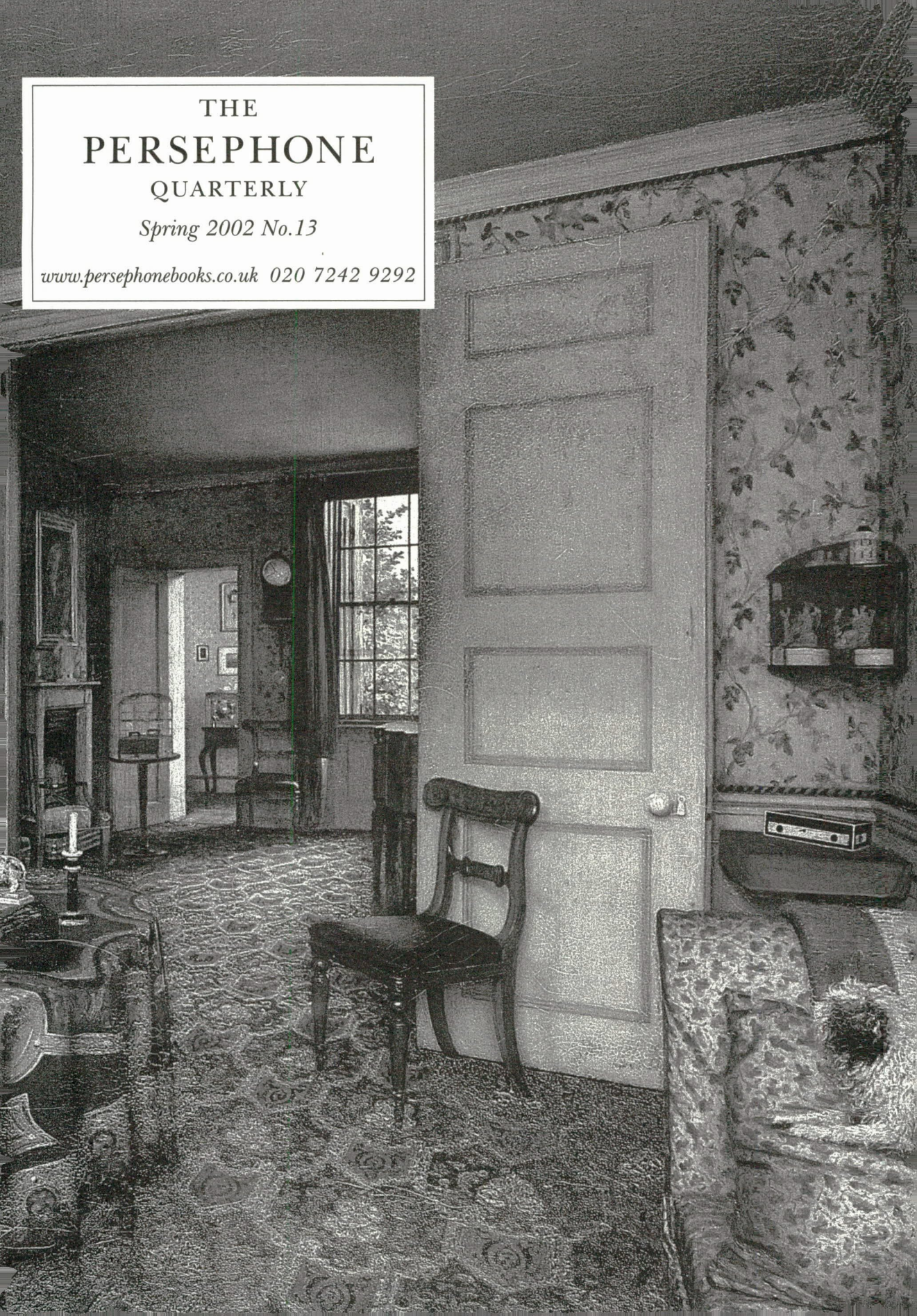

THE PERSEPHONE QUARTERLY

Spring 2002 No.13

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Our Spring 2002 Books

Georgian houses are the setting for this spring's Persephone books, one a terraced house in London during the nineteenth century, the other a large decaying house in the country in 1942.

The Carlyles at Home is about Thomas and Jane Carlyle's life together at 5 (now 24) Cheyne Row, Chelsea; it was written in 1965 by Thea Holme, a former actress then living there as co-custodian of the house with her husband. Her book evokes the everyday life of the Carlyles from the day they moved in, in 1834, until Jane's death in 1866. 'The Carlyles' dour joy in the daily battle of study and kitchen is the making of Thea Holme's detailed acccount of housekeeping at Cheyne Row,' wrote VS Pritchett in the *New Statesman* in 1965. 'No stove, cooking by candlelight, a state of civil war about doors and windows: he can't bear them closed, she freezes in the draughts.

'They are the best letter-writers, born chatterers and reporters who can knock off a scene or a person in a talking phrase. Jane Carlyle gives us Mrs Leigh Hunt continually in and out, borrowing spoons, porridge, even a brass fender, and usually drunkish. Jane screams at Browning for putting a kettle down on her best carpet; tells how an Irish builder falls through the ceiling of her bedroom during alterations; battles with the 32 maids she had in 34 years at £8 a year. She has that innate Scottish gift for the pawky recital of domestic clatter.'

