

aversion they have, which is light', she complained grandly. 'That is the reverse of my inclination'.

We move on 50 years. Was Robert Adam a neo-Palladian architect? 'We have not trod the path of others, nor derived aid from their labours', he declared in 1773 in the introduction to his own *Works*. Giles Worsley thinks otherwise. It is Adam's *oeuvre* in particular, he tells us, that demonstrates a stylistic debt to Burlington and his architectural heirs, James Paine and Sir Robert Taylor. Rusticated ground floors, porticos (both free-standing and attached), and Serlian windows abound. Not even Kedleston — Adam's model of 'movement' — is allowed to stand up for itself. Haven't we always been told its south front is a masterpiece of originality? 'Would this be so if it were not by Adam?' Worsley asks forcefully.

There are equally subjective diversions into Scotland, Ireland, Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, Soane's halls at the Bank of England and much else. It is a pity that there is just a little bit too much of the senior common room about this gloriously illustrated volume. At times my attention wandered, despite a personal love of the subject matter. Why is it that so many of our leading architectural historians write in such a dry and inaccessible way? There is no glossary, yet the text is peppered with esoteric and technical expressions which surely cannot be familiar to those readers outside Oxbridge and Courtauld circles.

I expect the Prince of Wales will heartily endorse Dr Worsley's lines of argument. *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age* is, above all else, a passionate hymn of praise to Palladianism.

Ryder puts in a request to see his schedule, for he is aware that various people have arranged to see him. Nor has he yet decided what to play at the recital: shall it be *Verticalities* or *Globestructures: Option II* or *Asbestos and Fibre*? In any event he will need some time to practise; he will need, in fact, to find a piano.

It becomes clear to Ryder, stepping at last outside the hotel, that the town he is visiting is labouring under some nebulous form of civic disappointment. This has to do with the cultural status of a community otherwise without the slightest distinction. Its resident conductor, Brodsky, has taken to drink; his predecessor, Christoff, has been something of a false start. Various committees and organisations are in place to remedy this sad state of affairs, and Ryder is expected to address them all.

Unfortunately he is still without his timetable, and although his faculties are somewhat sharper than those of his hosts', he is no match for their unparalleled discursiveness and their numinous expectations. Thus the title of the book explains exactly what it is about, and the reader is in the same position as the unwary visitor, subjected to alternate praise songs and uncompromising demands. The great set-piece in the concert hall, in which nothing in fact takes place, is the final irony (and yes, it is irony) in the whole protracted undertaking, one in which the author is effortlessly and beautifully ahead of the game.

Delay is the stuff of nightmare: so is importunity. I was reminded less of Kafka than of Thomas Mann. It will be remembered that in *The Magic Mountain* a certain Herr Settembrini is always on hand to interrupt his fellow patients in the sanatorium with a carefully researched disquisition. There is probably a Herr Settembrini in every establishment; here the town is full of them. The agonising flow is punctuated with surreal detail. When Brodsky's artificial leg is carelessly amputated by a surgeon he pilots himself onto the concern platform using an ironing board as a crutch. When Ryder's request for a piano can no longer be ignored he is shown into a very small cubicle, across the open door of which he is obliged to hand a bath towel. Card games are in progress in a cinema in which a space epic is being screened. A lavish buffet is served at the rear of a tram. Glass office blocks give way without transition to windswept graveyards. Ryder's parents' old car has come to rest in a distant field. All this is conveyed in limpid unstressed language, in which certain dainty archaisms — 'refreshments', 'confectioneries' — are timidly introduced. Ryder attends an evening reception in an open dressing gown, which gesture, he is assured, is warmly appreciated.

