

‘Will-they, won’t-they’ in a skilful theatrical romance

This impressive and charismatic debut novel revisits an actor and a director over various collaborations

The Guardian (UK)

In accordance with a special agreement with The Guardian Chronicle

The central characters of Frida Slattery As Herself, Ana Kinsella's debut novel, are the eponymous Frida, 23 when the novel opens, and John Reddan, five years older. Both live in Dublin. Frida loves acting but has never had a significant role, and didn't even get into drama school. John is a writer-director who has just had a play put on at a "real theatre". What's compelling about Frida is not necessarily what she says, thinks or does, but the way she is, and a large part of that lies in the physicality Kinsella writes into her. Frida, we learn, is "addicted" to the

theatre. "Every time she came off stage she felt like a prizefighter. The curtain fell in the community theatre and there she was, rolling her neck, bobbing on her feet."

However, Frida's acting aspirations are going nowhere. She eventually confides in her friend Catherine, who at university was a much more successful actor in student productions, but now has a proper job ("She owned an espresso machine and Frida lived in a bedsit"). "I just want something to happen," Frida says. Catherine introduces Frida to John. They meet in Kehoe's pub, then he asks Frida to accompany him on an errand which turns into a long, mystifying walk through Dublin, during which he interviews her. She asks in return what he is working on: "Are there any roles for women in their early twenties?" To which he responds, "Is that how you think of yourself, Frida? As nothing more than 'a woman in her early twenties'?"

Something sticks for both. John, we learn slowly, is taken with Frida – with her looks, but also that she's

comfortable telling him what she thinks. Frida is preoccupied with John, perhaps for the possibilities he represents. "Was it possible to have a crush on someone you didn't want to kiss? What was that called?"

The most enjoyable parts of the book are when they are together, writing, improvising, rehearsing, experimenting

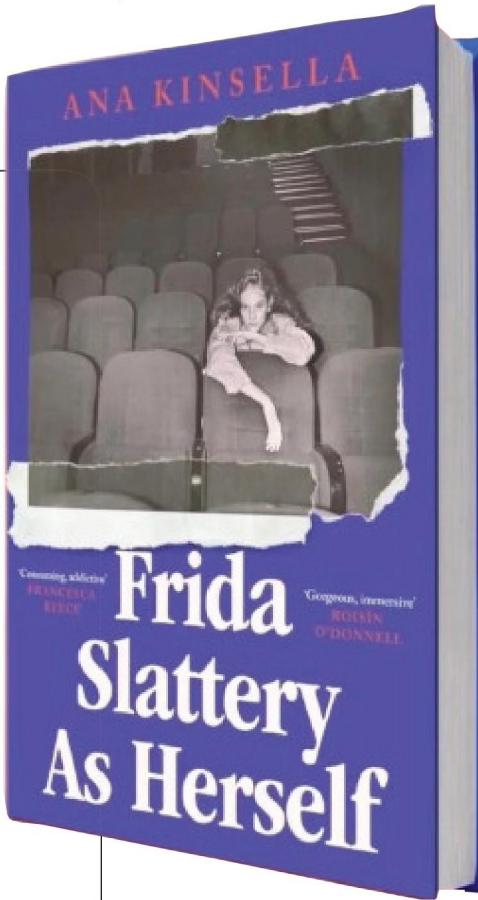
The 12 sections that follow see them working on projects together, as well as living in different cities (London, Los Angeles, New York) between 2005 and 2021. They take a one-woman show to secondary schools around Ireland, driving in John's car and staying in budget B&Bs. Some work is more glamorous: by the time both are in their 30s, Frida does a stint in a popular US television show, and John is a successful theatre director with a play that goes to Broadway. They date for a while, split up, betray each other in different ways, and orbit each other's careers from afar.

In a way the engine of the book is romantic – will they end up together? – but while this keeps the plot ticking over, the magic of their connection comes, pleasingly, in their creative collaboration. Frida in particular is a delightful character because her spontaneity and self-doubt make her feel so authentically real; John, a thinker, is perhaps slightly less interesting. Nonetheless, the most enjoyable parts of the book are when they are together, writing, improvising, rehearsing, experimenting. Their symbiosis makes sense: Frida is an actor who can't quite see her own charisma, John a director who realises his best material comes from the people he works with, and particularly from Frida. Inside the reliable pull of a well-written love story, Frida Slattery As Herself is a skilful, unusual novel – clever, ludic and unexpected in the way of good theatre.

BOOK REVIEW



Book: Frida Slattery As Herself
Author: Ana Kinsella
Rating: 4.4/5



5 Must-Read New Books This Week

Book lovers looking for their next great read have plenty of exciting options this week, with new releases spanning fiction, non-fiction, historical drama, crime, and children's literature. From family tensions unfolding at a luxury Mediterranean resort to a compelling exploration of the life and legacy of George Michael, these books offer something for every kind of reader.

Leading the fiction selections is All In by Claire Powell.

The novel follows Jo and Dave, a middle-aged couple whose marriage is struggling. Hoping for a fresh start, they join an all-expenses-paid holiday arranged by Dave's wealthy brother. However, instead of solving their problems, the trip exposes deeper frustrations and unfulfilled desires. Written with sharp humour and keen observations of everyday life, the novel captures both the awkwardness and emotional complexity of family relationships. Critics have praised its witty storytelling and relatable characters.

