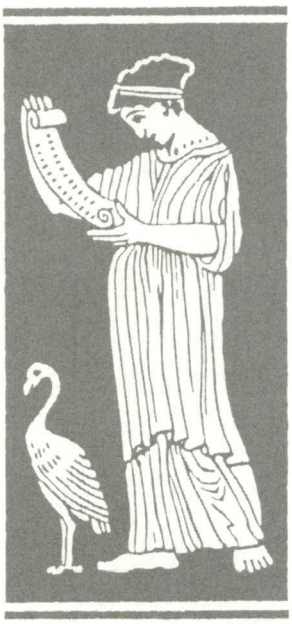
THE PERSEPHONE QUARTERLY



MARCH 1999

No. 1

A New Beginning

Persephone Books began in a room above a pub in the spring of 1998, moved in to its basement office in Clerkenwell in the autumn and publishes its first three titles a year later. Like the goddess, it emerged in spring, vanished to the underworld as winter set in and was re-born six months later.

We chose the name Persephone because it has a timeless quality; sounds beautiful; is very obviously feminine; and symbolises new beginnings (and fertility) as well as female creativity. We did not at first realise that Persephone also symbolises many other aspects of women's lives, for example, less cheerfully, she represents married hell (being raped and imprisoned by her uncle Hades). But mainly she is an image of women's creativity, and that is why our logo, based on a painting on a Greek amphora, shows a woman who is not only reading (the scroll) but also symbolises domesticity (the goose). She is not the goddess herself, but we preferred her to all other extant images of Persephone as well as to her own symbols - a daffodil, a lily, a pomegranate and a bat.

The domesticity of the logo makes it plain, we hope, that ours is a feminist press without being too overtly 'Feminist'. Most of our books are written by women; but they are realistic not idealistic, everyday not outrageous, sympathetic not alienating and domestic not angry. And realistic, everyday, sympathetic and domestic rather defines our logo - and us.

Persephone Books will be a new kind of publishing house because it will be accessible. Publishers generally have very little contact with the people who buy their books. Who, if they are not involved in the industry, has ever been to a publisher's office? Who has ever been able to tell a publisher what they would like to read?

We want ours to be a house that readers can feel is in some measure 'theirs'. And it is partly for this reason that we are by-passing bookshops and, in the main, selling by mail-order. Like you, perhaps, we have the feeling that in most bookshops there are simply too many books from which to choose: one ends up buying a hugely hyped book because it has a familiar name or, indeed, buying no book at all.

Our (ambitious) plan is to be like the old Book Society, which was founded in 1929 with an initial membership of 2500, grew rapidly and continued until 1946 - defeated, presumably, by paperbacks. Subscribers to *The Book Society News* chose a monthly Choice or Recommendation whereas *The Persephone Quarterly* will only contain details of our own three quarterly titles rather than of books bought in from other publishers. Nor will there be any obligation to buy. But in homage to *The Book Society News* we have modelled our magazine upon it visually and (in some respects) as regards content. Beginning as a mere sixteen pages, it grew as its circulation did

and this is what we hope will happen to us. And as we expand, we plan to include a short story in each issue, some contemporary reviews of our reprints, and more commissioned feature articles, for example in June we will have one on the thinking behind our choice of reprints and two on *The Victorian Chaise-longue* by Marghanita Laski's granddaughter, Esther Godfrey, and by Penelope Lively.

We have given much thought not only to the choice of titles we will publish but also to 'what women want'. Our books will look beautiful because we believe that, whether they are on an office desk, by the Aga, or hanging in a bag over the handles of a buggy, it is important to get pleasure from how they look and feel. We will send books out in padded envelopes that fit a standard letter-box, thereby avoiding the dread 'while you were out' note from the post office. For simplicity's sake, they will all be £10 with free postage and packing. Finally, *The Persephone Quarterly*, through which the books are ordered, is meant to be an amusing read as much as mere promotion.

'A Lapful of Windfalls', by Clare Leighton which appeared in Four Hedges 1935.

This opening article is also something of a plea. We want to know whether you have enjoyed the books and if not why not; we want to know whether there are any books that, for years, you have wanted someone to reprint; we would like you to write to us and we would like you to feel that this magazine is your forum.

