

My Reviews of Other People's Books

Robert Campion

Most of these reviews originally appeared on Amazon.co.uk, along with my reviews of various other items, that I have purchased over the years. This list of reviews will be updated periodically.

Richly imagined

Through the Vale: poems about how nature brings us back to life.

By V. Birchwood. Illustrations by Mavgaret

The poetry in this volume has a wonderful tangibility, a quality of all good writing.

We read of a limestone cave and dripping raindrops, greenwood crevices, fog looming in the distance, the rush of a river, the fall of night, the ankles of loved ones stinging from nettle, pine logs neatly stacked, Dutch oven roasts buried in embers, a fisherman pulling a sisal rope at the harbour docks, the poet's ancestors, still remembered... and much more.

To this extent, Vasi Birchwood's poetry recalls Theodore Roethke in some of his poems.

But Vasi Birchwood, more fundamentally, is her own person, with her own issues, preferred topics, and back-story.

There are seven colour illustrations (not counting the cover). They're very good.

I was favourably impressed by this little volume.

V. Birchwood has a YouTube channel, where she recreates clothing from various historical periods.

More interesting as a man than as a poet, I think

Alan Ross Poems, by David Hughes (editor)

24 July 2026

Alan Ross belonged to my Dad's generation. Magazine editor, travel writer, lover of cricket and horse racing. He sounds like the kind of guy I'd enjoy sharing a beer or two with, in an old pub somewhere.

But as a poet?

Two a.m. I've been reading random pages of his poetry. My impression? The following words drifted into my mind: 'Reads like prose, leaving no trace of its passing.'

Or am I being too harsh?

A gorgeously written, unique work

The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran

23 July 2026

'You pray in your distress and in your need; would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance.'

It took a long time for me to get around to reading this; I have long known of it. Now that I have read it, I can report that reading this extraordinary and unique work has been an interesting experience.

As the work opens, Almustafa, 'the chosen and the beloved', has been waiting 12 years in a town called Ophalese, for his ship. Finally, to his joy – and the sadness of the people of Ophalese – his ship has arrived.

People crowd before him, ready to accompany him to his ship and see him off.

But first, they have questions to ask him. They want his views on a wide variety of topics – love, marriage, children, work, joy and sorrow, reason and passion, friendship... and much more. His answers come in a series of eloquent statements. I am tempted to say utterances, for such is their tone.

It's a beautiful, gorgeous, tangible style, that Kahlil Gibran has adopted here. Indeed, it can be too easy at times to be so taken up with the eloquence that you end up not paying sufficient attention to the core of what he's saying.

But perhaps that is a minor thing, the weak side of this work's great strength.

Devout Christians reading this may find that certain utterances resonate with them, giving expression in different words to concepts they're familiar with. Other aspects of this work, perhaps, may seem strange and exotic.

I may not agree with some aspects of the philosophy of life given expression here; and yet, in other parts, I find myself nodding in agreement.

Now that I've finally got around to reading this work, I'm glad I did. I'm also glad I ordered a hardcover copy. It now has its place on my bookshelf.

Kahlil Gibran (1883 – 1931) was a Lebanese Christian. He emigrated to the USA, and became an American citizen.

Driven by curiosity, I bought this

The Spirits' Book by Allan Kardec, modernised by Alan I. Chapman

26 June 2026

Allan Kardec was the 19th century founder of Spiritism, which flourished alongside the better known Spiritualism. The movement is sometimes called Kardecism, after him. Allan Kardec insisted that his teachings were broadly in harmony with Christianity, though Christian churches may not necessarily agree with that.

The book is subdivided into four volumes. Each volume is further subdivided into chapters – or rather, 'parts'.

The approach taken is interesting. The material is presented in the form of questions and answers. The group of spirits giving the answers identified themselves as 'the Spirit of Truth'.

So, how do I feel about this?

I find a lot I can go along with. Other things I don't. My discomfort with it comes from the tone, the general feel of it. There's something anaemic and unsatisfying about it.

One short passage gives the game away. It states that the most highly evolved spirits live on planets which are barren, because they have developed spiritually beyond the need for anything material.

What...? Is this where the spiritual life, as conceived here, is headed? This is Catharism in modern form, or something very close to it.

Perhaps the spirits giving answers to Allan Kardec's questions were, in their earthly life 800 years ago, supporters of that belief system. Here they are again, in spirit form, having another go at promoting their doctrines. Sadly, Allan Kardec seems not to have thought of this possibility and did not raise the matter.

Whatever the truth may be as to that.... While this book aroused my curiosity in a deep way, and I see much merit in it, the philosophy of life I find in it is not one I would feel comfortable adopting. Not without another to complement and complete it. What I call the 'Earthy Divine' is not to be so easily dismissed, or a thing we cannot learn from and be inspired by.

As well as philosophers, we also need poets, whose souls are like trees rooted in the earth, and the ways of the earth. That too is wisdom.

So, do I regret buying it? Not at all. A work which can get you thinking to the degree that this one does, and in a deep way, too, is rightly regarded as a classic.

This edition is published by Shaman Oaks LLC, who have an interesting YouTube channel. Alan L. Chapman, of Shaman Oaks, has done fine work preparing this for an English-language readership.

I really enjoyed this

Rooms of Their Own: Where Great Writers Write by Alex Johnson (Author), James Oses (Illustrator)

26 June 2026

This book was given a positive mention on a YouTube channel I follow. It sounded like the kind of book I would enjoy, so I ordered a copy.

It's beautifully presented. An enormous number of writers are covered. Each one has one to three pages, including an illustration. The illustrations are lovely, by the way.

The coolest part of my flat is at the bottom of the stairs by the front door, which looks north. In this hot Summer, I've spent many late afternoons and early evenings sitting there, cooling down. This book has been close to hand.

Brief, evocative beauty

Haiku: Japanese Poems for the Four Seasons

by Kaori Yamaguchi (Illustrator), Ornella Civardi (Translator)

27 February 2026

This is a beautifully presented book: a joy to hold in the hand, to read, to have in your library. The choice of poems is good. Each poem has the kind of beauty that inspires a moment or two of reflection. Haiku are tantalisingly brief. Yet, in the hands of a master, they hint at a much bigger picture, a much bigger world.

I'm impressed

Tehillim - Book of Psalms with English Translation & Commentary by David Ben Yishai (Author), Yosef B. Marcus (Editor, Translator)

5 September 2025

I must confess, this is an impulse buy – an expensive one, as impulse buys go. Having said that, it is pretty impressive. Large, heavy, magnificently produced. Much love and care has gone into it.

The Psalms are printed on RH pages in the original Hebrew, with the English

translation on the LH. Underneath, are extensive (and interesting) commentaries drawn from the works of wise and learned men from former times. The book opens 'backwards', from my gentile perspective – what for us would be the back cover, is here the front. You soon get used to it.

So. What impressions do these psalms make on a man with my non-Jewish (and non-Christian) background? What literary comparisons might I make?

The psalms have always intrigued me, among the Biblical books. A very distinct personality comes across, and a disturbing one: dark, snarling, slightly psychotic, moralising, a-feared of God (as one might put it). Poor King David has a hard time of it. He is beset by enemies, both within and without. His enemies are all – of course – Godless and wicked. In others, he presents his Godliness and virtue to God, in the hope of kind treatment from the Almighty. At other times, King David obsesses about whether he is virtuous enough. A narrowly moral view of life looks like this.

Shakespeare himself (who would have been familiar with the psalms) could hardly have created a character as dark-souled and troubled as this. Perhaps a better comparison would be Dostoevsky, and the strongly portrayed, troubling characters who inhabit his extraordinary novels.

Perhaps the lesson we are to draw from this, is something like this: if you have committed to draw away from an exclusive focus on the things of this world, and towards a life in this world, but centred around God, don't assume that it will be an easy path to walk. But that path will purify you and strengthen you. David, as King of Israel, had great – and very worldly - responsibilities upon his shoulders, responsibilities he could not well ignore. So for him the God-centred path was especially difficult. There was always too much else to do.

The traditional commentators cited in this edition, include: Rashi, Radak, Meiri, Sforino, Yaavetz, Alshich, and others. The commentary of Radak is the primary source cited.

An interesting project to do would be to buy a Christian commentary on the Psalms, and compare commentaries. But that's a project for another time.

A handsome edition, beautifully illustrated

Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, by Washington Irving

24 June 2025

The two stories in this volume are old folk tales - or, at any rate, are written in that style. My favourite is the first, 'Rip Van Winkle'. Set in New York State, an old countryman is out walking one day. It is a few years before the revolutionary war. He falls asleep in a mysterious part of the countryside. When he wakes up again, everything has changed. The people in his village have changed, a different flag is flying, there is talk of a recent war, and a new government. That, basically, is the story.

Washington Irving begins his droll story McGuffin-style, with a colourful, drily humorous character study of the title character and his wife, plus some of the other characters in his village.

In terms of general style, you can tell that this work came from the same culture that, a couple of generations later, would produce Mark Twain.

'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' follows much the same pattern - it begins as a character portrait of the central character, until it reaches the point where the story itself kicks in.

This is a handsomely produced edition, beautifully illustrated. Seawolf Press have many other classic works in their list, and I recommend them.

American ex-pats, Jazz and the Left Bank

Paris Blues by Harold Flender

22 April 2025

This novel was made into a B & W movie in 1961, starring Paul Newman in an early role, and Sidney Poitier. It's a movie worth tracking down. The author of the novel it was based on, Harold Flender, wrote screenplays for TV, though he didn't do the screenplay for the movie based on his own novel.

I found it engaging enough, at first. Flender evokes the setting well enough – jazz clubs on the Left Bank – and does so with more than a whiff of decadence hinted at. His two main characters live an aimless but complacent life. The two black characters – played by Sidney Poitier and Diahann Carroll in the movie – find that they are treated more respectfully than they were back home in America.

I wonder, though, if Flender chose the right way to tell this story. I read the first eighty pages, and then had to focus on other things, so there was a hiatus in my reading. When the time came to get back to it, I found it difficult to work up enough motivation to do so.

It might have been better to have presented this story as a vivid, impressionistic style of narrative, with dialogue kept to a minimum. Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* is written that way. Another example of that way of writing, is *On the Edge of Night* by Friedo Lampe. A third is *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac.

Having just said all that, I intend to get back to it some day. But not just yet.

Here's what's wrong and who is to blame

Who Lost America? by Stephen Baskerville

23 September 2024

It would be easy to dismiss this as a sulphurous rant, and its author as an old grumbler. But that would be unfair: Professor Baskerville flags up a number of very

real issues and problems.

Stephen Baskerville is as critical of the establishment Right, as he is of the radical Left. While the latter are more egregiously the problem, the former are their enablers. Mainstream conservatives have failed even to diagnose the ills we face, in the modern West, much less address those ills in a meaningful way.

Stephen Baskerville puts his case with clarity and passion. He lambasts not only the political establishment for the current state of affairs, but all of us, for letting it happen. Indeed, that is his principal focus.

One can disagree with him at times, as I do, while agreeing with him on other points. For example, referring to the Russia – Ukraine war, he says: ‘The political class engineered a completely unnecessary war....’ Really? It was Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, who made the decision to invade Ukraine, not someone in Washington.

Sometimes, he throws out intriguing insights, the kind of off-the-cuff insight that one wishes he could have explained at greater length. To point to just one example: ‘...the racial militancy with which the Left intimidates the Right is largely a subterfuge, disguising a somewhat different agenda.’ Interesting.

Professor Baskerville believes that only a proactive, aware citizenship can turn things around: ‘The only long-term remedy’ he says, ‘is to resuscitate citizenship.... Citizens alone have an interest in finding solutions, so they can get on with the business of private life.’

Jung, Rain, and a Zen Garden

C. G. Jung Speaking. Edited by William McGuire and R. F. C. Hull

30 August 2024

I felt drawn back to reading Carl Jung, after a passage of many years. When I was in my late thirties, having plenty of time on my hands, and some issues that needed addressing, I read his complete works. This was one of the best things I ever did. And a good way to pass a lot of time!

Well, time has passed, I'm an older man now. I felt drawn back.

I came across this volume, one I don't recall having read.

'C. G. Jung Speaking' is an anthology. There are pieces by people who met him and knew him, however briefly; they give a lively picture of Carl Jung the man. And there are transcripts of interviews he gave: both short radio interviews and interviews for printed media, and, thrillingly, transcripts of the long, in-depth interviews that he gave toward the end of his life. In these settings, when he has to speak spontaneously, he expresses himself very clearly and well.

To accompany me, playing on my laptop: 'Rain On Japanese Zen Garden At Night'.

Excellent.

A twentieth century philosopher's signature work.

Skepticism and Animal Faith by George Santayana.

29th August 2024

George Santayana was a 20th century Spanish philosopher, who lived and worked in the United States. He was an eminently quotable writer, with a good style.

The philosophical system outlined in this book originated in a dilemma that troubled Santayana. On the one hand, while acknowledging the value of Skepticism, he found it inadequate; on the other hand, while he found Idealism at its heart, to be correct, he did not consider it a philosophy of life that anyone actually lives by. In *Skepticism and Animal Faith*, he introduces his own approach, based on purely pragmatic considerations. His core principle is a kind of gut instinct or intuition, concerning whatever situation we may find ourselves in, and what decision it would be wise to make. Fundamental to this, and making it all work, is a readiness to believe what the senses tell us, in the absence of any compelling reason to do otherwise. This is how ordinary people live their lives, he tells us, and it works for them.

So far so good.

Now to Santayana's narrative style. Santayana, as expected, writes well. Perhaps, at times, a little too well for the subject matter. As I progressed through the book, I found myself wondering: Is what he wrote here actually worth the effort to read?

A heretical thought, perhaps. I am sympathetic to Santayana's basic premise. A deeply pragmatic philosophy such as this – hardly a philosophy at all, and close to being an anti-philosophy – is very appealing to me. But... but....

Also, I noticed passages here and there, where he failed to rise above the narrow positivism of his age. *Skepticism and Animal Faith* is, at least in part, a work of its time.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't read it.

A slow burner

Sweet Bean Paste by Durian Sukegawa

30 July 2024

Sweet Bean Paste is a quiet, slow-burner of a story. It begins quietly, uneventfully, in a shop where dorayaki – pancakes with a sweet bean paste filling – are made. As the story progresses, we learn more about the small cast of characters. A new character enters the story – an old lady named Tokue. She teaches the young manager of the dorayaki-shop how to make superior sweet bean paste. A strange relationship develops between the old lady and the young man. Eventually, we learn more about her, and that's when the story starts to show previously hidden depths.

This is a quiet but deeply satisfying work.

Extraordinary characters

Tiger Juan by Ramón Pérez de Ayala

06 June 2024

It took me a while to track down a copy of this classic Spanish novel, in English translation, at an affordable price. ‘Affordable’ being relative, of course. I’m glad I made the effort.

Previously, I’d read *Belarmino and Apolonio*, a comic novel by the same author.

The author was born in Oviedo, in north western Spain. He was Spain’s ambassador to the United Kingdom during the thirties, so knew our country well. When the Spanish civil war broke out in 1936, he exiled himself, via France, to Argentina.

In *Tiger Juan*, Pérez de Ayala contrasts an effeminate Don Juan with a virile anti-Don Juan. The title character is an extraordinary creation: angry, bitter, opinionated, self-absorbed, and frankly disturbing. As the story progresses, he mellows, but I won’t give the game away by saying how. The Don Juan character is a travelling salesman known to Tiger Juan, and the relationship of these two very different men is well portrayed. There are notable female characters in this story, too.

Pérez de Ayala’s narrative style is noteworthy: playful and eloquent, with the occasional rhetorical flourish. There is a fine dramatic sense in the way the scenes are set up.

This is an excellent, well constructed and well told story.

May the stars carry your sadness away.

The Best of Chief Dan George: Poems

by Chief Dan George (Author), Helmut Hirnschall (Illustrator)

04 February 2024

Beautiful. Profound. Nostalgic. Elegiac. I like this poetry.

I shared the following two lines with my elderly father. I'm not young myself anymore, so we can both relate to this:

*The sun makes the young move fast
And slows us old people down.*

I enjoyed this. At first.

Collected Stories by Bruno Schultz. (Translated by Madeleine Levine)

04 February 2024

Bruno Schultz wrote about a town, the like of which you will find anywhere in the Western world. I have lived in suburbs like it – places where nothing much ever happens, and everyone goes slowly mad.

So far so good.

Bruno Schultz told his stories in a unique way. A narrative texture as rich and gorgeous as a Christmas fruitcake.

Alas, like the aforementioned fruitcake, there is a limit to how much of it you can take. Typically, you eat a small portion at a time, not the entire cake. So too with Bruno Schultz's two works, reproduced in this volume. By the time I had reached page 129, I was struggling, so I put it down and got involved with other things. What I found was that when I attempted to resume reading, I struggled even more.

I say all this with regret. Bruno Schultz is a writer whose work I would like to enjoy, and at first, I did. But, eventually, the 'fruitcake principle' (as one might call it) kicked in, and I couldn't go any further. I intend to return to it.

Impressive and satisfying stories

The Penguin Book of Korean Short Stories. Bruce Fulton (Editor)

29 July 2023

A piece in the Literary Review alerted me to this book. I'm glad it did. Korean culture has intrigued me for a while, so this volume of Korean short stories is just the ticket.

The short story form is highly regarded in contemporary South Korea, I'm happy to say. There are acknowledged masters of the genre.

This is a substantial volume, with a lot of weight to it. The hardcover edition, which is the one I bought, makes a resounding Thunk whenever you drop it on a table or desk.

The stories are arranged under five heads:

Tradition (Five stories)

Women and Men (Five stories)

Peace and War (Three stories)

Hell Choson (Six stories)

Into the New World (Six stories)

At the time of writing this, I have completed the first section, 'Tradition'. Here are the stories which comprise that section, with a brief note on each:

When the Buckwheat Blooms

An itinerant peddler recalls a night of love he had with a young woman twenty years before. This story has acquired classic status in Korea.

A Man Called Hungbo

A young man finds that one thing after another is going wrong for him. An unusually sad comedy. The Koreans seem to specialise in this kind of wry, bitter-sweet mood.

Mama and the Boarder

A young widow, who has a six year old son, takes in a boarder.

The Old Hatter.

A hat maker, who specialises in making traditional hats, finds that there is no longer any demand for his product.

Pig on Grass

An old man who owns a pig acquires a dislike for the animal. This story takes us inside the mind of a man suffering from dementia. By turns humorous and poignant.

I am looking forward to reading the stories that comprise the remaining four sections. 'A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist' is next to read.

These are impressive and satisfying stories.

A good buy

The Art of Kissing by Hugh Morris

25 July 2023

This is a reprint of a book originally published in 1937. It is a delightful little book, charmingly written, and probably still useful. The illustrations are nice, too.

Recommended.

A good story well told.

Snowbound Bride by Cathy Gillen Thacker

4 July 2023

A good story well told will always find readers. That's what I always say. That's what Cathy Gillen Thacker has produced, here. She has chosen a good story to tell, and tells it well. The story is paced well, too.

The storyline is straightforward. A 29 year old woman who is involved in advertising loses her job, and returns home. She is offered a role in the family business. She then discovers that her father has arranged for her to marry a man who is an old friend of hers. In exchange for his agreeing to this, he too will get a role in the family business.

