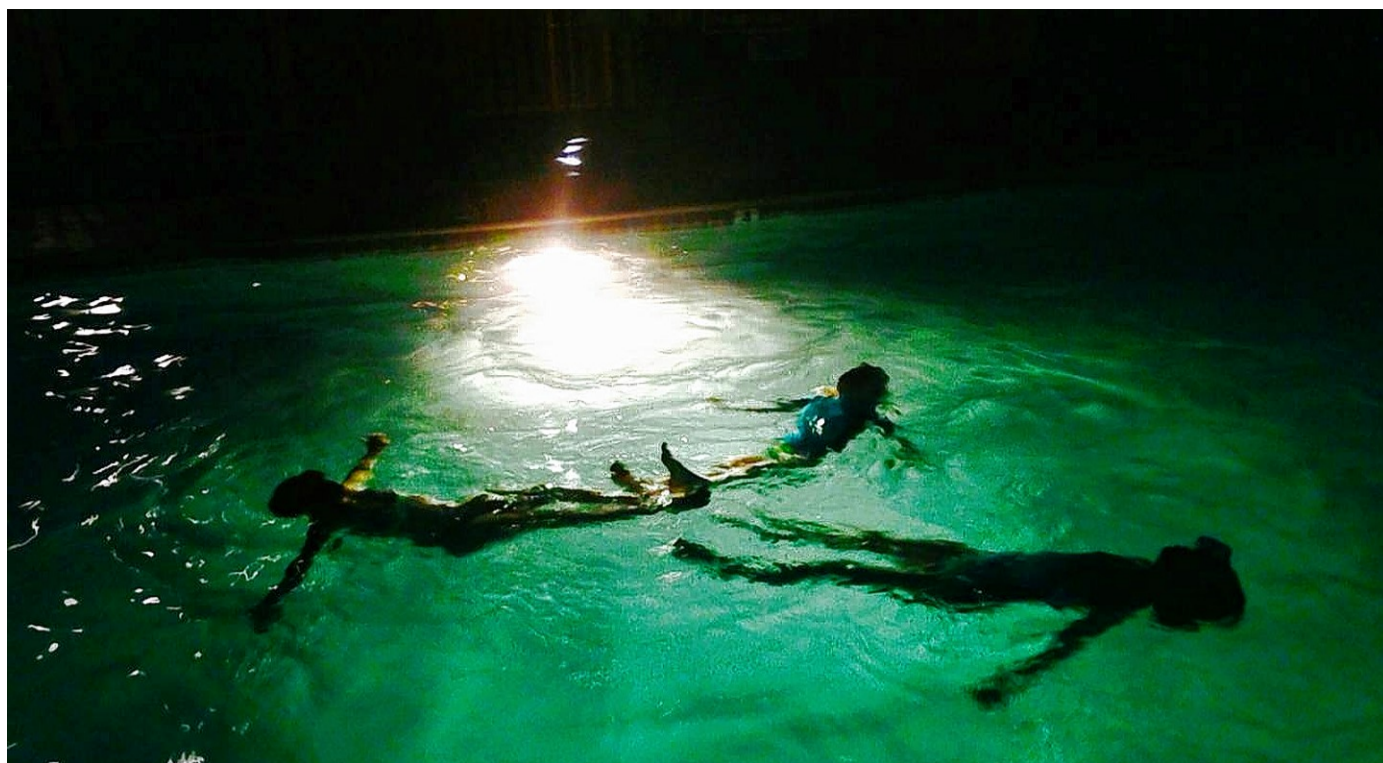


# A disease without any cure

CAROLINE MOOREHEAD

HEAVEN AND EARTH  
PAOLO GIORDANO

Translated by Anne Milano Appel  
416pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £14.99.



**P**AOLO GIORDANO'S NEW NOVEL opens with a wonderful scene. Fourteen-year-old Teresa (narrating from many years later), is in bed in her grandmother's house in Puglia, where she hears noises in the garden. It is a hot, still, summer night some time in the late 1990s. She goes to the window and sees three young boys take off their clothes and slip naked into the black water of the swimming pool. Two are dark; one has silver hair. They splash and laugh, and later she watches them talking quietly by the edge of the pool, their arms round each other's shoulders. A love story begins.

The boys, two of them half-brothers, all in their own way troubled, come from a nearby farm, where their sort-of guardians, Cesare and Floriana, run an ecological smallholding, frugally and with mystical and religious overtones. The boys - Nicola, Tommaso and Bern - half-wild, little-educated, in thrall to the nightly prayers and incantations, accept Teresa as a companion in their tree house and games. They play cards, work in the fields, swim. No one intrudes on their lives: to nearby villagers, they are a clan apart. Every summer, when Teresa returns from her school in Turin

to Puglia, the summer rituals resume. But then friendship becomes love and sex, and jealousy and rivalries form. As Janet Malcolm wrote in a recent essay for the *New York Review of Books* (April 9, 2020), the habit of love that we form in childhood is a "virus of lovesickness" that lodges in us, and for which there is no vaccine. "We never rid ourselves of the disease." For the rest of the novel, Teresa lives in and out of "states of chronic longing".

Giordano is a much lauded physicist by training and his first novel, *La solitudine dei numeri primi* (2008; *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*, 2010), used mathematics much as Primo Levi used chemical compounds in *The Periodic Table*, as spurs to memory and keys to character. Published two years before he completed his PhD in theoretical physics, it won him the Premio Strega and was translated into many languages. Giordano was twenty-six and the prize's youngest recipient. Another novel, *Il corpo umano* (2012; *The Human Body*, 2015) and a collection of short stories followed, and in March Giordano brought out a book of reflections on life under Covid-19, translated as *How Contagion Works*, which examines not just the virus, but other forms

of contamination, such as environmental destruction and fake news. In Italy, Giordano is a celebrity and public intellectual. He has co-written a forthcoming drama series for HBO, *We Are Who We Are*, starring Chloë Sevigny.