Some, of course, already have a forum, in the shape of a reading group, and we hope that being a Persephone subscriber might become an adjunct to belonging to one of these: a group of people meeting to discuss a book they have all read. Our books are planned to be perfect for discussion and if they are - or are not - we would love to know. (Reading groups, by the way, are able to buy ten copies of one of our titles for the price of nine.)

If you can be in central London on a weekday or occasional Saturday please try and come to a Persephone Book at Lunchtime at which the talk and discussion will focus either on a single title or a general topic (Is there such a thing as women's fiction? Why do some authors become forgotten and others endure?). We very much look forward to meeting you, our readers, and to hearing what you feel about this new venture, Persephone Books.

Our First Three Books

We launch with three titles: *William - an Englishman* by Cicely Hamilton, *Mariana* by Monica Dickens and *Someone at a Distance* by Dorothy Whipple. All three are reprints and two have been forgotten since first publication; *Mariana* was kept in print by Penguin but has not been available for many year; it is, however, still obtainable as cassette tapes.

William - an Englishman was written in the early months of 1918 while Cicely Hamilton was in France working as administrator for Concerts at the Front. It was published exactly eighty years ago, in the first months of 1919, but with unfortunate timing for its success - once the war was over, people did not want to read about it and it would be another ten years before there was a demand for books about the war.

This is the only explanation I can think of for the comparative neglect of *William - an Englishman*. Some books depend on timing and this, I think, is an example of one. I believe the book to be a masterpiece, with its gently satirical view of political movements (in this case the suffragette movement) and its wonderfully perceptive, unblinking yet tender description of the impact of war on two ordinary young people, William Tully and his bride Griselda; the whole written with an immediacy and a grim realism which can only be compared to an old-fashioned, grainy, flickering newsreel.

Why, if we at Persephone Books think this novel so extraordinary, has no-one else chosen to reprint it in all this time? I have no explanation except that, obviously, not everyone thinks it the masterpiece that we do. Then there are subsidiary reasons, such as books by women tending to vanish more quickly than books by men, or books with a domestic angle (rather than a romantic or a harrowing or a military one) tending to be disliked by feminist presses, or the logistical difficulty simply of obtaining a copy of the book to read. None of these explanations is enough. But eighty years after the ending of the Great War, and with books like Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road* and Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* firmly in the public consciousness - now is the time for *William - an Englishman* to have its moment.

Mariana, first published in 1940, is ostensibly a much more light-hearted book but could easily have been called Mariana - an Englishwoman. For this is what it is - the story of a young English girl's growth towards maturity and happiness, a story also framed by war and a war that we know was to continue for another five years after the book ends. We are shown her childhood at school in West Kensington and on holiday at her beloved Charbury; her attempt at drama school (perhaps the funniest part of the book); her time in Paris and her engagement to the appallingly smug Pierre; and finally, her work as a secretary and companion to Mrs Van der Meyer and her meeting with her future husband Sam. He is funny, sexy, handsome and very English. Social

historians might view *Mariana* as a patriotic novel that contributed to the war effort in the same way as the film *Went the Day Well?* or the book *Mrs Miniver*. The war-bound ending of *Mariana* is one of the great endings; however many times I curl up on the sofa with a copy of *Mariana*, a cup of tea and a chocolate digestive biscuit - the ending never fails to make me cry. Some will think this book merely frivolous. In which case they miss its strength and depth.

In terms of lack of recognition, *Someone at a Distance* is the greatest mystery of all. (This will be such a recurring theme in these articles about Persephone books that perhaps we should devise a formula, like prisoners not bothering to tell the joke but simply saying 'forty-one'.) As Dorothy Whipple's working notebooks testify, it was briefly called both The French Governess and You Can't Have Everything and was meant as an intensely moral book about an ordinary woman ('Ellen was that unfashionable creature, a happy housewife') completely fulfilled by her life, who loses everything through innocence, blindness, a touch both of smugness and of narrowness - and through her husband's weakness and vanity. The second half of the novel, as husband and wife struggle - separately - for individual salvation may appear to be lightly written and even commonplace. It is in fact writing of the highest order.

The novel's title perfectly evokes the gulf which can arise even between people who are devoted to each other. It also evokes the connections between the seemingly unconnected. Louise's behaviour can (in part) be explained by her despair at the loss of her lover. But he 'had never heard of the Norths, far away in England. He would have been amazed at the suggestion that he, at such a distance, could have had anything to do with the breaking-up of that family.'

