

Reading Nicole Krauss's new novel feels strangely intimate, almost stalkerish. Those who keep up with Brooklyn literary gossip will be aware that Krauss's marriage to the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, with whom she has two sons, has broken down. The underlying motor of the plot of *Forest Dark* is the breakdown of the relationship between the narrator (also called Nicole) and her husband, with whom she has two sons. The unwary reader might not know of this mirroring of art and life, and thus won't spot Krauss's teasing, as she challenges us to resist reading any autobiographical intent into her tale. But her descriptions of the uncomfortably growing distance between husband and wife as they face up to the loosening ties of a marriage, sustained only by their shared love for their children, seems remarkably close to the bone. The narrator describes the gradual leaking of love with what at times seems a stupefaction verging on catatonia. One key theme of this novel is what it means to be a writer who needs to commit thoughts to paper in order to make sense of them. We suspect that Krauss suffers as much as her narrator does from "extreme sensitivity" to people and situations, when "the walls between myself and the outside become more permeable . . . my mind more absorbent".

Krauss's ambition has grown with each of her novels. The undeniable charm of *The History of Love* (2005) was slightly marred by her penchant for over-neat plotting that threatened to undermine its emotional sincerity. Israel, its desert landscape and the ancient-modern city of Jerusalem, were glimpsed on the margins of her third novel, *Great House* (2010). Krauss returns to Israel in *Forest Dark*, initially to Tel Aviv, where, with a hint of the slightly mannered symbolism that is typical of the author,

Ennui at the Hilton

In Israel, two characters lose their grip on reality

NATASHA LEHRER

Nicole Krauss

FOREST DARK
304pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.
978 1 4088 7178 2

the narrator moves into the brutalist concrete Leviathan of the beachside Hilton hotel, where she just happens to have been conceived. She has flown away from her fracturing marriage in Brooklyn, to try to smash the writer's block that is preventing her from working on her new novel. Ostensibly she is on the trail of a mysterious man who apparently threw himself off one of the hotel's sea-facing balconies the previous week. This is an Austeresque thriller, a manhunt in which the quarry is an idea rather than a person. Like Auster, Krauss recognizes that the human urge to follow clues is ultimately about resolving the mysteries of the human heart. In this respect the Hilton touch is rather brilliant: one of this architecturally inspiring city's ugliest buildings, it is also one of the least likely places in which to find yourself.

The novel unfurls in two directions, as a mysterious millionaire, Epstein – some kind of a player at the crossroads of US finance and political power – to the horror of his children and for reasons that are never fully explained,



The Hilton Hotel, Tel Aviv

starts to disburse his wealth in increasingly incomprehensible ways. Overtaken with existential ennui, he too checks into the Tel Aviv Hilton, and eventually holes up in a squalid Jaffa apartment. An elegiac set piece with echoes of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* sees the doorman of Epstein's Upper East Side apartment building drifting off to sleep in Cen-

tral Park clutching one of Epstein's art treasures that he has been tasked with taking to a dealer, only to awaken, empty handed.

Epstein and Nicole never meet and indeed know nothing of each other. Krauss allows their individual narratives to develop in increasingly fantastical directions. Epstein's Kafkaesque pursuit across continents of his cashmere coat and mobile phone, casually pilfered from a New York hotel by a member of the security detail of the Palestinian Authority, eventually dovetails with Nicole's own existential anxieties.

The heart of the novel is a riff on the famous (suit)case of Esther Hoffe, Max Brod's secretary, to whom Brod bequeathed Franz Kafka's unpublished manuscripts. Friedman, a mysterious man with links to Mossad, is introduced to Nicole in Tel Aviv by a common acquaintance and tries to persuade her to finish an incomplete Kafka text found in the suitcase. As the story becomes increasingly hallucinatory, the reader begins to suspect that Nicole's mind is unravelling and she is perhaps writing her way through a nervous breakdown.

Krauss has a marvellous feeling for place, and her descriptions of the different Israeli cities her characters visit are extraordinarily evocative. *Forest Dark* is also dense and self-conscious with literary and philosophical allusion, from ancient Jewish mysticism to the inclusion of grainy, uncaptioned, Sebaldian black-and-white photographs of modernist buildings. This may sound schlocky but it's not; Nicole Krauss is always in control of the flow of ideas and allusions even as she evokes her two protagonists' increasingly feeble control over their own minds and sense of themselves. It is a remarkable accomplishment.