Cover: a detail from 'A Chelsea Interior': Carlyle's House at 5 (now 24) Cheyne Row in1857, by Robert Tait.
© National Trust Photographic Library/Michael Boys

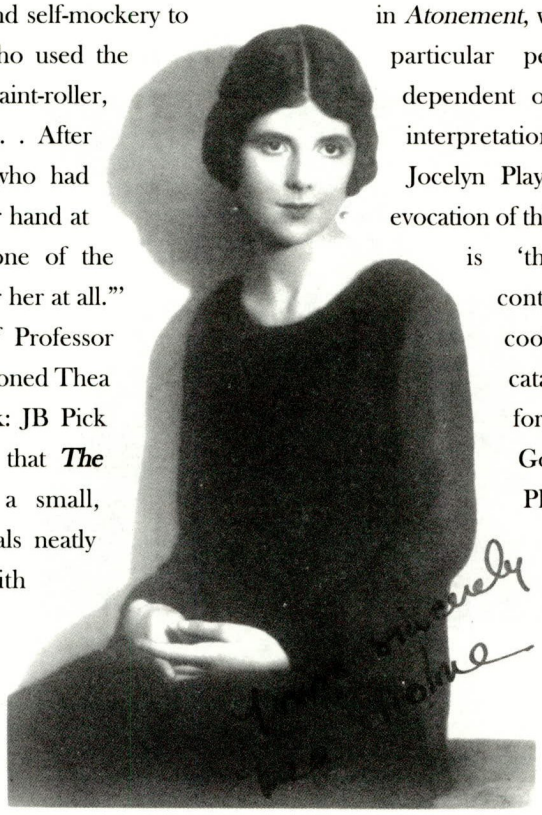
And the *Times Literary Supplement* observed: 'Mrs Holme has quantities of first-hand material rearranged nimbly and thrown into sharp relief by the inimitable comments of Jane Carlyle. It must convert the most highflown enemy of trivia: no couple's physical daily life is more accessible; their pets and pests, and digestive troubles and medicines, income and taxation, the plants they grew, the clothes they wore and mended. . . Thea Holme presents it all in its duality as an anxious drama and, through Jane's own accounts, an uproarious farce.'

Jane may have subsumed her life into that of the Sage of Chelsea but, such is the interest nowadays in domestic history and women writers, most twenty-first century readers will be more interested in her life than in her husband's. Each of the eleven chapters, with titles such as 'The Soundproof Study', 'Money' and 'The Garden', describes a different aspect of life in Cheyne Row, whether it is yet another builders' drama or a maid giving birth in the china closet while 'Mr Carlyle was taking tea in the dining-room with Miss Jewsbury talking to him!!! Just a thin small door between!' The open door to the closet is clearly visible in the Robert Tait painting of the two ground-floor rooms reproduced as the front and back endpapers of the Persephone edition. And because 24 Cheyne Row was bought by The Carlyle's House Memorial Trust, and is today run by the National Trust (to whom Persephone Books is donating fifty pence for each book sold) visitors can see the room almost exactly as it was when it was painted 150 years ago.

The Carlyles at Home is published at the

same time as a 600 page, £25 book by Rosemary Ashton, subtitled 'portrait of a marriage', which has been widely reviewed. In the *Sunday Times* John Carey asked 'whether Jane was not the better writer as well as the keener wit. She never published anything in her lifetime, but her hundreds of letters show subtlety, humour and self-mockery to a degree that Carlyle, who used the English language like a paint-roller, was quite incapable of. . . After Jane's death, Dickens, who had encouraged her to try her hand at a novel, remarked, "None of the writing women came near her at all."'

Three reviewers of Professor Ashton's book also mentioned Thea Holme's 'felicitous' book: JB Pick in *The Scotsman* wrote that ***The Carlyles at Home*** 'is a small, intimate book which deals neatly and sympathetically with their life in Chelsea.' The *New Statesman* called it a 'delightful reissue' And John Gross in the *Sunday Telegraph* observed: 'Some readers may feel that Rosemary Ashton's book is too long. For those who want a more compact account, domestic in emphasis, and confined to the Chelsea years, there is a timely resissue of Thea Holme's charming 1965 miniature ***The Carlyles at Home***.'



THEA JOHNSTON.
[Thea Holme]

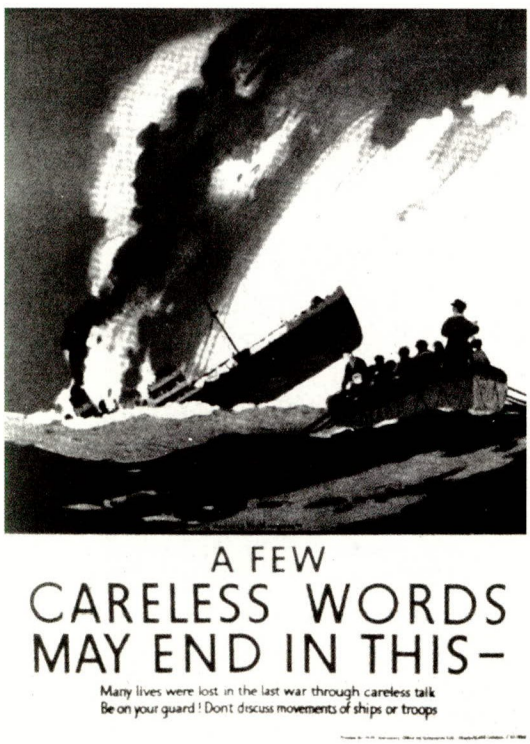
© Mander & Mitcheson Theatre Collection

Our other spring book is set in the kind of house that the National Trust was trying to save for the nation during the war years and after. ***A House in the Country*** (1944) by Jocelyn Playfair takes place sixty years ago this summer, at the time of the fall of Tobruk in 1942, one of the low points of the war. Its great interest for modern readers is that it is authentic: because it was written at the time it has a realism denied to modern writers such as Sebastian Faulks in *Charlotte Gray* or Ian McEwan in *Atonement*, who do their research, evoke a particular period, but ultimately are dependent on their own and historians' interpretation of events. A novel like Jocelyn Playfair's is an exact, unaffected evocation of things as they were at the time. It is 'the conflict between the contentment of the garden, cooking and home, and the cataclysmic events outside that forms the leitmotif,' writes Ruth Gorb in the Preface. 'Jocelyn Playfair wrote the book in a period when the war effort was all, and the plucky little Mrs Miniver figure had no doubt about what England was fighting for. But Cressida, the heroine, sees war as having reached "such a peak of insensate fury that it could lead nowhere but to ultimate chaos."'