Dorothy Whipple observed that 'the book will get grimmer and grimmer', as indeed it does. Yet its leisurely opening can deceive the reader into thinking this an anodyne book; only at the end can it be seen that the slow build-up to the central catastrophe is essential to explaining its extent. The destruction of the Norths' family life moves us so much precisely because we have participated in its calm, unexciting dailiness. Yet this leisurely lead-in (at a time when editors were 'going mad for action and passion' as Dorothy Whipple's publisher put it) was probably what deterred contemporary reviewers; so that a novelist who had once been hugely successful ('a kind of North- country Jane Austen', J. B. Priestley called her) had to endure the blow of receiving no reviews for this, her last book. She would never write another adult novel.

from: *Someone at a Distance* by Dorothy Whipple

Looking back, she had known all the time he had been taking too much notice of Louise. But she had merely thought he was being 'silly'. So many men were silly. What Ellen had felt when she saw him at it had been embarrassment, as if he'd got gravy on his chin at a public dinner or something like that, and she couldn't get at him to tell him about it. She hadn't been able to take it seriously. It couldn't occur to her to doubt him. She had lived in a fool's paradise all right. But she was out of it now. She saw clearly now. She would never trust anyone again after this.

Persephone Herself

The myth began in a sunlit field where the beautiful young Persephone, gathering flowers with her friends, was carried off to the underworld by Hades, the brother of her father Zeus. Her mother Demeter was so distraught by the loss of her daughter that she abandoned her duties as Earth Mother and began a long and fruitless search for her child: in desperation she attacked the land of which she was guardian, making the crops infertile.

Eventually Zeus ordered Hades to return Persephone; but because she had eaten three (or, variously, four or six) seeds of the pomegranate - a symbol both of death and of fertility - she was condemned to stay in the underworld for the same number of months. These represent winter. Allowed, however, to return to earth each spring, she also symbolises the new beginnings of springtime, and female creativity. In Ted Hughes's translation of Ovid's Metamorphoses (Faber, 1997) her divided nature is described: 'One moment/ Gloomy as hell's king, but the next/Bright as the sun's mass, bursting with clouds.'

Persephone's is a dramatic tale, touching, passionate and morally complex. She herself is both victim and mistress, innocent child and sage queen: like any fulfilled woman she has two sides to her but eventually manages (somehow) to reconcile them.

Our Future Titles

Our next three books will be published on 22nd of June. They are *Fidelity* (1919) by Susan Glaspell, with a Preface by Marcia Noe; *Etty Hillesum: Diaries and Letters 1941-3* with a Preface by Eva Hoffman; and *The Victorian Chaise-longue* (1953) by Marghanita Laski with a Preface by P. D. James.

Other future titles include: Mollie Panter-Downes's short stories from *The New Yorker*; Nicholas Mosley's 1976 biography of the First World War poet Julian Grenfell with a new Preface by the author; *Family Roundabout* (1947) by Richmal Crompton, the author of the William books; *Saplings* (1945) by Noel Streatfeild, the first of her adult novels that Persephone plans to reprint Leonard Woolf's *The Wise Virgins* (1914); *Little Boy Lost* (1949) by Marghanita Laski; more novels by Dorothy Whipple, beginning with *They Knew Mr Knight* (1934); *Consequences* (1919) by E. M. Delafield; and *A Flat Iron for a Farthing* (1884) by Horatia Ewing. In addition, we plan to publish one or two contemporary novels as well as some modern poetry, and some illustrated non-fiction.

William – an Englishman

by CICELY HAMILTON

Extract from the Persephone Preface by Nicola Beauman.

William and Griselda, completely caught up in a different struggle, give their lives to Progress... and, leaving behind 'crowds, committees and grievances', set off on their honeymoon to the Ardennes. They find themselves in a valley 'disquieting as well as beautiful' but in a reassuringly pamphlet-filled cottage where 'Woman and Democracy, even on the backs of books, had power to act as a tonic and trumpet-call.'