In 1938 the dandy son of a tycoon is sent by his father to the Honduran jungle to dismantle and bring back to New York a newly discovered Mayan temple. He is halfway through deconstructing the thing with the help of a small army of undifferentiated, loincloth-wearing natives when a Hollywood film crew arrives, looking to use the site to shoot a movie entitled *Hearts in Darkness*. The Californians occupy the intact half of the temple and demand the rebuilding of the other. A stalemate ensues, which lasts some twenty years, during which time the Second World War begins and ends and nobody thinks to send a search party after either group.

All this is told from the 1950s by Zonule, an alcoholic CIA agent doing an impression of a hardboiled American writer who, when not omnisciently narrating the goings-on in the jungle, unpicks the nothing-is-as-it-seems non-coincidence of the two groups' simultaneous arrival at the temple. Jaded and dying, he deals in burnt-out observations such as "proxy wars are nasty, shabby affairs", or the assertion that "the best of us must have a part of our personality that looks at the human beings around us as nothing more than objects colliding in space".

Like a petri dish left in the sun, the area surrounding the temple teems with gossiping, procreating, power-grabbing life. A newspaper is set up, an economy develops, alcohol is brewed. The madness promised by the title never really manifests itself; instead we get a kind of literature of game theory: rational

Zero-sum games

A tycoon's son, a film crew and a Mayan temple

MATTHEW PARKINSON-BENNETT

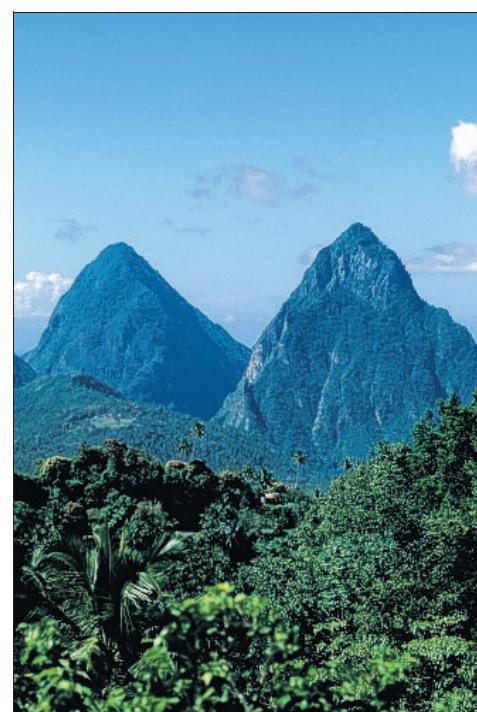
Ned Beauman

MADNESS IS BETTER THAN DEFEAT
416pp. Sceptre. £16.99.
978 1 4736 1358 4

actors out for their own gain. Against the backdrop of the low-stakes, zero-sum game cold war of the temple, a few prominent figures vie to subjugate the rest.

Ned Beauman's characters are mostly depthless, like the vacant subjects of mid-twentieth-century behaviourist psychology, their interiority constituted by appetite and cunning. So we don't flinch much when the author inflicts all manner of brutalities on them: lopping bits off, destroying their faces, or, as if to prove they are not actually empty, gifting them an "unceasing trickle from the anus". One specimen tries to escape the torture by jumping off the temple, only to get snagged on a rope and smashed repeatedly against a wall. She survives.

Madness Is Better Than Defeat is riddled



Pico Bonito, Honduras

with comments on the nature and problems of narrative (and some pre-emptive swipes at the critical reader). Whelt, the film's director,

is obsessed with a pattern he believes all successful stories follow. The temple itself becomes a source of never-ending narrative, filled with gods who author everything, or materials for the manufacture of copious lengths of film, or a fungus that grants omniscience to its consumer. But with its excessive length, cartoonish characters and deadlocked central conflict, the story fails to engage.

It might be argued that it is no longer appropriate to apply the Forsterian dogma of "rounded characters" to a novel of this sort. More problematic is the portrayal of the Honduran natives, less flat than one-dimensional. Without "the stench of truth" (what Zonule, a former newspaper man, values in a good story), the narrative must work hard in other places. Framing and eventually converging with the jungle story is Zonule's own, where Beauman is playful with his structure and voice. This part is more successful, though uneven and again overlong.

