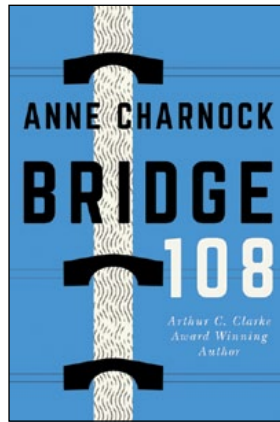
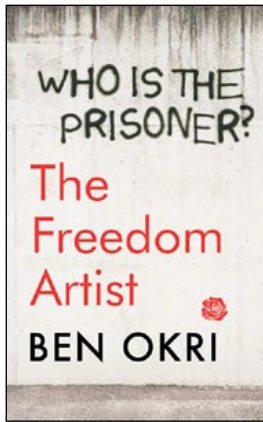


LOCUS LOOKS AT BOOKS: IAN MOND



The Freedom Artist, Ben Okri (Head of Zeus 978-1788549592, 14.99, 368pp, hc) February 2019. (Akashic Books 978-1617757914, \$30.95, 336pp, hc) February 2020.

Bridge 108, Anne Charnock (47North 978-1542006071, \$24.95, 204pp, hc) February 2020.

The Resisters, Gish Jen (Knopf 978-0525657217, \$26.95, 320pp, hc) February 2020.

...And Other Disasters, Malka Older (Mason Jar Press 978-0996103787, \$17.95, 201pp, tp) November 2019.

Sometimes it feels like all anyone is publishing these days is dystopian fiction. I get why. As I write, Boris Johnson has just won a landslide election victory in the United Kingdom assuring a hard-Brexit and further cuts to the country's social welfare system; in Australia, the Liberal/National Government is planning to introduce a Religious Discrimination Bill into Parliament with an explanatory memo straight out of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in the United States Donald Trump... continues to be Donald Trump. This swing to the right in the "developed world" – especially post 2016 – has not only seen the dystopia change in character – what was once a cautionary tale is now foreshadowing the inevitable – but has also led to a glut of novels. To prove my point, three of the four books I'm reviewing this month – Ben Okri's **The Freedom Artist**, Anne Charnock's **Bridge 108** and Gish Jen's **The Resisters** – feature dystopias shaped by climate change and reactionary politics.

Ben Okri begins his dystopian allegory **The Freedom Artist** with the ontological conceit, "written in the oldest legends," that "all are born in a prison." It's a founding myth that is initially accepted as a cornerstone of society, but eventually forgotten over time ("Their civilisations became so successful... they began to think they were free"). Everything changes when a cry of triumph is heard on the edge of the desert, heralding that "someone had escaped the prison of the world." Soon after, a radical and disruptive version of the founding myth – "it was not the earth or the universe that was the prison, it was the body" – emerges, infecting the populace and leading to civil unrest spurred on by graffiti sprayed across buildings, buses, and billboards emblazoned with the question: WHO IS THE

PRISONER? The establishment (known as The Hierarchy) crack down like every other authoritarian regime throughout history, by burning books, imprisoning publishers and booksellers, and destroying all forms of printing. Amid these oppressive conditions, where all knowledge is banned, where people scream in their sleep, where the environment has been devastated, and where the rich have taken over the world, we follow a boy, Mirababa, and a man, Karnak, both of whom have individually undertaken a dangerous quest for the truth. In the case of Mirababa, he is initiated as a mythmaker following the death of his grandfather, through a vision-quest of sorts where he comes to comprehend the nature of the prison. Karnak, on the other hand, is searching for the love of his life, Amalantis, who one morning is disappeared into a van – like many thousands before her – for daring to ask about the prisoner.

Up until writing this review, I was unaware that **The Freedom Artist** had been published in the UK twelve months ago. This caught me off guard, not because I'm an avid fan of Okri's fiction – I'm embarrassed to admit that **The Freedom Artist** is my first taste of his work – but because as someone who won the Booker back in 1991 for **The Famished Road** (the first Nigerian to do so), I'd expect the publication of a new Ben Okri novel to come with a certain amount of buzz and attention. But a quick skim of the Google-machine suggests that Okri has been on the nose with critics for close to two decades, reaching its nadir when, in 2014, he "won" the *Literary Review's* Bad Sex In Fiction Award for a love scene in **The Age of Magic**. Reviews for **The Freedom Artist** in the UK have been decidedly lukewarm, with *The Telegraph's* Claire Allfree calling the book a "silly dystopia" that you'd have to be high to enjoy.

While I liked **The Freedom Artist** more than Allfree, in striving for profundity Okri often overreaches. His desire to mix and match creation myths and parables from across the world leads to a nebulous mush of New-Agey concepts such as the infinite light that connects all things, or the notion that "before being human, man was a form of light in a circle of gold." The novel's heightened, fable-like quality also means that Okri's world never feels grounded or real. I'm sure this is deliberate, after all **The Freedom Artist** is an allegory, but it does mean I struggled to care about the characters. As an example, despite Okri's best efforts to flesh out Karnak's relationship with

his wife via several flashbacks, Amalantis is so perfect, so ethereal ("they argued all day and not once did she raise her voice. When she was most annoyed she sounded most gentle.") that I was never invested in Karnak's search for her.