One of the incidental beauties of the novel is the way it is made entirely plausible that the new Mr and Mrs Tully have no idea what is happening in the rest of the world outside their private Arden ('So they planned comfortably and without misgiving, while the world seethed in the melting-pot and the Kaiser battered at Liege'). Wonderfully plausible, too, is their dawning boredom even with each other: 'They had an uneasy foreboding... that long contact with solitude and beauty might end by confusing issues that once were plain, and so unfitting them for the work of Progress and Humanity - for committees, agitations, the absorbing of pamphlets and the general duty of rearranging the universe.' So that Griselda, missing the weekly Suffragette so much, was at last 'moved to utterance - late on a still, heavy evening in August, when once or twice there had come up the valley a distant mutter as of thunder.' Heartbreaking, too, the chain of events as the couple discover that their concept of war ('they had come to look on the strife of nations as a glorified scuffle on the lines of a Pankhurst demonstration') was absurd and irrelevant.

With their discovery, the tone and the pace of the novel changes. Gradually Cicely Hamilton's gentle mockery gives way to a harrowing narrative of events, What carries us along is her descriptive technique - the novel achieves in print what we more readily expect of film and gives us an indelible image of what it was like to be an innocent caught up in the tide of war.

The reason William - an Englishman has the power to move us so deeply is because of the very ordinariness of the young couple and the unexpectedness of their plight. Terrible things happen to them and yet they had imagined nothing more than a life of kindly protest meetings in the Conway Hall, the odd sojourn (it is true) in Holloway Prison and then a quiet and idealistic life in a small house in Bromley or Clapton or Highbury from where they would hope to hand the torch of fervour and protest on to the next generation...

Sexual Reading

This article by Nicci Gerrard, first published in The Observer on 27th September 1998, explores the differences between the books read by men and by women.

The contents of my husband Sean's bedside table long ago spilled on to the floor: a pile of novels, some short stories, several volumes of poetry, a leaning tower of maths and science books, a thumbed *Ancient Greek Made Easy*, the New Testament, a sprawl of biographies and essays and philosophical reflections. Currently, I'd estimate Sean is 'reading' about 50 books seriously; their pages are marked with torn lengths of paper. A further 500 or so that he has started and intends one day to finish are kept in a special bookcase close at hand. He lies in bed surrounded by his books and his magazines, picks them up at random, browses, grazes, assimilates facts, reads a poem out loud to me, exclaims over new discoveries, learns a Swedish drinking song and chants it softly to himself, tells me about Montaigne in his garden or the Book of Job, navigates his way through the sea of words he has spread around himself.

Books are Sean's way of organising, understanding and to a degree controlling his world. In his bedroom down the hall, my son also lies in a circle of books - football annuals, adventure stories, chess manuals, joke books, an introduction to logical paradoxes. He loves it when Sean gives him quizzes. He loves knowing things and displaying his knowledge.

By contrast, I have one novel on my bedside table. I begin it at the beginning and read it to the end, immersed in its consoling narrative world. I want to sink down into fiction, abandon myself to it, forget about the real world above its watery depths - the world from which I have, for a moment at least, escaped. My eldest daughter does exactly the same. If I shout at her very loudly ('Time for school!') she will surface, dazed. Together, we read *Little Women*, adore the March sisters, and cry over their misfortunes. Swimming or sinking, waving or drowning. Men and women read differently.

I greatly *admire* Don DeLillo for his bravura set pieces, his razzle-dazzle of ideas about history and culture, his wit and his surrealism and his bleakness. I avidly read Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* as a teenager, to find out what boys got up to (and was solemnly appalled, failing in my young panic quite to get the joke or the pain). I read Nick Hornby in the same spirit of tourism, and want to be his friend because he sounds so nice. Phrases and scenes from Martin Amis's novels rattle in my head long after I have put the book down. But I have not felt that these books were written for me, to me. I am not their ideal reader - at home in the words, lost in make-believe.

When, at about 14, I first read *Jane Eyre*, I knew at once that it was written for and to me. I was the Dear Reader. It wasn't just a simple matter of identification with the plain, stubborn, misunderstood and unloved heroine. The novel has everything - it is like a masterclass in what women want from fiction (it mimics our favourite fairy-tales and it spawned tens of thousands of Mills & Boons). It has empathy – we are all Jane, all yearning for love and home, all in love with Mr Rochester. It has a narrative that takes us from loss to gain, desire to fulfilment, loneliness to community. It appeals to the victor and the victim in us. It has a happy-sad ending, the kind of sweet and melancholy ever after we want and can't get from real life. It has a lucid and robust style that allows us to forget its author and sink under its surface. And it makes its secret appeal to women: madness up in the attic and between the lines; a powerful sense of injustice and emotional hunger rippling the text.

