

had lost a child and was overly dependent on her daughter. She killed herself by jumping from a hotel window.

Hall's mother was an only child who suffered from an unavailable and sometimes unkind mother until World War II provided an escape from her "suburban genteel captivity" (p149). Universities were encouraging teenage girls to apply to fill their empty lecture halls, which she did. Her cousin, to whom she had been very close, who had survived service in the war and resumed his veterinary practice, shot himself in 1959. She, however, made a happy marriage and died a natural death in old age, having bravely "stared the Furies in the face: (p203) and not given into them.

Hall has experienced suicide ideation since teenage and suggests controversially this may not always be harmful, that paradoxically life becomes more bearable when escape is a possibility. She is encouraged in this view by examples such as Churchill, who told his doctor he didn't like to stand near the edge of a platform with an express train due. However, research from Glasgow University and elsewhere suggest ideation can lead to actual suicide. Instead, we need to eliminate stigma so people feel able to talk about it openly and not be silenced and ashamed. Hall's book is an important step along the way.

Overall I enjoyed this book and think it can be helpful to our readers in contributing to the conversation about suicide and in achieving another of Hall's hopes for her book – that these plays to find a place in our discussions. She ends her book on a positive note with this exhortation to lament but believe the future may be better, as it has been for her:

*Sing the song of sorrow, but let good prevail.*

The Chorus, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*

**Diana Pringle**

## **On the Calculation of Volume Vol I & II.**

2024. Solvej Balle. Trans. Barbara J. Haveland. London: Faber & Faber.

It is always with some trepidation that I read a contemporary novel, or in this case novels (of which more later) being heavily promoted as the next REALLY 'Big Thing'. Disappointment is usually just around the corner. Solvej Balle's cycle of novels will emerge from the creative processes over the forthcoming years, but the first two volumes are available in English (they were originally written in Danish) and are under review here. There will apparently be seven in all. The third will be published in English later this year, a fourth is in the translation process, a fifth already exists and the last two are yet to appear. As far as the business

of publishing goes, we are in somewhat familiar territory here: multi-volume cycles of novels or autofiction from Scandinavian authors (think Fosse, Knausgaard and now Balle).

To cut quickly to the chase, and render judgment before expounding further, these novels are worth your time. Whether they are Nobel worthy, *qua* Fosse, or will achieve the cult status of Knausgaard, is not for me to say; only time will tell. And as to time, these slender volumes, translated into limpidly readable and deceptively simple prose, will not demand much of yours. To put it another way, these novels are the *amuse bouche* and appetiser, and I am keen to carry on with the remainder of the courses to come.

The premise of the books is a little cheesy, but compelling nonetheless, and in the hands of the author begins to open out into a mesmerising meditation on life, meaning, history and love, and is full of melancholy, hope, searching, doubt and courage. They are that good. Tara Selter, the first-person narrator of the novels, is a youngish (but indeterminate age), married woman who finds herself trapped in a time loop, endlessly repeating the eighteenth of November of an, also, indeterminate year, but quite recent (sometime in the 2010s, at a guess). No review can fail to mention *Groundhog Day* as a reference point, and if the author is fed up with the comparisons, I don't blame them, but they are inevitable.

We first encounter Tara *in media res*, on the 121st iteration of the eighteenth of November. The novels follow her thoughts and descriptions of how she discovers that she is trapped in the time loop (she appears to be alone in this) and then how she copes with it. By the end of volume II we have followed Tara through 1,144 iterations of the time loop, or roughly three and bit years of standard time, such as it is within the framework of the books. We are also left, at the end of volume II, with a tantalising hint of interesting further developments. As Charles Dickens reputedly once said (although not entirely reliably attributed), “make 'em laugh, make 'em cry and make 'em wait”.

A small part of the interest in reading the adventures of Tara in ‘18/11 land’ (my shorthand) is learning how she begins to grasp the rules of a world that endlessly resets back to the morning of 18/11 – what she carries with her from the reiteration of each day and what not. She carries memory of each day and can write down her thoughts and reflections. She can travel and not return, each morning, to the same hotel room in Paris where the time loop first traps her. She can retain certain objects, under certain circumstances, in her possession, without losing them each morning to the previous day's time and place. If she consumes something, eats a bar of chocolate for example, that item disappears from the world for good. She can hurt herself, physically, and needs to heal naturally over time. She can have hangovers! Unlike the hero of *Groundhog Day*, she cannot cannot

exist in 18/11 land without consequences. She cannot be reckless. Freedom is not unlimited. Thus far in the series, the logic of the world indicates that suicide would be final for her.