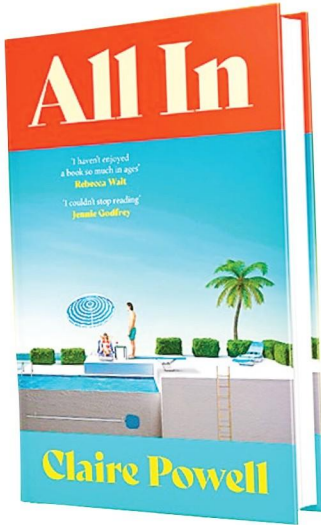
Another notable fiction release is The Devoted by Catherine Cho. Set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's criminal underworld, the novel centres on Eunha, the daughter of a powerful Triad leader. Years after leaving that world behind, her life is thrown into turmoil when her young son is kidnapped. Through a blend of past and present narratives, Cho explores themes of family loyalty, betrayal, and identity. The book offers an engaging, character-driven story with a strong emotional core.

Yesteryear by Caro Claire Burke blends historical fiction with mystery, taking readers on an intriguing journey between past and present. The novel follows a compelling narrative filled with secrets, unexpected revelations and emotional depth as its characters uncover connections that have long remained hidden. Burke skillfully weaves together themes of memory, identity and belonging, creating a richly layered story that keeps readers engaged until the very end. With its atmospheric setting and well-crafted plot, Yesteryear offers a rewarding read for fans of historical fiction and suspense.

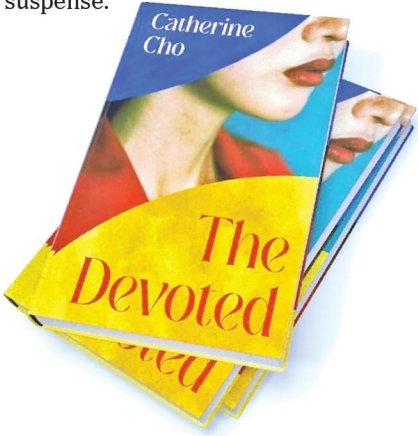
Among the non-fiction offerings, Tonight The Music Seems So Loud: The Meaning of George Michael by Sathnam Sanghera stands out. More than a biography, the book examines the cultural significance of the late singer and songwriter George Michael. Sanghera combines personal reflections with detailed research to explore the artist's career, activism, philanthropy, and influence on social attitudes during the 1980s and 1990s. The result is an insightful look at both a music icon and a period of major cultural change.

For younger readers, Dr Ranj's Human Body Encyclopedia by Dr Ranj Singh offers an engaging introduction to the wonders of the human body. Filled with colourful illustrations, diagrams, and easy-to-understand explanations, the book answers common questions about anatomy, organs, muscles, and health. Designed for primary-school children, it makes complex scientific concepts accessible while encouraging curiosity and learning.

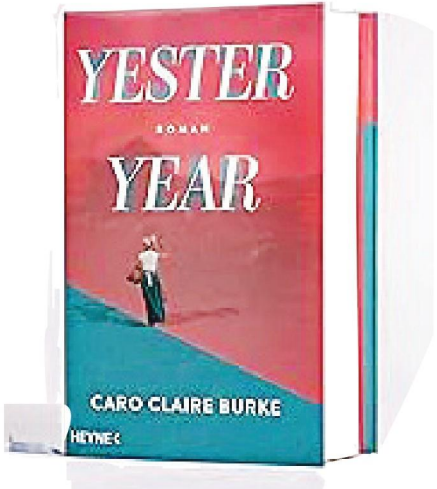
Together, these five books showcase the diversity of contemporary publishing, offering readers a mix of entertainment, education, history, and human drama. Whether you're heading on holiday or simply searching for your next page-turner, these new releases are well worth exploring.



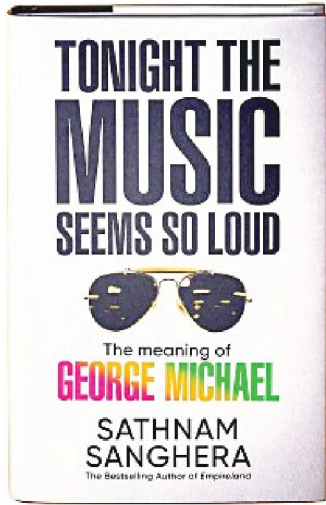
Book: All In
Author: Claire Powell
Rating: 4/5



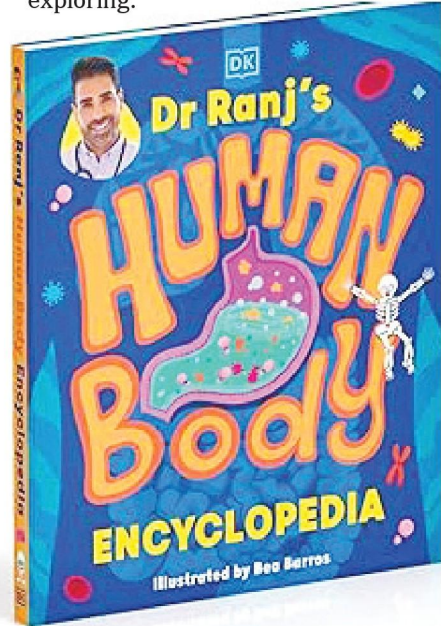
Book: The Devoted
Author: Catherine Cho
Rating: 4/5



Book: Yesteryear
Author: Caro Claire Burke
Rating: 4/5



Book: Tonight The Music Seems So Loud: The Meaning of George Michael
Author: Sathnam Sanghera
Rating: 4/5



Book: Dr Ranj's Human Body Encyclopedia
Author: Dr Ranj Singh
Rating: 4/5