

The best translated fiction – review roundup

Clean by Alia Trabucco Zerán, translated by Sophie Hughes (4th Estate, £16.99)

There's no hanging about in Chilean author Alia Trabucco Zerán's third novel, which opens with images of rabbits being frightened to death, life-threatening fungus, a piglet killed – and the warning that in the end, "the girl dies". Our narrator is Estela ("I've killed before"), who worked as a nanny to a wealthy couple – doctor, lawyer – and "the girl" is their daughter Julia. Estela appears to be under questioning by police, held in a room and talking directly to "you who'll eventually pass judgment on me". Her story proceeds at pace, building its depth from an accumulation of small details: the family's cruelty to her; the father's shocking way of teaching Julia to swim; the secret behind the household maid. A strong narrative energy drives the novel to its conclusion, by which time the atmosphere is so full of dread you could weigh it.

Comrade Papa by GauZ', translated by Frank Wynne (MacLehose, £12)

This funny, ebullient, often chaotic tale of French colonial exploitation of Ivory Coast tells two alternating stories. In the late 19th century, a young man joins a colonial expedition, caught between self-styled "Negrophiles" and "Negrophobes" – who disagree on everything except their shared loathing of the British – as he experiences his own bumpy personal voyage of discovery. Meanwhile, a century later, a European Black boy gives an account, filled with comic malapropisms ("lumpy proletariat"), of his own trip to Ivory Coast, and his upbringing by his communist father – Comrade Papa – who rails against everything from tulips (markers of capitalism) to Philips lightbulbs (made by fascist collaborators). Ivorian author GauZ' was shortlisted for the

International Booker prize for his novel *Standing Heavy*. *Comrade Papa* is even better.

The Son of Man by Jean-Baptiste Del Amo, translated by Frank Wynne (Fitzcarraldo, £12.99)

An opening scene of a group of ancient hunters switches, in a 2001: A Space Odyssey-style jump cut, to a present-day French family – father, mother, son – on a journey. “Are we there yet?” They’re heading to the father’s old house in the mountains of Les Roches to spend the summer. But this is no holiday: through flashbacks we begin to get the full, ugly picture, all told in visceral, physical prose. The mother lives on romance novels, beer and painkillers; the supplies packed by the father include cigarettes and a revolver. (The way he devours a chicken carcass will put you off poultry for life.) The father’s unpredictability reflects his experience with his own father, the mother turns out to be pregnant – and what about the mysterious Uncle Tony? The novel explores how unknowable the motives of adults are to children, and how man hands on misery to man. There aren’t many laughs on the way to the inevitable, satisfying conclusion, but it isn’t half gripping.

Comedy in a Minor Key by Hans Keilson, translated by Damion Searls (Pushkin, £9.99)

First published in German in 1947, this novella is a surprisingly entertaining account of a Dutch couple harbouring a Jewish man in their home during the Nazi occupation. As though things aren’t difficult enough, he then dies and becomes a much bigger problem. The story switches between his time in the house – playing chess against himself, looking wistfully through the window at the world he can’t join, trusting the local barber (“I only do one kind of cut. I hope you like it”) – and the couple’s attempts to dispose of his body. At first it appears that they have the ideal solution, and dump him under a park bench at night, “under the sky like a dead bird” – then they remember he was wearing a pair of the

husband's monogrammed pyjamas ... Keilson wrote only four works of fiction in his lifetime. We should treasure them.

Reports: John Self, The Guardian