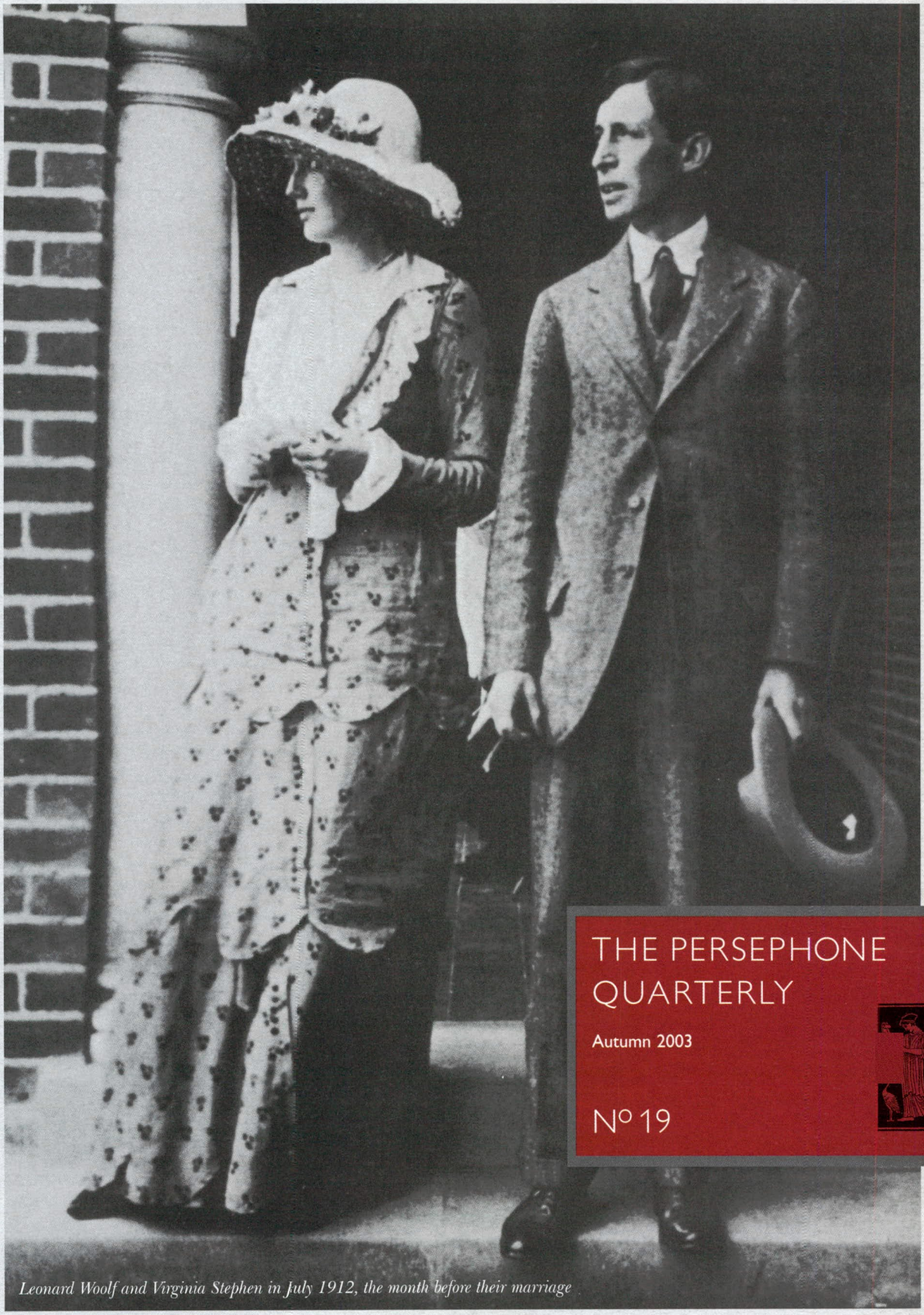


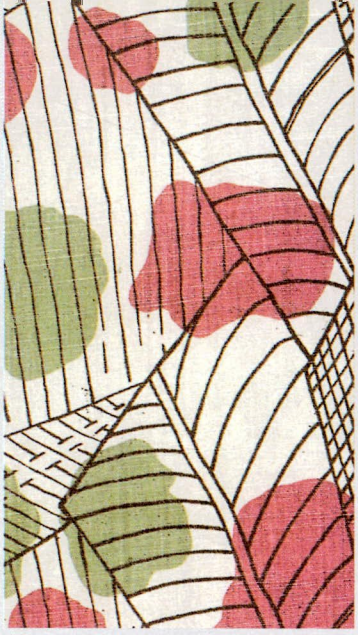
THE PERSEPHONE QUARTERLY

Autumn 2003

Nº 19

Leonard Woolf and Virginia Stephen in July 1912, the month before their marriage

OUR **AUTUMN 2003** BOOKS



'White,' designed by Vanessa Bell for the Omega Workshops, 1913

1949 design by Humphrey Spender for Edinburgh Weavers

Leonard Woolf began writing ***The Wise Virgins***, Persephone Book No. 43, on his honeymoon in September 1912, a month after his marriage to Virginia Woolf in August. It was his second (and final) novel, his first, *A Village in the Jungle*, having been written in Ceylon, where he had been a successful colonial administrator during the years 1904-11.

He had gone there not long after he first met the Stephen sisters, Vanessa and Virginia, and when he returned to England in June 1911 he quickly re-established his friendship with what was later to be known as the Bloomsbury Group. This included Vanessa Bell (as she had now become) and Virginia Stephen.

Leonard was 31 in 1912. When his father died his mother and brothers and sisters – he was one of nine – had been forced to move from Kensington to Colinette Road in Putney: 'Richstead' (ie Richmond/ Hampstead) in the novel. He was now in very much the same dilemma as his hero Harry Davies: whether to earn his living by writing (in Harry's case painting) or be subsumed by his dominating Jewish family.

