

Review of reviews: Books

Book of the week

Rivals

by Bill Emmott

Allen Lane 336p £20

Week Bookshop £18 (incl. p&p)

Much has been written about the economic miracles in China and India, said Hamish McRae in *The Independent*: the Chinese cities the size of London springing up out of nowhere (right); the extraordinary rates of growth (this year China will probably pass Germany to become the world's second-largest economy, while within a decade India may well have a larger economy than Britain). It's even argued that "just as the 19th century was Europe's and the 20th America's, so the 21st century will be Asia's". But too often we "think of Asia as a single entity and ignore the tensions between its major powers". In *Rivals*, Bill Emmott, former editor of *The Economist*, charts the difficult relations of China, India and Japan, and the effect they will have on our future. He asks whether they will follow the current path of peaceful prosperity – or make the same sort of catastrophic decisions that European nations made a century ago.

"India and China have hated each other for a thousand years," Taro Aso, Japan's former foreign minister, tells Emmott. "Why



should things be different now?" We think that "the future belongs to us", says a senior Indian official. And so does China. "We can't both be right." Emmott outlines China and Japan's history of mutual strife and mistrust, and shows how Japan is currently trying to offset China's increasing dominance in the region by strengthening India. All three countries are now engaged in an arms race, rushing to build larger navies. Chinese submarines have sneaked into Japanese waters, while India is buying up aircraft carriers from Europe. Tibet, Taiwan and Korea all provide potential flashpoints – and there is a clear likelihood that America would be dragged into any conflict. Emmott has written a concise and intelligent guide, said Malcolm Moore in *The Sunday Telegraph*. For the most part, however, *Rivals* is "what journalists call a 'cuts job': a thesis culled from secondary sources" which

tells the reader little that is new.

It's fair to say that Emmott knows more about Japan than India or China, said Edward Luce in the *Literary Review*: he was based in Tokyo for years – and in 1989 wrote a book that accurately prophesied Japan's coming economic decline. But "if there is such a thing as a scholar of China, India and Japan, I have yet to hear of that person". Emmott "provides as judicious and engaging a *tour d'horizon* as one could expect" of this vital subject.

The Bolter

by Frances Osborne

Virago 320pp £18.99

Week Bookshop £17.09 (incl. p&p)

Since the publication of Nancy Mitford's novel *The Pursuit of Love* in 1945, various women have been identified as the inspiration for the "Bolter", the narrator Fanny's "glamorous, flighty and much-married" mother, said Selina Hastings in *The Daily Telegraph*. In this "racy romp" of a book, Frances Osborne, the wife of the shadow chancellor, makes the case for her great-grandmother Lady Idina Sackville who, with a legion of lovers and five husbands, "certainly fits the part". "Restless, reckless and rich", and forever clutching her black Pekinese called Satan under her arm, Idina (above) became a familiar sight in the bars of Edwardian London. But it wasn't until her move to Kenya after the Great War and the first of her many divorces that she found herself in her element as the "high priestess" of the notoriously louche Happy Valley set. She would receive guests in a green onyx bath and devise sexually adventurous party games; her soirées became notorious for the drink- and drug-fuelled orgies that "scandalised the more respectable elements of expatriate society".

Idina is certainly fun, but the book is "thin gruel", said Claudia FitzHerbert in *The Sunday Telegraph*. Writing in the "slushy" style of romantic fiction, Osborne tries to paint a sympathetic portrait of "her delinquent antecedent". But a scarcity of manuscript material forces Osborne to recount conversations that "must have" taken place and resort to the "startlingly wooden" diary entries of Idina's first husband. As a result, she never really comes to life. Actually, Osborne's "prolixity of cliché" suits this absurd tale, said Sara Wheeler in *The Spectator*. Despite its thinness, *The Bolter* is a highly entertaining "light read".



Novel of the week

Breath

by Tim Winton

Picador 215pp £14.99

Week Bookshop £13.49 (incl. p&p)

"Small-town coastal Australia is the setting for Tim Winton's haunting eighth novel," said Adam Lively in *The Sunday Times* – "a place of limited opportunity where the only escape is the ocean itself." Bruce Pike, the teenage narrator, befriends Loonie, a local wild boy, who shares an interest in risk-taking and the sea. Together, they start to surf. One day they meet a bearded boarder, and fall under his spell. He pushes them to ever more dangerous feats: surfing huge waves on reefs far out to sea, or in bays frequented by Great White sharks. It's an old story, a coming of age tale, but in the hands of a writer as skilful as Winton, "the old stories can be the most powerful".

Although dark in places, *Breath* is "a wonderfully uplifting" novel, said Melissa Katsoulis in *The Sunday Telegraph*. Winton is "perhaps Australia's best-loved novelist"; his "sensitivity to the effects of the physical environment on a growing mind is acute, and his rapturous love of the sea is a thing to behold". He "does what a great writer can do", said Philip Hensher in *The Spectator*: "to make us see, while sitting in our armchairs, exactly what it would be like to stand on a bit of hardboard while a 30ft wave defeats our attempts to float on it. I don't suppose I will ever do anything of the sort, but now I don't have to in order to understand how it feels."



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