

Bargain buys, movie success and rare books

MAUREEN ISAACSON

Exclusive Books is having its annual summer sale, with an excellent selection. It includes the usual array of art, history, cooking, home and garden and children's lit. Novels include *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam, *Our Lives Are the Rivers* by Jaime Manrique and *The Tax Inspector* by Peter Carey.

● Vikas Swarup is still in the limelight. At the University of Southern California Libraries 22nd annual Scriptor awards, Swarup was given a Scriptor for his book Q&A, which was adapted by Simon

Beaufoy for the screen as *Slumdog Millionaire*. *Slumdog* swept the Critics Choice and Golden Globe Awards. It has also been nominated for 10 Academy Awards and is considered a favourite to win the best picture Oscar at the awards ceremony on February 22.

● *The Guardian* reports that 150 years after the birth of Knut Hamsun, the Nobel prize-winning Norwegian author who supported the Nazi occupation of Norway, he is to be commemorated on a coin.

Hamsun, a Norwegian national hero, fell from grace when he openly supported the Nazi party. In a newspaper article after the Nazis

arrived in Norway in 1940, he wrote: "The Germans are fighting for us all, and will crush the English tyranny over us and over all neutrals." Two psychiatrists ruled that he was suffering from "permanently impaired mental faculties", which ended his postwar trial, reports *The Guardian*. He was sentenced to the loss of his property, put under psychiatric observation and died in poverty in 1952.

Seven years ago, a ferocious debate over naming an Oslo street after Hamsun led to public outrage and the idea was abandoned. The coin shows a reproduction of Hamsun's notes for his novel *Markers*

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Hotels are a good source of subplots

The Fall of the Black-Eyed Night

by Sean Badal

(Umuzi) R150

review: Chris Dunton

The ominous title of Sean Badal's novel is drawn from the book's epigraph – a line from Aeschylus's doom-dogged drama *Persians*.

The first chapter, like every other, has its own epigraph, this time from Chesterton: "'Have you,' he cried in a dreadful voice, 'have you ever suffered?'"

All of this takes us straight into the mind-set of Badal's central character, Shehzad Shadhili. Newly returned to Cape Town from studies in London, Shehzad is reunited with his parents – his father is an imam – yet is laden with an unexplained anguish, an unuttered scream welling up inside him.

Though Badal's novel is wide-ranging and often very funny (owing to Shehzad's caustic wit), a current of profound presentiment runs right through it.

One year after the London bombings, the performance and standing of Islam is a crucial concern. Shehzad watches a television documentary on the event and recognises that this is structured like a film, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Except that fixed ideas are now so entrenched, "nobody took any notice of what was happening outside the frame".

A well-chosen epigraph from Edward Said speaks of the need to reinterpret the world and, where salutary, to shed the past.

Yet Shehzad cannot manage the latter. There are repeated references to an "incident" that took place in London, ever since which he has been obsessed with the quantification of pain, with coming to terms

with the "relentless misery" in his heart.

Bit by bit the details of the incident are pieced together: A London apartment where Shehzad has been chewing *gat* has been raided; Shehzad has had a policeman's boot pressed down on his neck (the injury still visible); and hence "English dog shit in his mouth".

This has had nothing to do with drugs; rather, he is arrested and interrogated because he shares the same name as a man on the terrorist database.

As this story unravels, subplots are introduced. Initially, these seem like shawls and scarves draped loosely over a gown but, in fact, the novel's structure is tighter than it first appears.

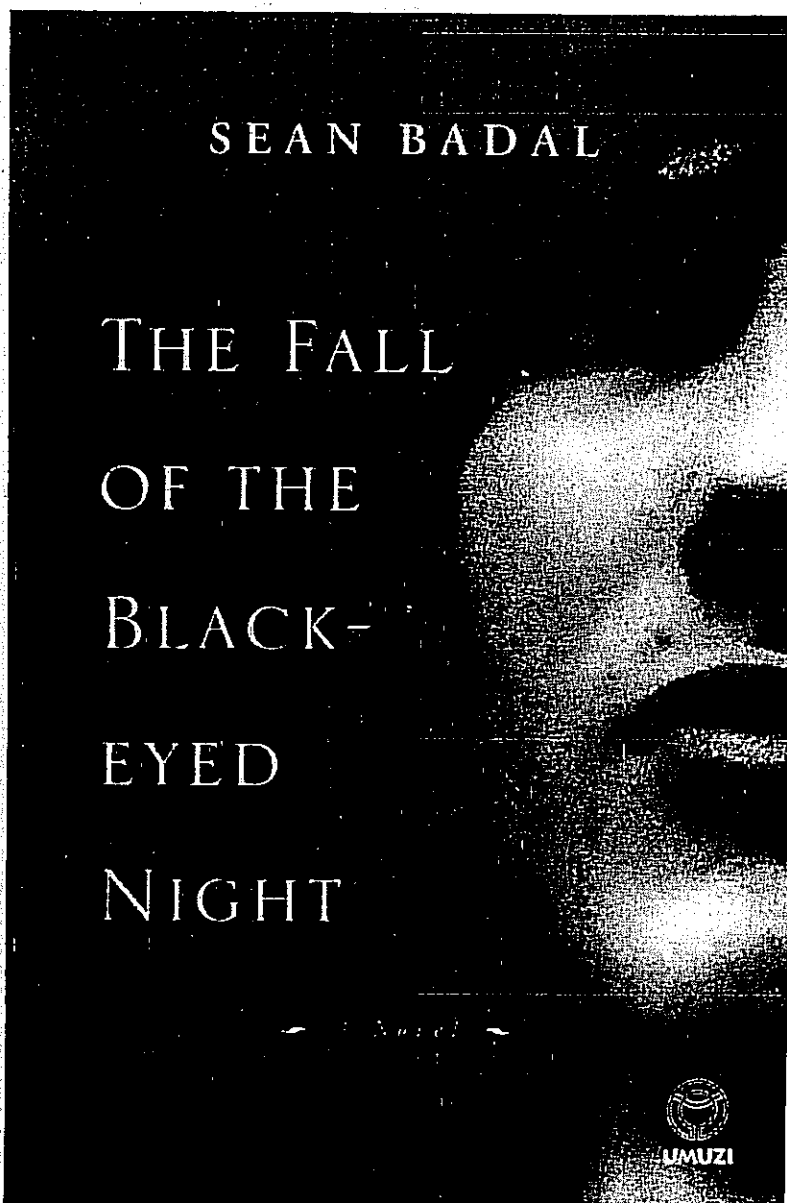
Shehzad is front house manager at an upmarket hotel. He uses an unoccupied suite as a venue for sex with his counterpart, Avril.