Living in the Country (1941) by Frederick Smith and Barbara Wilcox, p4. Illustrated by Norman Dakers.

There are other books that obviously set out to appeal to women because of their subjects: recognition-fiction such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, Kathy Lette's *Foetal Attraction*. They often have quotations on their jackets that say things like 'This book will change your life'. They are consciousness-raising, gender-specific, culture-specific, often angry. But these novels - like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which is fiction dressed up as fact (or should that be the other way round?) – don't really pull us down into fiction's deeper waters of self-forgetfulness. Their pleasures lie on the surface – 'me too' books, rather like Nick Hornby's or Blake Morrison's works. The novels that do this - the real 'women's novels' - are ones in which the self may be transported.

Women fall in love with Darcy, with Heathcliff. We become Rebecca, tremulous with fear and yearning. Sylvia Plath allows us to become raw and raging masochists (and masochism is a strong element of female identification: from gentle and self-sacrificing Anne in *Persuasion* to the terrifyingly complete victims in Jean Rhys's novels).

I always had an idealistic sense that literature cut through the gender divide. Yet when I think about it, I do feel that some books are essentially women's books; perhaps not surprisingly, all of these books are written by women. I have never met a woman who has read Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels (although I'm sure there must be a few around, just as there are a few girls who play War Hammer and learn football results by heart).

Men write satires and parodies; women usually don't. Men are sarcastic, sceptical, abstract; women are sincere and often sentimental. Men write novels that feel like fact. The heart of their books, its source, is often an idea, a theme. They thrive on aperçus, aphorisms, jokes, asides, digressions, nudges and winks to the reader. They feed us information. They like talking about cosmology. They show off in their writing, putting their logo on the text, never allowing the reader to forget them. Women draw us in close.

I always felt irritated and restricted by that old saying: 'Boys will be boys and girls will be girls.' I spent many years arguing with ardour and self-righteousness that differences were culturally determined. I used to be very stern and disapproving about the evils of biological imperialism.

But the evidence stacks up against me: girls concentrate, boys don't (five minutes is their apparent attention span). Girls play imaginary games and boys tumble and fight. Girls collaborate and boys compete. Girls are emotional and empathic; boys more abstract and judicial. Girls talk about feelings and boys talk about facts, ideas. Girls are interested in people and boys in ideas. Girls like stories, boys like lists. Girls like fiction and boys like fact.

Sean undoubtedly *knows* more than I do. He knows about logarithms and quarks and premier leagues and Bobby Fischer's best chess games and the dates of the Hundred Years' War and Wittgenstein's linguistic theories and when electricity was discovered and he can always remember the speed of light and the speed of sound and how many miles it is round the circumference of the earth and what the capital of Guatemala is. But I know what it is like to fall in love with Darcy, and I know what it is like to forget I am me, and that, I can't help feeling, is good enough.

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from: *Mariana* by Monica Dickens

The cab drew up with a squeak, and Mary and her mother fell out on the pavement, stiff and weary after a journey that had seemed longer and dirtier and more tiring because it was the journey home. As she entered the 'Flats 20-40' door of Clifford Court, Olympia, Mary was greeted by a smell that was as familiar as the Charbury Smell, but instead of inhaling it gladly, she wrinkled her nose. It was a mixture of the porter's cigarettes, the electricity smell of the slow, clanging lift, and the announcement, that drifted through the letter-box of the ground floor flat on the right, that its occupants existed solely on brussels sprouts.

Plus ça change...

Each issue of The Persephone Quarterly will contain a quotation illustrating this rather well-worn French phrase, beginning with Thackeray's Pendennis (1850) (p541 of the World's Classics edition).

