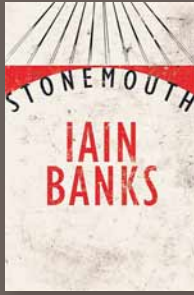


## BOOK REVIEWS

WORDS PAUL ROBINSON



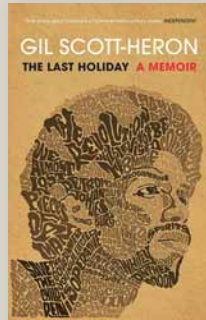
### STONEMOUTH

**Iain Banks** (Little Brown, \$30)  
Returning to his hometown five years after being chased out by the local crime family, Stewart Gilmour has mixed feelings. Back for the funeral of Murston patriarch Joe, he's also hoping to see his ex, Ellie Murston. This may be a bad idea as her brothers neither forgive nor forget. Effortless, thoughtful prose from a prolific penman who rarely puts a foot wrong.



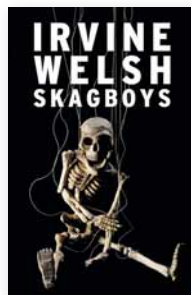
### THE WATCH

**Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya** (Vintage, \$33) **It's a standoff.** At a remote fire base in Kandahar, exhausted US soldiers recoup after almost being overrun. In the dust outside the base, a lone woman waits to claim the body of her *mujahedin* brother for burial. She has lost her village, family and legs to a stray US bomb. The Americans suspect a trap. Like a slow-burning fuse, this intense and powerful novel strips bare the reality of war. Little glory here.



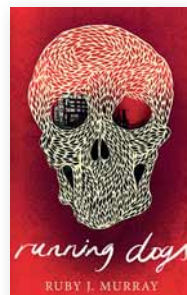
### THE LAST HOLIDAY: A MEMOIR **Gil Scott-Heron** (Canongate, \$45)

Gil Scott-Heron, who died last year aged 62, was a bona fide original: poet, novelist, reluctant Godfather of Rap ("Don't blame me for that") and recidivist crack addict. Long critically lauded, but much less rewarded, he addressed issues in the 1970s-'80s such as social injustice (*Whitey On The Moon*), environmental disaster (*We Almost Lost Detroit*), addiction, black incarceration and consumer apathy (*The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*) long before they appeared on popular radar. Although uneven, with much of it assembled from recovered writings, and little about his personal war on drugs, Heron's astute observations on his life, society and politics make for compelling reading. Right on, brother!



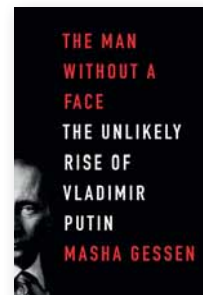
### SKAGBOYS

**Irvine Welsh** (Jonathan Cape, \$33)  
This prequel to the bestseller details how Renton, Sick Boy, Begbie and team enlisted in the junkie business of *Trainspotting*. Jobs are lost, love goes wrong and the pressures of survival mount as Thatcherism crushes working class hope, social cohesion crumbles and heroin grips Edinburgh in its velvet claws. Welsh's words are as searing as ever, the Scots dialogue machine-gun fast and his characters have even more weight because we know what's around the corner. Choose life, indeed.



### RUNNING DOGS

**Ruby J Murray** (Scribe, \$30)  
Working in Jakarta for an NGO, Diana Esposito is overwhelmed by the turmoil of a seething third world metropolis. An encounter with childhood friend Petra Jordan sucks her further into the maelstrom. Petra and her two brothers are scions of an elite whose tentacles manipulate both government and business. But the family is haunted by dark secrets. This tale of an expat adrift in an Indonesia beset by political unrest is so atmospheric you can almost smell the *kretek* cigarette smoke.



### THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE

**Masha Gessen** (Granta, \$30)  
Rambo of the steppes, conqueror of the Caucasus and apparently boss of Russia for as long as he desires, Vladimir Putin came out of nowhere. How this former KGB desk jockey and deputy mayor of St Petersburg parlayed a position as a Yeltsin *apparatchik* into total control, stifling criticism, sidelining the democracy movement and once more positioning Russia in opposition to the West makes a riveting read. Behind the populist PR mask, the thug lingers still.



## WHAT I'M READING

### ELLIOT PERLMAN *The Street Sweeper* (Vintage)

"*The Politics Of Memory* by Raul Hilberg. Born in Austria to Jewish parents, Hilberg escaped to the US before WWII. He served in the US Army in the last month of hostilities. It's not surprising he later wrote the definitive Holocaust account, *The Destruction Of The European Jews*. What is surprising is the trouble he had getting the book published and the attacks he experienced once it was."