Through conversations with the lodgers who are finding temporary refuge in the house Cressida re-evaluates everything with intellligence and insight; she realises that things would never be the same again. The relative tranquillity of her surroundings is deftly contrasted with what is happening to Charles Valery, the owner of Brede Manor, who has been torpedoed and, floating in a boat hoping for rescue, thinks about his past life.

Although Cressida has not been literally torpedoed, emotionally she is shipwrecked by what she knows about the progress of the war and the lives of those she is sheltering: the Polish refugee who is waiting to go back to Europe, the young soldier who will soon be posted, the wife whose husband is at Tobruk, the elderly gardener who continues to 'dig for victory' even after the bombs shatter his life.

Cressida's strength, Jocelyn Playfair is saying, is her ability to remain the 'still centre' even while she knows there might be no future and while she deals with people like her visiting aunt, selfishly impervious to wartime difficulties. In the final scene, after many vicissitudes, Cressida 'took a saucepan over to the Aga. Perhaps her somewhat high-flown thoughts had given her a heightened view of the commoner things of life, but the Aga looked to her symbolic at that moment. It seemed cleaner, squarer, more solid than usual, like a fortress for the simple, sane things of life; comfort, good food, warmth, friendliness.'



The Persephone reader who discovered this book, Mark Valentine, found it in a bookshop in Carnforth (the setting for the railway station scenes in *Brief Encounter*). 'It was while making my way through the fiction shelves that I chanced upon a few titles by Jocelyn Playfair. The name attracted me, so I took one down to have a look. Opening this at random, I was struck at once by a certain freshness and clarity about the prose. Reading on, I felt a growing sense of the sincerity of the author and her fine sensitivity to her characters' inner emotional life. Though I knew nothing about her, I thought this was an author worth finding out about. The books were not expensive, so I took whatever was there: and over time I chanced upon a few other titles by her. These reinforced my conviction that here was a quietly accomplished voice, whose work often achieved a subtle felicity and who spoke of people – women on their own at the Home Front, refugees, men whose minds were marred by the War – whose lives were often otherwise muted. Persephone's remarkable back-list had already reminded me of the work of Mollie Panter-Downes and I re-read *One Fine Day* (1947). I thought I saw an affinity between this book and Jocelyn Playfair's ***A House in the Country***, and wrote to Persephone to say so. With remarkable alacrity and open-mindedness they asked to see this title and were at once impressed. Their detective work uncovered the author's family. At this point, I bowed out, well content, safe in the knowledge that Persephone would do ample justice to an author who certainly deserves her rediscovery. I hope that most Persephone readers will welcome this reprint: but I think none will have more pleasure than I will, when I unwrap this freshly-printed, lovingly-designed edition to put beside the old, faded, shabby original that started it all.'

Our Readers Write

'I have just finished reading ***Someone at a Distance***, which is absolutely enthralling. Reading the moment when Avery is discovered on the sofa with Louise sent chills down my spine.' JH, Leeds

'***Miss Pettigrew*** is without doubt one of the funniest, most joyful books I have ever read. She may have been forced into a particular role by her circumstances, but when the opportunity came, she dared! This book is definitely my choice for my desert island.' IK, Brockley

'***Little Boy Lost*** is one of the few books which I have read in recent years which I couldn't bear to put down until I had finished it!' CR, Surrey

'I am amazed at the progressive thinking about the role of men and women in ***The Home-Maker***. I myself felt, as she puts it so well through Lester Knapp, that "you can't hire somebody to be a parent for your children" nor "hire intelligence sharpened by love."' IH, Telford

'Here is some Apple Butter from ***Good Things in England***, made with apples from North Somerset. It's the most enjoyable recipe – authentically satisfying (smells, tastes, sights – as the colour changes from silver to amber) and delightfully absorbing. I do hope you like it.' BR, Brockley

'I had not realised until now that Frances Hodgson Burnett had also written adult novels and am thrilled to rediscover her. Emily in ***The Making of a Marchioness*** has joined my long list of fictional heroines. I am enchanted by the detailed descriptions of clothes and domestic interiors and do love the melodrama! I have also just read ***Little Boy Lost*** and was very moved by such a beautifully written and touching story.' SW, Dublin

'I have read ***Every Eye*** and ***Brook Evans***, the former I found highly sensitive but a little bloodless, the latter was a marvellous antidote with its waves of emotion and powerful storytelling. I loved the way Susan Glaspell was able to recreate three very different times and places and at the same time keep the core of the book a constant.' JB, Windsor

'I was talking to a friend who has almost finished ***Farewell Leicester Square*** and is loving it, she has also just finished ***Little Boy Lost*** (in floods of tears) and we agreed that although we both read lots of other books, Persephone books have been the highlight of our reading over the last couple of years. You have filled a gap in our reading with authors we didn't know existed. I don't even hesitate about ordering now, I just assume I'll love whatever you are publishing.' LB, Victoria, Australia

'I have just read ***Consequences*** – a revelation! Until Persephone enlightened me, I had no idea that the author of the gently amusing *Diary of a Provincial Lady* had written such a powerful and disturbing novel. Like other Persephone readers I too was shocked by the ending. I couldn't put this heartbreaking book down.' SG, Woodford Green

'***Miss Pettigrew*** was delightful, and ***Good Evening, Mrs Craven*** had beautifully written stories, every one a cameo. I thought ***Marjory Fleming*** a wonderful insight into the mind and development of a very gifted and sensitive child.' JT, Edinburgh

'I had another lost day because of Persephone Books. I read the first chapter of ***Little Boy Lost*** on the train and then at five in the afternoon, having not done any of the other things I should for the rest of the day, I was gutted.' JB, N. London

