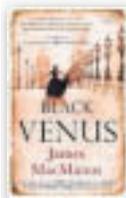


in short



Black Venus
by James MacManus
Duckworth, 352pp
£16.99 * £14.99

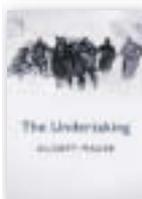
In the 19th century, there were two versions of Paris: before and after the Revolution of 1848. The old Paris, where Baron Haussmann had yet to create his stunning boulevards, was a place of narrow streets and legendary bohemianism. Charles Baudelaire is still working on the poems that will make his name. In the meantime, he wanders around the city, enjoying drugs, drink and decadence, while his inheritance drains away. In this well-researched and beautifully imagined historical novel, James MacManus tells the passionate story of Baudelaire's meeting with the love of his life. The "Black Venus" is Jeanne Duval, a cabaret singer from Haiti. She is the inspiration for Baudelaire's most famous work, *Les Fleurs du mal*, which leads to his trial for obscenity. This is a vivid recreation of a lost world; the Paris of *La bohème* and George du Maurier's *Trilby*, all cafés, ateliers and wild romance.



Balancing Act
by Joanna Trollope
Doubleday, 316pp
£18.99 * £14.99
e-book £9.99

A family business is ideal Trollope territory, with its constant tension between loyalty and hard commercial sense. This one is further complicated by being a business run by a mother and three daughters, in which men take a secondary role. Susie Moran, head of the family, has built up the successful Susie Sullivan Pottery, with a range of flowery, rustic-style jugs and bowls in the manner of Cath Kidston and Laura Ashley. She wants to buy an old house from her family's past, but this throws her daughters Grace, Ashley and Cara into collective panic. They think it's a crazy waste of money — but they're lashed to Susie's side by family history,

as well as money. Trollope writes about family relationships with intelligence and clear-eyed sympathy, and the outcomes in this terrific novel are always as believable as they are surprising. To be relished.



The Undertaking
by Audrey Magee
Atlantic Books, 294pp
£12.99 * £11.69
e-book £8.99

Love could hardly flourish in a less promising setting. It's the Second World War and Peter Faber is a German soldier who takes up a great offer: he marries a woman he has never met, Katharina Spinell, in return for ten days' "honeymoon" leave. When he visits his wife in Berlin, however, the two of them fall in love. Peter returns to the horrors of the Eastern Front with a mental icon of Katharina to keep him alive in the attack on Stalingrad. Back in Berlin, Katharina — egged on by her mad parents — is working her way into the very heart of the Nazi party. When the war ends, and they are both carrying their shares of the nation's guilt, can these two people ever recapture their old feelings? This sweeping, powerful, epic story would make a terrific film; Magee's writing is fast-moving, with a great visual sense, and conversations so believable that you can almost hear them.

Kate Saunders

