Leila McKinnon REVIEWS

MOTHERING SUNDAY
BY GRAHAM SWIFT, SIMON & SCHUSTER.
You could say Mothering Sunday is beautiful, brilliant and sexy, and you wouldn't be wrong. Yet what makes it exceptional is the understated way in which it tells all those things. It's effortless, cool and compact, a kind of Mona Lisa of literature. Jane Fairchild is the maid to the Niven family. It's 1924 and the servants have the day off to go to their homes for mothering Sunday. Yet Jane is an orphan, with somewhat different plans: an assignation with her lover, the sole surviving son of the wealthy family next door. That he intends to meet his fiancée later is unfortunate, but it doesn't appear to trouble either of them unduly. This is a very English story in which passions run deep beneath seemingly tranquil waters and glimpses of grief, despair, hope and freedom are all the more powerful for their restraint.

RAIN DOGS
BY ADRIAN MCKINTY, ALLEN & UNWIN.
Bless Adrian McKinty for bringing Muhammad Ali, Jimmy Savile and a new band called U2 to the mix in a way that makes perfect sense and is murder mystery perfection. McKinty is a true master of this genre, with muscular vigour rare and only McKinty can do what you believe to be right that is the real challenge and it pits Duffy against one of his oldest friends, his bosses, the secret services and the government. This is the fifth Duffy novel, one in which he encounters his second "locked room" murder, in Carrickfergus Castle. Bringing the killer to justice will be almost impossible in a world in which money and power trump righteousness. Novels with this kind of muscular vigour are rare and only McKinty brings Muhammad Ali, Jimmy Savile and a new band called U2 to the mix in a way that makes perfect sense and is murder mystery perfection.

ESPOSURE
BY HELEN DUNMORE, HUTCHINSON.
Helen Dunmore brings 1960 and the spy games of the Cold War off the streets of Moscow and London and into suburban homes, sacrificing high-octane action for gritty domestic tension. Simon Callington is a low-level employee at the Admiralty, happily commuting to an ordinary family life. Urbane Giles Holloway leads a lonelier existence, taking home top-secret files and photographing them for the Soviets. Yet when Giles drunkenly falls down the stairs one evening, both their lives are upended. There are no thrilling dead drops and no assassins here, just stomach-churning reality: a stoic and smart wife, resilient kids, a judgemental town and an uncertain future. Yet Exposure, with its surprising secrets and climactic murder, is as absorbing as any more flamboyant thriller.

SIX TUDOR QUEENS:
KATHERINE OF ARAGON, THE TRUE QUEEN
BY ALISON WEIR, HEADLINE REVIEW.
Who's your least favourite wife of King Henry VIII? Surely it should be Anne Boleyn for her brazen, ruthless ambition? Perhaps not – her flashy glamour and tragic end are strangely compelling nearly 500 years later. Katherine of Aragon, however, has gone down in history as the less interesting, ageing, rejected Queen. Yet in this first of a series looking at all of Henry's wives, Alison Weir's fictionalised account shows Katherine's life was just as tempestuous and that she was more than a match for Anne in strength of character. She married Henry when she was 23 and the marriage lasted 24 years. She was charged for milk and sugary drinks for two to a hammock, and rang topped and tailed passengers in the lowest rung topped and tailed two to a hammock, and were charged for milk and soap. Crisply researched and lavishly illustrated with colour plates.