The pace of London life is enormous: how do people last at it, I wonder - male and female? Take a woman of the world - follow her course through the season; one asks how she can survive it? or if she tumbles into a sleep at the end of August and lies torpid until the spring? She goes into the world every night, and sits watching her marriageable daughters dancing till long after dawn. She has a nursery of little ones, very likely, at home, to whom she administers example and affection; having an eye likewise to bread-and-milk, catechism, music and French, and roast leg of mutton at one o'clock. She has to call upon ladies of her own station, either domestically or in her public character, in which she sits upon Charity Committees, or Ball Committees, or Emigration Committees, or Queen's College Committees, and discharges I don't know what more duties of British stateswomanship. She very likely keeps a poor-visiting list; has conversations with the clergyman about soup or flannel, or proper religious teaching for the parish; and (if she lives in certain districts) probably attends early church. She has the newspapers to read, and, at least, must know what her husband's party is about, so as to be able to talk to her neighbour at dinner; and it is a fact that she reads every new book that comes out, for she can talk, and very smartly and well, about them all, and you see them all upon her drawing-room table. She has the cares of her household besides - to make both ends meet; to make the girls' milliner's bills appear not too dreadful to the father and paymaster of the family; to snip off, in secret, a little extra article of expenditure here and there, and convey it, in the shape of a banknote, to the boys at college or at sea; to check the encroachments of tradesmen and housekeepers' financial fallacies; to keep upper and lower servants from jangling with one another, and the household in order. Add to this, that she has a secret taste for some art or science - models in clay, makes experiments in chemistry, or plays in private on the violoncello - (and I say, without exaggeration, many London ladies are doing this) - and you have a character before you such as our ancestors never heard of, and such as belongs entirely to our era and period of civilisation.

from: *William – an Englishman* by Cicely Hamilton

They were married towards the end of July - to be exact, on the twenty-third day of the month. The wedding took place in Balham from the house of Griselda's aunt; the ceremony was performed by an enlightened vicar who had consented to omit the ignoble vow of obedience; and the church was thronged to its doors with comrades and ardent sympathizers. The advanced Press spread itself over the description of the ceremony and-in view of the fact that the bridesmaids, six in number, had all done time for assault-even the Press that was not advanced considered the event worth a paragraph.

Mariana

by MONICA DICKENS

Extract from the Persephone Preface by Harriet Lane.

Mariana is a romantic novel with a difference. Mary is sometimes quite difficult to like. As one of her end-of-term reports puts it, 'Although she is popular with her fellow pupils, I am afraid she is a bad mixer, being at the same time intolerant and unconfident of others.' Mary's prejudices permeate the narrative, sometimes cruelly, always comically, in her portrayal of her contemporaries: Cecily Barnard at St Martin's, who 'couldn't even write her own name and was not allowed to lock the door of the lavatory'; Greta Daniel, at the Commem. Ball in Oxford, puffing out the sleeves of her 'ingenuous taffeta dress' and saying 'Well, I think I'll be running along. George is waiting for me downstairs. *Isn't* this fun?'; Myrtle Drew at the Rockingham Academy, who 'made a great hit as a shepherdess gazing into a still pool at sunset. Miss Dallas clapped and said, "Splendid," and Myrtle saw her name in lights.' But Mary finds a friend in Angela, who as a schoolgirl had been 'much taller than Mary, with legs that looked endless in her black school stockings, and tunic that was always shorter than anybody else's' and as a young woman 'had both talent and beauty... with her shining coppery hair in little curls all over her head'.

There is nothing soppy or precious or accommodating about Mary. Quite early on, she realises that 'with other people one was only an unconsidered fragment of the company; alone, one was a complete entity by oneself.' Even her looks are disconcerting: at eleven, she is 'a shrimp of a child with no natural colour. . . when she grinned she looked like a gnome'; as an adult, 'small and thin and very pale'. But, for her time, Mary is extremely conventional (deferential to men, casually anti-Semitic, extremely conscious of class). Though her mother, the vivacious Lily, is the daughter of a dressmaker and has to work for a living, Mary has inherited the aspirations of the landed gentry from her father's side of the family. As a schoolgirl, she is quite appalled when her mother suggests that one day, when she grows up, she might like to get a job. 'Oh no, I shan't do that, I'm going to be married and have twenty-six children with names going all through the alphabet, like Arthur, Barbara, Chloe, Egbert, Felicity, George, Harriet, Ipheginia...' In many ways, since she is 'not the sort that gets scholarships', she is merely being sensible. The Rockingham College of Dramatic Art, a Parisian dressmaking school, her mother's shop on South Molton Street . . there is no expectation that Mary hopes to find her life's calling at any of these places. She is simply kicking her heels, waiting to be excused the grind of unmarried life...

'Somewhere in England'

This poem by Virginia Graham was written in 1939.

