

THE
PERSEPHONE
QUARTERLY

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Our Winter 2000 books

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day by Winifred Watson was first published in 1938. The *TLS* reviewer described it as 'a deliciously light and frothy story' about a governess 'sent to the flat of a cabaret dancer who asks no questions but involves her immediately in her highly unrespectable and astonishing affairs. . . Miss Pettigrew is entirely delightful' [but] her 'tolerance and tenderness add a note of depth.'

Winifred Watson (who is seen on the cover of this *PQ*) had written novels with historical/rustic settings when she produced this, her fourth book. After two more books she gave up writing; today she still lives in her house in Newcastle.

The Bookseller's verdict on potential Christmas bestsellers said that its 'outside tip would be a reprint from the 1930s, a hilarious period piece, featuring a governess, a night club singer, cocaine and cocktails.'

The endpaper is a 1938 furnishing fabric by Marion Dorn, a repeat pattern of a woman's hand holding a bouquet of sheaves of corn and red flowers, with yellow ribbons swirling among them.

Our second book this winter is poetry by Joyce Grenfell's close friend and collaborator Virginia Graham. Its humorous, indeed hilarious, approach is similar to our other, very successful, poetry volume, *It's Hard to be Hip*; but the tone is sometimes more sombre, since

the war is always in the background. *Consider The Years* (1946) collects poems from the previous eight years, many of which first appeared in *Punch*. The endpapers are taken from a 1943 printed rayon *crêpe* dress fabric, 'Careless Talk Costs Lives', based on a series of propaganda posters by 'Fougasse' of *Punch*; the yellow, green and white posters are displayed on a blue background.

*I have imagined going to the station,
Heart purposely numb, mind studiously blunt,
To see my family cheerfully, bravely off
To the battle-front.*

*In the night watches I have kissed them all goodbye
I have waved to them, my husband and my brother,
But never did I dream the first to go
Would be my mother.*

'London Train' 1941



'You must get him out'

Persephone Café Music

Our first CD is played by Dominic Moore (violin) and Daniel Becker (piano): 18 tracks of pieces by composers such as Albeniz, Tchaikowsky, and Elgar, first played in Vienna and Budapest a century ago but still as hauntingly beautiful today - happiness in a bottle. What has it got to do with women? you may ask. Nothing at all! Except, perhaps, isn't the point of café music to put women in the mood?

'The Test' by Angelica Gibbs

On the afternoon Marian took her second driving test, Mrs Ericson went with her. 'It's probably better to have someone a little older with you,' Mrs Ericson said as Marian slipped into the driver's seat beside her. 'Perhaps last time your Cousin Bill made you nervous, talking too much on the way.'

'Yes, Ma'am,' Marian said in her soft unaccented voice. 'They probably do like it better if a white person shows up with you.'

'Oh, I don't think it's *that*,' Mrs Ericson began, and subsided after a glance at the girl's set profile. Marian drove the car slowly through the shady suburban streets. It was one of the first hot days of June, and when they reached the boulevard they found it crowded with cars headed for the beaches.

'Do you want me to drive?' Mrs Ericson asked. 'I'll be glad to if you're feeling jumpy.' Marian shook her head. Mrs Ericson watched her dark, competent hands and wondered for the thousandth time how the house had ever managed to get along without her, or how she had lived through those earlier years when her household had been presided over by a series of slatternly white girls who had considered housework demeaning and the care of children an added insult. 'You drive beautifully, Marian,' she said. 'Now, don't think of the last time. Anybody would slide on a steep hill on a wet day like that.'

'It takes four mistakes to flunk you,' Marian said. 'I don't remember doing all the things the inspector marked down on my blank.'

'People say that they only want you to slip them a little something,' Mrs Ericson said doubtfully.

'No,' Marian said. 'That would only make it

worse, Mrs Ericson. I know.'

The car turned right, at a traffic signal, into a side road and slid up to the curb at the rear of a short line of parked cars. The inspectors had not arrived yet.

