

THE PERSEPHONE QUARTERLY

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OUR SPRING 2005 BOOKS

Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, published in 1933, is a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel, who lived from 1840-54. Its direct inspiration was a new edition, in 1930, of the Brownings' love letters in which 'the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life.'

Flush was also light relief from *The Waves*, Virginia's most modernist and 'difficult' novel: 'I enjoy my freak of writing *Flush* - & think it a good idea - this easy indolent writing once in a way - to let my brain cool,' she wrote in September 1932 and, in December, 'I shall take up *Flush* again to cool myself.'

When she read through the 30,000 words she had misgivings, realising that most reviewers would take refuge (when they were kind) in words like "charming", delicate, ladylike' and that 'I shall very much dislike the popular success of *Flush*'. Indeed, although 'practically no one has seen what I was after', *Flush* was rapidly

reprinted (15,000 copies were sold in the first six weeks) and earned the Woolfs extremely respectable sums of money; Virginia's embarrassment raises the perennial question: whether the popular and the critically acclaimed, the best-selling and the literary, always have to be separated by an invisible barrier?

These are questions that are implicit in Sally Beauman's Preface to *Flush*. Explaining that it purports to be a biography of the spaniel that had been given to the (then) Elizabeth Barrett by her friend, the writer Mary Russell Mitford in 1840, Sally Beauman points out: 'Flush's life has the symmetry of fiction: his two owners and his biographer were women; all three women, Miss Mitford, Elizabeth Barrett and Virginia Woolf were writers, and all three shared a common inheritance: all three struggled throughout their lives to free themselves from the shadow cast by their fathers... Although ostensibly a book about the

taming of a pedigree dog, *Flush* addresses the way society tames and classifies woman', indeed not just tames them but imprisons them: *Flush* is imprisoned by Taylor, the notorious London dog stealer, and Elizabeth is imprisoned by her father. 'Which is the more frightening, the brutal outlaw Taylor, or the brute-willed father, whose behaviour a whole society endorses and condones? And of course there is a *third* gaoler hiding in the narrative here. The book tracks the process by which a dog is trained, penned up, leashed, and housebroken.'

Flush is also an exploration of concepts of 'breeding'; Virginia Woolf shows that 'the classifications of DeBrett are as absurd and pernicious' as those of the Kennel Club that lead *Flush* to look up to greyhounds but down on mongrels. 'When we ask what constitutes noble birth,' says Virginia Woolf, 'should our eyes be light or dark, our ears curled or straight, are topknots fatal,



A 19th century marbled endpaper for *Flush*



A 1935 Colichem Printers' Association dog's label for *Flush*

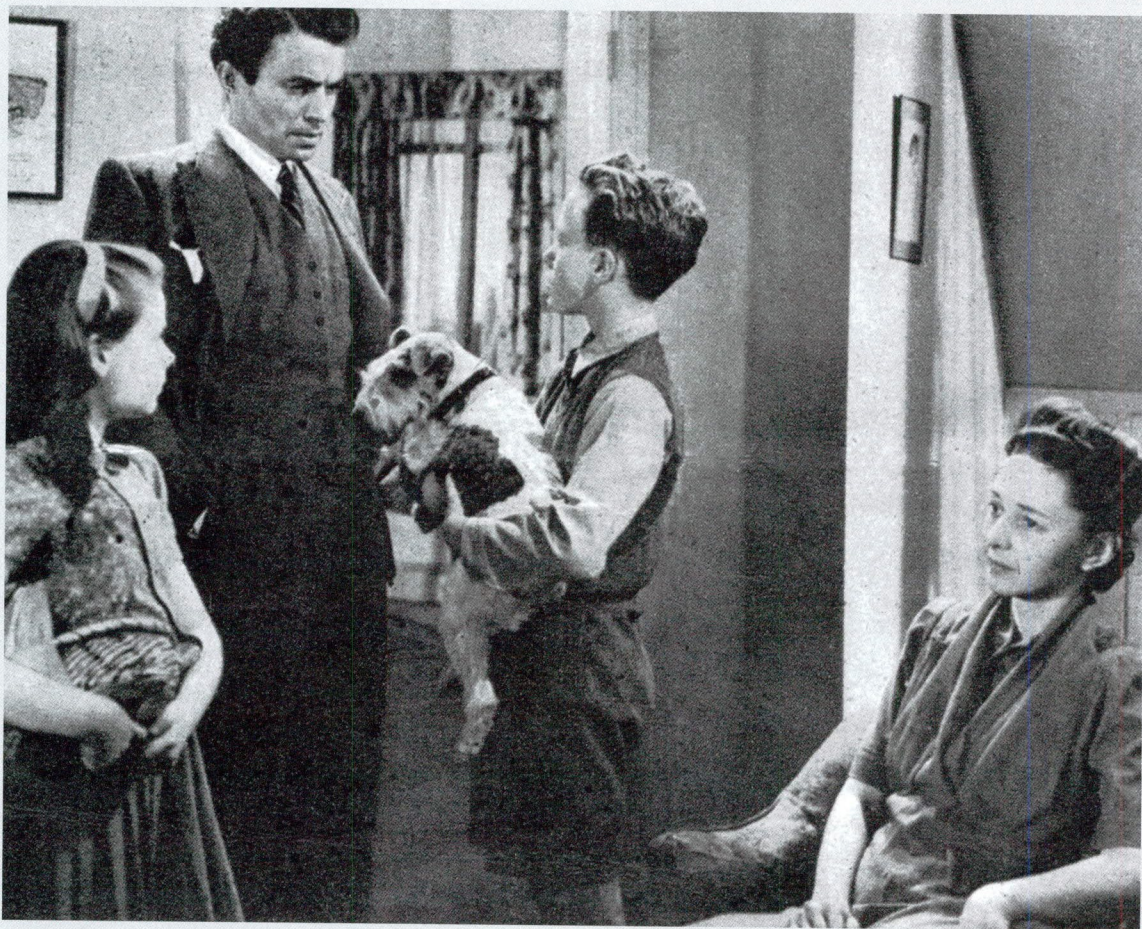
our judges merely refer us to our coats of arms. You have none perhaps. Then you are nobody.'