The rules appear arbitrary, and maybe they are, but this does not stop Tara from trying to understand them, discern logic or patterns and exploit them. She learns, very quickly, that everybody with whom she interacts during each iteration of the day retains no knowledge or memory the following morning. They live the same day over and over again, in exactly the same manner, as if for the first and only time. This has profound consequences for Tara. She can no longer form lasting relationships with people. Even relationships with her husband, whom she loves, her family and friends remain frozen at the point of 18/11 and cannot develop further.

Using her freedom to travel, she returns to her home in northern France to be with her husband. She attempts to educate her husband in her predicament. He is surprised, but surprisingly understanding. Each day the process needs to be repeated. He never remembers. Eventually, Tara stops trying to explain to him the situation, dispirited by the hopelessness of his never remembering and upset at herself for constantly disconcerting her husband. She continues to live in her house but now understands her husband's daily routine so perfectly that she can avoid him at all times and leave no visible trace of her presence that he will find. She makes herself deliberately invisible to him.

No matter how dispiriting this situation appears to be, the processes through which she has had to go to gain some understanding of her situation begin to change her in positive and constructive ways. The sheer amount of 'noticing' that she has had to do to rescue herself from bewilderment and stuckness, to accept that while the world constantly resets itself to the morning of 18/11, and she does not, leads her to glimpse the possibility that she can regain initiative and desire in this hamster wheel world. In two particularly striking passages, Tara experiences a kind of progression from the accumulated weight of knowing too much about 18/11 land and its routines towards a much freer sense of being able to flow with the overwhelming clutter of quotidian details. I will quote two passages, at length, because I found the progression especially illuminating.

On day #227

*It is my mood that chooses words for me. I have a mood. There is a lot you can do with such a thing. It can select words from the whole lexical palette, it can call language a palette. It can give things colour, even when they have no colours. I talk to no one but my world acquires more and more details. I pluck words from a world with many voices, from a mood that lends colour, that*

*rub off. But lending colour to things takes up space. The palette overflows with hues. Too many words pour in, the day becomes heavier, slower, comes to a halt.*

(v.I: 119)

On day #366

*So many things, colours. So many signs, shops, people, so many articles in the shops, so many handles on so many doors, so many shoes walking along the streets, so many coats, so much stitching in so many shoes, in so many garments, so many stones on the kerbs of so many pavements, so many details, a maelstrom of objects, of tiny details on these objects, all of these things I had amassed from the streets of the eighteenth of November, layer upon layer, so many that my mind had to cram them together, but I glided through it all with unaccustomed ease and found myself thinking how strange it was that one could float so lightly through such a compact world.*

*Somewhere in this mass of details there had to be a difference, I thought. Something to grab hold of. If there was another eighteenth of November under my day it would trickle through the cracks, I would see differences, I would close in, grab hold, climb aboard, float along.*

(v.I:168)

The author beautifully describes the process of acting in a phenomenological way, gathering, examining and re-examining the unsung details of life, noticing them, saturating oneself in them, grasping them, appreciating them and eventually becoming less overwhelmed by them and carrying them more lightly, to prevent the weight of details – the ‘so many-ness’ of everything – from weighing down so heavily.

I am aware that the novel is acting upon me as a kind of Rorschach test. The author is not a psychotherapist, as far as I know, and I do not know enough about her to know if she espouses a particularly existential-phenomenological stance toward the world or not. I read into these passages and the novels as a whole what I bring to them. But what I see is a consummate work of art, drenched in existential and phenomenological themes through the constant attention to detail, repeated over and over again, in the eternal recurrence of 18/11 (I have yet to grasp, why this day in particular). Much in the same way that Tara begins to bear, more lightly, the deep accumulated knowledge of her one repeated day, the novels imperceptibly carry a deep connection to the cultural heritage of

European philosophy and literature. We are in the realm of Dante's journey; Kierkegaard's repetition; Nietzsche's eternal recurrence; Heidegger's phenomenology; Sartre's project of being; Proustian recollection and world creation; Knausgardian self-reflection and diversion; Sloterdijk and bubbles; the forensic exploration of space and time and its compartmentalisation in order to make it more comprehensible, manageable and less overwhelming.

