

**Paul Magrs**

**ALL THE RAGE**

258pp. Allison and Busby. Paperback, £9.99.

TLS £8.99.

0 7490 0536 X

**A**ll the Rage, Paul Magrs's fifth novel, charts the fortunes of a pop band called "Things Fall Apart", from their debut (and dismal failure) at the 1981 Eurovision Song Contest to the release of their Greatest Hits album and subsequent decline into the "where are they now?" file. The story is set against a gaudy background of fashion, television shows and music, evoking "the decade that taste forgot".

On an evening out with work colleagues, Will recognizes Debbie Now, a fallen pop idol, singing karaoke in her mother's Chinese restaurant. He strikes up a friendship with her, partly attracted by her (now tarnished) fame, partly to spite his ex-boyfriend Simon, an aficionado of 1980s pop music. Debbie needs Will, who claims to be her biggest fan, to bolster her faltering self-belief. When she learns that a television soap star, Shelley Sommers, plans to record a cover version of the band's best-known song "Let's be Famous", she takes Will with her on a quest to reunite the scattered members of the band and rally them in defence of their music.

Magrs alternates chapters set mainly in the present day with flashbacks to the band's glory days and their ensuing fall from grace, poignantly contrasting past adulation with present anonymity. The novel is particularly engaging when detailing the group dynamics of a manufactured band. The gathering momentum of the group's self-destruction is finely plotted, but *All the Rage* is ultimately far more narrative- than plot-driven. In his earlier novels, Magrs evoked ordinary lives in careworn Northern towns, and here he treats the quotidian with a great tenderness. He has a fine ear for conversation and his dialogue is full of picturesque colloquialisms: "kayleighed" (drunk), "stotting" (furious) and "mithering" (fretting). The characterization is strong, and there are some good comic moments featuring Roy, the band's foul-mouthed transvestite manager.

*All the Rage* sometimes seems a bit too self-consciously literary. The band's name comes from W. B. Yeats; a fan of the band goes by the unlikely name of "Timon", while Will talks of Wordsworthian "spots of time" and complains that a character "was coming on like someone doo-lally in a novel by Virginia Woolf". This tendency, which seems to be at odds with the general tone and subject matter, is partly explained by Will's comment: "an English degree can really bugger up your later life".

SALLY CONNOLLY

**Tony Parsons**

**ONE FOR MY BABY**

330pp. Harper Collins. £15.99.

TLS £13.99.

0 00 226182 0

**F**ollowing the success of *Man and Boy*, Tony Parsons has written another comic fiction with a sentimental storyline. *One for My Baby* gives rise to some laughs, and most readers will get a lump in their throat at least once, as Parsons writes, vividly and with compassion, about a loved one with a terminal illness. However, the new novel is almost bound to disappoint those who enjoyed *Man and Boy* because it is strikingly similar, but weaker. The central character in both books lives in Highbury, North London, fancies women with long legs and "goofy" smiles and has read an article claiming that the person who holds the most power in a relationship is the one who cares least.

Alfie of *One for My Baby* is more honourable than Harry of *Man and Boy*. Harry's marriage ended because he was unfaithful. Alfie's ends because his wife dies tragically, but Parsons holds back this piece of information until the middle of the book for more dramatic impact. Harry had the pathos of being abandoned by his wife to look after his son alone, while Alfie struggles with self-pity. It is hard to believe in him as someone who wants "a trip to the moon on gossamer wings rather than a quick shag", not least because after taking a job as a teacher at Churchill's language school, he proceeds to sleep with several students. But perhaps a bigger problem is Parsons's inability to resist making terrible jokes. Alfie claims that he doesn't judge Jackie, the school's cleaner, for being an Essex girl. When she turns up uninvited on his doorstep, he says: "I was expecting the girl from Ipanema. What I get is the girl from Ilford." She is supposed to be the grounded single mother who will show him the way through mourning to a meaningful relationship, but he refers to her as the "Char from Churchill's". After his parents' marriage has broken up as a result of his father's infidelity, "You're mutton dressed up as ram, Dad", he says, and worries that his mother's new gardener is going to sink "his fingers into her top-soil". These quips seriously undermine what could otherwise have been, like its precursor, a moving and thought-provoking novel.

JOSIE BARNARD

**Lennard J. Davis**

**THE SONNETS**

164pp. State University of New York Press; distributed in the UK by Plymbridge. £14.

