

FIFTH BIRTHDAY ISSUE

Margaret Bonham and her daughter Cary in 1946

# THE PERSEPHONE QUARTERLY

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# OUR SPRING 2004 BOOKS

It is five years since we launched Persephone Books from the basement in Great Sutton Street and since then our mailing list has grown from 100 to nearly 10,000, we have 48 titles in print, we have a shop in Bloomsbury – and we are flourishing. Our birthday books are a novel and a volume of short stories. *The New House* was given by Lettice Cooper to her nephew's wife – Jilly Cooper, who writes in her new Persephone Preface: 'More than forty years later, I still remember how enraptured I was by *The New House*, staying up all night to finish it.' Jilly Cooper continues:

'For, like Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson, whose biographies Lettice later wrote, she was above all a storyteller, not of action-packed sagas, but of adventures of the heart. All that outwardly happens in *The New House* is over one long day a family move from a large imposing secluded house with beautiful gardens to a small one overlooking a housing

estate. But all the characters and their relationships with each other are so lovingly portrayed that one cares passionately what happens even to the unpleasant ones.

*The New House* reminds me of my favourite author Chekhov, who so influenced Lettice's generation of writers. Like him, she had perfect social pitch and could draw an arriviste developer as convincingly as a steely Southern social butterfly. Like him she seldom judged her characters and found humour and pathos in every situation. Part of her genius as a writer is to realise that humans are never consistent, that "hard people will suddenly be tender and gentle people hurt you." Every time the reader becomes outraged at the monstrous egotism of a character, the kaleidoscope shifts and they do something spontaneously, unexpectedly kind. "I never meant to be a selfish woman," cries Natalie in a rare and touching moment of self-

knowledge, but an adoring husband had made it so easy. "I wish he'd shaken me and told me not to be a little fool."

Like Chekhov, Lettice is also wonderful on lost love. Both the heroine Rhoda and her maiden Aunt Ellen turn down men whom they love and who love them because they put duty first and are not prepared to abandon their dominating mothers. But before either of them can adjust their haloes, Lettice (or Rhoda) points out: "You lived to be good not happy... It was better to forego your own wishes and enjoy the rarefied happiness from being on the side of the angels."

Jealousy is also brilliantly depicted. Thus we see Rhoda frantic to escape her mother's clutches yet unable to hide her resentment that maiden Aunt Ellen, during the move, is suddenly better at calming and looking after Natalie than Rhoda is. While Natalie, having totally



fabric for *The New House* designed by Margaret Calkin James in 1936



fabric for *The Cowan* designed by Emma Moore in 1948



enslaved Rhoda, is unable to hide her jealousy that an old school friend, who writes to wish Rhoda luck on the morning of the move, may be loved by Rhoda more than herself.

**T**he *New House* does not date, and reads as freshly today because above all it is about the shifting balance of power within any family. In our twenty-first century, the grand old house would probably be saved as a listed building and the NIMBYs would be out

protesting against anything being built in its place. Unlike them, but like Rhoda, Lettice was a true socialist, who although sad to leave a large, beautiful home, felt her conscience eased because it seemed right that such places should be knocked down to make way for lots of little houses for the poor.'

In this, as in other things, Lettice and Margaret Bonham, our other March author, were alike. The great

difference between them was that Lettice led a writer's orderly life – routine, literary friends who reviewed her books – whereas Margaret Bonham was bohemian, distracted by men, isolated. She tried to be meticulous about her writing but was trapped by her emotional and domestic life. Inevitably she wrote very little – one volume of short stories and a novel. But the stories (five of which are to be read on BBC Radio 4 in June) are outstanding examples of the genre: funny, observant, lingering in the memory.

**M**argaret Bonham's daughter Cary Bazalgette has written the preface to *The Casino*. It begins: 'One day in 1948, when I was six and my brother four, our mother disappeared. We were living at the time in Ware Cross, a sprawling '30s bungalow and smallholding on a sunny hillside above the Teign valley in Devon. I have the tiniest memory, like a blurred snapshot, of a car jouncing away down the rough driveway between the unmown lawns and experimental vegetable beds, her hand flickering happily out of the window. . . . Of course we already knew then that she was a writer. When *The Casino* came out in 1948 I hoped that boasting about it would secure me the esteem of other children at school, but they had already decided that, since my mother



Lettice Cooper in the 1930s



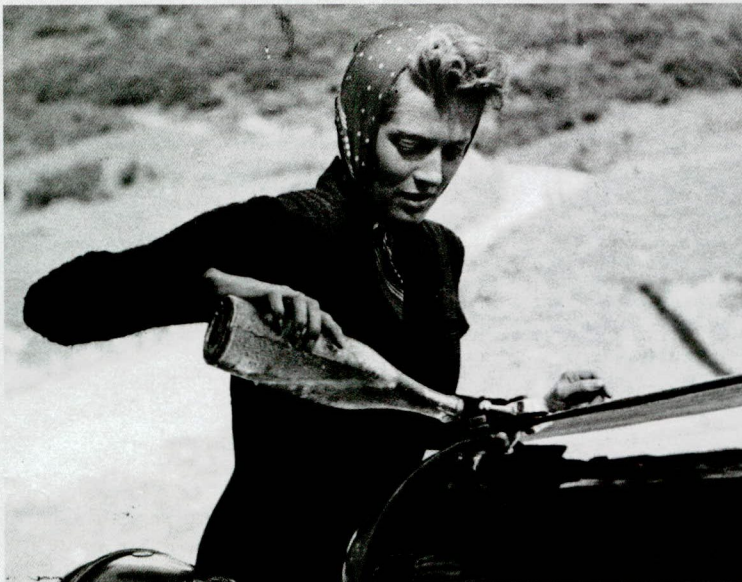
had run away, I was obviously some sort of grotesque, an unlucky figure best avoided. I found out later from the stories that she, at least, appreciated me. “One of them is about you,” she had said. “Read ‘The Professor’s Daughter’”.