As the work extends into its second volume, and having rediscovered a sense of flow and movement at the end of the first volume, Tara sets herself the project of trying to rediscover a feeling of movement and progress in time within the parameters of her limited world. She travels in Europe, trying to feel the seasons again even though it is always 18/11. It doesn't necessarily feel that way in northern Scandinavia (winter), Cornwall (spring), Mediterranean France (summer) or back at her home (autumn). This journey becomes more than just a sensuous chasing of the feeling of the seasons. She constantly learns more about the world and how she operates in it and how she can interact with people, if only meaningfully for one day.

After this period of travel, Tara settles. She finds a location where 18/11 is a warm golden autumn day, a kind of climactic goldilocks zone but which also carries an air of gentle and wistful melancholy. She has tired of the project of chasing the seasons, and of throwing herself into the flow of the crowd. She has a physical sense of wanting to find a new project, to find a new way to escape the eternal loop of 18/11, or the endless cycle of ersatz seasons as she artificially recreates them with sterile travel. She wants to be more than a tourist in her time-limited existence:

On day #889, Tara observes: "I was struck by a feeling of discomfort, almost like toothache or a slight dizziness and I sat down on a stone wall and looked out cross the river. I was taken aback. It was starting to dawn on me that history had already aroused my interest." (v.II: 172-3).

Tara seems to want to embrace the feeling of a deeper time, somehow to dwell more authentically in the "*longue durée*" that has brought her and her world to the endlessly recurring 18/11. She wants to use her hard-won mastery of the everyday-ness of 18/11, and the protection and stability that it now strangely gives her to dive into the vast ocean of time past. Why? Because the small details that she has observed, experienced, classified, repeated, understood and appreciated, all point to unfathomable connections with times past; lives lived; homes, villages, towns, cities, countries, empires, built and lost; ideas hatched and acted upon; commerce undertaken; landscapes altered; books written; art created; all human life. This strange cypher of a character, a northern European everywoman with an unremarkable but comfortable, middle-class existence but who has lost her way in the world stands, at the end of volume II on the threshold of all history with all the

time in the world to immerse herself in it. She stands on the brink of the abyss, with hope. Volume III cannot come soon enough.

**Richard Swann**

## **The Zone of Interest**

2024. Film. Dir: Jonathan Glazer.

Sometime last year I watched Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*, unsure of what to expect. Little did I know then, as I do now while attempting to articulate my response, that it has lingered inside me like a disquieting echo. The film is not a typical war story, nor, I would argue, is it solely a cinematic exploration of the Holocaust. Instead, it delves into something far deeper and more unsettling: our innate human capability for denial, the construction of formidable psychological walls against the unbearable.

The film centres its gaze on the domestic lives of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, his wife Hedwig and their children. These are not monstrous figures but rather disconcertingly ordinary individuals, immersed in the mundane rhythms of their daily existence. It is precisely this normalcy, their chilling ability to compartmentalise and wilfully disregard the inferno of human suffering unfolding just beyond their meticulously manicured garden wall, that forms the film's profoundly disturbing theme.

Glazer's lens lingers on the seemingly 'idyllic' tableau of the Höss family: children splashing in their pristine pool, all the petty squabbles and affections that mark any bourgeois household. Yet, this veneer of domesticity is brutally juxtaposed with its immediate proximity to the unimaginable horrors of Auschwitz. The film offers only glimpses of the camp, with figures moving like ghosts (out of focus) within its barbed-wire. It is the soundtrack that becomes a suffocating presence: muffled cries, the distant gunshots and the incessant, mechanical drone of the crematoria. These sounds bleed into the family's privileged reality (and into our experience as viewers), offering a dissonance that resonates deeply with Hannah Arendt's chilling concept of the banality of evil.

*The Zone of Interest* casts a harsh light on the terrifying implications of our human freedom, our capacity to choose what we attend to, and, crucially, what we choose to ignore. The Höss family's deliberate act of turning away, their narrowly defined sphere of interest, underscores the profound ethical weight of our existence and our interconnectedness. Their focus remains resolutely within the confines of their self-constructed world, while denying the shared humanity just beyond their garden gate. There are subtle yet piercing moments that crack this carefully constructed façade, such as the unsettling drift of ash that occasionally settles upon Hedwig's prized flowers and manicured lawn.