



Social skills

The comfort of strangers

For individuals and societies, an ability to talk to new people is vital. It can easily be lost

ATTITUDES TO STRANGERS tend to follow a familiar pattern. Children are taught never to speak to unknown grown-ups, especially those regarded by their parents as untrustworthy. The onset of adolescence and young adulthood brings a bursting desire to interact with all sorts of people, particularly the kind who might not elicit family approval. Whether the resulting encounters are sexual or social, they confer a thrilling frisson of escape.

Social circles generally narrow again as people find life-partners, form households and produce offspring of their own. Time becomes scarce; new friendships are often based on sharing the burden of child care. Some people never recover the youthful zest for unforeseen liaisons. Professional duties swell even as parental ones diminish, and the inclination sags. In old age, even if curiosity and charisma remain undimmed, frailty makes new serendipitous connections harder to establish.

But that is not the whole story. In mid-life and beyond people can still experience the joy of a random meeting, however

Hello, Stranger. By Will Buckingham.

Granta; 336 pages; £16.99

The Power of Strangers. By Joe Keohane.

Random House; 352 pages; \$28.

Viking; £16.99

Fractured. By Jon Yates. *Harper North*;

348 pages; \$28.99 and £20

short, which somehow touches a nerve. That might involve nothing more than a smile, or a chance remark that hits an emotional spot; or it might be an unexpectedly deep conversation on a plane or train, a surge of mutual understanding that is life-affirming even if the interlocutor is never seen again. This aspect of the promise and peril of strangers has enticed story-

→ **Also in this section**

76 A private-equity scandal

77 The story of Sicily

78 Art in San Sebastián

tellers—from the rapture of “Brief Encounter” and “Before Sunrise” to the ruin of “Strangers on a Train”. The knowledge that the exchange will be a one-off can permit a delicious, uninhibited frankness.

In the age of covid-19 and Zoom, the chronological pattern has been warped. Instead of their hazy possibilities and risks, strangers have assumed an all-too-literal role as a looming source of infection. During lockdowns they are officially to be avoided. Yet youngsters still long, dangerously, for the ecstasy of communion, not just with edgy individuals but anonymous crowds. People of all ages have come to miss the human stimulation of busy high streets or trains, or the comforting sense of fellowship in a cinema or theatre audience.

So this is an apt moment for three books about meeting strangers. Will Buckingham has written a moving memoir of finding solace, after the death of his life-partner, in travelling and talking in lands such as Myanmar that are culturally distant from his native England. Joe Keohane, an American journalist, argues that communicating empathetically with strangers is vital and potentially life-changing. Jon Yates, who runs a youth charity based in London, frets that deep fissures in Western societies are making it impossible for people to reach, even casually, between classes, religions, ethnicities and generations.

All three authors make sweeping generalisations about the evolution of human society, from hunter-gatherers to the age of ▶▶

▶ Homer and beyond. But they are more interesting when they reflect, using personal experience or scientific research, on how people live and communicate now. In different ways, they all make two separate but related points. First, interacting meaningfully with a new person can bring huge rewards—but it is a skill that must be cultivated and can easily be lost. Second, the self-segregation of modern Western societies means that, for many people, conversing with some fellow citizens seems pointless, undesirable or outlandish. The second problem exacerbates the first: if you consider others beyond the pale, why make the effort to get to know them?

As both Mr Keohane and Mr Yates emphasise, in Britain and America political divisions have ossified into tribal ones. Supporters and opponents of Brexit live in discrete clusters; Republicans and Democrats see each other as bad people, not fellow Americans whose opinions happen to differ. These opposing sides have become strangers to one another. Mr Buckingham focuses on the pleasures and pitfalls of encounters in remote places where the stakes are lower because the acquaintanceships are bound to be temporary—in a holiday flat-share in Helsinki or while travelling through the Balkans. But, like the other two, he notes that wariness of unfamiliar people is neither new nor insuperable.