The Wise Virgins is thus semi-autobiographical – should Harry go into the family business and marry the suitable but dull girl next door, or move in artistic circles and marry one of the entrancing and artistic Lawrence girls? For, as Lyndall Gordon, the biographer of Virginia Woolf, writes in her new Persephone Preface: 'It is a truth widely acknowledged that Camilla Lawrence in ***The Wise Virgins*** is a portrait of the author's wife – Virginia Woolf.' This is one reason why the novel is so intriguing. But it is also a Forsterian social comedy: funny, perceptive, highly intelligent, full of clever dialogue and at times bitterly satirical; while the dramatic and emotional dénouement still retains a great deal of its power to shock nowadays.

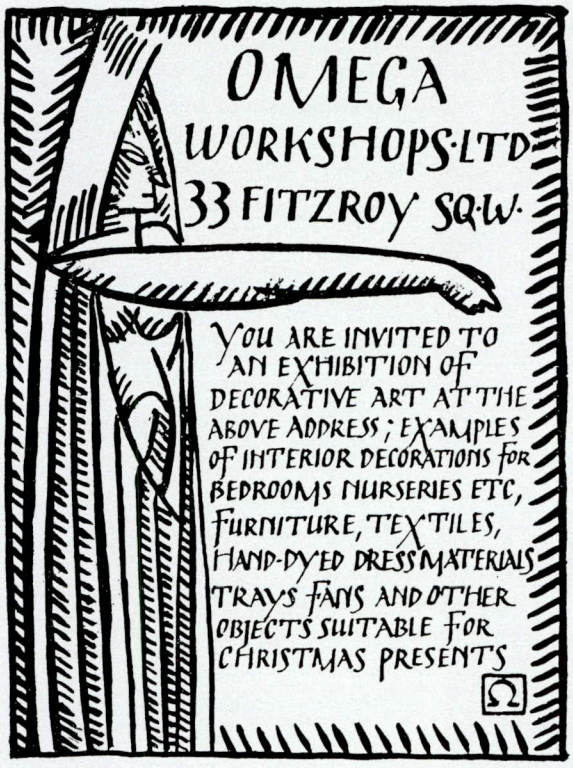
So why is ***The Wise Virgins*** not better known? Why was it never reprinted, except in a hardback in 1979? One answer lies in a remark of Leonard's that WWI 'killed it dead'. When it appeared in October 1914 it was widely reviewed but did not sell: people had other things to think about.

Another reason why the novel was 'killed' is that his family disliked it very much indeed. At the end of 1913 his mother wrote to him that if he insisted on publishing it as it stood 'I feel there will be a serious break between us.' And, in a long letter about the book, Leonard's sister Bella observed: 'You have dipped your pen in pessimism and it sticks to everyone'; 'time and again you seem to me not content with calling a spade a spade, but you insist on its being a bloody shovel.' (However, 'in a few words you often call up a picture or a sensation that others would need a page to describe.')

Finally, the book was written at the period when his wife Virginia was finishing her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, and she had a serious nervous breakdown soon after reading it in January 1915. It is therefore possible that, despite remarks such as 'Mr Woolf is going to be another of the novelists who count' (*The Scotsman*), Leonard decided that he would leave novels to his wife and concentrate on his political writing.

One of the great interests of ***The Wise Virgins*** today is that Leonard Woolf, although a key behind-the-scenes political figure, is now mostly remembered for being Virginia Woolf's husband. The novel is thus a *roman à clef* about loving someone very different from oneself, but reads at times like a parody both of the Bloomsbury Group and of Leonard's Jewish family: it is about class distinction but is also about a young man at odds with his family and confused about love. In addition, it is a novel about feminism, which Leonard called 'the belief or policy of all sensible men.' Finally, the agitation for the vote, then at its height, is integral to the book.

When ***The Wise Virgins*** came out the *Daily News* wrote: 'Mr Woolf is very young, we hope. No one but a youth has any business to be quite so cynical.' *The Irish Times* warned its readers that the book 'is not by any means a Sunday school story' and the *Manchester Courier* called it 'somewhat daring'. Only *Country Life* recognised the calibre of Camilla: 'a wonderfully fine piece of character drawing, delicate, subtle and true.'
Now Persephone readers can form their own opinion about this unusual novel.



Advertisement for an exhibition at the Omega Workshops, autumn 1913

Our other autumn title is ***Tea with Mr Rochester*** by Frances Towers, a book by a writer who had never had a book published before, and who died, aged 63, before this selection of the short stories she had been writing over the previous twenty years had appeared. But when these captivating, unusual, and at times bizarre stories were published in 1949 reviewers were unanimous in their praise. Here we reprint Angus Wilson's review in the *New Statesman*:

'Let me present you with two typical, happy, familiar English scenes. First the rectory drawing-room on a late winter afternoon: the sunlight shines palely through the pretty mauve net curtains, the chintz has faded badly, the chinese lanterns and silver leaf look a little dusty in the Poole ware jugs, but the chatter about servants and art, and the projected visit of the Thompsons to St Moritz is gay and lively, when a little brown, humorous-eyed, plain, dowdy figure withdraws herself un-noticed from the room.
It is the literary daughter and she has gone upstairs to write in her commonplace book or diary satiric observations or fierce

romantic communings in opposition to whatever may be the prevailing mood below. She has been doing this since Fanny Burney or before, and though at times we may resent a certain self-satisfaction, we must salute her as one of the great manipulators of the English literary puppet-show. Frances Towers was one of the really unique and brilliant of this elect company, and it appears no exaggeration to say that her death in 1948 may have robbed us of a figure of more than purely contemporary significance.

Vanessa Bell in 1905; pictures on pp 1, 3 and 4 by kind permission of Henrietta Garnett

At first glance one might be disposed to dismiss Miss Towers as an imitation Jane Austen, but it would be a mistaken judgment, for her cool detachment and ironic eye are directed more often than not against the sensible breeze that blasts and withers, the forthright candour that kills the soul. If something of Austen's manner is there, it is used in defence of the secret citadel, the inner being as the Brontes understood those terms. But she is well aware of the dangers of a spurious interior life, and it is one of the excitements of her work that her understanding and compassion can swing our sympathies round in the very last sentence of a story or leave us wondering most painfully if the moral self-comfort we have drawn from the tale is quite what she intended.

