

in vogue

quietens those nagging memories “of who they were and what, in the middle of their lives, they’d become”.

Sophie, a psychoanalyst in Murray Bail’s intelligent novel *The Pages*, is similarly blighted by self-doubt: “at forty-three, [she] was facing discomfort, uncertainty in the form of vague emptiness.” Her elder sister, Erica, for whom “nothing much happens”, is also in need of the tumult that greets these academic and urbane city women when they drive to a farm in Australia’s parched interior to examine a book of philosophy written by the recently deceased Wesley Antill. Wesley, a man who tried to change his surname because he thought it too Australian, too lacking in sophistication for a philosopher, is described with humour and sympathy. Also played for comic and tragic effect is the opposing way in which the sisters approach life and their hosts. As in Bail’s last novel, *Eucalyptus*, the unaccommodating Australian landscape is key to his characters’ journey to understanding.

A thriller is always excellent company when on holiday

A sense of place is also important to first-time novelists Susan Irvine and Celia Walden. Both find their inspiration in Paris and depict the city as alienating or dangerously seductive by turns. Irvine’s book, *Muse*, follows Naomi, a young stylist, on her first shoot in the city. Irvine has an ear for dialogue, and a feel for the often impressionistic way her protagonist thinks. Naomi’s experiences in Paris in the heady heat of August – her too-trusting manner with an amorous poet/bellboy, particularly – set off both a metaphysical and a very real crisis. Walden’s *Harm’s Way* is narrated by Anna. Eighteen years old and at large in the French capital, she is naïve, awaking to the potency of her youth and good looks, and eager to test her new power. She’s soon taken under the wing of Beth, an attractive woman in her forties. Anna, who likes men “all too easily”, soon becomes Beth’s sexual rival for the affections of Christian and the story unravels in betrayal and suspense.

There is a voyeuristic, unsettling account of a sexual fixation in Yoko Ogawa’s *The Diving Pool* where, in the first of three short stories, a young girl feels all too viscerally her status as the only non-orphan in an orphanage.

Brooding, she turns to cruelty and obsession. Each story is stranger and more chilling than the next and, in pared-back style, Ogawa spins dark tales that echo in one’s imagination.

Jim Cartwright’s *Supermarket Supermodel* is light relief. Cartwright, the author of the play *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, locates his pulchritudinous checkout girl, Linda, in a working-class Northern town. Spotted by an unscrupulous agent, she gets caught up in the glamour of modelling and soon forgets those she’s left behind, including her weakening mother. Like *Little Voice*, the book is peopled by tough women whose sharp tongues and humour hide the shortcomings of their lives, and they – more than anyone Linda encounters in the world she swaps them for – are at the heart of the book.

A thriller is always excellent company on holiday. Kate Atkinson’s *When Will There Be Good News?* is the third novel to feature her police inspector Jackson Brodie. Thirty years after a crime witnessed and survived only by a six-year-old girl, two characters in Edinburgh are connected by their search for people who’ve recently disappeared. Compelling from the start.

In *The Invention of Everything Else* by New Yorker short-story writer Samantha Hunt, the central character is Nikola Tesla, the pioneering electrical engineer and inventor of radio. He is, however, much diminished from his glory days, depicted with pathos as an old man living in a New York hotel, talking to pigeons, and still fixated on the rivals – Edison and Marconi – who stole his ideas. Into his life comes 24-year-old Louisa and the story picks up speed, taking in Tesla’s life, science fiction and a mystery for good measure.

Little Bee, the compelling narrator of *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave, is an illegal alien who has been accidentally released from an English detention centre. The story of how she came to flee Nigeria – told in the charmingly formal English that she taught herself in the camp – is drip-fed through the book as she struggles to settle into this new and strange land. Little Bee finds herself in the home of Sarah, a woman she encountered in the most brutal way on a beach in Africa, and to whom she’s inextricably bound.

Jennie Rooney’s first novel, *Inside the Whale*, is original and vividly written. It’s narrated in alternating chapters by Michael and Stevie, who were lovers in World War II and now, in old age, are estranged. Rooney’s style is immediate and rich and the plot whips along at pace, teasing the reader to the end. A very assured debut. ■



Clockwise from above: beach toile wallpaper, £55 per roll; bag, £19; plate, £33. All at Theshopfloorproject.com

Coast to coast

Come rain or shine, August is the month to kick off your wedges, roll up your Notify jeans and brave the icy waters of the British coast. Thankfully, with the re-opening of the iconic St Moritz Hotel (above) in Trebetherick, north Cornwall, you don't have to wave goodbye to city style. The Thirties building has been re-modelled as an Art Deco-inspired, Miami-style escape, complete with a chef from J Sheekey and a Cowshed Spa (Stmoritzhotel.co.uk). Further afield, the Isle of Tresco offers 12 New England-style beachside cottages (below) to rent on a self-catering basis. The rental comes with membership to the new Flying Boat Club, with a restaurant, bar, pool and spa at your fingertips (Tresco.co.uk/flying-boat-club). Armchair travellers, meanwhile, will enjoy the online exhibition at Theshopfloorproject.com, celebrating all that we love about British summertime. Ice cream, sandcastles, beach huts and the sea itself are depicted on everything from fabrics to jewellery - all of which is available to buy. *Until August 31. VB*