Here and there, we glimpse something – a character, a moment – that is more fully realized. And Beauman is able to turn a clever sentence: "Once again Whelt gathered his courage, which already had the crumpled quality of courage that's been gathered too many times in a row". Beauman's previous novel, *Glow* (2014), was an entertaining comic thriller and loving portrait of contemporary London. Here, Zonule might arouse some affection; but when he declares that "the campers and their follies didn't actually matter to me", we know too well what he means.

Still pretending

A middle-aged divorcee, adrift in adulthood

Give me the child until he is seven years old, and I will give you the man", certain educationalists used to say. Roddy Doyle's eleventh novel, *Smile*, shows how childhood experiences – in this case at a Christian Brothers school in mid-twentieth-century Ireland – can indeed define the course of a life. But it opens, like Doyle's two recent collections of stories-in-dialogue, with two middle-aged men in a pub.

Victor Forde, our narrator, is fifty-four, just divorced and living alone in a soulless apartment in his old home town. The opening of the novel is gently tragic. "I put the salt on the table and started my first shopping list. *Pepper etc.*", he notes, before setting out to find a new "local", one not *too* near his old life. "That would have been sad, a man of my age going back to some wrinkled version of his childhood. Looking for the girls he'd fancied forty years before. Finding them."

What Victor is really looking for is straightforward friendship from men his own age. What he gets instead is his quiet nightly pint gate-crashed by a brash man claiming to be an old schoolmate. Ed Fitzpatrick is an ugly character, who spread-eagles himself into Victor's personal space while giving away nothing about himself except an unpleasant glimpse up the leg of his shorts. "What was the name of the Brother who used to fancy you?" he sniggers, as if pouring vinegar on the chips of Victor's memory. Curiously, Victor doesn't remember a thing about Fitzpatrick. He simply knows he hates him.

Smile is a slight novel, that nevertheless

KATY GUEST

Roddy Doyle

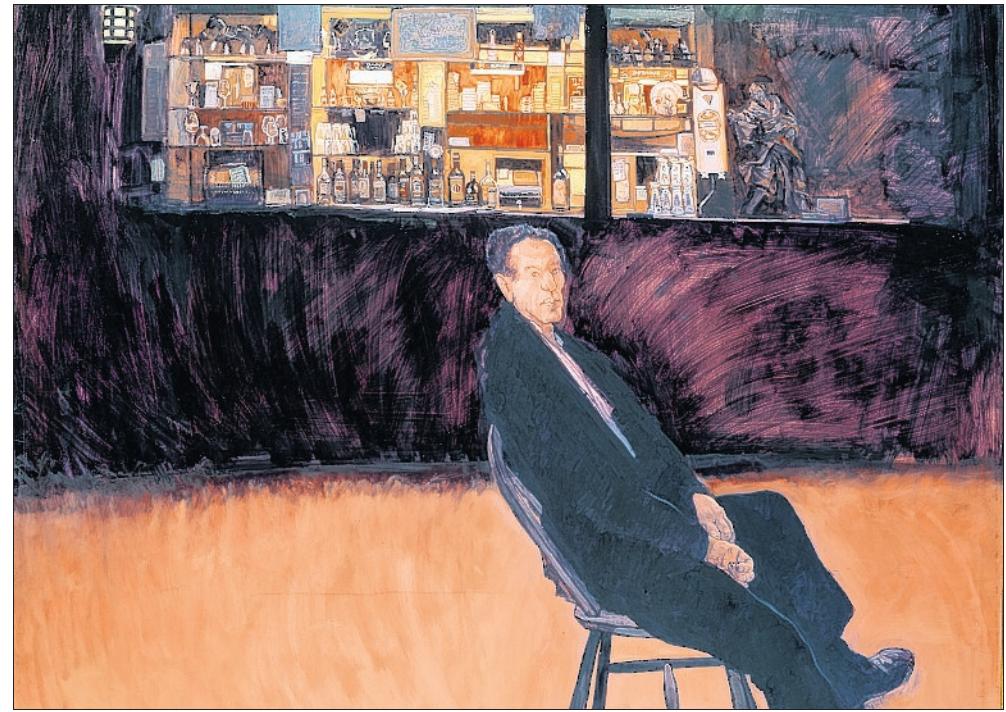
SMILE

224pp. Cape. £14.99.
978 1 911214 75 5

fleshes out a life fully: Victor's childhood, the death of his father, his mother crying every day after school. Early on, he describes how a Brother grabbed his crotch while ostensibly teaching him to wrestle. But the larger story of school is the group of choirboys pulled out of regular classes to learn Ó Riada's mass for Brother Connolly's funeral. The weird thing was, Brother Connolly was still alive.