Moving in a world that is confined to the villages of the Home Counties, or to the area round Well Walk or Cheyne Walk in London, straying only once into Bayswater in deprecation, and writing in a subtle, allusive, but formal style, she might be dismissed as a good but rather limited writer. This homogeneity, this geographical and social narrowness are, however, deeply deceptive, for she flashes and shines now this way, now that, like a darting sunfish. 'Lucinda', for example, opens with a perfect Compton-Burnett family in whose conversation that authoress herself might well take pride; then, somehow, without incongruity, a fantasy is introduced that never falls into whimsy; finally as we are happily arrayed against sharpness and talent, there is a little twist once more that tells us that not even the pure in heart can always be quite sure they have seen God. In the last resort, however, it is her satiric wit that must captivate the most reluctant reader. The writers of the secret diaries may be the elect, yet note how Miss Towers describes the quiet, plain Sophy's entry in the first story, 'Violet': ' "Notre domestique," wrote Sophy, in the green ink she affected, "is no ordinary scullion." ' Or the unexpected social criticism in 'The Chosen and the Rejected': ' "Something very gracious will perish, I'm afraid, when the aristocratic tradition is thrown on the bonfire. It is grace," she said, "that is so sadly lacking in those who are about to inherit the earth." "And whose fault is that?" asked Mrs Smithers, rather fiercely. "I don't know," Miss Hillier replied, with her maddeningly tranquil air, "but surely not the fault of those who have cared for beauty." '

It is a bitter thought that we shall hear no more of this.'

OUR REVIEWERS WRITE

'***The Blank Wall*** is on the one hand an illustration of the old adage, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave/ When first we practise to deceive,"' wrote Lady Antonia Fraser in *The Spectator*. 'On the other hand it is a brilliant psychological thriller with twists and turns, both morally and amorally, worthy of the great Patricia Highsmith herself ... [although] Sanxay Holding was Highsmith's senior by thirty-two years. That admirable institution, Persephone Books, has produced an edition, complete with Edward Bawdenesque endpapers, which makes this racy, suspenseful tale a pleasure to read. I certainly feel I have been introduced to a masterpiece.'

In *The Observer* Gaby Wood devoted a 'World of Books' column to ***The Blank Wall***, 'in my opinion, a perfect thriller – because its thrills arise accidentally, incidentally, and then, in collusion with human nature, conspire to take over the plot... Who really did it, and whether they get caught, becomes almost superfluous. Here the suspense is embedded in a tragedy of manners. The story is mostly conveyed in free indirect speech, so that you are both with Lucia and not with her... The plot engine is Lucia's noble and protective urge to keep up appearances... a classic of supense fiction.' In the *Financial Times* Ludo Hunter-Tilney noticed 'an unmistakable vein of high camp through the book. But there's a degree of sophistication here too. The writing vividly evokes the fluttering of Lucia's panicked mind. Her relationships with those around her are interestingly ambiguous, and through them are refracted themes of race, class, justice and gender... a satisfying *noir* melodrama.' And the *Guardian's* Maxim Jakubowski concluded that 'Sanxay Holding is a striking precursor to the likes of Highsmith and Rendell, and turns the psychological screws with insidious accuracy.'

In the *Guardian* two of our books were picked as choices for Summer Reading: Shena MacKay thought that 'Julia Strachey's 1932 novella ***Cheerful Weather for the Wedding*** has lost none of its surreal charm. This Persephone reprint would make a subversive present for a summer bride, or her mother. A brilliant, bittersweet upstairs-downstairs comedy.' And Sarah Waters was 'fascinated by Noel Streatfeild's 1945 novel ***Saplings***, a study of the disintegration of a middle-class family during the turmoil of the Second World War and quite shocking.' While in *The Sunday Telegraph*'s Summer Reading feature Jessica Mann chose ***The Blank Wall*** as a 'highly enjoyable period piece [which] plausibly evokes nightmarish events.' In the same paper Bee Wilson recommended the source of what is 'perhaps the most exotic breakfast of all, the one that almost none of us now eat: the true English breakfast. In ***Good Things in England*** Florence White lists some of the savoury viands once common on a morning sideboard: oxtail mould, pork cheese, potted beef, fried sprats, devilled kidneys. All that is long gone.'

Matthew Dennison wrote in *The Tablet* about ***The Priory***: 'Much of the novel is taken up with the disillusionments of love, sketched with wonderful skill. But, though poignant, this is not an unhappy novel. Whipple delivers the ending every romantic reader will hope for in a manner that is both believable and satisfying. In so doing she involves the reader in a central tenet of the novel's philosophy – that hope is rewarded. Ultimately in ***The Priory*** hope and love carry all before them. The reader's knowledge that war is just around the corner contributes a final, sharp poignancy to a totally involving novel by a writer who deserves to be better known.'

HOSTAGES TO FORTUNE

This review by Harriet Lane first appeared in *The Observer* on 13 July 2003

Elizabeth Cambridge was a doctor's wife who brought up three children in rural Oxfordshire after the First World War. The autobiographical ***Hostages to Fortune*** was her debut novel and for reprinting it Persephone Books deserves much thanks. Both a detailed description of middle-class life in the turbulent wake of the war and a striking analysis of the frustrations and pleasures of parenthood, ***Hostages to Fortune*** is an unusual novel, full of sharp edges. It deals with domesticity without being in the least bit cosy.

The scope of the novel, some fifteen years or so, is the period of active motherhood for Catherine, a country doctor's wife. The book opens with the birth of her first child in 1915 ('The poor little beast... with life, and a bath, and clothes all thrust at it at once') and closes in the early Thirties as her third follows the others to boarding school. (Catherine's children -- particularly the older two, the competent Audrey and indolent, dreamy Adam, whom one imagines will later find himself called up, as his father was – are key characters.) As babies, as children and teenagers, they never behave quite as Catherine and her husband William expect. After being rebuffed by the teenage Audrey, Catherine thinks resignedly: 'How right after all, how natural and salutary that Audrey should withdraw herself from the person who had combed her hair and trimmed her fingernails, cleaned her teeth and edited in biting language her table manners. How right... and how disappointing!' Motherhood is finally a business of accepting one's powerlessness, and once she has faced up to this, Catherine finds a sort of contentment.

