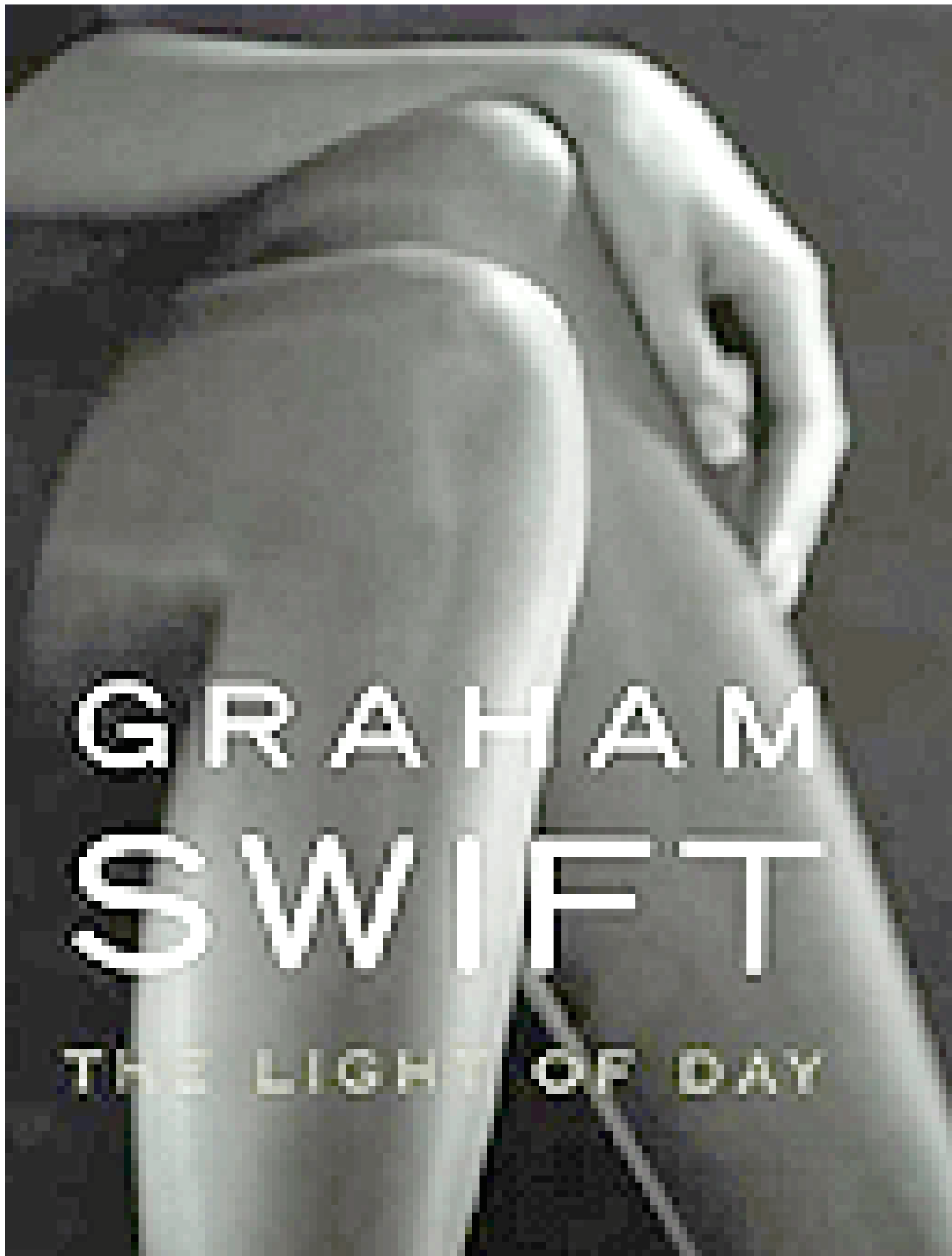


The Guardian





Someone to watch over you

Hermione Lee savours Graham Swift's profound mapping of ordinary human hearts in *The Light of Day*

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The Light of Day

by Graham Swift

256pp, Hamish Hamilton, £16.99

You could take a short drive - or open your London A to Z - and cover every inch of the journey Graham Swift's characters make in his intensely local new novel, *The Light of Day*. Up from Wimbledon Broadway to the Hill, off to the right along St Mary's Road, up Parkside to the hospital, across the common to the Putney Vale crematorium: the plot of this book is bounded by the postal district of SW19, with excursions as far as Chislehurst and Heathrow.

As in his first novel of 23 years ago, *The Sweet Shop Owner*, where the character's life is "set out like a map" over a few miles of south London; or the remarkable *Shuttlecock*, "a psychological thriller" bounded by Clapham Common and a Wimbledon childhood; or *Waterland*, where a whole history is unforgettably mapped on to the Fens (with a sad terminus in Greenwich); or *Last Orders*, with every inch of its ritual journey traced from Bermondsey and New Cross to Gravesend, Rochester, Canterbury and, at last, Margate Pier, Graham Swift's genius is for putting the strangest of lives into the most provincial of English landscapes. As he has said, in a recent talk on his work, "*Terra Incognita*" can be "just around the corner".

At one point he seemed to be turning away from this rewardingly obsessive territory. He set *Out of This World* (1988) all over the place, in Manhattan, Greece, Vietnam, Nuremberg, through the traumatised eyes of a war photographer: the world as "lost property", only reclaimed through the camera. He moved *Ever After* (1992) between Cambridge, Paris and 19th-century Dorset, in a painful quest for explanations. Swift's characters are still tormented by unanswerable questions - about history, the past, love, responsibility - but the closer to home they are asked, the more force they seem to have.