These stories, then, stood in for my mother during my childhood and teenage years. Reassuringly, few of the children in these stories have two parents and when they do trouble looms. Family life in a conventional sense is non-existent here: the heart of each story is usually the relationship between one parent and a child. Many of them, whether they say so or not, are set in Devon, where she and my father lived during and after World War II, and where my brother and I were born. And for many years I

mapped the stories in *The Casino* onto the real tensions between my mother and grandmother, constructing a drama out of the apparently unbridgeable gulf between bohemian daughter and suburban mother. There are recognisable fragments of my grandmother everywhere in the stories if you think you know where to look for them: Miss Jenner’s scything glance at the professor’s wife’s living-room (too full of books, too empty of furniture); Mrs Sedley’s strictures on clean shoes and washbasins in “The Horse”. Now I see these traits as less important than the female power struggles that drive most of the narratives. Margaret’s maternity wards, bridge parties and schools are more like competitive arenas than sororities. Her accounts of

parenting always play out a culture clash, directly or indirectly. William and Emmy in “The River” are a living critique of conventional parental fussing; the professor’s wife knows she must humour Britta’s fantasies rather than challenge them. Now I realise the role model to go for was Lucy in “The Two Mrs Reeds”, confident, knowledgeable, brisk, who reads the *New Statesman* but also wears candy-pink lipstick.’

*The Casino* is a beautifully written book which we are proud to be republishing. It was brought into the office by the author’s daughter; at first we were cautious because we had never heard of Margaret Bonham; but one only has to read the beautiful first paragraph for scepticism to vanish. Like *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, brought into the office by Henrietta Twycross-Martin, whose mother’s favourite book it was; and like *A House in the Country* by Jocelyn Playfair, sent to us by a reader in Yorkshire who compared it with Mollie Panter-Downes’ work and had a hunch we would like it, this was a forgotten book. Like them, *The Casino* has never been reprinted since its original hardback appearance; but we are confident it will eventually sell more copies to Persephone readers than it will have in its original incarnation.



Margaret Bonham filling the radiator of her open-top Lagonda on 3 September 1939



# OUR REVIEWERS WRITE

In his review of *Tea with Mr Rochester* in the *The Spectator* Matthew Dennison wrote:

'Frances Towers's writing is full of delicate implications; happily for the reader, each is neatly pinned. Such is the deftness of her touch, her elegant legerdemain, that she conceals the building blocks of her artistry, simply nudging the reader towards recognition of that implication that repeatedly in her stories provides the denouement... Towers's combination of detachment and brutality is all the more striking in a writer whose prose is so consistently, involvingly beautiful.' Lucy Lethbridge in *The Tablet* said: 'Hers is a tightly drawn, delicately observed world. These stories operate within a narrow social sphere but she sketches the fragile dramas within it with needle-sharp precision. All is cool, precise and airy.' And, said Valerie Grove in *The Oldie*, 'five short stories by Frances Towers went out on Radio 4 read by Romola Garai, Emilia Fox and Susannah Harker. *Tea with Mr Rochester* is luminously word-perfect, quirky and original.'

**T**he *Wise Virgins* was reviewed in the *The Spectator* by Kate Chisholm, who observed: 'You have the sense that despite its

elegant jacket and endpapers from Persephone this novel is set to deliver an explosive bombshell that will force you to confront all those uncomfortable thoughts you rather wish you didn't have ...there are wonderful moments.' Dina Shiloh in the *Jewish Quarterly* praised 'a vivid slice of history, portraying an England now gone forever. . . Most of all, the book gives a sense of the immense, complicated emotions Virginia aroused in Leonard: why he was so keen to marry this independent, gifted woman... The alternative was marrying a suburban, mousy Gwen.' And Jonathan Self in the *Jewish Chronicle* called *The Wise Virgins* 'a beautiful, moving and wry novel that should be judged on its own merits and not as some sort of literary curiosity... Throughout the prose is taut and precise, the observation penetrating.'

**T**he *Church Times* said of *Miss Ranskill comes Home* that 'the writing is spare and sensitive, the humour wry, the situation both comic and tragic', while *The Spectator's* reviewer commented: 'Everywhere she goes, Miss Ranskill encounters closed minds and a kind of awful self-righteous patriotism. No one seems able to listen. But ultimately the romantic comedy deepens to give

the book its moral core and with a nicely unexpected twist the romance with the Carpenter is "consummated" in that Miss Ranskill is able to pass love on.' *The Tablet's* reviewer 'very much enjoyed this ambitious and unusual book,' calling it 'warm, satirical, and historically fascinating... psychologically this is, in many ways, a very accurate novel and Miss Ranskill's character is engaging and almost always convincing.' And *Best of British* magazine thought that the book's 'blend of fantasy, satire and gentle comedy packs a powerful message about people's effect on each other in times of varying circumstances. It entertains from the start.'

**T**he Bournemouth *Daily Echo* described the stories in *Tea with Mr Rochester* as 'wise, perceptive, containing acute observations of life and love' and called *The Home-Maker* 'way ahead of its time, still bright, observant and relevant today. Persephone have discovered yet another great read.'

**T**he *Oldie* thought *Good Food on the Aga* 'a delight for all cooks, not just those with Agas', as did the *Irish Times*, which concluded: 'There are cute books, there are beautiful books, and then there are Persephone books.'



