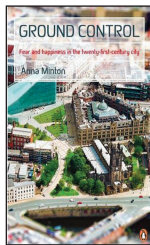


books

GROUND CONTROL

Anna Minton
(Penguin, £9.99)



With this antidote to the why oh why-isms of the *Daily Mail*, Minton takes to the towns and cities of the UK and lists the failings of urban society. She decries the privatisation of once public spaces

through shopping centres such as Liverpool One and through Business Improvement Districts, where one manager airily declares: "Bugger democracy." In gated estates she finds residents paradoxically more rather than less fearful of crime. And in the Pathfinder areas of housing regeneration, she hears complaints of social cleansing.

All this is reinforced with the control and criminalisation of human behaviour through Asbos, CCTV and

extensive stop and search. Minton's scope is impressive – there's room for discussions on the nature of happiness and sideswipes at modern politicians' insistence on "narratives", as if people were unable to take in the complexities of real life. And her conclusion is clear: civil society's fractures arise from "extracting the maximum profit from the places we live in".

KEVIN GOPAL



Off the shelf

POLLARD

Laura Beatty

(Vintage Books, £8.99)

A book about dropping out of society to live in the woods is inevitably going to draw comparisons with Henry Thoreau's *Walden*. Like *Walden*, this criticises the encroachment of the town on the country, but Pollard goes darker, showing nature through a lens of human cruelty.

BROKEN

Karin Fossum

(Vintage Books, £7.99)

An absorbing portrayal of the minutiae of everyday life, *Broken* blurs the boundaries between dreams and reality, and depicts a constant struggle for identity. Playing with notions of the author, Norwegian writer Karin Fossum uses two intertwining stories to explore morality, responsibility, addiction and loneliness, against an ever-present reminder of mortality.

NATALIE BRADBURY

MY STORY

Craig Phillips

(£18.99 Bantam)

Ten years after the humble Scouser won the first UK *Big Brother*, this is the story of how he balanced fame with building a media career and charity work. Swooped up into the world of the Beckhams, the Blairs and Branson, his sense of justice and goodwill shines through.

BOOK OF CLOUDS

Chloe Aridjis

(£11.99, Chatto & Windus)

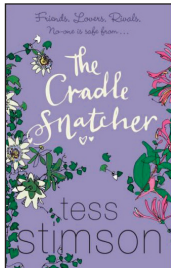
Poetic and elegant, Aridjis's debut novel deals with alienation in Berlin. Escaping her family in Mexico, Tatiana finds more meaning in the inanimate surroundings of her new city than its dwellers. As she finds a new job and community, her dreamy world view is evocatively challenged.

LIANNE STEINBERG

Author Q&A: Tess Stimson

THE CRADLE SNATCHER

(Pan, £6.99)



On graduating from Oxford, Tess Stimson went to work for some years as a news producer for

ITN. More recently her career's changed gear completely: she now lives in Vermont and pens best-selling novels about contemporary life and love. The fifth and latest is entitled *The Cradle Snatcher*. It centres on one Clare Elias, whose happy marriage is put through the wringer when she gives birth to twins and their new nanny turns everybody's lives upside down. With each chapter told in the first person from the perspective of one of the main characters, it's racy, smart and unexpectedly meaty stuff. Just don't go calling it chick-lit.

The Cradle Snatcher certainly isn't a standard entry in the genre – if you'll pardon the phrase – chick-lit. In parts it's genuinely quite hard and edgy. What was the thinking behind that?

Many female writers shudder at the phrase chick-lit, and with good reason. It's akin to calling a writer for the *Financial Times* a tabloid hack. It's a monumentally wide and patronising umbrella that embraces pretty much all novels aimed at female readers. I didn't set out to buck any trends; I simply wanted to write the sort of real, thought-provoking, challenging novels I like to read. Because they're written for a

female audience, naturally they get tagged as chick-lit, but I guess they aren't fluffy literary fast-food. And I think that's a good thing.

The book makes great use of a constantly shifting point of view. Was it as much fun as it looks, getting right inside the minds of all these scheming characters?

I loved writing from different characters' points of view. From a literary standpoint, it enabled me to shine a shaft of light illuminating a character from the outside as well as from within, without having to go back to the traditional third-person narrative. And from a personal viewpoint, it was so much fun – especially when I'm writing as an unlikeable character. I must do it more often. I really like playing with the reader's expectations, and turning assumptions on their heads. It can be quite complex to structure a book like this, but I find it much more rewarding to write – and I hope to read.

Are there any other writers in the field that you read and enjoy?

There are so many writers in this field I like and admire. I buy a dozen books a month, many from favourite authors who've been around a while, but I love discovering new writers too. Maria de los Santos is one such – her books have been huge in the US, and deservedly so. Something that breaks away from the norm is so refreshing.

What do you think makes a bad chick-lit novel? What are some of the pitfalls that writers need to avoid?

I think a lot of chick-lit is hackneyed,

cliched and repetitive. I am so over the thirty-something looking for love, or the deserted slummy mummy who loses her tummy and becomes yummy. Too many writers are lazy and don't make demands on themselves, or on their reader. With every novel I write, I want to experiment and push myself a bit, and my readers are sharp, bright and savvy enough to more than keep up. If that means I may fail sometimes, then so be it. Anything rather than chunter along on the same old, well-worn rut.

Do you ever get much feedback from male readers?

I do have a few male readers – probably far more than would confess to it – and they do occasionally write to me. They always seem surprised that my fiction is "intelligent" – if plot and character are purely male literary prerogatives. They also love the sex scenes, I have to admit.

In June you're bringing out another book, this time a non-fiction volume called *Beat the Bitch: How to Stop the Other Woman Stealing Your Man*. It sounds like a few of your own characters could do with reading it.

Beat the Bitch has been a wild ride! It does exactly what it says on the tin: it'll help women to discover when their man is having an affair, and how to slap the other woman down before she steals him. Any woman in a relationship should read it. Three out of four men have cheated or will cheat on their wives and long-term partners. That's a terrifying, but true, statistic. Girls, you have been warned!

ANDY MURRAY