The novel also charts the evolution of a marriage. Invalided out of the army, William – 'sharper, more irritable' – is 'a different person from the one she had married.' William too finds Catherine changed, done no favours by her cheap tweed skirts, old shoes and homemade hats: 'It irritated him that she kept the children better than herself.' Their privations may be privileged ones: after all, they have a cook, a gardener, a car and a house which even Catherine feels is unnecessarily large. But money is at first truly tight and Cambridge conveys the discomfort of the earliest part of Catherine's married life – a dull sensation of always being hungry or cold – which is all the worse for being unexpected.

Throughout the book, husband and wife circle each other, dependent, respectful and affectionate, but to a certain degree puzzled. They are closest on summer evenings when, wrung out by tiredness and hunger, the two of them sit in silence on the lawn, watching the stars come out. 'They didn't talk... talk turned at once to their problems and their troubles. When they were not speaking they could think kindly of each other, glad to be together, much as two horses will stand together out of harness, under a tree.'

As the family develops in often unexpected ways, so too does the country. Cambridge's narrative is shaped by the onset of modern Britain: the mortgage, the day trip, female education, the buckling of the class structure, divorce. 'It's wonderful to come down here to you. Everything is always the same, and nothing ever happens' says Catherine's niece dismissively; but Cambridge's achievement is to show, with a great deal of feeling, that quite the reverse is true.

VOTES FOR WOMEN

This article, 'Forcible Feeding', was published in *The New Statesman* in April 1913; ***The Wise Virgins*** was written at the height of the agitation for women's suffrage.

We have had enough of forcible feeding. The willingness of the forcible feeders to give as much pain and to do as much mischief as may be necessary to save them from having to give in may be natural; but it is in no way the less discreditable for that. The plain fact to be faced is that a number of women, from Lady Constance Lytton to Miss Sylvia Pankhurst, have undergone in prison a course of severe physical punishment to which they have not been sentenced and to which they could not be sentenced under the law for any offence whatever.

At first the House of Commons listened to the Home Secretary's accounts of such proceedings with bursts of laughter, and for the moment Mr McKenna had a merry time of it. But he reckoned without the Bishop of Lincoln, who suddenly showed the country that it is still possible for a bishop to be a Christian and a gentleman. Mr McKenna did not deny the torture: on the contrary, he pleaded that it had been so effectual that only eight of his prisoners had dared to go through with it. And he sat down convinced that this was what his chorus of laughers would have called a corker for the bishop.

May we ask Mr McKenna, since he considers it proper to employ forcible feeding, not merely as a life-saving measure but as a deterrent, to explain exactly why he did not increase the *peine forte et dure* to the point at which even the heroic eight could not endure it? Having gone so far, why did he not go all the way? When and why did he flinch?

At the end of it all the Government has had to admit that the women are determined to die rather than live voteless. And even Mr McKenna has discovered that it is now the correct thing to opine that forcible feeding is objectionable, and that nobody believes it to be the painless and even luxurious mode of nutrition he has hitherto defended. As for the public, it is asking very naturally why in the name of common sense this ridiculous Prisoners' (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Bill is not a Women's Suffrage Bill. Everybody knows – except those who never know anything beforehand – that the women are going to get the vote. That is what makes all this useless mischief so exasperating.

LIST OF PERSEPHONE BOOKS

William - an Englishman by Cicely Hamilton: A prize-winning 1919 novel about the effect of the First World War on William, a socialist clerk, and Giselda, a suffragette.

Someone at a Distance by Dorothy Whipple: 'A very good novel indeed' (*Spectator*), first published in 1953, about an Englishman's tragic destruction of his formerly happy marriage.

Mariana by Monica Dickens: First published in 1940, this famous author's first novel is a delightful description of a young girl's life in the 1930s.

Fidelity by Susan Glaspell: A 1915 novel by a Pulitzer-winning author that brilliantly describes the effects when a girl in Iowa runs off with a married man.

An Interrupted Life by Etty Hillesum: From 1941-3 a young woman living in Amsterdam, 'the Anne Frank for grown-ups', wrote diaries and letters which are among the great documents of our time.

The Victorian Chaise-longue by Marghanita Laski: A 'little jewel of horror' about a woman lying on a chaise-longue in the 1950s and waking up frozen in another's body 80 years before.

The Home-Maker by Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Carol Shields described this unforgettable, ahead-of-its-time book as 'a remarkable and brave 1924 novel about being a house–husband.'

Good Evening, Mrs Craven: the Wartime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes: Superbly written short stories, first published in *The New Yorker* from 1938-44.

Few Eggs and No Oranges by Vere Hodgson: A 600-page diary, written from 1940-45 in Notting Hill Gate, full of acute observation and humour.

Good Things in England by Florence White: This collection of English recipes was published in 1932; it inspired many, including Elizabeth David.

Julian Grenfell by Nicholas Mosley: A portrait of the First World War poet, and of his mother Ettie Desborough, by one of our foremost writers.

It's Hard to be Hip over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life by Judith Viorst: Funny, wise and weary poems about marriage, children and reality, first published in 1968.

Consequences by EM Delafield: A searing and funny novel about an Edwardian girl who enters a convent because she fails to catch a husband; by the author of *The Diary of a Provincial Lady.*

Farewell Leicester Square by Betty Miller: An atmospheric 1935 novel by Jonathan Miller's mother about a young Jewish film-director and 'the discreet discrimination of the bourgeoisie' (*Guardian*).

Tell it to a Stranger by Elizabeth Berridge: 1947 short stories described by AN Wilson as 'beautifully crafted', which were twice in the *Evening Standard* bestseller list.