From Some Recent Reviews

Charlie Lee-Potter opened a discussion on BBC Radio 4's Open Book programme by saying: 'Persephone Books has just republished Frances Hodgson Burnett's adult novel, ***The Making of a Marchioness***, a bestseller when it was first published in 1901. The writer Kate Saunders is passionate about it; the academic Gretchen Gerzina [who wrote the Afterword to the book] loves it so much she is writing Frances Hodgson Burnett's biography, having one day read ***Marchioness*** and been astounded by it. . . Kate, you came into the studio thrilled by this book, you had been searching for it for such a long time and now you've got your hands on it, it seems as though you couldn't quite believe your luck. What do you love about the book so much?' KS: 'I was up till two in the morning finishing it, turning the pages, it's not a novel without flaws, and it's not what you'd call I suppose serious, profound literature, but it's done so well, and it tells the story with such charm and directness. I suppose the magic in the everyday is what she's very good at, which is what children love about her work and it gets through into ***Marchioness***.' CLP: 'The novel divides into two. The first half has the heroine married by the end, the second has death threats, themes of domestic violence and revenge. How well do you think the books divide?' KS: 'I think very well, because the typical romantic story would end with, as Virginia Woolf used to say, marriages all round, but here, because we actually get to see the marriage, it's not at all a typical marriage story.'

In the *Daily Telegraph* Rebecca Abrams called ***Marchioness*** 'a wildly romantic tale, whose hero and heroine are "totally unromantic". This running joke gives the book a wry edge. Persephone Books is to be applauded for reissuing it in this elegant new edition.' 'Although the central premise is essentially escapist,' said the *Guardian*, 'this grown-up tale has a touch of Edith Wharton's stern unsentimentality in its portrayal of men, women and the marriage market.' And the *Spectator* wrote: 'The singular charm of the book is the way it happily enables the reader to have the story both ways, to enjoy both the Cinderella plot and the comic treatment of the marriage market.' 'Its happy ending and melodrama mark it out as a product of its time,' observed the *Daily Mail*, 'but sharp observations on constants such as class and social aspiration make this charming tale more than a mere curiosity.'

'The stories Katharine Mansfield wrote in the penultimate year of her life have been collected as ***The Montana Stories***,' noted *The Tablet*. 'The fascinating quotations from her diary and letters in the publisher's note show how strongly she felt her writing was a path towards moral and spiritual purification'. The *Spectator* wrote at length about the 'strange fascination' of ***The Children who lived in a Barn***, praising 'a particularly interesting and perceptive introduction by Jacqueline Wilson'; the *Guardian*'s Nicholas Lezard chose as one of his six paperbacks of the year ***Little Boy Lost***, 'a nail-bitingly emotional story of a man who may or may not have tracked down the son he had to leave behind in wartime France'; this was also Rachel Billington's book of the year in the *Daily Mail*; and Carol Shields 'read and loved a reprint of ***The Home-Maker***, a remarkable and brave 1924 novel about being a house husband' (*Daily Telegraph* Books of the Year).

What's wrong with new novels

asked the American critic BR Myers recently in a much talked-about article.

Robert McCrum in the *Observer* called this 'an entertaining and passionate lament for what Myers sees as the parlous state of contemporary American literary writing,' adding: 'Myers is saying nothing that has not been said behind the hand, and out of the corner of the mouth. But in years to come, literary historians may look back on this manifesto and realise this was the moment at which, like the little boy in the fairytale, someone dared to say out loud that the emperor has no clothes.'

Nothing gives me the feeling of having been born several decades too late quite like the modern 'literary' best seller. Give me a time-tested masterpiece or what critics patronisingly call a fun read – *Sister Carrie* or just plain *Carrie*. Give me anything, in fact, as long as it doesn't have a recent prize jury's seal of approval on the front and a clutch of precious raves on the back. In the bookstore I'll sometimes sample what all the fuss is about, but one glance at the affected prose – 'furious dabs of tulips stuttering,' say, or 'in the dark before the day yet was' and I'm hightailing it to the friendly black spines of the Penguin Classics.

I realise that such a declaration must sound perversely ungrateful to the literary establishment. For years now editors, critics, and prize jurors, not to mention novelists themselves, have been telling the rest of us how lucky we are to be alive and reading in these exciting times. The absence of a dominant school of criticism, we are told, has given rise to an extraordinary variety of styles, a smorgasbord with something for every palate. As the novelist and critic David Lodge has remarked, in summing up a lecture about the coexistence of fabulation, minimalism, and other movements, 'Everything is in and nothing is out.' Coming from insiders to whom a term like 'fabulation' actually means something, this hyperbole is excusable, even endearing; it's as if a team of hotel chefs were getting excited about their assortment of cabbages. From a reader's standpoint, however, 'variety' is the last word that comes to mind, and more appears to be 'out' than ever before.

More than half a century ago popular storytellers like Christopher Isherwood and Somerset Maugham were ranked among the finest novelists of their time, and were considered no less literary, in their own way, than Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Today any accessible, fast-moving story written in unaffected prose is deemed to be 'genre fiction' – at best an excellent 'read' or a 'page turner,' but never literature with a capital L. An author with a track record of blockbusters may find the publication of a new work treated like a pop-culture event, but most 'genre' novels are lucky to get an inch in the back pages of *The New York Times Book Review*. Everything written in self-conscious, writerly prose, on the other hand, is now considered to be 'literary fiction' – not necessarily good literary fiction, mind you, but always worthier of respectful attention than even the best-written thriller or romance.

It is these works that receive full-page critiques, often one in the Sunday book-review section and

another in the same newspaper during the week. It is these works, and these works only, that make the annual short lists of award committees. The 'literary' writer need not be an intellectual one. Jeering at status-conscious consumers, bandying about words like 'ontological' and 'nominalism': this is what passes for profundity in novels these days. Even the most obvious triteness is acceptable, provided it comes with a postmodern wink. What is not tolerated is a strong element of action – unless, of course, the idiom is obtrusive enough to keep suspense to a minimum. (Conversely, a natural prose style can be pardoned if a novel's pace is slow enough.)

