

BOOKS

COLLECTED COLUMNS

Uplifted by a pessimist

ARIEL LEVE IS a pessimist. She's a hypochondriac, an Olympic-league worrier, and expends a considerable amount of energy and intellection on figuring out how, precisely, it's all going to go wrong.

She is also very funny. Eeyore meets Woody Allen. Or, as Joan Rivers described her, "the love child of David Sedaris and Fran Leibowitz". But then you probably know that, having read her *Big Bagel* columns a couple of years or so ago in this very newspaper, and no doubt her *Cassandra* columns too, much beloved in the *Sunday Times*.

And now here's Cassandra in all her glory, graduating from column to book form to forecast our doom in *The Cassandra Chronicles* (Portobello, £12.99). If we've any sense, we'll listen. She has a gloomy view on everything, from blind dates to food sex, via dogs committing suicide and the soliciting of second opinions. Leve has

Leve has an eye for the trivial but deeply important stuff of life

Without worrying about the worst-case scenario, how would we prepare for things like illness, tragedy and death?"

a tremendous eye for the trivial but deeply important stuff of life. "The more I think about it, the more I realise how important it is to worry.

Quite right. And how very, very Jewish.

The effect of such a concentrated dose of negativity can be a little overwhelming at first – some of the early chapters here are genuinely quite depressing. "All my life I've had to have something to look forward to, and it's a constant struggle to replenish. It's exhausting, like laundry. As soon as it's done, you're already into the next load." But when this is conveyed with such an accomplished comic touch, ultimately it cannot help but cheer you up.

Leve's deconstructions of back-handed compliments; her conjecture about the life of a Victoria Secret bra scientist, her comparisons of medical services in London and New York are all sharp, witty and ruthlessly observed. For the reader, it could be worse, she says – you could be her. But from where I'm sitting that is far from a terrible thing, because she writes brilliantly – even, perhaps especially, when preparing for the worst: "When I got into the lift there was a woman with a hump. I could have a hump. Everyone has problems. I need to remember that."

FRANCESCA SEGAL



Ariel Leve: positive use of negatives