Most people, however, will read *Flush* simply as a delightful and unique classic, an unusual and extraordinary book by one of our greatest writers; it is, as well, perhaps the most wonderful book about a dog ever written and, as the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote thirty years after its first publication, 'a triumph of the creative imagination and a little masterpiece of comedy.'

Finally, without wanting to enter into the breeding debate, we in the Persephone office – where we have our own resident spaniel called Sasha – have been much exercised by the question of whether Flush was a cocker spaniel, as Virginia Woolf claims, or whether he was in fact a Cavalier King Charles like Sasha. We direct the reader to the pictures on pages 4 and 15 and are inclined to say that we rest our case; even though our preface writer's view is that in the

picture on page 4 'Flush might, with charity, be taken for a small King Charles, but the closest likeness is indubitably a fox.'

We do not know Virginia's reaction to *Flush* being selected as Book of the Month by the Book Society but we do know Dorothy Whipple's when *They Were Sisters* was chosen in November 1943: 'I have been excited many times in my life before, but I don't think I was ever as excited as now.' Nor do we know whether either writer



Still from the 1945 film of *They Were Sisters*: Ann Stephens, James Mason, John Gilpin and Dulcie Gray

read the other, although it is most unlikely that Virginia Woolf ever read Dorothy Whipple and fairly certain that Dorothy Whipple never read any Virginia Woolf except (we presume) *Flush*.

Nevertheless, the books are linked: both write about the way society 'tames and classifies' women, both explore attitudes to home and family. For Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for Virginia Woolf and for *Flush* 'the word "home" has a double meaning: it is a place of confinement yet of comfort; it denies him freedom, but provides protection.' Dorothy Whipple's women know they have homes only because they are wives.

This is the main theme of *They Were Sisters*: that the sisters' choice of husband dictates whether they have homes, and whether, in their homes, they will be allowed to flourish, be tamed or repressed. We see three different choices and three different husbands: the best-friend, soul-mate husband of the one sister, who brings her great joy; the would-be companionable husband of another, who over-indulges and finally bores her; and the bullying husband who turns a high-spirited, naive young girl into a deeply unhappy woman. It is the last husband, Geoffrey, who is the most horrifying character in *The Were Sisters*.

Man's cruelty to woman is a frequent theme in Dorothy Whipple's novels, but nowhere was there more scope for man to be cruel to his wife than in Britain before the reform of the divorce laws. As Celia Brayfield writes: 'Coupled with their financial dependence, but largely taken for granted because it would have been a fact of life for Whipple's readers, is the bitter truth that the middle-class woman of this time had almost no chance of freeing herself from a bad husband. Even after the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937 a divorced woman suffered grave social disadvantages' – and these are vividly described in the heart-wrenching short story 'Wednesday' that we reprint in this issue of the quarterly. This story is in one sense timeless but in another a lot has thankfully changed. What has not changed is that some men are bullies and some women are married to them. 'Described as a woman who loves too much decades before those words became the title of a book about women drawn to dysfunctional partners, Charlotte marries Geoffrey, a boorish, hard-drinking salesman who swiftly evolves into a domestic dictator. Yet his blood-curdling sadism towards his wife and children is evoked without any physical violence or the use of a word stronger than "damn"'. *They Were Sisters* is a compulsively readable but often harrowing novel by one of Persephone's best writers, who always manages to make the ordinary extraordinary.



An 1843 drawing of *Flush* by his owner's brother Alfred Moulton-Barrett
© the Provost and Fellows of Eton College

OUR READERS WRITE

'I was lent *Good Evening, Mrs Craven* and must say how thrilled I was to read such excellent writing. Mollie Panter-Downes must have been such a meticulous observer of human nature! I loved the humour about the ladies who are making pyjamas for the Greeks; and the pathos of the lonely lady who had enjoyed the Blitz because everyone slept in the corridors of the flats that she lived in and now that it was over she had nobody to talk to, moved me almost to tears.' V de B, Musgrave, South Africa

'I just loved *The Wise Virgins*. I thought it was beautifully written with such intelligence and humour and I related to it much more than I ever have to anything by his wife. In the most thwarted way it was incredibly romantic.' AR, London NW3

'*A Woman's Place* is a riveting read, inspiring and informative and in such an easy style.' CY, Beaconsfield

'We discussed *Manja* at our book group meeting and it was a very lively and lengthy meeting. We ranged from the history of the period, the various attitudes of our parents' generation, the excellence of the writing, the aftermath of the war and the awful possibility that this sort of thing could happen anywhere

again. I would have been very sorry to have missed this book, but might have dodged it if my book group hadn't chosen it.' CC, Edinburgh

'I thought some of the stories in the *The Casino* were the best I've ever read – but then most of your books are a source of great enjoyment.' HT, Leatherhead

