

fiction

this week's essential reading

{ 'Subtleties'
by Nate Barksdale,
Cardus

A curious and delightful reflection on the overlooked evolution of the film subtitle, from yellowing VHS cassettes to bootleg Bollywood DVDs }

The dispassionate anarchist

The Egyptian-born author Albert Cossery penned comic tales celebrating radical indolence as an alternative to political engagement, writes Jacob Silverman

In 1945, the writer Albert Cossery left his native Cairo for Paris. He would live in the French capital for the rest of his life, spending his last 60 years in the same hotel, but he never forgot his home country, which was the setting for most of his fiction. Cossery, who died, aged 94, in 2008, wrote in French. His novels were animated by political concerns but also shot through with sardonic humour and scepticism towards human drama. Despite his political awareness and friendships with Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Cossery wrote from a peculiar sort of louché slothfulness: an impoverished bon vivant, he touted the virtues of laziness (it allows time to think) and bragged about his sexual prowess. In life and writing, he threw his lot in with prostitutes, thieves, anarchists, and others from society's lower rungs. This mix of qualities endeared him to Henry Miller, who considered Cossery brilliant and arranged for the US publication of *Men God Forgot*, the Egyptian's first novel.

Cossery produced eight novels during his long life. All are now out of print in the United States and Britain, but this summer, the American publishers New Directions and New York Review of Books Classics are publishing new English translations of two Cossery novels: respectively, *A Splendid Conspiracy* and *The Jokers*. Each publisher has another Cossery novel in the pipeline.

These books offer insight into Cossery's feelings towards political consciousness. The writer's own politics, as interpreted through his novels, might be described as dispassionate anarchism. His protagonists put no stock in the state, particularly since they live under abusive regimes, yet they hold as much contempt for violent revolutionaries as they do for the tyrants they oppose. They argue that when faced with a bankrupt society, the only righteous responses are lazy indifference or ingeniously expressed scorn – and to have fun doing either.

In *The Jokers*, this philosophy finds expression in a clandestine graffiti campaign designed to provoke "an uprising of irresistible hilarity" against a despotic city governor. In *A Splendid Conspiracy*, a group of young men – Teymour, a recently returned student; Imtaz, a handsome, disgraced former actor; and Medhat, a mischievous pleasure-seeker – are mistaken for terrorists because they indulge in a carefree lifestyle.

In the case of *The Jokers*, the graffiti campaign, which centres around posters lavishing such effusive praise on the city governor that the authorities are baffled, does not mean to provoke an outright revolt. Rather, it aims to liberate the populace by offering them a daft joke to share. These schemers also believe that they need the governor, because "as a buffoon he lacked for nothing". They're grateful for the inanity he exudes, for the comedy that only a self-absorbed, bumbling ruler can provide. Consequently, their dominant feeling towards the unnamed governor is love, not hate; "to kill him would be blasphemy" – his death would leave them with nothing to lampoon. Life would be boring – the worst crime of all.

There's a dark but terribly funny form of cynicism at work here. It posits that political agitation is a useless endeavour, and that there is no glory to be found in fighting to topple a regime that inevitably will be replaced by something equally awful or depressingly banal. Better to indulge oneself, for life is "essentially pointless, and, at the same time, extremely interesting".

In arguing against political dissidents, Cossery lumps them together with the power-hungry governments they aim to unseat. Writ large, this is not an original notion: a popular narrative trope, in film and literature, is to portray opposed forces – say, cops and mafia dons – as equally corrupt. But Cossery's approach is distinct because it doesn't cast this equivalence as a moralistic



A wall painting by the British graffiti artist Banksy in the West Bank. Cossery's *The Jokers* uses a clandestine graffiti campaign to illustrate its central philosophy. David Silverman / Getty Images

debate over paradigms of political activism but in terms of ego and personal dignity. Reformers, in the view of Heykal, one of the graffiti campaign's ringleaders, are "all careerists". Rebels are worse because they can't "break out of the vicious cycle of power". They play "the game of honour and dishonour" – excessive pride being one of the most unforgivable sins in Cossery's novels – and turn themselves into prisoners because they share "the same myths as [their] adversary". In such

a world, the most rational modus operandi is to reject all myths, live hedonistically, and employ irony as a weapon. Both novels' protagonists oblige, carousing with a deep sense of fraternity and attempting to seduce any young woman who enters their visual field.

