

## Make sense of it all.

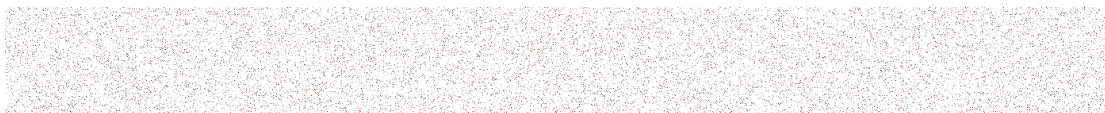
Become an FT subscriber

**Subscribe now**

### Fiction

## Legends, sisterhood and visions of Africa – a round-up of debut novels

Imagination knows few bounds in new titles that affirm the power of dreams and storytelling



© Tom Straw

**Suzi Feay** 5 HOURS AGO

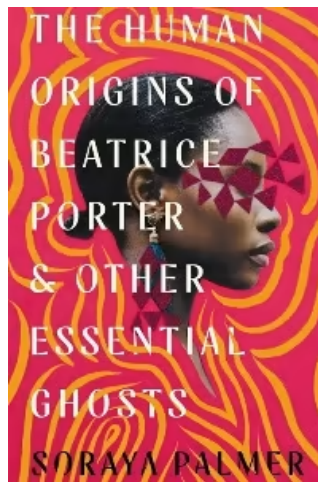
### Receive free Fiction updates

We'll send you a *myFT Daily Digest* email rounding up the latest Fiction news every morning.

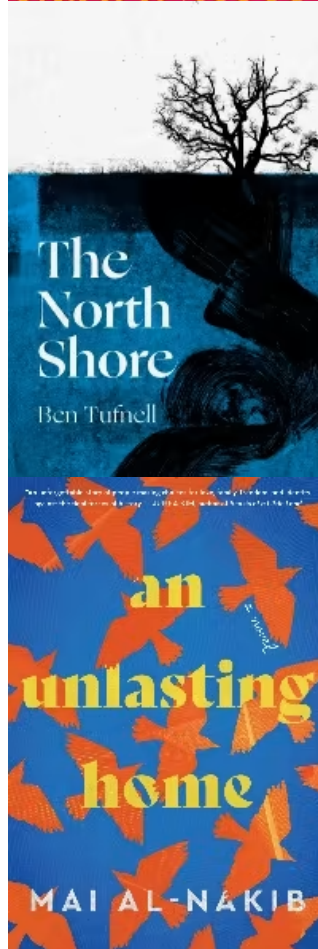
**Sign up**

Sometimes characters are so lively and entertaining, you don't want to say goodbye to them. Irresistible sisters Sasha and Zora in Soraya Palmer's [The Human Origins of Beatrice Porter and Other Essential Ghosts](#) (Serpent's Tail, £14.99) bicker and laugh their way through a troubled adolescence in Brooklyn.

A complex, unhappy man, their father Nigel hands on a love of storytelling to his daughters, even as he beats and brutalises their mother. His scary Jamaican stories involve the mysterious Rolling Calf, a figure of nightmares who pursues butchers, while their mother Beatrice's Trinidadian fairy tales involve the trickster spider Anansi and Mama Dglo, who can be petitioned for help from her castle deep in the ocean.



Zora wants to be a writer like her namesake, Zora Neale Hurston, while Sasha likes to dress up as a boy and explore her transgressive queerness. With their mother's descent into illness and their father's emotional defection to a white woman, the girls must learn to battle with the fantastical archetypes of their Caribbean culture. It's only by facing them down that such monsters from the imagination can offer up painful, necessary truths about the past. In wild, firecracker prose, Palmer whirls the reader into a realm where the real and unreal are constantly changing places. It's a stunning feat of storytelling in itself.



Legends of European origin flavour [The North Shore](#) by Ben Tufnell (Fleet, £16.99), set on the windswept Norfolk coast where the lonely narrator, a botanic artist, stumbles across a corpse seemingly thrown up by the sea. After vomiting a copious amount of seaweed, the man comes back to life, but when he continues to throw up vegetal matter, he seems less the merman he first appeared than the Green Man himself. He disappears, leaving behind a tree that wasn't there before. Ovid's tales of metamorphosis, Bernini's Apollo and Daphne, Botticelli's Primavera with its floral maiden are all drawn upon to testify the permeability of reality, the charms of fantasy, and the dangers of social isolation.

No fewer than five family trees preface [An Unlasting Home](#) by Mai Al-Nakib (Saqi, £20), and you'll need to consult them regularly over its wide span. It begins dramatically enough with the sudden arrest of Sara, a Kuwaiti professor of philosophy. One of the female students she has been lecturing on Nietzsche has reported her for blasphemy. During the tense weeks as she awaits trial, supported by her nervous lawyer and Maria, her beloved *ayah*, she recounts the lives of her forebears, mother Noura, grandmother Yasmine and great-grandmother Yeliz, and her other grandmother Lulwa. Indomitable women who had to face hardship and privation, they are a reproof to the fundamentalist students who denounced Sara, unaware of the battles of previous generations.

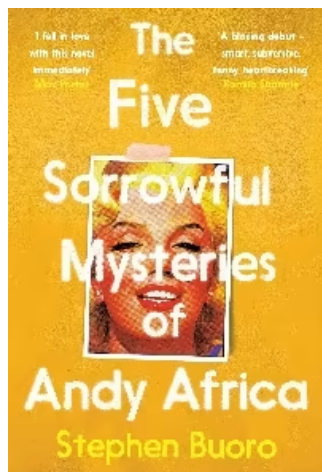
Woven into the women's dramatic story is that of Kuwait itself, but in a narrative filled with incident, it's curious how few memorable scenes the novel contains. This is due to a smooth, fast-flowing narrative

devoted to telling, not showing. It nevertheless stands as a testament to the eternal vibrancy and pluck of women in the Arab world.

Sara wishes her Kuwaiti home could be made perfect; young Andy Africa just wants to escape his "cursed" country — in fact the entire African continent, which he suspects is a computer generation. The young protagonist in Stephen Buoro's [The Five Sorrowful Mysteries of Andy Africa](#) (Bloomsbury Circus, £16.99) is a Catholic in a Muslim-majority town in Nigeria where religious riots occur regularly. Harry Potter and the Matrix films are his touchstones and, still a virgin, he longs for a white girlfriend. To his amazement, tall, platinum blonde Eileen, the priest's niece on a visit, shows an interest, but can his obsession ever truly be satisfied?

Andy is racked with guilt over his mother's difficult life, while being enraged that she won't reveal the name of his father, or accept any help from her rich twin brother. Tragically ebullient, even as the chaos of Nigeria threatens to overwhelm everything he holds dear, Andy enlivens what might otherwise be a painfully grim narrative. The ending is one of the most staggering since Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*.

Aoife Fitzpatrick transports us to the West Virginia of the late 19th century in [The Red Bird Sings](#) (Virago, £16.99), about the suspicious death of a young woman only a few months after her marriage. Her sinister new husband, Trout Shue, cut her off from family and friends, yet is so good a farrier that the locals are disinclined to condemn him, while a wife's reputation is easy to blacken.



It's left to Zona Shue's best friend, daring bicyclist Lucy, and her devastated mother Mary Jane, to pit women's intuition and smarts against overbearing male statutes.

Join our online book group on Facebook at [FT Books Café](#)



---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.

---