The Observer
08|06|25

the new review

Plus

Nicola Sturgeon on Jacinda Ardern

Kitty Empire: Little Simz gets angry

David Mitchell: the oddity of Liz Truss

Miriam Frankel: is the universe getting smaller?

‘Life, London … this moment in June’

On the centenary of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway, Vanessa Thorpe makes the case for ‘Dallowayday’. Plus: a new story by Deborah Levy inspired by the novel

Restaging Sarah Kane
Miranda Sawyer on a poignant theatrical revival

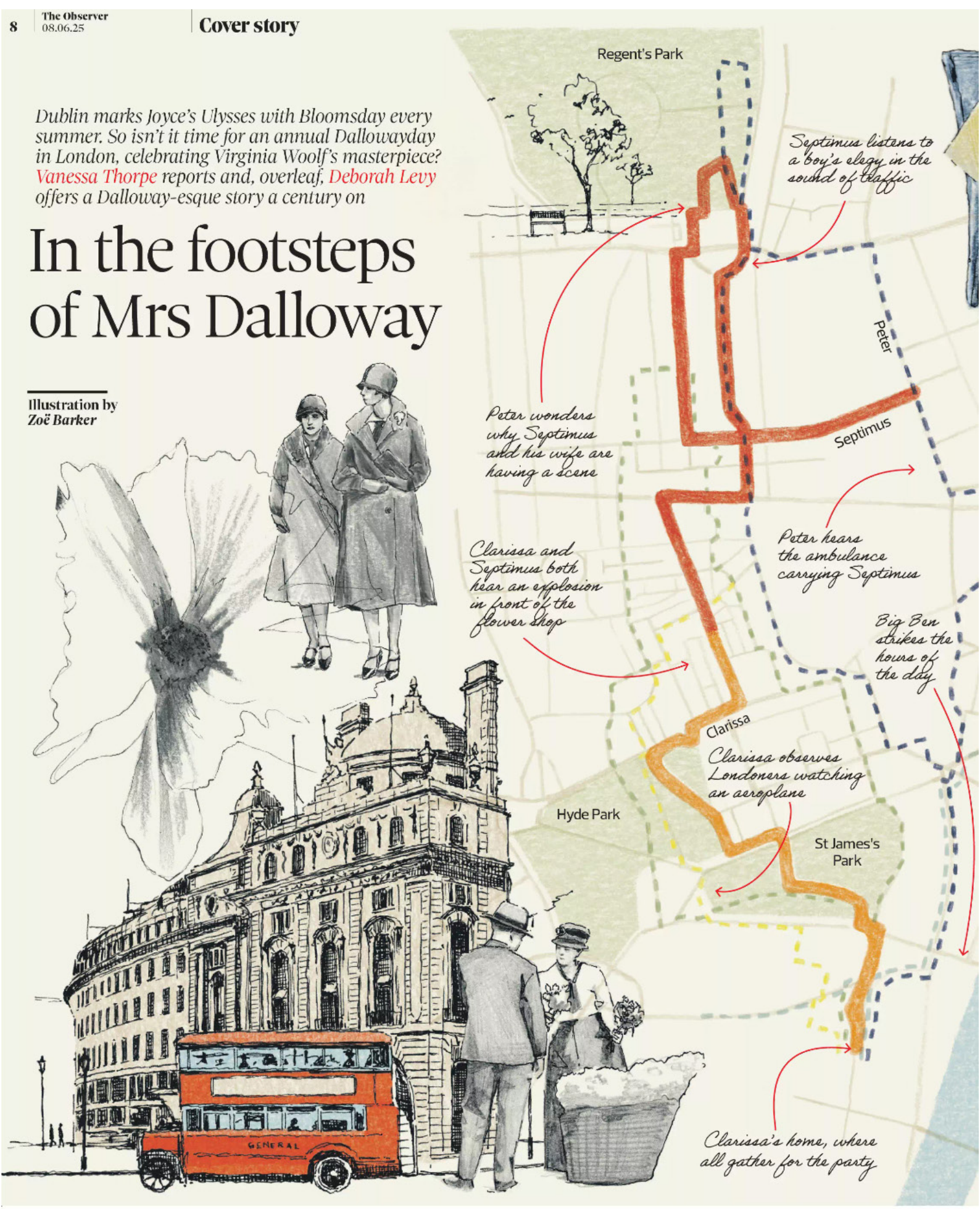
Haidt of anxiety
Tom Faber questions the scourge of smartphones

Treasure hunt
Andrew Anthony on the British Museum thefts

Dublin marks Joyce's Ulysses with Bloomsday every summer. So isn't it time for an annual Dallowayday in London, celebrating Virginia Woolf's masterpiece? Vanessa Thorpe reports and, overleaf, Deborah Levy offers a Dalloway-esque story a century on

In the footsteps of Mrs Dalloway

Illustration by **Zoë Barker**



Pedestrians on the pavements of St James's this week should be warned: they may have to circle clusters of apparently euphoric day trippers. Anyone with business in this part of London should please pass quietly by, allowing the visitors to tune in to the spirit of Virginia Woolf and listen out for "the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead; life; London; this moment of June". For they will be hardcore admirers of Woolf's short novel *Mrs Dalloway* – 100 years old this year – and out on a mission to trace the path of its heroine, Clarissa Dalloway.

