Observer Review: Only In America, Miracle At Sant’Anna And Everything Is Illuminated Essay, Research Paper

It’s literate, but is it literature?Only in AmericaDominic HollandFame ?10.99, pp250Miracle at Sant’AnnaJames McBrideSceptre ?14.99, pp277Everything is IlluminatedJonathan Safran FoerHamish Hamilton ?14.99, pp288It is unusual for me to choose commercial contenders for this column rather than books with more literary ambitions, but one thing I’ve never lost in years of reviewing is the pleasure of reading. Two of this month’s books are little more than entertainments, but they do entertain. So does the third, which would certainly be called literary, meaning that it succeeds in entertaining on a number of levels. Only in America by Dominic Holland is a farce, the kind of story where you know right from the beginning how it will come out, the pleasure being in how cleverly the happy end can be contrived for greatest happiness and protraction of ingenious complications preventing it.Juliet Millhouse, aka Milly, modest beauty and aspiring screenwriter, works as a receptionist at a posh hotel frequented by businesspeople and stars, including Hollywood producers. Having got an agent on the strength of winning a screenwriting competition, she now can’t get him to read her second script or even speak to her.Meanwhile, monster studio mogul Willenheim is looking for his next hit, which he finds when, in a move copied from The Importance of Being Earnest, Milly’s script gets mixed up with those from Willenheim’s development department.Of course, the development department, headed by former child star Mitch Carmichael, doesn’t know the script from Adam. The search is on, Mitch eventually staying in Milly’s hotel, searching for what is under his nose, and Milly assisting him, not knowing any more than he does about the mysterious author, since he doesn’t mention the name.The Americans often speak in an inadvertently British idiom, but if the moguls talk about sacking someone rather than firing them, British audiences are unlikely to notice and Americans will just think them unusually classy for Hollywood. Miracle at Sant’Anna by James McBride is almost a period-type popular novel – the 1950s – from an American writer of middlebrow journalism, intended to be heartwarming, inspiring and a bit educational. Set in the Italian theatre of the Second World War, among the then racially segregated American army, it follows a group of black troops who valiantly gain German-occupied territory only to lose it when their white commander fails to back them up.One of these, an illiterate, superstitious farmboy, has, along the way, scooped up a piece of priceless sculpture. When he isn’t shot, he believes the statue makes him invisible. In a similar manner, he adopts an injured little Italian boy whom he believes to be a lucky talisman. For his part, the boy – shell-shocked, as we learn, and not mad, as he seems – thinks the oversize soldier is made of chocolate. These two plus three members of his division end up in a Tuscan hamlet full of superstitions and complicated politics of its own.The prose here is merely doing menial chores, but very quickly makes you want to know what is going to happen to that little boy. The story manages to be pleasingly ingenious and cloyingly sentimental at once, tying up what one had hardly noticed were loose ends with a treacly moral. But along the way, one enjoys seeing the Italians much taken with the black Americans; good soldiering valued more than colour; and the Italian gusto for good food and pleasurable living explicitly appreciated, together with the many ironies of who is the enemy for any of these people.Serious subjects indeed are taken on in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated – loyalty, memory, the very possibility of doing right – by the 24-year-old author. These are belied by its manner, which alternates between whimsicality and linguistic comedy, depending on which of the two narrators is in charge – Alex, a boastful young Ukrainian whose word usage is derived from a thesaurus, or Jonathan Safran Foer, the fictional character, generally referred to by Alex as ‘the hero’.The hero has come to Ukraine from America in search of the woman, Augustine, who rescued his grandfather when everyone else in his shtetl was killed by the Nazis. Alex and his own grandfather, who will prove to be the central character, are the hired, utterly incompetent and obstructive guides, who between themselves, in Russian, refer to the American as ‘the Jew’. We are set up to regard the guides as lumpen lunks and ‘the hero’ as the refined if oversensitive one, but their positions slowly shift. They do not find Augustine but rather a woman connected to the other grandfather, Alex’s. Her discovery spurs the revelation of the grandfather’s terrible deed in the war. It is a great moment, worth the whole book, when the grandfather unravels his crimes and mysteries to the two young men.This book was excerpted in the New Yorker and has received tremendous press in the United States. For me, the humour is so broad as to be only mildly funny – the grandfather, the driver, is supposed to be blind, and malaprop Alex is the translator. Alex’s amusing butchery of the English language has been called hilarious and compared to Anthony Burgess’s inventions in A Clockwork Orange. Though the Burgess-like quality Alex’s voice does have a melody or poetry that stays in the head, I’ve read funnier.Jonathan’s sections are a history of the shtetl they are searching for, in prose that is like a verbal counterpart to Chagall – buffoonish, tragicomic, full of supernatural events perceived as ordinary and, when read by Alex, very justly criticised. It, too, however, has its moments. Whenever either magic realist Jonathan or braggadocio Alex stop posing and reveal human neediness, something close to magnificence is achieved.