# THE FIRST FIFTY PENGUIN NOVELS

## FICTION *orange covers*

- 2 A FAREWELL TO ARMS by Ernest Hemingway
- 3 POET'S PUB by Eric Linklater
- 4 MADAME CLAIRE by Susan Ertz
- 8 WILLIAM by E. H. Young
- 9 GONE TO EARTH by Mary Webb
- 12 THE PURPLE LAND by W. H. Hudson
- 13 PATROL by Philip Macdonald
- 15 FOUR FRIGHTENED PEOPLE by E. Arnot Robertson
- 16 THE EDWARDIANS by V. Sackville-West
- 17 THE INFORMER by Liam O'Flaherty
- 19 THE STRANGE CASE OF MISS ANNIE SPRAGG by Louis Bromfield
- 23 ESTHER WATERS by George Moore
- 24 HANGMAN'S HOUSE by Donn Byrne
- 27 MY MAN JEEVES by P. G. Wodehouse
- 28 THE OWLS' HOUSE by Crosbie Garstin
- 39 THE WALLET OF KAI LUNG by Ernest Bramah
- 41 CROME YELLOW by Aldous Huxley
- 42 DEATH OF A HERO by Richard Aldington
- 43 A SAFETY MATCH by Ian Hay
- 44 A CUCKOO IN THE NEST by Ben Travers
- 45 THE GLEN O' WEEPING by Marjorie Bowen
- 47 THE LONELY PLOUGH by Constance Holme
- 48 A PASSAGE TO INDIA by E. M. Forster
- 49 THE JUNGLE by Upton Sinclair
- 50 THE W PLAN by Graham Seton
- 52 THE SPANISH FARM by R. H. Mottram
- 53 DUSTY ANSWER by Rosamond Lehmann
- 54 I AM JONATHAN SCRIVENER by Claude Houghton
- 57 THE BLACK DIAMOND by Francis Brett Young
- 59 THREE WIVES by Beatrice Kean Seymour
- 72 STILL SHE WISHED FOR COMPANY by Margaret Irwin
- 73 MR. WESTON'S GOOD WINE by T. F. Powys
- 75 DECLINE AND FALL by Evelyn Waugh
- 76 DANGEROUS AGES by Rose Macaulay
- 80 THE DAWN OF RECKONING by James Hilton
- 81 TARKA THE OTTER by Henry Williamson
- 83 THE POACHER by H. E. Bates
- 84 LOLLY WILLOWES by Sylvia Townsend Warner
- 85 SIR ISUMBRAS AT THE FORD by D. K. Broster
- 86 THESE CHARMING PEOPLE by Michael Arlen
- 87 GREENERY STREET by Denis Mackail
- 88 THE GREEN LACQUER PAVILION by Helen Beauclerk
- 91 GHOST STORIES OF AN ANTIQUARY by M. R. James
- 92 THE HAMPSHIRE WONDER by J. D. Beresford
- 93 WILD STRAWBERRIES by Angela Thirkell
- 94 SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE GREYHOUND by John Hampson
- 95 THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY by G. K. Chesterton
- 96 SELECTED MODERN SHORT STORIES selected by Alan Steele
- 97 SOME EXPERIENCES OF AN IRISH R.M. by Somerville and Ross
- 102 YOUTH RIDES OUT by Beatrice Kean Seymour

As part of the fashion for lists we offer this one: the 50 novels among the first 102 Penguins that had appeared by 1937. The company launched its first books in July 1935 and distributed them from the crypt of Holy Trinity Church in Marylebone Road. They were published at sixpence, slightly more than double the production cost (17,000 copies had to be sold for a title to break even) and 3 million books were sold within 12 months.

There are 15 women novelists: the interesting thing is how few of them are readable today. E. Arnot Robertson remains witty and sharp, as do Rose Macaulay, Vita Sackville-West and Sylvia Townsend Warner; and *Dusty Answer* is now seen as a C20th classic. But EH Young (lavishly resurrected by Virago) is still, in our view, rather tame; Susan Ertz is unenticing, as are Mary Webb and Constance Holme. And Helen Beauclerk, Marjorie Bowen and Beatrice Kean Seymour – we think not.

Since we are about to publish our fiftieth book, it is intriguing to contemplate which will have survived in 65 years. Taste changes enormously: there are so many other wonderful novels that could have been in Penguin by 1937 but were not chosen. The main criterion was that they had to have been successful in hardback – but this was true of fewer books written by women than by men. (Ironically, the only Penguin we have resurrected from the list is by a man – Denis Mackail's *Greenery Street*.)



# 5TH BIRTHDAY PRAISE FOR PERSEPHONE BOOKS

I'm a huge fan of Persephone Books and have been since its inception... I loved discovering Winifred Watson, Marghanita Laski and Dorothy Whipple... Long may you continue to re-discover these wonderful women.

*Maureen Lipman* (favourite title, ***Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*** by Winifred Watson)

You can't judge a book by its covers, but when you pick up a distinctive, stylish, silver Persephone book you know it's going to be an interesting and beguiling read.

*Jacqueline Wilson* (favourite title, ***Saplings*** by Noel Streatfeild)

Persephone Books pull off the double. In their chic grey jackets, they feel like old friends and newly discovered treasure all at once. And for the fanatical antiquarian bookshop loiterer like me, they offer all the joys of the secondhand book, without the smell of mildew.

*Charlie Lee-Potter* (favourite title, ***Tell It to a Stranger*** by Elizabeth Berridge)

I do not think I have ever owned books more elegantly and beautifully produced than Persephone books – one is tempted to buy them all just to

see the design of the inner covers and the bookmarks, which I collect. Some are old favourites restored to new life, and some are revelations. Floreat Persephone! And Happy Birthday!

*AS Byatt* (favourite title ***Few Eggs and No Oranges*** by Vere Hodgson)

My favourite Persephone book is ***The Victorian Chaise-longue*** (by Marghanita Laski). I've never been able to get this book out of my mind. Subconsciously I think it flashes back to me every time I sit on a strange chaise-longue.

