

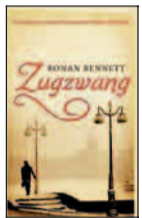
Paperbacks

FICTION Charmaine Chan

**Fireworks**

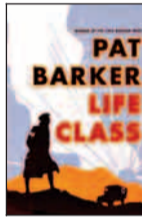
by Elizabeth H. Winthrop
Sceptre, HK\$132
★★★★☆

Readers of *Fireworks* could be forgiven for thinking "same, same but different". A married couple's relationship is threatened by the death several years earlier of their four-year-old son. Writer Hollis Clayton, in his 40s, is in denial about his rudderless life, even though it's clear he is flailing. His wife, who thus far has been his emotional buoy, decides to spend several months with her sister to work out whether she wants to remain married. With no one to turn to, not even the young woman with whom Clayton was having an affair (she drifts away after his disturbing behaviour at a fireworks display), he occupies his time with all things mundane: a lost dog, spying on the neighbours, trimming a hedge and the plight of a missing girl. One-person dinners become a chore (ironically, because there's no one else's preferences to consider), so he buys the same takeaway meal every day. And drinking is preferable to work, which is why he continues to avoid his editor, thus jeopardising his chances of success. Elizabeth H. Winthrop deftly succeeds in portraying the angst and hopelessness of her protagonist but almost completely eschews plot in favour of characterisation. However, her acute, and sometimes humorous, observations make this a winning debut.

**Zugzwang**

by Ronan Bennett
Bloomsbury, HK\$164
★★★★☆

Following in the footsteps of Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who serialised their novels in newspapers, Ronan Bennett made weekly submissions to *The Observer* for seven months, the result of which is *Zugzwang*. The novel, set in St Petersburg in 1914, is narrated by Dr Otto Spethmann, a psychoanalyst implicated in several murders and a widower with a wayward 18-year-old daughter. In the midst of the police investigation into the crimes is a chess tournament, whose star is the mentally unstable genius Avrom Rozental. Along with beautiful socialite Anna Petrovna, Rozental becomes one of Spethmann's patients. While the doctor delves into Rozental's mind and unwisely falls in love with his female client, he continues a chess match with his friend, Polish violinist R.M. Kopelzon. As he plots his moves – which Bennett details with pictures of the board, accompanied by captions such as "Can Spethmann win the all-important f-pawn?" – he mulls his seemingly impossible predicament in life among the pieces opening the path to his king. Hence the title *Zugzwang*, a chess term referring to a player's obligation to move even though he knows it will worsen his position. Cleverly plotted and paced, the novel is a chancy experiment that pays off for Bennett.

**Life Class**

by Pat Barker
Hamish Hamilton,
HK\$179
★★★★☆

Pat Barker's study of the first world war helped win her a Booker Prize for the last volume of her *Regeneration* trilogy. In *Life Class* she continues to anchor her narrative on biographies of artists who passed through London's Slade School of Art before the war. Barker casts her net wide, mixing fact with fiction and made-up characters with real-life figures, such as Henry Tonks, a surgeon-turned-artist in whose studio Barker's fictional characters meet in 1914 for life-drawing classes. They include protagonist Paul Tarrant, Elinor (Tonks' favourite pupil), and a married model Tarrant beds because he doesn't believe he stands a chance with Elinor. Not surprisingly it is life that educates Tarrant, as a volunteer, ends up helping the dying and injured at a military hospital and reproducing horrifying images of war on canvas. He expresses himself through art as much as Elinor hides behind it. Barker's brush-and-scalpel conceit adds colour while cutting open the casualties of war. That Barker effectively stimulates interest is revealed by the closeness with which readers will probably read her bibliographic acknowledgments: a tempting follow-up is *Henry Tonks: Art and Surgery* by Emma Chambers.