Saplings by Noel Streatfeild: An adult novel by the well-known author of *Ballet Shoes,* about what happens to a family during the Second World War; to be a 10-part serial on 'Woman's Hour'.

Marjory Fleming by Oriel Malet: A novel based on the real life of the Scottish child prodigy who lived from 1803-11. A French translation was published by Editions Autrement in 2002.

Every Eye by Isobel English: An unusual 1956 novel about a girl travelling to Spain, highly praised by Muriel Spark: it will be an afternoon play on R4 adapted by Micheline Wandor.

They Knew Mr Knight by Dorothy Whipple: An absorbing 1934 novel about a family man driven into committing fraud, who goes to prison; a 1943 film.

A Woman's Place by Ruth Adam: A survey of women's lives in the twentieth century, very readably written by a novelist-historian: full of unique insights.

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day by Winifred Watson: A delightful 1938 novel about a governess and the night-club singer who employs her; Persephone's bestseller, recently re-read on R4's 'Book at Bedtime'.

Consider the Years by Virginia Graham: Sharp, funny WWII poems by Joyce Grenfell's best friend and collaborator; a favourite of Maureen Lipman (who read *Miss Pettigrew* on R4).

Reuben Sachs by Amy Levy: A short, fierce 1880s satire on the London Jewish community by 'the Jewish Jane Austen', greatly admired by Oscar Wilde.

Family Roundabout by Richmal Crompton: By the author of the *William* books, this 1948 novel for adult readers is about two families watched over by very different matriarchs.

The Montana Stories by Katherine Mansfield: Collects together the short stories written during the author's last year, with a detailed publisher's note and contemporary illustrations.

Brook Evans by Susan Glaspell: A moving and unusual novel, written in the same year as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, about the enduring effect of a love affair on three generations of a family.

The Children who lived in a Barn by Eleanor Graham: Jacqueline Wilson contributes the preface to this 1938 classic about five children fending for themselves; starring the unforgettable hay-box. . .

Little Boy Lost by Marghanita Laski: This unputdownable novel about a father's search for his son in post-war France was chosen by the *Guardian*'s Nicholas Lezard as a 2001 paperback choice; it was a R4 'Book at Bedtime' last year.

The Making of a Marchioness by Frances Hodgson Burnett: A wonderfully entertaining 1901 novel about a woman who becomes a marchioness, and the ensuing melodrama.

Kitchen Essays by Agnes Jekyll: Witty and useful essays about cooking, with recipes, published first in *The Times* from 1921-22.

A House in the Country by Jocelyn Playfair: An unusual and very readable 1944 novel about the effect of the Second World War on a group of people seeking refuge in the country.

The Carlyles at Home by Thea Holme: A 1965 mixture of biography and social history describing Thomas and Jane Carlyle's life in Chelsea.

The Far Cry by Emma Smith: A beautifully written and evocative 1949 novel about a young girl's passage to India at the time of Partition; a great favourite.

Minnie's Room: The Peacetime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes 1947-65: Second volume of short stories first published in *The New Yorker* and previously unknown in the UK.

Greenery Street by Denis Mackail**:** A funny and delightful 1925 novel about a young couple's first year of married life in a (real) street in Chelsea.

Lettice Delmer by Susan Miles**:** An unforgettable novel in verse describing a young girl's spiritual journey in the 1920s, much praised by TS Eliot.

The Runaway by Elizabeth Anna Hart: A witty and charming 1872 novel for children, illustrated with over sixty woodcuts by Gwen Raverat**.**

Cheerful Weather for the Wedding by Julia Strachey: A funny and quirky 1932 novella by a niece of Lytton Strachey, admired by Virginia Woolf.

Manja by Anna Gmeyner: A 1938 German novel, newly translated, about five children conceived on the same night in 1920 and their lives until 1933.

The Priory by Dorothy Whipple: The third novel we have published by this wonderful writer, about successive generations of a family and their servants living in a large country house before WWII

The Blank Wall by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, 'the top suspense writer of them all' (Raymond Chandler). In this 1949 psychological thriller a mother shields her daughter from a blackmailer.

Hostages to Fortune by Elizabeth Cambridge: 'deals with domesticity without being in the least bit cosy' writes Harriet Lane about this remarkable fictional portrait of a doctor's family in rural Oxfordshire in the 1920s.

THE **SHORT** STORY

Instead of publishing an entire short story, this quarter we are reprinting three recent pieces about the genre; we publish them in order to celebrate the publication of *Tea with Mr Rochester*

'It sometimes happens that someone will say, of a story, "you could turn that into a novel,"' wrote Erica Wagner in *The Times* earlier this year. 'This is guaranteed to send the writer of stories straight to her bed with a case of the vapours. Perhaps it's not surprising. We live in a culture of too much information, one which supposes that bigger is better.

Yet no one ever argued that Shakespeare's sonnets would be improved by being the length of *Paradise Lost*. How much better to know only so much about The Dark Lady! How intriguing, how cunning. And so one returns to a great story again and again; somehow, it is less exhaustible because more mysterious. One could read Herman Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' – the tale of a clerk on Wall Street who answers all requests with 'I would prefer not to' – to the end of one's days and never get to the bottom of it, its obscurity, its power.

Perhaps readers feel anxious about dealing with stories because they fear they will either be overwhelmed (too many different people and things happening!) or left high and dry (I have just got to know these people and now I have to leave them). The answer is to take it slowly. It is almost always a bad idea to read a volume from cover to cover; the effect can be similar to eating an entire box of chocolates at one go.

Read a story (start in the middle of the book, there's a transgressive pleasure in this). Then do something else – read another book, go for a walk, think about what you've read. Then perhaps read another story. Who knows? You might want to finish them all – but pace yourself. You will find that, in a good collection, the stories and characters speak to each other in a subtle and complex way very different to a novel; but a way that has its own very particular satisfactions. And a story – small, crystalline – may stick entire in your mind, the way a novel never could.'

