

The Atlantic Ocean – Essays on Britain and America by Andrew O'Hagan.
Faber and Faber 2008.

Andrew O'Hagan is a prize-winning novelist but in *The Atlantic Ocean* it is his skill as an essayist that is to the fore, and what a skill it is. Essay writing is an art, demanding enormous facility for conciseness of thought and succinctness of expression, and O'Hagan has these in abundance; he also possesses great wit and a deliciously acerbic turn of phrase which make every essay in this wonderful collection a gem.

The range of subjects is considerable, dealing with matters on both sides of the Atlantic, from the murder of Jamie Bulger, written in 1993, to the deaths in Iraq of two servicemen, one British the other American, written in 2008. In between are pieces on, inter alia, Marilyn Monroe, the London bombings of 7/7, the 'Western' movie, geriatric cruises on a Glasgow sludge boat and begging.

My favourite essay is *Poetry as Self-Help*, a tour de force tirade against the dumbing down of poetry, one of literatures most magnificent and uplifting genres, but there is something in this collection for everyone.

The Atlantic Ocean is a book for all devotees of fine writing, as well as containing acute observations of many aspects and areas of modern life.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh