

MAX DAVIDSON

Felix in the Underworld by John Mortimer (Penguin, £6.99) — The ageing writer Felix Morsom, over-sexed and under-inspired, finds himself in a quandary. Not only is the fictional equivalent of the Child Support Agency demanding £10,000 worth of back maintenance, in respect of a son of whom he knows nothing, but he is also suspected of murder. He takes refuge among London's homeless until he has cleared his name. It is all rather laboured, some way short of vintage John Mortimer, but there are some nice satirical moments.

Thomas Cranmer: a Life by Diarmaid MacCulloch (Yale, £12.50) — This masterly Life took the 1996 Whitbread Award for Biography and a cluster of other prizes. Best known as the architect of *The Book of Common Prayer*, Archbishop Cranmer was forced into the role of clergyman-politician, ironing out the creases of Henry VIII's entangled matrimonial affairs. He was later imprisoned by Mary Tudor and died a martyr's death at the stake — quite a CV, and splendidly fleshed out here.

The Memory Game by Nicci French (Penguin, £5.99) — The author is a husband-and-wife team: Nicci Gerard and Sean French. Although it is to the couple's credit that they have produced a reasonably seamless book, its cliché-ridden plot about a family torn apart by skeletons literal and figurative never really gets off the ground.

The Secret Woman: a Life of Peggy Ashcroft by Garry O'Connor (Orion, £7.99) — The greatest British actress this century was also highly promiscuous, lurching from lover to lover: Paul Robeson one month, J. B. Priestley the next. As there are many promiscuous women, but very few with the artistic genius of Peggy Ashcroft, a shrewder biographer might have concentrated on her acting, and discussed her private life in parentheses. Garry O'Connor, alas, is not a shrewder biographer. This is tawdry, voyeuristic stuff — all gossip and no soul.

The Bride of Texas by Josef Skvorecky; tr by Kaca Polackova Henley (Faber, £9.99) — "I have become allergic to Marxist interpretations of the American Civil War," says the author. His point, amply illustrated in this magnificent novel, is that although the liberation of black slaves held centre stage, the racial composition of the respective forces was more complex than has usually been allowed. Many Czechs, refugees from their homeland, took part in the fighting; and Josef Skvorecky commemorates their role in a lively and elegant fiction rooted firmly in fact.

Eat Fat by Richard Klein (Picador, £6.99) — "Fat is beautiful, sexy, strong..." Richard Klein's point, vigorously stated within a framework of reference that stretches from nutrition to Shakespeare, is that it is only in our own century that such an extraordinary

premium has been placed on being thin. Why not connect with the generations who have been able to look at their fat in the mirror without feeling suicidal? A terrific polemic and cheaper than a set of scales.

The Bible Code by Michael Drosnin (Orion, £6.99) — You thought the Bible was all about Adam and Eve and the child born in a stable? Not so, says Michael Drosnin, in a comically earnest book which could only have been written by an American. Kit yourself out with a computer, work out the code, and you will find that it contains a cornucopia of useful predictions: the rise of Hitler, man landing on the moon, the Kennedy assassinations — all were foretold by the code.

Old Favourite

The Complete Fables of Aesop tr by Olivia and Robert Temple (Penguin, £5.99) — This gem is the first ever publication in English of the complete fables. Written in the 6th century BC, they have long suffered from textual corruption and doubts about authorship. Everyone knows the classics, like the hare and the tortoise, but much of Aesop's work remains shadowy. In this brilliant work of restoration we can finally see the man whole: a deft and often sardonic miniaturist, capable of much more than twee stories about animals, and not the prissy moralist of expurgated children's editions.