'The three titles by Marghanita Laski have been my favourite so far: it seems incredible to me that her books have remained so long undiscovered since their initial publication. While *The Victorian Chaise-longue* remains the work of hers that most impresses me (it's like a much subtler and more chilling version of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's famous rediscovered short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper', which Laski of course would not have known), I think *The Village* has been the book that moved me the most. Margaret's angry outburst towards her parents is one of the most satisfying speeches I've ever read in C20th fiction, and Laski's very open and nuanced analysis of class is superbly handled. *Fidelity* is also a brilliant book. Glaspell gets what so few other writers of the region understood, and Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis never rightly realised: that even people living in provincial towns

have complex inner lives, and do not see themselves as naive or backward.' JD, Portland, USA

'I found *Julian Grenfell* a most compelling and extraordinarily thought-provoking book.' SR, Cambridge

'All your cookery books have pleased and *They Can't Ration These* is a delight. I found Poto Pie and Gascony Game Pie delicious. And the Persephone mug is just right: it demands, and gets, quarter of an hour each mid-morning to enjoy its fine rim and ingenious construction.' DB, Le Touquet

'I loved *Lady Rose and Mrs Memmary*'s mixture of fairy tale and romanticism without sentimentality – an enchanting novel.' V W-H, London NW3

'I think *Someone at a Distance* is a brilliant book: clever in its construction and plot, and so subtle in its style and description of emotions. All the characters are depicted so clearly, and are utterly convincing.' DT, London

'*Manja* is an extraordinary book; she is unforgettable, and represents something very important, which is the immense strength of goodness and how powerful and penetrating that is. It's a book that could change you a bit if you let it.' SH, Hay-on-Wye

ALBIE SACHS ON THE WORLD THAT WAS OURS

It was the anti-apartheid activist Hilda Bernstein who introduced me to the term 'wives-of'. Married to Rusty Bernstein and using his surname, she was never his 'wife-off'. There was that famous moment when, as Rusty was rearrested after being acquitted in the Rivonia Trial in Johannesburg in 1964, she yelled out in court, 'Oh no, they are taking him again.' Her cry captured headlines.

The Rivonia Trial, at which Nelson Mandela and eight other activists were sentenced to life imprisonment, is the centre point of this enthralling story. It reads like a thriller. Page after page. Which was surprising, because not only did I know the facts inside out, and who the villains were, I had read it before.

It more than holds its own as a highly literate remembrance today of a world that was, but is no longer, ours. Rusty and Hilda Bernstein were amongst the great figures of the Mandela generation of South African freedom fighters. Almost forty years ago she wrote this story of Rusty's arrest, trial, acquittal and escape. She wanted it to be a personalised weapon of struggle, and to focus attention on

Mandela and the others in prison. Lightly re-edited, it grasped my attention from the beginning. Partly this was because of the Eric Ambler-like atmosphere, with heroes battling through webs of dense secret-police activity. But the real intriguing mystery for me lay in whether it would stand up to being read in our post apartheid era. Without the sub-text of struggle, would the text survive as literature? Without the tension of history, would the memoir sustain itself?

The answer is yes, triumphantly so. The vivid detail and flowing imaginative recall can be enjoyed for themselves. We can relish without any straining purpose the subtleties and freshness of Hilda's voice, the strong evocations of urban and rural landscape, and the details of character. Indeed, mingled with the anger and astonishment at what was once the apparent normality of apartheid, it is even possible to feel a certain sympathy for Colonel Klindt as he faced the well-planned and brilliantly executed emotional assaults of the women who confronted him in his den, spirited and independent women, for the most part still actively engaged in

dangerous clandestine work.

There is something peculiarly appropriate about this book resurfacing again. It is the loveliest of Hilda Bernstein's works about the ugliest of her times. The sense of integrity in the writing has been fully validated by subsequent events. We read it with a sense of triumph, but happily, without a feeling of triumphalism.

The dismantling of apartheid was not a miracle, it was the product of the vision so fluently and convincingly captured by Hilda at a time when liberation was widely regarded as a wonderful but impossible hope. And there is something especially satisfying in knowing that she can take it for granted that the knock on the door in her little flat in Cape Town comes not from the security police but from her grandchildren, and knowing that they are growing up in a country with a Constitution that not only proclaims non-racialism, but non-sexism as a foundational value.

The *Independent* 'Book of a Lifetime' October 29th 2004; Albie Sachs is a judge in South Africa's Constitutional Court.

OUR REVIEWERS WRITE

‘**A**mid the thousands of new novels that come out every year, there must be room for some revivals,’ said Nicholas Clee in the *Guardian*. ‘These are likely, if chosen by people of taste and discernment, to be better than at least 90% of the new stuff. Such a discerning publisher is Persephone Books... Ruby Ferguson’s 1937 novel *Lady Rose and Mrs Memmary* is a curious, affecting confection of high Scots romance and social realism. You may find rather syrupy the early chapters, in which Lady Rose enjoys an idyllic upbringing on a grand Scottish estate in the 1860s and 70s, but stay with it: you’ll come to see that this is a romantic novel that does not deny the inequalities of Victorian *mores* or the shattering of illusions that the 20th century will bring.’

