



Victim and perp: Rachel Cusk (main image); reviewer Camilla Long (far left); George Eliot (far left) and Charlotte Brontë (far right)



Delicious poison

A bad review may be agony for the author, but it should be bliss to read. John Walsh describes how he and his fellow judges chose a winner for the Hatchet Job of the Year Award

Reviewing a particularly terrible musical in the 1930s, the American theatre critic Percy Hammond wrote: "I see that I have knocked everything about this production but the knees of the chorus girls - and Nature has anticipated me there." The best hatchet jobs are wholesale demolitions, performed without any judicious weighing of strengths and weaknesses, and carried off with murderous glee. Like John Lockhart's famous review of *Endymion* in *Blackwood's Magazine* that almost stopped Keats from writing any more poetry: "The frenzy of the Poems was bad enough in its way; but it did not alarm us half so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiocy of *Endymion*. Mr Keats... is only a boy of pretty abilities, which he has done everything in his power to spoil..."

It's shocking to consider that good reviews seldom make history. Bad reviews, however, reverberate down the years. We read George Eliot's airy dismissal of Charlotte Brontë's dialogue ("I wish her characters would talk a little less like the heroes and heroines of police reports") with a sigh of century-defying pleasure. We read John Hollander in the *Partisan Review* losing patience with the leading Beat poet ("It is only fair to Allen Ginsberg to remark on the utter lack of decorum of any kind in his dreadful little volume. Howl is meant to be a noun, but I can't help taking it as an imperative"), and still delight in that silky, "It is only fair..."

Hatchet jobs are a joy to read, not because we love to see a writer's new baby stabbed through the heart, but because we admire the breezy wit that ideally accompanies the best ones. Hatchet jobs should make you laugh rather than recoil in horror. They should be more than a series of negative opinions. They should be about the work of an established writer rather a newcomer. They should consider the offending book from several directions in an amused manner; slowly ingesting it like a snake devouring a deer.

All credit then to Anna Baddeley and Fleur Macdonald, two Oxford

If you're staying in...

BOOKS

Fanny And Stella

BY NEIL MCKENNA

In 1870, two young cross-dressing London clerks, burlesque artistes - and part-time prostitutes - were prosecuted in a sensational trial. With careful research underpinning his zest and brio, McKenna tells their singular story, which challenged Victorian morality, and the astonishing outcome of their case.

DVD

Madagascar 3

CERTIFICATE PG

Witty, colourful, energetic animation that follows the Central Park zoo residents - Ben Stiller voices the lion, Chris Rock the zebra - as they try to make their way home from Africa. Heaps of fun.



graduates in their late 20s, who founded the Omnivore website to monitor newspaper reviews. Their weekly inspections led to their establishing, last year, the Hatchet Job of the Year Award "for the writer of the angriest, funniest, most trenchant book review of the past 12 months". It's sponsored by the Fish Society, who offer the prize of a year's supply of potted shrimps (the connection is that shrimps are natural "omnivores"). Last year the prize was won by Adam Mars-Jones for his magisterial, but humorous, evisceration of Michael Cunningham's precious novel *By Nightfall*. This year I was one of the judges, alongside the journalists and authors Lynn Barber and Francis Wheen. We had to take a longlist of 30 displays of book-reviewer bile and reduce them to a shortlist. Over croissants and sparkling wine, we set to, noticing some odd circularities about authors and reviewers. Several books (Martin Amis's *Lionel Asbo*, Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton*, *The Divine Comedy* by Craig Raine, *Vagina* by Naomi Wolf, *Aftermath* by Rachel Cusk) had attracted more than one hatchet. Some reviewers appeared several times, as if writing abusive copy were meat and drink to them (Philip Hensher; Craig Brown). Some knocking reviewers were authors whose books had been savaged in turn (Lionel Shriver rubbished *Lionel Asbo* while her book *The New Republic* was hatcheted by Scarlett Thomas, A N Wilson whacked Salman Rushdie and was thumped in turn by Richard Evans).

We began to narrow down our selection. We dropped Julie Burchill for attacking the author (Frances Osborne, wife of the Chancellor) rather than her book, about the Suffragists. We dropped others for being too academic (Peter Conrad on Stefan Colini's *What Are Universities For?*) or concentrating too closely on the syntax. Leo Robson's attack on Michael Frayn's literary farce *Skios* was too like someone taking a blunderbuss to a butterfly.

So we reached a shortlist of eight and announced it online. It was greeted with delight. Readers remarked how blissful it was to read eight disobliging reviews over a cup of tea and

a HobNob. We judges met the Omnivore founders for lunch at the Cavalry and Guards Club in Piccadilly and headed into the final analysis.

The judging proceeded by a process of elimination. Craig Brown's masterful detective work had discovered that Richard Bradford's joint biography of Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin was a shameless piece of self-plagiarism, bolting together two of his earlier works. But did that make it a hatchet job or a good exposure? Richard Evans's review of A N Wilson's biography of Hitler, which identified a series of misjudgements and inept researches, radiated academic contempt. It was a demolition. But it lacked, we thought, the breezy manner that makes the perfect hatchet job.