Victor becomes a cultural figure, starting out reviewing gigs before making a name for himself saying controversial things on the radio. He develops a bit of a swagger. He is "writing a book" – *Ireland: A horror story* – but he's not actually writing at all. He meets a great girl, marries her and has some flashbacks to the crotch-grabbing incident at school. He talks about it on the radio. His wife becomes a television celebrity. The incident becomes his party piece at dinners with their glamorous friends.

Unreliable memory plays an important role in *Smile*, sometimes tied up with the idea of writing and not-writing. "I hadn't written a book, although I'd met people who claimed they'd read it", jokes Victor. But a deeper theme is what youngsters now refer to as "adulting". From an early age, Victor has pre-



"The Brazen Head" by Hector McDonnell, 1983

tended to be an adult. At fifty-four, he is still pretending, and so, he sees, is everyone around him. "I went home to my mother's house for three days at Christmas, so I could go to the pub with the lads I'd gone to school with. I had to knock on doors because I had no phone numbers. Four or five hadn't emigrated; three were still living at home with their parents... boys I'd grown up running away from; and other boys, men now too... others still getting the hang of not being children...". Another theme

is male friendship, and how desperately Victor craves it. "Would I play golf? Would I go that far? I didn't think so."

The final few pages of the novel unspool in a rush, revealing the moment of fracture between the child and the man, the man and his emotions, memory and reality. The ending is shocking, sad and genuinely hard for the reader to take in. This is Roddy Doyle's talent: with wisdom and humour, to reveal the child in the man.

The distance "from here to there" recurs as a preoccupation in Claire Messud's elegant, understated new novel. Julia, its teenage narrator, has been friends with Cassie (Cassandra) Burns since they were young children. When *The Burning Girl* opens, Cassie and her mother, a nurse who works with the terminally ill, have already moved away two years earlier from their small town in Massachusetts, but Julia is still unable to let go.

Julia's family is close, secure and middle-class: "Home" was that feeling of falling asleep to the distant muffle of your parents' conversation, a sound rising through the floorboards... someone was always nearby". Cassie's mother, Bev, is a single parent, and emotionally erratic. Matters don't improve when Bev begins to go out with the creepy Anders Shute, a doctor who first appears in the girls' lives when he patches up Cassie's arm after a dog savages it. Is Anders stalking Cassie? What are his intentions? Telling the story of how her friendship with Cassie fractured is one of the ways Julia attempts to recuperate the loss of their intimacy.

Messud brilliantly renders the uncertainty of Julia's sense of identity. Her idea of herself is bound up with Cassie and their history, both in closeness and opposition. Cassie is beautiful, while Julia is more ordinarily attractive, at least in her own eyes; also, Cassie's future, for simple reasons of economics and class, will not be like Julia's. As the girls grow older, still friendly but

Uncertain identity

Two teenage friends, set on divergent paths

ANJALI JOSEPH

Claire Messud

THE BURNING GIRL
224pp. Fleet. £16.99.
978 0 7088 9863 5

no longer close, Julia is sent to a special summer camp for theatre, while Cassie, it later transpires, has spent the summer babysitting and attempting to elude her new, bizarrely restrictive stepfather: "it was like I was in prison for three months". Even Julia's family seem to accept as inevitable a future for Cassie in which she underachieves: "some of us have brighter stars to follow than others, I'm afraid", says Julia's grandmother. Julia notes the asymmetry between her projected future and her friend's, but what concerns her are the more dramatic possibilities: for example, is Cassie's new stepfather grooming her? Will Cassie's fixation on her natural father, who may or may not live a few hours away by bus, result in anything good for her?



There are other anxieties, more closely connected to Julia's sense of self worth. For a while, Cassie goes out with the boy Julia likes. Cassie then stops being close to Julia and takes up with another girl. Messud maps out the different directions in which an adolescent imagination can lurch, from ambition to lurid disaster. In one uncomfortable passage, Julia speculates on how Cassie felt when apprehended, apparently in the midst of running away, by a neighbour

in his car. Did she, for a time, feel fear? The more sheltered Julia imagines her friend's experience:

you give in, you get in. And the old leatherette of his Buick LeSabre is crackly but smooth too, and the vents are blowing hot air on your already burning cheeks, and he pulls the car out fast onto the road so it spits gravel, and you think as the seat belt bell is pinging, I've fucked up, I've fucked up, he's going to kill me after all.