*Lady Antonia Fraser*

Persephone books are just the kind that the characters I like to write about would want to read. Miss Garnet would love Persephone.

*Salley Vickers*

My favourite Persephone book is ***The Carlyles at Home*** by Thea Holme. This is an account, largely from the letters of Jane Carlyle (wife of Thomas, the sage of Chelsea), of how the middle classes lived 150 years ago, and it is unrivalled in its vivid details by Dickens or Trollope or anyone else.

*Maureen Cleave*

Persephone Books are imaginative and creative publishers who reissue attractive, and beautifully produced books and deserve to be celebrated.

*PD James* (favourite title, ***The Victorian Chaise-longue***)

Happy Birthday, Persephone! Long may you run. I have to say that ***Miss Pettigrew*** is still my favourite Persephone book. Every time I think of it I feel simultaneously wistful and joyful. It really is a wonderful book.

*Tracy Chevalier*

Oh, the bliss of Persephone Books!

*India Knight*





# LIST OF PERSEPHONE BOOKS

**1. William - an Englishman** by Cicely Hamilton: 1919 prize-winning novel about the effect of WW1 on a socialist clerk and a suffragette. Preface: Nicola Beauman

**2. Someone at a Distance** by Dorothy Whipple: 'A very good novel indeed' (*Spectator*) about an Englishman's tragic destruction of his formerly happy marriage (pub. 1953). Preface: Nina Bawden

**3. 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. Preface: Harriet Lane

**4. Fidelity** by Susan Glaspell: 1915 novel by a Pulitzer-winning author that brilliantly describes the consequences of a girl in Iowa running off with a married man. Preface: Laura Godwin

**5. 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. Preface: Eva Hoffman

**6. 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. Preface: PD James

**7. The Home-Maker** by Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Carol Shields described this ahead-of-its-time book as 'a remarkable and brave 1924 novel about being a house-husband.' Preface: Karen Knox

**8. Good Evening, Mrs Craven:** the Wartime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes: Superbly written short stories, first published in *The New Yorker* from 1938-44. Five were read on R4. Preface: Gregory LeStage

**9. 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 wit. Preface: Jenny Hartley

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

**11. 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. Preface: author

**12. 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. Preface: author

**13. Consequences** by EM Delafield: A harrowing 1919 novel about a girl entering a convent after she fails to marry; by the author of *The Diary of a Provincial Lady*. Preface: Nicola Beauman

**14. Farewell Leicester Square** by Betty Miller: Novel by Jonathan Miller's mother about a Jewish film-director and 'the discreet discrimination of the bourgeoisie' (*Guardian*). Preface: Jane Miller

**15. Tell It to a Stranger** by Elizabeth Berridge: 1947 short stories which were twice in the *Evening Standard* bestseller list. Preface: AN Wilson

**16. Saplings** by Noel Streatfeild: An adult novel by the well-known author of *Ballet Shoes*, about a family during WW11; a R4 ten part serial. Afterword: Jeremy Holmes

**17. Marjory Fleming** by Oriel Malet: A novel based on the real life of the Scottish child prodigy who lived from 1803-11.

**18. Every Eye** by Isobel English: An unusual 1956 novel about a girl travelling to Spain, highly praised by Muriel Spark: to be a R4 afternoon play in August. Preface: Neville Braybrooke

**19. They Knew Mr Knight** by Dorothy Whipple: An absorbing 1934 novel about a family man driven to committing fraud and the effect on his wife; a 1943 film. Preface: Terence Handley MacMath

**20. A Woman's Place** by Ruth Adam: A survey of C20th women's lives, very readably written by a novelist-historian: an overview full of insights. Preface: Yvonne Roberts

**21. Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day** by Winifred Watson: A delightful 1938 novel, our bestseller, about a governess and a night-club singer. Read on R4 by Maureen Lipman. Preface: Henrietta Twycross-Martin

**22. Consider the Years** by Virginia Graham: Sharp, funny, evocative WWII poems by Joyce Grenfell's closest friend and collaborator. Preface: Anne Harvey

