

DIARY

Richard Glover

I've never been considered a manly Iman, but this week I had my chance. A spider was spotted high up on a wall at work; the office manager was doing the full damsel-in-distress routine. She turned to a younger fellow who will remain nameless — well, OK, it was Robbie Buck — and Buck declared himself unwilling to kill the beast. To the rescue: your correspondent. I grabbed a Tupperware from beneath the sink and clambered perilously onto a window sill. I held the open vessel beneath the spider and flicked downwards with the lid. To my enormous surprise, it worked. The spider found itself imprisoned, to be released later into the shrubbery outside the ABC. I now pause each day at the damsel's desk. 'Any problems today,' I ask. 'Tiger that needs controlling? Panther on the loose?' So far, further acts of bravery have not been required.

My wife has created a TV drama for M Channel Ten. It's called *Offspring* and plays on Sunday nights, and so every Monday morning now begins with the phone call. How were the ratings? Debra listens intently, nods, and then whispers the figure to me. It's always something a bit over a million. I'm struck by the rude good health of mainstream media. Everyone seems obsessed with predicting the death of newspapers, network TV and AM radio. Yet all achieve an audience that your average Twitterer would kill for. And *Offspring* is hardly top of the tree; that prize goes to Ten's *MasterChef*, the finale of which had 5.7 million viewers. Show me a tweet with *that* pull.

Ditto: the book. One of the most bizarre growth industries consists of books predicting the death of the book, several dozen of which have been published annually since 1972. If they had the courage of their convictions, they'd all be published 140 characters at a time, as tweets.

One of the best things about books is the ability to underline the best bits — the heaviness of your pencil indicating your enthusiasm for the passage. I've just underlined this bit in the new Pete Dexter novel: 'Granny Otts was still



looking for a boyfriend herself and kept the bait in the water, never leaving the house without perfume and lipstick.' Giving myself a misting of cologne a few hours later, I add an extra squirt. Even a middle-aged chap, I find myself thinking, should definitely keep the bait in the water.

On the weekend, I head to Eltham in Victoria. I was last here reporting the bushfires for the ABC. Eltham stood just outside the firestorm and was the place to stay for reporters, police officers and firefighters. And native birds. One night during the fires I wondered down to the local Coles. It was 9p.m. and a small crowd had gathered across the road from a large maple tree. A father told his son: 'You'll never see a sight like that again.' The tree was heavy with parrots, 20 or 30 birds to a branch, maybe 600 birds all up. More flew in — ten, 20 at a time. Driven south by fire, they'd finally found refuge. The noise was startling, like a jet fighter screaming overhead. Today I revisit the tree. One fat pigeon is lord of the domain.

I'm in Eltham to speak at the annual meeting of the Earth Building Association of Australia, detailing my misadventures constructing a mud-brick house in the bush. I'm told that they need a laugh. I soon realise why. The industry, especially in Victoria, has been decimated by the new pro-environment building rules. Sorry? Come again? How can mud-brick, prized by hippies as the world's greenest building material, be suffering under pro-green rules? This piece of insanity is, of course, the talk of the conference. There's plenty of anger and much distress. These people wanted to save the planet and are now being put out of

business by people who also reckon they are trying to save the planet.

It all comes down to a thing called 'thermal mass'. Earth buildings have lots of it. This means they are warm in winter and cool in summer; owners hardly ever install air-conditioning. Yet thermal mass means the buildings can be slow to heat up, because the heavy walls soak up the heat, giving it back over time. If you want to walk in the door in winter and rapidly achieve 22 degrees, it can be done cheaper and quicker in an insulated, airtight, lightly-built box. And the computer software that rates energy efficiency — and gives permission to build — is based on the idea that everyone wants this sort of instant heating and cooling. So whack a beautiful, energy-efficient mud-brick building into the system and you get a response straight out of *Little Britain*: 'Computer says no.'

In practice, people who live in mud-brick homes don't expect to achieve instant temperature change. In winter, they put on a jumper, content that the house itself is holding a fair amount of heat. In real-world testing, earth houses consume far less energy than modern insulated boxes, partly because of the behaviour and expectations of the people who live in them. None of this, though, fits into the computer system, so the most world's most sustainable building material, with the least embedded energy and the smallest production of greenhouse gases, is being run out of town by a system designed to help the environment. Another triumph.

An inspiring young tradesman called James Henderson shows us how to make paints and renders using cheap materials such as clay, sand, talcum powder, milk and flour. We stand around watching, getting covered in flecks of mud and sour milk. As I stumble to the car, muddy and aromatic, I realise Pete Dexter would not be impressed. I'm failing to keep the bait in the water.

Richard Glover's new book, *Why Men Are Necessary*, will be published next month by HarperCollins. He presents Drive on ABC radio in Sydney.