

Twenty eight issues later, it gives me great pleasure to present the last SLR issue of 2014. I hope you enjoyed the variety of poetry, fiction and non-fiction we put together every Saturday. Between the writing competitions, rediscovery through translations, inter-cultural columns and of course the amazing 'Haylight' of our year, it has been pleasure undefined on our part. We end the year with Julia Bell's summation of her favourite books of 2014, Joe Treasure's argument not to end all arguments and my very own writer's wish-list for Christmas. Wishing SLR readers a merry Christmas, season's greetings and a happy new year!

MUNIZE MANZUR



## BOOKS OF 2014

Julia Bell

This year has been a fantastic year for books. Published this year have been some genuine gems that I will treasure in years to come. First Cynan Jones' *The Dig* - a short novel set in the countryside around Aberaeron in West Wales, where I grew up, and focusing on the hardscrabble lives of the characters who farm the land and topically, on a badger dig. To tell the story would be to give away too much of the plot but what I loved about this novella (Jones describes himself as the 'writer of short novels') is the economy of phrasing and the sensibility for the harshness and beauty of the landscape, the tender and lyrical use of language that gives the work a tone of mounfulness.

From there to Ireland and another book that I have been pressing on anyone who will listen, Colin Barrett's *Young Skins*. Again the hard lives of the rural small town, this time Ireland, and the contrast between the natural world and those who live bored, broken lives within its confines, his subject. He does this with a clever, downbeat flourish that stays with the reader. Like his

compatriot, Kevin Barry, Colin Barrett is a gifted observer of the 'new' Ireland and a talent to get genuinely excited by.

A first novel that impressed me this year was Zoe Pilger's *Eat My Heart Out*. Following the chaotic life of dropout and failure Annemarie this is a pisstake of the failures of feminism, a wry observation of hipster (non) values and a novel with a deliciously bad and hilariously messed-up central character. For all its flaws - the pacing goes off beam a little in the second half - this book made me laugh out loud in public and is a delight for anyone looking for a book with a bad-girl heroine that we can believe in.

Finally, Ali Smith with her masterful, *How to Be Both*, and Lydia Davis' new collection of stories, *Can't and Won't* - both writers who successfully play with form to encourage new ways of seeing. Davis' short fictions leave the reader with puzzles that remain long after reading and Ali Smith's new book - my edition had the teenager first - is one of those rare examples of a book where the formal experiment doesn't

undermine the pleasure of the text. She should have won the Booker.

There has also been an extraordinary year for poetry and there are three collections that have been on heavy rotation round at mine this Autumn. Firstly Rosemary Tonks' *Bedouin of the London Evening*. Her work has been hidden from us for years thanks to a cataclysmic nervous breakdown that turned her away from her writing. This new collection, with a sensitive introduction by Neil Astley, returns her to the public eye. She was admired by her contemporaries, including Larkin, and you can see why - her voice is completely original: ordinary and surreal, rhythmic and dissonant and always surprising. There are some classics here which I have read and re-read with great pleasure, so fully formed and alive is the work. 'Done For' and 'Bedouin of the London Morning' both stand out, but each one is like a jewelled present and she can now take her rightful place along with the best of our national poets.

The second from Martina Evans, *Burnt, Las Vegas*, more of her

narrative poetry that ranges between her childhood in West Cork and her house in Dalston. Last year's *Petrol* was a prose poem memoir and this collection also contains some prose poetry but the most successful poems - the title poem, 'Anatomy Lesson', and a sequence of poems about her daughters' shoes - are full of surprises, the language contemporary and exact and steeped in religious symbolism. Surely it's time for a Collected Poems?

Finally Kate Tempest with *Hold Your Own*. More poems as narrative - this time taking the persona of the blind prophet Tiresias, split into four sections covering the 'hoods' of life's stages: childhood, womanhood, manhood, as well as a fourth section 'Blind Profit' which is more obviously political. It's a poetry collection to be read in a sitting as well as individually. But in a way it doesn't need the fussy structure - because her poem 'The Cypher' articulates something of the fierce burning of her creative energy and her ambitious, androgynous, powerful voice: 'I move like the boys / I

talk like the boys, / but my words are my own.' To witness her perform her work is to see an example of an artist in the flow of a creative rapture - or *jouissance* - she can't, won't, help it and all the better for us. This collection changes the gears of contemporary poetry, brings a rhythmic intensity, inspired by hip hop as much as the Classics, to the table and I love her for it.

And a stocking filler - the handsome Notting Hill Editions have republished a selection of Woolf's essays, sensitively collected together by Joanna Kavenna under the title of *Virginia Woolf: Essays on the Self* - here is her famous and useful essay on 'Character in Fiction' and her musings about 'Professions for Women'. Underpinning all of the essays is the question of what it means to have a sense of self. A question that, in the age of the selfie, seems utterly topical.

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## WHAT'S IN A GIFT?

Munize Manzur

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" is an English Christmas carol that lists a series of increasingly grand gifts given by a "true love", starting from 25<sup>th</sup> December till 5<sup>th</sup> January. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*: "Suggestions have been made that the gifts have significance, as representing the food or sport for each month of the year. Importance [certainly has] long been attached to the Twelve Days, when, for instance, the weather on each day was carefully observed to see what it would be in the corresponding month of the coming year. Nevertheless, whatever the ultimate origin of the chant, it seems probable [that] the lines that survive today both in England and France are merely an irreligious travesty."

