is unreformable as a self-governing entity because unionists will not treat nationalists equally. Attempting to share power is therefore doomed, and the only solution is a referendum (or referenda) leading to Irish unity. Such an analysis bodes ill for any return to the arrangements so painstakingly pieced together in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.
Andy Pollak

This is Going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor

by Adam Kay (Picador, £16.99)

Before reading Adam Kay's diary of working as a junior doctor for six years between 2004 and 2010, I was blissfully unfamiliar with the medical term "deglove"—describing a kind of injury in which the skin is peeled off the underlying tissue like a glove. *This is Going to Hurt* is not for the faint-hearted.

One of the earliest diary entries recounts the horrific demise of a patient "hosing enormous quantities of blood out of his mouth." It is the first death Kay witnesses and afterwards he gratefully accepts his registrar's offer of a cigarette, even though he doesn't smoke.

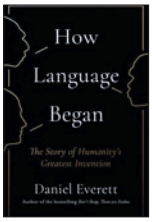
Kay eventually specialised in obstetrics because, as he writes, "you end up with twice the number of patients you started with… an unusually good batting average compared to other specialities. (I'm looking at you, geriatrics.)"

The final entry is a distressingly vivid description of an incident so awful that Kay simply cannot carry on and so resigns. "I went six months without laughing, every smile was just an impression of one," he writes.

Yet, extraordinarily, this book is filled with laughter. It is not all about "adverse outcomes," as the management jargon has it. Kay, who clearly decided that laughter is the best medicine and is now a comedy writer and performer, has a brilliant, scalpel-sharp wit which he uses to dissects the lunacies of the NHS—its patients and, sometimes, its employees. Probably best not to read it if you have any medical procedures scheduled though.
Neil Armstrong

How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention

by Daniel Everett (Profile, £25)



In this important and fascinating book, Daniel Everett draws on his years of experience studying the languages and cultures of hunter-gatherer tribes in the Brazilian Amazon, to challenge Noam Chomsky's famous theory of language acquisition. Popularised by Steven Pinker in *The Language Instinct*, Chomsky's view is that the capacity for natural language—and more specifically what is called generative grammar—is hard-wired into our brains.

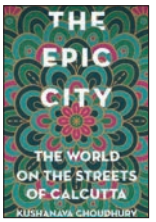
But Everett argues instead that language is a cultural invention. As such, language is not significantly different from other cultural artefacts, including axes and cars. It is, furthermore, dependent on brain structures that perform diverse cognitive functions, rather than on a specialised "language organ."

Everett's controversial conception of the relationship between the brain, language and culture has two important consequences. In denying the possibility for human instinct, it dispenses with the notion of a biologically programmed human nature. And by refashioning the mind as a *tabula rasa* and focusing on culture as the prerequisite and primary cause of language evolution, it pushes back the origins of language to two million years ago—a time when Homo erectus navigated the world on foot and by sea while inventing culture and symbols. Language is generally thought to have originated more recently, perhaps just 100,000 years ago, and to be a unique characteristic of our later Homo sapien speech.

The evidence for Everett's radical theory, although compelling, is ultimately unconvincing principally because of its denial of genetic constraints.
Adrian Woolfson

The Epic City: The World on the Streets of Calcutta

by Kushanava Choudhury (Bloomsbury, £16.99)



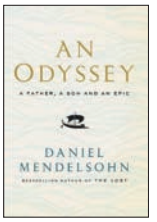
Calcutta has had many chroniclers. In the 19th century, Rabindranath Tagore's stories heralded the arrival of western ideas in what was then India's capital. In the 20th, Satyajit Ray's films delved into the social world that was created after independence. And in the 21st century, as the city's cultural and colonial glory faded, novelists like Neel Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri have charted the political convulsions of the city's decline. Now Kushanava Choudhury offers a more personal account of what he regards as "the epic city" in this brilliantly eloquent memoir.

The stereotypical journey of 21st-century middle-class Bengalis has been to escape the city for an elite education and then a well-paid job in the US. Choudhury, who has degrees from Princeton and Yale, baffled his family and friends by returning to his ancestral city after his education. There he became a reporter immersed in the life of the metropolis. He likens the task of finding stories to wandering the streets "with a begging bowl." He also compares his marriage to something out of a Ray film. The city exposes the couple's differences: sentimental backwardness versus the progressive capitalism of America and Delhi, favoured by his wife. "Calcutta offers nothing to see, nothing to do, and no one famous," Choudhury says mischievously.

That must be why the city has produced so many writers. With nothing to do, people turn to books. One could do worse than this one.
Tanjil Rashid

An Odyssey: A Father, A Son and an Epic

by Daniel Mendelsohn (William Collins, £18.99)



It is a truism that literary criticism doesn't sell without a healthy dose of memoir to entice the reader. Hence the proliferation of formulaic books with titles like, "How Proust Solved my Depression," or "Shakespeare Helped me get Over my Breakdown." But in the hands of Daniel Mendelsohn, a talented critic and sensitive memoirist, the genre gets a shot in the arm.

An Odyssey follows Mendelsohn's father Jay, who in his eighties decides to complete the classical education he abandoned as a teenager by attending the class his son taught on the *Odyssey* at Bard College. At first his fellow students don't know what to make of crotchety Jay, whose scientific mind isn't comfortable with there being no one right answer to the questions they tackle, and who can't see why Odysseus should be regarded as a hero—the gods do it all for him! Daniel is exasperated and sometimes embarrassed; but he knows that this class is an opportunity to get to know an emotionally distant man too old fashioned to say he loves him.

The beauty of this book is in the structure, loosely based on the poem. So we begin with a proem that summarises its argument; and as new characters are introduced we spool back to a telling anecdote, in imitation of the Greek poet's "ring-composition" technique. Central motifs echo through real life and the poem—the homemade bed Jay made for his son is a counterpoint to the bed of Odysseus and Penelope. It is a measure of the author's skill that the comparisons rarely feel forced.

An excursion on an *Odyssey*-themed cruise to the real Troy promises more than it delivers. But for the most part this is a moving love letter to Mendelsohn's father and to Homer, both of whom have done so much to shape the writer's mind and character.
Sameer Rahim