Later, Julia continues, "And then, afterward, there is the fleeting apprehension, the anxiety, that all the emotion and dread you experienced was a kind of pornography". She later acknowledges that this entire imaginative excursion may have been more to do with her than with her friend.

Cassie herself remains occluded, and movingly so: what she suffers is available to the reader only indirectly. Messud's writing in general is simple, at times precise and beautifully evocative (glimpsed by her ex-boyfriend in the supermarket after things have gone wrong for her, Cassie looks "sparrow thin, drifty in her movements"), while at other times the language mirrors teenage banality. The novel's literary antecedents remain background shadows: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, via the character of an inarticulate handyman who helps Julia at a pivotal moment; and Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, with its moments of prurience, censure and spite.

The 1 per cent

An exploration of crime, injustice and “post-tourism” in Mexico

Juan Villoro's first work of fiction to be translated into English, *The Guilty* (2015), features seven short stories narrated by seven middle-aged men. The men are all very tired: jaded, often reduced by past or dormant addictions, or physically injured in ways both mundane and dramatic (a past-it journeyman footballer's “body isn't normal, it's a kicked-in lump”, and he also gets blown up by a narco-terrorist bomb). Sexual desire and sexual insecurity burn continuously but with a dim flame, while women exist as if in some parallel dimension, only fleetingly and unintelligibly coinciding with those of the narrators: “It was hard to get Karla to accept a table. All of them violated some aspect of feng shui”; “[Renata] looked at me . . . as if I were a landscape: interesting, but a little out of focus”.

In his novel *The Reef* (*Arrecife*, 2012), translated by Yvette Siegert, the same voice is back, this time assigned to Tony Góngora, a fifty-three-year-old ex-heavy-metal bassist and former drug addict, who has also “overdosed on cartoons” (“My mind was a repository of cars running over purple dogs, of beavers dodging hand grenades”). Góngora has a limp and a missing finger from separate childhood accidents, plus “gastric and cardiovascular ailments, migraines, a strange pain in my liver, difficulty passing urine”. He is having the lightest glance of an affair with a fitness trainer: “She found my physical traumas interesting, as if my body were speaking to her in another language, in the French of injury”.

The stories in *The Guilty*, at least a couple of which are minor masterpieces, consist less of

LOUIS AMIS

Juan Villoro

THE REEF

Translated by Yvette Siegert
240pp. George Braziller. Paperback, \$17.95.
978 0 8076 0021 4

structured plots than of loose handfuls of bewildering or inconsequential events that happen to take place amid their narrators' introspections. What bears them along is the often highly ticklish rhythm of Villoro's satirical insight, delivered in free indirect style via the main character, in accompaniment to his languid progression through the world. Villoro skewers the hypocrisies of Mexican society, and especially the country's pathological relationship with the United States.

In *The Reef* “Mexico is a country of enormous delusions. The current disaster is mitigated by projects that stink of excess”. One such project is the Pyramid, a luxury resort in the Mexican Caribbean where Góngora has washed up, “without much interest in anything”, and found work sound-engineering ambient music for an aquarium. On this stretch of coastline, vacant hotels line the shore “like vertical mausoleums” (a character explains how these are the perfect vehicle for international money laundering). Cruise ships pass by without stopping: “Only their trash made it to the beach . . . children and old people wearing rags would emerge to sort through it”. The Pyramid has survived by offering, alongside the

Patty Yumi Cottrell

SORRY TO DISRUPT THE PEACE
288pp. And Other Stories. £10.
978 1 911508 00 7

Patty Yumi Cottrell's debut novel *Sorry To Disrupt the Peace* unfolds from the perspective of Helen Moran who, in the words of her now deceased brother, “might be an undiagnosed bipolar or schizophrenic, but she's figured out a way to live with it”. The story charts her attempts to figure out ways to live with an uncommunicative and broken family, adoption, isolation and a loss. She is introduced as a thirty-two-year-old woman (“single, childless, irregularly menstruating”) whose narrative voice belongs more to an erratic teenager than a grown woman. The effect is both comic and unsettling.

