

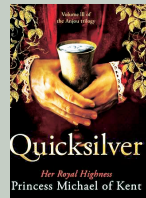
BOOKS

THE BEST NEW FICTION

Quicksilver

HRH Princess Michael of Kent

Constable £18.99



Princess Michael's original intention was to tell the story of the interconnected lives of Yolande of Aragon, Agnès Sorel and Jacques Coeur as straight history. But when she learned that Sorel, the beautiful and influential mistress of Charles VII of France, had been deliberately poisoned with mercury aged just 28, she decided to write it as a trilogy of 15th century historical fiction.

This final volume concentrates on Coeur, one of the most remarkable characters in French history, who rose from provincial obscurity to become Master of the Mint, a member of the Royal Council and his nation's richest man. A money lender and merchant who cornered the market in just about every lucrative trade – including arms, furs and jewels – Coeur's ambition and pride caused his own downfall when he was accused of Sorel's murder. 'I am on trial,' he realises, 'for my success, my arrogance, my presumption – and for the greatest of my crimes, that of being richer and even better housed than the king.'

The real culprits, according to the author – and her theory sounds entirely plausible – escaped punishment and later reaped the rewards of their scheming. This is historical fiction at its most authentic: exhaustively researched, sensitively told and convincingly imagined. A fine achievement.

Saul David

City On Fire

Garth Risk Hallberg

Jonathan Cape £18.99



Like Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire Of The Vanities*, this sprawling, 900-plus-page debut tries to capture the too-muchness and many extremes of New York City. It's set in the mid-Seventies and centres on the finely rendered William and Samantha. He is an artist, heir to a fortune he largely spurns, and estranged from a sister, Regan, whom he loves. She is a suburban 17-year-old who writes a punk newsletter, photographs graffiti, and sleeps with Regan's husband. Hallberg's Dickensian stagecraft, flashing backward and forward from 1976 to 77, links a dozen main players to the violent mugging of Samantha, a real-estate scheme, and finally a possible bomb plot amid a nightmarish rendering of the 1977 blackout.

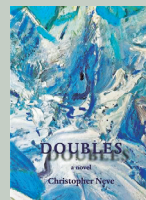
The novel, like the city, is overstuffed, exhausting, impressive and sometimes dazzling.

Jeffrey Burke

Doubles

Christopher Neve

Starhaven £12



The narrator of this intriguing, elusive book is an architect whose journey through life is plagued by tantalising glimpses of his past and by seemingly unconnected events. The narrative unfolds with the surreal rush of a waking dream and nothing is as it seems. *Doubles* is described as a novel, but its blend of magic realism, psychological exposition and dense cultural allusion might leave the reader with the feeling of having taken part in an elaborate literary game whose rules are never quite explained.

Simon Shaw

Are you in touch with your emotions? This is an increasingly common question, generally asked in a 'caring' tone of voice by those who are in constant touch with their inner smugness.

Such people will most likely be drawn to this little encyclopaedia, with its promise of exploring 156 different emotions. For at least some of the time, they will be thrilled by what they find, and the exciting range of brand new emotions on offer.

There's road rage, of course, and cyberchondria ('anxiety about symptoms of an illness fuelled by internet research') and ringxiety ('the feeling of low-level anxiety causing us to think we've heard our phones ring, even when they haven't').

Personally, I can't remember ever succumbing to pronoia ('the strange, creeping feeling that everyone's out to help you'), but at some point in their lives (or perhaps all points in their lives) all journalists will have experienced torschlusspanik, which is the German word for the panic you feel as a deadline approaches.

The trouble with many of these words is that there is no point in using them unless you happen to be talking to someone who has also read *The Book Of Human Emotions*. After all, what would be the point of saying you were combating basorexia to a friend who didn't know that it is the 'sudden desire to kiss someone'?

On the other hand, knowing that a word exists for a particular condition tells us that we are not alone in experiencing it, and this in itself can be a source of some comfort. Malu is a word coined by the Dusun Baguk tribe of Indonesia, meaning the feeling of being flustered in the presence of someone we hold in high esteem; ilinx is the 'strange excitement at wanton destruction' we feel when we kick over the wastepaper basket, or throw a cup against a wall.

Of course, few of these more niche emotions will appeal to the caring types who want to know whether we are feeling what we should be feeling: no, they prefer the big, positive emotions such as cheerfulness, hopefulness and self-esteem. So it may come as a shock to them that the beady author of *The Book Of Human Emotions* is not quite as positive about positivity as you might expect.

Take self-esteem, for instance. The term was first coined by the philosopher William James in the 1890s. He believed that you could achieve a certain measure of contentment if you lowered your aspirations to match your skills, or raised your skills to match your aspirations. In the Sixties, James's interest in self-esteem was revived to suggest a link between feeling good about yourself and behaving in a socially responsible way. Thirty years later, schools in California offered lessons in self-esteem. But instead of lowering aspirations to match skills, or raising skills to match aspirations, they made self-esteem a goal in itself. If you were pleased with yourself, then you were a winner but if, on the other hand, you were a loner, or depressive, or shy, you were branded as 'lacking self-esteem', which landed you with a whole new problem to go with all your others.

So self-esteem may not be all it cracks itself up to be: one particularly sharp psychologist, Jean Twenge, argues that attempting to engender self-esteem can often backfire: 'an inflated belief in one's own abilities can result in narcissism and, in turn, the loneliness which comes from believing you are "above



The Book Of Human Emotions: An Encyclopaedia Of Feeling From Anger To Wanderlust

Tiffany Watt Smith

Profile Books/Wellcome Collection £14.99



average" and stand apart from the crowd'. Tiffany Watt Smith wittily suggests that if you abandon the chase for self-esteem then you may well start to feel much better about yourself.

She comes down hard on various other 'positive' emotions, too, cheerfulness included. With more and more companies urging their employees to be cheerful, 'we may find ourselves in the peculiar position where the pressure to be cheerful leads to dissatisfaction, exhaustion and alienation'.

And even hopefulness has its drawbacks, particularly when applied to situations in which hope is inappropriate: for instance, the obligation on cancer patients to 'stay positive' may well make life easier for their friends and family, but can be debilitating for the patients themselves, forcing them to suppress more deeply-felt emotions such as anger and fear.

Just as she is wary of the crowd-pleasing emotions, Watt Smith likes to put in a good word for those that usually attract a bad press. People who worry have fewer accidents; envy may be the engine for fairness and equality.

She even finds something pleasant to say about hatred. 'Even the most polite and respectful among us do enjoy a certain kind of hating,' she notes. William Hazlitt once wrote an essay *On The Pleasure Of Hating* in which he described how a shared hatred at a dinner party can bring people together. In a neat little footnote, Watt Smith points out that 'Kingsley Amis realised he had met a kindred spirit in Philip Larkin when he discovered he also defined a bore as someone who "when he sees an unusual car in the street GOES OVER AND HAS A LOOK AT IT"'.

This is an example of her wonderfully broad frame of reference: she is as happy to use Hugh Grant in *Four Weddings And A Funeral* to illustrate embarrassment as she is to quote Kierkegaard on anxiety ('the dizziness of freedom') or Edgar Allan Poe on the attraction of perversity ('the more reason deters us from the brink, the more impetuously we approach it').

I wonder, though, whether – like many academics – she is not too in awe of obscure

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