Not liking this one bit, she gets in her car and heads south, crossing into Virginia. She stops in Clover Creek, a small town. She decides to stay awhile, as a record blizzard is reported to be headed their way. She quickly becomes acquainted with the town sheriff, and before long they are flirting and sussing each other out. Her father, meanwhile, has offered a reward for the return of his daughter.

I'm probably not the usual reader for a novel like this. Nonetheless, I enjoyed reading it.

A good find

Beast From Haunted Cave (Sinful Cinema) by Doug Brunell

18 June 2023

I saw the movie "Beast from Haunted Cave" on YouTube recently, soon after it was uploaded. I don't recall having seen it before. It is a good example of 'fifties B-movie. Good quality - if low-budget - film-making. I then searched around the internet to learn about the movie and the actors. Eventually, I came across a reference to this book, and ordered a copy from Amazon.

The book begins by describing the storyline of the movie. After that, various chapters are devoted to the people involved in it. From Producer Gene Corman (younger brother of Roger Corman), to Sheila Carol, about whom little is known, and various others.

An enjoyable read

Ruslan and Ludmila by Alexander Pushkin. Translated by D. M. Thomas

18 June 2023

Ruslan and Ludmila is work of the poet's youth. It's a classic tale of a princess (Ludmila) who is snatched from her husband on their wedding night, by evil wizard Chernomor. Prince Ruslan sets off in search of her. He encounters various remarkable characters on his journey, and has various adventures. Pushkin tells his tale with youthful brio.

D. M. Thomas has translated this tale into a verse form with relatively short lines, and end-rhyme, reflecting the rhymed tetrameter of the original. Normally I am averse to rhyme, too often a bane on English verse. But in this instance, D. M. Thomas makes it work.

Now, Ruslan and Ludmila could be dismissed as juvenilia, a concatenation of fairy-tale foolishness. But it's an enjoyable read for all that.

A final note. Much of the story centres on Kiev, and the Dnieper River, both in modern-day Ukraine.

Could have been better

Just F*ck Me! - What Women Want Men to Know About Taking Control in the Bedroom by Eve Kingsley

24 May 2023

The best part of this little book is the click-bait title. Full marks for the title!

The contents, though, are less impressive. Basically, what you get is a series of pep talks. Which is fine, if that's what you feel you need.

What this book needs (but doesn't have) are excerpts from women's romances, or similar episodes written by herself in that style, to illustrate her thesis. It's a pity she

didn't think of doing that.

I don't recommend buying the hardcopy version, at the prices currently being asked. I bought the much more reasonably priced Kindle version.

A good selection.

Poems by Alan Ross: Selected by Peter Vansittart

April 2023

Alan Ross was a twentieth century magazine editor, traveller, cricket lover and poet. I bought this volume of his poetry out of curiosity. He was not ranked in the top tier of British poets, perhaps. Nonetheless, his poetry is comprehensible and eminently readable.

In WWII he served in the navy. His earliest poems describe his experiences on board. Other poems describe places he visited, people he knew and remembered fondly, cricket matches, and more.

The poems are very readable, and describe very well a certain kind of leisurely twentieth century Englishness.

Wonderful

Hiroshige: Landscape, Cityscape: Woodblock Prints in the Ashmolean Museum

6 April 2023

This is a well produced book, containing 52 illustrations by the Japanese master of woodblock prints. The paper is good quality, and it is quite a heavy book. The prints are presented in double page format: an illustration is on the right hand page, explanatory text on the left.

We are given an explanation of the subject matter of the illustration - usually a location in Japan - plus other relevant information. A straightforward analysis follows, pointing out the composition that Hiroshige adopted, plus the colour scheme used and its effect on the mood of the illustration.

This was of great interest to me as a writer and poet. I have always been intrigued by the challenge of describing scenes visually, in a way that is both succinct and expressive. The visual arts – such as Hiroshige, here – can provide food for thought

Not what I thought I'd ordered, but still good.

Poetry 1945 – 1950 by Alan Ross

2 March 2023

Alan Ross seems to have been something of an English literateur, and all round good fellow. In WWII, he was in the navy, and wrote poetry about his experiences. Post war, he took on a variety or more or less literary roles. He was an editor of a couple of magazines (including The London Magazine); wrote about cricket, a sport he loved; wrote travel books. One anecdote I came across earns him a gold star, in my humble opinion. He was invited to a literary function of some kind. When he turned up, he was seen to be accompanied by two women. One for each arm? One woman was his wife, the other was his mistress.

When I saw that this book by him was available, I immediately thought: 'Oh! This must be a book of his poetry.' It turns out it isn't. Rather, it is a summing up of the poetry of the period 1945 to 1950. While he's at it, he gives us an account of British trends in poetry, its principal concerns and themes etc, during various stages of the 20th century.

Alan Ross writes fluently and well. I suspect this was a topic of which he had a deep knowledge, so writing this little book came easily.

Various names are mentioned which were already known to me: Lawrence Durrell, Stephen Spender, Edwin Muir, and others. There are also poets - and poems - that were new to me.

This wasn't the book I thought I'd ordered. Nonetheless, as a writer and poet myself, I found it a delightful and informative read.

Chaotic world, remarkable characters

Of Love and Other Demons by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

27 February 2023

12 year old Sierva Maria is the young heroine of this novel. The drama begins in the town market, when the girl is bitten on the ankle by a rabid dog. As the story unfolds, it is widely assumed that she has contracted rabies. But has she? It is then thought she is possessed, and is confined in a nunnery, under close watch. But is she possessed, really? Perhaps she is mentally disturbed, and in need of love. There is an unknowability about the girl that frustrates all who have dealings with her.

One who does get through to her is a 35 year old clerical librarian. Towards the end, he realises he has feelings for her. This troubles him greatly, since, as a man of the cloth, he shouldn't be entertaining feelings of that kind. Especially for one so young!

Another running theme is the superstition and cruelty of the Church of those days, and the impossibility of escaping it. That was the main take away for me.

Abrenuncio, the doctor, is one of the few reliefs we get from that. Him, and Cayetano Delaura, the girl's clerical lover.

Another by the master

Memories Of My Melancholy Whores by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

16 December 2022

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is one of my favourite authors. 'Memories Of My Melancholy Whores' is a short work, and a good one: slow, meditative, melancholy, an elegiac account of a wasted life.

A very readable account

Defying Hitler: A Memoir by Sebastian Haffner

16 December 2022

The author describes his life in his native Germany during his childhood and youth. The account begins in 1914 or just before, and continues through WW1, the post-war years, and the twenties. The National Socialist Workers Party (the Nazis) became too big and noisy to ignore. Haffner describes how people he knew responded to them. Some were madly in favour; others horrified; yet others were complacent. Haffner describes very well how Evil tends to get the upper hand over Good - a least in the short and medium term. The account ends in 1933, when Hitler was confirmed in power. Haffner saw clearly where Germany was headed, and emigrated to England in 1938. This is an excellent and very readable account of a traumatic and wholly lunatic period.

One of my favourite cookbooks.

Middle Eastern Cooking by Claudia Roden

16 December 2022

Full of Mediterranean-style recipes, but with a Middle Eastern twist. This is one of my favourite cookbooks.

Left hemisphere, right hemisphere

The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World By Iain McGilchrist

19 June 2021

I was made aware of Dr McGilchrist and his work when I saw him in the first interview he did with Professor Jordan Peterson.

His thesis – that the two hemispheres of the brain see the world in very different ways - fascinated me.

This is a large book and a substantial read, as befits his subject. Fortunately, it proves the maxim that a man who is expert in his subject is the best one to turn to for an explanation.

In the first part, Dr McGilchrist tells us about the scientific studies, and medical case studies, which inform his hypothesis.

In the second part, his focus is more cultural. He explains that in some periods of Western cultural history, the gifts of the left hemisphere's way of viewing the world, have been emphasised. This was the case the eighteenth century (the "Age of Reason"), and arguably so today.

In other periods, the unique take on reality provided by the right hemisphere of the brain has been given full play in our cultural life. Dr McGilchrist cites the 17th century, and the Romantic Era, as examples.

The conclusion I found particularly interesting. In his conclusion, Dr McGilchrist compares Far Eastern with Western modes of thought, and how that plays out in the two cultures.

This is a book to read at an unhurried pace. Possibly, too, one should plan on reading it more than once, with a suitable interval between readings.

One tip: If you plan on reading this book, before you do so, look up Dr McGilchrist on YouTube. You will find him there doing interviews, and presentations. He explains the basic points of his hypothesis very clearly and well.

George Santayana's only novel

The Last Puritan by George Santayana (1949)

19 June 2021

George Santayana's only novel has a gentle, old fashioned style, which is often richly metaphoric. I found it an enjoyable enough read, if a little unvarying in mood and tone.

Nathaniel Alden - one of the characters - shapes up interestingly. In his stiff, starchy manner and his pompous moralising, he is a character of the Shakespearian/ Dickensian type.

When you get further into the novel, you realise that Santayana's story has a satirical edge. Santayana's characters are pompous, puritan, and Protestant. Santayana, a Spaniard with a Catholic upbringing, is having a good laugh at them.

Harriett Alden (nee Bumstead) in particular, is impossibly genteel and snobbish. Again, one thinks of the character types Shakespeare used to make fun of, or, for that matter, Dickens.

Illuminating and depressing

The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World By Catherine Nixey

19 June 2021

This is an illuminating – and depressing – account of the takeover of the ancient world by Christian fanatics. They had highly focussed minds, were convinced of their own righteousness, and brooked no opposition. Furthermore, the Roman authorities appear to have been far too complacent in dealing with them. The author points out that the Roman authorities, if they had wanted to, could have wiped Christianity out, at this time. The Christians, observing the characteristic Roman tolerance, took full advantage.

I would like to have seen a little more analysis of what it was about the Classical world at that time that could have inspired this kind of opposition. The impression I have long had, was that Christianity started off as a kind of moral reform movement, in a world which had become too settled, too comfortable, and frankly moribund. So far so good. At a certain point, a kind of psychotic streak got involved, leading to the terrible things detailed in this book.

This book is uncomfortable reading for a man like me. But I am glad the book has been written.

Explores an important issue.

The Macabre Dance: a Contemporary Woman meets a Contemporary Man

By J P Tate

19 June 2021

In this novel, a homeless man sees a woman park her car, leave the keys in the ignition, and dash into a nearby shop. He sits himself in the driver's seat, and drives away. A short while later, he has found her country property. She is away, so he breaks in and takes up residence. When she returns, she is horrified to find that she has an unwanted lodger. It turns out that she is a radical feminist, who believes that all men are absurdly privileged. Some rather testy conversation follows between the homeless man and the feminist. J P Tate's purpose here is to contrast the two characters, their very different life stories, and their different points of view.

Comprehensive and detailed.

The Joy of Self-Publishing by Mike Buchanan

19 June 2021

Some books have to be self published, or they don't get published at all: crime novels and cookbooks are the only books traditional publishers are interested in nowadays, it seems.

Mike Buchanan's book takes the reader through the process step by step, in a comprehensive and detailed way. It may seem intimidating at first - but you'll be glad to have the information.

I recently published a book of poetry via Amazon (The Book of Good Love), and Mike Buchanan's book, though it does not refer to Amazon-KDP, did at least give me the confidence to have a go.

Not for me.

The Marquise of O and Other Stories by Heinrich Kleist

19 June 2021

This is widely regarded as a European classic. Yet, sadly, I was unable to get into it.

Food for thought on an important subject

The Way Men Heal By Thomas R. Golden LCSW

19 June 2021

Tom Golden is an American psychotherapist, who specialises in men's issues – depression, trauma (often caused by a break up or nasty divorce), bereavement, and so on. His thesis is that men tend to heal – psychologically, emotionally – in a different way to women. The therapist, therefore, has to take a different approach. And so does the man concerned.

Tom Golden's book is relatively short—around 58 pages—and is written succinctly and well. In this book you will find the distilled essence of a lifetime of experience in this field. Tom Golden gives examples of well known personalities who underwent the loss of a loved one, and how they dealt with that. He also gives (anonymous) examples of people known to him personally, and how they dealt with their loss.

Tom Golden participates in a YouTube channel (now on Substack) called “Regarding Men”, along with Paul Elam and Janice Fiamengo. That is how I came to know of him. He also has his own channel, “Men are good”.

Two kinds of love.

The Book Of Good Love by Juan Ruiz

19 June 2021

This is acknowledged as a Spanish classic. It was written in the early 14th century by Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita; our own Geoffrey Chaucer may have been familiar with the work.

The Archpriest's grand thesis, is that there are two kinds of love. One - which he calls "buen amor", or good love - is life affirming and positive, and has God's blessing. The other kind, he

calls "loco amor", or mad love, which isn't really love at all. It is the cause of sin and suffering. We are urged to avoid the latter and embrace the former. The Archpriest presents his thesis in the form of an (almost certainly fictional) autobiography of his love life. Many anecdotess and tales are told. Philosophical points are illustrated by various fables. The Archpriest is also well read in classics from the Pagan era - Ovid, for example.

Clever and entertaining.

The Ten Word Film Review Book: Over 1,200 succinct summaries from blockbuster to arthouse

By Andrew Goodwin

19 June 2021

This book must have been a nightmare to write. Just how do you sum up a film in just ten words? But Andrew Goodwin has done it, and the result is a clever and entertaining read.

One of my favourite writers.

The Good Companions. Heron Collected Works of J. B. Priestley

19 June 2021

Among my late brother's many books was a set of books by J B Priestley, folio edition. Priestley was a long time favourite of both of us. One book that was missing from the collection, however, was his early masterpiece "The Good Companions". Hence why I purchased this. It is beautifully bound, and - of course - a good read.

In praise of the master songbird.

The Nightingale: 'The nature book of the year' By Sam Lee

14 June 2021

It was Mark Radcliffe who alerted me to this book by Sam Lee, on his folk music program. (Wednesday nights, Radio 2) Sam Lee is widely known in folk circles. This book was a good purchase: eloquent, knowledgeable, written with passion for its subject. Beautifully illustrated, too.

Just what I need

How To Self-Publish A Book On CreateSpace & Amazon

By Christopher Fielden

5 May 2021

I have been considering Amazon's PoD service for some time, but found the prospect too intimidating. Christopher Fielding's little book explains the process of getting published via Amazon, in a simple, clear, step by step fashion. I supplemented Fielden's guidance with further tips from a couple of blogs: I found Phoenix Rainez (on Blogspot) and Mimi Barbour to be helpful. Another book I have is "The Joy of Self Publishing", by Mike Buchanan. Not specifically about Amazon's service, but full of insight into the general publishing process. The more information you have, from different sources, the more confident you'll be.

A rambling, leisurely tale

The Shadow of the Wind: The Cemetery of Forgotten Books 1

By Carlos Ruiz Zafon

5 April 2021

My brother came across this book before I did, and he gave it a hearty recommendation.

It is set in post-war Barcelona, and centers around a "library of forgotten books". It is a rambling, leisurely tale, ostensibly involving the search for information about an obscure author. The novel succeeds by virtue of its gothic sense of place, and its interesting characters.

It strikes me as the kind of book that would struggle to find an agent, or get published, if it had been written by a UK writer. Fortunately for the author, it was first published in Spain, where, it seems, you are not restricted to crime novels and cookbooks, if you want your work to have any chance seeing the light of day.

Short and simple.

Innocent in the Harem (Mills & Boon Historical Undone)

By Michelle Willingham

28 March 2021

At 50-odd pages, this is a novelette. The storyline has a broad simplicity about it. The author, in her introduction, mentions her lifelong love of Arabian Nights tales, which is apt. She has learned well.

The black-haired heroine is a bedouin girl, whose family was killed in an Ottoman attack on them. She survived, but was taken captive. When the story begins, she is in a slave market and about to be auctioned off. When a group of Arabian horses over yonder get restive, she runs over and calms them. As a bedouin, she understands horses. This remarkable deed is witnessed by an Ottoman prince, who happens to be nearby. He scoops her up onto his horse, throws an emerald to the auctioneer, by way of payment, and gallops off with her.

If you want to know what happens next, you'll have to buy a copy.

There are a couple of sex scenes, which are beautifully and thoughtfully written. The only criticism I would make of the sex scenes, is that they are probably a little too long, relative to the overall length of the story. In a 600 page historical romance, they would be just right.

As an older man, I am probably not the target audience for this kind of thing. Nonetheless, I enjoyed reading it.

May I make a recommendation? The Sheik, by E. M. Hull. Published c. 1920, it was the inspiration for the silent movie of the same name, starring Rudolph Valentino. No sex scenes in that one, though Edith Hull makes it pretty obvious what's going on.

Zen-like utterances of a French countryman

Journal 1887-1910 (riverrun editions): an exclusive new selection of the astounding French classic

By Jules Renard

15 December 2020

French writer Jules Renard put down his thoughts in a journal, which he kept from 1887, when he was 23 years old, until 1910, when he was 46. He was a countryman, who lived in a village in northern Burgundy, called Chitry. In 1904, he was elected mayor. But there was another side to him—he was also a writer, his best known work being *Poil de Carotte* ("Carrot Top"). He wrote eighteen novels in all, and seven plays.

Jules Renard reveals himself in these journal entries to be very much an independent thinker, though not aggressively so. He was pacifist, anti-clerical, and a sharp observer of natural life. Human life, too. His fellow villagers are described, in his journal, with wry humour. He also made periodic trips to Paris, where he mixed in the cultural circles of the day.

Jules Renard was very much a prose-poet, with a quiet temperament. His writing often has a zen-like pungency and wisdom.

He was only 46 when he died. Too young—and yet, one gets the impression that, for some time before that, he felt that there was not much more living left for him.

A good find

Home by the Sea: (Poetic Reflections) by Benjamin James Elliott

9 December 2020

The man who alerted me to this little volume was a YouTuber named Bjorn Andreas Bull-Hansen, who specialises in viking lore, bushcraft and country living. In one of his videos he mentioned that his friend Ben Elliott has published a volume of poetry.

Now, you can never be sure what you're getting when you buy a volume of poetry by a poet who is new to you. When I read the poems in this slim volume for the first time, I felt immediately reassured. How to describe the style? There is a suggestion of Roger McGough, a suggestion also - nothing more - of Walter De La Mare, in the rhythm and cadence of the

poems, when read aloud. But in the end, Ben Elliott's voice is his own.

Ben Elliott's volume opens with a poem about rats: "Thin and pasty, coughing jibes at passers-by/ with caps balanced back on greasy scalps...." It concludes with Talking Colours: "Gently push, my eyes to see/ the shapes and colours ahead of me...." In between, there is Home By The Sea, which is a sour piece about Brighton; He's Alright; Twilight; and more.

If poetry is your thing, you may like to give this one a try.

An important historical document

The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism by Bertrand Russell

11 November 2020

A few years following the Russian revolution, the British Labour Party sent a delegation to Russia, on a fact-finding mission. Philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell was granted permission to accompany them, and this book is the result.

Russell reports on how various classes of people felt about the new order of things, and how the communist government were attempting to deal with various quite serious issues. He also offers his own critical comments.

The book also includes a summary of a conversation Russell had with Lenin.

Another chapter covers education, which was orientated towards the indoctrination of socialist principles in the young. The communist government also set up a system of child care. However, there was nothing benevolent about that, as Russell points out. The idea was, firstly, to aid in the weakening of family bonds by driving women out of the home and into the workplace. The communist party's fear was that attitudes not consonant with socialism would be preserved privately—within the family—unless family bonds were weakened. The biggest influence on the young had to be the state, not the family.