And yet, I couldn't help but be entertained by **The Freedom Artist**. It has all the naïve boldness of a debut novel, an author throwing a kitchen sink of ideas at the page to see which ones will stick. Some are bizarre, such as the novel's dizzying lurch toward horror as the Hierarchy, out of desperation, unleash a special force of cannibals wearing jackal masks (yes, you read that correctly) to gobble down any dissidents. But when the ideas do land, they are tremendous. There's the wailing contagion that spreads across the world and causes people to burst into tears for no apparent reason. There's Karnak's moving encounter with the terminally ill, all of whom are enjoying their last moments because they know they have nothing to lose: "[Karnak] had never seen such merriment, never heard such laughter, such free expression of feelings and language". And there are the writers who spend their days endlessly recording every death, dream, disappearance, and moment of joy. "They write with all the passion of their lost tribe. They capture what technology cannot see, record what technology cannot feel. They are the last dreamers." This here is the heart of **The Freedom Artist**: a deep appreciation of literature, storytelling, and flights of the imagination; a condemnation of the tendency to dumb down great works of art; and the overriding message that true freedom can be found in the pages of a book.

Anne Charnock's **Bridge 108** is set in the same universe as her terrific 2013 debut **A Calculated Life** (a deserved finalist for both the Philip K. Dick and Kitschies Golden Tentacle Award). When Charnock wrote **A Calculated Life** six years ago, Brexit, or more accurately the possibility of a referendum to leave the EU, was the wishful thinking of die-hard Euro-sceptics. Now her near-future dystopia, influenced by climate change and limited resources, where the wealthy enjoy genetic enhancements and the impoverished are forced to live in make-shift ghettos outside the city, seems horribly prescient. With the inclusion of climate refugees, child trafficking, and slavery **Bridge 108** adds that final touch of verisimilitude to Charnock's post-Brexit nightmare.

Bridge 108 centres on Caleb, a 12-year-old boy

who, with his mother and father, leave a Spain ravaged by drought and unmanageable wildfires for the promised safe harbour of England. Things, however, don't go to plan. After five weeks, Caleb's father, who headed off before his wife and son, stops sending messages back home. Not prepared to wait any longer, Caleb and his mother make the treacherous journey toward England. But the rigours of travel become too much for Caleb's mother who, one night, wanders off and never returns. Three weeks later, barely surviving on the coast of Northern France, Caleb meets Skylark. With her electric bicycle and sidecar, she convinces Caleb to come along with her rather than head for the Reception Centres in England, where he will be handed over to a work camp and become an indentured slave "doing filthy work on the fish farms." What Caleb doesn't know is that Skylark is a trafficker, funnelling children to the Enclave outside of Manchester to work at a recycling facility run by "the family." Caleb, though, is sent to Ma Lexie where, on the roof of an apartment block, he and two other boys fashion clothes out of recycled textiles. When Caleb befriends Odette, a fellow refugee, an opportunity opens up for both of them to escape. But is life outside the Enclave any safer?

What's impressive about **Bridge 108** is the amount of restraint Charnock shows in her treatment of Caleb. It would have been easy (and even tempting) to depict the young man's life in the Enclave, and beyond, as one of endless physical, mental, and sexual abuse. But while his circumstances are less than ideal, and while Charnock never avoids the fact that Caleb is a victim of child trafficking, his time with Ma Lexie is one of relative stability and safety. She even promotes him to supervisor when Caleb expresses a flair for design. It's only when Caleb gives Ma Lexie the slip at the market (on a private errand of his own), and she slaps him on his return, (the first time she's ever struck him) that Caleb begins to understand the reality of his predicament:

While I stood at the back of the stall, I decided Ma Lexie didn't trust me – even though I'd worked hard and tried to be cheerful all the time. I never once blamed her for any of my problems. I decided, standing there listening to her laughing and joking with her scummy customers, that Ma Lexie is just another chapter in my story of hard luck.

The tragedy for Caleb, which becomes evident when he leaves the Enclave, is that, for all his courage, resourcefulness and innate talent, there is no place for him in this England of genetic enhancements, closed borders, and forced deportations.

While the narrative revolves around Caleb, we also see the world through the eyes of the adults he interacts with, like Ma Lexie and Skylark, and those he meets on the other side of the Enclave, specifically Jerome (not his real name) and Officer Sonia. With the latter two, Charnock provides an insight into the workings of the bureaucracy that tracks down, imprisons, and repatriates refugees and asylum seekers. Neither Jerome (who inveigles his way into rural communities and Enclaves to shut down farms or factories that use illegal immigrants) or Officer Sonia (a simulant

– artificial human – who investigates anomalies in the system) ever seem morally or ethically conflicted by their work. On the contrary, they view themselves as assisting refugees, ensuring they're not exploited but rather returned safely home. This is summed up by Officer Sonia, who believes that Caleb can start afresh in Spain because it's not "as though he's seeking asylum. His life isn't in danger." It's the horrible banality of a worldview that doesn't consider a global climate crisis as dangerous that I find more confronting and effective than repetitive, gratuitous scenes of torture and abuse. As such, it's almost an act of faith to hope that unlike the case with **A Calculated Life** we will have moved further away, rather than closer to, the grim, climate affected reality of **Bridge 108**.