Debbie Taylor (editor of *Myslexia*), in the same issue of *The Times* observed: 'The story is the quintessential literary form. Long before people could write, they told stories: myths, folk-tales, memoirs. They were complete and absorbing and shone light on an aspect of life that the community felt needed illuminating. The short story still performs that function. So why are so few being published?

Publishers say they don't sell. But one type of short story is thriving. The commercial short story – cheerful and plot-driven, with heroines who triumph over adversity – has flowered for years in mass-market women's magazines. Nor are poor sales of literary short stories caused by lack of publicity or review coverage. One publicist is quoted as saying, 'It's easier to get someone to read a short story than a novel. People quickly get a taste for what the collection is like.'

But reviewers' enthusiasm is not shared by the general public. It seems that UK readers just don't like the form, preferring the total immersion of a novel. There is a strong sense that readers do not know how to approach the short story. Their expectations are based on the novel-reading experience, so they find short stories unsatisfying. But the short story is not a novel-in-brief. As such it requires a different attitude and different reading skills. It is an

acquired taste, one that is atrophied in the British reader. This is because there is no place for the short story in our literary culture – although Russian bookshops are full of short stories and in France, Spain, Italy and Germany they treasure the shorter literary forms: stories, novellas, essays.

Some blame newspapers for publishing reviews and essays, lifestyle features and interviews and thus usurping the role of the upmarket cultural magazine that, in the US and elsewhere, is the main mass-market outlet for the literary short story. In the UK there is no equivalent to *The New Yorker, Harper's* or *Atlantic Monthly*. So the general public never encounters a literary short story – and never has a chance to cultivate a taste for them.'

© *The Times/Myslexia*

Kate Atkinson wrote in the *Guardian*: 'Like many writers, I started by writing short stories. I needed to learn how to write and stories are the most practical way to do this, and less soul-destroying than working your way through a lengthy novel and then discovering it's rubbish. Unfortunately, the fact that stories are often used as practice pieces helps to denigrate their status in the eyes of many people – publishers and book-sellers being no exception. The story is a genre in its own right, not the little sister of the novel.

I began my own collection of short stories because I was worn out with writing. I'd never done the same job for more than a year (work for me was always – rightly or wrongly – an experience rather than a career), and then suddenly here I was, writing year in, year out, and it was no longer fun. I knew instinctively that stories were the way to restore the joy that nestles at the heart of writing. Not only did they write easily, but they allowed me a watershed between what is essentially the trilogy of my first three books and whatever is to come after.

With novels, I'm very aware that I'm always looking for redemption for the characters. I want them to have endings, and preferably satisfactory ones where good and evil are rewarded and punished in some way. When I write stories I feel liberated from this compulsion – I can leave things unresolved, allow the edges to be blurred and abandon characters to unhappiness.

As I wrote these stories I found they were becoming intertwined. It was very important to me that each stood alone, but as I went on I found that thin, spider web-like connections began to form. It became very tempting to start working in a more organic, novelistic way, and I had to deliberately stop myself doing that.

I think the stories helped me to become a more subtle, restrained writer. They also ignited an interest in the internal monologue – two of my favourite stories in the collection are internal monologues – and the novel I'm working on at the moment has developed that interest further.

For a while I thought the stories had taught me a new method of writing; I whined a lot less when I was writing them. Unfortunately, now that I'm back to writing a novel, the whining has recommenced. Stories are freedom; the novel is a prison from which you spend your days dreaming of escape.'

© the *Guardian*

Lynton Lamb, illustration for Lysis: A Dialogue of Plato (1930)

OUR **READERS** WRITE

‘Along with others, I too am bemused as to why Dorothy Whipple has not been re-discovered and then greatly valued as an author. In ***The Priory*** she seems to have made an in-depth life study of human nature and, in a most low-profile way, can cause us to turn round and understand and empathise with others.’ MJ, Clevedon

‘I was so gripped by ***Little Boy Lost*** that I had to read it in one sitting; I adored ***The Blank Wall*** – very Highsmith in its quality of suspense and such a credible heroine; ***Hostages to Fortune*** so well conveyed the joys, frustrations and sheer hard graft of parenthood; and I did indeed love ***Someone at a Distance***, a beautifully crafted novel, really superb characterisation, and the plot was as inexorable as a Greek tragedy. Really breath-taking.’ HC, London SE25

‘Once again, with ***Hostages to Fortune*** Persephone has rediscovered a delightful book that should never have gone out of print... As with ***The Far Cry*** I was not expecting such a literary work. I admired immensely the spare style and the simple truthfulness of the story. It is difficult to do justice to the richness of the book. There is so much in it – an assessment of someone’s life, the picture of a marriage as it changes over the years, the way a mother’s relationship with her children changes, the effect of the First World War on individual lives and on society... I found it compulsively readable.’ RSH, Coventry

‘I absolutely adored this book [***The Home-Maker***] from start to finish. I am fascinated by the way Dorothy Canfield Fisher exposed this family so very well and of course the scenes between the father and youngest boy were so beautiful they nearly made me cry. It is a perfect book.’ CM, Florida

‘I have just finished ***Farewell Leicester Square***. It was very satisfying: she is so whole-hearted and delicate at the same time.’ JS, London W11

‘A friend recently introduced me to your books. So far I have read ***Every Eye, Little Boy Lost*** and ***A House in the Country***, all excellent and each better than the one before! The ambivalence and childish reactions of the father in ***Little Boy Lost*** show Laski’s awareness of the same truth articulated so profoundly by Jocelyn Playfair in ***A House in the Country***, namely that grown-ups still exhibit the same behaviour as children, though by and large they learn to make it socially acceptable. Playfair’s Cressida reflects on how this behaviour, on an international scale, is the major cause of war. I can’t overstate how impressed and moved I was by Playfair’s exploration of reasons for going to war and its inherent futility.’ HW, via e-mail

‘I have just finished ***The Priory*** and must tell you it is one of the most *comfortable* and *satisfying* books I have read for years.’ NC, Attleborough

‘***The Priory*** was in my opinion a brilliant novel... for me the characterisation was the key to its success.’ TW, Mansfield