'You have the papers?' Mrs. Ericson asked. Marian took them out of her bag: her learner's permit; the car registration, and her birth certificate. They settled down to the dreary business of waiting.

'It will be marvellous to have someone dependable to drive the children to school everyday,' Mrs Ericson said.

Marian looked up from the list of driving requirements she had been studying. 'It'll make things simpler at the house, won't it?' she said.

'Oh, Marian,' Mrs Ericson exclaimed, 'if I could only pay you half of what you're worth!'

'Now, Mrs Ericson,' Marian said firmly. They looked at each other and smiled with affection.

Two cars with official insignia on their doors stopped across the street. The inspectors leaped out, very brisk and military in their neat uniforms. Marian's hands tightened on the wheel. 'There's the one who flunked me last time,' she whispered, pointing to a stocky, self-important man who had begun to shout directions at the driver at the head of the line. 'Oh, Mrs Ericson.'

'Now, Marian,' Mrs Ericson said. They smiled at each other again, rather weakly.

The inspector who finally reached their car was not the stocky one but a genial, middle-aged man who grinned broadly as he thumbed over their papers. Mrs Ericson started to get out of the car. 'Don't you want to come along?' the inspector asked. 'Mandy and I don't mind company.'



Mrs Ericson was bewildered for a moment. 'No,' she said, and stepped to the curb. 'I might make Marian self-conscious. She's a fine driver, Inspector.'

'Sure thing,' the inspector said, winking at Mrs Ericson. He slid into the seat beside Marian. 'Turn right at the corner, Mandy-Lou.'

From the curb, Mrs Ericson watched the car move smoothly up the street.

The inspector made notations in a small black book. 'Age?' he inquired presently, as they drove along.

'Twenty-seven.'

He looked at Marian out of the corner of his eye. 'Old enough to have quite a flock of pickaninnies, eh?'

Marian did not answer.

'Left at this corner,' the inspector said, 'and park between that truck and the green Buick.'

The two cars were very close together, but Marian squeezed in between them without too much manoeuvring. 'Driven before, Mandy-Lou?' the inspector asked.

'Yes, sir. I had a license for three years in Pennsylvania.'

'Why do you want to drive a car?'

'My employer needs me to take her children to and from school.'

'Sure you don't really want to sneak out nights

to meet some young blood?' the inspector asked. He laughed as Marian shook her head.

'Let's see you take a left at the corner and then turn around in the middle of the next block,' the inspector said. He began to whistle 'Swanee River.' 'Make you homesick?' he asked.

Marian put out her hand, swung around neatly in the street, and headed back in the direction from

which they had come. 'No,' she said. 'I was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania.'

The inspector feigned astonishment. 'You-all ain't Southern?' he said. 'Well, dog my cats if I didn't think you-all came from down yondah.'

'No sir,' Marian said.

'Turn onto Main Street here and let's see how you-all does in heavier traffic.'

They followed a line of cars along Main Street for several blocks until

they came in sight of a concrete bridge which arched high over the railroad tracks.

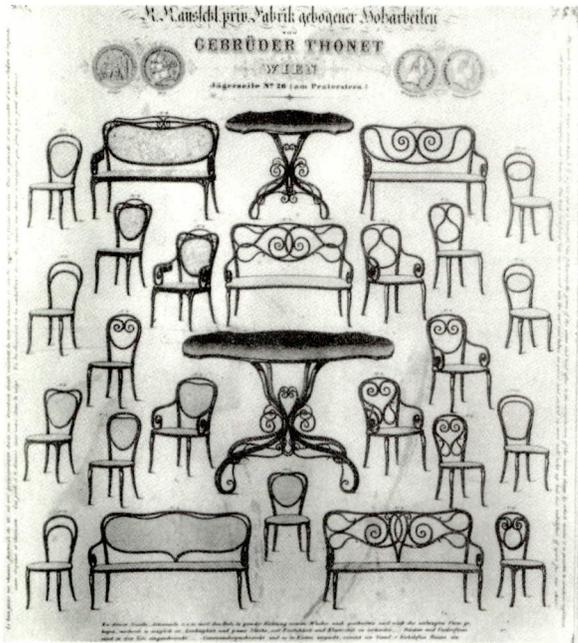
'Read that sign at the end of the bridge,' the inspector said.

