

books

KABOOM

Matt Gallagher

(Bantam, £12.99)

Former fratboy Matt Gallagher didn't need to join the US army but did so in search of an "authentic experience", which he certainly found when he pitched up in northern Iraq in late 2007 as the leader of an armoured cavalry



platoon. A gifted writer who had read his Shakespeare and Orwell, he started an acerbic blog to keep friends and family informed about his counter-insurgency mission, but soon found himself with a wider audience, including Pentagon higher-ups who balked at his insight, honesty and humour and shut it down.

The blog is the basis for this funny and harrowing book, an account of his 15 months in Iraq when Sunni tribes allied themselves with the US –

or at least their dollars – to fight insurgents. These Sons of Iraq, as they became known, squabbled so much at one meeting where Gallagher's men were providing security that they created a "shouting match the British Parliament would envy".

By the end of his authentic experience, the naïve idealist has become "more of a veteran than an American".

KEVIN GOPAL



Off the shelf

GRAVEN IMAGE

Charlie Williams

(Inpress, £4.99)

Welsh writer Williams uses precise and economical prose to set the scene, establish his characters and get the plot rolling. Brothel bouncer Leon has to rescue his abducted daughter from his boss, Graven, but things start off badly and get a whole lot worse.

CALIFORNIA

Ray Banks

(Inpress, £4.99)

Banks took up crime fiction when the casino he worked in was ram-raided. It's no wonder then that his prose brims with realism and edginess as he depicts criminal Shuggie Boyle who has a plan to move to California in the US on his prison release. Unfortunately for Shuggie he has to go to California in Falkirk first to pick up his share of the booty from a robbery.

THE ENGLISH GERMAN GIRL

Jake Wallis Simon

(Polygon, £12.99)

Set during the 1930s, the novel tells the story of Rosa, a German girl who escapes Berlin to England, promising to secure safe passage for her remaining family when she gets there. But as war breaks out, that promise becomes harder to keep. There's a good sense of place and atmosphere, but Wallis Simon also meanders somewhat to little purpose.

THE SENTIMENTALISTS

Johanna Skibsrud

(Gaspereau Press, £12.99)

When his health fails, Vietnam veteran Napoleon Haskell is moved by his daughters to the banks of a manmade lake in Ontario to recuperate. The lake hides a drowned town, and the sense that something lies beneath haunts this sparse, tightly atmospheric short novel.

DOUG JOHNSTONE

Author Q&A: David Kaiserman

GROTTON REVISITED

(£19.99, Routledge)

David Kaiserman is a town planner who worked for the short-lived Greater Manchester Council, and was Manchester's acting director of planning in the mid-1990s. He has just co-written his second satirical look at the joys of planning in modern Britain, *Grotton Revisited*, which lifts the lid on a county council and its five district councils' attempts to grapple with the system.

Your new book is called *Grotton Revisited – Planning in Crisis? Where on earth is Grotton?*

There is actually a village called Grotton near Oldham, but the county of Grotton in the book is fictional. The book is a spoof set of learned articles about planning, with lots of bewildering maps, photographs and plans, for the joke *Planning in Crisis?* conference, to be held at the Polytechnic of Central Grotton. The idea is to poke gentle (and sometimes not so gentle) fun at planners, architects, councillors, civil servants, members of the public and

anyone else trying to make sense of our eternally baffling planning system.

You and your co-authors are all town planners who spent your formative years in and around Manchester – presumably that's where you got your inspiration?

I couldn't possibly comment on that, but our city of Grotton is very much New Labour and neighbouring borough Grimethwaite as firmly Old Labour. Nearby Dunromin is Tory, Cloggley is hung, and Golden Delicious no one's quite sure about! So you decide. Although they don't really exist, I think everyone will be horribly familiar with these councils' heroic attempts to attract (or, in Dunromin's case, prevent) development, conserve the environment, improve transport and provide a superb service to the public, all for very little money.

The book's already been praised by teachers of town planning and prominent MPs from all three main political parties. Does it have things to say to general readers?

Absolutely – we take a light-hearted approach which I hope will resonate with anyone coming into contact with planning. Tongue firmly in cheek, its



central messages are: if you think your area's got problems, remember there's always someone worse off than you; don't worry if you can't understand how planning works – by the time you find out the rules will have changed anyway; and there's nowt so queer as folk.

You're now an independent planning consultant. Do you think town and city planning is improving?

To get serious for a moment: yes. I think planners are much better than they used to be at understanding the way their areas tick, and working closely with local communities and everyone else with a stake in their future. You'll never please everyone of course, and even the best planning is only one element in addressing the complex social, economic and environmental issues that face us all, but there is a real sense of partnership now which was much less in evidence when Grotton first appeared. Whether they appreciate it or not, planning is important to people's lives at many levels, and it's still a key role for the councils being elected all over the country.

JO NIGHTINGALE

Listen to this

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES: DREADFULLY EVER AFTER

Written by *Steve Hockensmith*

Narrated by *Katherine Kellgren*

(Audiible.co.uk, £15.19)

Audiobook sequel to the 2009 surprise publishing phenomenon. Elizabeth Bennet fights 19th century zombies but is distracted by Mr Darcy.

