

What We're Reading - 9 July 2021

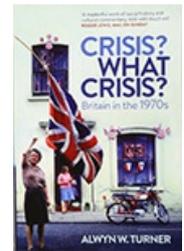
Lucy Nathan

Opinion - Books Friday, 9th July 2021

The BookBrunch team reveals what's on their bedside tables

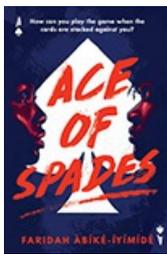
Nicholas Clee

Dominic Sandbrook in the Sunday Times was highly complimentary about Alwyn Turner's latest history of an era - given that Sandbrook writes in the same genre, the praise was generous, and possibly judicious too. The piece prompted me to read Turner's *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s* (Aurum), indulging my perverse nostalgia for a decade that was, as the author shows, grim. There were the three-day week, relentless strikes, sharp inflation, terrorist atrocities, general grottness; but I, in my youthful bubble, was excited by the newly won freedoms and cultural vibrancy I encountered. The Seventies seem distant now, but Turner reminds us how many contemporary concerns surfaced then: the environment; representation of marginalised groups in the media; left wing infiltration (Militant then, Momentum now). Turner, less opinionated than Sandbrook, has a similar eye for telling details, and offers a more tightly structured narrative. Very enjoyable.



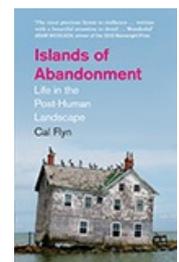
Lucy Nathan

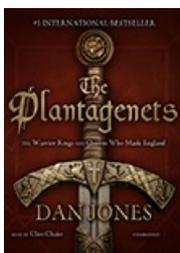
Ace of Spades is an absolutely triumphant YA novel by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé. Described as "Gossip Girl meets Get Out", it follows Devon and Chiamaka, the only two Black students at their prestigious private school, as they are targeted by an anonymous bully. Unsurprisingly, the school has dark secrets - but these secrets run far deeper, and far more darkly, than most YA novels dare to go. It has some really shocking twists, and although I sometimes find alternating point-of-view chapters jarring, it was paced to perfection as the tension builds and builds. It's a tangled story that is well worth unravelling.



Neill Denny

There is something compelling about ruined buildings, forbidden zones, places abandoned by man and overrun by nature. The itch to explore and discover these lost places is thoroughly scratched in *Islands of Abandonment: Life in the Post-Human Landscape* by Cal Flynn (William Collins). Cal has no truck with keep out signs and hostile environments, taking us, amongst others, to abandoned textile mills in the US, the forbidden zone of Chernobyl and a sinister patch of poisoned earth at Verdun in France. Here, after the Great War, 200,000 chemical weapons were destroyed, leaving a bare patch of insanely polluted earth a century later, hidden in the forests that have colonised the wider battlefield. Cal tracks it down on Google Earth, burrows like a fox under a fence, to step on its polluted surface: an incredible 17% of the soil's weight is arsenic, of which 'four or five grains is enough to fell a grown man.' But even here nature is at work, with specialist plants gradually filtering out the heavy metals, and the overall message of the book is hopeful, that whatever atrocities we may inflict on the planet, nature is surprising resilient. The writing too is of a higher order; this is a classic in the making.





Jo Henry

Despite going to school in a building erected by William the Conqueror, I know almost nothing about early Medieval English history. So I'm hoping that my latest audiobook will change that and enable me to identify the various King Henrys and Edwards in the future. *The Plantagenets* by Dan Jones (Collins) starts out brilliantly. King Henry I's heir apparent, a rather reckless young man named William the Aethling, is having a wild party with family, friends and crew before setting out - at night - to sail from France to England. Disaster inevitably follows, throwing England into a war of succession between William's sister, Matilda, and his cousin (who had fortuitously disembarked from the doomed ship

- suffering from stomach problems apparently). This is excellent narrative history that wears its research lightly, and the author does a good job of reading the book himself. (I often wonder if authors reading their work for audio want to - or even do - make editorial changes if they notice an infelicitous phrase or word?) I am happy to spend the next 19 hours in his company.

Source article: <https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-detail/what-we-re-reading--9-july-2021>