As an Aussie, I do love my cricket, but I'm the first to admit that some of the most memorable fiction and non-fiction I've read features America's favourite summer-sport, baseball. This includes Thomas Dyja's stunning civil war novel **Play for a Kingdom**, where Union and Confederate companies play a series of baseball games between each battle; Stephen King's absorbing essay "Head Down", where he spends the summer reporting on the fortunes of Owen King's little league team; and possibly my all-time favourite fantasy novel, Michael Bishop's **Brittle Innings**, where (spoilers) Frankenstein's monster plays a season for the Chattahoochee Valley League in the American Deep South during the Second World War. (If I haven't mentioned W.P. Kinsella's **Shoelless Joe** it's not because I found the Kevin Costner adaptation mawkish and cheesy, but because I've never read the novel). While not much can compare to those works (and particularly **Brittle Innings**, which is criminally under-read), Gish Jen's **The Resisters** comes close, pulling off the feat of making the unlikely pairing of baseball and a dystopian setting seem like a natural fit.

The Resisters is set at a point in the future where widespread automation has split America (now AutoAmerica) into two classes of people. There are the "Netted" who continue to have jobs and enjoy a life of privilege and wealth, and there are the "Surplus" who have been made redundant by AutoHouses, AutoLawns, AutoLawyers, and AutoSurgeons. The Surplus are paid a Basic Income (Andrew Yang-style), which they're required to spend on products manufactured by the Netted, and they earn "Living Points" that provide them with limited freedoms. All this is governed by an Artificial Intelligence (dubbed Aunt Nettie) that keeps the Surplus in check via an army of drones and human enforcers. Into this automated world comes Gwen, who, at a young age (just like Roy Hobbs), shows an aptitude at accurately throwing spherical objects (well, frankly any object). However, a Surplus-wide ban on free-association means that Gwen can't play baseball. Cue Gwen's mother Eleanor. Famous (or infamous) for defending the civil rights of all Surplus (a role that has led to her incarceration and torture), Eleanor decides to establish an underground baseball league. Surprisingly, when Aunt Nettie becomes aware of the league it doesn't shut it down. Instead, recognising

Gwen's skill with a baseball – and the role she might play in defeating the ChinRussians at the Olympics – Aunt Nettie offers Gwen a scholarship at Net U (Netted University) to further harness her talent. It's an opportunity that most Surplus would jump at, but as Eleanor's daughter Gwen appreciates there's more at stake than her prodigious southpaw.

Whether it's the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), experts from Stanford, or the World Bank's Chief Economist, the prevailing view is that the effects of automation have been vastly overstated, the AI takeover as characterised by Gish Jen is unlikely to eventuate (despite Amazon's best efforts). **The Resisters**, though, isn't so much about the long-term dangers of automation. Rather, in portraying an American dystopia where baseball – a symbol of freedom and the American dream – is played in secret and where zoning laws have forced the Surplus to live in swampland, Jen not only echoes the discriminatory policies of redlining but also amplifies contemporary concerns about income equality, the whittling away of civil liberties, and limited access to essential services in the poorer parts of the US (for example the five-year water crisis in Flint MI).

The Resisters, as the title suggests, is also a novel about fighting against all forms of authoritarianism – human or AI. For Jen, it's the mothers who will inspire their daughters to withstand gross injustice. This is illustrated, somewhat tongue in cheek, via the aphoristic words of wisdom Gwen's father attributes to his mother: "as my mother used to say, a secret is a shame or a treasure," "as my mother used to say, Goats don't jump, their feet jump;" and "as my mother used to say, No paint job could cover that." More notably, it's the courage exhibited by Eleanor, who, in the face of "distinguished treatment" (AKA torture), continues her ongoing legal battle against Aunt Nettie to ensure that Constitutional and human rights of all Surplus are protected. The novel's denouement (which I won't spoil) brings this to the fore in a manner that cleverly plays against the traditional baseball-movie climax and sees the baton of hope and resistance passed on to the next generation. With **The Resisters**, Gish Jen provides a new angle to the dystopian narrative, while doing justice to that great American literary sport: baseball.

Although it's a slim book, the nine stories and three poems that feature in Malka Older's debut collection **...And Other Disasters** showcase an eclectic and vivid imagination. This includes a future history detailing the break-up of the United States of America (cleverly split into seven individual sections across the collection to mimic the dissolution of the country); military SF featuring a battalion of midwives heading off to fight oppos-

» p. 74

THIS MONTH IN HISTORY

February 24, 2117. New New Madrid threat. Sudden shudders and steam from Kentucky Bend Sink trigger first 5-state compulsory evac since 2112.