And Susie Maguire commented in the *Glasgow Herald*’s ‘Book of the Moment’ column that *Lady Rose and Mrs Memmary* ‘is written in a style which fits somewhere between the witty satire of Susan Ferrier’s *Marriage* (1818) and the innocent gaiety of Daisy Ashford’s *The Young Visitors* (1919). The novel so captivated the late Queen Mother, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, that she invited the author to dine at Buckingham Palace.’ ‘Perhaps she was moved

by Ruby Ferguson’s encomium of all things Scottish,’ said Matthew Dennison in the *Spectator*; ‘perhaps the novel’s lush unabashed romanticism invited willing surrender. Present-day readers similarly prepared to suspend cynicism and surrender to its vintage charms will find unexpected depths, wisdom and even social protest.’

‘**T**he *Village*,’ wrote Julian Margaret Gibbs in *The Tablet*, ‘is a novel of ideas but it is warm and readable because Marghanita Laski is good at character and relationships too... She looks to the future a good deal and often her views are dated, but this emphasis on the significance of the changes coming to the village seems, from our vantage point, prescient.’

‘**G**ood *Food on the Aga* is an absolute gem,’ said Hayley Anderton in *Leicestershire and Rutland Life*, ‘totally indispensable for anybody owning one of these ovens. First published in 1933, this is another offering from the excellent Persephone Books. All of the dishes are particularly suited to Aga cooking but not exclusively so, so don’t dismiss this just because you have the “wrong” oven. It’s a delight from start to finish.’

In the *Independent Books* of the Year Charlie Lee-Potter chose *They Can’t Ration These*, ‘a whimsical forerunner to *Food for Free*, packed with recipes for stewed starlings, sage toothpaste and hedgehog paté. I pore over it late at night and cheer myself with the thought that the recipe for snail consomme need never be used again.’ While the Christmas Eve *International Herald Tribune* commented, in a long piece on the Vicomte de Mauduit’s book: ‘He was trying to make the best of a rotten situation and could not have guessed that his coping strategies would become part of today’s affluent society. The salads he recommends are now found in supermarkets along with olive oil, which in his day was only found in chemists. The pumpkins and squashes which he praises are replacing the beet on modish menus. Perhaps the biggest star of de Mauduit’s book is the good old nettle.’

Finally, *The Victorian* (the Victorian Society’s journal) called *Bricks and Mortar* ‘intelligent and serious, vividly evoking the period, in parts genuinely touching. One of the most attractive strands is the father-daughter relationship: Helen Ashton conveys well the enthusiasm they both feel for the architectural education he gives.’

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. 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

3. 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 Bowden

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: 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 very 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'. Afterword: 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, published in *The Times* and reprinted as a book in 1922. 'This is one of the best reads outside Elizabeth David' wrote gastropoda.com.

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. A 'Book at Bedtime' in 2004. Preface: author

34. Minnie's Room: The Peacetime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes 1947-1965: Second volume of short stories first published in *The New Yorker*, 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 extraordinary 1920s novel in verse describing a young girl's stormy adolescence and journey to redemption. It was much praised by TS Eliot.

37. The Runaway by Elizabeth Anna Hart: A Victorian novel for children and grown-ups, illustrated by Gwen Raverat. 'There never was a happier book' wrote *Country Life* in 1936. After words: 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 the Nazi takeover. Preface: Eva Ibbotson

40. The Priory by Dorothy Whipple: Our third Whipple novel, this one is 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, filmed as *The Reckless Moment* and *The Blank Wall*.

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' (Putney). 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 for Aga users which can nevertheless be used by anyone; with numerous illustrations by Edward Bawden.

46. Miss Ranskill Comes Home by Barbara Euphan Todd: A 1946 novel by the creator of *Worzel Gummidge*. Miss Ranskill is shipwrecked and three years later 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 resulting tensions between mother and daughters. Preface: Jilly Cooper.

48. The Casino by Margaret Bonham: 1948 collection of short stories by a writer with a unique voice; they were read on BBC Radio 4 in 2004. Preface: Cary Bazalgette.

49. Bricks and Mortar by Helen Ashton: A beautifully written 1932 novel by a once very popular writer, chronicling the life of a London architect over thirty-five years.

50. The World that was Ours by Hilda Bernstein: A memoir that reads like a novel about the events leading up to the 1964 Rivonia Trial when Nelson Mandela received a life sentence but the Bernsteins escaped to England. Preface and afterword: the author

51. Operation Heartbreak by Duff Cooper: A 1950 novella about a soldier who misses going to war – until the end of his life. Nina Bawden has called this 'the novel I enjoyed more than any other in the immediate post-war years.' Afterword: Max Arthur

52. The Village by Marghanita Laski: This 1952 comedy of manners describes post-war readjustments in village life. Afterword: Juliet Gardiner

53. Lady Rose and Mrs Memmery by Ruby Ferguson: A 1937 romantic novel about Lady Rose Targenet, who inherits a great house, marries well – and then meets the love of her life on a park bench. Preface: Candia McWilliam

54. They Can't Ration These by Vicomte de Mauduit: A cookery book about 'food for free', published in 1940, full of excellent recipes.

55. Flush by Virginia Woolf: A 1933 biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel, 'a little masterpiece of comedy' (*TLS*). Preface: Sally Beauman

56. They Were Sisters by Dorothy Whipple: The fourth Persephone book by this wonderful writer: a 1943 novel that contrasts three very different marriages. Preface: Celia Brayfield

'WEDNESDAY'

a short story by Dorothy Whipple

Mrs Bulford, as she still called herself, kept passing and re-passing the double wooden doors, standing wide open to make a gap in the garden wall. Every time she passed she glanced in at the house. She did no more than glance, but with every glance she saw a little more. She saw something else; a hoop lying on the lawn; Elsie as she stood at the kitchen window examining her nails in the pause between the courses in the dining-room. Mrs Bulford, Elsie's former mistress, knew how particular Elsie was about her nails, how she brooded over every little break or blemish, blaming her work, threatening to leave, insisting on the best soap if ever she had to wash anything.