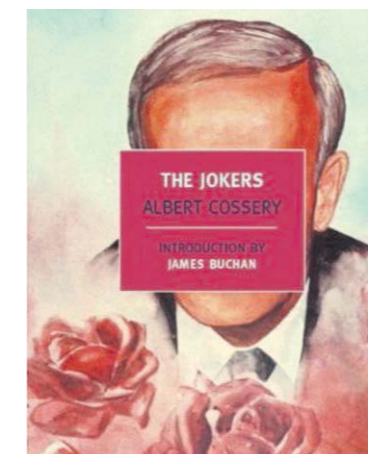
There are times, however, when this sybaritic credo fails its adherents. First, it's difficult to live the good life if one is poor and desperate. The men of *The Jokers* and *A Splendid Conspiracy* are either

wealthy, blithely supported by ignorant parents, or the beneficiaries of unexpected inheritances. On the other hand, beggars, while clearly beloved by Cossery ("a peaceful race with such deep roots in the soil"), receive a treatment bordering on condescension. They're something like the proverbial noble savage: interesting to look at, worthy of a donation, but their real trials – hunger, abuse by police – are glossed over.

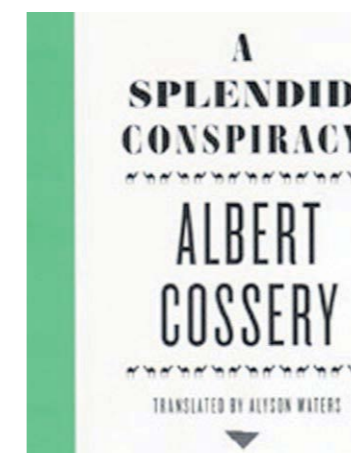
In addition, the lifestyle Cossery champions leaves little room for

women, except as tools of manipulation. Indeed, his chief weakness as a writer is a dismissive attitude towards the opposite sex.

He offers a much fairer and empathetic treatment of the mother of Urfy, one of the graffitiists. Urfy works as a teacher to support himself and his elderly, increasingly senile mother. As a worker, he's practically alone among this cast, and while the very notion of work is pilloried in these books, those who must work occasionally receive a touching sympathy, such as Rezk, the pathetic man in *A Splendid Conspiracy* driven by financial concerns to be a police informer.



Jokers
Albert Cossery
New York Review of Books
Dh60



A Splendid Conspiracy
Albert Cossery
New Directions
Dh60

Like his friends, Urfy values irony above all else, but his mother's ill health represents "a pain no dose of irony [can] alleviate". He's ashamed of her, more embarrassed still by the fascination shown for her by Heykal, who has no worldly concerns. But through a moving psychological portrait, a rare dip into realism unfettered by farce or black humour, Cossery reveals that Heykal in fact envies Urfy's immiserating concern for his mother, both because it is genuine and because this woman, marooned in her own decaying mind, is "free of rancour or ambition". It's a welcome dose of humanism,

aided by a gentler irony, and the revelation allows Urfy to love his mother as she is.

Given the aforementioned complications, one might accuse Cossery of rigging the conditions of his satires. The menace is rarely genuine; violence and death mostly take place off-screen, and the authorities are laughably foolish. Perhaps owing to Cossery's self-imposed exile, there is also no sense of history here, no indication of the various political and religious movements that convulsed Egypt throughout the 20th century. (Cossery himself was from a land-owning Greek Orthodox family.)

Yet there's something exculpatory in these very faults and omissions. Cossery's visions of rebellion, limited though they might be, retain their optimism, and their humour, by rejecting the mainstream, political or otherwise. To look askance at power, to be unable to even take it seriously, and to instead embrace sensual pleasures – this is the root of Cossery's moral code. Its dogmatism is exuberant not oppressive, and it runs independent of outside influence.

