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Staying In Book Reviews: Fiction

Strung along by a daring concept

It's a rare novelist that dares to emulate the comic plotting of early Italian opera. Frankie & Stanice author Barbara Trapido does just that in her seventh novel, Sex & Stravinsky, which provides precisely the rich but problematic pleasure you might expect from a writer governed more by concept than narrative.

Trapido reveals her intentions slowly. Caroline, an almost mythically talented Amazonian Australian, is happily married to opera obsessive Josh and selflessly burdened by her monstrous mother, who has always preferred Caroline's moosy younger sister Janet, and who, following the latter's initiation into a Christian cult, arrives on Caroline and Josh's doorstep with the assumption that they will look after her. This they duly do, until a set of events conspires to send Josh to his native South Africa, shortly followed by Caroline.

FICTION OF THE WEEK
Sex & Stravinsky By Barbara Trapido (Bloomsbury, £18.99) ★★★☆☆

Throughout, Trapido flashes back to adopted Josh's childhood in apartheid South Africa, which provides a darker backwash to the novel's buoyant foreground, and she marshals her plot strings with all the ease of a puppeteer. But once in South Africa, the novel accelerates into an increasingly preposterous sequence of incidents as Trapido organises her characters and their destinies with all the blithe disregard for emotional back story of a comic librettist imposing implausible order on chaos.

Trapido's prose has the elasticity of a ballet dancer, and initially makes elegant music of the book's themes of destructive parent-children relationships. But the novel, for all its very human parts, feels a bit like a malfunctioning marionette that won't quite dance to Trapido's tune. *Claire Allfree*

Promising start: *Barbara Trapido's elegant story falls victim to implausibility*

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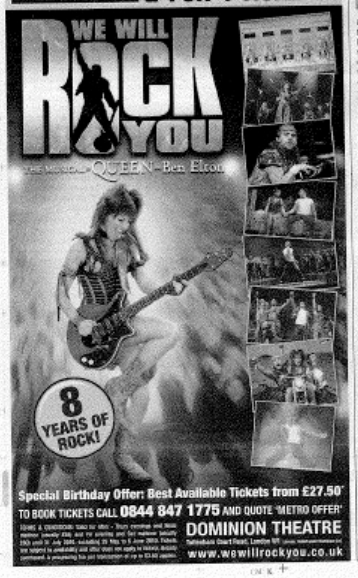

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Island Beneath The Sea By Isabel Allende (Fourth Estate, £18.99) ★★★☆☆

Chilean author Isabel Allende uses the Haitian revolution for her latest lushly melodramatic epic. Her tested formula is applied: family chronicle charting turbulent change through the eyes of a marginalised woman character – in this case Zarité, slave girl to plantation owner Toulouse Valmorain. Allende is keen to show she's done her homework on the explosive mix of rich and poor whites, free 'mulattoes' and slaves in Saint Domingue society, the breathtaking cruelty of planters and overseers, the slaves' voodoo beliefs and the effect of revolution in France, which all contribute to the incredible, bloody success of the 1791 uprising that created Haiti. Unfortunately, the excess of historical detail is sometimes suffocating. Allende's conventional approach is also disappointing, given that her roots are in magic realism and that Haiti inspired one of Latin American magic realism's founding texts. The book is undeniably entertaining (despite the awful sex scenes) and its emphasis on women's plights is thought-provoking – it just never seems to tap the rich potential of its source material. *Siobhan Murphy*

The Last Weekend By Blake Morrison (Chatto & Windus, £12.99) ★★★★☆

Literary types will call Ian, the protagonist of The Last Weekend, an unreliable narrator. In less polite terms, he lies shamelessly: to others; to himself; to the reader. Yet it's a while before we realise, for Blake Morrison has crafted Ian to sneak below our radar: how could we suspect a primary school teacher initially guilty of nothing more than winning candour? Likewise, the scenario at first appears to be that stock in trade of the British writer, the couples' holiday fraught with underlying tensions as Ollie and Daisy, old university friends with vastly more successful lives, invite Ian and his partner Em on a weekend away. Morrison's guile soon wrenches us out of comforting familiarity and mortality, voyeurism and even madness enter the mix. The warning is flagged up early – friends, Ian tells us: 'Suck you in. They drag you down' – but the full haunting meaning becomes apparent only late on in a compelling psychological thriller that, in parts, will cause you to actually flinch. *Ben Felsenburg*

Burley Cross Postbox Theft By Nicola Barker (Fourth Estate, £18.99) ★★★★☆

Few people write letters these days and certainly not like the 27 examples that form the bulk of Nicola Barker's new book. It's a highly original Little England novel: a comedy set in a small Yorkshire village populated by eccentrics and oddballs; their various obsessions are revealed through the conceit of their letters, undelivered after being found in a back alley after the postbox was broken into. Net curtain-twitching, pettiness and trivia reign supreme: the letters reveal fascinations with mentals covers, methods of disposing of dog poo and the workings of the local anti-claim society. But amid the rich humour there are genuinely moving events, which give the book an interestingly salty flavour as a mother begs the daughter she put up for adoption to let her get on with a new life and two star-crossed lovers write out their longing for each other. As you'd expect from Barker, shortlisted for the Man Booker for 2007's Darkmans, it is wildly imaginative and energetic not just in range but in the gleeful, witty use of language. No one writes letters like these – more's the pity. *Tina Jackson*

Picture This Our Choice From The Latest Art And Photography Books

Every summer since the early 1970s, photographer Joseph Szabo has taken himself off to Long Island's Jones Beach. Captivated by the rolling mass of humanity that congregates there – more than million visitors a year, making it one of the world's busiest beaches – he became a well-known fixture, creeping sun and fun-seekers, young and old, through the decades. **Jones Beach** (Abrams, £22.50) is a selection of some of his best work: the dizzyingly exuberant mix of sun, sea, sand and bare flesh laid out in shimmering black-and-white images. Geezers, muscled and tanned exhibitionists share space on the sand with couples in intimate huddles and teenagers relishing their freedom (1960s Dance, pictured). The chance to see and be seen, Szabo shows us, beguiles people across the spectrum: the careful precentions – swimwear, hairstyles and accessories – a crucial element of these New Yorkers' day at the beach.

METRO 6 MAY 2010