The dualism of literary versus genre has all but routed the old trinity of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow, which was always invoked tongue-in-cheek anyway. Writers who would once have been called middlebrow are now assigned, depending solely on their degree of verbal affectation, to either the literary or the genre camp. David Guterson is thus granted Serious Writer status for having buried a murder mystery under sonorous tautologies (*Snow Falling on Cedars*, 1994), while Stephen King, whose *Bag of Bones* (1998) is a more intellectual but less pretentious novel, is still considered to be just a very talented genre storyteller. Everything is 'in,' in other words, as long as it keeps the reader at a respectfully admiring distance.

Reviewers tend to think that anyone indifferent to the latest 'smart' authors must be vegetating in front of the television, or at best silently mouthing through a Tom Clancy thriller. The truth is that a lot of us are perfectly happy with literature written before we were born – and why shouldn't we be? The notion that contemporary fiction possesses greater relevance for us because it talks of the internet or supermodels or familiar brand names is ridiculous. Older fiction also serves to remind us of the power of unaffected English. In this scene from Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) a man meets a woman at a Fourth of July picnic. 'He saw her running in the women's race, her arms close to her sides. She was among the stragglers and stopped and walked off the field, laughing and wiping her face and throat with a handkerchief of the same material as her silk summer dress. Leventhal was standing near her brother. She came up to them and said, "Well, I used to be able to run when smaller." That she was still not accustomed to thinking of herself as a woman, and a beautiful woman, made Leventhal feel very tender toward her. She was in his mind when he watched the contestants in the three-legged race hobbling over the meadow. He noticed one in particular, a man with red hair who struggled forward, angry with his partner, as though the race were a pain and a humiliation which he could wipe out only by winning. "What a difference," Leventhal said to himself. "What a difference in people."'

Scenes that show why a character falls in love are rarely convincing in novels. This one works beautifully, and with none of the 'evocative' metaphor-hunting or postmodern snickering that tends to accompany such scenes today. The syntax is simple but not unnaturally terse – a point worth emphasising to those who think that the only alternative to contemporary writerliness is the plodding style of Raymond Carver. Bellow's verbal restraint makes the unexpected repetition of 'what a difference' all the more touching. The entire novel is marked by the same quiet brilliance. As Christopher Isherwood once said to Cyril Connolly, real talent manifests itself not in a writer's affectation but 'in the exactness of his observation

[and] the justice of his situations.'

It is easy to despair of ever seeing a return to that kind of prose, especially with the cultural élite doing such a quietly efficient job of maintaining the status quo. Clumsy writing begets clumsy thought, which begets even clumsier writing. The only way out is to look back to a time when authors had more to say than 'I'm a Writer!'; when the novel wasn't just a 300-page caption for the photograph on the inside jacket. A reorientation toward tradition would benefit writers no less than readers. But if our writers and critics already respect the novel's rich tradition – if they can honestly say they got more out of *Moby Dick* than just a favourite sentence – then why are they so contemptuous of the urge to tell an exciting story?

'The Wife', 1929, by Tirzah Ravilious, from The Wood Engravings of Tirzah Ravilious (1987)

Small publishers are to be commended for reissuing so many older novels; it would be even more encouraging if our national newspapers devoted an occasional full-page review to one of these new editions – or, for that matter, to any novel that has lapsed into undeserved obscurity. And modern readers need to see that intellectual content can be reconciled with a vigorous, fast-moving plot, psychological thrillers or translated fiction. To discover Shiga Naoya's *A Dark Night's Passing* (1937) and Enchi Fumiko's *The Waiting Years* (1957), two heartbreaking classics of Japanese fiction, is to realise how little we need a white man's geisha memoirs.

Feel free to disparage these recommendations, but can anyone outside of the big publishing houses claim that the mere fact of newness should entitle a novel to more of our attention? Many readers wrestle with only one bad book before concluding that they are too dumb to enjoy anything 'challenging'. Their first foray into literature shouldn't have to end, for lack of better advice, on the third page of something like Don DeLillo's *Underworld.* At the very least, the critics could start toning down their hyperbole. How better to ensure that Faulkner and Melville remain unread by the young than to invoke their names in praise of some new bore every week? How better to discourage clear and honest self-expression than to call Annie Proulx – as Carolyn See did in the *Washington Post* – 'the best prose stylist working in English now, bar none'? Whatever happens, the old American scorn for pretension is bound to reassert itself someday – and dear God, let it be soon. © 2001 BR Myers, first published *The Atlantic Monthly.*

Pandora's Handbag

Elizabeth Young, 'the great avant-garde literary critic the British had, but never really knew existed. How bloody typical' (Will Self) died in the spring of 2001 aged only 50. *The Times* called her 'a grounded combination of the everyday and the esoteric; eccentric but not flaky'; the *Guardian* obituary writer described her as 'one of the most brilliant literary critics of her generation'; and the *New Statesman* singled out 'her fierce independent intelligence, her originality and daring as a literary critic, the depth of her reading and, above all, her fearlessness. She was one of a small squad of reviewers who were not in thrall to established reputations and, because they were smart and well-read, wrote about books and the writing life with enormous power and iconoclasm. In a less meretricious age, Elizabeth Young would have been a star; but, in many ways, she was too good, too uncompromising in her tastes.'

Now her literary criticism has been published as *Pandora's Handbag* (Serpent's Tail). One of the essays in it first appeared in the *New Statesman* in July 1999, when she wrote: 'We have been warned regularly, for almost a century now, that the Death of the Novel is nigh. This dire prediction has always been confounded but now, for the first time, something seems different. I can find almost no new UK fiction that I wish to read. I am not suggesting that there is no-one at all in Britain who is currently writing readable fiction but with the occasional exception there is very little that, well, seizes the soul. Most of what passes for literary fiction in Britain is just not very good.'

