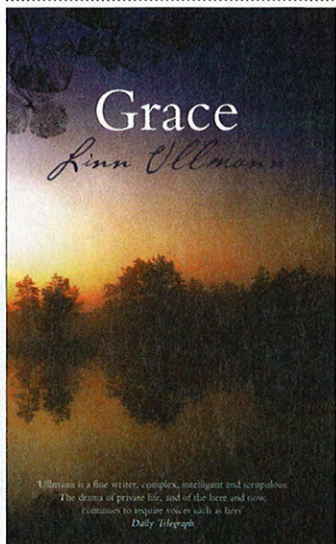


# Linn Ullmann Grace



★★★★★

Picador £12.99

Johan Sletten lies in a hospital bed, dying of cancer. Sitting at his bedside is a small pile of objects – some tapes, a Walkman, a morphine pump and a middling novel lent to him by his wife Mai. The novel is neither good nor bad and to Johan in his present condition, it is completely and utterly worthless: 'How dare such a thing lie there on his bedside table presuming to be the last novel of his life? This was a time for masterpieces.'

Linn Ullmann's elegant and concise novel is a study of life and its

exquisite banality and Johan's last read is no exception. In fact, Johan himself is no exception. He is neither a kind nor particularly interesting man – a bad father, a mediocre journalist, a hypochondriac. Even his illness is treated as an inevitability: 'spreading was a word he had been waiting all his adult life to hear'. In fact, the moment his doctor gives him the bad news 'was hardly dramatic at all'.

The bright spark in Johan's life is his second wife Mai, younger than him by 17 years. Their relationship is masterfully laid bare to the reader through a series of conversations, flashbacks and bedside visits. It isn't an all-consuming, passionate life they share together. It is, in fact, completely ordinary. But it is exactly this ordinariness, and Ullmann's ability to get the arguments and moments of tenderness just so, that makes the novel so quietly devastating. Johan's cancer will definitely kill him. The narration tells us so from the beginning and never ceases to remind the reader of the fact. Johan's last hope is that, with Mai's help, he will be able to choose the moment when he gives up the fight.

Johan develops a mantra towards the end of his time in hospital that he repeats over and over again: 'It grows light in the morning and dark in the evening'. 'Grace' is, in a sense, about what happens in between, the major and minor events that occur over the course of any given day. Ullmann's triumph is that even when dealing with the weightiest of these, she has the lightest of touches.

Natalie Moore

# Yuri Norstein and Tale of Tales: An Animator's Journey

★★★★★

John Libbey Publishing £17.50



Passions in cinema are often personal, idiosyncratic, unlikely; this is good. It is, after all, the medium perhaps most likely to generate the strongest advocacy on

the part of its defenders and promoters. But there aren't many filmmakers who have attracted the keen and diverse support of Johnny Vaughan, novelist AS Byatt and 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind' director Michel Gondry, and when that person is a Russian artist animator, it's a safe bet something pretty extraordinary is going on.

Yuri Norstein has made only a handful of authored works, but his 1979 'Tale of Tales' has twice been nominated, by international peer acclaim, the best animated film ever made. This 28-minute visual poem, an endlessly creative expression of childhood memories and

communal identity, stands almost alone in its manifestation of philosophical beauty within the moving image.

It is a work that wins over all who see it, but few have pursued that response as vigorously as Clare Kitson, former Commissioning Editor of Animation for Channel 4, who was so fascinated by the film that she watched it over 50 times, learned Russian in order to speak to the filmmakers and has now written the definitive study of its making and concerns. An exploration that should prove of great interest to anyone moved by an unwavering commitment to art and life, Kitson's book covers all aspects of Norstein's life and work, placing it in the context of both Soviet cinema and society, as well as the larger frame of international animation. There is a rare chance to view the film this Thursday (Jan 19, 6pm) at the Curzon Soho, where Kitson will be in conversation with AS Byatt about the film's unique emotional and intellectual appeal.

Gareth Evans

# Ben Walters

★★★★★

BFI Publishing £12



Forget the millions of words which have been written about Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's sublime sitcom, 'The Office'. Buy this book, written by TO staffer Ben Walters, and you won't

need to bother with anything else. (Even Gervais himself declared, on www.rickygervais.com, that Walters 'knows more about "The Office" than I do'.)

The book traces the genesis of the programme back to a 20-minute film about a 'seedy boss' figure made in 1998 by Merchant and Gervais for a BBC training scheme and the painstaking efforts the pair put into developing the mock-doc style. There is also shrewd analysis of how this framing device both increases the scope for comedy and, occasionally, limits it. All the key players are interviewed to give their (sometimes contradictory) accounts of how the show made it to a series.

