

Books

He's got language on the brain

WHEN Steven Pinker first appears on stage at a scientific conference, you half expect him to grab the mike and start singing. His cascading curls, chiseled jaw and perma-tan give him the look, famously, of a (now slightly superannuated) pop star. Then he starts speaking, and you become aware of the awesome combination of analytical and imaginative thinking that has earned this Harvard psychologist a place among Time Magazine's list of '100 Most Influential People'.

Pinker's latest book, *The Stuff Of Thought: Language As A Window Into Human Nature*, is a perfect example of his special skill. By scrutinising seemingly trivial oddities

Critic's choice
THE STUFF OF THOUGHT
by Steven Pinker
(Penguin/Allen Lane, £25)



by **Rita Carter**

of language, Pinker illuminates fundamental truths about the human mind.

His subject matter — tiny shifts in grammatical construction, for example — seems, at first, unpromising.

Why, he asks, do the words 'drink from a glass of water' and 'drink a glass of water' mean different things even though the action described in both is identical? Why can you say 'I'll send a message to the boarder' or 'I'll

send the boarder a message' and mean the same thing, but if the message is going to a 'boarder' rather than a 'boarder' you can phrase it only the first way?

Why is the past 'behind' us in some languages, but 'in front' of us in others? Why do we ask absurd questions such as 'Can you pass the salt?' (as if it might be too heavy to shift).

And why, when we swear, do we place the rude words randomly in sentences rather than positioning them, like other words, according to whether they are nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs?

Most of us take language so much for granted that we fail to notice these funny little anomalies or assume they are insignificant. Pinker, however, teases out the deep meanings wrapped within them.

This is the Big Idea of *The Stuff Of Thought* — that language is not just a way of communicating but a keyhole which reveals the (largely innate)

brain mechanisms that force us to see the world in a uniquely human way.

He shows that the circumlocutions we use to issue requests and orders ('would you mind terribly if I shut that window?') are not just cultural conventions but indicators of our need constantly to negotiate social relationships.

As Pinker himself puts it: 'On the one hand, you do want the salt. On the other hand, you don't want to boss people around lightly. So you split the difference by saying something that literally makes no sense while also conveying the message that you're not treating them like some kind of flunkey.'

At the other end of the language spectrum lies swearing. Pinker claims that the words we use when we swear fall into five distinct categories: sex, religion, excretion, despised groups, and disease and infirmity.

The words themselves change over time and differ from one society to another, but the categories are constant, reflecting deep-seated taboos.

Paperbacks
Fifty Is Not A Four-Letter Word by Linda Kelsey (Hodder, £6.99)



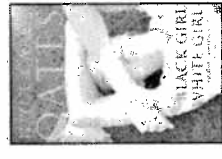
AS SOMEONE who knows that fifty is a four-letter word, I was unprepared for how much I would enjoy this read-at-

one-sitting exploration of the angst of middle-aged womanhood. Linda Kelsey is a former editor of glossy magazines, as is her fictional protagonist Hope. There, I hope for her sake, the resemblance ends. For Hope turns 50, gets the sack, is left by her husband, falls out with her son, loses the plot generally and goes up a dress size.

But Hope is a survivor and aided by a formidable sense of humour — this book is very funny — she muddles through and manages, after some pretty painful adjustments, to make it through to 51.

Don't be misled by the fun, though. Kelsey tackles some pretty big issues with commendable lightness of touch but also undeniable wisdom and insight. Highly recommended.

Paperbacks
Black Girl, White Girl by Joyce Carol Oates (Harper-Perennial, £7.99)



IT'S 1972, and Genna is the daughter of a rich and famous radical lawyer many of whose clients were anti-Vietnam

protesters wanted by the FBI. In his study he keeps photos of Southern blacks being lynched by white mobs. Only natural, then, that when Genna finds that her roommate in her exclusive college is Minette Swift, a black preacher's daughter, there on a scholarship, she is determined to be her best friend. But Minette is not friendly, nor open to the blandishments of a well-meaning white liberal girl.

Genna will not take no for an answer and when Minette appears to be the object of anonymous racist slurs, her anguish knows no bounds and ultimately contributes a disastrous outcome.

This is a riveting, painful depiction of white guilt, youthful regret and unrequited passion set in America's years of crisis following the end of the Vietnam War.

Paperbacks
700 Penguins introduced by Jim Stoddart (Penguin, £20)



THIS is a fascinating collection of 700 memorable Penguin covers from Britain and around the world, hand-picked by Penguin staff and dating from the publisher's birth in 1935 through to 2000.

For graphic design aficionados, it is a collector's item and you will have hours of fun identifying favourite illustrators and typographers as well as poring over countless mutations of the much-loved Penguin style; for others such as myself, it is a journey back down memory lane, leaping through the early plain orange (fiction), green (crime fiction) and blue (biography) covers as well as the later fully illustrated jackets, each one a small work of art and a reminder to re-read some old favourites.

A lovely book to browse, and I envy the fun that designer David Pearson must have had sifting through the Penguin archives.

PINKER describes brain-imaging experiments which suggest that we are all shocked by profanities, however much we try not to be. When we hear swear words, the part of the brain which reacts to negative emotions becomes active in much the same way that it does when we are physically threatened.

Similarly, our disregard for grammar when we swear suggests that cursing comes straight from the deeper, older and more primitive parts of the brain which are unconcerned about niceties of syntax.

By scrutinising these built-in concepts, we may come to see them as illusions created by our brains rather than a reflection of the real world. So Pinker is not just offering us insights into our own thought processes — he wants to help us understand universal truths that we are not biologically prone to grasp. Pinker writes lucidly and elegantly, and leavens the text with scores of perfectly judged anecdotes, jokes, cartoons and illustrations. Given the ambition, scope and 500-odd pages of *The Stuff Of Thought*, though, you should not expect to romp through it. Give it a month, I would suggest. At least.

What to



Harry Pea

...ARE YOU READING?
The Laughing Policeman by Maj Sjöwall and Per Olov Enquist. It's part of the Mai series of police procedurals written in the Sixties by Stockholm, Beck's excellent downbeat protagonist with the (he doesn't write drive a vintage car too much coffee a his wife and kids); grainy day-to-day detective has proven better described than they're so good I limit myself to one don't run out too

...WOULD YOU TAKE A DESERT ISLAND?
The Penguin Company by Sherlock Holmes. I'm on edge or de can read the open pages of any story always cheers me rooms at 221b Baker Street. Watson rattling the newspaper, Holm violin, the smell of pipe tobacco — it's equivalent of our

...FIRST GAVE YOU A READING BUG?
The Weirdestone of Brisingamen by A read this when I was the first book that seemed mor than television. It involves lots of w and various other Earth types rarer 1960s Cheshire (but presumably), it all footballers move unlikely in retros can still feel the claustrophobic of two children are through the tunnel Alderley Edge.

...LEFT YOU COLLECTING?
Greenmantle by John Galsworthy. I'm a big fan of the type written! Doyle, Rider Haggard, Anthony Hope, but get along with Bu Hannay is so hum self-righteous. I Greenway thro could preserve to at some point so would tell him to smack him in the Harry Pearson's Unbelievable Encyclopaedia of Football, is publish Brown at £9.99.

CANAL WINTER
If you read the murder novel you're probably waiting for the sequel Canadian Winter by George Peck. It's in any good bookstore. Phone 01892 83844 for more info on how to buy it. Stanley, George Peck email readgulliver@canadianwinter.com