Somewhere there must be music, and great
swags of flowers,
leisured meals lasting for hours,
and smooth green lawns and roses.
Somewhere there must be dogs with velvet
noses,
and people lounging in big chairs,
and bees buzzing in the pears.
So short a while, and yet how long,
how long,
since I was idling golden days away,
shopping a little and going to the play!
Somewhere the red leaves must be fluttering
down,
but I am on my way to Kentish Town
in Mrs. Brodie's van,
which has no brakes and rattles like a can.
Tomorrow I shall go to Wanstead Flats
with bales of straw, or a cargo of tin-hats,
or ninety mattresses to aid
the nether portions of the Fire Brigade.
Not for me a quiet stroll along the Mall,
I must be off to Woolwich Arsenal
with our Miss West;
and it seems I cannot rest,
there shall be no folding of my feet at all
till I have been to Islington Town Hall
with a buff envelope.
Some day it is my tenderest dearest hope
to have my hair washed, and I
would love to buy
something - anything so long as I could stop
for a moment and look into the window of a shop.
Somewhere there must be women reading books,
and talking of chicken-rissoles to their cooks;
but every time I try to read *The Grapes of Wrath*
I am sent forth
on some occupation
apparently immensely vital to the nation.
To my disappointed cook I only say
I shan't need any meals at all today.
Somewhere I know they're singing songs of praise
and going happily to matinées
and home to buttered toast,
but I at my post
shall bravely turn my thoughts from such enjoyment.
Ah for the time when, blest with unemployment,
I lived a life of sweet content -
leisured and smug and opulent!
Fear not, Miss Tatham, I am ready as you see,
to go to Romford Hospital or Lea.
Be not dismayed, I will not stray or roam,
Look how I fly to Brookwood Mental Home!
See with what patriotic speed I go
to Poplar, Ealing, Beckenham and Bow!

A close friend of Joyce Grenfell, Virginia Graham wrote the words to some of her songs. This poem evokes her work as a driver for the WVS. The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck was published in 1939 and won the Pulitzer Prize that year.

Someone at a Distance

by **DOROTHY WHIPPLE**

Extract from the Persephone Preface by Nina Bawden

The writing of fiction is a dreadful trade. Critical assessment can be capricious, publishers uncertain; good books perish, bad ones thrive; worldwide best sellers can sink without trace. Dorothy Whipple, several of whose novels were not only immensely popular Book Society Choices in this country in the nineteen-thirties and forties, and a great success in America, but also highly regarded by respectable critics, was unknown to me until I was sent a copy of *Someone at a Distance*. Although after its publication in 1953 she continued to write short stories and children's books, this was her last novel. It was also - surprisingly, since it is to my mind her best - the only one of her novels not to receive a major review in a national newspaper.

It is strange because she was, if not a great writer, a remarkably good one, setting her plain, forceful tales in the same geographical and emotional area as Mrs Gaskell. Her distinction had been widely and approvingly noted by - among others - Hugh Walpole, who foresaw that she would be a novelist of 'true importance', Orville Prescott (the notably stern reviewer of *The New York Times*), and Terence de Vere White, who wrote about her at length in the *Irish Times*. For Frank Swinnerton she brought to her work 'a human talent, a seeing eye and the freshness and humour of one to whom the writing of novels is still a happy adventure.' And Anthony Burgess, reviewing her last collection of short stories, called them 'illuminating and startling'.

Of course there is nothing new in Dorothy Whipple's fate. Time is a notorious monster of ingratitude. And fashions change. The kind of gentle - well, apparently gentle domestic tales she tells, no violence except of the spirit, sex only hinted at, may have had something to do with her disappearance from the paperback lists and the library shelves...

But it does not explain her exclusion in more recent years from the general revival of interest in women writers. Perhaps this is because she is not a 'woman's novelist' in the way that the term is commonly used. Dorothy Whipple once said, 'The world of men is so different from the world of women, it is a wonder they speak the same language' and she herself possessed what Virginia Woolf insisted that all good writers should have, an androgynous mind. She writes about men as she writes about women, with understanding, from within. And her style is clear and precise, graceful without being showy, and never fancy or fey...

Persephone Endpapers

Each issue of The Persephone Quarterly will contain details of the fabrics used on the endpapers of that quarter's new books.