'The aftermath to this essay,' wrote Elizabeth Young in the book, 'was most interesting and curious. I received a letter from an editor at a new, mail-order publishing house who had divined, quite correctly, that what I was complaining about was not being able to find books to *love*. My library is full of books I truly love but it is very hard to find new ones now. Anyway, she enclosed a copy of ***Fidelity*** by Susan Glaspell – and I did indeed love it. I was particularly intrigued by these publishers, Persephone Books, as their founder, Nicola Beauman [*embarrassingly nice remark*] wrote *A Very Great Profession*: The Woman's Novel 1914-39, and apparently had long wanted to be able to reprint books she loved which had been forgotten. I wrote to thank Victoria Wallace, who had sent ***Fidelity***, and she sent me ***William – an Englishman*** and ***The Victorian Chaise-longue***. I read both these novels consecutively, at one sitting. They were extraordinarily absorbing – and very good. The books themselves are utterly beautiful – grey softbacks with the most incredible endpapers, designs chosen from the period of the novel and intended to enhance and echo the themes of the book So if you, like me, are short of real fiction – the sort that blots out the world – I suggest you contact Persephone Books. All the books cost £10 each, which I think is a bargain nowadays.

'I am very, very bad at answering letters and acknowledging books sent to me. The fact that I wrote long letters back to Persephone Books indicates very clearly how much receiving these publications meant to me – and how happy I was to encounter a publisher with such an admirable set of priorities. Books must be loved – with discrimination.'

The Persephone Short Story

'Chopin' by Natacha Stewart is the eighth in the Persephone Quarterly Collection.

In the study, Guy Dutour, known to the village as '*notre cher Maître*', played the 'Andante spianato', Opus 22. When he began the 'Grande Polonaise brillante', his lap dog, Malachite, asleep on a cushion by the pedals, raised her heavy Pekinese head, opened her laminated idol's eyes one at a time, and wheezed appreciation. Upstairs, in the enormous bedroom Mme de Sévigné had occupied as a girl, his young wife, Annette, examined the pale curve of her eyebrow in a magnifying mirror. She held no tweezers; she could no more touch a hair of her brow than pluck a straying blossom at the edge of the pond.

At the kitchen door, Guy Dutour's maid of fifteen years, Gertrude, heard the chef's bicycle on the gravelled path. He dismounted with the bicycle still in motion, and Gertrude caught the handle bars like a bridle. Once he was over the threshold, she took off his beret and his trench coat, and handed him his chef's hat.

It had rained for two weeks now; sometimes it cleared toward the end of an afternoon, just long enough for the sun to illuminate the landscape until it looked like a page from *Les Très Riches Heures,* and then it rained again. The water screws weltered in the drowned wild-strawberry beds, a fresh downpour tumbled the pink snails off the raspberry bushes, and the frogs were in paradise. The wind always came from the east, and on the far horizon four cypresses leaned to the right, like the first diligent strokes in a child's exercise book. Annette watched them from the window as she twisted her pale hair into a fan-shaped knot, in the manner of the peasant women of the county; then she turned to her back-view mirror to secure it, high, with two gold barrettes from Cartier's. In the study, Malachite lightly snored at the crescendos in the Mazurka, Opus 24, No. 4. In the kitchen, the chef's right hand beat a rotary motion with a silver fork while his left squeezed olive oil from a medicine dropper. Then Gertrude announced lunch. *Oeufs mayonnaise, escalopes de veau Maintenon, petits pois, laitue, fromage de chèvre, mousse au chocolat,* and coffee. Over coffee, Guy Dutour addressed his wife: 'My dear, what are your plans for the afternoon?' And Annette answered, 'A little sleep; perhaps a little read; then Gertrude is going to help me hang the full-length mirror. She is going to the post office to get my new Balenciaga. And I must supervise the dinner. Have you forgotten? We have guests tonight.'

Once in the enormous bed and under the vicuna, Annette placed two small balls of hardened pink wax in the shells of her ears, to protect herself from the frogs, and fell into a sleep of fleeting, soundless visions. In the study, his slippered feet on the arm of the couch, Guy Dutour drowsed over Simenon's latest 'Maigret'. At the kitchen table, propped by cushions, a napkin tied around her neck, Malachite ate cold chicken on Gertrude's left, while at the farm on the estate, Eglantine, the farmer's wife, in search of a truce with the flooded afternoon, fed her small twins *vin ordinaire* from a teaspoon before putting them to the breast. Drunk in the cellar, her husband, Pierre-Emile, sang and lamented his sinking

vineyards as he rubbed Baume Bengué into the joints of his knees.

Guy Dutour was awakened by a little girl who moved toward him jerkily, her eyes strained, her face wet, delicate, and green. She held an offering of sweet peas in one hand and half a goat cheese in the other. Before she attempted the poem dedicated to '*notre cher Mâitre*', Guy Dutour brought her to the cushion by the pedals and prodded her hand into a crescent of perfumed sleeping fur: Malachite opened one laminated eye, wheezed, growled, barked, and, in warning, bit the air sideways.

When Gertrude took away the sobbing little girl, Guy Dutour sat down to the piano and worked a passage from the Mazurka, Opus 24, No. 4, with infinite patience, as if he were playing Czerny back in his sedulous childhood. Gertrude, her left hand on the door-knob, waited for the end of a phrase to bring in the camomile tea. As she was about to set the cup and saucer on the rim of the piano, the teaspoon wavered, rattled, and fell to the carpetless floor. Gertrude laughed, and her direct laughter, urgent and uniting, settled between them like a conspiracy. For Guy Dutour, the moment (sprung from the fluid mazurka and his right shoulder blade, which ached from playing in the dampness) converged on Gertrude's back and her smell (fresh-chopped tarragon, delicate sweat, and a drop of *eau de Javel*). He watched her wide back stretching the blue lawn house dress as she bent to pick up the spoon, and he remembered and saw her, climbing aboard trains with the mute practice keyboard - Gertrude, who never interrupted a phrase, and saved his leftover camomile to rinse her hair! The chilled longing, the stilled sadness, of the mazurka still held to his fingertips as his hand gently went out to her; his insured hand, kissed so often, came down the length of her spine and - as she straightened, gripping her spoon - over the lenient flesh of her buttock.

Through it all, dressed in her new Balenciaga, Annette had stood in the doorway like one of those absurd apparitions summoned by Simenon to force an improbable dénouement.