NON-FICTION Tim Cribb

**Making Globalization Work - The Next Steps to Global Justice**

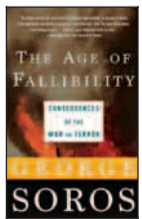
by Joseph Stiglitz
Penguin, HK\$148
★★★★☆

There are three types of economist: those who can count, and those who can't. Quite how that relates to the 2001 Nobel Prize for Economics recipient Joseph Stiglitz may be somewhat moot. Since his rant against the International Monetary Fund and the mess it made of the Asian financial crisis, the former chief economist of the World Bank has been on something of a globalisation campaign: *Making Globalization Work* extends the argument he began in *Globalization and its Discontents* (2002) by suggesting ways the poor, developing world might better benefit from a system skewed in favour of the rich, developed world. His proposals include seven reforms of the way countries can borrow funds, seven changes in the international trading system and five major fixes to the operations of multinational corporations. Joe Perkins in the *London Review of Books* calls the author "an inventive and original thinker". This author did win the Nobel Prize for showing Adam Smith wasn't always right and that markets do sometimes misallocate resources. Not all of his arguments hold up here, but Stiglitz makes a lot of valid points and his use of anecdote and vignette to highlight inequity makes for a sometimes chilling argument.

**Seize the Hour - When Nixon Met Mao**

by Margaret MacMillan
John Murray, HK\$148
★★★★☆

Former US president Richard Nixon didn't so much seize the hour as fawn throughout his 65-minute audience with the Great Helmsman in February 1972. He was basking in the minutely planned television coverage – the four-hour banquet was broadcast live by the US networks – and the huge jump in popularity helped him to a landslide re-election. Mao Zedong, a "crafty realist" who wanted rapprochement as much as Nixon, kept his guest waiting in what one diplomat considered the manner of a Chinese emperor. Nixon, ignorant that Mao was dying of heart failure, declared "the Chairman's writings moved a nation and have changed the world" and felt honoured when Mao replied: "Your book, *The Six Crises*, is not a bad book." And so it went, what Nixon himself dubbed "the week that changed the world". But by Margaret MacMillan's telling in *Seize the Hour - When Nixon Met Mao*, it was "a remarkably shabby human tale". Her narrative is gripping – what Percy Cradock in *The Sunday Telegraph* called "diplomatic history at its most lively and accessible" – and she fleshes out the familiar story with contemporary context and ample anecdotes about Nixon and Mao, and their lieutenants Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai.

**The Age of Fallibility - The Consequences of the War on Terror**

George Soros
Public Affairs, HK\$120
★★★★☆

The billionaire financier and philanthropist lays out how he plans to save the world in *The Age of Fallibility - The Consequences of the War on Terror*. "In financial markets, I take positions to win," George Soros writes. "In the social sphere, I take positions because I believe in them whether I succeed or not." He doesn't claim to have all the answers, but reckons "the common interests of humanity badly need looking after and it is better to do it imperfectly than not to try at all". In his well-argued and provocative *The Age of Fallibility*, Soros explains that fallibility is to accept that nobody is in possession of the absolute truth, so individuals within societies must question not so much what they believe but how and why they have come to believe what they do. The American tycoon wants to understand why we elect governments that blatantly restrict fundamental liberties and his particular nemesis is George W. Bush's administration. The first part of the book is an optional discussion of the philosophy behind his thinking as a financier and humanist. The second is about issues that must be confronted for the sake of the future.

Media control, expat living and the handover: Muhammad Cohen tells a tale that few people dare to tell, writes **Annemarie Evans**

Here comes a city



It's six months before the handover and New York-based news reporter-turned-television producer Laura Wellesley dreams of covering the story. She secures a transfer to Hong Kong to work for the morning show at Franklin Global Network Asia, or FGN Asia. She brings her Jewish lingerie-selling husband, whom she hastily married for visa purposes prior to their arrival.

They live in a cramped flat near the escalator and Laura's life is one of antiscalar hours, with a wake-up time of 2am, and working with an egomaniacal anchor, Deng Jiang Mao. Her husband works days, she comes home and falls asleep, he plays away and cracks start to appear in the marriage.

Muhammad Cohen's novel *Hong Kong On Air* pierces the crazy world of morning television, where there is no such thing as stress, the anchor has an enormous ego, there is lots of running around at the last minute and somehow every day Laura manages, by the seat of her pants, to put the programme out.

