

## SUNDAY TIMES RECOMMENDS



**THE SUM OF OUR DAYS** by Isabel Allende, Fourth Estate, R190

**RUTHLESSLY** honest, deeply personal, sometimes even ironic, Allende's account of the years following the death of Paula,

daughter of this formidable writer, is not only a chronicle of profound grieving, but also an intimate examination of her whole family and its troubled dynamics. The dead Paula is often addressed directly, and her sorrowful but caring ghost seems to hover on the edges of the family's activities. In places, Allende also talks about her own writing career. A richly rewarding book; brave, intelligent, pain-ridden, but defiant. Any parent who has lost a child will find it harrowing, but ultimately inspiring. — *David Pike*



**THE CHATHAM SCHOOL AFFAIR**, Thomas H. Cook, Quercus, R129.95

IT'S a pity the publishers chose such a garish cover design and revolting pay-off line ('Only tragedy can truly quench the flames of passion'), because they do this book a disservice. Cook's setting is New England in the '20s, the time and place of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and he writes with the same stylish grace of observation, infusing a chilling story of human error with a great deal of empathy. Narrator Henry Griswald recalls the events that have left him a solitary old man, looking back to when a beautiful young teacher taught him about strong feelings and free spirits and made him hate the confining order of his Massachusetts village. Under the spell of Byronic ideals, devoid of clear thought and compassion, Henry tried to facilitate what in his clouded adolescent mind was a great romance and, in so doing, made a horrendous mistake that shattered several lives. Far from being simply crime fiction, this is a moving exploration of a boy's emotional development and deserves more attention from the literary world. — *Sue de Groot*



**THE GOOD THIEF** by Hannah Tinti, Headline Review, R209.95

THE setting of American-born Hannah Tinti's first novel, *The Good Thief*, is a dark and Dickensian 19th-century America. It introduces us to the orphaned Ren, a boy with a missing left hand. When Ren is adopted by the dubious Benjamin Nab, who claims to be Ren's older brother, he is introduced into a life of theft and grave-digging. Sometimes, though, the novel's adventure slips out of Tinti's control and becomes implausible. But, while not perfect, this is an entertaining attempt by the first-time novelist. — *Karl van Wyk*



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I want to be a great thinker without doing the work—I am indeed phony

What 60 years of previously unseen personal correspondence reveal about Norman Mailer



**BON VIVANT:** Travel, feature and novel writer William Dalrymple

Picture: SIMPHWE NKWALI

# Just William

In 'The Last Mughal', William Dalrymple lays bare the imperious cruelty of the British Raj, writes Sean Badal

WHEN William Dalrymple reaches the part where the British forces storm the Kashmiri Gates in Delhi and massacre everyone in an orgy of horrific violence, there is a hushed silence in the Wits auditorium. The Indian aunts in their finest *shaitaar kameezes* mutter under their breaths and the white-haired Anglo gentlemen beside them squirm uneasily in their seats. Dalrymple is describing the siege of Delhi of 1857, one of the most blighted episodes of British rule in India. It forms the nexus of his latest book, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty*. It's a poignant account of the life of the last Mughal emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar.

Dalrymple's voice reaches a Wellesian crescendo, but ends gently with an Urdu couplet from Zafar himself, who was something of a noted poet (even if you strip away all the royal sycophancy): "The days of life are over, its evening of death. Now I can sleep without any stress forever."

It is a fine, artful speech that Dalrymple delivers, threading delicately between *bon vivance* and a sort of headmasterly lecture. The comedic flourishes are layered with all the drama and pathos of the Raj in India and the relief is palpable as the audience files out for canapés and conversation.

"Yes, there is an element of the-over breakfast at his Houghton guest-house, "but it helps pay the bills!"

Dalrymple was in South Africa as a guest of the second Words on Water: India & SA in Conversation literary festival, held under the auspices of the newly launched Centre for Indian Studies at Wits University. The centre plans to expand research collaborations between Wits and Indian universities.

