



Reviewed in short

The Incarcerations: BK-16 and the Search for Democracy in India by Alpa Shah

William Collins, 672pp, £30

Beginning in the summer of 2018, authorities across India arrested an assortment of human rights advocates, including professors, lawyers, journalists and poets. The group – 16 people in total – was accused of inciting a deadly riot at a commemoration event in the village of Bhima Koregaon, in the country’s west, and plotting to kill the prime minister Narendra Modi. The evidence against them was flimsy and, as Alpa Shah’s deeply reported investigation makes clear, planted. Many have languished in jail for years with no trial date. One, Stan Swamy, an 84-year-old Jesuit priest and indigenous rights activist, died in custody in 2021.

As well as tracing the backstories of each of the so-called BK-16, Shah recounts the myriad, complex injustices inflicted on them by authorities increasingly intent on destroying democracy. Told in propulsive prose, *The Incarcerations* is sweeping in scope and meticulous in its detail; a glossary of key figures in the case at the beginning of the book spans nine pages. Read before India’s election this spring, it’s an account that shocks, illustrating the brazen lengths the state will go to to quell dissent. But it’s also galvanising in its depiction of the group’s defiance.

By Megan Gibson

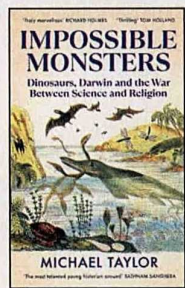
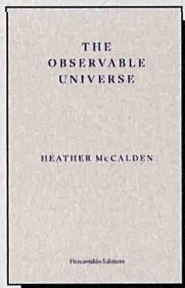
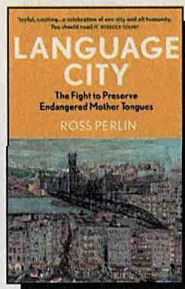
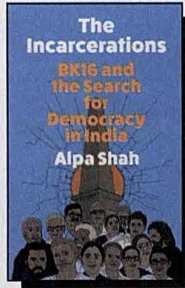
Impossible Monsters by Michael Taylor

The Bodley Head, 496pp, £25

In 1654, after careful calculations, Archbishop Ussher of Armagh declared that the day of Creation started at 6pm on 22 October, 4004 BC. The Most Reverend’s assertion quickly became canonical. In this book, subtitled “dinosaurs, Darwin and the war between science and religion”, the historian Michael Taylor narrates what happened when the discovery of fossil bones undermined accepted truths. The first blow came in 1811 when the Dorset fossil hunter Mary Anning and her brother found the skull of a crocodile-like beast: it was named the proteosaurus, “original lizard”.

The emotional impact on the Victorians of this was profound. Such creatures seemed to contradict the Bible story; where did that leave religious belief itself? Taylor recounts not just the interventions of palaeontologists and geologists but also those stricken by events as their faith evaporated. Others such as Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton used the discoveries to justify imperialism and eugenics. Taylor’s story is not a new one, but he marshals his cast expertly and shows lucidly why it mattered so much.

By Michael Prodger



Language City: The Fight to Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues by Ross Perlin

Atlantic, 432pp, £12.99

In his second book, Ross Perlin, the linguist and co-director of Endangered Language Alliance, a non-profit that documents endangered languages, guides us through his native New York, mapping out corners of “the city that now looks more and more like the world itself”. There are over 700 languages spoken there, but political oppression and xenophobia threaten many with extinction.

Perlin’s retelling pre-dates the 1613 arrival of the first non-native resident of what would become New York City and runs up to the present day. He explains how the city became a refuge for endangered vernaculars, and challenges our understanding of what constitutes a language at all: does it need an alphabet; should we consider “ethnolects” spoken by particular ethnic communities? Perlin documents his conversations with six speakers of endangered languages – from the Nepalese Seke to the Native American Lenape – with a sense of urgency, as though he is working against the clock to prevent these dialects from dying out. He draws on a bleak possibility that stretches far beyond New York: half of all 7,000 human languages are at risk of extinction over the next century.

By Zuzanna Lachendro

The Observable Universe by Heather McCalden

Fitzcarraldo Editions, 424pp, £14.99

In this memoir turned treatise on grief, Heather McCalden traces the evolution of Aids – from which both her parents died when she was a child – alongside the development of the internet. What they have in common is virality, a linguistic parallel that could feel staid rehashed over more than 400 pages. But McCalden’s sequence of itemised yet interlocking chapters – many less than a page long – is so surprising that this debut book feels revelatory.

McCalden places factual accounts of scientific discoveries alongside intimate recollections of her grandmother, who raised her after her parents’ death. Along the way she examines hacking, social media and her practice as a photographer, and recalls a youth of late-night trips down LA freeways. She hires a private investigator to look into the life of her father, about whom she knows very little. This gives her story drive – rare in a collection of vignettes. But it becomes clear that for McCalden the facts of the past are not really important: what matters is grappling with how we live now, with contagion and loss in the digital age.

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger