian, Bini Szacsavay, whom he met at teacher's college. The



whites treated the immigrants. "Pretty disgustingly," says Cheng, who is Australian-born but keeps in touch with relatives in Mongkok and Causeway Bay. Waving his ponytail, he talks about how whites scalped some newcomers. But the Chinese persisted, he says, and weren't angered by learning what they went through. Quite the reverse.

Cheng says he was thrilled to be able to tell their story. Does he think the animosity towards the Chinese still exists in Australia? "No, no. Look at Sydney. I mean, we all get on." And it's the same elsewhere, he says. Melbourne, for instance, has a Chinese mayor, Hong Kong-born John So. "It's really funny; I'm of Chinese heritage and it's never been an issue really. That's the beauty of this place. It's so multicultural."

Sydney is also increasingly "bio-diverse". More native trees are being planted and native wildlife is returning. Behind Cheng, a crowd of pigeons and ibis has now gathered. The look of delight on his face when they're round and sees them is priceless.
David Wilson

pair have no children – and no plans for them. Cheng says he and his wife already get quite enough exposure.

He finds time to write four days a week. His latest project is a departure – a novel entitled *New Gold Mountain* to be published in July. It will examine the plight of Cantonese who joined the Australian gold rush at the start of the 1860s, and explore how