‘Agnes Jekyll’s ***Kitchen Essays*** is a real delight and each just the length for a quick read whilst the kettle boils – her witty prose rings like polished cut-glass! I shall keep buying it for my friends.’ REW, Carlton, Notts

‘I have just spent seven nights totally beguiled and shocked by your clever juxtaposition of ***The Priory*** and ***Manja***.’ MG, Malaga

‘***Manja*** was totally absorbing. I felt I was living it all with them and experiencing the insidious, relentless, inevitable build-up of horror. And yet it was written so early – what perspicacity! I think it should be prescribed reading for everyone.’ LRW, Ripon

‘I thoroughly enjoyed ***Little Boy Lost*** – it’s one of the most beautiful and moving stories I have ever read’ MC, Kempston

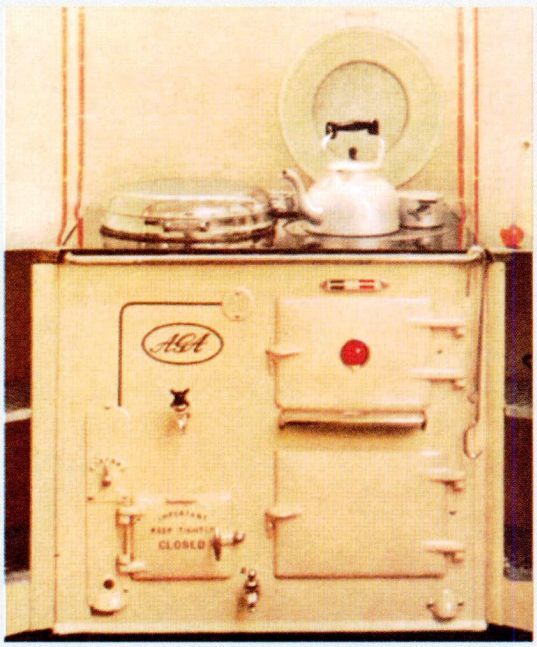
OUR **SEPTEMBER** FABRICS

Leonard Woolf's ***The Wise Virgins*** has as its endpapers a printed linen furnishing fabric called 'White', designed by Vanessa Bell for the Omega Workshops in 1913, the same year the novel was published. In this design the virginal white is constrained by box-like patterns which suggest the stifled lives of young women living in the London suburbs.

The endpaper fabric for ***Tea with Mr Rochester*** by Frances Towers is a 1949 design for a block printed cretonne. Its unusual, slightly ethereal flowers echo the often dream-like landscapes of the stories. The designer Humphrey Spender very kindly found this fabric for us in his collection and had it specially photographed.

OUR **NOVEMBER** BOOKS

Good Food on the Aga by Ambrose Heath, Persephone Book No. 45, was first published in 1933, four years after the Aga was first sold in Britain. Invented by a Swede who had lost his sight, the Aga will next year have been a part of British life for seventy-five years. Yet this cookery book can be used just as well by those who do not own Agas. The recipes for each month are prefaced by 'Important points to Remember about an Aga'. Then there is a list of seasonal food for each month and recipes that can be cooked on any kind of stove. The book, wonderfully illustrated by Edward Bawden, is a highly sought-after collectors' item in its original edition.



From a 1933 brochure for the Aga, The Story of a Kitchen Classic by Tim James p57

Our other Christmas title is the only novel for adults by the author of the Worzel Gummidge books, Barbara Euphan Todd. Rosamond Lehmann wrote in *The Listener* in 1946: '***Miss Ranskill Comes Home*** is a work of great originality, and delightfully readable, a blend of fantasy, satire and romantic comedy.' Miss Ranskill is a middle-aged woman in the Miss Pettigrew vein who is shipwrecked on a desert island in 1939 and returns to the wartime England of 1943. 'Simplified by a caricaturist's eye,' wrote Rosamond Lehmann, 'but near enough the knuckle to make one squirm and groan as one smiles... a very entertaining novel, less light than it seems.'

SAPLINGS by Blanche Ridge

The start of an occasional series in which our readers write about books they particularly admire

I have thoroughly enjoyed all the Persephone novels and have learned now that when I pick one up and open it I will love reading it and be made to think as well. But I have enjoyed none as much as I enjoyed my first reading of ***Saplings***.

It is the story of an ordinary English middle-class family at the outbreak of the Second World War. Its characters are lucky, happy and secure at the beginning; we watch them through the many vicissitudes they endure and see what happens to them by the end. It is gripping because in a simple and anecdotal way Streatfeild brings her characters to life and helps us see a little of their inner journeys. She does not waste words – at times her style is almost breathless – but by the time we reach the end and she stands suddenly back, it is as if we are left beholding the whole picture, having watched each deft brushstroke in detail. We stand back too, and are aghast.

But what makes ***Saplings*** so special? Anyone who grew up with Streatfeild's children's books will find the same powerful spell thrown over them – succinctly vernacular and lively dialogue with brief, vivid, almost cinematic references to each speaker. As an adult reader, I can appreciate the brevity with which she handles her material, saying the minimum and allowing her readers to fill in the gaps. There is a delightful sense that we are in this together, that the author is our companion.

Brevity of style makes the book light in hand, even though the subject matter is not. At a particularly unhappy and lonely time, Laurel, the eldest daughter, suddenly has an inspiration about how to make life better: 'Then suddenly her breath was caught, as if in winter she had seen dog roses.' The syntax of the sentence is awkward, with the object at the very end, but it works well like that. This is typical Streatfeild.

Above all it is refreshing to read a book which is about human psychology but contains no jargon whatsoever. Tony, the eldest son of the family, is subject at one stage in the story to what we would now call panic attacks: these are not laboured, but are delineated with graceful vividness, and indicate his suffering with immense potency. We are never preached at about him, or the other children. They interact with grown-ups who wield authority which is often well-meaning, but ignorant of what is really going on in their lives. This ignorance is not wilful, or even stupid, though it sometimes is; but the children are profoundly affected by it, and communication between child and adult worlds fails or proves impossible.