Passing again, Mrs Bulford saw Elsie going past the passage window with a tray. She must be taking the pudding in now. Perhaps it was the children's favourite: Queen's Pudding with meringue on the top. Pat used to bang his spoon on the table with joy when this pudding came in; but probably he was too old for that now. Mrs Bulford hoped it wasn't Queen's Pudding today because the children ate it so slowly, making it last. They wouldn't hurry, she feared, even

though they knew their mother was waiting outside the gate.

Preoccupied with the innocent cruelty of her children, Mrs Bulford walked quite a long way beyond the house before she turned back. The trees hung over the garden walls, making a pleasant irregular shade. There were the familiar drowsy summer sounds; the doves cooing from the Watsons' roof, the faint sound of someone's wireless, far away from the hum of the city.

The road was empty. The families living in the pleasant houses were all within, having lunch. Parents and children sitting round the table, the subdued clatter of spoons and forks, intimate small talk. 'Don't spill, darling.' 'I got all my sums right this morning, Mummy.' 'I saw Mrs Parsons in town. I haven't seen her for ages.' 'Please may I have some more?'

Mrs Bulford laid her hand on the wall as she walked. Behind this it was all going on as before. She alone was shut out. She was shut out of the house, waiting for her children to finish their pudding at a table presided over by Cecil's new wife. Another woman sat in her place, did her hair at her dressing-table, slept in her bed, bought clothes for her children.

She was shut out of the town too, because she shrank from being seen in it. She had taken rooms in a village on the outskirts, just far enough away not to be known, she had fancied. But by this time, everyone in the village knew all about her; she saw it in their eyes.

Half the time, she couldn't believe that such a thing had happened to her. She would lie in bed, her arms behind her head, looking round at the cottage bedroom, at the pink-washed walls, the yellow furniture with white china knobs on the drawers, and think 'It can't be. How have I got here?'

She had the wholly unwarranted feeling that she might be able to go home sometime. She was like an exile waiting all the time to go home, devouring news of the place she longed to be in. She bought the Beddingworth papers, morning and evening, and read every word, even the advertisements. She knew who was born and who died or was married, she knew who wanted domestic help or houses. Every train that passed through to Beddingworth, she felt she ought to be on it. If anyone so much as mentioned the name of the city, a pang went

through her. Though when she lived there, she had taken little interest. She had other things to do, she had so much . . . Now she had nothing. She did nothing but wait for the first Wednesday of the month; the first Wednesday, fixed by Cecil's lawyers as the day when she, not a fit and proper person to have custody of her children, could, as a concession on Cecil's part, nevertheless see them for a few hours in the afternoon.

The children were quite used to these Wednesdays now, that was why they didn't hurry out. After all, it had been going on for almost eighteen months. The separation had grown less painful for them; more painful for her. But it was better that way. Anything was better than that first terrible Wednesday when they hadn't been able to understand, at the end of the afternoon, why she couldn't go back into the house with them. They had tried to pull her inside the gate, crying: 'Why don't you come in, Mummy? You must come in. Don't go away again. Don't go, Mummy. Come in...' She had seen the alarmed faces of Elsie, the daily woman, and Cecil's new wife at the windows. Then Elsie came out to get the children in, and she had to tear her skirt from their hands and go away, weeping. She could hear them calling after her as she went.

She thought she could never face another Wednesday after

that. It would be better to go right away, never try to see them again, she decided. But on the first Wednesday of the next month, she could not help herself. She was at the gates, walking up and down, waiting for them as she waited now.

Passing the house again, she saw that the nursery windows were thrown wide; she was glad of that. She saw there were new curtains at her bedroom windows. Perhaps everything was new there now. When she had come to sort out the things that were hers, to take away, they made such a pitiful collection that she had left them. Keep them, keep them, she had cried to Cecil. He had kept them and presumably his new wife had them now.

He had married the very week the decree was pronounced absolute, and she didn't know who his wife was. That was what was so extraordinary; she didn't know where he had got her from. During her life with Cecil, she had never heard of anybody called Sheila. Yet he must have known her all the time he was getting the divorce. He had always been secretive. He had always known how to hide things, even the most trivial, and she herself never had, or she would not have been walking up and down outside the wall now.

He must have been watching all the time. He must have seen the affair with Jack dawning, developing and giving him his

opportunity. He edged her into adultery, set the trap and watched her fall into it. He could not afford misconduct himself; he was a lawyer and his practice would have been ruined. Her idiotic infatuation for Jack was the chance he must almost have despaired of, because she had never given way to, or even felt, such a temptation before.

It had all been very short-lived. It was over in three days. She had pretended to go to Aunt Julia's, had gone to London with Jack instead, and after three days, the private detective got them.

It had been a temporary madness, induced by loneliness, the cold withdrawal of Cecil, the approach of middle-age. She felt her looks were going, she made a last grab at the romance she had missed. She felt that if she didn't get it then, she would have missed it for ever, and how sad to die without having loved or been loved. As it stood on the horizon like the sun about to go down into night, love seemed the most important thing in life and Jack, to her almost incredulous happiness, seemed to love her as Cecil had never done.