Gertrude, who saw her in Guy Dutour's eyes, walked out of the room and made her way to the kitchen carefully, like a patient after adrenalin. Annette ran upstairs, combed out her pale hair, and put in a phone call to her lover in Paris. While waiting, she thought of her black sealskin coat, and decided that for the coming season its shoulders should be taken in a little. She imagined her other furs, labelled, hibernating in cold storage. She catalogued them, simultaneously wrapping the image of her husband in infinite tenderness. And she finished the list with the private little smile she had, at times, smiled against the lapel of a dinner jacket when a man, at a charity ball, complimented her on the skin of her back and shoulders. She cancelled her call.

Guy Dutour had thrown a raincoat over his shoulders, tucked Malachite under his arm, and run slowly to the farmhouse, where he now sat drinking his third glass of Anjou *rosé* with Pierre-Emile, while Eglantine rocked the twins, who slept, flushed and fitful, grasping for air with small mottled hands. In spite of her curiosity - she sniffed intrigue behind the unexpected visit - Eglantine often deserted the men's conversation to dream a set of dentures patterned on Annette's small and delectable teeth.

Guy Dutour left them to run his long black Chrysler through the mud of the village; he crossed the swollen river, grazed and splashed the length of wall by the Manoir de Vivefontaine, drove through

the brown countryside, into the forest, until he saw, posed like a white nest in a clearing, the Château de Cybèle. Malachite whined and trembled by the doorstep as Guy Dutour hesitated, then recognized the loose stone that the gatekeeper had shown him. Underneath it was a key. The door opened silently, and in spite of her wheeze, which had amplified with the damp drive and the new dust, Malachite followed Guy Dutour as he tried the easy marble staircase and haunted the forsaken rooms with the idea of renting, perhaps, for the following summer.

jacket for A Note in Music 1932

When he returned, Annette and her two guests, the lisping conductor and the New York impresario who never spoke, were sitting down to dinner. Gertrude served *asperges sauce mousseline, poulet à l'estragon, carottes au beurre noir,* and *chicorée à l'ail.* Eglantine, still in search of intrigue, made her daily delivery in person. 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' she said as she slowly crossed the dining room, balancing a wet copy of *France-Soir* on her head; she carried the fresh goat cheese to the kitchen, that Gertrude might bring it back in. They had *crème renversée.* Throughout dinner, the conductor who lisped spoke: 'My beat . . .' he said. 'My baton . . .' 'The way *I* handle a musician . . .' 'My sinus will disappear, God forbid,' he said, 'the day I die.' They took their coffee into the study, and Guy Dutour sat down to the piano. Malachite slept through the 'Andante spianato', Opus 22, the 'Grande Polonaise brillante', and the Etude, Opus 10, No. 4. 'Marvellous!' said the New York impresario, over a large cup of *tilleul.* 'Stupendous and stupefying!' said the lisping conductor, and, waving Guy Dutour aside, he got up, rubbed his jewelled hands together, walked toward the Pleyel, and sat down.

Annette excused herself and went upstairs. She called Gertrude to the enormous bedroom and asked for a pail of hot water. She took her habitual cool bath. Alone in the bed, having found with her feet the heat of one of three hot-water bottles, Annette lay still among the cornflowers of her printed linen sheets. But she did not sleep. There was an unexpected crescendo in the Etude, Opus 10, No. 4, and the customary decrescendo of the chef's bicycle on the gravelled path. There was the rain. There were frogs. There was the old beaver coat she wore in bad weather, which she would give Gertrude as a gesture. There was the dark mink she need no longer keep for the evenings, because now she would have the sables - the outrageous, snuff-coloured sables, wild and more tender to the skin of her back than a man's dark love; the sable coat would now be hers because she had forgiven.

Cooking with Persephone

Lady Arabella Boxer talked on the radio about Agnes Jekyll, 'an inspired hostess and *maîtresse de maison*. Munstead House, where she and her husband lived, was renowned for its delicious food, and invitations for the weekend were much sought after. The essays she wrote for *The Times* and then published as ***Kitchen Essays*** in 1922 proved to be a breakthrough in cookbooks which had, up till then, consisted of dry collections of recipes. For the first time we find discursive articles with recipes thrown in informally, in a sophisticated fashion that was soon followed by others. I doubt that Lady Jekyll herself knew how to cook, yet the recipes are reliable and easy to follow. The simplest of dishes are given an imaginative garnish, like a tomato consommé served with croutons piled with whipped cream. Baked apples are served on fried slices of spongecake spread with quince jam, while *oeufs mollets* are laid on a bed of rice under a sauce mornay. For a picnic, hard-boiled eggs are served with sandwiches of lettuce or watercress and a twist of oriental salt mixed with black pepper. For a dinner party, a leg of Welsh lamb is roasted and carved, with a purée of turnips spooned into the cavity, and the slices of lamb laid back over the top, brushed with a little of the gravy. I have owned a copy of this enchanting book for many years, and have used it constantly. Occasionally Lady Jekyll loses her head, which is rather a relief, as when she suggests serving puffed wheat, toasted in the oven, and laid in mother-of-pearl shells, as a snack to serve with drinks. . .'

Leslie Geddes-Brown told *Observer* readers that 'lovely Persephone Books has just reproduced ***Kitchen Essays***, a collection of Agnes Jekyll's pioneering cookery columns'; and a Persephone reader pointed out that in *An Innkeeper's Diary* (1931) John Fothergill, who managed the Spreadeagle at Thame near Oxford, wrote: 'Colonel Freyberg, VC (*bis*), when he comes to lunch, is disappointing, for instead of talking about Gallipoli and Channel swims, he gives me long lists of the vintages of Burgundy and Port that he has. Lady Jekyll, his mother-in-law, brought a pretty trio to lunch. I owe more to her ***Kitchen Essays*** than anything else.'

