

FOOD OF THE GODS: THE SEARCH FOR THE ORIGINAL TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Terence McKenna

Rider, £9.99

McKenna's thesis – hold on tight – goes like this: the evolution and history of our species has been almost entirely shaped by our relationship with various "psychoactive" plants, that is, drugs. By turning on to psilocybin mushrooms, our African ancestors acquired an evolutionary edge: better eyesight, a more active sex life, an

aptitude for language, and a predilection for the sort of ecstatic, otherworldly experiences

which religion and art now supply.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way out of Africa, we blew it. Our unquenchable lust for drugs led us into bad habits – alcohol, sugar, tobacco, crack, heroin – which have both enslaved and deprived us of our "partnership" as McKenna's terms it, with mother earth. The emergence of a corrupt, ego-ridden, "dominator" culture has marooned us from our natural roots, which survive mainly in the folklore longing for that old (mushroomy) paradise. Unless we get back on one of those good hallucinogens pretty sharpish, we and the planet are doomed.

Summarised like this, *Food Of The Gods* sounds completely wacko. It isn't. McKenna has researched his topic with tremendous skill, wit and erudition. Some of his conclusions are pretty wild, but few books have ever offered a more challenging and provocative thesis as to what being human is all about. Essential reading. ★★★★★

Robert Sandall

YARDIE

Victor Headley

X Press, £5.95

Although a Caribbean British press review pronounced Yardie "the boo-yacka of all modern gangster novels", it would be inverted-snob-liberal nonsense to get overexcited about such a miserably limited thriller. This story of a Jamaican crack dealer and killer called D who comes to London, sets up his own operation and gets into a

spot of bother, works, just like its literary models, Richard Allen's *Skinhead* and *Suedehead*, by exploiting a current stereotype. The writing is tight enough – speech in patois, narrative in straight English – but the whole thing is shallow, empty and has no roots in anything but cheap thrills (at a stiff price for 162 paperback pages, in fact). What's more, Headley actually dumps the ending into sorry anticlimax as he drifts away from excitement into blatant yet soggy manoeuvres to set up a sequel. ★★

Phil Sutcliffe

JAZZ

Toni Morrison

Chatto & Windus, £14.99

Subtitled (A Novel) so that there can be no misunderstanding, this book always struggles to overcome its pretentious title. Morrison won a Pulitzer Prize for an earlier work, *Beloved*, and you can see why she commands attention. *Jazz's* canvas is broad (black urban life in the US, with the '20s serving as a chronological crampion); and her brush strokes are confident but bird-like, pecking at a number of different worms in throw-of-the-dice order, the narrative perspective shifting relentlessly. As to whether the undoubted bravura makes for great fiction is uncertain – too often the whole edifice is weakened by uninspired insights, the artifice serving to camouflage a paucity of real originality. ★★

Brian Glasser

SONGS OF THE DOOMED

Hunter S. Thompson

Picador, £5.99

Drinking and speeding with a work-release felon in a library at 4am; coming down off mescaline as the plane takes off from LA; driving along Palm Beach with two lesbians on his way to an orgy – just the usual "true" events befalling "Gonzo" journalist Hunter S. Thompson. But the last, undeniably real, episode before deadline saw Thompson arrested on nine felony accounts and three misdemeanour charges of brutal sex and violence, with a potential charge of 16 years imprisonment – "an episode reminiscent of some of his books" a local journalist noted.

As Thompson says in this paperback edition of the third collection of Gonzo Papers that begun with *The Great Shark Hunt*, journalism was a path to the action but a lousy way to pay your rent, and the answer was to write books. None has been forthcoming. It's equally disappointing that Thompson spends too much time backtracking here, to the point of unheard-of sentimentalism, while the brief chapter on the '90s is solely taken up with his court case, when you just know Dan Quayle was born for a man like Thompson to bury. For all that, the rattle, hum and hysteria of his hyper-realist prose are what counts, and there are brilliant flashes, especially the library encounter and the Pulitzer divorce case. The good doctor may not be writing with the same velocity but his intent to document the death of the American Dream is ever-present. ★★★★★