Set on a single summer day, 13 June 1923, this talismanic book follows one woman around the smarter streets of the city as she buys gloves and chooses flowers for the dinner party she is to give. (Her route is shadowed in the novel by the walks of her former suitor, Peter Walsh, and her suicidal double, Septimus Smith.) For the centenary of the book's publication, a growing body of devotees are calling for the proper institution of Dallowayday in the literary calendar. This would grant the novel equal stature to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a work honoured every summer in Dublin three days later, on Bloomsday, when fans walk in the steps of its protagonist, Leopold Bloom.

"A day for Mrs Dalloway would be a great thing," urges the London Literary Salon's Californian founder, Toby Brothers. "It would be a wonderful chance to celebrate the exquisite proposal that Woolf makes in this book: that the interior realm can be heroic. We could have a party too, as the book is about holding a party." Brothers suspects Woolf would have relished the implicit challenge to the status of *Ulysses*, written seven years before her own novel came out. "Joyce has created perhaps a more expansive, explosive world, while Woolf's is introspective. But her writing really does acknowledge the integrity of the individual psyche and the privacy of the self in an extraordinary way."

> *"The exquisite proposal Woolf makes is that the interior realm can be heroic"*

Woolf's radical narrative, so the argument goes, can match Joyce's epic, stride for stride, admittedly over a shorter distance. True, Bloom's fictional tour of the Irish capital bristles with energy and bravado. But somehow, in spite of the fact Clarissa Dalloway is a dutiful 51-year-old wife to a Conservative MP who simply enjoys the breeze in Regent's Park after visiting the shops, the themes of her day are darker and more permanently unsettling. The line most often quoted to describe the strain of jeopardy that runs through the novel is now almost scripture for Woolf's keenest readers. Mrs Dalloway, we learn, "had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day".

The novel, which was followed over the next three decades by Woolf's major works, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*, paints a pleasing portrait of London, but it is also a sharp provocation. It insistently asks whether the fleeting joys of life can make it all worthwhile. We know Woolf's ultimate answer to this question. On 28 March 1941 she left her home and walked into the River Ouse, her pockets laden with stones. But in *Mrs Dalloway*, written 16 years earlier, she alludes to an alternative, more positive response, never denying the reality of human misery.

Helen Tennison, who is directing an immersive theatrical walk based on the novel, starting at the London

Continued overleaf

LEFT
A map showing the routes through London taken by some of the characters in Mrs Dalloway. The novel starts by following Clarissa, who meets Septimus at the flower shop. He then continues Clarissa's path up Bond Street.

wears sunglasses and has wrapped a long scarf entirely around his head, a kind of bandage, she thinks, or perhaps he resembles a pharaoh embalmed in a tomb. It is possible he is medicated, or wild and medicated, or feels royal like a pharaoh, wild and powerful. Everyone is watching him when he steps towards the door and suddenly jumps, a high jump, arms stretched above his head.

He reaches for a red button located above the door and presses it in a flash with the tips of his fingers. When the door opens halfway up the hill, he leaps off the bus and zigzags across the traffic.

It turns out (she is curious and a little scared) that he has pressed the button for the emergency exit, invisible to everyone else. He obviously knows all about escaping. The driver does not shout or respond, he merely closes the door with own remote button and continues driving. A woman sitting at the front of the bus (she wears a yellow knitted hat) says out loud: "Yes, and the world is at war."

Most people on the bus are on their screens, scrolling, scrolling, scrolling through the news in the 21st century; her own fingers, the littlest fingers in the family, are scrolling too. The news breaks into her mind and will sit there, desolately, all day. What is the day today? Tuesday. What is the news? Terrible. Desolate. When the bus stops by the park that was donated in 1889 to those who have no gardens, "a garden for the gardenless", she wonders if sleep might be her emergency button to exit the perilous world and tranquillise herself from the pain of others.

And her own.

Pain.

> *She had slept through the storm. It was as if it had never happened*

Now, as she walks through this park, a child, maybe nine years old, is saying to her mother: "I am a lion." She wears the blazer of her school uniform. Her mother replies, as if correcting her homework: "No, you are not a lion, it is a lion." Her child looks up at the aeroplane in the sky, flying through dusk, through twilight, flying through the beginning of the end of the day.

"I am a lion," the child chants, "I am a lion", and suddenly, she breaks away from the path to run across the grass, as if to chase someone or something away.

The winter trees that circle the small lake are bare, but what about the pigeons swelling themselves up for courting, chasing their sweethearts across the grass? Would she, age 60, prefer to be walking through this park with someone by her side, someone who has loved her for a long time, or would she prefer to be in the company of someone, who, at this moment, is falling in love with her? Yes, why not? Yet it would be absurd to make plans to fall in love, like the philosopher making plans to get to the temple on the Greek island, but never arriving.