In 2003 we hope to reprint a selection of cookery columns by Laurie Colwin, published in America as *Home Cooking* and *More Home Cooking*. She said in 1988: 'I love gingerbread in its true cake form - moist, spongy and spicy. It is strictly home food and exists in some form or other all throughout northern Europe. Florence White's classic ***Good Things in England***, for example, has twelve recipes. It is definitely food for a cold climate, its spicy, embracing taste the perfect thing for a winter afternoon.' She also wrote: 'My copies of Jane Grigson's *English Food* and Florence White's ***Good Things in England*** are falling apart. From them you can make such wonderful things as Queen of Puddings, Easter biscuits, potted shrimp, lemon sponge, Bath buns, orange custard, Lancashire hot pot and crumpets, which I have attempted many times, never with any success.'

Finally, *The Week* published a recipe for Madeira Cake from ***Good Things,*** 'a wonderful collection of regional recipes dating back to the fourteenth century. Florence White was passionate about English food, which she believed was the finest in the world but "nearly lost by neglect."'

Our Spring Fabrics

The endpaper for ***The Carlyles at Home*** shows 'A Chelsea Interior', a painting done in 1857 by Robert Tait, who irritated Jane Carlyle by prowling around the house making sketches and false starts because he had had 'the bright idea that he would make a picture of our sitting-room - to be "amazingly interesting to posterity a hundred years hence."' And of course it is amazingly interesting. The painting has reproduced most beautifully - our colour printer has surpassed himself - and when you look at the endpaper you can almost feel you are in the room (a detail is reproduced on the cover of this *PQ*). Indeed one can be in the room, because the house is owned by the National Trust. Opening times are on the bookmark; fifty pence goes to the Trust for each book sold (more if it is bought at the house).

The endpapers for ***A House in the Country*** reproduce a 1942 Jacqmar scarf lent to us by a Persephone reader whose mother had worn it during the war: men in caps and coloured jackets are shown digging, with the slogan 'Dig for Victory' running above and below them. This fabric is espcially appropriate because the Brede Manor gardener, hard-working and indefatigable, is such an important symbol of continuity in the novel.

Our Summer Books

Emma Smith published ***The Far Cry*** in 1949 when she was 26. It was her second book, after the highly-successful *Maiden's Trip*, about her life on a canal boat during the war. ***The Far Cry*** is set partly in India, to which she had gone with a documentary film unit, and was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for the best English novel of the year in 1950. It describes Teresa, taken away from England by her father in order to remove her from her mother's sphere of influence, going on a passage to India where, like Adela Quested, she is changed and matured. A perceptive study of character and a wonderfully readable book, 'this is my favourite Persephone book so far' declared the proof-reader - who has not been exactly unmoved by our other books.

Persephone Book No. 34 can truthfully be described as 'eagerly awaited' - by the 2500 people who have bought and loved the first volume of Mollie Panter-Downes's short stories, ***Good Evening, Mrs Craven*** (Persephone Book No. 8). ***Minnie's Room***: the Peacetime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes contains ten short stories that appeared in *The New Yorker* between 1947 and 1965. They evoke post-war Britain with a bleak but tender gaze, describing the beleaguered middle-class as it endures difficulties unimaginable before the war. Thus in the title story a family cannot believe that their maid, Minnie, is leaving them to live in a room of her own, and in 'The Exiles' an elderly couple decide that in England 'things were so bad that they must get out while there was still time.' Again, none of these stories have appeared in print since their original publication, but have been discovered in the files of *The New Yorker* by Persephone Books.

Finally. . .

Just before Christmas we had a Persephone lunch at which Jacqueline Wilson, who wrote the preface, talked about ***The Children who lived in a Barn***. She said that it is a 'crossover' book (read by both children and adults) but is unusual in not being fantasy, and that it 'was heavily influential on me in many ways that I had not realised.' She suggested that the book still has such power because the children are left on their own - them against the world - and that the barn represents every child's fantasy of the den.

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In January Tracy Chevalier nobly filled in for Susan Hill, who was unwell. She began by mentioning that she had just read ***The Home-Maker*** and enjoyed it enormously, and expressed the hope that in years to come her *Girl with a Pearl Earring* might also be a Persephone book (we would like that too!) She observed that ***The Victorian Chaise-longue*** is a horror story, or psychological science fiction, that explores the two big issues, sex and death. Whereas *Girl* is a historical novel, and she had tried to steep herself and her readers in the period in which it is set, Marghanita Laski steps in to a particular period and makes you want to get out as quickly as possible.

Other excellent lunchtime speakers included Ann Thwaite on ***The Making of a Marchioness*** and Pamela Norris on romantic love in fiction with especial reference to ***Fidelity***; at our Christmas lunch we showed the 1943 film of ***They Knew Mr Knight***. The next few lunches are sold out but there are places for the lunch on June 18th when Emma Smith will talk about her novel ***The Far Cry***.

Reading Groups: in our opinion the most suitable among our books are ***William - an Englishman***, ***Someone at a Distance***, ***Fidelity***, ***The Home-Maker***, ***Reuben Sachs*** and ***Little Boy Lost***. This is nothing to do with merit but simply reflects the fact that these six are the ones that provoke discussion, if not controversy. The successful reading group book is the one that everyone wants to talk about: consensus can be dull. If you would like advice on books to take on holiday, to give as presents, or a trio to start off with if you are a new Persephone reader - do ring and ask us! We love talking about them.

The Spectator restaurant critic said that she would be returning to Cigala: 'There can never be sufficient excuses, anyway, to flag down a London hackney carriage and bid the driver to Lambs Conduit Street. Lambs Conduit Street. Isn't that beautiful? Doesn't it just make you want to move there so that you can write letters with your old fountain-pen on the stiffest creamiest headed paper, which bears the legend at the top, "Lambs Conduit Street"?'

We hope that the name makes you want to buy books from the ***Persephone Bookshop***, 59 Lamb's Conduit Street (off Great Ormond Street), open from 9-6 on weekdays and 10-5 on Saturdays, nearest tube Russell Square, buses 19 and 38.

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