He was good-looking, several years younger than she was, weak and frightened of life. She felt she made him strong by her love, but it had all been an illusion. When they were found out, his horrified family came and bore him away to safety; the safety of not having to marry her. As if she

would ever have married him! She was deeply hurt that he should have thought she would try to make him marry her.

Anyway, he had gone abroad. The suit was undefended. The whole affair redounded to her shame and hers alone. It was all heaped on her and she accepted it. She was so overwhelmed by it that she never looked up to see what Cecil was doing. She accepted the proceedings as her due; she told herself that she deserved the worst and made no protest.

For several months she felt this. But afterwards she had seen more clearly. She saw that Cecil had calculated everything; and sometimes as she brooded in the cottage bedroom, she felt that if there was fairness anywhere, not in this world, but in what she vaguely thought of as 'afterwards', she felt he would be faced with a meaner sin than hers.

As she reached the gates again, she saw the children passing the staircase window, going up to put on their outdoor things. Cecil and his wife were standing together in the garden, admiring the sweet peas. She saw the sun shining on the girl's fair hair. She was young.

The whole thing was oriental really, thought Mrs Bulford. Ageing wife got rid of, young one put in her place. But since nature discriminates against women, why should men do otherwise?

When she found herself on the verge of middle-age, she should

have dug herself in, she thought grimly, and kept her children, kept her place in the house and in the world. Instead, she had gone gallivanting after Jack and lost everything. What a spectacle she had made of herself! What an ugly, exposed thing to do! It was like one of those bad dreams where you find yourself in a public place with nothing on but your vest. Only from this dream there was no waking.

She was still walking in the opposite direction when the children came out of the gate, Pat, aged six, examining with absorbed interest a toy aeroplane in his hand. She turned and saw them and came hurrying, a stout figure in a tight coat and skirt; in spite of her suffering, she grew steadily fatter.

'Darlings,' she said breathlessly. What happiness to kiss their round, smooth cheeks. They let her, and she kissed them over and over again, greedily, until Pat drew off, frowning a little, and gave his attention to his plane again.

'Mumsie's going to buy me a Comet when she goes out this afternoon,' he announced.

'Is she, darling?' said Mrs Bulford brightly. 'How nice of her.'

That was how it had been arranged. She was 'Mummy' and her supplanter was 'Mumsie'. The children had jibbed at it at first. They wouldn't say it. But they said it now without a thought, she could see.

Mrs Bulford took Susan's hand and drew Catherine's arm through hers. She blinked back the tears of happiness and emotion that had come into her eyes, and saw Susan looking up at her with curiosity. Nine-year-old Susan wondered why anybody grown-up should cry. Surely when you were grown-up and could do as you liked, you had no need to cry?

Mrs Bulford squeezed Catherine's arm against her side and smiled lovingly at her tall daughter. Catherine smiled in a constrained way and looked across the road. She let her arm lie in her mother's for several minutes. Then she withdrew it.

'Now what would you like to do this afternoon?' asked Mrs Bulford brightly. 'Where would you like to go?'

'The Little Park,' said Pat. 'I want to fly my plane on the grass so if it makes a crash landing it won't matter.'

They walked on, Mrs Bulford in the midst of them. For the next few hours they were hers.

'Now tell me all you've been doing since last month,' she said, drawing Catherine's arm within hers again. It might have been her fancy that Catherine withdrew it last time. Perhaps there was nothing wrong really. She knew how apt she was to look for slights and coldness now.

Catherine, her arm lying inertly along her mother's, shrugged her shoulders and said she didn't think she'd been

doing anything. Pat was too absorbed to answer. What did he care about last month when he had this plane in his hand today? Susan remembered she had lost a tooth and showed her mother the gap.

'Oh, did it hurt?' asked Mrs Bulford with concern.

'No. Mumsie pulled it out. I only felt a little tweak. Mumsie gave me sixpence for being brave.'

Mrs Bulford felt a sharp pang of jealousy, which she tried to suppress. She knew she ought to feel glad that Cecil's new wife was kind to her children. And it wasn't the girl's fault that Cecil had married her. If it hadn't been her, it would have been someone else. Mrs Bulford told

herself these things; but remained jealous.

Catherine, murmuring that there was something wrong with her belt, removed her arm from her mother's, fiddled with her waist and did not replace the arm.

'So there is something wrong,' thought Mrs Bulford.

They reached the Little Park, a bright, new, open place with an artificial stream running over a cement bed, looped by hump-backed cement bridges. On the cement shores of a shallow lake, blue, red, green and yellow boats were drawn up. Everything was miniature, Walt Disneyish, except that in a caged enclosure sat one solitary monkey quite out of key, forlorn, flea-bitten and, in spite

of the heat, shivering. The children were always sorry for this monkey. Catherine held out her hand and murmured tenderly.

'Susan, how is that toe of yours?' asked Mrs Bulford. 'Is it better?'

'It hurts sometimes,' said Susan.

'Take off your shoe and sock, darling, and let Mummy see,' said Mrs Bulford.

'Oh, you can't,' said Catherine. 'Not here, what will people think?'