As well as driving women out of the home and into the workplace, the state arranged for their children to be indoctrinated in socialist principles whilst in daycare centres. They were quite open about that.

One thing I noticed as I read this book, was that Russell, in this early stage of his career, was much more sympathetic to the socialist ideal - if not always to its practice - than he was in later years. You live and learn, I guess.

This is a well written book, and an important historical document. I recommend that it be read with *The Gulag Archipelago* - an abridged version of which, with a forward by Professor Jordan Peterson, is now out.

Like a fable or folk tale.

Cloud of Outrageous Blue by Vesper Stamper

26 October 2020

I am probably not the kind of reader Vesper Stamper had in mind for this book. Nonetheless, I enjoyed it. “A Cloud of Outrageous Blue” has the simplicity of a folk tale or fable. Teenager Edyth loses her family, and gets sent to a priory, where she is put to work as an illustrator. (Like the author). She finds herself on the bad side of Sub-Prioress Agnes. But Agnes has a back story that she is not admitting to anyone. If that weren’t enough, there are worrying reports of another plague heading their way. There is a touch of magic realism towards the end, which I liked, but also a lot of tragedy and sadness. It is a slow-burner: you have to be patient. Vesper Stamper’s style is marked by grace and eloquence. Her illustrations are delightful.

A final note: I first came across Vesper Stamper when she featured in one of Professor Jordan Peterson's podcasts. This book was not yet published. I have since seen her in the Engineering Politics podcast. (Also good). I note that she has also been in conversation with Jonathan Pageau, though I have not seen that yet.

Evocative, impressionistic

At the Edge of the Night By Friedo Lampe

21 September 2020

Friedo Lampe, a German writer, published this in the thirties. It is an impressionistic account of a single night in Bremen, Germany. There is no plot as such, as befits the

impressionistic style, just a general movement of events. It did not stay published long: the Nazi government of those days promptly banned it, as soon as they got wind of it. There are one or two scenes in the book where Friedo Lampe hints that the characters are homosexual. The Nazis, who were great moralisers, took exception to those scenes. The book was later published again, but with the offending scenes omitted. The book is now available as Friedo Lampe wrote it. This translation, by Simon Beattie, is the first in English.

Potential readers should note that "At the Edge of the Night" is not gay literature as such. Friedo Lampe is simply being honest about the kind of characters you are likely to meet about town, on an Autumn night.

The style is cinematic, intensely visual, and I enjoyed it.

A fable

West By Carys Davies

12 June 2020

Beautifully written and constructed. As you get further into it, you can guess where this going, but you keep reading nonetheless. Carys Davies' story has the relentless simplicity of Greek tragedy. Like the Greek plays, the conclusion is dramatic.

"And the point"? Life is like this. You are inspired by a great dream. For the first time in years, you are passionate about something. You set off. Enormous efforts are required on your part. But look how it ends up.... Meanwhile, back home, an unpleasant neighbor has designs on your daughter. Perhaps only a reader with a few years of life under their belt, and the pessimism that comes with that, could fully appreciate a story as pessimistic as this.

An excellent introduction to Goethe's poetry

Goethe: Roman Elegies and Other Poems and Epigrams

By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

18 March 2020

I like this a lot. Some of the poems Michael Hamburger has chosen to translate have the pungent simplicity of folk song. Others are written in long, sprawling, leisurely lines. Among the latter are the remarkable Roman Elegies. Originally, Goethe entitled them Erotica

Romana, which gives an idea of their nature. An example is No. IX—warmly autumnal, and brilliant in its use of metaphor. Excellent.

A revelation

The Cooking of Russia (Sainsbury Cookbook Series) By Karen Craig

11 March 2020

I first bought this cookbook some years ago. That one got a bit tatty, so I sent for a new one.

For anyone who expects the recipes in this little book to be grey, bland and Eastern Bloc—think again. These Russian recipes will be a revelation to you.

The introduction describes Russian cuisine as follows:

"The main feature that distinguishes Russian cuisine is its very strong personality and breadth of character: very savoury or very sweet, very hot or very cold, raw or well-cooked."

That sums it up. This is the cuisine of the land that produced Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Pasternak, Rimsky-Korsakov, Scriabin and Rachmaninov.

Here is a list of recipes which I have tried and liked: Roast Buckwheat (a good staple). Cabbage Pie (better than it sounds) Roast Goose with Apple Stuffing (try this one at Christmas). Mushrooms with Smetana (a kind of sour cream). Siberian Pelmeni (Russian ravioli!). Carrot Salad (simple and good) Georgian Cheese Pies. There are also recipes for flavoured vodkas. Recommended.

A remarkable choice of story.

The Sealwoman's Gift by Sally Magnusson

2 November 2019

Sally Magnusson has made remarkable choice of story with this novel. The story is based on actual historical events. In the 17th century, pirates raided an Icelandic village, and carried off 400 people. Included among them were the pastor and his wife Ásta. The story is told from her point of view. The captives were taken to Algiers, where they were sold. Author Sally Magnusson has woven her story around this bare outline.

I enjoyed reading this book. Sally Magnusson's style here is ruminative and full of reminiscence. This is a style of storytelling which does not suit all stories, but Magnusson makes it work here.

There are quiet spells in it, when the characters are waiting... waiting... waiting.... Nothing much is happening. But that is part of the rhythm of life, and also an important part of the rhythm of good storytelling. Sally Magnusson handles these passages well.

There is a lot of sadness in this story. This becomes more and more evident as you progress through the story. And sadness too is part of life, as the stoics of old recognised. One of the things history teaches us, if it teaches us anything, is that life is never far from sadness and tragedy. Author Sally Magnusson reminds us of that.

I like this book.

Beautifully written, horrifying to read.

The Beekeeper of Sinjar: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq by Dunya Mikhail

17 March 2019

This has to be the saddest book I have ever read - and I have read a lot of books. What a sad, broken world Islamic State created, wherever they went. The beekeeper of the title is a man named Abdullah. With the men who work for him, he has been making heroic efforts to free enslaved Yazidi women and children. In this remarkable book, Dunya Mikhail tells their stories. There is nobility and goodness in the world, as well as horror.

Life in Rome when Marcus Aurelius was on the throne

The Street of the Sandalmakers by Nis Peterson

1 June 2018

Nis Peterson (1897 to 1943) was a Danish writer. He is better known in his native land as a poet. According to Martin Seymour-Smith ("Guide to Modern World Literature") "... at times he can achieve the sultry eroticism of a D.H. Lawrence." He traveled a lot, and wrote

“readable, exaggerated accounts” of his wanderings, as well as poetry, and a couple of novels.

This novel is set in the Rome of Marcus Aurelius. The street which gives the novel its name is where a Christian community may be found. The story focuses on the inhabitants, both slave and free, of a domestic establishment of a rich family. A romance kicks off between the young man of the family, and a slave girl.

If your view of ancient Rome has been formed by Robert Graves’ Claudius novels, this one should form an interesting contrast. Graves’ Roman world is the grey world of court intrigue and power politics. With only a few changes, Graves’ story could be relocated in almost any centre of political power—Victorian Britain, Washington D.C....

Peterson’s world, however, is definitely that of pagan Rome.

We come to Peterson’s style. I would describe it as “jumble-tumble” writing: this happens, that happens, these people speak, those people talk. The focus is very much on the everyday life and circumstances of the characters. In painterly terms, it may be compared to the 17th century Dutch masters, who had a similar focus on the everyday.

The down side. After a hundred pages or so, I was finding it hard to stick with it. The story tends to wander off in an unfocussed way, and there is no obvious dramatic structure. The dialogue is often less than engaging.

For all that, Nis Peterson’s novel is a great achievement, and is worth persevering with.

A sampling from one of Britain's great essay writers

Books v. Cigarettes by George Orwell

24 April 2018

George Orwell is best known for his novels “1984” and “Animal Farm”, which are now acknowledged modern classics. His essays are less well known, and are well worth a look.

Dog psychology

The Dog Listener by Jan Fennell

24 April 2018

The author has studied the way dogs – and their wild cousins, wolves – communicate with each other. She has acquired a deep understanding of how dogs socialise, how they determine who has authority over them and who does not, and dog psychology generally. This understanding has proven invaluable to her work as a “dog listener”. She gives much good advice, backed up with numerous anecdotes about various dogs which she has helped. There is a reference to Monty Roberts, the California horse-trainer who has studied the language of horses. Jan Fennell and Monty Roberts have met. An excellent and insightful book.

Delicious fun

My contact with UFOs by Dino Kraspedon

24 April 2018

I first came across this strange book in a library when I was a bookish schoolboy, in the seventies. The author is Brazilian. His book purports to be a series of interviews that the author had with an alien gentleman, who hails from one of the moons of Jupiter.

The conversations range widely - how spaceships work, the fate of planet earth, and much else.

The author tells us that as a result of the insights he received from his alien friend, he became a devout Christian. Which tells you what this book is really about - its underlying theme is the author's journey from scepticism to belief, cast parabolically in the form of a series of (fictional) interviews with an alien. If you read the book that way, it makes a mad kind of sense.

However you read it, it is delicious fun.

Extraordinary tales

The Best Tales of Hoffmann

24 April 2018

I first came across E. T. A. Hoffman when I discovered a volume of his (translated) stories in a library. I was a lot younger then than I am now, so it was good to rediscover this extraordinary storyteller. His tales are completely crackers - but there is beautiful craftsmanship there too, and good character-drawing. His masterpiece "The Golden Pot" is included in this volume.

A novel by The Master

Crime and Punishment (Dover Thrift Editions)

24 April 2018

I love Dostoyevsky. "Crime and Punishment" is one of his best known works. It will not let you down. Dostoyevsky introduces you to the usual mad characters treading on each others heels, and getting involved in each others business. The story centres around the brutal murder of old woman who is a money-lender. But, unlike most crime novels written today, who did it is not a mystery. Dostoyevsky takes a more Shakespearian approach: you see inside the young man's head, and the dangerous, nihilistic thoughts he has, you see him commit the murder, and you see him slowly unravel afterwards. Professor Jordan Peterson, by the way, has spoken highly of this work.

Changing times

Parade's End by Ford Madox Ford

24 April 2018

A well written story, and an interesting one. It sets you thinking. The story focusses on Christopher Tietjens, "the last of the true Tories"; the story opens in the years before World War One. This novel will take us through that war, and into the twenties, when everything has changed.

The character-interest is what holds you. Christopher Tietjens never departs from his principles, and considers himself an honourable man.

And yet, you cannot help feeling that the genteel code he obliges himself to live by, is also a trap. “Honourable conduct” seems to be defined negatively. There are certain things you avoid doing, certain things you avoid saying. It is a “via negativa”. Christopher feels that by adhering to this gentlemanly code, he keeps out of trouble, and maintains his dignity. Sadly, it doesn’t turn out that way.

Christopher becomes “the most dishonoured man in London”, because of certain things he is rumoured (falsely) to have done. And there are certain other things, which perhaps he ought to have done, and for which he would have been forgiven. But his code restrained him. For example, right at the end of the first book, he fails to make a move on the Wannop girl - even though he desires her, and she him. The title of this first book “Some Do Not” refers to that scene. Christopher Tietjens is certainly honourable - but he is frustrating, too!

The European War breaks out. Everyone rather optimistically expects the war will be soon over. Christopher takes an army commission and is sent to the Western Front. The tone is quite different here, and it is well described.

World War One eventually grinds to a halt, and the world has changed completely. Christopher’s brother Mark, who works for the civil service, cannot adjust to this new world. Christopher himself makes a brave attempt to forge a place for himself: he becomes an antiques dealer.

Finally, Christopher Tietjens and the suffragette Valentine Wannop... but you must read the book, if you want to learn more.

This is a truly great book. Panoramic in its scope, thought provoking, and engaging to read.

This is how it all ends.

The Good Soldier Svejk (Everyman's Library Classics)

14 April 2018

Every lover of good books has read this, or at the very least has heard of it. The story is set during the dying, decadent, cynical days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, just before the Empire's collapse during WW1. Hasek's anti-hero Schweik finds himself in the army—much to the army's frustration. No army would want good soldier Sveik in its ranks.

The satire takes the form of rollicking, anti-establishment humour. Though, it must be said, the rollicking humour sugar-coats what is actually quite a bleak vision of the world. It is a world where ordinary folk are made to feel like outsiders in their own land; regarded as beyond the pale, in their own world; their values sniggered at; their sense of humour condemned. But the hero's simplicity, and sheer serendipitous luck, enable him – miraculously - to survive. And he survives with a smile on his face, too.

Hasek's work still resonates. The anti-elitist mood which is currently sweeping the globe, is something Hasek would have understood.

Hasek died (of alcoholism) before he could finish work on this, his masterpiece. If he had lived longer, he might have tidied it up, given it a more definite end. I get the impression that he ran out of ideas, and things to say, towards the end, but could not think how to conclude it, so just kept on going - until death forced him to stop.

Satire is rarely as good as this.

This novel could have been better than it is.

The Fathers by Allen Tate

14 April 2018

Martin Seymour-Smith spoke well of this book, in his 20th Century World Literature. He contrasted it with the better known novel *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell. Both novels are set in the old South; both were published in the thirties. Seymour-Smith judged *The Fathers* to be the superior novel.

Probably, though it is not a fair comparison, for they are different types of story. Tate's is a stately, leisurely-paced tale; nothing much seems to happen for a long time. If you are used

to reading thrillers, this is not the novel for you. However, if you have already read Margaret Mitchell's epic, you may wish to read this as well, so you can make your own comparison.

The Fathers has a wonderful opening sentence. You find yourself right there, in a particular time and place:

"It was only today as I was walking down Fayette Street towards the river that I got a whiff of salt fish, and I remembered the day I stood at Pleasant Hill, under the dogwood tree."

A unique talent

Valle-Inclan: Plays One: "Divine Words", "Bohemian Lights", "Silver Face" (World Classics)

14 April 2018

Magnificent. Valle-Inclan's plays describe a world inhabited by colourful, down-on-their-luck characters. Think of a story by Eugene O'Neil, dramatised by Samuel Beckett, and you get the general idea.

Interesting

The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide To Finding Intimacy, Passion And Peace With Your Man

12 April 2018

This book contains a lot of old-time wisdom in modern form, and in the process forms a stern critique of our failed (and failing) modern ways. Interesting.

Strange and delightful.

Smearing The Ghosts Face With Ink: A Chinese Anthology

12 April 2018

I bought this to replace an earlier edition, which I bought at a charity shop some years ago, but which had fallen to bits. This one, thank Heaven, is in better condition. The tales in this

volume are strange, and delightful. Wives, concubines, lovers, ancestral spirits, scholars, you name it, it's all here. There is a moral dimension to many of the tales too, with karma being a factor in many of them, and people getting their just deserts. I don't know what age group the originals (in Chinese) were aimed at, but these English versions could be enjoyed by older children. As well as their parents!

A superb translator and an excellent play.

Gl' Ingannati, the Deceived: A Comedy Performed at Siena in 1531; And Aelia Laelia Crispis (Classic Reprint)

19 January 2018

This comic play from Renaissance Italy was known to Shakespeare, it is thought. The English translator, Thomas Love Peacock, was the author of "Nightmare Abbey, and "Crotchet Castle". These are two of the best - and most eccentric - comic novels in English literature. He always had a very clear, limpid style, and that serves him well in this wonderful old Italian play.

What does sir need to know?

A Butler's Guide to Gentleman's Grooming (Butler's Guides)

18 January 2018

Full of excellent tips - the kind of information that all of us guys need to know. Highly recommended.

"Oh, you beast! You beast!"

The Sheik

18 January 2018

I bought this out of curiosity - this is the 1921 novel which inspired the Rudolf Valentino movie of the same name. It is a spanking good read. It should more properly be called an adventure-romance, for there are some good dramatic scenes in it. At times, Edith Hull's tale had me thinking of dear old Rider Haggard. He would have been proud of her.

The heroine was brought up by her older brother, Sir Aubrey: she is an obstinately independent, tomboyish type. Appropriately enough, she is named Diana, after the Goddess of hunting and wild places. Mounting an expedition into the Moroccan desert - against her brother's wishes - is the form her romanticism takes. She ignores pleas from those who are concerned for her safety.

The opening scene made me smile. Lady Conway, in high dudgeon, voices her disapproval:

"Are you coming to watch the dancing, Lady Conway?"

"I most decidedly am not. I thoroughly disapprove of the expedition, of which this dance is the inauguration. I consider that even by contemplating such a tour alone into the desert with no chaperon or attendant of her own sex, with only camel drivers and servants, Diana Mayo is behaving with a recklessness and impropriety that is calculated to cast a slur not only on her own reputation, but only on the prestige of her country...."

And that's just the beginning!

Hull focuses very clearly on the character of her heroine. It occurred to me, too, to wonder if she was fond of the theatre - Shakespeare at the very least - for the structure and writing of the story suggest that. Scene follows scene in a suitably dramatic way. The dialogue is good.

Needless to say, Diana gets abducted, in a particularly swashbuckling scene, and she spends most of the remainder of the story in the nomad chieftain's tent.

But there is more drama still to come, and a surprise revelation about one of the characters.

Well worth reading, if you want a swashbuckling story, or even if, like me, you are motivated by curiosity.

Can we have a new movie version now, please?

It's good to be back.

Nightmare Abbey & Crotchet Castle (Penguin Classics)

18 January 2018

I hadn't read this book for many years. The main story - such as it is - concerns Skythrop, a young poet (based on Shelley, whom Peacock knew personally). He is beset by two young women, who both want to marry him. Being a romantic, he ends up in quite a state, and the story ends with an hilariously appropriate tragicomic conclusion.

While all that is going on, a dinner party is going on. Various characters – based on well known people of the day, such as Lord Byron, Coleridge, and others – drink copious quantities of wine, sing the odd song, and express their views with great eloquence. Two hundred years after it was written, Nightmare Abbey can still make you laugh.

The other work is Crotchet Castle. It follows much the same pattern, except that the topic of discussion this time is not romanticism (as in Nightmare Abbey) but economics. An unlikely subject for comedy? Give it a try. Author J B Priestley many years ago considered this to be Peacock's best work.

What a Balkan village did during the war.

Hero on a Donkey by Miodrag Bulatović.

18 January 2018

Hero on a Donkey, set in a Balkan village, is a chaotic story, inhabited by chaotic, dysfunctional characters.

Eventually, it becomes clear to the Italians occupying the village, that Fascism has lost, and Communist and Allied forces are drawing ever nearer. A Playboy-of-the-Western-World-type of theme then emerges: rascal Gruban Malic grows in stature. Even more absurdly, the Italian General who happens to be in town at the time, announces a "partial - I emphasise partial - capitulation."

We don't get to hear what happened to the "great hero" Gruban Malic, in the end. In the final scene, Colonel Peduto is slumped on the side of the road just outside of town. He finishes off a bottle of slivovic, and fantasizes that Malic hangs himself in a hen-house. And, on that undignified note, the story ends.

No more EU! More democracy!

Revoltin': How the Establishment are Undermining Democracy and What They're Afraid Of

18 January 2018

The author is editor at large for online magazine Spiked. If you are familiar with Spiked, you will have a pretty good idea what to expect. This little book is a clear and passionately argued polemic against the EU (mainly) and in favour of more democracy.

More from the master

Anton Chekhov's Short Stories (Norton Critical Editions)

17 January 2018

An excellent collection of some of the master's short stories.

