

FALL OF GHISLAINE MAXWELL BY ANNA PASTERNAK

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Christmas special!

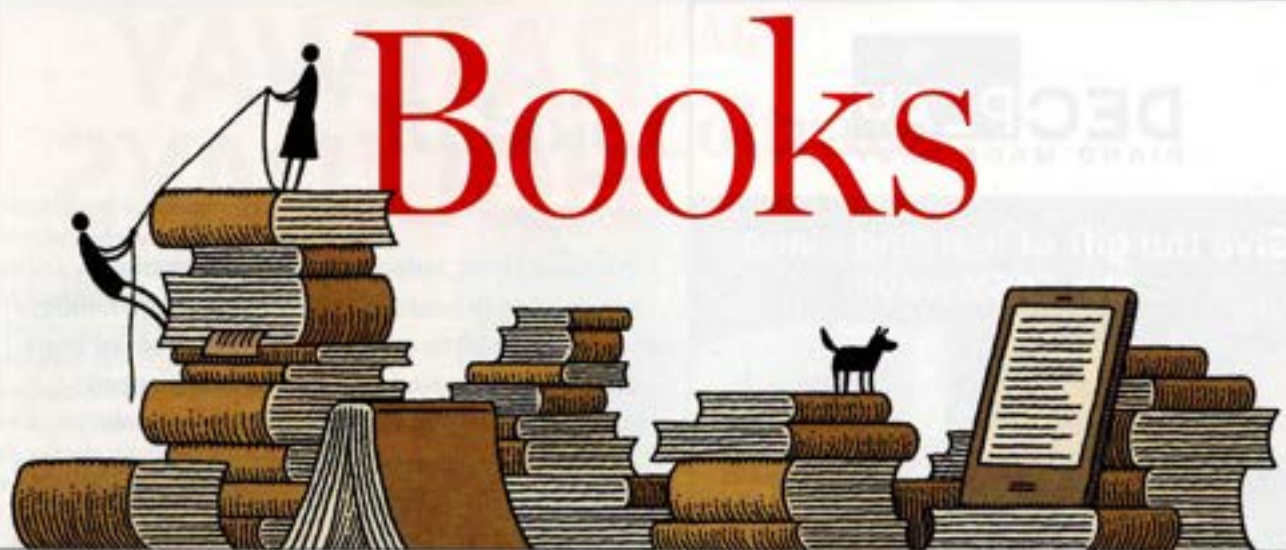
Paddington Bear, Oldie of the Year

Edward Ardizzone's 1939 pub crawl

I'm dreaming of a Beano Christmas - Joseph Connolly

Grey is the new black - Mary Killen on hair colour





Rise and fall of Daddy's girl

Anna Pasternak knew the calculating Ghislaine Maxwell at Oxford. A new biography reveals the sadist streak she inherited from her father

The jaw-dropping trajectory of Ghislaine Maxwell's fall from grace has been chronicled so often that surely there's nothing left to say. She plummeted from the upper echelons of British society to a US Federal Prison in Tallahassee where she is serving 20 years for sex trafficking.

We all know how this darling daddy's girl, the favourite offspring of megalomaniac ogre and corrupt tycoon Robert Maxwell, who siphoned £500 million from his companies' pension funds in the late eighties, fell under the wicked spell of one monster to another.

We're intimately acquainted with the fact that, after her father's mysterious death in 1991, when he plunged off the back of his yacht the *Lady Ghislaine* off the Canary Islands, Ghislaine became the accomplice in crime to the filthy-rich paedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

Weirdly, Epstein also died mysteriously, when he was found hanged in his New York prison in 2019.

We've followed the sorry Succession-esque saga of Ghislaine's life, where her survival in these stratospheric circles necessitated acquiescing to the whims of two repulsive, reprehensible men.

When the devastating details of the crimes perpetrated against innocent young girls – the 'nubiles' – whom

Ghislaine ensnared to feed Epstein's paedo sexual habit emerged, it fuelled further car-crash fixation. What the hell happened to the gilded girl who mixed with princes and presidents?

When *Hunting Ghislaine* by investigative journalist John Sweeney hit my desk – which Sweeney penned off the back of his addictively chilling podcast *Hunting Ghislaine* – I genuinely thought, 'Nah, nothing new here.'

Surely we have reached peak Maxwell saturation. It's a situation I have fully contributed to. I've written pieces about Ghislaine and appeared on Sweeney's podcast, thus meriting a few lines in this book.

The reason for my bit part in Maxwellian history is that I knew Ghislaine briefly in the late eighties.

Although she was a few years above me at Oxford, we moved in the same social circle. While she wasn't a friend, she was an air-kissing acquaintance.