Travesty or not, I have to profess an inexplicable attraction to this particular carol from a young age. It is in the promise of gifts building upon gifts. The idea of not just one day of delights but twelve days! The stability of always coming back to a partridge in a pear tree. Whenever I heard this song, I had visions of twelve drummers and eleven pipers playing music while ten lords and nine ladies merrily danced around a ballroom. In the morning, they would have a farm-fresh breakfast courtesy of the eight maids-a-milking and then go for a leisurely stroll on rolling hills and dales, chancing upon seven swans, six geese, four calling birds, three French hens and two turtle doves. (Too much Enid Blyton and, later, Georgette Heyer can do that to you.)

The perfect ending to this scene was sitting under a pear tree with the partridge. Sometimes the partridge was a wise bird and had many stories to tell. Sometimes it warbled while you took rest under the tree. Sometimes it ate a pear from your hand. But never ever did it peck you or land any nasty projectile on your head.

For me, that remained the ultimate promise of this carol. Even if the ten lords fought over who would partner with the nine ladies; or the pipers felt the drummers were being divas and trying to take all the attention; or the milk turned sour because the maids were hung over and had overslept - that partridge always waited to sing to you. Even if the five golden rings tarnished and you realised they were actually made of brass; or the seven swans swam away and never came back to you; or the two turtle-doves got divorced, that pear tree would be waiting for you to lean on. Regardless of how your twelve days turned, it started and ended on that one comforting note. Back to basics.

I still enjoy listening to this Christmas carol. But if they would reconsider a rewrite of the twelve gifts, what are some changes I could think of? Here's what the sardonic (yet hopeful) writer in me came up with:



as he is relating his story, allowing you to enjoy your kacchi in peace.

5. A laughing Elmo doll: Featuring the famous red infantile character from Sesame Street, these were a sold out Christmas item many years ago. Cute as he is, Elmo has the most grating laugh imaginable and perfect to set before the next aunt who tells you your novel's protagonist.

Anamika is totally based on her, isn't it...admit it...isn't it??

6. A jar of words: for all those times when you can imagine the exact emotion but can't express it in one word, this jar will be your perfect after-midnight pick-me-upper.

7. A pen monster on wheels: this robot will trail through your home,

desk, all writing corners to find pens that no longer work. It will then gobble them up so they never frustrate you again at your inspirational moment.

8. A pen fairy on wings: an excellent companion for item number 7, this robot will flutter about blessing your home and favourite nooks and crannies with pens so you never run short of ink when on a writing high.

9. A DO NOT DISTURB bubble: automatically inflatable when your stress level is high, it is easy to lose yourself in when you're working on deadlines, rewriting the conclusion that refuses to conclude or simply prefer the company of characters hovering inside you over those hov-

ering around you.

10. A treasure chest: to keep your favourite books in. It fits conveniently under your bed so you always have them handy when you need inspiration.

11. A genius playlist: It will assess the writing mood you are in and select songs from your music library accordingly so you never again get a rude jolt by Axl Rose's "Welcome to the Jungle", while in the middle of writing a romantic scene.

12. The perfect writing café: reasonably priced vanilla latte, soft-spoken customers, phone free zone, well-spaced out tables, sympathetic waiters. Open daily, from 11pm to 4am. Total bliss!



## SILK PURSE OR SOW'S EAR?

Joe Treasure

"The writing is overstuffed and leaks sawdust." So writes Michael Hofmann of Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, in the *London Review of Books*. The novel's many admirers, like the tourists recently observed by Hofman throwing themselves out of the path of a monumental granite ball that turned out to be fake, have been "hoaxed by polystyrene".

Hofman is not the only dissenter. In the *TLS*, Craig Raine described the novel as "saturated, not always judiciously, in poetry," poetry, for Flanagan, meaning "exaggerated imagery, an uncertain, elevated tone, and generous rights on repetition".

This is the same book that was praised by Catherine Taylor in the *Telegraph* for its "grace and unfathomability" and whose war scenes were described by Leyla Sanai in the *Guardian* as "devastating".

The Man Booker judges sided with the novel's admirers and gave Flanagan the prize. They took a different view of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*. With the competition open for the first time to American authors, expectations were high for Tartt's third novel, which had already won her a Pulitzer, and when the judges announced their longlist in July, its absence was, for some reporters, the big story.

Early reviews had been mainly positive, some verging on the ecstatic. In the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani called it a "glorious Dickensian novel... that pulls all [Tartt's] remarkable storytelling talents into a rapturous, symphonic whole". Kamila Shamsie wrote in the *Guardian* that to say too much about the events "would be to deprive

a reader of the great joy of being swept up by the plot." The *Telegraph*'s Catherine Taylor found the grief of the young hero for his mother "so tangible the pages appear teardrenched".

But there was a growing band of sceptics. In the *Guardian*, Julie Myerson described it as a "mystifying mess", wondering why a writer of Tartt's talent was wasting her time on this over-long and slackly written "Harry Potter homage". In the *New Yorker*, James Wood agreed that "its tone, language, and story belong in children's literature".

What are we to make of these starkly diverging opinions? Is there something about these books in particular that scrambles reader's critical faculties, inciting them to hyperbolic gushing or sneering put-downs? Or are they just the extreme cases, reminding us that all literary opinions are utterly subjective and any attempt to judge artistic merit is futile? Should we, perhaps, question the motives of the writers, suspecting the favourable reviewers of sycophancy, the detractors of envy?

I resist all these conclusions. As a novelist, I find I'm attached to the notion that there are worse ways of writing and better ways, even if only in some Platonic sense. Why else is it so hard to get it right? And it's good that people care enough to argue fiercely about what those ways are. I find their arguments, and my responses to them, sharpen my own sense of what fiction is for and inform the choices I make in my work.

Read more of Joe Treasure at <http://joetreasure.blogspot.co.uk/>