The novel begins with Helen's discovery that her adoptive brother has killed himself, and then follows her journey to her childhood home in Milwaukee to complete a “metaphysical investigation” into the reasons behind this act. “Perhaps to investigate his death would revitalise my own life”, she explains. Her occasionally tedious complaints about decay, flies, mosquitoes, infestations of bedbugs and silverfish act as an

impetus for her disquieting observations on loss and grief: “underneath my laughing, I was sobbing”.

The narrative spans only a few days and its events occur in Helen's past as much as the present. While mopping the floor in an attempt to clean away “the dirt and dead skin cells” in the hallway, she reflects on memories of her brother; a spell of “throwing up and retching” in the bathroom after too much wine triggers childhood memories of her mother. There is a strange tension between the constant quiet of the rooms and streets that she occupies and the turbulence of her thoughts. She paces “around the empty house, upstairs and down, to-ing and fro-ing like some kind of harmless perambulator”, occasionally accompanied by a “balding European man” who is her imagined personification of Grief.

Cottrell's writing lacks the solemnity we might expect from a novel about suicide. And this is what is so striking about *Sorry To Disrupt the Peace*. It is not dominated by the death that has occurred; instead, it is an exploration of the absurd, the contradictory and the human. Much like the acerbic tone of the novel's title, Cottrell's narrator bristles with defiance.

ALEX HOWLETT

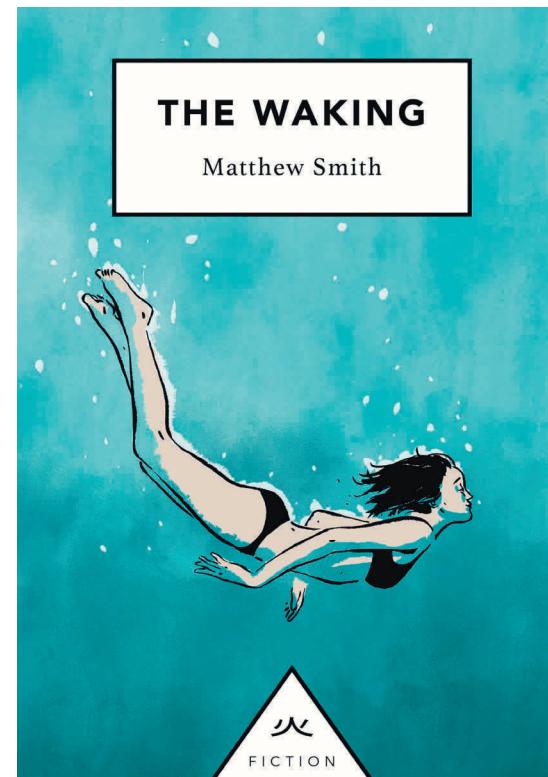
world, you'll read bad news about Mexico. Mutilated corpses, faces splashed with acid, heads rolling, a naked woman hanging from a post . . . What's strange is that people who live in peaceful places want to experience that”.

The Reef does have a conventional plot, initiated when a scuba diver named Ginger Oldenville, who “saw himself as an aquatic sheriff”, is found shot in the back with a spear gun. It unfolds along the lines of a detective novel, but the desultoriness of Villoro's hero seems to overwhelm any attempt at the fine-tuned pacing the genre demands. The mismatch may be intentional, for thematic reasons: the crime thriller as just another set of formulas and assumptions arbitrarily imposed from north of the border. Góngora finds himself at the centre of the affair, detectives questioning him, villains reposing their secrets in him, all for no apparent reason. But in Mexico only 1 per cent of crimes are ever punished, and his lot is merely to shuffle through, somehow: “I knew justice wasn't possible, but I kept hoping for some unexpected logic to emerge”. Villoro's short stories seem purer than *The Reef*; they are this character's natural habitat, where he doesn't need to bother looking for any logic.



Punta Cancun, Mexico

usual travesty of the Mayan civilization, a type of staged entertainment variously described as “post-tourism”, “legally authorized fictions” and “recreational paranoia”. One character explains: “In every newspaper in the



The Waking is a literary debut novel that explores the outer limits of grief through the eyes of a young woman, as she tries to forge her identity by the power of memory and creative expression.

★★★★★

“Smith is a poet... not a single word is wasted – his prose is direct, intimate and immediate.”

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