All his characters have been private detectives, in a way, searching for clues with which to understand their lives. But they've tended to be more verbosely contemplative types - teachers, academics, civil servants. (The brooding speaker of *Ever After* thinks of himself as Hamlet.) Lately, it's the unliterary, workaday professions that have come to absorb Swift: publican, butcher, car-salesman, undertaker, in *Last Orders* and in *The Light of Day*, a disgraced cop turned private detective. In these last two novels, he's perfected a much more laconic, spare, colloquial style, short on verbs, thick with question-marks. In *The Light of Day*, casual phrases gather weight, and every word tells: "crossing a line", "in the blood", "off duty", "compassionate leave", "meant for

each other", "time to kill", "worth the wait", "missing persons", "lost soul", "vacant possession": no cliché is innocent here. Sometimes this is over-played (the sweet word "sweetheart" is worked too hard), sometimes it produces some nice grim comedy: "The crematorium doing a roaring trade".

But it alerts you, as the reader, to be as attentive as any sleuth. The Light of Day has a brilliantly slow, precise, careful structure, covering "every hour, every minute, every detail" of its case with as much control as it lays out its geography and deals with its parts of speech. Within this tight little map, the story it has to tell is wildly extreme, sensational and romantic: completely out of hand. Its characters "cross a line" into savage places. In this banal suburbia, they "fall through space"; in this quiet corner of the civilised world, there are no safe houses.

George Webb's detective agency is run from an office above a tanning studio on Wimbledon Broadway. He's used to snooping: as a child, he spied on his father's adultery. His assistant, Rita, is also, occasionally, his mistress, and he hasn't missed his opportunities with some of his lady clients. No St George in shining armour, then, but a "corrupt" cop thrown out of the force for coercing a witness, his marriage a failure, his daughter only recently back in his life after a long estrangement. (He makes her nice dinners; he's a "cooking detective".) Sarah Nash, a language teacher and translator, enters his life, and changes it for ever, when she comes to ask him to spy on her husband. He's a gynaecologist who's been having an affair with a Croatian refugee they've taken in. The affair is over, Kristina is going back to her war-scarred country, but Sarah wants them followed to see if she really does get on the plane. Slowly, and, it seems, inexorably, this chain of events leads to a death. Now, two years on, George is putting flowers on a grave and visiting Sarah in prison.

It's as if the comical detective in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (whose heroine has the same name) has become the central character; and there is something of Greene's melancholy, elegiac Englishness in Swift. Like *The End of the Affair*, this is a retrospective story that brings us to the present, told from one point of view. The method has its drawbacks. Some of the crucial scenes have to be guessed at, and can't be directly dramatised. As a result the Croatian girl and the terrible history she has fled from, outside this particular world, stay rather out of focus. And the moment of the crime itself remains obscure to us.

That's part of the point, though. You can sleuth all you like, as novelist or detective, and some things won't come to light. You can't lift up the roofs of houses and see what's going on inside. How to explain the inexplicable things in life: the strangeness of love at first sight, love like a blow to the heart, love for the duration? One of the tender, hard questions the novel asks is how much can we watch over each other? The narrator - like his author - is a watcher by trade. He has devoted his life to "watching over" the person he loves. But there's nothing to tell us why this should be a human duty, or a rule. Very often it isn't: "The truth is we meet, we part, we go our way. They aren't any laws, there aren't any rules. We're not here to follow each other, to guard each other's lives."

There's a kind of compulsion in great novelists - towards a scene, a subject, an obsession - something they have to keep going after in book after book. For Swift, the key recurring scene is the visit to an incarcerated person. Someone comes - from love, guilt, duty - from the outside world, over and over again, to "watch over" a person who has had a breakdown, or can't speak, or is deranged or terminally ill. So, in *Last Orders*, Amy visits her daughter June for 50 years without ever being recognised; in *Waterland*, the narrator visits his unspeaking wife, after her breakdown; in *Shuttlecock*, the son's visit to his silent father in the mental hospital is "like entering a foreign country where you must bide by the native customs". The visit to the prison in *The Light of Day* is

a step into "another country, another world": "Everyone ought to be made to do it perhaps... To know what it's like to leave the world then be put back in it again." It's a scene of confinement within the novel's already confined space. And it also links with the theme of alienation in the everyday world.

There is more than one exile in the novel - Kristina from Dubrovnik, Sarah in her prison, Sarah's husband, in the last hours of his life, in exile from himself, a walking ghost. Also, by an odd quirk of history, there's the Empress Eugenie (on whom Sarah is working), the widow of Napoleon III, who shared his exile from France, after the Battle of Sedan, to, of all places, Chislehurst. Their house is now the club house - "the emperor of a golf course" - and she outlived him there for nearly 50 years. The empress provides a curious, even comical, local example of exile, or of being buried alive. Our safe, civilised suburb turns into a limbo of lost souls. George the private detective could also be Orpheus, trying to get his Eurydice back out of the cave of the underworld and up into the clear light of day. Well, we know what happened to Orpheus and Eurydice. But it's one of the touching and appealing things about Graham Swift's apparently downbeat characters that they live in hopes.

· Hermione Lee's books include a biography of Virginia Woolf. To order a copy of *The Light of Day* for £14.99 plus p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 066 7979.

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