This volume includes the following extras:

- A longish piece on Chekhov written by Maxim Gorky.
- Selections from Chekhov's letters.
- A handful of critical essays giving insight into Chekhov's style and methods - food for thought here.

Food for thought.

We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love

17 January 2018

Robert A Johnson's book takes the form of an analysis - or contemplation - of the Tristan and Isolde story. Johnson argues that the philosophy of love that is articulated so well in that Medieval story is at the root of modern notions of love, particularly so-called romantic love.

Men's Rights Advocate Paul Elam has highlighted this approach to love as being at the root of the modern West's "gynocentrism", and its attendant problems.

The kind of love that is celebrated in Tristan and Isolde is the kind which yearns to rise above the "ordinary and the gross", and draw nearer to Heaven. Rather than seeking to transform and ennoble the ordinary and the earthy, chivalrous love seeks rather to transcend it entirely.

Johnson argues that this approach is at the heart of our entire Western culture - hence why he wrote the book.

One point which I found interesting, was that romantic or chivalrous love was an outworking of the suppressed Cathar heresy, which was a kind of extreme puritanism. The idea was to purify one's soul, and one's life, of all that was of the earth, in order that one may qualify to enter Heaven.

These notions, of course, had a revival in the 19th century - the Tristan and Isolde story was turned into an opera by Richard Wagner.

It could be argued that what the West needs now is a new cultural narrative in these matters - one in which love is understood to be the process by which a man and a woman draw ever closer together, and then becoming inseparable. That seems to me more along the right lines. Johnson, however, is skeptical of the idea that a serious departure from the romantic-chivalrous model could ever be achieved, now. It is too deeply and anciently rooted, he says.

But is it? I'm not so sure, sometimes.

Johnson to his credit, has this to say in his concluding chapter:

"We can learn much of human love by learning to look with an open mind at Oriental cultures and their attitudes. During the time I spent in India and Japan, I saw marriages and love relationships that are not based on romance but on a warm, devoted, and enduring love."

I have known such couples myself, and the kind of love they have is much quieter than what we expect in the West. But it works.

Figures in a landscape

Shadow Lands (New Directions Paperbook)

17 January 2018

Bobrowski's laconic, zen-like poetry must be unique. I do not read German, but the translations here convince me that Johannes Bobrowski was a unique talent - as are all great poets.

Food for thought

Feminism v. Mankind

5 December 2017

A superb collection of essays, which look at the subject from various angles.

An excellent coverage of its subject.

Polygamy, Bigamy and Human Rights Law

31 October 2016

This is an excellent coverage of its topic - Polygamy, Bigamy, and Human Rights Law.

Chapman points out that the debate kicked off in the 17th Century, with the translation of the Authorised Version of the Christian Bible. That made everyone aware that many of the friends of God (in the Old Testament) were polygamous.

Not only that, but the law code revealed to Moses (and upheld by Christ) acknowledges polygamy, and in some instances seems to require it. This was awkward for the 17th Century churchmen, who argued for continuance of Church tradition, which insisted on monogamy.

The result of all this disputation was a typical English fudge - Bigamy was enshrined in civil law, but was defined as a crime of deceit, requiring "malicious intent". This still remains the case today, Sam Chapman believes: "Polygamists couldn't be charged with bigamy, even if they wanted to be."

This book covers the various issues which arose during the Imperial Age, when marriages which were contracted abroad became an issue with which the law had to deal.

Sam Chapman's book also covers the modern welfare state, which tacitly acknowledges polygamy for benefits claim purposes.

Finally, he covers EU Human Rights law, and its possible influence on British law with regards to polygamy.

In conclusion, he opines that the "legal status" of polygamous unions may one day be purely academic, as our modern culture seems to be moving away from a purely legal understanding of marriage. "De Facto" marriage, as it is sometimes called, is increasing common. Increasing numbers of people simply don't want Church or State involved.

This book was published in 2001, so it would be interesting to read an updated (Post-Brexit!) edition.

A seminal work

The Idea of the Holy (Galaxy Books)

23 August 2016

Rudolf Otto's thesis is thought provoking, and will be consonant with the experience of many spiritually sensitive people. His central concept is the "numen" - a classical Latin word which refers to the Divine, insofar its presence can be sensed by those who are sufficiently sensitive. Even ordinary people can sense it, in certain situations, certain places, certain moments. Otto - a Protestant - argues that established religion can get too caught up in ritual, or in religious teachings. As a result, religion loses touch with where its roots really ought to be, in actual, living, spiritual experience. Otto writes mostly from the Protestant Christian point of view, though occasionally he does make reference to eastern spiritual traditions - Indian, and Chinese, principally. Not a book to read quickly, but intriguing.

"Rain later, Good" is good.

Rain Later, Good: Painting the Shipping Forecast

28 June 2016

You could probably add Peter Collyer's name to a list of British eccentrics, on the weight of this book alone. Travelling around to each of the places mentioned in the BBC shipping forecast, and painting the locations, is not something most people would think to do. But what a great idea! Each painting includes a page or so about the location and his time there.

Rose Macaulay takes us back to the 17th century.

They Were Defeated

28 April 2016

Rose Macaulay - a twentieth century writer - is almost completely forgotten now. That seems a pity: she seems to have been a fluent and enjoyable writer. This novel - her personal favourite - is set during the reign of King Charles, in 17th century England. It opens at a Harvest Day festival in a Devon church. The vicar is Robert Herrick, who writes poetry in his spare time (a real historical character). A friend of his is the local doctor, a skeptic, and rumored to be an atheist. The doctor's clever daughter is the heroine of the novel.

The novel proceeds mostly through the dialogues and conversations of various characters. The dialogue is written in a 17th century/ West Country style. This is not as difficult as you might imagine - you soon get used to it.

The first part of the novel, representing roughly one third of the whole, centres around an accusation of witchcraft against an old lady in the village. After that, it moves to Cambridge, where many well-known poets and thinkers of the day may be found.

I found Rose Macaulay's novel an enjoyable read.

A sad and beautiful Greek love story

The School Mistress with the Golden Eyes

28 April 2016

This novel is set in a village on the Greek island of Lesbos; the time period is the twenties, not long after the disastrous Greco-Turkish war. A young Greek soldier named Leon Drivas returns home: one of his comrades was killed in that war. Before departing this life, he charged his friend Leon to take a wallet containing some memento's to his wife, back on Lesbos. The widow turns out to be a teacher, a very attractive young lady. A love story ensues, sort of. I say sort of, because former soldier Leon Drivas is a tortured, and tortuous, soul. At first, he is not sure he wants love in his life, or that she is the one. But Love finds a way. Stratis Myrivilis' tale is beautifully written - often solemn, but ultimately life affirming.

A gem of a work.

Essays on Marriage (Companions of Zen Training)

28 April 2016

There are many books available nowadays on how to keep a relationship between man and woman happy and lasting; few, perhaps, are as beautifully written as this one, by Zen master Seikan Hasegawa. The work consists of a series of succinctly written essays, on various topics touching on the overall theme. None of the essays are more than a few pages in length. I got the impression that the reader is meant to read the book slowly, one essay at a time, meditating on each one before moving on to the next. The fact that the insights expressed here are rooted in a spiritual view of life makes them, to my mind, especially valuable. A spiritual view of life can be more comprehensive than a purely material one.

For the record, here is the list of contents. The titles will give you an idea of the flavour of the book:

Choosing a marriage partner

Virginity

For those who are not virgins

Marriage quarrels

Jealousy

Anger

Sexual desire in marriage
 Having sex without hoping for childbirth
 Religious differences between husband and wife
 Don't tell anyone
 Concealing nothing
 Realizing commonness
 Thanks and complaints
 Expressions of love
 To think about death
 Advancement of married love
 Freedom and married life
 Unusual marriages
 Divorce
 Loyalty
 To study oneself in married life
 To have children

It took me a long time to get around to reading this modern classic

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov

13 February 2016

Nabokov was a playful and mischievous writer: few books are as mischievous as "Lolita", a story of a middle aged man's obsession with a twelve-year-old girl. "Lolita" is a bizarre and brave novel: I cannot think of one other work of note which deals with this theme.

There is one thing which impressed me more and more, as I read through the story: narrator Humbert's isolation. This isolation is not obvious at first. But you soon begin to notice the signs. His reluctance to let anyone get too close. His reluctance to reveal too much about himself in conversation. The endless, mindless travelling. All this betokens a very isolated person. Indeed, an isolated couple, for Lolita, while she remains with him, is isolated too. Middle-aged Humbert and adolescent Lolita, throughout most of the novel, have to keep their distance from everybody else. They remain isolated from the mainstream of humanity. Some would add that they are living outside the moral universe too.

A word on the narrative style. Lolita is a worthy successor to Wilde's "Dorian Gray". There is

a decadence in both novels, and both are written in gorgeous, hothouse-artificial style.

I discovered an interesting sidelight on Nabokov's novel. Or rather, upon its name.

Nabokov lived in Paris for a time, and spoke fluent French. He may have been familiar with a historical novel by Cecil Saint-Laurent, called "La vie extraordinaire de Lola Montès". The real life Lola Montez was a 19th century courtesan, whose lovers included composer Franz Liszt and the King of Bavaria. Saint-Laurent's book inspired a Max Ophul movie: "Lola Montez". It was released in 1955, the same year that "Lolita" was published. According to one reviewer, Lola in Max Ophul's movie 'is merely a passive blank onto which men project their fantasies.' Which is exactly what Nabokov's Humbert Humbert does with his own little Lola. He writes about her at great length, and with great eloquence. The bitter irony (and the sadness) is that this Lola is not a high flying courtesan, but a 12-year-old girl who reads comics.

An enlightening book.

Big Phil Campion's Real World SAS Survival Guide by Phil Campion

14 December 2015

There's a lot of solid material in here - everything from how to make your home more secure, to what to do if you find yourself caught up in a riot. And much more - even online dating. (There are dangers there too).

There is too much in this book to assimilate at one reading.

There are self-defence tips too, for those who feel they may one day have a need for that. Having said that, Phil Campion's advice is to avoid conflict if you can. Walk briskly the other way. If that is not a possibility, try confidence and charm. If physical conflict is unavoidable, go for it. "I'd rather face a jury of twelve than be carried by six." But avoiding conflict is always better, if that is a possibility.

As I said, loads of material in here.

Bill Bonner's latest

Hormegeddon: How Too Much Of A Good Thing Leads To Disaster by Bill Bonner

29 Aug 2014

Bill Bonner is a master - though his witty, and joyfully pessimistic style can often distract you from appreciating just how good he is. In this book he explains his theme (expressed clearly in the subtitle) with reference to various eras of history. He points out the dangers faced by the modern world too, and why, in his view, why we're headed for Hormegeddon. Disaster. Brilliant.

Thirties Hollywood.

The Day of the Locust by Nathanael West

14 December 2015

I've been wanting to read this American classic ever since it was recommended in RV Cassill's *The Writing of Fiction*, which I read when I was much younger than I am now. It has taken me a shockingly long time to get around to read it. But I am glad I did. It is a modest book, crisp, terse and eloquent. The central character is 25 years old, and like many 25 year olds (including myself when I was that age) he seems a bit lost. He works in Hollywood in the thirties as a set designer, but doesn't push himself too hard. His wry observations of the Hollywood scene give the novel its flavour. He finds himself drawn to a young lady of dubious morals who wants to be a movie star. But you suspect that the only reason he's trying his luck with her is because he is bored. And who else is there? None of this sounds like promising literary material. But Nathanael West makes it work.

Different style to Monty Roberts' own books

Horse Sense for Leaders: Building Trust-Based Relationships

14 December 2015

Monty Roberts himself didn't write this, but Dr Susan Cain, presumably with his blessing. Dr Cain draws upon Monty Roberts' teaching. The style is different to Monty Roberts' own books - instead of an anecdotal style of narrative, Dr Cain presents her material in a way

reminiscent of a Power Point presentation. Everything is boiled down to basic principles and presented simply.

I'm glad I worked up the courage to give this one a go

Jurgen by James Branch Cabell

1 September 2015

I didn't know if I'd like this book or not - I wasn't sure what to expect. Martin Seymour-Smith describes it as a masterpiece, in his "Guide to Modern World Literature". Seymour-Smith didn't let me down. Jurgen is indeed a masterpiece, if by that we mean a master work, which only one author could have written. The story (a mock-medieval romance-cum metaphysical novel) is exuberantly told, and quite mad. Wonderful. I bought the Dover edition, which is well presented: there are illustrations, as well as the original short story out of which the novel developed.

Just as I remember it

The How and Why Wonder Book of Time Hardcover – 1963 by Gene Liberty

6 July 2015

When I was a boy in the sixties, I loved the How and Why Wonder series of books. I used to save up my pocket money for them. I was full of boyish enthusiasm and curiosity about the world I had been born into, so these books were perfect for me. The one on Time - this one - was far and away my favorite. I was fascinated by this mysterious thing called time, and the flow of life through the ages. We read about people in periods of history long past - but it is only "past" for us. It was their "now". This copy is just I remembered it, with lots of information and pictures on clocks and calendars throughout the ages, plus one or two experiments you can do. ie things to make. It should still appeal to children today.

A Faroe Islands Romance

Barbara by Jorgen-Frantz Jacobsen

29 April 2015

This story is set on the Faroe Islands: it concerns a new pastor who gets involved with the young widow of the previous pastor. She was also married to the pastor before that, and has had various other men. Hmm. I was reluctant to send for this book for a while. Now I have read it, I am glad I did. The eponymous heroine is certainly an immoral and foolish woman, but she is portrayed sympathetically. And the pastor she joins up with is not without blame: he should have known better. The couple are deliriously happy for a while: then, inevitably, it starts going wrong. In real life, such a woman would find everything caving in on her eventually, and she'd end up in a mental hospital, or in need of some other sort of care. I've known one or two examples. (*SPOILER ALERT!) Indeed, the novel ends on such a note: she ends distraught and broken, her paramour having abandoned her. She's not in control anymore. And there the novel ends.

It's a pity Jabobsen died so young: he had real talent, and he evokes the bleak beauty of the Faroe Islands wonderfully.

Difficult

Between Man and Man by Martin Buber

29 April 2015

I'm afraid I found this book heavy going. I appreciate the basic message, which is simple enough, but the style is impossibly turgid. One day I'll give it another try.

A nicely presented edition.

The Duel and Other Stories by A. P. Chekhov

29 April 2015

Dover books are always nicely presented, and this one is no exception. The title story is a short novel - a novella in fact, around 80 pages. It has been praised for its masterful construction, and the way the conflict is shown to be inevitable by the contrasting nature of the two principal characters. Other stories in this slim volume are shorter. They include "The

Kiss" (hilarious), "The Malefactor", and one or two others.

Here's a quote from Chekhov (Not included in this volume): "Medicine is my legitimate wife, storytelling my mistress. When I get tired of one, I sleep with the other."

I have enjoyed Chekhov since discovering him as a boy: he is always reliably good.

What do women see in those books? Here's what.

Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance by Jayne Ann Krentz

29 April 2015

Many feminists look down their noses at women's romances, it seems - something I didn't know before. There was even a concerted campaign a few years back to infiltrate the romance publishing industry, and force writers to write in a more politically correct manner. The campaign failed, of course. You can read all about it in this insightful book. It consists of essays by various women romance novelists, in defence of their art. As a male, and a novelist myself, I found this an insightful and interesting work.

A minor classic which is worth a look.

The Country of the Pointed Firs by Sarah Orne Jewett

29 April 2015

Originally published in 1896, this work describes the inhabitants of a quiet fishing village on the coast of Maine. It is a remarkable little book. Quiet and gentle in tone, it gives a delicious insight into the kind of community few of us now are likely to be familiar with. The characters - each of them distinctive - are well drawn, and the sense of place is beautifully evoked.

A truly astonishing work

Pedro Paramo by Juan Rulfo

15 January 2015

Strange. Poetic. Extraordinary. Highly recommended

Wonderful title, can't warm to the story

A Woman In Sunshine by Frank Swinnerton

12 December 2014

I confess I was attracted to this novel because of its title. Also, because the author once had a good reputation. This novel is said to be "the best of the later ones": it was published 1944. The lead characters are a middle class couple living in London. He works for a law firm, which is about to lose an important client - said client is elderly and ailing. The lawyer's career seems to have an uncertain future, since he does not entertain hopes of becoming a magistrate. The novel appears to be well crafted. But I cannot warm to his soporific prose. It's all too careful and grey. We don't write like this anymore. Indeed, not all writers wrote like that then - one of Swinnerton's contemporaries was Ford Madox Ford, one of the greatest English language novelists, and a master of supple, expressive prose. Possibly I am being unfair. After some time has passed, I may give A Woman In Sunshine another go.

An unusual (and very modern) love story.

Yesterday: A Novel of Reincarnation by Samyann

12 December 2014

In this novel, a woman who has a lot of sadness in her life rescues a policeman from under a train, which has fallen from the elevated railway in Chicago. It turns out they may have known each other in a former life. As the story progresses, we (and of course the central character) learn much more about this former life which they appear to have shared. The concluding section of the story is suitably melodramatic.

My only criticism is that it could have done with a final revision by the author. The dialogue is a bit clunky here and there, the syntax sometimes a tad bookish. (Though it improves.) The prose style needs a brush up here and there. But these are minor irritations, which occur only occasionally. Overall, this novel is a good read, and the premise is excellent.

A classic work

Light and Color in the Outdoors by MGJ Minnaert

5 November 2014

Marcel Minnaert's work is rightly regarded as a classic: it is quite a dense work, with an astonishing amount of material in it – rainbows and reflections and shadows, and lots more.

As well as the usual division into chapters, there are smaller units – 273 in all. Each of these smaller units has its own heading: “Images of the sun” (No. 1) “Mirages above cold water” (No.43) “Will-o'-the-wisps” (No. 273)

Scientific explanations are provided (where known) for each phenomenon looked at. For those with a mathematical bent, the appropriate equations are provided (sines, cosines, and so on.)

There are also regular quotations by Victorian art critic John Ruskin, and others. Goethe is another whose quotes appear more than once in this book.

The colour photos – most of them by Finnish photographer Pekka Parviainen – are glorious. The book concludes with tips for those who wish to do their own photographs of colour and light effects. This section was written before the invention of digital cameras, but it should be possible to adapt the advice given.

Because Minnaert's book is so densely packed with material, I chose to read it a little at a time, inbetween other (lighter) reading. In a few weeks or months time, I shall read it again, making notes.

I like this book very much. All we need now is a companion volume on Sound and Smell in the Outdoors!

A unique cookbook from south-west France

The Walnut Cookbook by Jean-Luc Toussaint (Author), Betsy Draine (Translator), Michael Hinden (Translator)

25 October 2014

Lots of lovely recipes in here, and many I haven't tried yet. My recommendation is to follow each recipe exactly, the first time you make it. When you try it, you can then judge if you need to modify it slightly next time. One of the recipes I have tried is honey and walnut ice-cream. It was very good, but needed a slightly higher fat content - next time I may replace part of the milk with cream. Xmas is getting nearer as I write this, so I may save up my pennies and try one of the duck recipes. There are also bakery recipes in here.

Solemn brilliance

The Magic Barrel by Bernard Malamud

25 October 2014

There is a solemn brilliance about these tales, with their down-at-heel, out of luck characters. Everything is in shades of grey, with deep dark shadows, like an old film noir. A little goes a long way, however: 13 tales is about right.

Intriguing.

