Lisa O'Donnell
CLOSED DOORS
256pp. Heinemann. £14.99.
978 0 434 02255 7

At this year's Hay Festival, Lisa O'Donnell was awarded the Commonwealth Book Prize for her debut novel, *The Death of Bees*. For her second book to be published so soon afterwards creates high expectation – and *Closed Doors* suffers for it.

The close-knit neighbourhood on the island of Rothesay in Scotland (O'Donnell's birthplace) during the early 1980s is an interesting backdrop to a predictable plot and often tedious first-person narrative by an eleven-year old boy, Michael. Most of the characters are working-class, trapped on welfare benefits and the victims of the socio-economic tensions caused by "that bloody woman":

> Ma says we did good getting a house on Barone Hill and it was brilliant of Margaret Thatcher to build them for us. That's when Da tells her to "Shut the 'F' up" because Da hates Margaret Thatcher and because she didn't build them anyway. A big fight always happens when he says the F-word, and words like "beer", "bitch", "dole", "stupid", "unemployment" and "lazy arse" go flying around the kitchen until a door slams and locks all the words away.

Doors here symbolize a threshold between the adult world and childhood, between the community and private home. Michael "listen[s] at doors now. It's the only way to find out stuff", and he obsessively spies on his neighbour Mrs Connor ("I only watch her dance because her windows are so low"). What begins as childish curiosity turns into unpleasant, adult reality. Michael's unemployed father drinks and swears; his mother and grandmother "smoke like chimneys". A plethora of clichés topped off with a sugary ending, however, make it difficult to buy into Michael's unrelenting voice – or into any of the other characters (one throwaway comment labels a prostitute "the invisible woman"). Pages of dialogue – at times clever, filled with black humour – jar with Michael's mundane descriptions ("the town is busy and it is a nice day"). An argument he witnesses wearily trails back and forth: "Ma told Da . . . Da told Ma . . . Ma told Da . . . Da told her . . .".

The novel's crux is the family's "ugly secret" – his mother's rape – and its impact on the household, as well as Michael's sexual flowering. A dictionary and his friend's "nudey magazines" help him to find out why his home life has changed so dramatically: "Force, I think. Violence. Sexual intercourse. Violence. Force. Ma's blood, I think. Ma's cuts. Ma's tears. Ma!". But the fight between two female neighbours ("a big scandal") and Michael's sexual experiments are somehow more shocking than the rape, which is never described (Michael does not witness it, nor is it directly talked about with him).

In horror, what is not revealed is generally more terrifying than what is; but O'Donnell's deliberate withholding of detail does not have a comparable effect. Where Mark Haddon, for example, used childhood naivety to give original nuances to the adult world in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), O'Donnell's child voice remains disappointingly banal.

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Gill Hornby
THE HIVE
304pp. Little, Brown. £12.99.
978 1 4087 0435 6

"8.45 A.M. DROP OFF." It's the first day of term at St Ambrose Primary in a leafy green-belt somewhere in the south of England, and the playground is alive with new faces, noise, butterfly tummies and mothers. These descriptions jostle with italicized words, busy authorial reflection, a floundering interior monologue and many mixed metaphors in the opening pages of Gill Hornby's first novel, *The Hive*. "While August had been dank and dark, the summer had bounced back buzzing and full of beans for the start of a new school year." Rachel, who watches while Bea makes an Important Announcement regarding cuts to the school's library budget, is however oddly "buzzless". Her husband has left her. She feels like "Sisyphus and his wretched rock, rolled into one", but is not so bludgeoned with unhappiness that she cannot think deep, if endlessly qualified, thoughts about the "heavenly" community of the school, with its handsome new Head and its age-old sense of "caring".

By page six, we are immersed in a shrill clamour of voices belonging to other mothers, who all sound as if they've recently left – or are longing to return to – Enid Blyton's Malory Towers. "Yikes!" "Golly!" "Crikey", we hear, as they share "deep and meaningfuls" between "mightily off-pissing" personal remarks. While her chums invent names for a disease that makes your bottom fat, or slink off to share secret fags, Rachel struggles with grown-up thoughts: "Cease forthwith your tiresome prattle. Now, have you read the new McEwan?". But her elevated reflection takes a dip when she falls for Mr Orchard ("THE HEADMASTER!") at the school quiz and they bond over thoughts on the passive voice. From here it's a short trip to "a liquid feeling" as they kiss, which naturally leads to "Rachel Selfish Knickers Mason" becoming "the headmasters wife".

The Hive is an exhausting book, with no shape, no development and very little plot. There are occasional quiet moments, necessary to the laborious theme of the hive (Rachel's mother keeps bees), but the whole has a woozy touch-screen feel, with raucous gatherings unfolding in ten-minute time bites. As one fundraising event follows another, we begin to feel the numbed indifference that comes with a slideshow of a stranger's wedding. This is not to say that Hornby is incapable of imagining the significant events she clearly feels novels must include: one mother dies of cancer; another finds a (benign) lump in her breast; someone's husband hangs himself (he has been depressed). But these leave us untouched, since the characters fail to engage with each other, or have any convincing relationship with themselves.