Cohen knows that world. He worked for CNN in Washington. He then moved to Hong Kong in 1995 to work on the start-up of CNBC Asia and decided to stay.

"When I worked at CNN in Washington we had a noon show. One of the points of pride for us

Asia Specific

was that every day we would get the tape in the morning on Capitol Hill which we could get on the show at noon," he says.

"That sounds straightforward, but we would have to select sound bites and get it on the air, get those sound bites transcribed and put into the system. And it was important that we got it on the air as it was one of the big justifications for our existence in Washington. If you work in live television you can't believe in stress. You just do it. You can't waste a minute on stress."

Apart from Fox Television and CCTV, Cohen says television news shows evolve in the studio and not from editorial policies on high. He's also pleased that most people from his television days are still talking to him and that he never knew an anchor like Deng, a ghastly American-born Chinese who makes Laura's life hell.

"The characters developed as the book went on. When I started I couldn't have told you how these different characters would play out. But I did have an idea of the basic

story that I wanted to tell," says Cohen, who began writing the novel in 1996. "I wanted people to understand television news, how much individual control there is, rather than corporate control. Everyone talks about corporate control of the media. In fact, it's still a very individual thing and what you see on the air is the product of a number of individuals."

His book at times is hilarious, at times wince-inducing. Jeff Golden, Laura's husband, oversees the production line for his Golden Beauties lingerie. Business is done over the table, under the table and with cookie cans stuffed with cash smuggled over the border, as well as in mainland brothels. Golden is dominated by his mother running the stores back home in the US and she's quite happy to cut her son out as the middleman if she feels she can score a better deal – killing his confidence in the process.

Increasingly estranged from his wife, he finds solace with Yogi, a Japanese banker who likes Jewish food and men, and they frolic in the swimming pool of Hong Kong's Jewish Community Club. Cohen was fascinated by the Jewish Community Centre; before Hong Kong he'd never come across the concept.

Cohen comes from a Jewish

background and was previously known as Eliot Cohen, changing his name a few years ago when he converted to Islam and married his Indonesian partner. They have a young daughter who is also being brought up in the Muslim faith. Cohen is keen on inter-religious dialogue and activities that bring people of different faiths together, working with an international organisation encouraging the same.

In a lot of ways this is a love letter to Hong Kong, about how this really was a melting pot bubbling with pure gold

In *Hong Kong On Air*, Cohen reflects on the cramped living conditions and the hectic pace of life in Hong Kong as seen by Laura and Jeff. But whereas many people saw the handover as "the story" of 1997, Cohen says the story that people don't tell is how China rose through the financial crisis that hit its neighbours, and how it benefited from it. "In a lot of ways this is a

love letter to Hong Kong, about how this really was a melting pot bubbling with pure gold and the whole world was watching it. This was the centre of the universe, anyone who was anybody in the news business wanted to be here on June 30, 1997. Everyone was wondering what would happen.

"The other thing that I wanted to get through to people in the story was that we thought we knew what the biggest story of 1997 was. What could be bigger than the handover? But, of course, within hours of the handover the Asian economic crisis happened, which was a much bigger story, and a much bigger story for Hong Kong, because it was what moved China to centre stage in the global economy."

A new young boss of FGN Asia arrives in Hong Kong, turfs out the dead wood, turns the graphics girl into a star and makes the station a hit. It's time for the handover, with Cohen's characters involved in revenge, betrayal, success and failure. "Through the characters and events in the book you see how China takes centre stage," says Cohen, "which triggers a great leap forward for some and a long march to failure for others."

Hong Kong On Air
(Blacksmith Books, HK\$95)

The Booker Prize runners and riders

Tim Cribb

What would the Man Booker Prize, one of the richest and most coveted literary awards, be without controversy, manufactured or otherwise? There was concern enough that the shortlist of six novels, announced on September 6, from a long list of 13 titles, featured only one "name" author, Ian McEwan. There is always a row about who is overlooked.

This year's "scandal" focuses on the outspoken chair of the panel of judges, Howard Davies, director of the London School of Economics.