"Proceed with caution. Dangerous in slippery weather," Marian said.

'You-all sho can read fine,' the inspector exclaimed. 'Where d'you learn to do that, Mandy?'

'I got my college degree last year,' Marian said. Her voice was not quite steady.

As the car crept up the slope of the bridge the inspector burst out laughing. He laughed so hard he



1859 bentwood catalogue, from *The Café Music* CD booklet



could scarcely give his next direction. 'Stop here,' he said, wiping his eyes, 'then start 'er up again. Mandy got her degree, did she? Dog my cats!'

Marian pulled up beside the curb. She put the car in neutral, pulled on the emergency, waited a moment, and then put the car into gear again. Her face was set. As she released the brake her foot slipped off the clutch pedal and the engine stalled.

'Now, Mistress Mandy,' the inspector said, 'remember your degree.'

'Damn you!' Marian cried. She started the car with a jerk.

The inspector lost his joviality in an instant. 'Return to the starting place, please,' he said, and

made four very black crosses at random in the squares on Marian's application blank.

Mrs Ericson was waiting at the curb where they had left her. As Marian stopped the car the inspector jumped out and brushed past her, his face purple. 'What happened?' Mrs Ericson asked, looking after him with alarm.

Marian stared down at the wheel and her lip trembled.

'Oh, Marian, *again?*' Mrs. Ericson said.

Marian nodded. 'In a sort of different way,' she said, and slid over to the right-hand side of the car.

The New Yorker 15 June 1940 © Angelica Gibbs

The Spectator on Every Eye

Anita Brookner, while admiring 'a lucidly written account of various kinds of confusion' and the 'particularly lovely. . . descriptions of Ibiza', devoted much of her review to a polemic, claiming that, unlike 'the combative individualism of the Virago reprints', Persephone's are about women 'characterised by modesty, patience, reserve - virtue, even - but also by a muffled resentment disguised as an acceptance of unequal conditions.' Writers like Whipple, Miller or Laski, 'reinforced. . . widely shared. . . attitudes, with not a hint of. . . inventiveness or. . . freedom.'

We read this comment with wry amusement. In our view you could not have angrier writers than the four mentioned, with the proviso that they were writing within a domestic context: anyone who has run a household or had children knows exactly what we mean. It is the difference between Feminism and feminism, between pie-in-the-sky

and realism. . . Women who manage to be a good enough wife, lover, cook, mother, chauffeur, housekeeper and gardener would be sad to be told that they lacked 'combative individualism' or 'patience, reserve - virtue, even'.

Surely we have gained our freedoms in exactly the way Whipple, Miller and other Persephone writers wanted us to - through understanding, compassion, intelligence, and hard work? This does not mean that we read these books only as evocations of a vanished era. Good, or indeed great, literature is timeless; its context may be dated but its narrative force and its insight has a lasting voice. Has *William - an Englishman* become irrelevant because women now have the vote? Is *The Home-Maker* unreadable because it is becoming socially acceptable for men to stay at home? Was *Consequences* out of date once women who did not marry had options other than going into a convent? We think not!



From Some Recent Reviews

Every *Eye* by Isobel English received two major reviews over the summer apart from Anita Brookner's. *The Tablet* hailed it as 'a marvellous discovery'. In the *Literary Review* Francis King said that it was 'a welcome reminder of one of those quiet, considered, impeccably articulated voices in constant danger of being drowned out in the increasingly raucous hubbub of contemporary fiction. . . Very much of a time when, after the grey confinement of the war years. . . people then felt that they had been intellectually and emotionally transfigured; and [the heroine] is no exception. . . her physical and emotional journeys. . . evoked with unflinching concision and clarity. . .'

