

earlier. Among the impressions of the scene of the siege, where he encounters Lermontov's daughter for the first time, and the two of them hatch an absurd plan.

Making a character convincing is always hard work, but Grace's amazing sensitivity to music establishes Leonard as a believable jazz saxophonist in a handful of brilliant passages, particu-

With a saxophone in his hand, he's a risk-taker. That was how Francine fell in love with him in the first place. But away from the bandstand he's timid and feels like a fraud for failing to be the courageous, politically active firebrand of his imagination.

Grace takes us back to Texas in 2006 to show how Leonard's inaction has

AS AN EXAMINATION OF A HERO'S  
 And on far shores the phantom  
 sound  
 Will clash with larks' and still  
 astound,  
 Till out at the sea the song will cease  
 And maverick birds now hold their  
 peace.

ALASTAIR MABBOTT

## PAPERBACKS

### SITE WORKS

Robert Davidson  
 Sandstone Press, £7.99



Mud-encrusted, soaking wet, freezing cold and treated like dirt by the bosses.

Construction is a gruelling trade, a hard life for hard men.

Robert Davidson's former career as a civil engineer has given him an encyclopaedic

knowledge of a world that fiction forgot. The downtrodden guys in this novel are building a sewage drainage facility in the north of Scotland in winter, and clinging to what small comforts they have – alcohol, illicit liaisons with married women, even horror comics – to make it bearable. Lording over it is an irascible and hard-hearted boss, threatening to replace them with cheaper workers and turn the building site's fragile hierarchy on its head. Davidson has come up with an incredibly vivid depiction of a temporary community of transient workers, which is almost too authentic for comfort.

### THE BOOK OF CROWS

Sam Meekings  
 Polygon, £14.99



A sprawling, poetic work that spans millennia. The Book Of Crows is neither a collection of short stories nor an episodic novel. The titular Book Of Crows is a mythical creation by Meekings, a tome which gathers superstitions about

crows and contains secrets of the past and future. In one way or another, it touches the lives of the characters in each of the stories, from Jade, sold to a brothel around 80BC, through two Franciscan monks crossing a desert during the era of the Mongol Empire, to a jaded office worker in 1993. Told in chronological order, the stories are segmented, enhancing the feel that this book is all one flowing tapestry. Continuing the fascination with China he showed in his debut, Under Fishbone Clouds, Meekings's prose is exemplary, showing a desire not just to honour Chinese culture, but to contribute to it.

### SCAPEGOAT

Katharine Quarmby  
 Portobello, £15.99



To call this a sobering read would be an understatement. It's an excoriating indictment of society. Katharine Quarmby has studied the plight of disabled people in this country over the past century and gathered her findings into a

fireball of a book. Excised from the heart of society and forced to live in the margins, with their only able-bodied contacts generally paid care-workers, the disabled are also statistically far more likely to be the victims of violent crime. Quarmby traces how ancient superstitions about the disabled were not dispelled by science but propped up by eugenicists, and how compulsory euthanasia was a suggestion earnestly put to Home Secretary Winston Churchill when he was drafting the Mental Deficiency Bill of 1912. A shocking, challenging call to action.

### INTO THE ARENA

Alexander Fiske-Harrison  
 Profile, £15.99



Plagued by conflicting feelings about bullfighting, writer and actor Alexander Fiske-Harrison decided the only way to resolve the issue was to spend a year in Spain immersing himself in bullfighting culture and training alongside professionals, then

taking to the ring himself. Before he could conclude the spectacle of the fight might not be worth the life of an innocent creature, he felt he had to understand bullfighting at the deepest level. With Hemingway's Death In The Afternoon a constantly looming presence, Fiske-Harrison comes across as the kind of devil-may-care Englishman who built an empire. But is he a man out of time? Does he really have to get into the ring with one of these creatures to decide whether or not it's barbaric? An informative and breathtaking volume of gonzo journalism.

ALASTAIR MABBOTT