It is a superb achievement. The logic of the procedure is never in doubt. The reader's simultaneous absorption and

A superb achievement

Anita Brookner

*A reconsideration of
Kazuo Ishiguro's
unappreciated latest novel,
The Unconsoled*

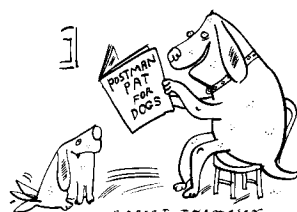
The short attention span of readers and critics in the electronic age was never more amply demonstrated than in the reception awarded to Kazuo Ishiguro's masterly novel, *The Unconsoled* (Faber, £15.99, pp. 535). With the honourable exception of Rachel Cusk in the *Times*, the general tone was one of impatience and bafflement, as if the task of reading the novel were too onerous, too 'boring'. Kafka was rather doubtfully mentioned as being the originator of the form, which is one of infinite frustration, yet even here a regret was voiced that Ishiguro lacked Kafka's 'irony'. I doubt if Kafka were thought ironic in his own time: the sad eyes in the well-known photograph speak eloquently of impotence, and of its recognition. Kafka is a tragedian rather than an ironist, and it is only historical experience that enables us to claim him as our own.

Yet 'Kafkaesque' is an adjective that might be usefully or at least decently applied to *The Unconsoled*, as long as the comparison is not stretched too far. We are dealing here with a form which is faintly familiar: a dreadfully plausible account of a purpose continually occluded, a simple undertaking subverted at every turn by an apparently inexhaustible sequence of personal interventions, in which strangers with

elaborately courteous manners lay their requests, some of them peremptory, before a visitor who has come to give a piano recital in a nameless central European city before moving on to give another in Helsinki.

Ryder, the pianist-visitor, a man of international reputation, is unprepared for the torrents of information that descend on him from all sides. 'Good evening, sir', says that desk clerk wearily, as he checks in to his hotel. Within minutes, the hall porter, in the first of those soliloquies which seem to be the local form of communication, has approached him in the hope that he will not only address some form of hall porters' association, but will effect a rapprochement with Sophie, the daughter to whom he has not spoken for several years. This before Ryder has even been shown to his room. First he has to be shown how the porter can manipulate heavy suitcases, something of a professional qualification to which lesser porters aspire in vain. He will later demonstrate this in dance form.

The hotel manager, Hoffman, is equally friendly, and hopes that Ryder will have time to peruse his wife's scrapbooks, as well as counselling his son on the wisdom or unwisdom of pursuing a musical career.



"Oh dear", said the doctor, "that ankle's going to need a stitch."

helplessness are a tribute to the author's mastery. In a brief interview I read he appeared to be handsomely unapologetic for foisting this phantasmagoria onto an unwitting public. His smiling face, in the jacket photograph, conveys the no doubt disconcerting impression that he has, and will have, the last laugh.

Recent books on tape

Richard Cooper

Just when we thought the cassette was on the way out, the audio book revolution has given our plastic friend a new lease of life. Walk into any bookshop and you'll be greeted by shelves of talking books; it is now the norm for publishers to issue popular titles on book and tape simultaneously.

Our Game by John le Carré (Hodder Headline, £9.99, Abr.) Useful tips for the novice spy: corner properties make the best safe houses, and always leave dust on furniture if you're away. Le Carré has taught us nearly all we know about Cold Warfare, but with the Wall now rubble and 'dead letterboxes' sealed, where to now for the king of the genre? *Our Game* is the story of retired spy Tim Cranmer's search for his ex-double-agent-cum-best-school-buddy, who has mysteriously hightailed it with Cranmer's girlfriend and £35 million. This six-hour tape is highly recommended; time restriction has tightened up a plot prone to straggle. Probably not his best, but Le Carré's reading is unsurpassable; this man could breath life into *The Highway Code*.

There's just a whiff of Le Carré in Stephen Fry's first novel *The Liar* (Random House, £19.99, Unabr.) Word pictures of cryptic characters as 'the moustache', 'the tweed', or 'the Hermes scarf' are favoured by both and here help add a shadowy aspect to the far-fetched plot. Most of *The Liar* is a bawdy, post-pubescent romp which follows the exploits of the outrageous Adrian Healey. The humour, at its mildest, is lavatorial and with Fry's fruity voice and impeccable timing for the incalculable jokes, this tape is constantly entertaining, but at £20 the laughs don't come cheap.