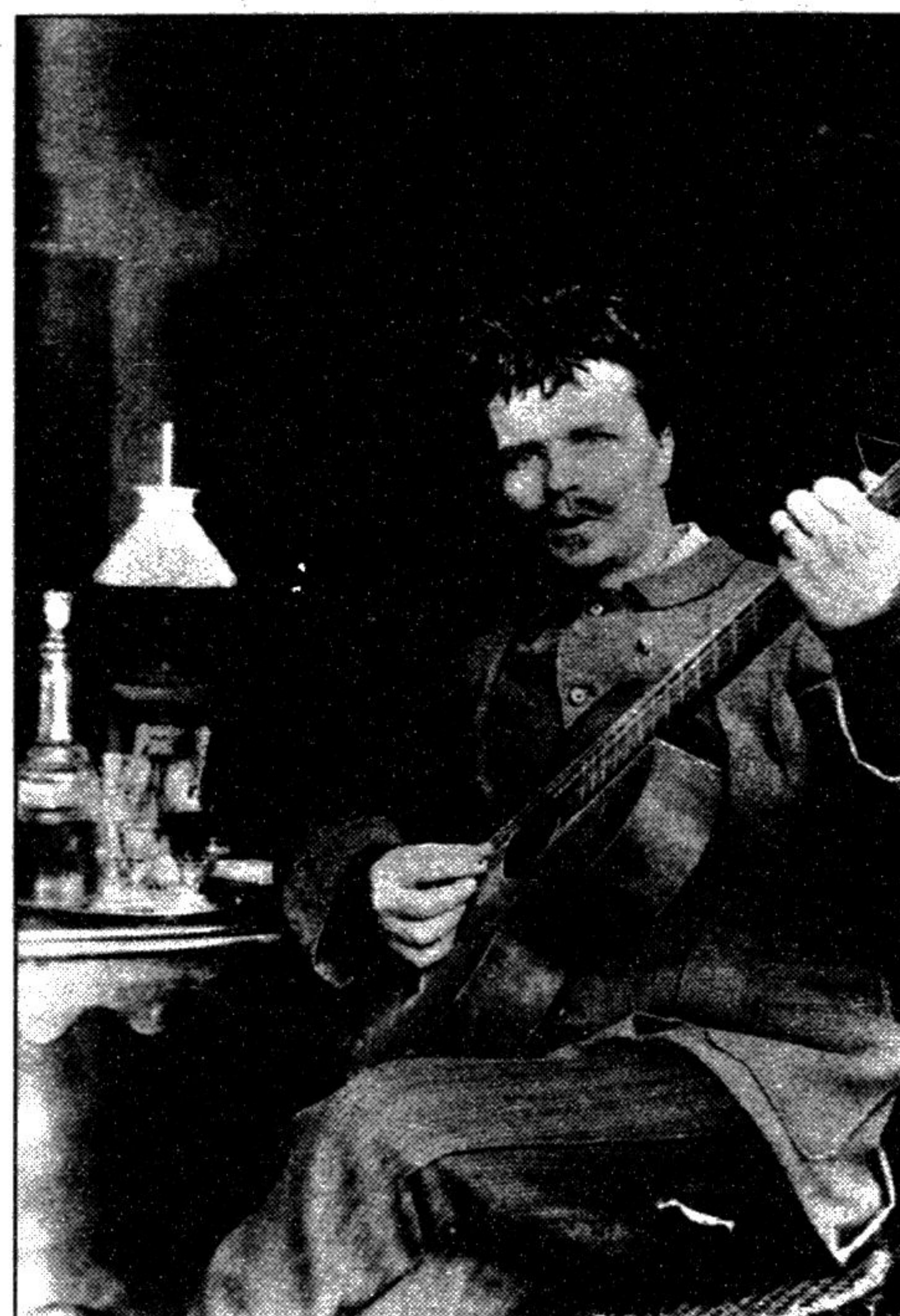
TLS £13.

0 7914 4977 7

**T**he Sonnets is a playful game of magic realism. It closes with the narrator, Professor Will Marlow, beginning to inscribe the novel we have just read, taking "a kind of inspiration from Shakespeare's own life", and using an antique notebook allegedly once owned by Voltaire that he has foolishly purchased for \$8,500 for his unbookish "fair youth". Instead of writing an academic book on the "Sonnets", the Columbia professor uses them to lend spurious greatness to his own sexual adventures, thus removing them as far as possible from "the dusty Oxford dons who owned and licensed the Bard". Each chapter has as its title a quotation from the Sonnets – for example "The Only Begetter", "The Vacant Leaves Thy Mind's Imprint Will Wear". On to the dismembered body of Shakespeare's Sonnets, Lennard J. Davis has grafted a more contemporary form, the campus novel, with echoes also of sexual harassment narratives such as David Mamet's *Oleanna* or J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Fashionable jargon is usually associated here with the professor's Dark Lady, Chantal:

We were wrestling for the phallus, as Lacan would have said had he been there. Had he been there, he would have had the phallus, but luckily he was dead, his penis now a dry bit of parchment having lost all claim to lofty signification.

Wisecracks and literary allusions abound, as do fantastical inventions, such as Chantal's device for summoning up computer-generated images of the dead from musical notation – Shakespeare, of course, is summoned up – and the young man's obsessive construction of a model of the solar system. But a simpler, more familiar tale of campus life struggles to get out. The most compelling passages are not the sex scenes, which are rather unpleasant, but the passages in which the professor expresses his hatred for the rival poet, a New Zealander



One of a series of thirty-seven self-portrait photographs taken under the direction of August Strindberg in 1886; this one has the caption: "It doesn't help to eat grass."

From *Strindberg: Photographer and painter* by Per Hedström (192pp. Yale. £30.