Zoë Heller's 5,000-word review of Rushdie's memoir of life in hiding under the fatwa was, we agreed, the best-written of all the reviews we'd read, but was more a critique of the author's pronouncements, over the years, about art and its political context than a focused book review. *The Washington Post's* Ron Charles made a gory mess of Amis's *Lionel Asbo*, but leaned a little too heavily on American TV shows when discussing his shortcomings as a satirist.

And so a winner emerged. Camilla Long's *Sunday Times* review of *Aftermath* by Rachel Cusk, about the break-up of her marriage, sank its fangs into her subject from the first sentence and wouldn't let go. She homed in on Cusk's "whinnying detail," her "mad, flowery metaphors and hifalutin creative-writing experiments," and remarked on her presentation of herself as "a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist who exploits her husband and her marriage with relish." But she also corrected the mistakes in her classical allusions. By the end, we felt, we had a clear picture of both book and author; but it was a demolition review with a difference: it made you want to go and read the book, for all its faults.

And for its intelligence and wit, and its beady focus on the author's literary effects, it won the 2013 Hatchet Job of the Year last night.

On the brink of death, but still performing

Wilko Johnson's not the first to play on when dying, says Simon Hardeman

When - let's not tempt fate by saying "if" - R'n'B guitar hero and inspirational performer Wilko Johnson takes the stage for his farewell mini-tour at the beginning of March, he will be the latest artist to have taken a terminal diagnosis as a prescription to carry on doing what he does best.

Johnson has pancreatic cancer, the same disease that laid low the man who made the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra famous, Erich Kunzel. The celebrated conductor knew he was dying and yet also kept going. "He was crying," said principal horn Elizabeth Freimuth of the final concert in 2009. He died a month later.

The man who wrote "Werewolves of London", US singer-songwriter Warren Zevon, was diagnosed with inoperable cancer in 2002. He refused treatment he felt pointless, as Johnson has, and not only began recording his final album, *The Wind*, with guests including Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty, but also featured in a documentary for VH-1 and a David Letterman show special devoted to him, where he sang, and offered the advice, "enjoy every sandwich".

Jazz great Stan Getz knew he had liver cancer in 1987, and carried on performing and recording when the end was clear, almost to his death in 1991. His last renderings of Billy Strayhorn's "Blood Count" are hugely poignant for both their playing and because it was a tune that Strayhorn had finished while in hospital in 1967 in the last stages of his own cancer.

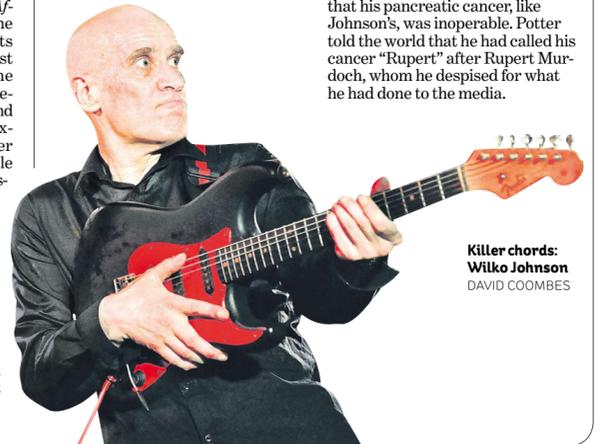
As well as playing live, Johnson has said he wants to record again. Terminal diagnoses have

spurred such bouts of creativity from many acts. Lee Hazlewood, who wrote and co-performed "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" and "Some Velvet Morning" with Nancy Sinatra, only went back to the studio in 2005 after he was told his cancer had gone too far. Of the record, *Cake or Death*, he said, "if [it's] not what you like, hurry... get your money back, because that's as good as it's going to be". Meanwhile, George Harrison showed gallows humour when he wrote what was reportedly his first song for 10 years after doctors gave him a grim prognosis on his cancer. He noted the publishing credit for "Horse to the Water", which he sang for a Jools Holland album in 2001, to "R.I.P. Ltd". He died the same year. Film great John Huston directed his last movie from his wheelchair. He died before the film's release. It was called *The Dead*.

One of the most extraordinary performances by an actor on the brink of death comes from Edward G Robinson in the 1973 film *Soylent Green*, where he plays an almost impossibly poignant euthanasia scene. The only person who knew he was dying was his co-star Charlton Heston who wrote: "I've never heard of an actor playing a death scene in terms of his own true and imminent death... Eddie knew it was truly his last."

Five years later, John Cazale played his part in *The Deer Hunter* after being diagnosed with cancer. He was nursed through the shoot by his partner and co-star, Meryl Streep. Like Huston, he never saw the finished film.

The screenwriter Dennis Potter, was interviewed at length by Melvyn Bragg for Channel 4 in 1994, only a month after being told that his pancreatic cancer, like Johnson's, was inoperable. Potter told the world that he had called his cancer "Rupert" after Rupert Murdoch, whom he despised for what he had done to the media.



Killer chords: Wilko Johnson
DAVID COOMBS