

**A WOMAN LOOKING AT MEN  
LOOKING AT WOMEN: ESSAYS ON  
ART, SEX, AND THE MIND**  
by Siri Hustvedt  
(Sceptre, £20)

**JOHANNA THOMAS-COBB**

SIRI Hustvedt's latest book is really long. Perhaps the American novelist, and essayist, who is married to Paul Auster and remains best known for her novel *What I Loved*, didn't have time to write a short one. Perhaps she felt that this collection of articles about art, literature, neuroscience and philosophy should capture every thought she's had since 2011, which was when she finished her last book of essays. Or maybe she just believed that nothing less than 500 pages plus 50 pages of notes would cement her scholarly credentials.

It certainly reflects a heroic commitment to research. The book's first section includes ponderings on figures such as Pablo Picasso, Pina Bausch, Jeff Koons, Robert Mapplethorpe, Pedro Almodóvar and Louise Bourgeois. It also includes a takedown of literary darling Karl Ove Knausgaard and reflections on the author's own experiences teaching creative writing in a psychiatric clinic and undergoing psychoanalysis.

The second and third sections grapple with the mind/body conundrum, highlighting her problems with the computational theory of mind and evolutionary psychology – especially the work of its most prominent advocate, Steven Pinker. In one of her best articles Hustvedt argues that by falling on the side of nature over nurture, and asserting that certain traits are "rooted in biology", Pinker promotes received ideas that women are biologically unfit for technology and the sciences.

The spectre of brilliance hangs over the first pages of so many of these essays as Hustvedt teases at questions such as: where do ideas come from? What is fiction for? Could we have morality without other people? Is the mind separate from the brain?

She claims the perspective of the "perpetual outsider who looks in on several disciplines", believing this puts her in a unique position to breach the great arts-science divide. But it's odd that she should focus on CP Snow's famous 1959 lecture, in which he berated artists for not being able to



Circular motion: essayist Siri Hustvedt continually revisits the same ideas

## Asking questions she can't answer

explain the second law of thermodynamics, without mentioning how many have since taken up that challenge: Thomas Pynchon's *Entropy*, Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Ian McEwan's *Solar* and the rest have since made it into its own subgenre.

And instead of enlivening the subject herself, what we get is a lot of phenomenological jargon, lofty statements about what it is to be an artist, watery musings about the need for soulfulness in literature, gratuitous name-dropping of philosophers, physicists and neuroscientists, toe-curling anecdotes about dinner-party squabbles and platitudes of the sort she claims to abhor.

"Every human is capable of being wounded," she says, on the subject of male vulnerability.

For all her fawning over the "seques-

tered but intense worlds of the intellect", what Hustvedt seems to relish about the world of academia is its petty rivalries and po-faced ntpicking. I lost count of how many times she seethes at another intellectual's stupidity or preens at her own cleverness.

Later, she refers to the "genius" and "beauty" of ambiguity, an appreciation of the "lowering fogs". Despite the variety of subjects, she appears to be condemned to one room of thought where she is endlessly picking up the same ideas and putting them down again.

It doesn't surprise me that she's so keen on psychoanalysis. Reading her prose is not unlike becoming a therapist to someone locked in a series of circular arguments over a period of many years.

### PAPERBACKS OF THE YEAR

William Leith

#### NEUROTRIBES

by Steve Silberman

(Allen & Unwin, £9.99)

Is there an epidemic of autism? If there is, why might it be happening?

This book, the result of 15 years' research, comes close to being a comprehensive guide to the subject.



#### THE CLASP

by Sloane Crosley

(Windmill, £7.99)

When did I last read a first novel as good as this? Sloane Crosley is a bit like Anne Tyler at her best.

This is about a group of thirtysomething friends. We see them at a wedding in Florida. What will life do to them, we wonder?



#### THE BOYS IN THE TREES

by Carly Simon

(Constable, £9.99)

There are many cheesy books by celebrities about themselves. This is not one of them.

It is a superb memoir by someone who happens to be famous – and who captures the essence of the Sixties and Seventies.



#### ONE OF US

by Asne Seierstad

(Virago, £8.99)

July 22, 2011. In Oslo, on the island of Utøya, Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people.

Seierstad describes the bombing and the shooting. Then she tries to tell us why it happened.



#### POUR ME

by A.A. Gill

(W & N, £8.99)

A superb memoir – and one of the best books on addiction I have ever read.

"The bliss of drink is that it's a small death," says Gill. He describes many things – people, works of art, parts of London – wonderfully well.



#### THE UNFORTUNATES

by Sophie McManus

(Windmill, £8.99)

A very sharp novel about a rich family – George, his wife Iris and his mother Cecilia.

McManus shows us the world through the cloudy lens of the truly moneyed and gives us a riveting sense that something horrible is about to happen to these people.



#### SOME RAIN MUST FALL

by Karl Ove Knausgaard

(Vintage, £8.99)

A Norwegian guy looks back at his youth in a fascinating way.

This is the fifth volume in a series of six. It's best to read from the first book but you don't absolutely need to. Drinking, smoking, awkwardness. Brilliant.



#### PURITY

by Jonathan Franzen

(4th Estate, £8.99)

Franzen is great at hooking you so far in to a person's life that you want to stay there.

The person in this case is Pip. She's a Californian woman in her twenties, in debt, full of self-doubt. Her real name is Purity. As always, Franzen is superb.



#### THE INVENTION OF SCIENCE

by David Wootton

(Penguin, £12.99)

This history of the scientific revolution is one of the best histories

– of anything – I've ever read. It's about how, after about 1500, human beings discovered something truly amazing – the concept of discovery itself.



#### HIGH DIVE

by Jonathan Lee

(Windmill, £8.99)

It's 1978. Meet Dan, a Belfast boy who wants to join the IRA.

Now meet Freya, a young woman who works in the Grand Hotel in Brighton. Dan checks in. So does Margaret Thatcher. We know what will happen.



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