**On Divination and Synchronicity: The Psychology of Meaningful Chance
by Marie-Louise Von Franz**

25 October 2014

Marie-Louise von Franz's book is a transcription of a series of lectures she gave at the Jung Institute in Switzerland in 1969. They read very well, and you can imagine her speaking at the podium.

A number of times as I was reading through the lectures, I found myself wondering what practical use this stuff is - but I kept reading anyway. A lot of ideas are thrown out and explored: it is deeply intriguing. The author has also written a book on archetypal patterns in fairy tales.

A thought provoking read.

Man & People by Jose Ortega y Gasset

8 August 2014

Jose Ortega y Gasset was a twentieth century Spanish thinker who is always worth reading. In this book- the last one he wrote - he looks at society, and asks what society is exactly. Of what does "Society" consist? He points out that while eminent sociologists (he cites Durkheim and Weber) have written thousands of pages on society, they never once defined what society actually is. In the course of exploring this question, Ortega y Gasset raises some interesting ideas and points - the salutation, customary usages, man and woman, the opinions we hold which aren't really ours, but simply "what people say", and much more.

Fascinating.

His book on Love is also worth a look (See my review of it.)

A rich thoughtful work.

On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme by Jose Ortega y. Gasset

3 July 2014

I first came across this book in a library many years ago. I was a young man then - a lot younger than I am now. Author Jose Ortega y Gasset impressed me with the depth of his thought on the subject, and the brilliance of his style.

Rereading it now as a much older man, I find that my opinion has not changed much. It is a rich, thoughtful, serious work, in which he attempts to develop a philosophy (or "science") of love. He analyses the nature of love between the sexes, distinguishes it from sexual desire, looks at the difference between male and female, and the different ways in which each responds to the other.

He has interesting - and quite caustic - things to say about Don Juanism, too. The inadequacy of the Don Juan type intrigued another Spanish writer, I recall - novelist Perez de Ayala ("Tigre Juan" and other works).

In contrast with that, he also writes (briefly, alas) on courtly love. The modern age is the offspring of the Renaissance, he points out. He continues: "The Renaissance in turn is the

offspring of Provençal culture which flourished in the thirteenth century. The Provençal culture rose under the protection of a few genial women who invented the *ley de cortezia*, the first break with the ascetic, ecclesiastical spirit of the Middle Ages."

It is possible to disagree with one or two of the points he makes - but you never forget that you are disagreeing with a man of supreme intelligence who has thought deeply and widely on his subject.

For the record, here are the essays which comprise this work:

"Features of Love" introduces the subject.

"Love in Stendhal" looks at a work by French writer Stendhal - "De L'Amour" ("On Love".) Ortega y Gasset disagrees with the Frenchman, and presents his own alternative view of how love works.

"The Role of Choice in Love" points out that we do not fall in love at random, with just anyone - there is a pattern that can be observed.

Here is the opening paragraph: "The essential core of our personality is not fashioned from our opinions and experiences; it is not founded upon our temperament, but rather upon something more subtle, more ethereal and independent of these. We are, more than anything else, an innate system of preferences and distastes...."

"Thoughts on Standing Before the Marquesa de Santillana's Portrait" meditates on the difference between male and female.

"Landscape with a Deer in the Background" looks at Captain Nelson and ambassador Sir William Hamilton, and the woman they both loved.

"Portrait of Salome" deals with a particular kind of abnormal psychology.

"Toward a psychology of the interesting man" This essay begins: "Nothing is so flattering to a man as to hear women say that he is interesting. But when is a man interesting in the opinion of a woman? This is one of the most subtle and difficult questions to raise....."

An excellent recreation of some classic tales

One Thousand and One Nights by Hanan Al-Shaykh

5 June 2014

This is a joyfully and beautifully written collection of tales. "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad" is the principal tale: the others are fitted inside it. The stories are not bowdlerised, (thank Heavens!), so they're quite racy at times.

Judge Honeywell, you should have known better

The Romantic Comedians by Ellen Glasgow

5 June 2014

This novel is set in the years post WW1 – 1923 - when new attitudes and styles were about. The lead character is sixty-something Judge Honeywell, who remains nostalgic for the 1880's. A widower now, he falls in love (or thinks he does) with young Annabel, whom he marries. But she turns out to be a materialistic and flighty young lady. "I cannot live without love!" she cries at one point. Unfortunately, at this point she is married to the judge: she married him for a comfortable life, and she knows it. It is not hard to predict where the story goes after that.

"The Romantic Comedians" is a slight tale, but gorgeously told. The lush, epigrammatic style is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde.

Stefan Zweig's swan song

Chess by Stefan Zweig

21 May 2014

Stefan Zweig wrote this novella at what turned out to be the end of his life - it was published posthumously in 1943, the year after he committed suicide. It is a well-constructed tale about a remarkable and brilliant chess player, who meets his match on board a ship headed for South America. The two protagonists are very different characters, and are very well drawn. There is a touch of Dostoevsky, too: one character teeters on the edge of madness, from time to time; another has a brilliant mind, but zero social skills. A touch of Asperger's? This was my introduction to this author: I intend to read further works by him.

Fancy four wives and lots of children? Read this first.

The Lonely Polygamist by Brady Udall

21 May 2014

I first heard of this novel when I stumbled across an interview with the author online. The book was also praised in a forum. Now that I have read it I can say it is a good read.

The lead character is a Mormon man who has four wives, and 28 children. If that weren't enough, the boss's wife is angling for him. It's all too much for the poor fellow, especially as his voluminous family is slowly unravelling, with bitterness towards the first (and oldest) wife, the children dividing into separate tribes, and his own incapacity - or simple unwillingness - to deal with the situation. Udall's novel is quite touching in parts, especially when the back stories of certain characters are revealed. Udall knows that people are full of surprises. The Lonely Polygamist is a substantial read, but a delightful one.

'Sleep takes off the costume of circumstance, arms us with a terrible freedom...'

A Terrible Freedom by Eric Linklater

21 May 2014

Linklater wrote A Terrible Freedom late in his career – in the sixties. I remember first reading it – along with others of his novels – when I was much younger than I am now. It was good to read it again. Most of Eric Linklater's novels are light entertainments – amusing, fluently written, and not very profound. A Terrible Freedom is more radical and interesting than anything he had done previously.

Narrator Evan Gaffikin is a comfortably off sixty-something: he is bored with life. Fortunately for him, he has developed a remarkable capacity to dream. A number of his dreams are included, alternating with chapters describing his waking life. The story acquires rich lyrical power when he takes a leisurely boat trip around the western isles of Scotland. The author's heart was there, and it shows. In that section, the reader will also meet two extraordinary characters, the McPhee brothers. Linklater has a lot of fun with them. A postscript by the narrator's son William Gaffikin ties up some loose ends, and gives extra insight into his father. A found it very poignant.

Eric Linklater seems to have dropped completely off the literary radar since his death: few

have heard of him now. This is one novel by him that deserves to survive.

The title 'A Terrible Freedom' is taken from a quote by Emerson.

This was a big influence on me.

Develop Your Powers of Persuasion by Paul P. Parker

29 April 2014

This was published in the sixties - the time when TV series Mad Men is set. In some ways it is very much of its time. A little simple minded and naive, radiantly positive.

The author's previous book was "How to Use Tact and Skill in Handling People", which describes his overall message. I must confess I was probably too young for this book when I first bought it - I was maybe eight or nine years old, and was attracted to the bright blue and yellow cover. The title too intrigued me. Well, that copy eventually fell to bits, but not before it had its influence.

In the early chapters the author teaches social skills - how to be a friendly, positive person, whom people like to have around. Paul P Parker uses anecdotes to illustrate his points, and very good they are too.

The final chapter is entitled "Get Yourself A Dream". This concerns deciding clearly what you want in life, making a plan to achieve it, not being phased by initial failure, and so on. It seems very naive now - perhaps because I have become old and cynical. But it was an important perspective on life when I was young, if only to counteract some very different ideas that were around.

This book gave me the right ideas to wrestle with, as I approached manhood, and can still be valuable. It is the original positive thinking book. If I was to write a book like this, now, my approach would be a little more worldly wise and nuanced.

One final comment: the assumption in much of the book is that the reader will be working in a corporate setting, probably in sales.

Intriguing and challenging

I and Thou by Martin Buber

4 April 2014

I have been wanting to read this seminal work of 20th century thought for a long time, and have finally got around to it. It is certainly a challenge - and intriguing too. The thesis is straightforward enough: we have two modes of interacting with the world. One, which he calls "I—It", "experiences and uses". The other, which he calls "I—Thou", is a higher function. In this mode, we enter into a living relation. Furthermore, in every "I—Thou" encounter, one can sense the presence of something divine standing behind it. In other words, God reveals Himself to us through our relationships. As Buber expands on his thesis, it gets deep and dark. I found parts of the early section a bit opaque. But I soldiered bravely on. I am glad I did. I came across passages that were wonderfully illuminating. There were some brilliant single lines, too. This is a book to go back to, after a suitable interval.

Quote:

"For actually there is a cosmos for man only when the universe becomes his home, with its holy hearth whereon he offers sacrifice; there is Eros for man only when beings become for him pictures of the eternal, and community is revealed along with them; and there is logos for man only when he addresses the mystery with work and service for the spirit."

A delightful read

The Library of Unrequited Love by Sophie Divry

4 April 2014

A middle-aged female librarian works in the geography section, in the basement of a library. When she arrives at work one morning (ahead of opening time) she finds that a man has been locked in overnight. So, she starts chatting with him - and it turns into a long, rambling, stream of consciousness rant. The influence of Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" can be detected here - but the tone is different, and it is funny in a different way. It is not a full length novel, but a novella, so quickly read.

This book changed the way stories are written

Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson

4 April 2014

Until Sherwood Anderson got to work, the accepted way of writing short stories was the 19th century realist manner - carefully plotted, etc. Anderson broke the form away from that. The result is a minor masterpiece.

All these tales are set in the same mid-western town, at the end of the 19th century. Modern technology and industrialisation is coming, but has not reach the little town yet. Each story focuses on a specific character. But the emphasis is not on plot: rather, the narrative - apparently artless and digressive - moves toward a great and terrible revelation.

Anderson's narrative style is noteworthy. It is not as simple as it appears: it is exquisite, and beautifully crafted. Anderson has a lot of affection for his characters, but he is also honest about their weaknesses and inadequacies. So far as that goes, I sensed a kinship with a writer from a slightly later generation - Raymond Chandler. There are obvious differences: Chandler wrote urban detective stories, Anderson's tales are semi-rural. But there is a similarity of tone - a similar sadness, a similar failure, a similar unfulfilment. The figure of 18 year old George Willard provides a unifying figure. He meets all of the characters whose stories are told. We also see him maturing through the course of the work.

The Norton Critical Edition comes with extras: letters from Anderson, a handful of reviews from the time, critical essays. Of particular interest to me was one which explained that Anderson's art is not realist, but expressionist. Anyone who has an interest in story writing and how it's done, should take a look at the Norton edition of Winesburg Ohio.

Conversations with Eight British Authors

Writers Revealed by Rosemary Harthill

22 March 2014

In the summer of 1989, BBC Radio broadcast a series of interviews with eight British novelists of that time. This book is based on those interviews. Rosemary Harthill explored

the upbringing and background of each writer. There is an emphasis on their religious upbringing, along with what their views (and doubts) were, at the time of the interview.

Most of the interviewees had a Christian background - but not all. Bernice Rubens was Jewish; Sara Maitland combines Christianity with feminism; John Mortimer was more complicated - he admired some aspects of the Christian ethos, yet could not bring himself to believe in God. Faith he described as a "great leap in the dark."

This book offers a good - and perhaps unusual - insight into a former generation of novelists. They may have been the last generation of British novelists to grow up in close contact with Christianity and the Church (es). One wonders what interviews with comparable novelists today, would be like.

The novelists in conversation with Rosemary Harthill, are:

Anthony Burgess

Sara Maitland

Brian Moore

John Mortimer

Iris Murdoch

Piers Paul Read

Bernice Rubens

A N Wilson

A saga of changing times

Triptych: Herself Surprised, To Be a Pilgrim and Horse's Mouth by Joyce Cary

8 February 2014

Triptych is a trilogy by Joyce Cary, a writer I've been meaning to read for some time. Each novel begins where the previous one ends. Furthermore, each is told from the point of view of a different character. The complete trilogy covers a period of around 60 years of British history, from the late Victorian Era, to the beginnings of World War Two.

Herself Surprised is the opening story. Sara Monday is the narrator and main character. As the story opens, she is being sentenced to prison, in what must be one of the greatest opening

lines ever.

My first impression was that there is a Thomas Hardy influence in Cary's novel. But this is a later age than Hardy's, and a changing one. The stratification of classes, with which the novel begins, starts to look like it cannot last too much longer. The narrator's semi-rural town turns into a suburb. But things haven't changed completely, yet - Christianity is still a strong influence on the characters (artist Gulley Jimson being a notable exception.)

To Be a Pilgrim is the novel in the middle. Sara Monday's lover Tom Wilcher, a retired lawyer, is the narrator here. The narrative voice is quite different, as is the overall pace and tone. The 70 year old lawyer's situation is simply described: following some incidents with young ladies, he has been confined to his ancestral home, Tolbrook House. He is being cared for by his niece Ann. It is the nineteen thirties, and the world has changed greatly from the world he knew in his youth (Victorian/ Edwardian). He casts a quizzical eye on the young folk, who do not share his values, and whom he does not entirely understand. The wider world, meanwhile, is inching toward war: a certain Mr Hitler is making a noise over in Germany. There is an irony here: back in the old days, Tom Wilcher was a Radical "as we all were then." Mention is made of the "Revolution of 1906" when the Liberals swept into power and put forward a program of social reforms. Now, an old man of 70, he looks with conservative eyes on a world he does not understand anymore - a world that Edwardian radicals like himself helped bring about.

The novel ends on a sombre note: many of those who were close to him have predeceased him, and he is convinced that his niece and her husband want him to die soon, so they can inherit the property.

To Be a Pilgrim is a slow burner, but is worth persevering with, for it is masterfully done.

The Horse's Mouth is the final instalment. Triptych is like a symphony in three movements, with a slow meditative movement in the middle, and a lively dramatic movement to conclude. The Horse's Mouth focuses on painter and independent spirit Gulley Jimson: he is the narrator. The style is lively, exuberant, extraordinary. The novel opens when he has just been released from a short spell in prison. He visits various people he knows, hoping to cadge money from them: but he already owes them money, and they want to be paid back. He takes up residence in an old boat shed, and immediately sets to work planning his

masterpiece. Various picaresque adventures follow, leading to a suitably dramatic conclusion. Great fun.

Wonderful evocation of life in old Armenia

Scenes from an Armenian childhood by Vahan Totovents

4 December 2013

"Scenes from an Armenian Childhood" is the English title for this book: the Armenian title translates as "Life on the Old Roman Road". Author Totovents describes his childhood and early youth in Old Armenia, in the days before the massacres of 1917 denuded the area of its population. (There are a couple of allusions to this, but it is not dwelt upon.) His style is to tell a series of tales, anecdotes, and lyrically described scenes, that he draws from a clearly well-stocked memory. We meet some interesting characters, and there are some rollicking stories. There are some wonderful lyric passages too. The setting is semi-rural: the village and the surrounding countryside, with its farms, vineyards, and orchards. Vahan Totovents writes with simple eloquence. This little book is poetry in prose, movingly and beautifully written.

The author became a leading poet, dramatist and author in his native Armenia. Alas, he fell victim to one of Stalin's purges, and was sent to Siberia, along with other creative people who were not writing in the prescribed socialist manner. He was never seen again. He was 37. This little book (and perhaps others of his, which I haven't read) is his testament.

I enjoyed this book

The garden of the Finzi-Contini by Giorgio Bassani

26 November 2013

I enjoyed this book, and look forward to seeing the DeSica film. Bassani's book is written like a memoir, written some years after the events. Much of it concerns the narrator's idyllic - though rather static - existence in 1938/39. He spent his time back then playing tennis in the private courtyard of the Finzi-Contini's, a wealthy Jewish family. Mussolini's anti-Semitic legislation is starting to bite, and a certain Mr Hitler is chancellor of Germany. But the significance of events beyond their garden wall doesn't seem to dawn on the young people -

nor, for that matter, on their elders. Bassani evokes this atmosphere of complacency and denial beautifully.

There is romance, too. Well, almost. The narrator becomes very fond of the Finzi-Contini's daughter Micol: this curious (non) romance is the overarching story which pulls the whole book together.

The style Bassani adopted for this story is worth noting. There is a curious passivity about the narrator - indeed, about most of the characters. They just react to life, and sometimes do not even do that. So long as the tennis is good, they seem to be satisfied. This vaguely pathetic quality is very Italian, perhaps? Only Japanese writers (and poets) are able to evoke that passive, hopeless kind of tragedy as well as Bassani does here.

Nuggets of life.

Neighbours of the Night: Selected short stories by Endre Ady

20 November 2013

Endre Ady was a Hungarian, who lived in the late 19th-early 20th centuries. That was the tail-end of the romantic period, and there is definitely a fin de siècle quality about his work - girls die young, young men live in night-filled loneliness, etc. The stories are quite short - around 5 or 6 pages as a rule. The style is brisk but eloquent. Ady was a renowned poet, as well as short story writer. The stories often feature bitterly ironic situations, and what approaches to a gallows humour. Ady was clearly a man without illusions, and that shows in the stories he told. There is a hardness here: but it is a hardness that hides deep compassion, I suspect. Interesting.

A good, satisfying read

White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in 18th-century India by William Dalrymple

19 November 2013

This is the (true) story of James Kirkpatrick, who worked in India for the British East India Company. He seems to have liked the local culture, and assimilated to it to a large extent. This was before the Evangelical influence grew stronger, and banned that sort of thing. On page 152, beautiful young Khair un-Nissa enters his life. There are quite a lot of other

characters who are mentioned incidentally, about whom I would like books to be written, too. Very often, these characters took advantage of the different cultural climate in India to marry local women. Sometimes more than one!

White Mughals is a work of Shakespearian breadth; there are interesting characters whom you get to know quite well, romance, drama, and – ultimately - tragedy. There is a sequel to this work, called The Last Mughal.

Now for something completely different

Absolute Good Fortune by Toshu Fukami

19 November 2013

Toshu Fukami, who wrote this book, made his own fortune selling watches. His spiritual interests are a side-line, it would appear. His cultural background, as you would expect for a Japanese, is Shinto-Buddhist-Confucian. That makes him a modern polytheist, which was the main attraction of this book to me. The book certainly has some interesting ideas in it. Don't be put off by the easy to read style and the cartoon-like illustrations - there is insight here. As self-help books go, this one is quite different to anything that you may find by a Western author. Delightful.

Wake me up when it's finished

Daniel Deronda by George Eliot

19 November 2013

Daniel Deronda failed to hold me: I could not warm to George Eliot's grey, elephantine prose. The book smells too much of the lamp, and the characters are there to illustrate a thesis. I skipped forward to a section where Daniel is participating in a discussion with some learned Jewish men: that was passably good. But overall, no. George Eliot, sadly, is more interesting as a woman (real name Marian Evans) than as a writer. For insight into one particularly interesting period of her life - before she became a novelist - I recommend 142 Strand, by Rosemary Ashton.