And this, in the end, is what makes this book so hard to put down, and so completely unforgettable, for I cannot remember reading anything which has come so painfully close to making me remember exactly how the helplessness of childhood felt. Although her book is about the effect of war on one particular family, Streatfeild is also effectively telling us this: that in every happy family there will be times when a child feels out of control and frightened, unable to express his or her true self or to negotiate the next hurdle because of misunderstandings with grown-ups. This is what life is like and no amount of sheltering can completely prevent it. Given Streatfeild's cracking pace, her gentle clear-eyed wisdom, and the dark story line, the overall impact is extremely powerful. And for a parent, there is the added and painful reminder that whatever you do, this is what your own children must face too.

THE CARLYLES AT HOME

We reproduce here a newly-discovered picture of Thea Holme and part of an article by AN Wilson

'At some stage every summer, I revisit the house of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle in Chelsea – a place that not merely evokes its former inhabitants but feels verily haunted by them.

The Carlyles are figures who stay in your head. This is partly because few marriages have been odder, and partly because, through their letters and journals, they chronicled their passing moods with such vivid intelligence and cruel articulacy.

Jane Carlyle's *Journal* covers the lowest point of that dark marriage when Carlyle was deep in his researches on Frederick the Great and Jane was suffering the worst of her deep depressions. They were in what she called the "Valley of the Shadow of Frederick." Carlyle took consolation in his maddening infatuation with the obese Lady Ashburton, and there were often fights.

In my fantasy life the Carlyles are two dear old friends, and I have always turned a blind eye to the truly violent nature of their marriage. There have been some excellent studies of the Carlyles at close quarters – Rosemary Ashton's *Thomas and Jane Carlyle:* Portrait of a Marriage is the most psychologically tender study known to me, while for sheer comedy Thea Holme's ***The Carlyles at Home*** (Persephone Books) is a marvellous account of their servant problems and rows. But if these studies mention the actual fights, I have been "in denial" about it.

Jane's friend Geraldine Jewsbury told Carlyle's first biographer, as perhaps only a female best friend could, that Jane could be "extremely provoking" and that Thomas Carlyle was "the nobler of the two." I suppose this is true. Jane's endless carping sarcasm still has the capacity to alarm. Lady Ashburton's condescending letters inviting the Carlyles to stay receive some corking replies that have the power to make your toes curl one and a half centuries after they were first written.

The *Journal* has a true novelistic brilliance, for example in its evocation of Jane's friendship with a boring neighbour: 'Miss Wilson dislikes me, I was told last year, by a creditable authority, and speaks ill of me behind my back. And yet she looks glad to see me, and always presses me to stay. And the best is, I don't like her a whit less for that superfluous warning...'

Thea Holme as Portia in 1938; she was a successful actress before she and her husband became custodians of the Carlyles' House.

Jane and Thomas Carlyle were both of fiendishly unhappy temperaments, but we surely find the clue to why she was so miserable in such entries as 'My morphia a dead failure last night – gave me neither sleep nor rest but only nausea' and 'Last night there was a lump on my brow as big as a plover's egg and I felt *all heels over head* – like a drunk. But a spoonful of henbane did wonders in composing me to sleep.' © *The Daily Telegraph*

FINALLY

Two of our books will be on Radio 4 this autumn – five of the stories in ***Tea with Mr Rochester*** will be read at 3.30pm from 13-17 October and Micheline Wandor's dramatisation of ***Every Eye*** will go out during the first week of December. ***Saplings*** will be a ten-part serial on Woman's Hour (repeated at 7.45pm) from 5-16 January 2004.

There is no Persephone lunch in September because instead a hundred readers will be attending the first Persephone Conference at Newnham College, Cambridge. One or two places remain for the Sunday afternoon, do telephone the office if you would like to join us.

On **Thursday 16 October** Elizabeth Crawford, who has written extensively on the Suffragettes, will give a talk about what was happening ninety years ago this autumn and explain the context for ***The Wise Virgins*** (in which Harry declares that he is pro-Suffrage and his father says there is no proof that women really do want the vote). After lunch, and weather permitting, Elizabeth will take us for a short Bloomsbury walk, pointing out some Suffragette landmarks on the way; the walk will end at the new café in Russell Square. And on **Thursday 20 November** Kay Dunbar, who runs the 'Way with Words' events at Dartington, Southwold and Keswick, will talk about '**The Pleasures and Pains of running Literary Festivals**'. As always it costs £25 to attend a lunch, which is from 12.30-2.30; please ring up to reserve a place.

When you telephone the office at Lamb's Conduit Street, or come into the shop, you will find Nicola Beauman and Hester Plumridge, who are there almost all the time; Alarys Gibson two days a week and Jo Bobin three; and, occasionally, James Twist (who has done all our design work since we began nearly five years ago), Olivia Lacey (who designs our website) and Francesca Beauman (who set up our database), as well as other kind people who wrap books, help in the shop on Saturdays and so on. Now, however, we have a new addition to the team – Stephanie Allen has joined us from John Murray to do our publicity two days a week.

In *The Times* Valerie Grove wrote about staying at the Temple at Badger Dingle, 'a diminutive Palladian folly (sleeps two, dog welcome) chosen from the Vivat Trust brochure... On the bookshelves were PG Wodehouse and the dove-grey volumes of Persephone Books. Wooden floors with Indian rugs, Gould prints of native birds and Osborne and Little fabrics.'

If you would like to have a delightful holiday reading Persephone Books (we give a selection to the eleven Vivat Trust properties) ring 0845 0900 194 for a brochure.

The Bookseller, in a feature on the publishers of classics, said about us: 'There is a personal feel to the whole operation – from the little shop in Lamb's Conduit Street to the superb production standards. It is a belief in the general appeal of the classics that has produced some of the most exciting new paperback publishing ventures – Hesperus and Persephone for example. These lists are founded on a passionate enthusiasm for titles that have not gained a place in the more established series. Their growth is impressive and bears testament to what can be achieved in new or neglected markets if the presentation and pitch are right.'

PERSEPHONE BOOKS
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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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