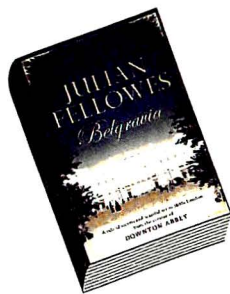


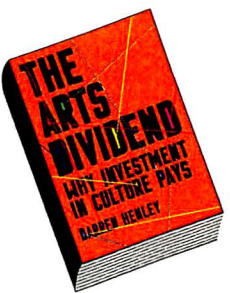
## A weekly look over the shoulders of our scholar-reviewers



**A. W. Purdue**, visiting professor of history, Northumbria University, is reading Julian Fellowes' *Belgravia* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016). "The book begins with the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo and an ill-fated romance between the daughter of an ambitious businessman and the son of an aristocratic family, who is killed in battle hours after the ball. She dies giving birth to a son, believed, wrongly, to be illegitimate. The consequences lead us, a quarter of a century later, to London's West End, where new buildings are transforming the environment and social values are changing as new money disturbs the established order. The plot creaks a bit, but Fellowes' knowledge of the period, his skill in recreating its atmosphere and mores, his ability to create fascinating characters and his acute eye for social relationships make the book well worth reading."



**Laura Scuriatti**, junior professor of English and comparative literature, Bard College Berlin, is reading Nadia Fusini's *Vivere nella Tempesta* (Einaudi, 2016). "This is a fascinating and refreshing journey through Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, its contexts, sources and aesthetics, intertwined with Fusini's autobiographical narrative of her life and study of Shakespeare's corpus. Following *The Tempest's* form, Fusini's essay evokes numerous intertexts, fusing new historicism, philology, formalism and personal criticism, and it offers a mesmerising panorama and useful reassessment of the different modes of reading which *The Tempest* offers and demands. Repetition, metamorphosis and wonder are at the centre of *Vivere nella Tempesta*, as they are in the Shakespearian original, and Fusini argues that these highly complex and at times ambiguous concepts ultimately yield possible answers to the question, which she identifies as the fundamental one in *The Tempest*, of what it means to be not abstractly human, but humane human beings."



**Mark O'Thomas**, dean of academic affairs, Newcastle University London, is reading Darren Henley's *The Arts Dividend: Why Investment in Culture Pays* (Elliott & Thompson, 2016). "Part travelogue, part advocacy document, Darren Henley's exploration of what culture delivers back to society makes for a cogently argued read. Henley, who is chief executive of the Arts Council, details a cornucopia of benefits that the arts actively return on their financial investment. Acting as a sound rebuttal to those seeking to cut back on the public funding of the arts, the book embraces the whole of England as the author travels around the country and experiences at first hand how tangible 'dividends' are realised from arts practice. I'm finding the book a source of great inspiration and it is particularly timely for academics, as the tangible impact universities have on the cultural and civic life of their communities is both detailed and celebrated."

# F-bombing all over the show

Seneca meets *The Sopranos* in a lively who, what, when, where and why of cursing, says Tom Palaima

**In Praise of Profanity**  
By Michael Adams  
Oxford University Press  
272pp, £11.99  
ISBN 9780199337583  
Published 29 September 2016

**D**iscreet profanity charms the bourgeoisie. And they still buy books.

Knowing this, Michael Adams has written *In Praise of Profanity* as an amusing look at language usage that violates norms set down and followed by those who control power and the rest of us in our English-speaking cultures.

The tone and level of inquiry match those of a dinner party in a comfortable residential neighbourhood near a university campus where guests are keen to talk about the latest hit television series. Adams begins by discussing an episode of an ABC sitcom in which a two-year-old drops an F-bomb, except that viewers never really hear her say it. Such discreetly edited programming in what Adams nonetheless calls the age of profanity pushes the envelope of acceptable social behaviour titillatingly slightly while never threatening the social order.

The coda to Adams' three breezy, and one admirably more serious, chapters in fact is an account of dinner-table discussion of the word "clusterfuck" at a conference on English historical lexis and lexicography at the University of Oxford last year. He calls this afterword "Ultimate Profanity". It reads like a personal email describing to absent colleagues what high wit they missed over drinks.

Throughout, Adams is sensitive to how codes of language use relate to power and class. In his breezy chapters, he analyses the power strategies behind intentional public usage of profanity: US vice-president Dick Cheney telling senator Patrick Leahy on the floor of the US Senate "Go fuck yourself!" and an Alaskan television newscaster

resigning on the air with "Fuck it, I quit."

Scholars with an active sense of wonder about humankind have changed their ways of thinking over time. Alan Walker Read collected graffiti – obscene, humorous, poetical, aggressive – on toilet walls across the western US and Canada in 1928. What Read took then as symptoms of neurosis Adams with insightful empathy now sees as desperate acts of communication in search of solidarity, even intimacy.

This interpretive sympathy, once awakened, runs through the final chapter devoted to what Adams calls the literary value of profanity. Using Seneca's *On Anger* as a guide, Adams explains the moral point, the tragedy, the destructive violence and feelings of social decline transmitted by the 7,037 instances of profanity scattered over 85 episodes of the HBO series *The Sopranos*. In criticising the negative reactions of Julia Neuberger to the obscenity-laced language of Sammy, the main character in James Kelman's Booker Prize-winning *How Late It Was, How Late*, Adams channels George Orwell's acute sensitivity to the class implications involved. It made me wish that Adams had invited down-and-outers, the racially, ethnically and sexually marginalised and the underclass that now enact violence for us in our armed forces to his dinner party sooner.

As embedded reporter Gordon Dillow remarked about the language of young US Marines early in Operation Iraqi Freedom: "Every fucking word was fucking this or fucking that...In a way it gets poetical – the way they can string these 'fucks' together...But you can't put that in a family newspaper."

But Adams could have put it and them in his fucking book.

Tom Palaima is professor of Classics, University of Texas at Austin, US.