The Victorian Age as it is not often seen

142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London by Rosemary Ashton

19 November 2013

This book deals with John Chapman, 19th century publisher of the Westminster Review, a radical magazine. It provides a fascinating insight into a world and a time very different to our own. For all its shambolic nature, I prefer Britain as it is now!

The bulk of this book deals with John Chapman's remarkable personal life. As well as a wife, with whom he did not get on, he had a live-in mistress. So, a Victorian polygamist, basically. Then a secretary joins the household, one Marian Evans. Previously, she had been in the social circle of wealthy ribbon manufacturer and philanthropist Charles Bray, up in Coventry. This gentleman had, in addition to his wife, a second lady, by whom he had a number of children.

Now, young Marian Evans was in the household of the Westminster Review publisher, down in London. John Chapman seems to have taken a shine to her, which alarmed the wife and the mistress. They decided that two women were enough for him, so poor Marian Evans had to leave. She eventually ran off (to Germany) with one of the magazine's regular contributors. Since this was done "without benefit of clergy", it caused a great scandal when the news got out. She also took to writing novels, using the pseudonym George Eliot.

This book reveals a side of Victorian life that we do not normally see - the radical, independent-minded side, uncomfortable with Christianity, and determined to go its own way. Another book offering a similar insight, is Vol 1 of Bertrand Russell's Autobiography, which I also recommend.

This book is also valuable for the insight into the oppressive nature of Anglican Christianity at that time. For example, you could not become a doctor, or a member of parliament, without being a church-going Christian. And they checked! Also, you could not graduate from Oxford without signing your assent to the 39 Articles of Faith of the Church of England.

Another delight of this book is the number of incidental characters who are mentioned visiting John Chapman - even Thoreau came over from America.

The main weak point, is Rosemary Ashton's prose. I found it rather dry and weary - not unlike George Eliot's own style, in fact. Also, once Marian Evans departs from the picture, it gets less interesting.

Brilliant and thorough

Mystery of Reincarnation: The Evidence and Analysis of Rebirth by J. Allan Danelek

19 November 2013

J Allen Danekek approaches this topic from an interesting place. He was formerly part of an Evangelical Christian community, with all that that implies - reincarnation is regarded by them as a doctrine promoted by the Devil to lure people away from God. Then one day he decided to look more closely at the arguments.

The result was that he now accepts reincarnation as likely to be true. Danelek's unique personal journey is what makes this one of the best books on the subject available - he has been on both sides of the debate.

In this book he looks at a number of arguments that are put up against reincarnation. He arranges them under two heads, religious, and scientific, and examines each argument in turn. The arguments against reincarnation turn out to be quite weak, and the case for it, strong.

In addition, he spends some time looking at a case where a man could remember a previous life as a submarine officer in World War 2. Other cases are mentioned, but more briefly. This is a good solid read.

Yum!

Old Fashioned Homemade Ice Cream: With 58 Original Recipes by Thomas Quinn

19 November 2013

There are some good recipes in here—fruit flavours, vanilla, chocolate, and various others, some new to me (such as Mexican Penuche, for example.) There are interesting tips, such as the fat content that ice-cream needs for success, and things of that sort. Note that these are American recipes, though I did not find that a problem. Owners of ice-cream machines may need to scale down some of the recipes.

I'd rather be eating ice cream

Tantric Secrets: 7 Steps to the best sex of your life by Cassandra Lorus

19 Nov 2013

I had a number of goes at reading this book. This final time, I was no more able to concentrate on it, than the first time. I found this book hard work. This book achieves the remarkable feat of making sex boring. There are meditation techniques, new age philosophy, etc. Possibly this kind of book is aimed at the kind of people who need human sexuality to be turned into a thing to be understood intellectually, before they can feel comfortable with it.

So, I put the book down for the final time, and reached for a book of ice-cream recipes that I had recently purchased. Now there's sensuality!

Witty, imaginative, eccentric

Belarmino and Apolonio by Ramon Perez De Ayala

12 November 2013

The translator's introduction to this book is interesting and insightful. After that, we get to the book itself. The Prologue sets up the story: we meet a learned 70 year old gentleman in a guest house, who is holding forth at the dinner table. The upshot of his rambling spiel, is that the sciences cannot teach you much worth learning, really. There are only two paths to Truth: the way of the philosopher and the way of the dramatist. This sets us up for the subsequent chapters, where we meet the two characters who give their names to the book:

Belarmino and Apolonio. They are two shoemakers who are bitter rivals: for most of the book, they do not speak to each other. One of them fancies himself as a poet, and has written a play; the other thinks himself a great philosopher. They are very much like characters you might meet in a pub! There are other striking characters in the novel, too. There is also a love theme - the daughter of one runs off with the son of the other. If you want to know how that works out, you'll have to read the book. I enjoyed reading Perez de Ayala's novel, and look forward to reading one of his other works - possibly "Tigre Juan".

First time reader of James Wright's poetry

The Branch Will Not Break: Empty-Grave Extended Edition by James Wright

2 November 2013

James Wright's poems reveal him to have been a gentle old soul. There is a wonderful simplicity and freshness in his poems, too, as well as a lovely - and often surprising - turn of phrase.

Now, here's what's wrong with Western civilisation

The Rage for Utopia: Obsession and Civilization by Ronald Conway

1 Nov 2013

I first encountered this author many years ago when I came across two of his early works in a charity shop, circa 1980. They were "The Great Australian Stupor" and "Land of the Long Weekend". In those books he gave Australian society and culture a real pasting. His ranting, sulphurous style, and the catty eloquence of his language, really appealed to me then.

"Rage For Utopia" was published 1992, so it is a work of Conway's latter years. His style has mellowed only slightly, though his subject matter has broadened. This time he takes on the whole of Western (ie Christian) civilisation.

His thesis is that obsessive-compulsive psychology has dominated (and continues to dominate) Western Civilisation. Christianity in its traditional form is largely responsible for this, he says; he has some harsh things to say about rationalism, too - no doubt justly.

It is a stimulating read and makes some valid points.

For example, in one passage he points out that students from Far Eastern countries who had come to study in Australia also showed signs of an obsessive-compulsive personality, if they had a Christian background. However, if they were Buddhist or Confucian, they did not show these signs. It is for incidental insights like this that one values a book of this type.

Otherwise, it is a learned, wide-ranging, opinionated, Conway rant.

Since Conway's death in 2009, dark clouds have appeared over him. Those wishing to enquire further should search for R J Stove's contribution to the Victorian State Government's enquiry into child abuse in the Catholic Church in Melbourne. Stove's paper is entitled "Sex abuse in Victorian Catholicism: the Ronald Conway connection".

A wonderful account of a recent period in our history

Aprons and Silver Spoons: The Heartwarming Memoirs of a 1930s Kitchen Maid, by Mollie Moran

1 November 2013

This book is a good read: 96 yr old Molly Malone is a good storyteller. In this book she recounts her life "Downstairs" in a stately home in the thirties. This is Downton Abbey territory, told from the servants' perspective. There are quite a lot of stories involved - comic and touching, amusing and alarming. From her balmy childhood days in Norfolk, the book progresses through her days as a scullery maid, to her work as cook, and from there to marriage and the birth of her first child. This is the thirties, so a certain Mr Hitler becomes chancellor over in Germany; Mosley and his black-shirted supporters hold big rallies; towards the end, World War Two breaks out, changing everything. The war comes to an end eventually: but the old "upstairs-downstairs" system was too fragile to survive it. New technology, and a democratic post-war spirit, brings the old way to an end. This book gave me greater insight into how many of the women in my family tree would have lived.

A forgotten masterpiece

Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest by W. H. Hudson

29 October 2013

Right from the word go, you're in a world - and a time - other than your own. Reading the short prologue (by an anonymous narrator) I said to myself: "Yes, this is an Edwardian novel alright - in the best sense of the word!"

The main part of the story is told by Abel, a Venezuelan of European extraction and culture - sophisticated, charming, accustomed to city life. One day, tired of his customary life, he heads out into the jungle. When there, he encounters a mysterious forest girl, with whom he becomes obsessed. She proves elusive, at first.

Hudson's novel is beautifully strange, and gorgeously written. It is written with knowledge, too. Hudson is not content to give us a generic description of the many jungle scenes—he names species of trees and plants, and identifies types of birds.

Rima, the love interest, is an intriguing person: exasperating, too. There are other characters, all strongly drawn. As for Rima, Abel inspires strong feelings in her: but she does not understand these new feelings: she keeps the relationship platonic. For a long time, she will not let him touch her, or look into her eyes.

The dénouement of the story - without giving too much away - is overwhelmingly emotional. Unashamedly romantic, you might say.

I wish I liked it more

The Comic Romance by Paul Scarron

29 October 2013

This is an English translation of a 17th century French picaresque novel. It describes the adventures of a troupe of travelling players. Author Paul Scarron knew this world from personal involvement in it.

Now, this is the type of book I would normally enjoy, so I am surprised that I didn't enjoy

this one more. There are no great heights or depths in the story, nor even the promise of it. In the end, it failed to hold me, and I didn't take it up again.

One day I'll give it another go.

Tales of old Prague

By Night Under the Stone Bridge by Leo Perutz

18 September 2013

This is one of my favourite novels, by one of my favourite writers. In brief, it is a collection of overlapping tales set in 16th century Prague. The characters include Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, a wealthy Jewish businessman, upon whom the Emperor is dependent, his beautiful wife Esther, who meets the Emperor in dreams, a Great Rabbi who has occult powers - and many others. The stories have a folk-tale like quality, and together, they create a marvellous picture of a living, vital community. Marvellous.

Made me feel good.

Dracula (Barnes & Noble Leatherbound Classics) by Bram Stoker

18 September 2013

I was in a glum mood, when this arrived, but I got stuck in regardless. The horrors of Dracula made my own glum mood seem trifling in comparison. So, it cheered me up. It must be twenty years or more since I last read it, and I had forgotten how good it is. This edition is very handsome, too, a joy to read.

Stunning

The Good Soldier by Ford Madox Ford

18 September 2013

Ford chose a curious way to tell the story, with Dowell, the infuriating and meandering narrator - but it is the right way to tell the story. One gets the distinct impression that when the events were going on, Dowell remained in blissful ignorance. In modern parlance, he didn't have a clue. Now, in retrospect, when it's too late, he does. As you progress through

this short novel, more and more is revealed, the fog clears, and the full tragedy of it becomes apparent. This has been described as an Edwardian Tragedy - but told in a very 20th century way. "The Good Soldier" is staggeringly good, the work of a master.

One of France's great 20th century writers

The Body's Rapture by Jules Romain

18 September 2013

My first encounter with Jules Romain was as a dramatist. Many years ago, when I felt I had mastered the French language sufficiently, I purchased some books to read. One of them was a comic play called "Knock", by Jules Romain. (Highly recommended, by the way.)

Martin Seymour Smith in his "World Literature" speaks well of "The Body's Rapture". He points out that "the frankly sensual writing is an improvement on D H Lawrence... who was uncomfortable with his material...." Having read this work, I can concur. That is not an unjust comparison, either, for the original French version was published in 1922, when Lawrence was still around. His "Lady Chatterley's Lover" was published 1928. (And then banned.)

My initial impression of Romain's novel, was: "This is going well." After a quiet, moderato beginning, Lucienne's future lover, Pierre Febvre enters the story. She is giving piano lessons to two sisters; he works on board ship, but is on 6 months' shore leave; he calls round one day to see the family, to whom he is distantly related. He walks her home from the music lesson one evening, and is soon very chatty. Jules Romain the comic dramatist shows himself here.

That first part is narrated by Lucienne; the second part is narrated by Pierre, and the change of tone is managed well. The third and final part alternates between the two.

The style throughout is introverted and introspective - philosophical at times. Romain uses this simple tale to explore his "unanimist" ideas. Unanimism was a philosophy which

emphasised the feeling of oneness experienced by people in a group, whether the members of a family, a group of friends, or a whole society. Or, as here, a man and woman united by love. Pierre at one point makes an interesting observation. His view is that whenever a man and woman meet - even if all they do is pass by in the street - there is always a spark of love. Normally, however, the spark of love lasts but a moment. But on rare and beautiful occasions, it sustains, it builds, it strengthens, it doesn't die: that is the experience we call "falling in love".

The ruminative passages do sometimes go on too long - this is an experimental novel. The sensual passages on the other hand are very well done. A paranormal episode toward the end may surprise some, but it fits in with the author's overall theme.

In summary, it is not the masterpiece it might have been: nonetheless, it is a very interesting work by an author of undoubted intelligence. Definitely worth a look.

Good old fashioned storytelling

Tales of Terror and Darkness by Algernon Blackwood

18 September 2013

Algernon Blackwood is a writer I've only recently come across. I'm glad I did! His stories are of the "Twilight Zone" type. ie they start off ordinarily enough, with nothing unremarkable happening, and then get progressively more and more strange. There are a lot of stories in this volume, so you can dip in at random, whenever you're in the mood. Here are my comments on some that I've read already:

"The Doll" , which opens the collection, is a later work (1946), about a supernaturally possessed children's doll.

"Running Wolf" is one of my favourites so far. Written in the twenties, it is set in the Canadian backwoods, on the shores of a lake: the story concerns a mysterious grey wolf.

"The Occupant of the Room" concerns feelings of dread in a hotel room in an Alpine village.

"The Man Whom the Trees Loved" is another masterpiece. It is a beautifully written novella about an elderly couple who live in a cottage on the edge of the New Forest. The man loves the trees, and spends an increasing amount of time alone in the woods. This worries his bible reading wife, who finds it all rather sinister. This is one of those strange plotless stories which cast a spell on you, and draw you in.

"The Damned" is another novella, this time about a stately home in Sussex, which has a strange pall hanging over it. This story seems more personal than some of Blackwood's others.

"The House of the Past" is a shorter piece with interesting psychological (and spiritual) implications. Jung would have understood this story.

"The Trod" is one of his best: it is a strange, magical tale set in a haunted area of moorland in the north of England.

In "Chinese Magic" we get to know a gentleman who has fallen in love with traditional Chinese culture. But has it turned his head?

And that's only a few of them! Note, that his tales "The Willows", "The Wendigo" and "The Listeners" are not included in this volume.

Contemporary account of the Boxer Rebellion

China from Within, Or, the Story of the Chinese Crisis by Stanley Peregrine Smith

13 September 2013

I must start by confessing that I did not buy this book from Amazon - I found a copy of the second edition (Feb 1901) in a second hand bookshop. However, I found it a terrific read, and since no-one else has reviewed it on Amazon yet, I thought I should do so.

In brief, it is a thrilling read, and often shocking. The outrage that was felt at the time radiates off the page; there are a lot of circumstantial details of the kind that you can only get from a contemporary account such as this. Author Stanley Smith is described on the title page as "Formerly of Trinity College Cambridge, and of the China Inland Mission." So, this is a missionary's account. He was a partisan of the Protestant form of Christianity - and probably an Evangelical, if one may judge from the tone of voice towards the end of the book, and the views he expresses. The Catholic Church, for one, get a pasting; he is also pretty scathing of the Manchu regime, who were then in charge in China. He more than once refers to the Chinese as "heathen" who need to be "civilised" - and "civilisation", of course, is identifiable with Christianity. There is much along those lines in this book, especially in the second half, where the author speculates on what Imperial China needs, and what path it should adopt. This is not a book for the politically correct! But it adds to the authenticity of the account.

And besides, after 113 years, many passages have an ironic tone, now. I couldn't help musing, that the parts of the world where the most sizable populations of devout Christians are to be found, in the modern world, are Africa and South America. Yes, Africa and South America. So, are those continents the "civilised world" now? And we have become the "heathen"? Time adds an interesting poignancy to a book as old as this.

The "plot" is worthy of Grand Opera. The Emperor, belonging to the Manchu Dynasty, was named Kuang-hsu (personal name Tsai-t'ien). He was in his thirtieth year in 1900. He was a quiet, studious man, who was well read in Christian books, including the Old and New Testaments. In the beginning of 1898 he sent for 129 different kinds of books, of which 89 were issued by the Christian Literature Society. It should be pointed out that Christian churches were evangelising rather aggressively in China at this time. It didn't stop there. The secretary of the Board of Rites, Wang Chao proposed that the Protestant Christian religion be made the official state religion, instead of Confucianism.

The Empress Dowager had had enough. She gave the Emperor "a most terrible rating", banished him to his inner apartments, and governed in his stead. She had the full support and encouragement of traditional-minded counsellors; she also had the support of the "bitterly conservative" mandarins, who managed the imperial bureaucracy.

One of the first things the Empress Dowager did was set up paramilitary units at various locations throughout China. On her word, they sprang into action, and the slaughter began. A German government minister was among the first to be slain; Christian missions throughout China were targeted. Author Stanley Smith knew many of them: he gives the names of many of those who were slain, as well as the time and place and manner of their deaths. He includes an account of the siege of the British Embassy in Peking, as told by someone who was there. Again, the circumstantial detail brings it horribly to life.

The Manchu dynasty, in power at the time, was in its final, declining phase. According to the history books, only one other Emperor followed: the child Puyi. He was the subject of a motion picture in 1987. But, as this book draws to an angry close, all that is still in the future.

Pleasant undemanding reading

Hotel stardust by Susan Barrie

6 August 2013

Susan Barrie is a pen-name of Ida Pollock: she was born in 1908, and amazingly is still writing. "Hotel Stardust" was published in 1955. This is an unusual book for me - Mills and Boon and all that. The story lacks great heights or great depths, and burbles along very pleasantly.

Glad to see it again

Guide to Modern World Literature by Martin Seymour-Smith

6 August 2013

I first came across this work - in paperback form - in a discount bookstore many many years ago. I loved it. Well, the years passed, I moved home a few times, and much else happened. It occurred to me recently to purchase a new copy, which I duly did. Martin Seymour-Smith's survey of world literature is as magisterial as I remember it being. He is as opinionated as I remember, too (a plus, in my view.) The introduction is of interest: he takes the reader through the basic concepts which he employs. Such as, for example, "Naive and

sentimentive" (from Schiller), "middlebrow", "objective correlative" (from TS Eliot), and so on. More generally, this is a good guide to finding authors, dramatists and poets, whom you may not have considered - or even heard of - but which you might appreciate. On his recommendation, I have already read Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, and am currently reading *The Body's Rapture* by Jules Romain.

Family life in a new land.

***Almonds and Raisins* by Maisie Mosco**

July 2013

Back in 1979/80, I lived down the road from a small regional library. I spent a lot of time there. One book I noticed was this one - *Almonds and Raisins*. I flipped through it a number of times, intrigued. It was clearly different to the sort of thing I was reading in those days - I was making my way through Rider Haggard's complete works. However, I did get the sense that I would probably enjoy it, if I were to give the book a try.

Well, I never got around to it, and eventually I moved away. Recently, I remembered the book, and decided to send for it. I'm glad I did! Maisie Mosco's story opens with a Jewish family fleeing persecution in Russia: they have arrived in Manchester. The year is 1905. They are made welcome by a local rabbi, and get to know the Moritz family, who arrived a few years earlier, from Vienna. As the years pass, the two families grow together, and become like one big clan. This novel (the first of a trilogy) ends in 1930, when Moseley is making his presence felt in England, and a certain Mr Hitler is doing the same in Germany.

Almonds and Raisins has been a good read: the fug of family life, Jewish style, as the children grow up and the years pass. The characters are well delineated, as are the relationships between them. The novel provides lively insight into British Jewish life at that time - and into British life in general, too.