Despite cover notes to the contrary, there is nothing amusing about *The Fermata* by Nicholson Baker (Random House, £8.99, Abr.) An erotic phone call was the theme of Baker's earlier novel *Vox*. In *The*

Fermata the bottom line has barely moved. By applying his forefinger to his spectacles Arno Strine, a seriously disturbed temporary typist, can stop time. Unlike the 1960s cartoon character Billy Binns, who used these heaven-sent moments to score the winning goal in the Cup Final, Strine undresses women, gawks at them, reclothes them and returns to his typewriter. The three hours of this irksome tale is made even less tolerable by the sinister, nasal delivery of the reader, Will Patton. Here is a gilt-edged candidate for the 'fast forward of the month award'. A hideous experience.

The Stone Diaries by Carol Shields (Reed, £7.99, Abr.) is a breath of fresh air. There's always the worry with abridgement that a treasured moment will end in the bin. Anyone who enjoyed this 1993 short-listed Booker Prize novel, can heave a sigh of relief. Not an ounce of atmosphere has been lost and Connie Booth's mesmeric reading makes this three-hour tape well worth snapping up. Most of the action takes place in Canada, as we follow Daisy Flett from the cradle (or kitchen floor) to her grave. Daisy's honeymoon 'sneeze' is sure to have listeners hitting the rewind button.

Daphne du Maurier by Margaret Forster (Hodder, £7.99, Abr.) The author leaves us in no doubt about the complex, shadowy side of Du Maurier's character. As a child she yearned to be, and actually convinced herself she was, a boy. The 'boy in a box' pops up throughout her life. She was particularly besotted by Gertrude Lawrence, whose death left du Maurier devastated. The three hours of this riveting tape pass in a flash. Tones don't come more clipped than Anna Massey's, enabling the listener to hear every syllable on even the noisiest road.

High Fidelity by Nick Hornby (Random House, £8.99, Abr.) Nigel Planer is an inspired choice of reader for Nick Hornby's best-selling first novel. With his downbeat style of narration, Planer sounds just like a chap who might run a back-street second-hand record store — aptly, since this is precisely how Hornby's down-on-his-luck hero scratches a living. An obsessive cataloguer of taste, he judges people entirely on what they listen to rather than what they think or say. Hornby's sharp-witted observations and a compulsive storyline make this four-hour abridgement a sure-fire chart-topper. A must for the baby boomer still stuck in the Sixties and Seventies groove.

Being Digital by Nicholas Negroponte (Hodder, £7.99, Abr.) The Information Superhighway isn't necessarily the road to hell if we allow Nicholas Negroponte to be our guide. The author is director of the Media Lab at the MIT; he's a dab hand at predicting how digital technology will change our lives. In little more than an hour the conciliatory voice of reader Penn Jillette helps stem the tide of anxiety for

tomorrow's Internet Surfers. We had better get used to talking to our toasters, or respecting the fridge when it tells us the milk has gone off. Where the book may intimidate the techno-agnostic, this tape is extremely user friendly.

Original Sin by P. D. James (Chivers, £17.95, Unabr.) This tape, which runs for more than 17 hours, allows ample time for the erudite sleuth Adam Dalgleish to sift through the clues before pouncing inexorably on the killer(s). The setting is the palatial Thames-side headquarters of the Peverell Press. All the ingredients for a classic whodunnit are here: stacks of atmosphere and plenty of corpses. The climax is so thrilling there should really be a warning on the tape for anyone driving a car. Keep your wits about you and you'll find the reader, Michael Jayston, a peerless companion.

The latest gem from the Golden Days of Radio collection is *The Best of Sherlock Holmes 4* (Hodder, £5). These four half-hour stories were originally broadcast in the 1950s and, so the cover notes inform us, were only recently rediscovered. With Sir John Gielgud as Holmes, and Sir Ralph Richardson as Watson you could hardly ask for more. But you get it. Orson Welles makes a guest appearance as the evil Professor Moriarty. You can almost see the glow of the wireless valves through the Victorian pea-soupers.

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