

Books

>> 'Simon Schama provides a refreshingly modern perspective in *The Story of the Jews*'
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PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK OF THE MONTH

Oh, we do like to stroll beside the seaside

Pierdom

Simon Roberts
Dewi Lewis £35, pp160; 81 colour plates

"Piers provide a walk on the sea without the disadvantage of being seasick," declared the poet of all things quintessentially English, John Betjeman, "and are havens of fresh air and freedom which we can ill afford to lose." Betjeman was one of the founders of the National Piers Society, an organisation that continues to campaign to safeguard the future of the 58 surviving piers in Britain. He would have been delighted with this book.

Pierdom is another instalment in Simon Roberts' ongoing visual documentation of modern England. He has photographed every British pier using a 4x5 plate camera, which has also captured the landscape from which they extend, the sea around them and the sky above them.

Roberts has photographed some piers from a distant elevation and others up close from underneath their steel and wood structures. Thus, Deal pier in Kent seem to stretch to the horizon, while Aberystwyth looks like an industrial sculpture. Others, like the "lost" pier of Brighton West or Hastings pier, both greatly damaged by fire, seem like malformed things that may at any moment fall into the sea. (As I write, work has begun on the reconstruction of Hastings pier, but Brighton's West pier remains lost, though there are ambitious plans to build a towering pier in the sky at its entrance. This does not seem right, somehow.)

Like his previous book, *We English*, *Pierdom* is a kind of topography of



Sands of time: Southport pier is one of 58 surviving piers documented by Simon Roberts.

There are hints of John Hinde's postcard vision of Britain in the diptych of Walton-on-the-Naze

England and Englishness. There is a similar sense of stillness in many of the large-format landscapes, as well as a sense of the abiding otherness of the English seaside town. Blackpool now

looks much like Blackpool then, or is it just the almost Kodachrome colours that make the ornate entrance look oddly old-fashioned? Sandown Culver pier on the Isle of Wight is a different kind of study in muted colour, with a hint of silver sunlight on the horizon where the grey of the sea meets the lighter grey of the sky.

This is a much cooler and detached approach than, say, Martin Parr's seaside photographs, and shares a certain similarity of style with John Davies's documentary photographs of British landscapes. Here and there, though, there are hints of John Hinde's

postcard vision of Britain as one big unreal leisure theme park, especially in Roberts' wonderful diptych of Walton-on-the-Naze pier.

A homage, then, to the enduring vision of the Victorian pier designers, but also to an England that still values the bracing benefits of "a walk on the sea without the disadvantage of being seasick". And a very beautiful book from a master of stillness, light and landscape. **Sean O'Hagan**

To buy *Pierdom* for £28 with free UK p&p call 0330 333 6847 or go to guardianbookshop.co.uk

THE NEW READING

Ebooks, Kindles and the web

For quick-thinking Penny, digital works like a dream

Last month, journalist and activist Laurie Penny (below) was in a safe house after bomb threats were sent to her Twitter account. The essay she wrote while she was there, *Cybersexism: Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet* (£1.74, published by Bloomsbury), is now available to download as an ebook.

The ease and speed of digital publishing is perfect for this kind of reactive long-form journalism. Penny was an early practitioner of the form: her short ebook, *Discordia: Six Nights in Crisis Athens*, was published last year as part of Random House's Brain Shots series.

Cybersexism is more brain dump. Penny writes in raw, engaging prose about how blogging was a liberation from her troublesome teenage body, about the joys of being a geek, and – most interestingly – about what it is like to be on the receiving end of sexist abuse. Her insights into the psychology of trolling are fascinating, and her honesty about how online bullying makes her feel is endearing. When she describes how young women tell her they dream of going into journalism or politics but are put off by the abuse they might suffer, it makes you sad and angry.

It's when she wades into wider debates about censorship and pornography that Penny seems out of her depth. Generalisations (anyone worried about the impact of porn on children must be a rightwing loon) and contradictions (an upbeat conclusion that it is up to geeks to save the world seems at odds with her observation that the internet is simply a reflection of society) abound.

A danger of digital is that the rush to publish while the topic is still fresh means editing is sacrificed. *Cybersexism* would have been infinitely more powerful had it focused on Penny's personal experiences. Still, a worthwhile and provocative read. **Anna Baddeley**

