

Little gems make a book reviewer's toil so worthwhile

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EDITING the books pages of a newspaper sounds like a high calling. Actually, it's a blue-collar job, day after day opening packages of new books and disposing of them without despairing. Sometimes you feel like discarding yourself along with the jiffy bags, like the poor chap who chucks himself into the garbage truck at the end of *Once Upon a Time in America*.

Among the approximately 180,000 new titles published in the UK each year may be many that, while not of interest to you (obscure studies of medieval theology, biographies of expired sportsmen, numismatics) obviously do have their destined readers and one can only wish them well on their journey.

It is not true of fiction, though. Fiction is an unmanageable flood since, unless you actually know the author's work or read the book, the quality is impossible to assess. And in fiction, quality is all that matters.

Some novels – such as the torrent of “Girl” books that have arrived this month, thrillers about off-their-head women doing terrible things not only to themselves but to other women whose lives they cover – can confidently be classed as vacant products. But then there are more and more enormously long novels that lay claim to the very highest literary merit.

Just occasionally these pleas from their publishers are justified. I am very

glad that, quite unstopably, I read Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (736 pages in paperback) once I'd started it. But having made one such concession, you are lost. Perhaps some other epic novels coming up out of nowhere, so warmly recommended by their publishers – *The Nix*, for example, a 625-page debut by Nathan Hill, out later this month – redeem the time too?

Just landed on my desk is a colossal new novel by the American writer Paul Auster. It is called 4321 because, its publisher explains, whereas in Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*, a traveller comes to a crossroads, he “can take only one path, but Auster allows his main character, Ferguson, to travel along four paths”. That's why it is 866 closely printed pages long and hurts to carry. For heaven's sake! We are lucky it was not 87654321.

But every now and then this job is joyous too. In the same post comes a gift: Michael Hofmann's beautiful new translation of night-time fragments by Kafka, *The Burrow* (Penguin, £9.99). Here is one of them, complete. Give it 30 seconds.

“Little fable. ‘Oh,’ said the mouse, ‘the world gets narrower with each passing day. It used to be so wide that I was terrified, and I ran on and felt happy when at last I could see walls in the distance to either side of me – but these long walls are converging, so quickly that already I'm in the last room and there in the corner is the trap I'm running into.’

‘You have only to change your direction,’ said the cat, and ate it up.”