He is a toiler, and South Africa is another stop in a relentless crisscross of countries that has taken his lecture tour from the US to Australia.

"They don't really get me in America," he says, "They don't really understand India and the history of colo-

onialism, even though *The Last Mughal* was my biggest seller in the US. Wish they would, though. It would give them a greater understanding."

It's not difficult to see what that understanding is. When he is not writing books, Dalrymple is a prolific features writer, concentrating mostly on Middle Eastern issues for publications ranging from *The New Yorker* to *The Spectator*. He is a passionate advocate of a greater understanding of the Muslim world and this has brought him in direct conflict with the neocons on both sides of the Atlantic, who prefer to see the world in much more starkly Manichean terms.

His British contemporaries on the conservative side, Niall Ferguson and Andrew Roberts, are brighter luminaries in the US, where their benign view of imperialism goes down well.

"I'm totally against that revisionist view," says Dalrymple vehemently, "especially Ferguson's attempt at whitewashing the role of British imperialism as though it was some sort of benevolent force for good. It never was. It was a history of conquest, greed and bloodshed, of economic profit and military might."

If you look at the two, Roberts is the less successful, probably because he is essentially an English conservative with a firm belief in the Atlantic alliance. Unfortunately the idea of this kind of tolerance for imperialism is catching. Even the UK government is jumping on the bandwagon and urging a more sympathetic view of imperialism — in schools, for example."

He is against 'whitewashing the role of British imperialism as though it was some sort of benevolent force for good'



It is as a travel writer, though, that Dalrymple is perhaps best known. His first book, *In Xanadu*, was published 1989 when the author was just 22. In it, he chronicles the trip he took in the footsteps of Marco Polo, from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to the site of Xanadu in Outer Mongolia. It is a wonderful book, by turns erudite and witty, with imprimaturs of *Road to Orizana* — by Robert Byron, one of Dalrymple's heroes — all over it. The book, however, was actually inspired by Dalrymple's other hero, Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor, who Dalrymple recently interviewed in Mani, Greece.

"It was the reading of his travel books while at Cambridge that inspired me to attempt to follow in his footsteps," says Dalrymple. "With a paperback of Leigh Fermor's in my backpack, I set off to Jerusalem following the route of the Crusaders during my first summer vacation. He is 93 now, and still gives me hope and inspiration."

In 1989 Dalrymple moved to Delhi where he researched his second book, *City of Djinns*, about a year he and his wife

spent in the sprawling, bustling metropolis. At his lecture at Wits, there was a gasp from the audience when he showed exactly how the city was levelled to the ground by the vengeful British: beautiful buildings and castles shattered by artillery power.

He returned to a Christian leitmotif in *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium*, an absorbing travelogue covering the journey of two Styrite monks, John Moschos and his pupil, Sophronius, who traversed the Byzantium world in 587AD. It is a deeply moving and spiritual book, the author's limp prose holding its own among an older generation of great travel writers like Jonathan Raban, Colin Thubron and Jan Morris. It remains an inspiring read in an age when most travel writing seems to veer from morose to gimmicky and publishers fight to see who can put the most stupid of titles on their books.

It is to India, however, that Dalrymple consistently returns. He published *The Age of Kali* in 1998, a collection of essays on India, *White Mughals* in 2002, anchored in the love affair and marriage of James Achilles Kirkpatrick, an East India Company officer, and Khair-un-Nisa, a Hyderabad princess.

Dalrymple spends most of his time in India, having purchased a farmhouse outside Delhi.

"It's hard to explain. I wouldn't call it an obsession, but there is nowhere else I would rather live. Of course when you are in India, there are certain things about London you miss, but I think we are all transients these days."

His phone bleeps as he talks. It is his wife, the artist Olivia Fraser, texting from Delhi. She is a miniature portraitist in the Mughal tradition, and wants advice on something or the other. ● *The Last Mughal* is published by Bloomsbury, R174.95