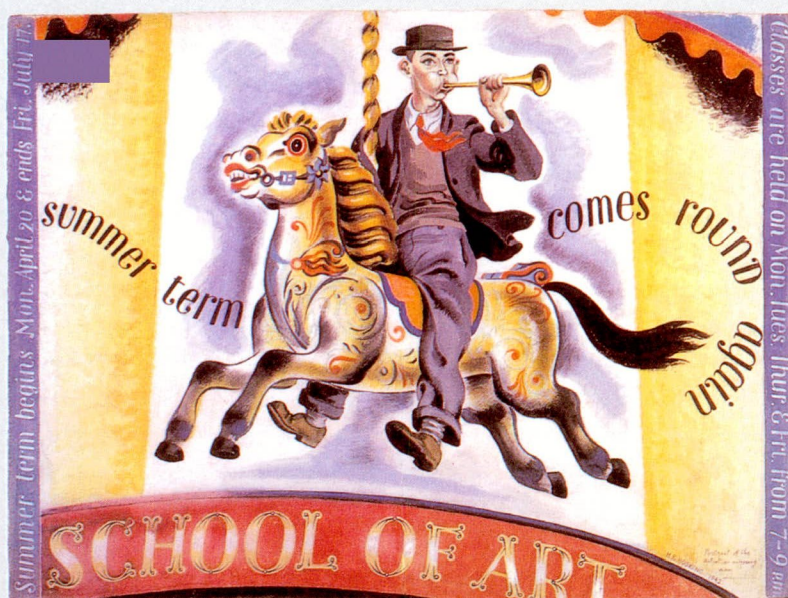
'You mustn't mind so much what people think,' said her mother.

'I think it's better to,' said Catherine in a low voice, turning her head away.

Mrs Bulford took Susan's soft little foot into her hand.

The feel of it moved her unbearably. What a loss – not to be able to touch her children every day, any time of night or day as she used to, not to know their limbs, their bodies any more. Once she had known them better than her own. She closed her fingers over Susan's foot and could hardly see it for a moment.

But she repressed her tears. She knew how mystified and oppressed the children were by signs of adult grief. She spread Susan's toes out, soothing the small pink mark that showed on one.



Poster, now a postcard, by Dick Hosking, whose wife Alma Ramsey designed the fabric for *They Can't Ration These*; Hosking Houses Trust 01789 262924

'You must always be very careful about your shoes, Susan,' she said. 'You must ask – Mumsie – to see that this toe has plenty of room. You have feet like mine, the third toe is as long as the second. So many shoes don't allow for that.'

'D'you remember how we used to play "This little pig went to market" when we came into your bed in the mornings?' asked Susan, laughing up into her face. She said it without any sadness; she said it as if all that wasn't over, but could be resumed at any time.

'Yes, I remember,' said Mrs Bulford. 'Now, let's put your sock on again. I think it must be time for tea.'

'Hurray,' said Pat, sliding off the bench at once. 'I'm hungry.'

Tea was the crown of the afternoon, not only for the children but for Mrs Bulford. Sitting like any other mother with her children at the table, pouring out tea for them, spreading Pat's bread-and-butter with jam, wiping his fingers, entering into indulgent co-operation with the waitress to give them all they wanted, Mrs Bulford almost had the illusion that she had never left them.

Pat, his aeroplane out of sight and mind under his chair, was able to give his mother his attention. He was getting what he wanted, she was giving him things. She was letting him have another cream bun, so, his chin only an inch or two above his

plate, he beamed on her.

'You are kind, Mummy,' he said with sudden fervour. Then added, as if to explain this to himself: 'But I are a little bit your boy, aren't I?'

Mrs Bulford put the tea-pot down on the provided tile with a slight crash.

Susan was disgusted with her brother.

'Of course you're Mummy's boy. She borned you,' she said. 'She doesn't live with us now, but she's still our Mummy, aren't you, Mummy? Can I have another cream bun, too?'

Mrs Bulford passed the plate of buns with a smile. They couldn't help it. They didn't understand. She didn't know which hurt most, Pat's confusion, Susan's matter-of-fact acceptance, or Catherine's judgement.

'Are we going home now?' asked Pat eagerly. 'P'raps my Comet is there now. P'raps it's waiting. I think Mumsie will be back now.'

'Yes, you're going back now,' said his mother.

The little party returned along the leafy road, Mrs Bulford setting a slow pace to keep them with her as long as possible.

Then, turning the corner, walking towards them arm in arm, came Cecil and his new wife.

Mrs Bulford, her eyes fixed upon them, came to a standstill. She could not face such an encounter. But Pat, breaking away from his mother, ran

towards them shouting: 'Mumsie! Did you get it? Did you get it, Mumsie?'

Susan raised her eyes to her mother. 'May I go too?' she asked.

'Certainly, darling. But kiss Mummy goodbye first,' said Mrs Bulford.

Catherine stood awkwardly with her mother.

'You'd better go too, dear,' said Mrs Bulford. She kissed the girl's smooth brow. 'Goodbye. I'll see you on the fourth, won't I?'

Catherine nodded.

'Goodbye,' she said.

The group had reached the gate. Cecil raised his hat to the woman he had lived with for fifteen years. Pat disappeared with his parcel; Susan waved vigorously, Catherine with restraint. Then they were gone.

Mrs Bulford turned and walked back the way she had come. She could not bring herself to pass the house yet.

But later when the dusk was deeper, she passed it on her way to the bus. Elsie had just come out to pick up the hoop on the lawn. Upstairs someone was drawing the curtains, first at one window, then at another. They were all gathered in for the night. Everything was very quiet. Even from the gate she could smell the sweet peas. She walked away down the road.