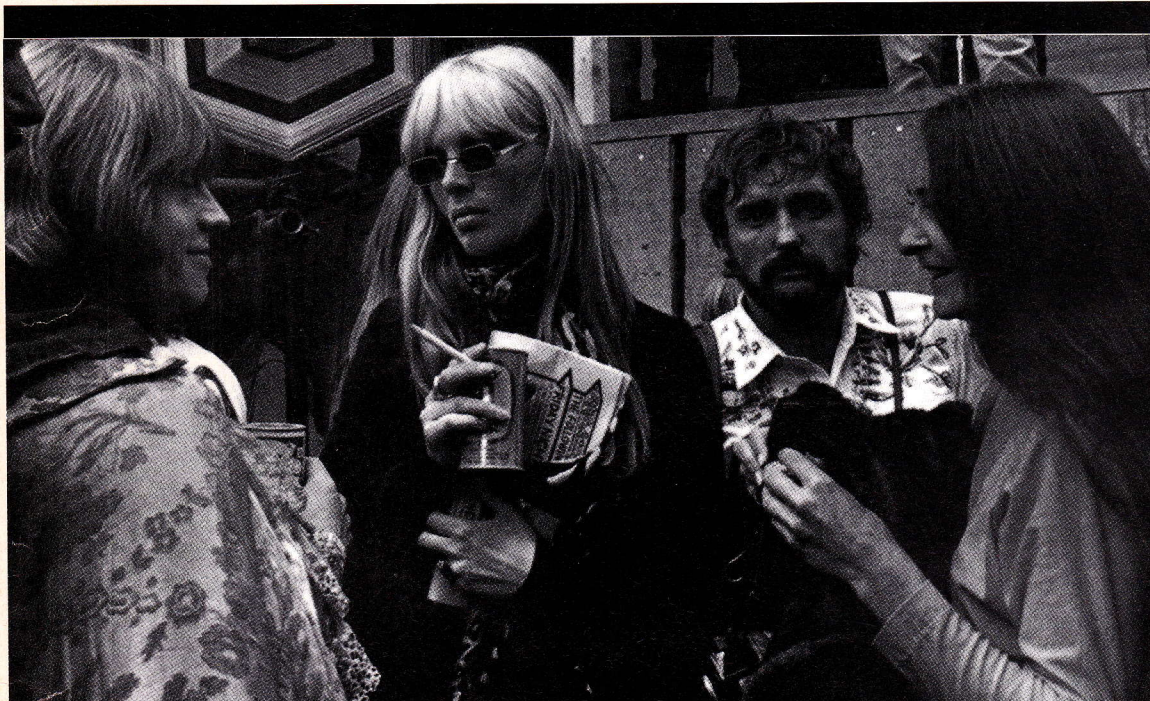
Martin Aston

NEIL YOUNG: A COMPLETE ILLUSTRATED BOOTLEG DISCOGRAPHY

Bruno Fisson & Alan Jenkins

Neil Young Appreciation Society, £11.50

A 260-page catalogue, this ultra-trainpotterly tome admits, with a modest duck of the head, to being the product of a combined 40 years of research by the authors. However, the liveliest it gets is a crisp admonishment to Live In Detroit noting that "The cover says recorded on 24 October 1969 – but it's actually from 14 December 1969". Anecdote-free, it has all the



Brian Jones, Nico, Dennis Hopper and friend backstage.

MONTEREY POP

Joel Selvin

Plexus, £9.99

1967's Monterey Pop festival survives in a series of moments captured by D.A. Pennebaker. His film remains perhaps the crucial record of performances with which Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and The Who launched themselves into rock legend.

Twenty-five years later, The San Francisco Chronicle's Joel Selvin juxtaposes those breakthrough sets with a look at the business forces that conspired to make Monterey a turning point in the fledgling rock industry. Created by an uneasy alliance between the San Francisco underground and Hollywood hustler-hipsters like John Phillips, Monterey was both a flowering of youthful creativity and a business venture designed to promote the new culture. Dylan's manager Albert Grossman and The Mamas And Papas used their power to hustle their proteges on to the bill, Janis Joplin was obliged to repeat her devastating Saturday afternoon performance to get it recorded for TV and questions still remain over how the profits were distributed.

Yet, ultimately, it is Jim Marshall's stunningly intimate photographs that bring this extraordinary festival to life. Soon Redding, Hendrix, Joplin and Jones were dead and what had seemed like the dawn of a new era suddenly seemed fragile and short-lived. Monterey remains one of those moments when conflicting forces somehow hold their breath and smile. It is a credit to Selvin's book that while laying bare the politics of Monterey, it also recaptures the wilful abandon of Hendrix, Joplin et al. ★★★★★

Mark Cooper

Janis Joplin on stage on the Saturday (or Sunday).