*Heaven and Earth* (*Divorare il cielo*, 2018) is a highly enjoyable novel, convincingly and smoothly translated by Anne Milano Appel. Spanning twenty years and the anguished love affair between Teresa and Bern, some of it takes place in the dark recent days when Puglia's olive trees were attacked by a beetle that reduced the landscape to an apocalyptic vision of the planet's end. Giordano is especially good on the textures, smells, heat and colours of the Italian south, where almost the whole novel is set, the herbs that scent the air, the rocky terrain on which little grows. These stay long in the mind, as does the way he writes about the obsessiveness of love, the way it dominates and distorts and the self-delusions and fantasies it gives rise to. Puglia's scorched earth and, later in the novel, the craters and caverns of Iceland become metaphors for a plot that is both touching and sad, violent and uncomfortable. ■

Caroline Moorehead is the author of a quartet of books on resistance in the Second World War, the fourth and last of which, *A House in the Mountains*, was published last year

# Forever young

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

THE ISLAND  
ANA MARIÁ MATUTE

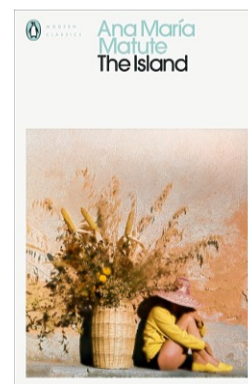
Translated by Laura Lonsdale  
192pp. Penguin Classics. Paperback, £9.99.

**S**TEWING IN HEAT, boredom and loneliness is fourteen-year-old Matia, the first-person narrator of Ana Mariá Matute's *The Island*. She lives in Mallorca with her formidable, pitiless grandmother, having been expelled from her convent boarding school for kicking a teacher. Matia's mother died when she was eight, and her father has left. Her fifteen-year-old "bully-boy" cousin Borja and aunt Emilia are staying for the summer at the family estate, which sits above the little town. Below, on the slope leading to the sea, are the workers' houses. Rumbling in the background is the Spanish Civil War. It has just started and seems to Matia "eerily unreal, at once remote and immediate, perhaps more frightening for being invisible". Early on in the novel, there is an inescapable sense that the ills of Spain, the island, the town and the family are interconnected and will be unleashed in a dizzying and irremediable chain of events.

One afternoon Matia and her cousin row to the secluded cove where they hide their stash of stolen cigarettes, playing cards and "an old mysterious package" belonging to Borja. Lying face down on the

beach is a dead man. Manuel, a teenager who lives on the slope, appears from behind the rocks and tells them that the corpse is that of his father, murdered by the jackbooted Taronji brothers, who terrorize the community. Borja reluctantly lets Manuel borrow the boat to take the body home. Nobody can know about this, Borja says to Matia: Manuel is a low-class "dirty Jew", his family is "marked out". But Matia is drawn to Manuel, and begins to spend time with him.

Matute's brilliant, devastating book was first published as *Primera memoria* in Spain in 1959; it originally appeared in English as *Awakening* (1963), and now Laura Lonsdale's new translation should earn its author, who died in 2014 and has been somewhat neglected outside her home country, the overdue attention of the English-speaking world. Her Mallorcan landscape suffocates and bristles; the sky is "swollen like an infection", agaves are "swords of a long-forgotten game". Every character is remarkable and captivating. Matia's grandmother has a "hard, curdled white face" with eyes that "shift a little closer together, like siblings whispering dark secrets to one another". Names are deliberately muddling. We meet Antonia, Antonio, Juan Antonio, Toni, Ton, José and Jorge. The Taronji brothers look like Aryans ("pale and blond with round blue eyes like enormous babies"), but have "big Jewish noses". They are related to the town's other Taronjis - Manuel's out-cast family. Gossip about Manuel's mother implies her son might be part of Matia and Borja's family. As for the war: Matia only half-understands who is on which side and why they are fighting. A portrait



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of her dead grandfather in "his important uniform - I never did know what was important about it" - hangs on a wall in her grandmother's house. She can't remember if he wears a red or blue sash.

What is so noticeable about *The Island* is its depiction of how the "sordid world of men and women" devours a child's innocence against their will. Matia is on the precipice of adulthood, eyes closed, hands over her ears. "What kind of monster am I now, no longer a child, but definitely, definitely not a woman", she asks herself. She still hides a rag doll under her blouse for when things get too much. Sex seems full of mystery: "maybe it's just another lie ... I wished death could also be a lie". She insists on navigating life through the fairy stories she reads. In the second half of the novel, there is a very moving sequence when Matia nervously watches Borja preparing to fight a rival in the town square. His opponent pulls on the sleeve of his jumper, revealing a meat hook. Matia's inner voice can no longer suppress the ugly reality she's faced with:

*Captain Hook fought Peter Pan on the cliff tops of Never Never Land. Borja, an exiled Peter Pan, as I was ... Never had Borja looked so small as he did at that moment. He did the spring cleaning, when it was time to sweep up the leaves, in the forest where the Lost Boys lived. But the Lost Boys, suddenly, were too old to play, and yet they were too young, suddenly, to enter a life and a world we didn't - we didn't? - want to know.*

Misplaced trust is Matia's undoing in the end. And the adults around her, she bleakly realizes, are just as ignorant, impressionable, cruel, or useless. "Can it be that we live out complete lives as children", she wonders, "only to repeat ourselves stupidly, blindly, meaninglessly?" ■