With their distinctive plain grey jackets and cream 'labels' for the title wording, all our books will look the same from the outside. Inside each will be different, with endpapers chosen especially to match the date and mood of the book.

Fabrics are as much a part of our daily lives as furnishing and dress materials, yet we rarely see them used in any other context. However, fabric design should be celebrated for its own sake; and because it is a field in which women designers have been particularly prominent we would like to use their work whenever possible.

For *William - an Englishman* (1919) we have chosen 'Pamela', an Omega Workshops linen attributed variously to Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant. It dates from 1913 when the novel opens and with its abstract pattern of shapes outlined in black has an austerity appropriate to the subject of war. Yet the soft curves evoke the hills and valleys of the Ardennes, that part of Belgium in which the central section of the book is set; and the blue, green and purple recalls not only rivers and fields but also the colours of the suffragette movement that played such an important part in the protagonists' lives.

Mariana (1940) describes the girlhood of a girl born in 1915. The design we have chosen for the endpapers was produced by the Calico Printers Association in 1933, when she would have been eighteen. The pattern is bright and bold - red, blue, yellow and pink tulips encircled by swirling lines of green, white and blue - encapsulating the headiness of youth, its cheerfulness and optimism. The fabric (a voile dress material) also evokes the simplicity and beauty of the English gardens that Mary loves so much.

For *Someone at a Distance* (1953) we have chosen a fabric that was first issued by Sanderson's in 1956 but was in fact designed in the late 1940s when Dorothy Whipple began writing the book and when it is set (the war has ended not long before). The designer of this linen furnishing fabric was Ashley Havinden (1903-73), who seems to have based his design on a series of abstract paintings and drawings that he did in the late 1930s. This is appropriate because the novel's heroine would have furnished her house in the early years of her marriage; something redolent only of the modernist 1950s would not represent a sensible, loyal woman who scorned updating for no reason. The red background is a warm, sensuous colour with, of course, an overtone of blood; the abstract shapes are beautiful and unusual, and combine a slightly menacing feel with a hint of the domestic.

Finally...

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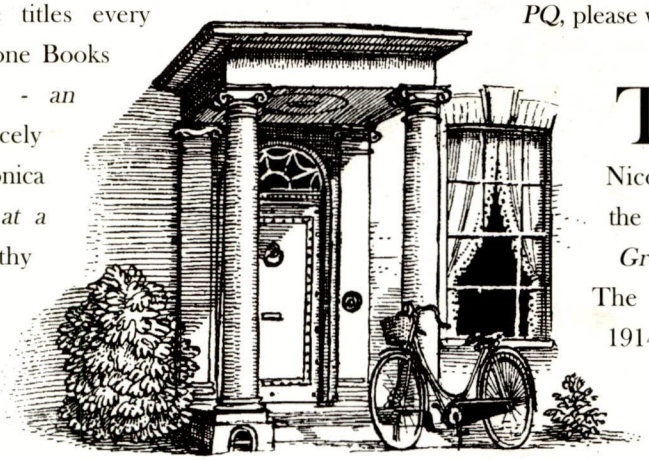
We publish three titles every quarter. Persephone Books Nos. 1-3 are *William - an Englishman* by Cicely Hamilton, *Mariana* by Monica Dickens, and *Someone at a Distance* by Dorothy Whipple. Persephone Books Nos. 4-6 are *Fidelity* by Susan Glaspell, *Etty Hillesum: Diaries and Letters 1941-3* and *The Victorian Chaise-longue* by Marghanita Laski.



'Piano Lesson' by Rex Whistler, p90 The New Keepsake (1931) © Estate of Rex Whistler. All Rights Reserved, DACS 1999

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Readers who are able to join us at our Clerkenwell office are warmly invited to a Persephone Book at Lunchtime. These will be held on the 22nd of April, May and June (thereafter September, October and November) from 12.15 to 2.15. There will be a buffet lunch from the Islington delicatessen Limoncello, a talk given by a well-known writer and - we hope - a lively discussion. The cost will be £25, which entitles participants to buy any one of our titles at half price.

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The founder of Persephone, Nicola Beauman, is the author of *A Very Great Profession*: The Woman's Novel 1914-39 (1983, now a Virago Modern Classic), *Cynthia Asquith* (1987), and *Morgan*: a life of E.M. Forster (1993). She has written and lectured widely on twentieth century women writers. She has five grown-up children, and lives in North London.