

paperbacks

Nonfiction

The Outrun by Amy Liptrot

Canongate, 304pp; £8.99

In the unforgettable opening scene to Amy Liptrot's memoir, she describes how she first met her father on the airport runway strip in Orkney. Liptrot was a newborn, held by her mother in a wheelchair; her father was in a straitjacket, about to be taken to a secure unit off the islands.

Liptrot's childhood was defined by her life on the family farm on the Scottish islands, where she lived a life shaped by the seasons and by her father's mental illness. As she grew up she longed to leave the island behind and she moved to London, where her drinking spiralled out of control. When she hit breaking point, she returned to Orkney, where the slow recovery from addiction began.

Around this time, Liptrot began writing about her life in Scotland and the significance of place and identity in a blog for the nature-writing website *Caught by the River*. At first the outside world seems as untamable as the inside of her head, but gradually the days tracking puffins and terns and the wild swims begin to make sense.

The Outrun was shortlisted for the Wellcome book prize in April and won this year's Wainwright prize for the best UK nature and travel writing. It deserves all the accolades it can get; Liptrot's memoir is profound and moving. **Fiona Wilson**

Francis Bacon in Your Blood: A Memoir by Michael Peppiatt

Bloomsbury, 416pp; £9.99

One of the many aphorisms uttered by the painter Francis Bacon was that "you always have to go too far to get anywhere at all, in art or life". The artist, who died in 1992, was as good as his word:

he was an unashamed homosexual with a taste for brutal masochism, and a relish for rough trade and high life; a gambler and bon vivant with a superhuman capacity for drink (a couple of bottles was barely a snifter); and a painter whose flayed imagery of the dark side of the human condition outraged (Margaret

Thatcher once described him as "that man who paints those dreadful pictures") and enlightened. He had vast charisma, an acid tongue and deep pockets — and was liberal in his use of all.

In 1963 Michael Peppiatt was a Cambridge undergraduate who had never heard of Bacon. When he took over a student magazine, however, and planned

an art issue, he was told by a friend that he should interview the liveliest character in the modern British scene. During a restaurant, pub and club crawl, artist and student struck up an unlikely friendship that was to last for 30 years. In Peppiatt's words, Bacon was "the making of me", a "father figure and the central influence on my life". This is his sixth book about the artist and the most personal yet. **Michael Prodder**

Fiction

Grief is the Thing With Feathers

by Max Porter Faber, 128pp; £7.99

A woman has suddenly died, leaving a husband and two boys. Dad is an academic, working on a book about Ted Hughes's 1970 collection, *Crow*. One night, when

Dad is nearly insane with longing for his wife, the doorbell rings. It is not another "orbiting griever" bearing lasagne, but a huge, smelly black bird.

The bird says: "I won't leave until you don't need me any more." Dad is resigned to living with "Crow" — garrulous, anarchic, tormenting bird that he is (Poe's Raven only ever said "Nevermore"). In a series of fragments, more poetry than prose,

Porter writes with heartrending accuracy about grief taking up residence in a house of sadness. It's a slip of a book; amazing and unforgettable, and exactly as long as it needs to be. Yet it's not comforting; don't give it to the recently bereaved.

Kate Saunders

Did You Ever Have a Family by Bill Clegg

Vintage, 304pp; £8.99

Bill Clegg is a savvy New York literary



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agent who is known for brokering big deals for his authors, among them Rose Tremain, David Levithan and John Waters. Ten years ago things were very different. In 2011 Clegg published his first book, *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man*, a graphic account of his years of addiction, which had come to a head in 2005 when he attempted to commit suicide by way of a two-month crack binge, blowing the last \$70,000 of his savings on drugs and booze. Clegg's harrowing memoir and its follow-up, *Ninety Days* (2012), about his struggle to stay sober, made him an overnight literary star.

Did You Ever Have a Family is his first novel and it channels all of the darkness, fear and uncertainty that can be seen in his earlier works. There are rumours that this work got a seven-figure, two-book deal. You might well feel a tad suspicious of this literary agent's good fortune. However, Clegg has produced a moving, clever novel that subtly dissects the relationships between mothers and their children, lovers, neighbours and strangers.

June is the sole survivor of a fire that kills her lover, her ex-husband, her daughter, who was meant to marry that day, and her daughter's fiancé. Guests show up expecting a wedding and get a funeral. If you want an action-packed drama, look elsewhere. This is a quiet, compassionately crafted novel on love, loss and the path to recovery. **Fiona Wilson**

**Max Porter
writes with
heartrending
accuracy
about grief**