The Jokers bears similarities to GK Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the British author's gleeful send-up of anarchist conspiracies. Unlike *Thursday*, Cossery's work is defiantly secular, but it shares a sense of play and a prankish attitude toward authority. Both men's novels delight in plots, in how the threat of a secret, any secret, can drive government officials mad, particularly those who believe that they have the firmest grip on power. This last tack is deployed well in *A Splendid Conspiracy*. Although frequently quite funny, it's a less focused work, awkward in its attempts to balance the revenge fantasies of two characters – both of whom have been deeply wronged – against the brash chauvinism of Medhat and Imtaz. These hedonists may flout society's strictures, but their callous brand of humour brings them closer to narcissism than independence – a fitting result for "a society based on betrayal".

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new paperbacks

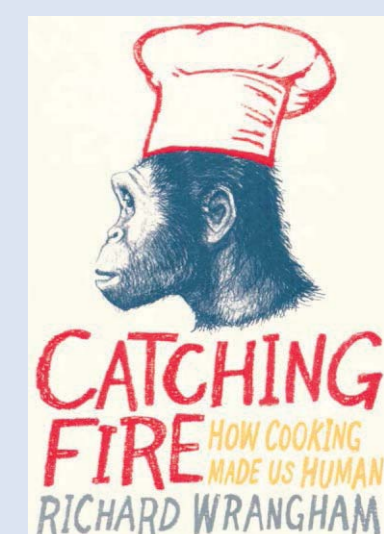
Creatures of the flame

Human beings have reached the top of the food chain and outsmarted every other animal to get there by having large brains. But the growth in our brain size would not have been possible without cooked food. That is the essence of the primatologist Richard Wrangham's argument in *Catching Fire*.

Our ancestors started cooking at the beginning of human evolution. The shift from raw food increased the amount of energy our bodies received from meals. Less time spent chewing meant more time for hunting, gathering and bonding with others. This allowed us to survive, reproduce and pass on superior genes to our children.

Wrangham also puts forward an intriguing theory: cooking may have given women more free time but it also forced them to become dependent on men because they exchanged their labour for physical protection.

This is a wonderful book. Wrangham's clear and elegant writing style does not detract from the complexity of his



Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human
Richard Wrangham
Profile Books
Dh52

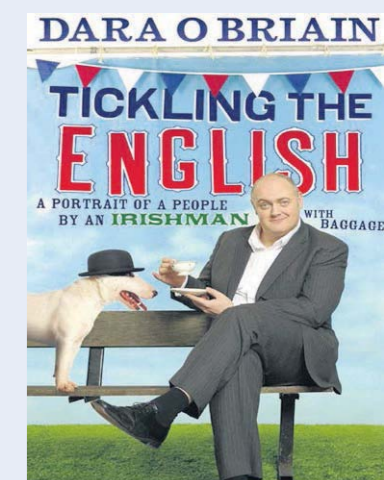
arguments. Our physiology, he says, is tied to our discovery of fire. "We are the cooking apes," he writes, "the creatures of the flame."

Small island, big idea

In *Tickling the English* Dara O'Briain, the Irish stand-up comedian, attempts to tread in the footsteps of Bill Bryson and his *Notes From A Small Island*, by travelling around the United Kingdom to find out what it is that makes the English so typically English.

It is a decent enough premise, although O'Briain's analysis is quickly derailed by the relentless grind of his performance commitments, as he moves from suburban town to major city, and a work that should have offered a comic analysis of the state of a nation (Bryson-lite, if you will) becomes a more straightforward tour diary. To his credit, O'Briain will make you laugh out loud even if his grand idea is spread far too thin over more than 300 pages.

He doesn't completely abandon his duties, however, exploring readers at one stage to "take a brief pit-stop and look at the bigger picture", without ever nailing his theories down to anything more than concluding that the English "like to talk



Tickling the English
Dara O'Briain
Penguin
Dh45

themselves down". In between, O'Briain presents a string of the funniest one-liners, put-downs and ripping yarns from months spent sharpening his act on the road, all of which are bound to play out well with his innumerable fans.

From *The Jokers*, page 42 Who cares? Don't tell me you're the kind who wants to make the world a better place?