In August *The Guardian's* food writer Matthew Fort called our 1932 cookbook *Good Things in England*, 'a marvellous compendium of recipes, as important a repository of our culture as Cecil Sharp's collection of English folk tunes. Minnow tansies, saucer pies, roasted cygnets, fag pie and Mrs Comber's sauce. . . they are all here with sources properly acknowledged and recipes that are models of brevity and point. A true marvel.' *This England* magazine called the book 'wonderful', bracketing Florence White's 'superb recipe collection' with those of Mrs Beeton and Elizabeth David; it congratulated us for being 'delightfully old-fashioned' and 'breathing new life into neglected but deserving literature.'

In *Caledonia*, the Edinburgh magazine, *Marjory Fleming* was called 'refreshingly free of sentimentality': it 'exhibits an intense empathy with its subject and remains a vivid and eloquent memorial to an extraordinary young girl.' The *Catholic Herald* observed that the combination of

the 20th century talent of the twenty-year old Oriet Malet and the fascination of her subject 'gives an extraordinary evocation of childhood', praising particularly 'a brilliant description' of Marjory discovering she can read. The reviewer went on to refer to 'the sheer beauty of the book as a book: within silver-grey card covers, absolutely plain, you encounter first some brightly-coloured endpapers, copied from a Paisley shawl; the text is printed on thick, creamy paper, in that most elegant and readable of type-faces called Baskerville. . . it is extraordinarily good value for money.'

The Scotsman called the book 'a captivating imaginative reconstruction of Marjory's life, firmly rooted in the actual people and events recorded in her journals', and reminded us that 'the novelist Elizabeth Bowen observed that Marjory "had the temperament of a poet, the vehemence of a lover", so her life, though short, was not devoid of drama.' And the writer Geraldine Perriam commented in the *Historical Novel Association* magazine that 'Oriet Malet tells Marjory's story with sensitivity and astonishing insight. At times it seems as if Malet actually knew Marjory. One cannot help but love her after reading Malet's sensitive account of her life, so skilfully written.'

Finally, *Saplings* was reviewed in *The Guardian's* Small Press Corner; it remarked that Noel Streatfeild's novels for adults have not been as well cherished by posterity as classics such as *Ballet Shoes*, and added: 'In a fascinating Afterword the psychiatrist Jeremy Holmes points to the extraordinarily advanced insights that Streatfeild, a spinster daughter of a vicar, had into the sexual life of the family in the war years.'

Our Readers Write

'I read *William* last week. I started slowly, thinking Oh yes, a pleasant story about ordinary people, but I read most of it in one long evening and was devastated by the end. It is so easy for us (with hindsight) to be amazed that William and Griselda had no idea of the coming war, but I was totally caught up in their slow realisation of their fate. Hamilton's gently ironic tone was perfect, and the change in William's attitude to the war as his experiences changed him forever was moving and totally believable.' LB, Australia

'We have just spent a week at a Vivat Trust property and on the sideboard, in pristine condition, were *Saplings*, *It's Hard to be Hip* and *Marjory Fleming*. Wonderful! I devoured them in five days and they made my holiday! Very many thanks.' SP, Stockport

'I was stunned by *Consequences* - kept wanting to stop reading it because it was so painful, but needed to know what happened to her. What a remarkable telling of a very private, lonely tragedy. I say 'tragedy' because it has a theatre/drama tragic quality; sometimes 'too much' but never once losing my attention or deep emotional involvement - isn't that what Greek tragedy or any tragic play was meant to do? I still think about Alex's misunderstandings and genuine surprise at getting something wrong again.' CJ, London W11

'I have just read with enormous pleasure *Every Eye* by Isobel English. . . I thought it an absolute gem in need of rediscovery.' AZ, Maidenhead.

