

# Waltz to the music of time

Olivia Laing

**The Emperor Waltz**  
Philip Hensher

Fourth Estate, 624pp, £18.99

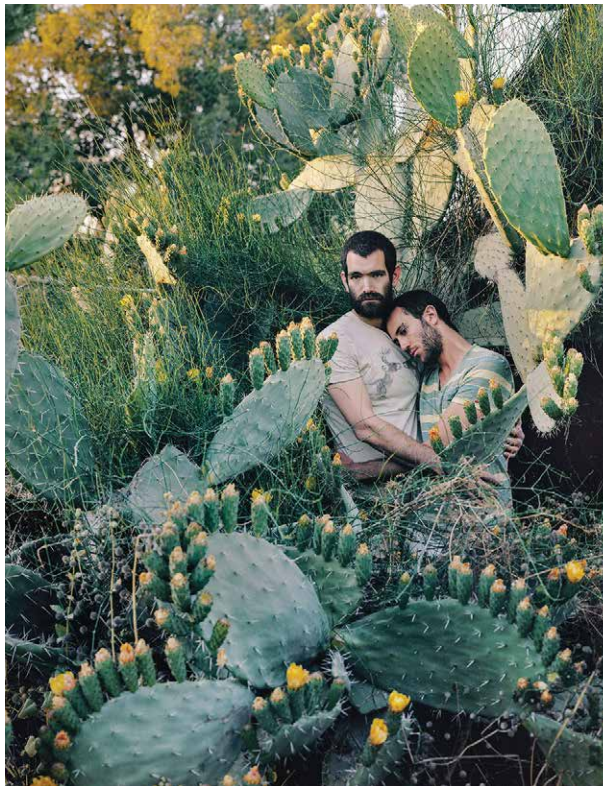
Listening to “Emperor Waltz” by Johann Strauss II is like being caught in a lovely whirl, spinning through disparate movements that somehow come together to form a complex, intricate whole. It’s an experience echoed by reading Philip Hensher’s ambitious and extraordinary ninth novel, which is haunted by “a familiar piece of music, the old-fashioned sound an orchestra might make for rich ladies and gentlemen to dance to, in the old-fashioned times”.

It is common to find a novel praised for its range and scope but what makes Hensher’s approach remarkable isn’t just the subtle parallels he draws between far-flung eras but also his decision to alight on historical moments that are more threshold than pivot, selecting periods of flux, preludes to some main, more scrutinised event.

The first of these is Weimar Germany, in the city of Weimar itself. A lawyer’s son is about to start studying at the Bauhaus. Despite his artistic tendencies, Christian Vogt is not a natural bohemian and he finds the avant-garde exhibitionism of his fellow students – the shaved heads, home-made purple robes and persistent whiff of garlic – less alluring than a pretty girl he encounters in the market. Elsewhere in town, Paul Klee is experimenting with lines and practical jokes, anti-Semites are parading in the streets and hyperinflation is advancing so swiftly that the price of a cup of coffee goes up by 50,000 marks in the space of an hour.

The problems raised here – of insiders *v* outsiders, power *v* resistance, risk *v* comfort – trouble other time frames, too. In a hospital bed in modern London, one Philip Hensher, a novelist, contemplates the imminent amputation of his toe, engaging in some profoundly middle-class manoeuvring to gain a private room. On the edge of the Roman empire, a merchant’s daughter comes into contact with the strange cult of Christianity, which is spreading among her household slaves. She, it turns out, is the young St Perpetua, one of the earliest Church martyrs, her story told in an appealingly fable-like way, reminiscent of A S Byatt’s “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”.

The Perpetua tale’s themes of martyrdom and resistance re-emerge in the more sprawling story of Duncan, a young gay man who in 1979 establishes London’s



## PICTURE BOOK OF THE WEEK

Frédéric Brenner’s *An Archaeology of Fear and Desire* (Mack, £45) is a book of beautiful, honest portraiture. It presents his contribution to “This Place”, an international project exploring the complexity of Israel and the West Bank through the eyes of 12 photographers. Brenner wanted to create images that would make us question our notions of identity, religion and politics in the region – but he offers no answers. “The viewer is asked to work. There are no resolutions, not for me and not for anyone,” he says. “People will have to wrestle with the ideas of longing, belonging and exclusion.” The 2012 image *Shlomi and Oren* (pictured) is typical of his work: intelligently constructed, offering a fresh view of the people and cultures that make up this fascinating and fraught part of the world.

first gay bookshop with money inherited from his loathsome father. The lively, beleaguered space of the Big Gay Bookshop, populated by an enjoyably argumentative clique, forms the emotional centre of *The Emperor Waltz*, the heart of a many-chambered piece.

All these people are running counter to the current, inhabiting small pockets of resistance in a largely hostile world. The stakes vary. In Carthage, to stand against the

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Roman empire is to risk being torn apart by wild beasts, to the amusement of a crowd. In Germany, the cost of nonconformism undergoes a hyperinflation of its own: the ridicule and poverty of 1922 escalate within a decade to beatings, exile and censorship, with far worse punishments to come. In London, the bookshop and its staff are menaced by broken windows, neighbours who spit in sandwiches and children shouting “Got Aids yet?” before running off “like a celebrant in a street fair”. Aids decimates the community, bringing funeral after funeral, one soundtracked by Donna Summer, another in which the vicar speaks euphemistically of a rare Chinese bone disease.

The links between these different periods are lightly wrought, a matter of small echoes

rather than hammily wrangled plot lines. A gesture is repeated in multiple centuries, gaining in poignancy on each return. A beautiful silver teapot disappears in one world, only to wash up in an antique shop in another. A small boy re-emerges – delightfully, heartbreakingly – as an elderly man. And the sound of “Emperor Waltz” drifts from doorways and windows, a catchy, persistent reminder of how art works: “It had spread from player to player, from music to memory, and passed on and on, through fashion and neglect making its way in the world... a benevolent contagion.”

The central question in all of this is about value, the way it shifts and slips and slides. What is art worth? How do you make a good life? Are principles worth dying for, as Perpetua concludes, or can you abandon them and settle for a secure, if not exactly satisfying, existence? There are no pat answers but it’s hard not to emerge in favour of defiance, of making something that endures, whatever the individual cost.

Duncan, in a tipsy speech at a benefit to save the shop, describes books as going out into the world like little candles. Later, he sums it up even more succinctly, saying of his long, wearying attempt to counteract isolation and invisibility: “I’ve lit a fucking torch.” Something of that same spark illuminates this generous, courageous firework of a novel – a Roman candle, alive and fizzing in the hand. ●

Olivia Laing is the author of “*The Trip to Echo Spring*” (Canongate, £10.99)