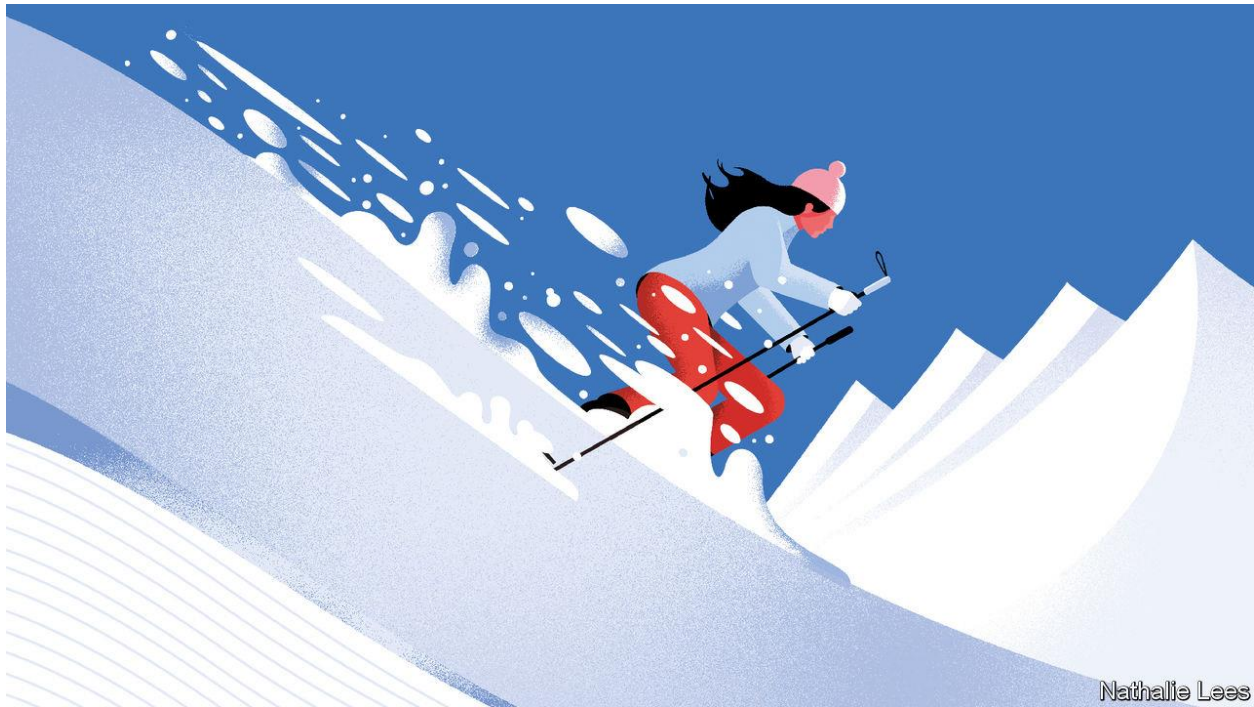


THE ECONOMIST

Word up

## Our books of the year

*They were about the IRA, Harper Lee's lost work, rational economics and an Ohio housewife*



[Print edition](#) | Books and arts

Dec 7th 2019

### Culture and ideas

**Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud and the Last Trial of Harper Lee.** By Casey Cep. Knopf; 336 pages; \$26.95. William Heinemann; £20

An ingeniously structured, beautifully written double mystery—one concerning the Reverend Willie Maxwell, who was accused of murdering five relatives for the insurance money in Alabama in the 1970s (before being fatally shot himself); the other, Harper Lee's abortive efforts to write a book about the case. Tom Radney, a lawyer who is the story's third main character, defended Maxwell—and his killer.

**Kafka's Last Trial: The Case of a Literary Legacy.** By Benjamin Balint. W.W. Norton; 288 pages; \$26.95. Picador; £14.99

An account of the struggle over Kafka's papers between competing archives in Israel and Germany—plus a woman who inherited them from a friend of his editor, Max Brod—which played out after most of the writer's family had died in the Holocaust. A book about the provenance of art, and how much, in the end, it matters.

**Underland: A Deep Time Journey.** By Robert Macfarlane. W.W. Norton; 384 pages; \$27.95. Hamish Hamilton; £20

A haunting examination of the world below the surface—a place that has always been envisioned as a zone of treasure and of dread. From the Paris catacombs to the soil of Epping Forest to caverns in remotest Norway, the author, a celebrated nature-writer, re-envisioning the planet from the ground down.