I remember her as glamorous, popular and calculating. As I was of no interest to her – I wasn't rich or well connected – she would scan over my shoulder at parties for someone more important to talk to. She wasn't warm, but her smile could melt tundra if aimed at you. Which it never was at me.

She saw women not as cosy chums, but as a conduit to powerful men.

After Oxford, she started the all-women's Kit Kat Club, named after an early-18th-century political club.

It seems utterly ironic to me now, given her complete and depraved betrayal of young women, that I was in awe of her for hosting a gathering of women only in smart London addresses to listen to female speakers she invited. I keenly attended a few of these talks, where Ghislaine dazzled.

As I also spent my early childhood in Oxford, where the Maxwell family loomed large at the top of Headington Hill, I imagined there wasn't much I could learn from Sweeney's tome about Ghislaine's early life.

My older sister, Jane, went to prep school with Ian and Kevin Maxwell, and was invited to parties at the family home, Headington Hill Hall, a bleak 53-room mansion.

There, the backdrop was the tyrannical and terrifying figure of despot Bob. Even in the seventies, there was the sense that Maxwell's children (there were eight of them) paid a high price for their privileged existence.

Maxwell, an impoverished Czech immigrant who became a billionaire newspaper magnate, always felt – and indeed was – an outsider in Britain.

Insecure, paranoid and unrelentingly cruel, he created a surveillance state in



Maxwell house: Headington Hill Hall

his offices and home. Interestingly, so did Epstein.

Back to Sweeney. Once I had adapted to his blokish conversational style, I raced through his book, stuffed with tantalising facts fresh to me.

While he is never going to win a Pulitzer for his prose – I laughed out loud at his description of Ghislaine wearing a ‘kaftan thingy over her top’ – his dissection of this ‘dark fairy-tale story told in reverse’ is clever and compelling.

We learn that ‘Maxwell was a sadist who loved sadism as a spectacle’. What on earth could his cultured French wife, Betty, have seen in him? Why did she stay with a man who ritually abused her and their children? Sweeney explains Betty’s self-destructive passion for her loathsome husband. In one letter, she writes to him, ‘I want to drown my soul in your desires... You will only need to say what you want and it will be done, or to express a desire and I will satisfy it.’

Sound familiar? Isn’t this what Ghislaine pledged to Epstein?

I didn’t know that the brittle and brutal Ghislaine used to boast about ‘making Diana cry’ (Ghislaine knew Princess Diana’s brother, Charles, at Oxford) or that one of her closest friends at Oxford was Count Gottfried von Bismarck.

I devoured the pages about the great-great-grandson of Prince Otto, Germany’s Iron Chancellor, because in my first year my rooms were below his in Blue Boar Quad at Christ Church.

I knew who he was only when the police arrived, that summer term, because Olivia Channon, the 22-year-old daughter of Paul Channon, one of Margaret Thatcher’s Cabinet Ministers, had tragically died of a heroin overdose in von Bismarck’s room. I remember the police cordons and the shock.

Sweeney details how von Bismarck ‘left Oxford so quickly that he did not have time to settle his bills. His father, Prince Ferdinand von Bismarck, sent a manservant, who went round his son’s favoured watering holes, restaurants and his tailor with a fat chequebook.’

The disgraced von Bismarck kept in touch with Ghislaine until his death in 2007 from a drug overdose.

I also learned that Ghislaine’s habit of calling Epstein’s victims ‘minions’ came from the Piers Gaveston Society, where members were divided into Masters and Minions. I attended one of their parties in a stately home near Oxford. A former head of the society said that the Piers Gaveston appealed to those who ‘only went to Oxford to feel as if they were in a pornified Evelyn Waugh novel’.

One of Epstein’s victims told *Vanity*

Fair Maxwell ‘would call people her minion[s] ... so you felt like you were nothing’.

Sweeney crisply concludes, ‘The worry is that she took a joke for posh twits in the Piers Gaveston Society and lived its sick, elitist gospel to the letter.’

Sweeney’s coverage of Ghislaine’s trial in New York really zings, punctuated by his unbeatably blunt observations.

‘Watching how Ghislaine’s defence lawyers earned their big money, how they used their wits to trash sad, broken women, [I could feel that] my pity for Ghislaine Maxwell shrivelled with every passing minute,’ he writes. Just as ours does with every passing page.

Sweeney views Ghislaine with a clear eye, worrying at one point that ‘we might be judging Ghislaine Maxwell unfairly, using the #MeToo glasses of 2022 to look at the world of the 1980s and 1990s’.

Yet nothing can excuse her. He finishes quoting from *The Great Gatsby*, ‘how the rich “smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money”. Nothing good came of that. Or them.’

Amen to that. ●

Hunting Ghislaine by John Sweeney is published by Hodder & Stoughton (£22)