It would be nice to think of Hornby's swarming creatures as serving some satirical purpose, but the book's voice is too chaotic and cosy for that. What remains when the gestural "story" is finished – the school library stocked, the "outsider" brought into the centre and the "too good-looking, too bright, too successful" intruder excluded – is a sense of time spent with a well-read, articulate young teenager, entranced by the world of grown-ups. The "trained lawyer" who stays home to be with her babies is the most contented person here – the mother all children want but even the Famous Five don't have. "Like the Ming, she was leaving her mark upon the planet; like their wall, her family could stretch and flow and rise and fall and live as long as the earth beneath it." What fresh larks will next term bring? Perhaps someone will write a novel.

SHEENA JOUGHIN

Patrick Flanery
FALLEN LAND
422pp. Atlantic. £12.99.
978 0 85789 877 7
US: Riverhead. $27.95. 978 1 59463 180 1

Paul Krovik is an architect who goes bankrupt trying to build a utopian community in the American Midwest. He bullied his plot of land from a widow, Louise Washington, whose ancestors had lived there for one hundred years and were the victims of racist violence. Hiding out in the home she is supposed to have left, Louise witnesses Krovik lose everything. He lives in a secret bunker underneath the house, fearing an apocalypse caused by nuclear attack, terrorists or civil war. The new owners of the property, the Noailles family, have their own history of trauma and psychological imbalance – and they receive nightly visits from Krovik. *Fallen Land* is the tense account of these characters' coexistence and unravelling.

Following Flanery's well-received debut, *Absolution* (*TLS*, June 29, 2012), this is a disturbing and professional second novel, though it can be heavy-handed in its symbolism and sententiousness. Flanery is seduced by the prospect of writing a titanic American novel that speaks for the whole country, but rather than balancing solemn political comment with naturally heightened notes of paranoia, he sets his dystopian motifs in competition: alarm systems intrusively film households; a school uses Tasers on pupils; a biblical flood drowns the land; a whole cast of characters loses its grip on reality. The reader isn't overwhelmed by the novel's sense of dread: the novel is.

Flanery's gift is for close observation: quiet, localized moments of moral and mental deterioration. Nathaniel Noailles's nervous decline is conveyed in finely calibrated flashes of bigotry. Emasculated and oversensitive himself, he feels embarrassed that his son dances rather than plays soccer: "If only the physical intelligence could be channelled into a more masculine discipline, not that Nathaniel cares what kind of person Copley becomes. If he happens to fall in love with men later in life, Nathaniel will of course accept it, but he does not want a son who prances". That "happens to fall in love with men", with its denial of agency, is perfectly judged. When Nathan later hopes to get a gay man deported because of his foreign accent, we realize how gradually Flanery has been developing his themes. And when the roulette of viewpoints gives us Louise's first-person voice, the writing gets closest to capturing the movement of thought. Louise remembers Krovik at work: "Not a friendly fellow. Nodded and took the coffee, drank it in front of me, handed back the mug like I was a boss he begrudged". A few sentences later, she watches his team of builders: "shoe-leather backs, hides instead of skins, ass cracks rising pinky-white out of a sheath of dirty blue jeans". Louise's plot strand or the story of the Noailles family, shorn of everything else, would have made a more affecting, even more ambitious, book.

JONATHAN MCALOON

Adam LeBor
THE GENEVA OPTION
340pp. Telegram Books. Paperback, £7.99.
978 1 84659 155 6

On March 28, 2013, the United Nations Security Council approved the creation of its first ever intervention brigade, with a mandate to enforce peace in the African Great Lakes with armed response, as opposed to its more traditional military role of peacekeeping. The brigade was deployed in Goma in May. This sea change in UN policy is rooted in the organization's deep soul-searching after the calamitous and ineffective intervention in the Rwandan genocide.

Adam LeBor uses his latest novel to examine the tension created by this tactical change in UN strategy between traditionalists in the Department of Political Affairs and interventionists in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. His protagonist in *The Geneva Option* is Yael Azoulay, a young, intelligent and beautiful UN negotiator who finds herself embroiled in a dark conspiracy. After the successful completion of a distasteful, and probably illegal, mission in which, on the Secretary General's direct orders, she offers a lenient prison sentence to a Hutu génocidaire, she returns to New York, where a close colleague is murdered and her UN employment is terminated. Lebor conjures up the suffocating, hidebound, rule-ridden, quasi-civil-service atmosphere of the UN in the extraordinary but plausible account of Yael's sacking – from the high-handed approach of the Secretary General to the haughty demeanour of his French PA to the fat, frogmarching UN policemen and the petty confiscation of Yael's treasured blue beret. LeBor also opens a window onto the rarefied life of the UN press corps, moulded by the same institutional themes: office space allotted by international politicking, jostling between the ranks, the strange parasitic relationship between the international hacks and international diplomats. LeBor's tersely structured prose complements these well-painted and stifling pictures of life at the UN.

Ostensibly fired for leaking a memo disclosing details of the génocidaire plea bargain to the *New York Times*, Yael discovers that the deal is far more complex and insidious than she had at first thought. An anonymously sent tape reveals the UN traditionalists to have sided with a faceless international pharmaceutical corporation, KZX, backed by a private security firm. This somewhat far-fetched conspiracy is designed to discredit the interventionists, foster genocide, privatize peacekeeping and maintain control over deposits of the region's coltan: a mineral needed for all mobiles and computers.

Despite the unlikely ambit of the plotters' scheme and the unwieldy use of acronyms throughout, Yael's undercover adventures in New York and Switzerland provide a compelling tale, which, bolstered by a wide array of well-drawn and interesting characters, drives an entertaining, atmospheric and fast-paced narrative.

JUSTIN WARSHAW