

BOOKS

# Gutenberg vs Zuckerberg

They had syphilis and Savonarola, we get Trump and superbugs. Is this the new Renaissance, asks *Robert Colvile*

**AGE OF DISCOVERY**  
by *Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna*

312PP, BLOOMSBURY,  
£18.99, EBOOK £10.04



★★★★★

It's a scary old world out there. Technology is changing habits and upending industries. Communication has sped up to the point where ideas can spread with unprecedented ease. Some people find this intoxicating; others, terrifying.

The best way to work out how to respond, argue Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna in *Age of Discovery*, is to get some perspective. Back in the 15th and 16th centuries, Europe was plunged into similar social and intellectual ferment, driven by forces that mirror those at work today. They had Gutenberg; we have Zuckerberg. When Goldin and Kutarna call the 21st century a "New Renaissance", they don't mean that everything is getting better, but rather that we face the same mixture of progress and turmoil.

Goldin is the head, and Kutarna a fellow, of the Oxford Martin School, a new institute within the university, where more than 200 researchers are tenured to think big thoughts about humanity's present condition and its prospects. *Age of Discovery* accordingly comes garlanded with praise from Christine Lagarde, Richard Branson, Arianna Huffington, Niall Ferguson and most of the rest of the Davos World Economic Forum guest list.

The result is not a book that makes concessions to the casual reader: there are no anecdotes to ease you in, no accessible case studies, and precious few jokes. But what it does have is facts – and ideas. This is the kind of book that skips from economic growth to medical advances to nanotech to quantum computing to inequality to migration. The authors marshal their statistics impressively: for example, that the free storage Google now gives to its email users would cost them \$15,000 each at 1995 prices, or that mobile phone penetration in the developing world has gone from 1 per cent to 90 per cent over the same period.

Goldin and Kutarna articulate their views on where we are going right and wrong, and where our best hope for the future lies, with clarity and force. The world,

they say, is not so much connected as entangled: we are all, like it or not, in it together. Our future will best be served by embracing new ideas and fostering our "collective genius", rather than retreating into suspicion and selfishness.

Their writing style is declarative, insistent and occasionally arcane: "contestation", we are told, "remains at the heart of our global reaching". And you can almost hear the squeals of protest from early modern historians at some of the parallels that Goldin and Kutarna draw. For example, they argue that Wikipedia is akin to the basilica of St Peter's – both are the fruits of giant collective effort. They compare current revolutions in understanding to the way Copernicus and Leonardo began to test their theories rigorously with practice; and they show how movement between countries spread syphilis then and superbugs now. But although these Renaissance sections feel unsatisfactory, they are only the set-up, not the punchline. *Age of Discovery* wants to teach us about the present rather than the past. Goldin and Kutarna are optimists, but not blindly so.

## Like Trump on Twitter, Savonarola used pamphlets to whip up outrage

The book's early sections focus on the marvels of modernity; the later ones on its terrors. The Renaissance, they point out, ended in a spasm of religious violence, triggered by the failure of a corrupt and complacent elite to attend to the concerns of those beneath them.

Central to their story is Savonarola, the friar who threw Florence into turmoil. While he promised to restore a lost age of morality, he also used new technologies such as the printing press to spread his propaganda, inventing the "open letter" in the process. The authors draw a parallel with Isis, but there is more than a passing resemblance to Donald Trump, whipping up the grievances of the hard-done-by on Twitter.

*Age of Discovery* will leave its readers drained by the scale of the problems we face. It isn't easy to read, but its scope and authority do reward the effort.



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## This week in Books



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### WHITE SANDS

by Geoff Dyer



240pp, Canongate, £18.99, ebook £7.12

★★★★★

Geoff Dyer is up to his old tricks in this piquant collection of travel writing, in which the distinction between fiction and fact is "irrelevant", he says. Its 10 essays, on empty football stadia, Polynesian obesity, Gauguin's syphilis, land art - and much else - have all previously been published but it feels like a coherent whole, bound together by Dyer's voice. **Richard Grant**

### HIERONYMUS BOSCH

by Nils Büttner, tr Anthony Mathews



160pp, Reaktion, £14.95

★★★★★

At least as weird now as it was 500 years ago, the canon of Hieronymus Bosch tempts scholars into wild surmises about what sort of crazed individual might have painted *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. But, as Nils Büttner points out, Bosch lived a conventional, bourgeois life. Sadly, this study is marred by clumsy translation and a few errors. **Tim Smith-Laing**

### VINEGAR GIRL

by Anne Tyler



233pp, Hogarth, £16.99, ebook £9.99

★★★★★

Adam Mars-Jones once compared Philip Roth's "astonishing display of piss and vinegar" to Anne Tyler's "milk and cookies". So this, Tyler's novelisation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, feels pointedly titled, but in fact there's no lurch into the dark. Kate, a nursery teacher in Baltimore, isn't a shrew - just a bit irritated. Updated, Shakespeare's plot feels even sillier. **James Walton**

### AGE OF DISCOVERY

by Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna



312pp, Bloomsbury, £18.99, ebook £10.04

★★★★★

When Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna call the 21st century a "New Renaissance", they don't mean that everything is getting better, rather that we face the same mixture of progress and turmoil that existed back in the 15th and 16th centuries when Europe was plunged into intellectual and social ferment. They had Gutenberg; we have Zuckerberg. Enlightening. **Robert Colvile**

### THE GIRLS

by Emma Cline



368pp, Chatto & Windus, £12.99, ebook £7.99

★★★★★

An intense evocation of adolescence, this absorbing debut novel about Evie, a girl sucked into a Manson-esque cult, is filled with trance-like impressions: "slurry days", blushes "clotting" cheeks, dresses "stuttering with loose stitching", the "brackish sea" of an older girl's cocaine-coated kiss. At moments, the exposition is disappointingly heavy handed. **Lidija Haus**

### THE CRIME WRITER

by Jill Dawson



256pp, Sceptre, £18.99, ebook £12.99

★★★★★

A recent spate of crime novels has imagined real-life crime writers, such as Agatha Christie, trying their hand at detective work. But since sleuths are only peripheral in Patricia Highsmith's novels, it feels apt that Jill Dawson's witty novel, set in Suffolk, imagines Highsmith committing, rather than investigating, a crime. **Jake Kerridge**

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