An old friend

Magnus Merriman by Eric Linklater

30 May 2013

I first came across this author's books in a local library many years ago. I decided to re-acquaint myself with him. Most of his novels are Ealing-comedy type novels – witty, light, easy to read. Magnus Merriman, though, is the novel into which he poured his seriousness. That is the impression I get. But for all that, Linklater's wry comic mind can't resist some comic episodes. The first section of the book describes Magnus' life in London. He has written a successful novel, and has a love affair, which ends suddenly. (She takes offence at something he says.) He then recalls an old friend from his army days, now in Edinburgh. So he decamps up there, and more picaresque episodes follow.

So far, the humour has been rather satirical and deprecatory. The tone changes when he decamps to Orkney, where he has family connections. In Orkney, he feels at home for the first time - at one with the land, the earth beneath his feet, the Orkney sky, the Orkney people. Linklater himself had Orkney roots, and it shows. This section has a quiet lyric glow to it.

I feel DH Lawrence would have understood this feeling - oneness with one's own land, oneness with one's people. "That's what I always tried to say!" DH would have said. Alas, Lawrence died before this book was published (in 1934) so we'll never know what he would have thought of it. One thing I do know - Linklater had a better sense of humour than Lawrence. And he doesn't rant so much.

Magnus Merriman is curiously up to date. There is mention of a banking crisis, and threatened bankruptcy of Britain, a coalition government (called The National Cartel by Linklater), and calls for Scottish Independence.

Magnus Merriman may not be a masterpiece (few novels are) but it is eminently readable.

For all who love horses

Black Beauty by Anna Sewell

30 May 2013

A listener who phoned in to a Radio book program a while back explained how he came to read this book. He was a middle aged man, and said that a woman once suggested he read this book to learn why a woman falls in love. So he read it, and discovered what a good book it is.

I must concur. Mind you, it is not a conventionally dramatic novel - it's a gentle quiet read. But those who can gear down to its quiet tone and pace will find that it is written with great insight. The author (a 19th century woman) knew horses intimately, how they think and feel, how they act and react, how they view us humans.

This edition is valuable for another reason - the introduction is written by the great California horse trainer Monty Roberts. It turns out his mother read the book to him when he was a child, and this was a great inspiration for him.

A good old fashioned fairy tale

The Knight in Panther Skin: a free translation in prose

by Shota Rustaveli (Author), Katharine Vivian (Translator)

23 March 2013

"The Knight in Panther Skin" reads well - surprisingly so, for a 12th century work. Absurd at times, as medieval romances usually are, but delightful reading for all that. It is a well-constructed tale, beautifully told. The character drawing is good, too: the characters are described in bold simple brushstrokes, and are instantly recognisable whenever they appear. This edition includes colour illustrations, reproduced from a 16th century Georgian manuscript. Highly recommended.

Insightful

Love Times Three: Our True Story of a Polygamous Marriage by Joe Darger

31 January 2013

The Dargers come from a (Mormon) religious background, and are quite spiritual. At all stages of their courtship and marriage, they consulted the Lord, either by studying their scriptures, or through fasting and prayer, or both. It is this spiritual background which makes this tale of polygamous life a class above what less well informed people might perhaps expect. All four of them contributed to the writing of this book, including one or two of the older children. The book describes how Joe Darger came to court two girls at once, in his youth - it was not what he had originally planned to do. We also read honest accounts of the difficulties that came up, and how they dealt with them. One thing that impressed itself on me, was how trivial are the incidents which can spark off some trouble - usually jealousy, and so on. I am not a Mormon myself, nor a polygamist, but I found the book an interesting read.

Great fun

Hagar the Horrible (Annuals) by Chris Browne

31 January 2013

I have long been a fan of Hagar, the dreadful old Viking. The humour is simple but effective, and there is good cast of characters. This annual did not let me down. The cartoons in it were originally printed in the Sun newspaper. Note: the annual divides effectively into thirds, the first and last third being in colour, the middle section in black and white.

A Tale of Obsession

Little Apple by Leo Perutz

5 December 2012

Ian Fleming (of James Bond fame) called this a work of genius, and it is easy to see why - though it is a dark kind of genius here, quite different to other Perutz novels that I have read. The sombre tone is established early. Georg Vittorin is on the train home from Moscow, with four fellow officers, all former inmates in Chernavyensk prison camp. It is the end of WW1: they have been released and are headed home to Vienna. Vittorin reminds them of their pledge, made on their honour as gentlemen: to return to Russia to deal with the Camp Commandant who humiliated them.

But Vienna has changed irrevocably. The emperor has been overthrown, and the glorious Austro-Hungarian Empire is no more. No-one knows for how long the currency will hold its value, and there are those pressing for a communist state to be set up. Nonetheless, Vittorin's comrades soon settle back into Viennese life, with its cafes, and opera, and easy idleness. Their pledge is soon forgotten. Vittorin is enraged. Spurning a business opportunity (which he later regrets) he heads back to Russia. Alone.

Thus begins his long search for Selyukov, the ex-Camp Commandant. Frequently, during the difficult times ahead, he daydreams of the fateful day when meets up with him again. "Michael Michaelovitch," he would say, "do you remember me?" Vittorin keeps the hatred burning.

But it is not easy. Russia is in the grip of revolutionary civil war; inevitably, he gets drawn into it. Selyukov, his prey, always seems a step ahead of him. Many minor characters pass through the story: numerous vignettes reveal the misery of that period. Eventually, he follows his quarry to Istanbul, another place in transition: Turkey has lost its Sultan, and Istanbul is occupied by allied troops. Selyukov, however, continues to elude him.

The end, when it does come, is bitterly ironic. But oh so true to life. Brilliant.

Beautifully crafted, cunningly wrought.

The Marquis of Bolibar by Leo Perutz

29 November 2012

This was Leo Perutz's favorite among his novels. It is set almost wholly in the besieged town of La Bisbal, in north western Spain, during the Napoleonic Wars. The rough, knockabout humour between the cavalry officers, in their billet in town, rings true. Perutz himself had had military experience, in WW1. Two thirds of the way through, the mood takes a dramatic turn, and the ending, when it comes, is extraordinary: as always, with Perutz.

Extraordinary stories

LAW'S STRANGEST CASES: Extraordinary But True Incidents from Over Five Centuries of Legal History (Strangest Series) by Peter Seddon

29 November 2012

My copy of this book went astray in the mail - then six months later, it suddenly turned up, with apologies from Royal Mail. It was worth the wait. None of the stories are less than interesting, and some are extraordinary. This will give you a new insight into human nature. Either you'll shake your head in righteous despair, or (perhaps more likely) you'll burst out laughing.

Stories of a turbulent past.

The Book of Dede Korkut by Geoffrey Lewis (Translator)

29 November 2012

This is a classic (read very old) Turkish work: I bought it because of my interest in the epic form of literature. It consists of a cluster of stories, all of which involve the same characters - a tribal chieftain and the men of his court. It is set in eastern Turkey, the Caucasus, and north-western Iran, during a turbulent and violent period.

An excellent introduction to this intriguing game

Go: A Complete Introduction to the by Chikun Cho

29 November 2012

Cho Chikun's little book is an excellent introduction to this game. No prior knowledge is assumed, and he takes the reader through the basic concepts of the game, step by step. There are many diagrams, so you can reproduce the moves. The first chapter includes a very simple game on a 9 x 9 board, to give you an idea of how Go "works". Other chapters introduce us to "Capturing Stones", "Eyes and Living Groups", "Linking up Stones", etc. By the way, you can mark off a section of a full-size board, to play a 9 x 9 game, or you can make your own. Chapter Nine takes us through a nine stone handicap game, played by two amateurs. Chapter Eleven takes us through one of the author's professional games, (on a full size board.) His commentary is very instructive. Finally, inbetween each chapter Cho Chikun has inserted a short essay on various aspects of the game. Thus, one is entitled "The Origins of Go." Others

include "The Development of Go in Japan," "Go Around the World," "Go Equipment," etc. My book came from a US seller: delivery was very prompt.

A very pleasant discovery

A Leaf in the Storm by Lin Yutang

1 November 2012

I first encountered Lin Yutang around 15 or 20 years ago, in one of the libraries I belong to. They had a couple of his philosophical works: I liked his clear exposition and lucid style, peppered with flashes of well-expressed insight.

More recently, I was browsing on Amazon. Out of curiosity I decided to see what books they had by Lin Yutang. One on the list was this one, with its evocative title. I assumed it was a novel of some sort, but knew nothing else. Bargain price, so I ordered it.

"A Leaf in the Storm" has been a very pleasant discovery. Essentially, it is a love story set against the backdrop of the Sino-Japanese War. The central character is Poya, a young man with a privileged background, who is unhappily married. The romance kicks off when he meets Malin, who is a friend of his aunt Lola, and (apparently) a refugee from Shanghai. But she remains mysterious and does not discuss her past. The middle section of the book contains passionately written descriptions of the "biggest emigration in history", as millions of Chinese refugees flee inland, to escape the depredations of the Japanese. When this part of the book was written (around 1941 or '42) these events would have been fresh in the author's mind. Lin Yutang writes throughout with his usual quiet, limpid style. There are some interesting discussions, too, on the issues of the day.

This is a very accomplished work.

A good selection

The Virgin and the Gypsy and Other Stories- The Great Writers

Library Hardcover by D. H. Lawrence

16 October 2012

This is a handsome hardcover edition of some of Lawrence's stories. Some are novellas (60 - 70 pages long) while others are longish short stories. Here is the list of contents:

The Virgin and the Gipsy

Odour of Chrysanthemums

The Rocking Horse Winner

The Blue Moccasins

The Man Who Died

Daughters of the Vicar

The Fox

The White Stockings

England My England

The Prussian Officer

The Lovely Lady

The Captain's Doll

Jimmy and the Desperate Woman

The Woman Who Rode Away

Here are my impressions of four of these:

"The Virgin and the Gipsy"

This is a more mature and mellow work than one expects from Lawrence. At 70 odd pages, it is a novella, a form in which Lawrence was arguably at his best. The Virgin and the Gipsy is really quite good. Thematically, it resembles Wuthering Heights: Cathy Earnshaw reincarnates here as Yvette Saywell, the village Rector's daughter; Heathcliffe in Lawrence's tale is the gipsy man, all dark eyes and proud silence. But it is much more than a replay of Emily Bronte, for it develops in its own Lawrentian way. I am not sure when it was written: the setting is post-world war one. There is also an affinity with Lady Chatterley's Lover. In both stories, the heroine is dissatisfied with her domestic life; in both she encounters a man who - from her perspective - is a "proud outsider". Lady Chatterley is irresistibly drawn to

the gamekeeper Mellors; Yvette in this story feels drawn to the gipsy man. The Lady Chatterley novel is more notorious, but *The Virgin and the Gipsy* is the better story.

"The Captain's Doll"

This is a novella, set in post-world war one Austria. It describes a rocky relationship between a Scottish army captain, and an impoverished countess who earns a living making dolls. As is usual in Lawrence's world, the heroine finds her man frustrating. The problem is that he is disillusioned with love, which has never worked for him. But nor does he want to be alone. He would settle for a marriage where he is honoured and obeyed, but with no love expected. She for her part is a normal woman, not yet disillusioned, for whom love is important. Lawrence is not able to explore this theme in full in this novella; however, he does (as so often) raise some interesting questions

"The Prussian Officer"

(1914, 20 pages) Anthony Burgess in his book about Lawrence *Flame Into Being*, pointed this out as one of Lawrence's best stories. It is a brilliantly written story of an abusive relationship between a German cavalry officer and his orderly. There is a suggestion - nothing more - homosexual feeling, on the officer's part. The tone is beautifully sustained, as it proceeds to the tragic conclusion.

"The Fox"

Another novella. This one describes the life of two women who live on a country property, where they raise chickens. The women become very fond of each other. Then a young soldier on leave stops by, and that's when things start getting interesting. The story proceeds at a leisurely pace to its inevitable - and tragic - end.

A good book for a quiet day in.

Turlupin by Leo Perutz

16 October 2012

At 137 pages, this can be read in a day, with appropriate breaks for tea and snacks and a walk around. It is 1642, and there is revolution in the air. Tancrede is a young barber, who was brought up by foster parents. One day he finds himself at a ducal funeral, in a Paris church. He gets it into his head that the deceased was his long-lost father. When the widow looks at him in what he takes to be a meaningful manner, he assumes that she has recognised him as her son. And that's just the beginning. Turlupin is a fool, as well as a fantasist, and Perutz has a lot of fun with him. There is a Prince and the Pauper theme here too, which the author plays for comic effect. I found it an entertaining, if undemanding read. It kept my spirits up on a quiet day.

Water from the village well

The English Teacher by R. K. Narayan

16 October 2012

My brother bought this volume of Narayan's stories, and enthused about it. "If I was a writer of short stories, I'd write like this," he said. I borrowed the book, this is my review.

Narayan has a very limpid, deceptively simple style. It would be easy to dismiss his stories as trifles, with no real warmth or breadth or depth at all. But that would be a hasty judgement, for there is real skill here, in the delineation of character. Indeed, it is the characters (rather than the plot, what there is of it) who are the focus of interest. In their quiet, subtle way, these stories very original. Other writers give you a good rich wine: Narayan offers plain clear water, from the village well.

A good basic introduction

Mah-Jong (Know the Game) by Gwyn Headley and Yvonne See

27 September 2012

This is a good basic introduction to the British form of the game. It is published by the British Mahjong Association. The book is attractively illustrated, in colour; it is printed on

stiff paper, so it should be hard wearing. No problems so far! I recommend supplementing this with the excellent Jelte Reys book - Great Mahjong Book: History, Lore, and Play.

A fascinating study

The Kikkuli Method Of Horse Training: Revised Edition by Dr. A. Nyland

27 September 2012

3,300 years ago, Kikkuli of Mitanni was a master horse trainer. When Suppililiumas King of the Hittites acquired his services, Kikkuli wrote down his entire 214 day training program, in cuneiform characters on clay tablets. Fast forward now to early twentieth century Turkey—Boghazkoy, to be precise. The Hittite library was discovered, and among the clay tablets was the work of Kikkuli of Mitanni.

In about 1991, Australian Dr Ann Nyland put a half dozen or so horses through the entire 214 day program, just as Kikkuli specified. The results were remarkable. Dr Nyland declares the Kikkuli method superior to modern methods of horse training. She also makes comparisons with the way human athletes are trained (interval training, and the like.) She also gives some interesting insights into horse behaviour along the way. This was a proper study, so, although the book is not long, it is dense with information. The stats are there too—heart rates (measured while trotting, cantering, etc) feed, days off, etc. A distinction is drawn between training for endurance, and training for speed. The Kikkuli method was designed for warhorses, who needed endurance above all else. However, Dr Nyland does give advice on how to adapt the info for trotters, or racehorses, whose needs will be different. A number of the horses put through the program went on to do very well indeed in endurance races. One final note on the breed of horse used: Dr Nyland used the Australian variety of Arab horse, which is very close to the horses that Kikkuli himself would have trained.

I am not a trainer myself, but I do have a love for these remarkable animals, so I found this book fascinating. It is a good historical insight, too.

A masterful work

The Master of the Day of Judgement by Leo Perutz

27 September 2012

Leo Perutz was a master story teller, and deserves to be much better known. The Master of the Day of Judgement turns around a number of mysterious suicides in 1909 Vienna. Initially, it reads like a well-crafted European murder mystery, with an upper class setting. Then towards the end, the story moves into unexpected territory - as Perutz's stories often do! It turns out to be rather more than the well-crafted murder mystery that you thought you were reading.

Touching on greatness

Lost Empires by J. B. Priestley

27 September 2012

This is a very good book indeed. Priestley's picaresque work describes life in the old time musical hall, in the months running up to World War One. Priestley shows his usual deft skill in character-drawing. You really get to like the characters, even grumpy old Uncle Nick. Making Uncle Nick such a negative, cantankerous person, was a stroke of genius on Priestley's part. I should also note that the story is told in the first person, a form I usually dislike. Priestley's use of it, however, is wholly justified. He manages the narrative voice well. J B Priestley wrote many novels, and other works, none of it less than readable. In Lost Empires, he touched on greatness.

Another good book by Larry Dossey

The Power of Premonitions: How Knowing the Future Can Shape Our Lives by Larry Dossey

14 June 2012

Larry Dossey is an author I like, and this book of his does not disappoint. He is a doctor by profession, and approaches his subject from a scientific perspective. You'll be surprised what scientific study there is on this kind of thing, and the intriguing, thought-provoking results.

From the golden age of Greek lyric poetry

Greek Lyric: Anacreon - Anacreontea - Choral Lyric from Olympus to Alcman vol. 2 (Loeb Classical Library) by David A. Campbell (Editor)

14 June 2012

This volume is everything I was expecting it to be, so I declare myself satisfied with it.
Included, are:

- * Biographical details of Anacreon, quoted from classical authors
- * Quotations from classical authors concerning Anacreon's use of certain words.
- * The surviving poetry of Anacreon, and other poets from the 6th century bce
- * The so-called "Anacreontea". These are poems written by later poets in his style.

In the usual fashion of Loeb books, the original Greek is on the left hand page, English translations (in prose) on the right.

The choral lyrics by Olympus and Alcman are worth a look too - Alcman is particularly good. One must regret that we don't have the original music for these. However there is a good introduction, explaining the form in which these great creative artists worked.

One final note: the Greeks of the Pagan Era heard rhythm differently to the way we do today. They heard rhythm not as a beat, but as a "pattern of units of time." Today, you will find this kind of rhythm in ballroom (and Latin) dance. "slow—quick—quick—slow..." and so on. Greek lyric rhythms were often intriguingly complex:

"quick—quick—slow—quick—quick—slow--quick--slow—slow..." and the like.

One can only imagine now, what it sounded (and danced) like.

A spare, simple tale

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

14 June 2012

This is a great book. It reads like a Greek tragedy, proceeding relentlessly to its inevitable end. Chinua Achebe's story opens in a 19th century African village. They still worship the old Gods, and honour their ancestors. It is a closely-knit community... until Christianity intrudes. It is a spare, simple tale, focussing on a single powerfully-drawn character.

Excellent.

The best mahjong book out there

Great Mahjong Book: History, Lore, and Play by Jelte Rep

10 May 2012

This book provides a very comprehensive look at that wonderful old Chinese board game. It is well illustrated. Jelte Rep begins by taking you through the various pieces which comprise a mah-jong set. Then he explains the rules of the basic game. ie the fundamental principles, which are common to all forms of mah-jong. He then takes you through many national variants of the game. This is fascinating in itself! Finally, he tells you what to do if you want to play for a non-standard number of players. ie normally there are four players, but what if there are five of you? Or three, or even two? Jelte Rep has a good, clear, way of explaining this fascinating game. I bought this book before buying a mah-jong set, and am glad I did—it meant I didn't have to rely on the directions that came with the set, which were awful! So be prepared, and read up on the game first.

Slow down and love, my friends!

The Art of Hugging by William Cane

10 May 2012

I bought this together with *Kiss Like a Star*, by the same author. (Also recommended.) Surveys have revealed that none of us gets as many hugs as we feel we need, so this book is timely. It gives a very comprehensive look at the subject. Read it with your loved one.

Quaint and mischievous

The Recently Deflowered Girl by Hyacinthe Phypys (Author), Edward Gorey (Illustrator)

10 May 2012

The late Edward Gorey had a deliciously strange sense of humour, and this work is no exception. Quickly read, but great fun. Perhaps one should regard a work like this as a delightful aperitif, to be savoured in a leisurely manner. Mel Juffe provided the text, Gorey illustrates.