Yes, the 21st century was in its twenties. Always a chaotic time, the twenties, certainly her own twenties; tumbling into love and out and in; exhilarating to have no mother to correct her feelings, she was a lion; breathless in her twenties, kissing, laughing, so much feeling, touching, crying, so much crying and laughing and kissing, so much to feel; she was softer then, light on her feet, letting wind blow her hair about, sun scald her shoulders, rain soak her shoes in every season. Yes, in her twenties she had arrived at the temple without making a single plan for the journey.

Now, walking through the park, she is slow and steady; slow and turbulent, steady and sadder, serene and steady, yes, calm and turbulent; she is a lion, more or less, less and more, less roaring than in her twenties, was that right? No, it was too exhausting to go into that (again), she would rather drift across the grass, and anyway she is looking forward to roasting the chestnuts. She will pierce each of them with the tip of a knife and wrap them in foil to roast. All the same, at least one of them would explode, like someone in a family always does.

Her neighbour is knocking at her door, can that be right, knocking gently, persistently? Yes, it is her neighbour, the doctor, a bunch of red roses in his hands, for her, he says, and he has good news. Today he managed to make plans for two weeks' leave in June, it took some doing to arrange; therefore, he wonders if he might, if he could definitely, take up her kind offer to look after his plants and his cat, including watering the small lemon tree.

So he had heard her, after all.

Almost. But not entirely. She explains that she has her own plans for the month of June, but she hopes that one way or another, he will make it to the temple.

***LEFT** Cécile de France in Yann Gozlan's forthcoming thriller, Dalloway.* *Mubi*

her Clarissa. Brothers takes up arms on behalf of Mrs Dalloway again: "It is simplistic and lazy to categorise her as either snobbish or asexual," she says, pointing out the character's romantic recollections of a long-ago kiss with a girl, Sally Seton; a memory that repeatedly detonates: "Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination, a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed..."

At the Cannes film festival this spring, audiences were given a fresh perspective on the perils lurking in *Mrs Dalloway*. When the lights went down for the premiere of Yann Gozlan's new thriller, *Dalloway*, they were presented with an unnerving scene from the near future in which a lone French novelist confronts a blank page. Her personal AI assistant, Dalloway, is nursing her through a bout of writer's block and duly projects a selection of visual prompts on to the wall.

A black and white photograph of Woolf's final home, Monk's House, flashes up, because the author, Clarissa, played by Cécile de France, is planning a book about Woolf's last day. Then, without warning, the image is replaced by the face of the writer's dead son. Dalloway is clearly playing a cruel game.

Gozlan's sinister screenplay goes on to pit the mind of a grieving human artist against the evolving intelligence of an algorithm. So far, so *Black Mirror*. The thriller, to be titled *The Residence* when it comes out in Britain this September, is the latest in a lengthening list of works inspired by the novel. The director riffs on Woolf's theme of suppressed anguish. And so too did Michael Cunningham in his 1998 bestseller *The Hours*, a literary hit that was also made into a film starring Nicole Kidman as Woolf. Brothers' literary salon is to screen this film in London on Friday at the Cinema Museum to mark the 100th "Dallowayday".

Earlier this spring, the Charleston festival, staged in what was the Sussex home of Woolf's sister, artist Vanessa Bell, opened with a pacan of appreciation for the novel in the form of readings and modern responses from writers; in the autumn, choreographer Wayne McGregor's *Woolf Works*, a meditation on the book, is to be revived by the Royal Ballet. Last month, the actor Fenella Woolgar starred in a new two-part adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway* for BBC Radio 4; and this week the David Simon Contemporary gallery in Somerset has joined in, mounting an exhibition of work by 15 modern artists made in reaction to the novel.

Perhaps the most unexpected variation on Woolf's themes will come later this week, though, in the shape of a novel by the Italian literary star Chiara Valerio. The writer has previously translated Woolf's works for Italian readers and has a particular feeling for *Mrs Dalloway*.

Her bestseller *The Little I Knew* was influenced by its ideas and will arrive in Britain laden with expectation, since Valerio has been praised by the acclaimed writers Mariana Enríquez, Sarah Waters, Jhumpa Lahiri and Olivia Laing.

"There are many correspondences between my novel and *Mrs Dalloway*," Valerio says on the phone from Italy, drawing out two elements. The first is Woolf's "fabulous, courageous idea that everyday conversations are not continuous. Between one sentence and the next there are birds, wine, other phrases out of context, memories, deaths." The second is the effect of social class on the way her characters express themselves.

Woolf is now a popular muse for the masses, says Valerio: "She is an icon now. You can buy a T-shirt with her brilliant, elegant, gloomy face on it." But for the Italian writer this commercialisation cannot dilute the intensity of *Mrs Dalloway*, "the darkest novel about war" she has read. It chronicles, Valerio thinks, the damage inflicted by marital and romantic wars, as well as by violent military conflict.

The line "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" holds the key. "Because so do I, so often," says Valerio. "So do a lot of women who decide to throw a party. The actual reason why one throws a party is that one is alive. One 'parties' because one is alive: because one can breathe, and nobody is bombing every Friday morning. *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel about the horrors of war: in the big world, in past loves, and in domestic life. So it is always important to celebrate being alive."