There are fascinating sections on the use of the camera; David Brent's namechecking of other TV comedies; on the dynamic between the characters; and on the relationship between the two series and the Christmas specials. Walters also examines the broadcasting ecology which allowed 'The Office' to come to life and locates David Brent in the cavalcade of inept self-deluders who have marched through TV comedy history from Anthony Aloysius Hancock and Captain Mainwaring through to Basil Fawlty and Alan Partridge.

It's a scholarly, well-informed book, but there's plenty of fun too – check out the section where BBC executives subtly stick in a few stilettoes, not least over whether one of them told the show's creators that 'the fat bloke has to go'. Alkarim Jivani

# Bookworm

## Greeks treat

Film director Franc Roddam, best known for 'Quadrophenia', has moved into publishing. One of the first offerings from his Ziji imprint, distributed by Duckworth, is Rodney Shields' charming account of life on the Greek island of Zakynthos 'Margarita's Olive Press'. The book was written years ago – Dennis Potter saw an early draft and remarked that it was 'properly flavoured with yoghurt and honey' – but sat gathering dust in the family archive until Shields' daughter Daisy found it, edited it and hawked it round publishers.

## Run for cover

Headline has announced it's to reissue all six Jane Austen novels in May with 'romance-style' covers. The publisher, which has attacked its rivals for marketing Austen as a 'dry, academic author', is currently seeking celebrity endorsements to 'illustrate how broad and commercial is Jane Austen's appeal'. Don't we have a reasonably secure sense of this by now?

# Poetry events

## How to use the listings

Books listings are divided into sections, daily events are in a noticeboard for writers and poets.

**FREE** Means that admission is free.

## How to be listed

Mail, fax (020 7813 6000) (poetry@timeout.com – attachments please) info: Daniel Paddington by Friday before publication. NB: £1851 Feb 8-15 should arrive Jan 27. State date, venue, nearest rail/bus and phone number. Listings inclusion is not guaranteed and space is limited.

## Wednesday 18

**David Puttnam** *Confessions of a Director* British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB. 020 7412 7222. King's College London, 100 Brookline Drive, London W8 7AH. 020 7599 6300. £10, concs £7.50. O. Producer.

**Michael Moorcock** *Vampire* Mallet Street, WC1E 7HU. 0800 400000. 7pm; £6, concs £4. Moorcock, author of 'The Werewolf', in conversation with comic creator of 'Watchmen' League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.

## Thursday 19

**FREE** *Itallville Italian Club* 39 Belgrave Sq, SW1X 8NX. 1461. Hyde Park Corner. 6.30pm; £10, concs £7.50. O. of anthology of Italian prose.

**Patsy Rodenberry** *London Bookshop*, 14 Bury Place, WC2E 9JF. 020 7769 9030. Holborn. 7.30pm; £5. Reading in the 'Realms of the Imagination' presented by Ruth Padel, chair of the Society.

**Shortfuss** *Camden Head*, 100 Camden Road, NW1 8DY. 020 8536 8300. 8.30pm; £5, concs £3. First show of the year, with Simon Munnelly, Michael Alistair Cook, Host Nathan Peacock.

**Tale of Tales** *Curzon Soho*, Shaftesbury Ave, W1D 5DY. 020 7769 9030. 6pm; £5, concs £4. An animation discussed by AS Byatt & Clare Kitson.

**FREE** *Utter The Salisbury*, Parade, Green Lanes, N4 1JX. 048995. Turnpike Lane. 8pm. Comedy and prose from Vis the Sim, Richard Tyrone Jones and Michael McEvoy.

## Saturday 21

**The Celler Poetry Café**, 2, Street, WC2H 9BX. 020 7420 0000. Covent Gdn. John Stammer, Francois, Julian Fox. Host Nicky.

## Sunday 22

**Big Words at The Pineapple**, Pineapple, 51 Leverton Street, E1 1JL. 020 7609 2543. Kentish Town. With Nick McDonnell.

**Should Poetry Pay?** *Torricelli House*, 99 Torricelli Avenue, E1 1JL. 020 7677 2751. Kentish Town. £5-£2. A talk followed by discussion with Raymond Geuss, reader in Philosophy, Cambridge University.

## Monday 23

**Alfred Corn and Joyce Kilmer** *Troubadour Coffee-House*, 20, Brompton Road, SW5 9JA. 020 7606 0660. Earl's Ct. 8pm; £5.50. Poetry reading.