

# Revenge of the seamstress in Renaissance Italy

**Silk and sexism in 16th-century Bologna, plus a female crime gang in 1922 London.**  
By **Antonia Senior**

**Book of the month**

**City of Silk**  
by **Glennis Virgo**  
*Allison & Busby*  
£22 pp320

It is 1575 in Bologna, a city famed for its silk industry. Elena Morandi is a seamstress, making clothes for the city's women, but she has the ambition to be a tailor, making more prestigious outfits for men. She overcomes sexism to find work with an open-minded but exacting tailor. However, this brings her into contact with one of his powerful clients: Antonio della Fontana is a great patron of the arts and a serial abuser of girls at the city's orphanage. Elena grew up there and, along with her best friend, suffered at his hands. Elena plots her revenge and is helped by the Carracci brothers, Annibale and Agostini, who are portrayed here at the start of their illustrious careers as artists. *City of Silk* is an enjoyable and immersive debut. Bologna is vividly recreated and the themes of abuse and powerlessness are handled carefully.

**The Lion Women of Tehran**  
by **Marjan Kamali**  
*Simon & Schuster* £9.99 pp336  
One day in New York in 1981, Ellie receives a letter from Homa, a former

friend whom she has not seen for years. The request to get in touch urgently is a shock to Ellie; she still feels shame for an act of betrayal that separated them more than two decades before. She is forced to examine her conscience and revisit her Iranian past in the 1950s and 1960s when as a child she played in Tehran's streets with Homa. "We will grow to be lionesses," ambitious Homa, who dreams of becoming a lawyer, tells her quieter, more privileged friend, who harbours conventional aspirations of marriage and family.

When, after a few years apart, they are at university, outspoken Homa is even more rebellious, fired up by communist politics. It is dangerous to be a radical in the Shah's Iran. The pair are suddenly and irreparably split apart after a betrayal, and their lives diverge. Marjan Kamali writes largely from Ellie's perspective, with occasional chapters from Homa's point of view. The backdrop is fascinating, as the women navigate the difficult world of women's rights and expectations in Iran in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Poor Girls** by **Clare Whitfield**  
*Head of Zeus* £16.99 pp416  
The future looks dull for Eleanor Mackridge. She is doing drudge work

at a hotel in Brighton, being patronised by guests and tongue-lashed by an overbearing boss; she lives in a cramped house with her shell-shocked father, resentful mother and spiky sister. It's 1922 and a comedown from the freedom she enjoyed during the war years, when she worked in a factory. But a chance encounter with a glamorous thief opens up new possibilities.

Soon she is living in a flat in London with three other girls, working as a member of the infamous, and real, female crime gang the Forty Elephants, led by Alice Diamond, "the patron saint of lady hoisters". Eleanor shoplifts in the week and parties hard at the weekend, but this world is not all fur coats and champagne. An exuberant and atmospheric read.

**Revenge of Rome** by **Simon Scarrow**  
*Headline* £22 pp432  
Simon Scarrow returns with his 23rd adventure about the Roman military duo Cato and Macro. This instalment begins with the slaughter of Boudica's army. But the queen of the Iceni has escaped, keeping the rebellion alive. Emperor Nero is furious: he wants to parade this woman, who has humbled his empire, through the streets of Rome. Orders are issued to mop up the rebellion, find the

lost standard of the Ninth Legion and capture Boudica. This thankless task is given to the brave but occasionally priggish prefect, Cato, who is tired of Britannia and its warring tribes. He sets out to find Boudica with his old friend Macro, who many years and many books ago was her lover. More recently, he helped her to escape Roman captivity, unwittingly enabling her rebellion. This time, Macro knows that she must be brought to Rome, dead or alive. The prolific Scarrow plunges the reader as convincingly as ever into the violence and tribalism of Roman Britain.