In the hotel he encounters the repugnant, though magnificently named Pleydenwurff, a golf-estate developer, and his teenage daughter, Brigitte. Pleydenwurff pays Shehzad (handsomely) to keep an eye on the girl. Though at first she seems impossibly truculent, later, when faced with personal tragedy, the relationship she establishes with Shehzad is touching.

An especially nicely handled sub-plot deals with the arrival at the hotel of second-rate but well-heeled Bollywood stars, one of whom commissions Shehzad to organise canned hunting for him (Shehzad realises that this guy's success stems from "a highly-developed and theatrical sense of *entre nous*").

Another narrative strand covers Shehzad's friendship with Wu, the hotel's Korean/Chinese Muslim sushi chef (that's right), who reveals out of the blue that he's an illegal immigrant and that he's killed his wife.

As the main plot line develops,



Shehzad's father retires and is replaced by a Wahabi, a cold, intimidating man, disdainful of his predecessor. The Wahabi's supporters spread rumours about Shehzad (mostly true) – that he drinks and that he sleeps with a white woman.

Meanwhile, it's discovered that Pleydenwurff's golf course is to be built on top of one of Cape Town's *kramats* (the graves of holy men), the burial place of Shehzad's grandfather.

Opposition to the golf course comes from both those who wish to safeguard the *kramat* and from environmentalists; Badal's characterisation of the spokesperson for the latter, a tight-arsed English-woman who sprays her room with aerosol after a delegation of Muslims has left, is especially acute.

The Wahabi takes a contrary stand, questioning who is in the *kra-*

mat and arguing that the institution is idolatrous. Inspired by a real-life scandal in South African-American relations (we even get a scene set in Ronnie Kasrils's office), Shehzad devises an audacious and ingenious plan to oust the new imam.

Badal is a former journalist whose specialism in technology reporting lends an air of authenticity to Shehzad's scheme.

I wouldn't say that his novel is particularly well written. There are too many non sequiturs and redundant asides; too many clunky phrases such as "the absurdities and sublimities of life" and too many commonplace notions (the moon witnessing events on Earth; humans as seen from a distance compared to scurrying ants). Still, there's a good deal of energy and insight in this novel and it holds one's attention from the outset.

Finely layered set during

Lark and Termite

by Jayne Anne Phillips

(Alfred A Knopf)

review: Susan Salter Reynolds

Falling in love with a writer requires commitment. They get old, you get old. The relationship waxes and wanes. Most readers can recall times of perfect synchronicity – when the book was the necessary enzyme, the catalyst, the missing piece. *Black Tickets*, Jayne Anne Phillips's first collection of stories, published in 1979, was, for more than one earnest English major, such a book!

Phillips came of writing age in the post-Vietnam era: each of her deeply political books, including her latest, the novel *Lark and Termite* (Alfred A Knopf), set during the Korean War, has examined trickle-down violence in American culture.

Black Tickets was not a nice book: it was full of drugs, rape, murder, incest, poverty and pain. And, because Jayne Anne Phillips was and is a literary fiction writer, she knew, even then, how to bypass the reader's brain and inject her words into the bloodstream.

This is what makes literary fiction so dangerous; it is a genre that requires a comprehensive understanding of the soul's vulnerability. It is by nature experimental because the author is partially judged on her ability to climb into a character's mind, like the drug dealer in the story *Black Tickets*: "When you touch my flesh I slide out of it and wake up standing, propped by your arms, your knee, the cold tile wall. I feel the cloud still seeping from you and it dries on my hand, cracking to a pile of charcoal numbers; dim serial of odd and even, a catalog of fools."

In those days, there weren't many such books written by women. Phillips gave the green light to writers such as Susanna Moore (*In the Cut*), Kathryn Harrison and many, many others who came up through academia, through creative writing classes in which women didn't always tell it

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A brilliant celebration of Johnson's bitter life