

FROM THE EDITOR

Aga sagas

Charles Day

Martin Amis, a former bad boy of British literature, was interviewed last year by the *New York Times* about his reading habits. Asked which genres he enjoys and which he avoids, he replied, “I confess I have never read an Aga saga or a bodice ripper—or indeed a western (though Hitler, incidentally, read nothing else).”

What, you might ask, is an Aga saga? The term was coined in 1992 to describe the novels of Joanna Trollope, which, being set amid middle-class society in the countryside of southern England, could be presumed to feature a type of stored-heat cooker called an AGA. By happenstance, my home library includes the epitome of Aga sagas, Trollope’s *A Village Affair* (1989). Motivated to one-up Amis, I read the book. No AGAs appear within its pages, but thanks to YouTube, I spotted one in the trailer for the 1995 TV adaptation.

The acronym AGA stands for Aktiebolaget Svenska Gasaccumulator (Swedish Gas Accumulator Limited). The company has a connection with physics. Its chief engineer and inventor of the AGA cooker, Gustaf Dalén, was awarded the 1912 Nobel Prize in Physics “for his invention of automatic regulators for use in conjunction with gas accumulators for illuminating light-houses and buoys.”

Dalén was inspired to invent a cooker after being blinded in 1912 in an acetylene explosion. Spending more time at home, he noticed how much work his wife, Elma, put into fueling and running the family’s stove. His solution was to create one that ran continuously. When introduced to the UK in 1929, the AGA stove became popular among the rich owners of large country houses.

AGAs not only serve as cookers, they also heat water. The stove is hot enough that it warms a kitchen. In a drafty old house, the kitchen is the coziest room because of the AGA.

But all is not well in Agashire. Since Trollope wrote her first Aga saga in the late 1980s, climate change has nudged up the mean temperature in the UK and led to more frequent and intense heat waves.

AGAs run too hot for some parts of the country. Indeed, without much difficulty, I found a news story about a resident of Aldeburgh in the east of England who complained that her AGA made her kitchen “unbearably hot” during a 2019 heat wave. If the Aga saga endures, the genre’s name will become vestigial.

A changed climate—invariably a worse one—has been a setting for science fiction for decades. Notable novels that feature warmer worlds include Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Peter F. Hamilton’s *Mindstar Rising* (1993), Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), and Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (2007).

Climate change is also showing up in literary fiction. In Iain Banks’s *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* (2007), a gamekeeper on an estate in the Scottish Highlands laments, “Ah, it’s all changing. We can see it here. The salmon and brown trout, they’re mostly gone. And we don’t get the winters we used to. I’ve got clothes and winter gear I just never wear—well, maybe a day a year or some-

thing—because it’s milder all the time.”

Banks himself became increasingly alarmed about climate change. In 2007 he sold his fleet of cars (BMW M5, Land Rover Discovery, Porsche 911 Turbo, and Porsche Boxter S) and replaced them with a Lexus RX 400 hybrid. PT



JOANNA TROLLOPE

A VILLAGE AFFAIR



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