**23. 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. Preface: Julia Neuberger.



- 24. Family Roundabout** by Richmal Crompton: By the author of the *William* books, this 1948 family saga is about two matriarchs watching over their very different children. Preface: Juliet Aykroyd
- 25. 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 the contemporary illustrations. Five were read on R4 in 2002.
- 26. 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.
- 27. The Children who Lived in a Barn** by Eleanor Graham: A 1938 classic about five children fending for themselves; starring the unforgettable hay-box. Preface: Jacqueline Wilson
- 28. Little Boy Lost** by Marghanita Laski: This unputdownable novel about a father's search for his son in France in 1945 was chosen by the *Guardian's* Nicholas Lezard as his 2001 paperback choice. A 'Book at Bedtime'. Preface: Anne Sebba
- 29. The Making of a Marchioness** by Frances Hodgson Burnett: A wonderfully entertaining 1901 novel about the melodrama when a governess marries well. Preface: Isabel Raphael, Afterword: Gretchen Gerzina
- 30. Kitchen Essays** by Agnes Jekyll: Witty and useful essays about cooking, with recipes, first published in *The Times*, then reprinted as a book in 1922.
- 31. 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. Preface: Ruth Gorb
- 32. The Carlyles at Home** by Thea Holme: A 1965 mixture of biography and social history describing Thomas and Jane Carlyle's life in Chelsea.
- 33. The Far Cry** by Emma Smith: A beautifully written 1949 novel about a young girl's passage to India at the time of Partition; a great favourite. To be 'Book at Bedtime' in June. Preface: author
- 34. 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.
- 35. Greenery Street** by Denis Mackail: A delightful 1925 novel about a young couple's first year of married life in a (real) street in Chelsea. Preface: Rebecca Cohen
- 36. Lettice Delmer** by Susan Miles: An unforgettable 1920s novel in verse describing Lettice's troubled journey to redemption, much praised by TS Eliot.
- 37. The Runaway** by Elizabeth Anna Hart: A witty and charming 1872 novel for children, illustrated with over sixty woodcuts by Gwen Raverat. Afterwords: Anne Harvey, Frances Spalding.
- 38. Cheerful Weather for the Wedding** by Julia Strachey: A funny and quirky 1932 novella by a niece of Lytton Strachey, much admired by Virginia Woolf. Preface: Frances Partridge. *Also read on a cassette by Miriam Margolyes (38A)*
- 39. 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. Preface: Eva Ibbotson
- 40. The Priory** by Dorothy Whipple: Our third Whipple novel, this one about three generations of a family, and their servants, living in a large country house before WWII. Preface: David Conville
- 41. Hostages to Fortune** by Elizabeth Cambridge: 'Deals with domesticity without being in the least bit cosy' (Harriet Lane in the *Observer*), a remarkable fictional portrait of a doctor's family in rural Oxfordshire in the 1920s.
- 42. The Blank Wall** by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding: 'The top suspense writer of them all' (Raymond Chandler). A 1949 thriller about a mother who shields her daughter from a blackmailer.
- 43. The Wise Virgins** by Leonard Woolf: this is a wise and witty 1914 novel contrasting the bohemian Virginia and Vanessa with Gwen, the girl next door in 'Richstead'. Preface: Lyndall Gordon
- 44. Tea with Mr Rochester** by Frances Towers: 1949 short stories, broadcast on R4 in 2003. They are magical, unsettling, unusually written. Preface: Frances Thomas
- 45. Good Food on the Aga** by Ambrose Heath: A 1932 cookery book meant for Aga users but can be used by anyone; with numerous illustrations by Edward Bawden.
- 46. Miss Ranskill Comes Home** by Barbara Bower: A 1946 novel by the author of the Worzel Gummidge books describing a woman who is shipwrecked and returns to wartime England. Preface: Wendy Pollard
- 47. The New House** by Lettice Cooper: 1936 portrayal of a family's move to a new house and the tensions this evokes. Preface: Jilly Cooper.
- 48. The Casino** by Margaret Bonham: 1948 collection of short stories by a writer with a unique voice. Preface: Cary Bazalgette.



# 'THE ENGLISH LESSON'

one of the short stories in *The Casino* by Margaret Bonham

When Miss Maurer remembered she had to take IVa for English at three, there was no more pleasure in looking out of the staffroom window at the bare trees etched on a winter sky. She turned away towards the fire and her hands were already cold with apprehension. I've got to be firm with them she said in silence, I've got to be, it's not too late to start. She watched how, over a book, the science mistress bent half-smiling, fresh from IVa's biology lesson with not a hair out of place, not a hair stirred by a breath or a movement from the class. Miss Maurer thought in desolation, if I smile they get worse than ever, and if I am stern they laugh behind the desks. A bell rang, and with her stiff, cold fingers she picked up her books and went into the icy corridor that led to the classroom.

All the seventeen children in IVa were sitting on desks and window-sills and arguing passionately about cakes; it was Prue Leigh's birthday and her mother was taking her out to tea. They said, 'Oh, Prue, you don't want to go to Lostriffs'; Lostriffs' are awful.' 'They don't have any with

chocolate on.' 'The Bay Tree have jam puffs with sticky on top. Gosh, they're absolutely –' 'Oh, Anna, those are *foul*.' 'Helen, they're *not* foul.' Miss Maurer heard it from the passage. 'Shut up, she's coming.' 'Oh, Lord, *English*.' 'Shelley.' Touching the frozen brass of the handle, the lunatic desire came to her again, to walk away down the corridor and down the stairs and out of the iron gates at the end of the path and along and away and on down the road. She held the knob for a second, and turned it, and went in.

Every time Miss Maurer faced IVa it seemed to her not possible that they should be no more than seventeen; in dozens, in scores she saw the pure immature lines of their faces turned towards her, their eyes clear or the deceiving light on glasses, scorn and amusement in their mouths and noses, hair impertinently curling or limp with approaching boredom. She touched the desk with her frozen fingers and set her books side by side on the slope. Beyond the window the hills were lighter with snow than the iron sky with the promise of it, and lighter than this

malicious dusk in which thirty-four hands shuffled at notes and pencils and Things behind the lids of desks. 'Please,' she said, 'please be quiet at once.' Something in Prue's corner made a noise like a saw; but who would bring a saw to a lesson on Shelley?

Prue said, 'Oh, please, Miss Maurer, I can't see to read.'

'Turn the light on, Mary; I said *Mary*. Helen and Susan, go and sit down.'

'Oh, Miss Maurer, it's awful with the light on.'

'Oh, shut up, it isn't.'

'Shelley,' said someone very low, 'gives me a pain in the . . .'

'Anna, you are *awful*.'

'Neck.'

'Oh, Anna, you *weren't* going to –'

'Page eighteen,' said Miss Maurer; she felt her brows contract, her mouth stretch in a helpless disciplinary mask. 'Mary,' she said. In a quite flat and expressionless voice, as if it were a seed catalogue, Mary began to read: 'O wild west wind thou breath of autumn's being thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead are driven . . .'

Almost before the bell had stopped ringing, Miss Maurer passed the child who held open the door; the child contrived, simply by standing on one leg and sliding a



sideways glance, to convey both insolence and relief. Once in the corridor, her fingers warmed and unflexed on the books, she walked with elegance; from one hand she swung a small saw. That was over and she looked forward to Blake with the Sixth, whose hands lay quiet on their desks and who had a good maturing respect for their own language; and then, she thought, I will go out to tea by myself for once, somewhere rich and warm.