Darkly humorous

"Fortean Times" Book of Strange Deaths by Steve Moore

10 May 2012

I was attracted to this book by the title, and am glad I purchased it. Most of the stories are less than a page long, and they are all (apparently) true. The stories are organised under twenty one chapter headings.

#Judge Dee's final case

Murder in Canton: A Judge Dee Mystery by Robert van Gulik

10 May 2012

This is the final novel in the Judge Dee series (in internal order). Dee is Lord Chief Justice, working in the Imperial Capital. However, he is sent to Canton, with his two lieutenants, to work on a case there. This will be his last criminal case.

Since Canton is a southern port city, this gives van Gulik an opportunity to point to a wider world than the immediate confines of the plot. So, for example, the Chinese Empire itself is indicated, by the fact that Dee has come down from the Imperial Capital. Among the characters are a Smaragdine dancer, the leader of the Canton Arab community, and a retired sea captain. An ethnic group called the Tanka get involved; and there is an attempt at a comic theme, involving twin sisters.

Van Gulik seems to be moving toward a more epic type of story here. But the "epic spirit" (if I may call it that) seems at times to jib at the confines of a Whodunit. It is tempting to wonder what kind of novels van Gulik would have gone on to write, had he lived longer.

Only one more novel was published by him: *Necklace and Calabash*, which is set earlier, in the middle part of the Judge's career.

Judge Dee in brief

Judge Dee at Work: Eight Chinese Detective by Robert van Gulik

10 May 2012

This is a volume of eight short stories. They are set in various periods of the Judge's career, in Peng-lai, Han-yuan, and Lan-fang.

The impression I was left with, is that the short story is too short a form, for van Gulik's creative spirit to work with. Nonetheless the stories are deftly told and there are some well written scenes.

The Judge's two wives appear in "He came with the rains".

"Red Tape Murders" deals with a military murder.

"The murder on the lotus pond" deals with the murder of an elderly poet.

"The two beggars" describes why the Judge was late for his dinner, on the Feast of Lanterns.

"The Coffins of the Emperor" is set in winter, during a troubled period of China's history.

The two others, are "Five auspicious clouds" and "Murder on New Year's Eve"

Murder in an amusement resort

Red Pavilion by Robert Van Gulik

10 May 2012

I was powering through the Judge Dee novels, when I read this. It is set on Paradise Island, an amusement resort. The Judge is passing through on his way home, from the Capital, when he is asked by his old friend Magistrate Lo to help him with a suicide case. This novel is set in the Judge's Poo-yang period, and follows Chinese Bell Murders.

A very satisfying read

The Chinese Maze Murders: A Judge Dee Mystery by Robert van Gulik

10 May 2012

This is a good read, as Judge Dee stories always are. This one is set in Lan-fan, in the far west of China, where China merges into the steppes of Central Asia. An exotic setting! The reader will encounter the usual plethora of deftly drawn characters. There are some excellent dramatic episodes and scenes. Van Gulik was at the height of his powers when he wrote this. At close to 300 pages, it is one of his longer novels.

Would make a great movie

Lacquer Screen by Robert Van Gulik

4 April 2012

Van Gulik does it again. In internal order, this novel follows "Chinese Gold Murders", in which Judge Dee begins his career. In this one, he is still the magistrate of Peng-lai, a harbour town on the north-east coast of China. The judge sojourns in nearby Wei-ping, for a short time, intending to buy some items for his wives. However, he gets drawn into a murder investigation. He and his lieutenant Chiao Tai go incognito amongst the gangsters and rogues of the town. Van Gulik's world once again is vividly imagined.

I wanted to enjoy this more than I did

The Romance of the Harem by Anna Harriette Leonowens

4 April 2012

This is the book which is the source for the musical "The King and I", (and movie, starring Yul Brynner) It is one of the few musicals that I actually like, along with "Fiddler on the Roof". Alas, Leonowens was not up to the task of writing this book. This is especially true for a modern reader, who inevitably, has the movie in mind. Unfair, I know. The construction of the work is not at fault, just the author's prose style, which I found rather grey and earnest. There's an emotional flatness about it. Still, it provides insight into a world quite different to our own. The authorial voice, is no doubt a part of that!

Another great Judge Dee mystery

Phantom of the Temple by Robert Van Gulik

4 April 2012

There's nothing much to say about this, except that it lives up to author Robert van Gulik's usual high standard. The historical setting is absolutely convincing, and there are the usual deftly-drawn characters. This story is set in Lan-fang, on the far western frontier, where China merges into the steppes of central Asia. So quite an exotic setting, even by van Gulik's standards. In internal order, it follows "Chinese Maze Murders". Judge Dee's three wives make an appearance. Excellent book.

Poems worth preserving

Imagist Poetry by Peter Jones

3 April 2012

When I first encountered the imagists and their poetry, there was a feeling of kinship, for their ideals were coincidentally similar to my own. Their sources of inspiration, too - both ancient Greek lyric, and Oriental poetry. And the differences that I discovered between their practise and my own, was also illuminating.

There are some delightful little poems in this collection. Admittedly, the Imagist manner has its limitations. All too often, it results in a static, stained-glass window kind of beauty.

Chinese Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei - a poet some of them may have been familiar with, and a Buddhist - comes to mind.

The editor has provided an excellent introduction too, along with biographical info on the poets featured.

Delightful

Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil by A. K. Ramanujan

3 April 2012

A K Ramanujan has done us lovers of poetry a service in translating these into English. Tamil - a South Indian language - is one of the world's last classical languages, and has a rich poetic tradition.

The poetic theory behind it all is fascinating, and this is explained in the introduction. Basically, their classic poetry is divided under two broad heads - Akam (literally "Inner") and Puram ("Outer") Akam poetry concerns itself with the inner world of man - love poems mainly, plus poems of family life. Interestingly, devotional poems also come under this head. Puram on the other hand covers poetry of more public concern - accounts of war, heroic leaders, praises of the prince or king, satires too.

The love poems all take place in a small number of archetypal settings, which are (or were, when these were written) traditional. This results in recurring imagery, which gives these little poems a curious dreamlike quality.

I like these poems - they are very evocative of the brilliant light and warmth of the land from which they have come.

A fun book

Kiss Like a Star Paperback by William Cane

3 April 2012

Well, I never realised there were so many ways to kiss a woman! The author analyses kissing scenes in a number of Hollywood movies, telling you how they did it. The movies chosen cover a wide span of time, from Clarke Gable and Vivien Leigh in "Gone with the Wind", to more recent ones. It would help if you had these on video/DVD, but not essential. If you're an old hand at this sort of activity, you may find you don't know as much as you thought (always more to learn). And if you are new to it, or perhaps a little out of practice, then this book will give you some great ideas.

Simple but good

The Catalyst Paperback by Ronald Duncan

3 April 2012

Ronald Duncan was a dramatist and poet from years gone by. He was born in Rhodesia, as was, but settled in England. He had an interest in science, in addition to his literary work.

In this play, his intention was to keep it very simple. There is only one set, and only three characters. Within this limited framework, he spins an interesting yarn, mainly concerned with relationships. One of the three characters is a doctor, working from home on research work. He lives with his wife. (Bored and restless, in the opening scene - brilliant!) He also has a live in secretary, with whom he is having an affair. The relationships between these three, and how that develops, is the essence of it.

In 1957 when it was written, the censor must have thought it deleterious to public morals, as the Lord High Chamberlain banned it from public performance. It was performed in a private club in 1958. Finally, a licence was granted in 1963, and it was then performed in the Lyric Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue (London).

With its emphasis on the network of relationships, this is the sort of story a woman would do well, so it is interesting to see a male dramatist doing it here. Successfully too!

One final question. Or rather, two: Has this ever been done as a radio play? If not, why not? It would work very well on the radio.

Dark brilliance

The Willow Pattern: A Chinese detective story by Robert Van Gulik

3 April 2012

This is one of Van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries. It takes place towards the end of the judge's career, when he has been appointed Lord Chief Justice, in the Imperial capital. The Black Death is threatening the entire Tang dynasty. A revolutionary air is abroad: there is a group of people who identify with "the old ways", and call themselves "the old world." Everyone else, they call "newcomers". Even the Emperor! This is darker than van Gulik's other Judge Dee novels, and is brilliantly done.

A spiritual view of things

The Tibetan Art of Parenting: From Before Conception Through Early Childhood by Anne Hubbell Maiden

3 April 2012

I first read this book in a library copy, mainly because it aroused my curiosity. I now own my own copy. There is a plan to it: seven stages are recognised in the creation of children. These are:

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| 1) Preconception | 4) Birthing |
| 2) Conception | 5) Bonding |
| 3) Gestation | 6) Infancy |
| | 7) Early childhood |

Each stage has its concerns, and rituals. For example, pre-conception will be marked by prayers, inviting good spirits to consider them as parents, efforts will be made to live a pure life, so as to attract a good quality of spirit, and so on. At certain stages, the mother (and sometimes the father) will meet her future child in a dream.

Not all the practices will be translatable into a western context. Nonetheless, there is much food for thought. And the spiritual backdrop to it all, is fascinating.

Good practical advice

Fathering from the Fast Lane: Practical Ideas for Busy Dads by Bruce Robinson

3 April 2012

I first heard this guy being interviewed on the Focus on the Family radio program and was immediately impressed. The book lives up to expectations, giving a lot of good practical advice. The author is a doctor who treats cancer patients. Many of them expressed their regrets they had not been better fathers. Bruce Robinson interviewed many men who were successful - in business, sport, politics. Since these men were also good fathers he asked them how on earth they did it. This book is the result. Highly recommended.

Introducing the Lord Buddha

The Gospel of Buddha by Paul Carus

2 April 2012

This book was first published some time ago, but it remains one of the best introductions to the Lord Buddha and his teachings. It tells the story of his life, and includes some of his most significant sermons. One of them is the magnificent “Sermon at Benares”, in which the Buddha lays down his philosophy of life, in once and for all fashion. How I’d love to hear it read aloud! Even if you are not a Buddhist, and do not plan to convert, this book will leave you impressed by one of history’s great minds. The book is organised in a series of short chapters, which makes reading easy – you can read it in short digestible gobbets, if you wish.

A classic work

Passive Men- Wild Women by Pierre Mornell

31 March 2012

This is Pierre Mornell's classic study of modern relationships, and why they break down so often. Mornell's observation is that relationships just don't work well when the man

neglects to take the lead when he should, neglects to make decisions at home, fails to be pro-active in his involvement with his family. The expression he uses is "wet noodle" to describe modern husbands. Such men think they're giving their spouses equality, but the women concerned just find it frustrating. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, speaking a hundred years ago, is quoted making a similar observation. Interestingly, it is often those men who are very pro-active and dynamic in their business life, who are most often guilty of being a "wet noodle" at home. This book is not long, but contains much food for thought. I found that it accords with my own observations over the years.

A fitting conclusion to a great series.

Necklace and Calabash: A Chinese Detective by Robert van Gulik

28 December 2011

"Necklace and Calabash" is van Gulik's final, valedictory novel, a good end to a great series. It is quieter and less dramatic than some of the other Judge Dee novels, almost elegiac in tone. Almost, but not quite. It is set in the middle period of the Judge's career. Judge Dee, returning to Poo-yang, intends to spend a few days in a quiet country town, fishing. But as soon as he arrives, an event has occurred - a body has been fished out of the nearby river. As time goes on, it becomes apparent that mysterious things are going on behind the scenes. But what, exactly? The Judge is as baffled as the reader for most of the story. Then the truth starts to emerge, and the story draws to a satisfying conclusion.

The novel has the usual collection of deftly drawn characters: a mysterious Taoist recluse, a young woman who takes a fancy to the judge, the military captain who has authority over the area, and a number of others.

Finally, there is a poignancy in van Gulik's last novel being set in the Judge's Poo-yang period - for his very first published Judge Dee novel was set in Poo-yang ("Chinese Bell Murders").

This novel is a must-read for all Judge Dee fans.

Good for a laugh

Sex is Not Compulsory by Liz Hodgkinson

13 July 2011

It occurred to me to buy "Sex Is Not Compulsory" as a joke - I have put it on the bookshelf next to a book about Aphrodisiacs. As for the contents of "... Not Compulsory", it is not wholly bad. A blend of sense and nonsense, I'd say. The perspective is feminist, as you would expect, so perhaps it is worth reading for insight into a certain kind of puritan feminism.

One of the best

Chinese Gold Murders by Robert van Gulik

13 July 2011

A superb "whodunnit", which reads like a thriller. Will somebody please a movie of this? It is set in the (fictional) harbour town of Peng-lai, in the north east of China, near the border with Korea. This turns out to be important to the plot. If you want to read Van Gulik's novels in the order in which they are set, then this should be the novel you begin with, as it marks the beginning of Judge Dee's career as investigating magistrate. The characters, as always, are deftly drawn, and the ancient Chinese setting is completely convincing. Superb.

A good introduction to Judge Dee

The Haunted Monastery by Robert Van Gulik

1 June 2011

This author was not known to me, until very recently. I was passing an idle hour on the internet, when it occurred to me to search for films in which there are polygamous characters, or in which polygamy is a theme. ie One of the characters has more than one wife at once. This brought me to a made-for-TV film called "Judge Dee and the Monastery Murders." (1974) This is set in ancient China, and features an investigating magistrate named Judge Dee, who finds himself spending a stormy night, with his three wives, in a remote Taoist monastery. It seems strange things have been going on there -

the death of the former Abbot, the death under mysterious circumstances, of three young women who were hoping to become nuns.

Well, I don't recall having seen the film, and I don't know if it's on DVD. But the Robert Van Gulik novel is still available.

The novel is not long - about 150 pages or so, so not too intimidating, if you are not familiar with this author. It opens dramatically: Judge Dee is travelling in his carriage with his three wives, and servants, when the carriage gets stuck, in a terrible storm. They are in a mountainous area, a long way from habitation. However, up the hill a ways, is a Taoist monastery. So the judge, his wives and companions, spend the night there.

The plot is constructed well. At first, it is not clear (either to Judge Dee, or to the reader) if any crime has been committed. Then more information is discovered, just incomplete glimpses of the whole picture. Towards the end, a couple of revelations reveals the truth.

So, a mystery in the classic style, with an unusual (and for me, very interesting) setting. The character drawing is sharp, too.

The author seems to have written his Judge Dee novels for fun. By day, he was a Dutch diplomat, who worked variously, in India, China (where he married a Chinese woman), and Japan.

I am now going through the whole series, in the order of the time when they are set. So next, "The Chinese Gold Murders", which is set at the beginning of the Judge's career; then "The Lacquer Screen", and so on. (See Wikipedia for the complete list, in order).

I found "The Haunted Monastery" a good introduction to Judge Dee.

Wise sayings about achieving good health

Food Rules: An Eater's Manual by Michael Pollan

5 December 2010

I enjoyed this little book very much. However you have to understand what you're getting here. If serious explanation, backed up by scientific studies, is what you're looking for, then the author's other works should be your first port of call. Personally, I've done that kind of study already. What this book offers is a series of Food Rules - like axioms, or "wise sayings" - about how to live healthily. It is a very enjoyable summary of a healthy living philosophy. It also occurred to me that this book might be useful if you wish to teach this to your children.

Easy to cook, & very tasty

The Cooking of Greece and Turkey (A Sainsbury Cookbook) by Rena Salaman

20 August 2010

I have owned my copy for many years, and have tried many of the recipes, some of them countless times. I can heartily recommend it. The dishes you will be creating will be tasty, hearty and nourishing, as only Mediterranean food can be. You could live to be 101 on food like this.

The best book on bread baking that I have yet seen

The Village Baker by Joe Ortiz

1 July 2008

Joe Ortiz's book is superb. He clearly loves his art, and communicates the joy of baking to the reader. The book is also very informative. The early chapters explain, very carefully, point by point, the techniques of baking that have been developed over many centuries by European bakers. Then follow the recipes, from artisan bakers in France, Italy, and Germany. (The sources of the recipes are named). "You should never hurry a natural process" the author says, "either of baking bread, or writing a book". That sums up his philosophy in a nutshell.

A Wonderful Addition to your Kitchen

Classic Italian Jewish Cooking: Traditional Recipes and Menus

by Edda Servi Machlin

6 June 2007

I have given this book a prominent position on its bookshelf, along with some other well used cookbooks. This book is an impressive looking volume, an inch thick, and lovingly designed.

The first 26 pages describe the author's life growing up in the Italian Jewish community before WWII - a culture that hardly exists anymore.

As for the cuisine, it follows the Mediterranean pattern, with, here and there, a strong suggestion of the Middle East. Thus, anyone who enjoys Mediterranean/ Middle-Eastern cuisine, will appreciate this book

An added bonus, is a chapter on "Breads, Pizzas and Bagels". In this chapter, you will find 23 recipes, including Sourdough Bread, and three recipes for Chollah—that's the rich egg bread that Jewish people eat on the Sabbath.

The author of this review is not Jewish, but what of that? Good food is good food, and the food described here would be hard to improve upon.

The author has missed something

Death Of The West by Patrick J. Buchanan

5 December 2006

Pat Buchanan's book has the following quote. It is from Katarina Runskes's Essay "Empty Hearts Empty Homes" (Included in the book *Feminism v. Mankind*):

"Feminism is a Darwinian blind alley. In biological terms, there is nothing that identifies a maladaptive pattern so quickly as a below replacement level of reproduction; an immediate consequence of feminism is what appears to be an irreversible decline in the birthrate. Nations pursue feminist policies at their peril."

Buchanan adds: "In short, the rise of feminism spells the death of the nation and the end of the West." And a little later, he says: "... the decisions women are making today will determine if Western nations will even be around in a century, and Western women are voting no."

Gloomy thoughts indeed.

The trouble with Buchanan's view, is that it is gynocentric: "Western Society" is being identified primarily with its women. Men are not even in the picture! In any case, is it really all the women's fault? Just women alone? We men need to look at ourselves, too. Things would change very quickly, I suspect, if men started looking for non-feminist women to be their life-companions and the mothers of their children. Non-Western, perhaps? There are plenty of them out there. We men need to know what we need and what our values are.

It is common for the problem of declining birth-rates is to be approached as it is in this book: from the point of view of women avoiding motherhood. The result is a picture which is only half-complete, and so the solution is not found. Here are some examples:

Fifteen years or so ago, the declining birth-rate in Italy became too serious to ignore. Pope John Paul was moved to speak publicly about it. He urged women to "rediscover the joys of motherhood". A very noble sentiment. But he didn't mention fatherhood at all. Or if he did, the media failed to report it.

The birth-rate in Britain has dropped to a record low. In September 2004 government minister Patricia Hewitt spoke publicly about this problem. She urged women to help solve this problem by producing more babies. "It is your national duty", she said, "to embrace motherhood." And no, she didn't mention fatherhood either.

I remember listening to a BBC World Service program on this subject. A study had discovered that 25% of young women aged 16 to 24 had decided never to have children. And the young men? What was their attitude to fatherhood? We were not told. No-one thought to ask the question.

All too often, in Western countries, there is a huge blank space, where fatherhood should be honoured. Or at least mentioned. Maybe that's the real underlying problem.

We're only seeing half the picture, stubbornly refuse to see the half that is missing.

Pat Buchanan, unfortunately, in his otherwise excellent book, does not explore that aspect of things.