Faces look ugly when you're alone

Mr Keohane and Mr Yates offer tips on befriending strangers. Mr Keohane describes exercises in which groups of Republicans and Democrats were, with great difficulty, coaxed to overcome stereotypes and see one another as rounded individuals. They were trained to ask each other good questions and avoid name-calling. Mr Yates discusses the case for a kind of national social service that would encourage youngsters to mix with other groups and generations. Both have homely micro-solutions that readers can apply in daily relations—assume the best of others, remember that most have stories they are longing to tell, react philosophically when a friendly approach is rebuffed.

A telling point that none of the books captures is a paradoxical one: some of the most sophisticated forms of interaction between strangers occur in societies that are chronically divided. Think, for example, of rural Northern Ireland, or of parts of the former Ottoman Empire, such as Lebanon, where residents have lived in separate communal silos. In ways impenetrable to outsiders, the denizens of such places develop perfect antennae for the affiliation of a stranger and adjust their remarks accordingly. The ensuing exchanges occur within well-understood parameters—including a sense that social categories are resilient and pleasantries

will not change them. But tact allows people from antagonistic camps to have amicable encounters and transactions.

All three authors are inclined to overstate the ability of brief interactions to stave off conflict. Yet at least this much is true: a capacity to engage with new people in civilised, humane and meaningful ways is a necessary condition for social peace, even if it is not a sufficient one. That points up a half-hidden cost of covid-19. Children educated on screen; teenagers bouncing off the walls; adults working at home; lonely pensioners: more or less everyone's

social skills have been atrophying, with consequences not only for individuals but, perhaps, for the fabric of society.

As lockdowns lift, people are now stumbling back into a world of accidental collisions, some eagerly, some queasily, most with an odd sensation of novelty after a year of hibernation. The lesson of these books is that the easing of restrictions is not just a coveted opportunity to reconnect with those you love and resemble. It also restores a freedom, long taken for granted even if little used, to come to know the profoundly different. ■

A private-equity scandal

All that glitters

The spectacular rise and fall of an investors' darling

The Key Man. By Simon Clark and Will Louch. *Harper Business*; 352 pages; \$29.99. *Penguin Business*; £20

AT THE HEIGHT of his success, Arif Naqvi liked to remind colleagues that “Today’s peacock is tomorrow’s feather duster.” That ended up being an apt description of his own fate. As head of the Abraaj Group, the Pakistan-born financier spread his wings and attracted billions of dollars from global investors, only to end up being plucked by prosecutors as the alleged perpetrator of one of the largest corporate frauds in history—charges he denies.

Abraaj never became a household name. In its heyday in the mid-2010s, however, it claimed to be the world’s largest private-equity group focused on emerging markets. Within a decade of founding the firm in 2002, Mr Naqvi had earned a

reputation as a swashbuckling empire-builder, propelled by cheeky deals and a talent for self-promotion; he was one of Davos’s keenest flesh-pressers. He burnished his image with bursts of philanthropy. At one point he was even tipped as a future prime minister of Pakistan.

For the investors needed to plump up Abraaj’s private-equity funds, the biggest attraction was that Mr Naqvi seemed to be a master of “impact investing”, according to “The Key Man”, an account of his rise and fall by Simon Clark and Will Louch of the *Wall Street Journal*. This more caring form of capitalism, which involves trying to make a profit and do good at the same time, was right for the era. Mr Naqvi “was sought out by billionaires and their millennial heirs who enthusiastically adopted the idea of impact investing and the feel-good veneer it gave to the old game of making money”. Among those who invested in Abraaj’s funds were the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and Western and Middle Eastern governments.

Academics and journalists lapped it up, too. A prominent Harvard professor became a cheerleader for Abraaj. *Institutional Investor*, an industry publication, crowned Mr Naqvi “The Gulf’s Buy-out King”. (The firm’s headquarters were in Dubai, a fitting base given the emirate’s reputation as a freewheeling financial centre.)

The seeds of Abraaj’s downfall, say the authors, were the breakneck expansion of the business and Mr Naqvi’s increasingly lavish lifestyle, which left the firm struggling to cover its costs, including salaries. To keep things going, Mr Naqvi and some of his lieutenants allegedly started to sweep more and more of the available cash in Abraaj’s funds into secret bank accounts that they controlled, thereby breaking a cardinal rule of asset management: that in-▶



Naqvi in his pomp

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.