Prue went to meet her mother by the Abbey gates, running across the already darkening square in the importance of her birthday, hair curling out and speckled with

snow under the round, dark-blue hat. Against the icy flakes in the wind her mother was only two oval dark eyes between the fur of her cap and the fur of her jacket; in fur-lined boots, her feet stamped an expensive pattern on the stones. Like a Czarist lady, she smelt of cold and Cuir de Russie.

When they opened the door of the teashop the warmth, the rosy light, the rich smell of cakes struck almost solid on their faces, almost pressed them back into the street. They sat on gilt chairs against the sweep of petunia curtains shutting out the snow. Prue said, 'I'd like to live in

a place like this.' 'Vulgar, darling, but at least warm,' said her mother, shedding gloves and furs with the graceful assurance Prue admired but never managed to copy. 'I wish I had a fur coat,' she said. 'A white one.' She looked sideways at the cakes on the tables round them. 'Mary said they didn't have chocolate ones here, and look, it's crawling with them.' 'Chocolate what?' said her mother. 'Darling, did you have a nice day at school?' 'Lousyish,' said Prue; 'well, I mean it was all right. English was quite fun.'

'What did you do in English?' 'Oh, I forget; some sort of poetry, Shelley, I think. I meant we were ragging Maurer.'

'Dearest, I do get them so mixed up; which is Maurer?' 'Oh, Mamma, I've told you; the new one. She's one of those hags – well, she's quite kind and all that, I suppose, but people simply shouldn't let themselves, should they? I wouldn't, would you?'

'Let themselves what?' said her mother vaguely.

'Be ragged around with. I mean, if they didn't show it, nobody would, would they? Mamma, you aren't listening.'

'Darling, I'm sorry; I was staring rudely at someone very beautiful and it took my mind off. Do say it again.'

'Oh, where? Mamma, let me see,' said Prue, turning inelegantly.

'The girl over near the door,



Picture of Lamb's Conduit Street by Lucinda Rogers



but you don't have to go into contortions; do sit down.' Prue half-rose from her chair, the cups rocked; she peered over and around the intervening heads. 'Oh, Lord, Mamma, there *is* Maurer; how awful. She couldn't hear what I said from there, could she? She does look pretty cheesed off. What on earth do you think she's doing here? Mamma, I can't see anyone beautiful near the door.'

'Well, never mind; which is Maurer?'

'Well, that one – the hag by herself next to the pillar, with no hat.'

'Darling, that's the one I mean. In a black coat.'

With the overdone surprise so irritating in the very young, Prue sat down and stared speechless at her mother. 'Mamma,' she said at last, 'you *must* be dotty, you must have made a mistake. You can't possibly mean Maurer. I mean, I told you, she's quite awful. It couldn't –'

'You can't be expected to have any taste at your age,' said her mother maddeningly. 'I suppose you think anyone is plain who hasn't got golden curls. I suppose I did too. Maurer is very beautiful indeed, and you'll have to take my word for it.'

'But, oh gosh, what's she *got*? I mean, anyone can see she's a hag; her hair's straight.'

'I know one does at your age, but do you really think people with straight hair are plain just like that?'

'Well, I mean I've got eyes; and, Mamma, she's so *dull*. What on earth can you see in her?'

'Choose your cake and let's stop arguing, it's no use at all. Darling, what a pity – you may never see a face like that again; by the time you're old enough to appreciate it, she'll be teaching some other horrid children, or having broods of her own, and getting wrinkles, not that in her case it would matter a great deal. Do you want the chocolate or the jam?'

'Both, please,' said Prue almost absently. 'Couldn't you ask them to get us some more, Mamma?' she said. 'I still think you're dotty.' Tilting back her chair to an angle from which she could see Miss Maurer's profile colourless in pale and dark against the gilt and petunia wall, she ate steadily through the cakes.

Miss Maurer's tea took her mind off IVa at the time, but in the cold morning she was no more inclined to teach them English grammar than she had been to face them with Shelley the day before; when she sat in the staffroom window at break she could, indeed, hardly bear the thought. Snow had fallen through the night and the glass framed in white feathers the dark trees with white plumes, the hills like swans. She could have watched them unmoving all the morning. But the bell rang; and walking up the

corridor she felt the mask of horrid and impotent authority impose itself already on her face. Like ice and lead the books and her fingers froze together.

Prue was sitting on the window-sill above the class; she was saying, 'Well, I know it's rot. It's only what my mother thinks. I mean, she does know about that sort of thing so she ought to know what she's talking about, but she must have had a sort of fit or something. No, but I mean, if she was so absolutely ravishing we could all *see*, or couldn't we?' IVa were enchanted with sensation, united against Prue's mother, yet pleasingly racked with doubt; they said, 'Oh, Prue, her hair's *straight*; Prue, there must have been something funny about the light; well, your mother must have been looking at someone else; well, we can't all be off our rockers; I mean, she looks like nothing on earth; Prue, are you *sure* it was. . .'

From the corridor, Miss Maurer heard the murmur, the scuffle, the 'Shut up, she's coming'; feeble with apprehension, her fingers burning with cold stuck to the handle, but she went in to a profound silence. Thirty-four eyes were frozen on her face, and Miss Maurer was quite terrified. Oh, heavens, she thought, oh, what are they going to do today? But in this awful vacuum of calm they sat quiet at their desks, not



whispering, not scraping, not sawing, only fixing their eyes on her, staring, gazing, as intent as owls. Too unnerved to have more than the dimmest notion of what she was saying, Miss Maurer began at random on the subjunctive mood, but her mind was quite taken up with what in heaven's name they could be staring at. Nothing odd about her clothes, which were the same as yesterday; her skirt was fastened, her suspenders held, both her shoes were black; and, in any case, the eyes all focused on her face. She ran fingers over her hair; it fell on her neck in some disorder of darkness, but not more than usual. It can only be, Miss Maurer said to herself, a very large smut or a smear; but if it is that, why don't they laugh? She turned away from the temptation to leave them and go and look in the staffroom mirror. She went on talking about the subjunctive mood and they went on staring in silence.

