this case study suggests, they can influence the political climate for generations.

People find it impossible to assess such accusations in good faith; they excuse their own side, and are easily persuaded that their opponents are not just misguided but treacherous. That undermines the bedrock trust required for democracy to function. Another malign effect is that conspiracy theories can obviate self-examination.

Some British historians maintain that the Labour Party neglected to study its own mistakes because it thought dark forces, in the domestic establishment or beyond, had thwarted its chances in 1924. That is another warning for Americans and others to ponder. Public life suffers if the idea takes hold that wicked Russians (and their accomplices) are responsible for beaten politicians' failings. ■

The literature of Trieste

# Tales of the city

**A Perfect Mother.** By Katri Skala. *Hikari Press; 224 pages; £15*

ON NOVEMBER 3rd 1918 the *Audace*, a warship, moored in the harbour of Trieste. It came to claim the cosmopolitan free port of the dying Austro-Hungarian Empire for Italy. The fabled city, which sits on the Adriatic coast east of Venice and beside the border with Slovenia, has long attracted artists as well as conquerors. From their grandiose harbour-front HQs, shipping and insurance firms once linked the empire to the world; generations of literary exiles and nomads have flowed in, and made Trieste their own.

James Joyce, who taught English in Trieste before the first world war, finished "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" there, and wrote "Dubliners" and parts of "Ulysses". His friend and pupil Italo Svevo—the Jewish director of a family painting business, whose real name was Ettore Schmitz—set his rueful comic classic "Zeno's Conscience" in the tolerant, bourgeois home city he adored. On nearby cliffs in 1912, while staying with his aristocratic patron at Duino Castle, the visionary poet Rainer Maria Rilke heard a voice that asked: "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic/Orders?"

Thus were born Rilke's "Duino Elegies", which changed the course of European verse. The great Italian poet Umberto Saba lived, wrote and ran a bookshop in the city. Dasa Drndic, an outstanding Croatian novelist who died earlier this year, explored its darkest wartime chapters in her masterpiece, "Trieste".

Now Katri Skala—a British-American author with Viennese ancestry—has joined this chorus of Trieste-smitten mavericks with her debut novel, "A Perfect Mother". Shadowed by its past, this becalmed former melting pot, with its "medley of histories", begins and ends a story that subtly links the legacies of collective and individual trauma. Ms Skala's protagonist is Jacob, a divorcing, middle-aged journalist from London. He goes in search of a Viennese Jewish great-grandfather who vanished in the Trieste of the 1930s.

While seeking to "excavate the wounds of his ancestors", Jacob meets and begins to love an alluring, troubled Englishwoman, Charlotte. The half-buried tragedies of her own life—an abusive childhood, a baby lost to a cot death—are counterpoints to Trieste's city-scale combination of glamour and horror. Individuals, like their homelands, bear imperfectly hidden scars from "the vicissitudes of power and dislocation". Cities, even handsome, cultured ones, "like families, like nations, like lovers are never only solid surfaces". Secrets, and stories, always lie beneath. Ms Skala conveys the shadowed charm of these story-haunted stones. Her Trieste is never an abstraction, but it becomes a potent metaphor for the mask of beauty that violence may wear.

In her book about the place she has cherished since a first visit in 1946, Jan Morris, an illustrious travel writer, calls Trieste the "natural capital" of "the nation of nowhere"; a haven for the wandering spirit. "Ethnically ambivalent, historically confused", the hybrid city had passed from Austrian into Italian hands, fallen under German, Yugoslav and joint Allied control, then reverted in 1954 to Italy. Many of its Jews perished in the Holocaust: the San Sabba rice mill became Italy's sole death camp. The "easy inter-racial jumble" of the Habsburg era (as Ms Morris puts it) faded. A brief phase of Yugoslav command in 1945 included massacres that are still disputed. Sizeable Slavic minorities continue to live in the area.

No single narrative can account for this past. Still, a century after the *Audace* docked, the ideal of a free and open Trieste remains seductive. "Citizens of nowhere, unite!" Ms Morris exhorts. "Join me in Trieste, your capital." As Ms Skala's novel shrewdly shows, reality does not always match the ideal. These days the Trieste region votes heavily for Italy's anti-migrant Northern League. Yet at a time when politicians pour scorn on "citizens of nowhere", the dreamy enclave that Joyce dubbed "Europiccola"—a miniature Europe—still casts a melancholy spell. ■



Written on the water

A novel of the mafia

# The children of Gomorrah

**The Piranhas: The Boy Bosses of Naples.** By Roberto Saviano. Translated by Antony Shugaar. *Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 368 pages; $27. Picador; £14.99*

THE weeks before the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin on August 15th are shakedown time in Naples: one of three moments in the year when traders can expect their neighbourhood mobsters to collect protection money. Earlier this month, four armed gangsters walked into a shop in the suburb of Monterusciello and demanded €5,000 ($5,800). When caught by police, the youngest turned out to be aged 14; the oldest was 19.

That is the grim reality behind the first novel by Roberto Saviano—author of "Gomorrah", a bestselling exposé of the Camorra, the Neapolitan mafia network. "The Piranhas" recounts the misadventures of a fictional "baby gang", a bunch of unpleasant louts captained by one Nicolas Fiorillo, alias Maraja. Like most of its real-life counterparts, the gang operates under the auspices of the Camorra—a branch of which has sentenced Mr Saviano to death.

The author knows that readers of gangster novels like to be shocked and disoriented. A "city like Naples, or Mumbai, or Kinshasa", as he sardonically puts it, is ideal for the purpose. In Mr Saviano's Naples, not even the playgrounds are safe. The youngest member of the gang arranges for some Roma children to raid one: "taking the littlest kids off the rides and the seesaws, shoving other kids so they fell on their faces, frightening them and making them cry". He and some accomplices shoo out the Romas—before demanding five eu-