0 300 09187 7)

called Norman Goldman who gets the girl, the boy and even the Nobel Prize: "shits like Goldman somehow managed to create beautiful things". Not sexual obsession but academic envy drives *The Sonnets*, making it entertaining in ways that the author may possibly not have intended.

KATHERINE DUNCAN-JONES

**David Pirie**

**THE PATIENT'S EYES**

245pp. Century. £12.99.

TLS £10.99.

0 7126 7089 0

**D**avid Pirie's novel places Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself at the heart of the narrative. With at least a passing nod to history, it describes the relationship between a youthful Arthur Doyle and one of his tutors at Edinburgh University, Dr Joseph Bell. Bell has long been credited as the inspiration for Sherlock Holmes, and Pirie makes him an amateur sleuth with Doyle his enthusiastic assistant – thereby promoting the doctor from mere inspiration to the very model of the great detective. It is a witty, elegant conceit, but its effect is to diminish the role of Doyle's imaginative powers in the creation of his most iconic character. The novel opens with its protagonist freshly graduated from medical school and struggling to make a success of his Southsea practice. His very first patient, a beguiling young woman named Heather Grace, is bothered by a phantom cyclist who vanishes as soon as he is pursued. Doyle pledges to help, but is soon forced to call on the services of his old friend Dr Bell. The narrative, which is charged with full-blooded melodrama, draws on some of Doyle's stories: the heroine derives from "The Speckled Band", the pedalling stalker from "The Solitary Cyclist".

Pirie creates a convincing Victorian world of eerie moors and fearless detectives, impenetrable ciphers and strange hooded assassins. Even the novel's villain, the monstrous naturalist Charles Blythe, is a quintessentially Doylean creation. We are left in no doubt that the man is a blackguard from his very first appearance, when he boasts of flaying the skins of snakes for sport, adding gleefully "sometimes I even

milk their venom". Unfortunately, the deductions of Pirie's Dr Bell, supposedly near miraculous, here rather deflate the atmosphere. Compared to Sherlock Holmes's magnificent leaps of logic and imagination, Bell's observation that a patient of Doyle must be prone to anger, based only on the fact that her right shoe is worn down from constant, irate stamping of her foot, seems very small beer. However, this is a pacy, enjoyable yarn, with a surprising twist that ranks with the best of the Doyle canon.

JON BARNES

**Francis King**

**PRODIGES**

358pp. Arcadia. Paperback, £11.99.

TLS £10.99.

1 900850 55 9

**F** Francis King sets his novel in a version of the nineteenth century where cash is limitless, religion absent and morality easily shrugged off. Daguerreotypes, botanical sketchbooks and quack health cures – even the introduction of Clara Schumann and a Russian Tsar – are not enough by themselves to convey the true period atmosphere. Alexine, a pretty Dutch heiress, flouts convention with impunity. Her mother and her aunt are so unshockable that it is hard to fathom why they all need to go to Africa on a voyage of discovery; there seems little scope for liberation. The revelation that Alexine's aunt was circumcised in London twenty years before demonstrates the barbarism of the civilized world. Savage Africa is where people are reborn and where they come fully alive.

Alexine meets a retired explorer at a Romanian spa, and he gives her a map of Africa covered in red markings which follow an "erratic zigzag course, often doubling and redoubling on itself". The image is echoed later by the crimson threads of blood which mark the face of a dying missionary. The tracteries symbolize the paradoxical qualities of the Dark Continent, life-giving and lethal. Alexine thrills to Captain Scott's contemptuous opinion of what he escaped by going to Africa: "silly conventions . . . hypocrisies", little women, slippers, fawning children; "Ugh!" he shudders, "stretching out his long powerful legs ahead of him". These legs are startling, as on the previous page they are limping and "gamy".

On the map he has written "here be monsters", so there is the promise of monstrous "prodigies" or even the snap of a crocodile's jaw. It is disappointing to discover that the prodigy is Alexine herself, the tribute awarded to her by another traumatized revenant from the Heart of Darkness. "You must be an extraordinary woman", he says, "– a prodigy". If quelling mutinies by looking imperious in a night-dress and doling out biscuits to manacled slaves is prodigious, then so she is. But she falls flat whenever she opens her mouth, as does everyone else here. When she succumbs to a bout of fever, monsters surface in her brief delirium: "prodigies far more terrible than even this huge, frightening, fascinating continent was capable of spawning out of its pitch-black womb".

Following on an erratic course between Finland, The Hague, Sicily, Naples, Tripoli, Khartoum and Cairo, *Prodigies* resembles a high-budget costume drama, at first dazzling, then depressing. The prose is a mangrove swamp of superfluous detail and subordinate clauses that stagger off course. Buoyed up at first by hopeful conjecture, one dashes bravely up narrative blind alleys – until one realizes how inconsequential they all are. Many will sympathize with Alexine's Aunt Addy who opts out of the adventure halfway and retires to the top of a camel to read Balzac.

NOONIE MINOGUE



Connolly, Sally. "Fiction in Brief." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5133, 17 Aug. 2001, p. 21. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200505348/TLSH?u=txshracd2588&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=f1335ff3](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200505348/TLSH?u=txshracd2588&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=f1335ff3). Accessed 23 Aug. 2021.