The lesson dragged itself in tedium round the clock; but towards its end there was a gradual stirring among the class, as though it had slept and was slowly waking. Miss Maurer, in her shell of fear and apprehension, watched it with the beginning of relief. When her questions were answered with a touch of impertinence, when Prue leaned from her desk and whispered to Helen, when heads turned inattentively to look out of the window, she was almost

happy; at the first sign of insolence, she smiled. Oh, they're unbearable, Miss Maurer said to herself, but now they are back to normal I nearly like them; anything, anything rather than that shattering stare. And still smiling she looked over their heads to the first patches of green on the white hills, the first melting of the snow.

'Oh, Prue,' said Iva after the lesson, 'do you think your mother was pulling your leg? Oh, Prue, you *don't*!' 'Well, I can see what she means, too.' 'Gosh, Susan, well, you must be cracked.' 'Helen, I'm not cracked.' 'Well, you must say, Anna, when she smiled -'

Miss Maurer stood in front of the staffroom mirror, still holding her books in both hands; without expression, her face looked back at her, nothing about it was different. Her eyes, her pallor, the disorder of her hair were those she saw every morning and night, disinterested, in her glass; only her eyes remembered the staring, her mouth the relief of its relaxation; and lifting her shoulders, shaking her head in the conviction she would never know, she moved across to the window and stood looking out at the trees and hills darkening and melting with the thaw.



detail from *The Schifanoia Frescoes in Florence* by Francesco Cossa, c.1470 – a display of affection very unusual in Renaissance painting.



# OUR READERS WRITE

*'Miss Ranskill Comes Home* is one of my favourite Persephone books. The plot is clever, and while parts of the book are terribly funny it is also heart-rending. The afterword is particularly impressive and enlightening.' KB, Glasgow

'I would just like to say how much I enjoyed *Reuben Sachs* and *Miss Pettigrew*. The former is so moving, yet witty (I can see why Amy Levy is called the Jewish Jane Austen) and the ending left me stunned. *Miss Pettigrew* – and I'm glad I read them in that order – was so funny and charming and delightful. Both were "unputdownable"'. AG, Saltdean

*'Few Eggs and No Oranges* has become one of my all-time favourite books.' GG, Swindon

'I loved *The Priory* – Dorothy Whipple's characters are accessible even though so much of their period. The reader understands their dilemmas and decisions and becomes absorbed in their world.' AN, London W8

'I had been thinking about buying *The Priory* for some time but finally decided to do so after reading *The Provincial Lady in War Time* where, when a friend asks her to recommend a book to read, "Inspiration immediately descends upon me and I tell her without hesitation

to read a delightful novel called *The Priory* by Dorothy Whipple...and that it is many years since I have enjoyed anything so much.'" CW, Ossett [In fact this comment, first read many years ago, was the source for our own discovery of Whipple; this led to *Someone at a Distance* being one of the first Persephone books, followed by two more of her novels with, we hope, more to come.]

'I have just finished Elizabeth Cambridge's *Hostages to Fortune* and it is my best Persephone Book yet! Lots of pencil markings of particularly sensitive passages which have really moved me in their perception and truthfulness now adorn my copy, which I will not be lending out!' CF, Lewes

'I don't know when I have enjoyed a book so much as *Miss Ranskill*' MH, Royston

*'Hostages to Fortune* has been early morning balm – the story of William and Catherine's unremitting grind and the sheer physical demands that children pose, and the emotional frictions – it was so truthfully told. (But I also felt very ashamed because our walls aren't damp, and I don't have such a restricted life as Catherine.) Now I'm on *The Children who Lived in a Barn* and feel such shock about it – those extraordinary parents, who

are much more present in their absence than in most children's books, and drawn so realistically! And then the crushing weight of bourgeois expectations on these children – Susan seems to think of nothing but properly-served hot meals and washing. I can't decide if Eleanor Graham admires or criticises her.' TH-M, St Albans

'I took *The Far Cry* with me to read in India, started to read it on the train and discovered I was making the same journey, getting off halfway across India but on the same Bombay-Calcutta mail train. A more populated landscape than the one Teresa sees but other than that I read and saw the same India. A wonderful read, cleverly written, a strange sense of restraint very present despite the vividly descriptive language.' SH, Hay-on-Wye

'I have just finished *Hostages to Fortune*. What a BEAUTIFUL book. I think that it is, most probably, the best book that Persephone have published.' GM, N Yorks

'I have just re-read *The Wise Virgins* in your edition and thoroughly enjoyed it, surprising myself. I thought it very funny this time round – clever, observant, and far more readable than some of Leonard Woolf's wife's novels!' VC, Emsworth



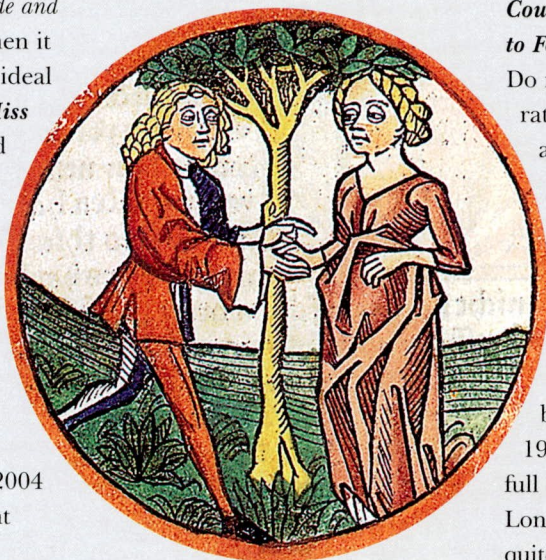
# AND IN CASE YOU MISSED THIS...

