

Review of reviews: Books

Book of the week

In the Garden of Beasts

by Erik Larson

Doubleday 448pp £20

The Week bookshop £18 (incl. p&p)

Erik Larson, author of this “fascinating” new book, once remarked that most historians leave their best stories “languishing in the footnotes”, said Roger Moorhouse in the Financial Times. True to his word, he has promoted one of those “forgotten asides” to centre stage in the tale of William Dodd, an American ambassador to Nazi Germany, and his “flighty, foolish” daughter, Martha. Dodd was an odd, “almost accidental” choice for the post – an ageing history professor at Chicago University when appointed in 1933, shy, frugal and utterly unsuited to the showy and treacherous diplomatic world. At first, he was blind to the brutality of his Nazi hosts. *In the Garden of Beasts* “conveys the complex climate” of the time, interweaving the story of Martha’s “embarrassing passion for Nazism” (and for a string of high-ranking Nazis) with that of Dodd’s slow, painful disillusionment.

I found no new insights into the Third Reich here, said Dominic Sandbrook in *The Sunday Times* – but Larson’s “fast-moving” narrative has its “darkly enjoyable ironies”. The “hapless” Dodd



Dodd: an odd choice for the job

was offered the job by President Roosevelt (whom he fervently admired) only after five others had turned it down. On arriving in Berlin, he leased a handsome mansion in the Tiergarten (from which the book takes its name) without asking why its Jewish owners were leaving; he alienated his staff by lecturing them on their expensive taste in food; and reported, after meeting with Hitler, that the dictator was a “reasonable” man, intent on peace. Meanwhile, party girl Martha had fallen in love with Germany’s “thrilling rebirth”. Her story “is worth a book in itself”, said Nigel Jones in *The Daily Telegraph*. Newly divorced at 24, she conducted affairs with Hitler’s foreign-press chief, Ernst Hanfstaengl, the air ace Ernst Udet, and the head of the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels. She even went on a “blind date” with Hitler, who privately held her in contempt. Finally, she was seduced by a Soviet diplomat into spying for Russia, and ended her days behind the Iron Curtain.

It was the murderous purge of 1934 – the Night of the Long Knives – that finally opened Dodd’s eyes, said David Crane in *The Spectator*. From then on, he refused even to shake hands with the Nazi “crooks”, and became “a Cassandra”, increasingly irritating to Washington. He was recalled in 1937. With its “sparse reporter’s prose”, Larson’s book is “compelling” – “a brave effort to see history as it evolves, not as it becomes”.

Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life

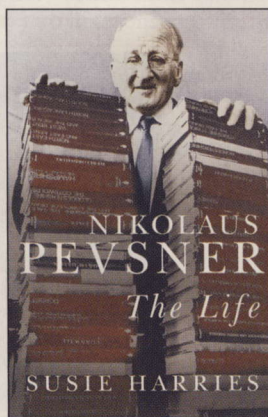
by Susie Harries

Chatto and Windus 834pp £30

The Week bookshop £24 (incl. p&p)

“A second-hand compiler of inventories,” the art historian Nikolaus Pevsner once called himself. His legacy “tells a different story”, says Philippa Stockley in *The Sunday Telegraph*. Forced to step down from his post at Göttingen University in 1933, he left Nazi Germany for England at the age of 31, becoming an establishment figure by the 1970s thanks to works such as *Pioneers of Modern Design*, and the much-loved 46-volume *Buildings of England* – often referred to simply as “Pevsner”. After years of penury as a refugee, he succeeded thanks to his manic industriousness and – as Susan Harries’s “enormously likeable” biography argues – the “unique creative genius” that shines through his dry, modest but “addictively naughty” prose style.

The son of a Jewish fur-trader, he converted to Protestantism in youth, and developed a deep belief in the patriotic and social duty of the artist. One of the surprises of this “stunningly good” biography is his naïve sympathy for Hitler, says Simon Heffer in *The Literary Review* – even in 1939, he and his half-Jewish wife, Lola, sent their three children on holiday to Germany. His life turned round when he met Allen Lane, Penguin’s founder, who commissioned *The Buildings of England* after the War. An “army” of assistants (“fragrant young women”, often objects of infatuation) helped him prepare it – but the field trips were lonely, ill-paid and punishing. He covered two counties a year, spending only a month on each, “charming his way past butlers” by day and writing at night in “ill-lit pub bedrooms”. He was mocked as “a ‘Prussian pedant’ lecturing the English on Englishness”, said George Walden in *The Observer*, but Harries’s “masterpiece” leaves no doubt he was the man for the job.



Novel of the week

The Trouble with Alice

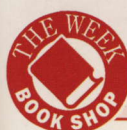
by Olivia Glazebrook

Short Books 277pp £12.99

The Week bookshop £11.69 (incl. p&p)

Olivia Glazebrook’s “wise, humorous” first novel begins with a terrible accident, said Kate Saunders in *The Times*. Kit and Alice are a happy young couple on holiday in Jordan when their car crashes in the desert and Alice suffers a miscarriage. The trauma “pulls their relationship violently out of shape”: Kit reverts to bachelor selfishness, and Alice, no longer understanding “the man she thought she loved”, descends into anorexia, intent on creating a new version of herself, beyond others’ reach. It’s a “shattering opening” to a story about “the nature of real love”.

Glazebrook is a “witty” writer with a sharp eye – I loved her “descriptions of five-star hotels and trendy London types”, said Wendy Holden in *The Daily Mail*. But Alice’s “minutely detailed” breakdown was just “too dark for me.” Not for me, said Charlotte Moore in *The Spectator*. Kit and Alice are saved from “desolation” by Kit’s monstrous father, Tod, “a great tragi-comic creation” whose cruel intervention forces them to take stock, rescuing the novel from potential stasis with scenes of real power and “originality”.



To order these titles at the above discounts, or any other book in print, visit the online bookshop at www.theweek.co.uk/books, or tel 0843-060 0020. Free p&p for UK customers.

For p&p in Europe, add 20% of the cost of the order, and 35% in the rest of the world.