Jeanette Winterson, whose *The Stone Gods* (reviewed this week) was among those overlooked in the long list, was appalled at Davies' admission that he read 80 pages an hour. "If you've got some bloody idiot who thinks it's great to read at 80 pages an hour when it's not *The Da Vinci Code*, you're doomed," she told *The Guardian*, which is something of a watchdog when it comes to the Booker. Davies took umbrage and, in an unapologetic retort in *The Independent*, declared Winterson's book "a complete failure as a novel".

The winner of the 2007 Man Booker Prize and its £50,000 (HK\$790,000) will be announced on Tuesday. The punters have their preferences, as the odds from Ladbrokes attest, but the judges

have backed themselves into a corner. The winner is obvious.

Mister Pip by Lloyd Jones

(John Murray) – 2/1
This surprise favourite from the New Zealand writer had five impressions in softcover before reaching hardback. Jones, 52, attracted attention in 1993 when his *Biografi: An Albanian Quest*, was chosen as a *New York Times* Notable Book. *Mister Pip* won the Commonwealth literary prize in May.

Set in Bougainville amid the 1990s uprising, *Mister Pip* weaves a reading of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* into the brutal realities of a minor war and its incumbent atrocities. Potentially a powerful example of post-colonial literature, it's let down by its final chapters.

On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan

(Jonathan Cape) – 5/2
There have been arguments that this is more novella than novel, although, at 166 pages, it's only 12 pages shy of his *Amsterdam*, which won the 1998 Booker. This is the 10th novel from 45-year-old McEwan.

Set in 1962, about a married couple's first night together, the book's premise is the universal problem of communication, of what is said and left unsaid, of moments in everyone's lives when a single word changes everything, for better



Shortlisted (from left): Ian McEwan, Lloyd Jones and Indra Sinha. Photos: AP

or worse. McEwan's sublime accomplishment is to end this rich and lyrical tale exactly where he should, with the reader clamouring for more and, by rights, the prize should be his.

Darkmans by Nicola Barker

(Fourth Estate) – 4/1
Barker, 41, sallies forth in her seventh novel with an inventive and often witty 838-page epic centred on the town of Ashford in Kent and involving a large cast of characters and the manifested spirit of one John Scogin, 16th-century court jester of Edward IV.

This risky book has little in the way of plot and relies on careful construction and exploration of language to lead the reader. Critics were divided, except in agreement that Barker is not to everyone's taste. One reviewer was "bereft"

when it ended, another annoyed and exhausted by its "arbitrary and unsatisfactory" resolution.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist

by Mohsin Hamid (Hamish Hamilton) – 6/1
Reviewing in these pages, Manreet Sodhi Someshwar declared *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to be "a beautifully written narrative" in which Hamid, 36, "explores the dilemma of a young man who discovers within him a primeval force – patriotism" following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre.

Hamid, who moved to London from Lahore via Princeton and Harvard Law School, and who has *Moth Smoke* (2000) to his credit, deserves praise for his control and "lovely stillness", but he lays on the symbolism with a trowel.

The Gathering by Anne Enright

(Jonathan Cape) – 9/1
What would the Booker be without a showing from Ireland? Enright, 45, delivers a family epic set around the alcoholic death of a younger brother and pursued through an uncomfortable first-person narrative filled with what one critic called unconvincing "omniscient third-person flashbacks".

With three novels to her credit, Enright, a product of Malcolm Bradbury's writing school, displays the technique and imagination required of a great writer but as yet lacks the mastery, not least the grammar, expected of a Booker Prize winner.

Animal's People by Indra Sinha

(Simon & Schuster) – 9/1
An award-winning advertising copywriter, Sinha, 57, bases his second novel, *Animal's People*, in a small Indian town ravaged by a toxic chemical leak from a nearby American factory. Turn your mind to Bhopal and Union Carbide.

His narrator is a teenage boy with a damaged spine who learns to walk on his hands and wants only to walk upright and experience humanity. This is a big-issue novel – justice, equality, the nature of man – and Sinha leaves the reader with much to think about, but the verbosity of his characters almost drowns out the message.