**Three Women.** By Lisa Taddeo. Simon & Schuster; 320 pages; \$27. Bloomsbury Circus; £16.99

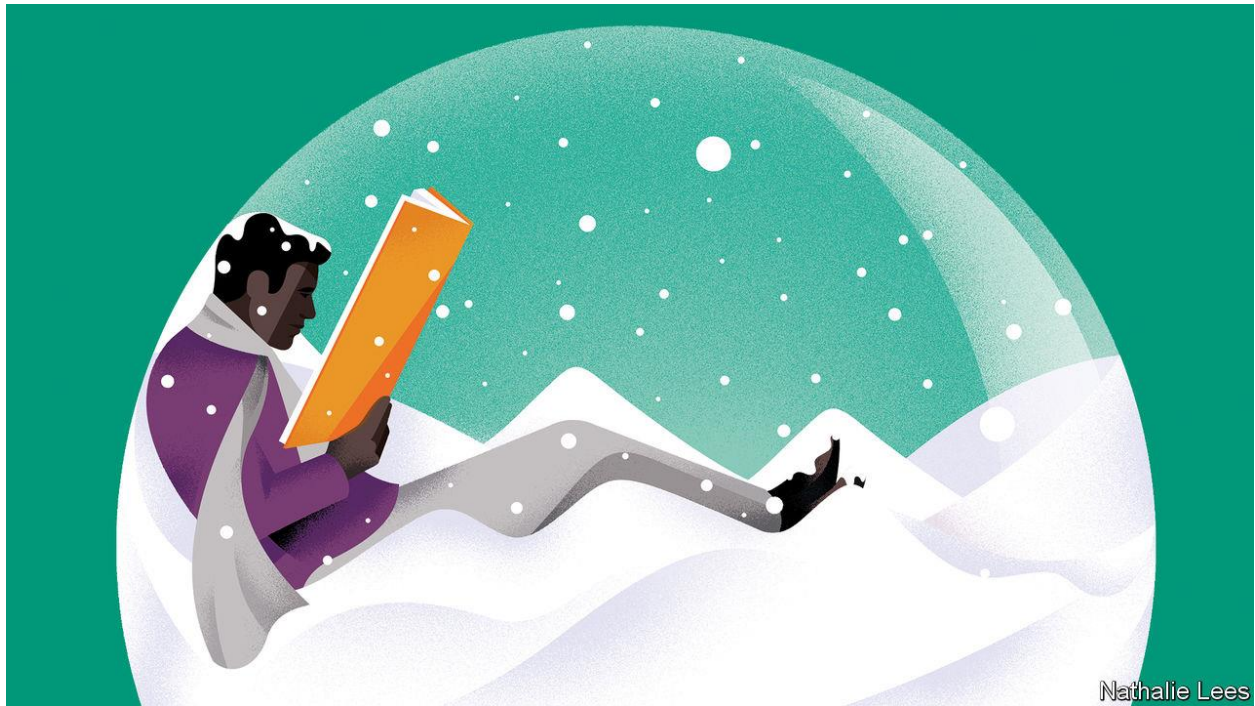
Eight years of reporting went into this portrait of American sexuality from a female perspective. The author's three subjects "stand for the whole of what longing in America looks like"; she spent time in their home towns to study their daily routines, jobs and, above all, their desires. With a novelist's eye for detail, she captures the pain and powerlessness of sex, as well as its heady joys.

**A Month in Siena.** By Hisham Matar. Random House; 126 pages; \$27. Viking; £12.99

The author's life and writing have been shaped by his Libyan father's kidnapping in 1990 by the regime of Muammar Qaddafi. In previous work he tried to uncover what happened; in this slim, bewitching book he finds answers, of a sort, by travelling to Siena. Meditating on art, history and the relationship between them, this is both a portrait of a city and an affirmation of life's quiet dignities in the face of loss.

**This is Shakespeare.** By Emma Smith. Pelican; 368 pages; £20

A brilliant and accessible tour of Shakespeare's plays that is also a radical manifesto for how to read and watch his work. Witty, irreverent and searching, this book, by a professor at Oxford University, shines dazzling new light on the oeuvre of the world's greatest literary genius.



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