*From 'Wednesday' (1944) by
Dorothy Whipple © The Estate of
Dorothy Whipple*

A PUBLISHER'S KISS

It is cheering when a book of real quality seems to break through a barrier of indifference and bad luck [*wrote the TLS in a leader on April 14th 1961, commenting on a recent reprint of a book first published in 1952*]. It seems possible that the period of hibernation may have done it no harm. But how often are titles raised from the dead in this way? Nowadays a new book has only a short time in which to sell or die – sometimes as little as three months. Less than ever, it seems, can publishers afford to keep unprofitable works in print, and in the restless search for new titles it is most uncommon for a publisher to turn to a more or less unsuccessful work of the past.

Why the backward look should be so short-sighted it is difficult to say. There have of course been revivals of forgotten classics – it is not long since Stendhal himself was a minority cult – but so far as modern literature goes it is much easier to think of works which stupidly petered out and are only known to a handful of devotees.

Probably everyone has his own mental list of neglected works which he is always pressing on his friends.

What happens then? He lends out his out-of-print copy; somehow it disappears; he cannot replace it; and within a few months he too has half forgotten what the book was like.



'Flushie's likeness! Is'nt it like? The ears rather too long, the nose rather too short, the eyes rather too round! All the rest very like indeed! – Papa brought it home for me some days ago, as Flushie's double'. Elizabeth's Barrett to Mary Russell Mitford February 21st 1842: The Complete Browning Correspondence Volume 5 p228

And yet it may be that a book of this kind has merely been published before its time. To take one example, the English translation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* was being remaindered in 1939; today it is published by Penguins as a modern foreign classic.

Does this then mean that merit will win through in the end? It is not at

all certain that it will, and for every sleeping beauty that is awakened by a publisher's kiss there are others that slumber on. Admittedly kisses of this sort are not encouraged by the fact that reprints are so seldom reviewed. But it is a pity if every generation in turn has to treat the more difficult and original works of the past as undiscovered territory.

We stagnate if we do not absorb them into our literature and evaluate them; we waste time and energy repeating the same experiments only to arrive, twenty or thirty years too late, at much the same point

Memories are not quite as long as either publishers or literary editors seem to think. On the one hand, if a book goes out of print the apparent lack of interest in it that ensues does not mean that it can be written off because there is no potential audience. Nor, on the other, has that audience necessarily read a review that was printed ten or twenty years ago; if a book is reprinted it may need reviewing again. Though it is heartening to find an exception, the number of worthwhile books now unobtainable is a reproach to us all.

FINALLY

The next *Persephone Event* will be on **Wednesday April 20th** from 6-8 at the Carlyles' House 24 Cheyne Row London SW3. This will celebrate Thea Holme's **The Carlyles at Home**, Persephone Book No. 32. But it will also anticipate our 2006 publication of *Jane Welsh Carlyle: a Selection of her Letters* edited by Trudi Bliss in 1950; Anne Harvey and Benjamin Whitrow will give a reading from Jane and Thomas's letters. On **Tuesday April 26th** at the BFI 21 Stephen Street W1, from 1-4 pm, there will be a repeat showing, due to popular demand and again courtesy of Kevin Brownlow, of the 1924 silent film of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's **The Home-Maker**, Persephone Book No. 7; wine and sandwiches will be served beforehand, tea and chocolate brownies afterwards. (We have telephoned the people on the waiting list after the last performance, but have some places left.) And on **Monday May 16th** (BFI 1-4 pm) we will show the film of **They Were Sisters**, sixty years to the day since its première in 1945. Dorothy Whipple's niece, Judith Eldergill, will be present. On **Thursday May 26th** there will be a **Persephone Book Group** to discuss **Hetty Dorval** by Ethel Wilson, which will be Persephone Book No. 58. A free copy of the book will be sent to participants in

early May. The event will last from 5.30-7.30; tea, madeira and pizza will be served. On **Wednesday June 8th**, by kind permission of the owners, there will be a **Persephone Lunch** from 12.30-3.00 pm at Roppelegh's, the beautiful C16th house near



Haslemere where Mollie Panter-Downes lived and worked. We will be shown over the house, and will be able to walk to the writing hut in the woods where Mollie did all her work, as well as hear a privately-recorded 1984 interview with Mollie. (For this event readers need to arrange their own transport.) Lastly, on **Wednesday 22nd June** from 5.30-7.30 there will be the first **Possibly Persephone?** event at the shop. Readers are invited to bring a book which they particularly recommend as a potential Persephone book and should be prepared to talk about

it for five minutes and to read out a paragraph they particularly admire. Tea, madeira and home-made pizza will be served. The lunches, film and book group are now £28 (the first increase since 1999); **Possibly Persephone?** is £10. Please telephone to reserve places for these events, and for:

The Third Persephone Weekend at Newnham College, Cambridge, which this year will be held on the earlier date of **September 10-11th**. The Newnham kitchens are to be renovated, and we can accommodate slightly fewer readers this year; but, as usual, there will be a distinguished line-up of speakers (including, so far, Julia Briggs, Amanda Craig, Eva Ibbotson and Jan Marsh) and we plan to show two Persephone-related films.

The June books this year will be **The Hopkins Manuscript** (1939) by R C Sherriff who wrote *Journey's End*; this is a most unusual and compelling catastrophe novel; and **Hetty Dorval** (1947), the first book by the well known Canadian novelist Ethel Wilson, a wonderfully-written novella about the influence on a young girl of a much older woman with a past.

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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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