'So pleased you have published the Ruth Adam *A Woman's Place*. This was the best book I had when writing [BBC television's] 'Out of the Doll's House'. . . I have always thought it one of the best

summaries of a woman's lot in the 20th century.' AN, London W8

'I can't tell you how exciting it was to read a brand new Noel Streatfeild aged 50! Just that same recognisable style I knew so well as a child - and such a lot of subtlety. . . How well she did write - what a storyteller. Not George Eliot, but good stuff, and so very wise. I hugely enjoyed *Saplings* - thank you.' BR, Bristol

'I have just finished reading *Fidelity* and wanted to write and tell you how much I loved it. . . I found it absolutely gripping and very beautifully written. I'm amazed it ever went out of print!' IdB, London W1

'I should like to say a special thank you for introducing me to ETTY - meeting her has been a key experience in my life and I am on my third reading. . . It is a privilege to follow an inner journey which leads to such a flowering of the human spirit.' MY, Saffron Walden

'I very much enjoyed *Marjory Fleming*. It is a strange, intense story with extremely complicated emotional strands running right through from start to finish. . . I am so enjoying the books and greatly look forward to each fresh publication. For me, they are quite perfect and fill the gap between difficult literature and the Aga Saga variety. They are all interesting and readable and unputdownable. I am always deeply involved by the end and greatly disappointed to have finished. . . most I have, at least in part, re-read.' HW, Newark

'I have just finished *Consequences* and enjoyed it very much, and also appreciated the reviews contemporary with the novel.' AG, Abingdon



Our Spring 2001 Books

It's directness, its uncompromising truths, its depth of feeling. . . make it, in some sort, a classic,' wrote Oscar Wilde in 1889, about *Reuben Sachs* (1888). Its author, Amy Levy, who died aged 27, had been the first Jewish student at Newnham College, Cambridge; she had then published poetry, articles, book reviews, and *The Romance of a Shop*, a 'new woman' novel describing the struggle by four sisters to earn their own living. *Reuben Sachs* is a short, fierce satire about the marriage market, ambition and money amongst the Jewish community in Bayswater and Maida Vale. Its description of Anglo-Jewry was in part a response to the idealism of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and some have read it as anti-semitic; in fact *Reuben Sachs* (which has a new Preface by Julia Neuberger) is a heartfelt feminist plea for women to be allowed to fill their lives with something more than money, social status, gossip and cards.

The author of the hugely bestselling 'William' books, Richmal Crompton, once hinted that her 'Frankenstein's Monster' had ambushed recognition she would have welcomed for her serious fiction - fifty volumes of novels and short stories written over 35 years. *Family Roundabout* (1948) spans the inter-war years and portrays two widowed matriarchs' quite different approaches to their children. 'Mrs Fowler's hands-off approach is on the face of it more appealing than Mrs Willoughby's repressive autocracy,' Juliet Aykroyd writes in the Afterword about a novel that uses 'gleeful humour, acute observation of human silliness, compassion for the disempowered' to create many 'sparkling pleasures'. She concludes: *Family Roundabout* is 'a novel-length debate on the subject of what makes a good mother, yet in the end we are left pondering, What is a successful mother, or, come to that, a successful child?'

Finally...

This is a short *PQ* because it is accompanied by the first *Persephone Catalogue*, which we hope will be useful as a way of catching up on already-published titles.

The Book at Lunchtime has been extremely successful but we have decided to experiment with the Book at Teatime; this will cost £8.25 plus VAT (ie. £10), and the 'Old English Plum Cake' out of *Good Things in England* will be served. The Teas will be from 2.30-4.30 on Thursday 18 January, at which we will discuss *Fidelity*, Wednesday 14 February (*Someone at a Distance*) and Wednesday

14 March (*The Home-Maker*). There have been mutterings about 'the rush hour' and 'fetching from school': if anyone would prefer Books in the Morning, perhaps madeira and seed cake (which we seem to remember is what they had in the morning in *Northanger Abbey*) from, say, 11-1, please let us know.

The next *PQ* will be sent out in early March.

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If we have failed to acknowledge something that appears in *The Persephone Quarterly*, please let us know.

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