India Knight's new book *The Shops* mentions us three times, once when it calls **Miss**

**Pettigrew** 'the sweetest grown-up book in the world' and puts it in the 'Bed Books' category (ie. books to curl up in bed with) along with titles that include *The Making of a Marchioness*, *The Pursuit of Love* and *Pride and Prejudice*; a second time when it recommends our books as ideal 'Presents for Mums' and **Miss Pettigrew** in particular; and a third when *Kitchen Essays* is reviewed in a food section: 'An absolute delight to read – a lesson on how to write, in parts – and the recipes have held up surprisingly well.'

The *Time Out London Shopping Guide* for 2004 writes: 'This brilliant shop is owned by the eponymous publishing house that finds obscure or forgotten works by women writers and gives them life. The beautifully printed books are published in elegant paperback form. The staff are absurdly friendly.' And the *London Illustrated News*, in a feature about Lamb's Conduit Street (illustrated by the picture by Lucinda Rogers on page 11) described us 'working away to the sound of Mozart. Yet you sense a core of steel and I leave £10 lighter.'

**G**razia magazine, in a feature headed 'Da Londra, romantici & chic', said: 'Si chiamano Persephone Books e sono una versione ipersofisticata [hyper-sophisticated] della letteratura al femminile. Piccoli gioielli da riscoprire [jewels to rediscover].



*'The Month of May': from a 1488 German calendar in the library at St Gallen, Switzerland*

E una veste grafica curatissima [a most carefully-chosen graphic form].'

**W**e have ten books that we especially recommend for reading groups – the reason is that they are full of themes to discuss, and for this reason we do not recommend something like *Miss Pettigrew*, since almost

everyone simply declares elatedly 'isn't it wonderful?' but this does not lead to an animated two-hour discussion! The books we recommend are *William - an Englishman*, *Someone at a Distance*, *Fidelity*, *The Home-Maker*, *Saplings*, *Little Boy Lost*, *A House in the Country*, *The Far Cry*, *Hostages to Fortune* and *The Wise Virgins*. Do not forget that we do special rates for groups – please ring and ask what they are.

The two books we publish in June are *Bricks and Mortar* (1932) by Helen Ashton, a novel about the life of an architect living in London between the 1890s and 1920s, an enjoyable family saga full of architectural details about London (the family moves house quite often!); and *The World that was Ours* (1967) by Hilda Bernstein. Hilda's husband Rusty was one of the defendants at the Rivonia Trial in South Africa in 1964 at which Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment; Rusty, however, was acquitted and able to escape to England. This is a woman's view of that time, a moving description of resistance to the apartheid state and a classic work that bears comparison with memoirs by writers such as Nadezhda Mandelstam and Christabel Bielenberg.



# FINALLY

Half the one hundred places have been sold for the **Second**

**Persephone Weekend** to be held at Newnham College, Cambridge from 18-19 September this year. Among the confirmed speakers are Salley Vickers, Juliet Gardiner, Jane Brown, Henrietta Garnett, Kate Saunders and Frances Spalding. The focus will be on women writers, and Persephone writers in particular, in response to the launch this year of the *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. The weekend will again cost £275 including VAT. If you would like to attend this very enjoyable and special event, please send a (refundable) deposit of £100.

**The Far Cry** by Emma Smith will be 'Book at Bedtime' on BBC R4 from 7-18 June; also in June the

R4 'Afternoon Story' slot will broadcast five short stories from Margaret Bonham's *The Casino*.

**The** May Lunch will be on Wednesday 19th when Cary Bazalgette will talk about her mother Margaret Bonham: her work and life, and in particular the short stories collected in *The Casino*. On Tuesday June 22nd Gretchen Gerzina, who wrote the afterword for *The Making of a Marchioness* and has written a new biography of Frances Hodgson Burnett, will give a talk about her. Both events cost £25 and last from 12.30-2.30. And on the afternoon of Tuesday 27 April we will show the 1924 silent film of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *The Home-Maker* at the BFI on Stephen Street W1. This extraordinary piece of film history, never previously shown

in the UK, has been tracked down by Kevin Brownlow, to whom very many thanks.

**We** welcome the launch of *Slightly Foxed: The Real Reader's Quarterly*. A magazine with a difference, for people 'who don't want to read only what the big publishers are hyping and the newspapers are reviewing', *Slightly Foxed* will feature all those wonderful books on publishers' backlists and from small presses that only rarely get noticed. (Persephone features in the first issue.) *Slightly Foxed*, which costs £32 a year for four 96 page issues, can be contacted on 020 7359 3377; [www.foxedquarterly.com](http://www.foxedquarterly.com).

**We** hope some of you may be able to attend a Persephone event at the Oxford Literary Festival at 4pm on Sunday 28 March; and that London readers can get to the Imperial War Museum's excellent *Women and War* exhibition before it ends on 18 April (our First and Second World War books are on sale in the bookshop).

**P**ersephone now has added French chic! Hester has alas moved on after her fifteen months with us, but her role has been taken over by Sybille, who has joined us from Paris.



*'The Sisters' 1917 by Edmund Dulac, from the 'Women and War' exhibition at the Imperial War Museum - a land girl, a nurse (wearing the dress on display at the Persephone bookshop) and a munitions worker.*

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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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