



## THE PERSEPHONE QUARTERLY

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*Ethel Wilson in the 1940s*



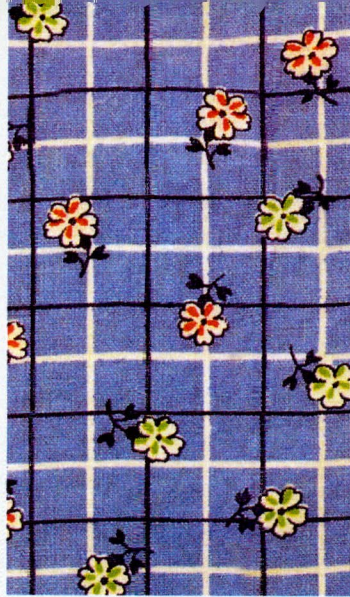
# OUR SUMMER 2005 BOOKS

Ethel Wilson (1888-1980) is one of Canada's most distinguished novelists, on a par with Alice Munro, Carol Shields and Margaret Atwood. Although born in South Africa – her parents were English missionaries – she was brought up in England until, at the age of seven, she was orphaned; the rest of her long life, apart from her years at school in Liverpool, was spent in Vancouver as a teacher and as the wife of a local doctor. When she was nearly fifty she published some short stories, but did not write anything during the war because 'it was impossible in that terrible time to be trivial.' **Hetty Dorval**, her first novel, appeared in 1947; four more novels and a volume of short stories followed over the next fifteen years, including *Swamp Angel* (1954), the first chapter of which we publish in this *PQ*.

In three weeks of 'passionate concentration' **Hetty Dorval** grew from 'the sage brush of British Columbia, from the hills and trees, from the rivers and a bridge, from a skein of honking Canada geese.' Near the small

town of Lytton a young girl named Frankie meets and is befriended by the beautiful and enigmatic Mrs Dorval: 'we walked our horses side by side and she hardly seemed to know that I was beside her; she just took me for granted in a natural fashion.' But the local community has chosen not to 'know' Hetty ('a very ugly story had followed her from Shanghai to Vancouver and so to Lytton'), and Frankie has to deceive her parents when she visits her new friend; then confesses; and then, as she grows up and when she and Hetty meet each other years later in London, must decide for herself what her attitude is.

This quiet, subtle, morally complex book is thus, in essence, the story of Frankie's growth from an innocent young girl into a morally aware adult. Hetty seems to have behaved unconventionally, indeed immorally. But is Frankie's adult perception to be preferred to that of her childish innocence?



late 1930s American cotton fabric for Hetty Dorval



'Wamole' 1930s American cotton fabric for The Hobbits Manuscript

There are many ways to read this novel. Is Hetty objectively a 'Menace'? Or is this a novel about the pernicious effect of gossip and about Donne's 'no man is an Iland' quoted on the frontispiece: Hetty has chosen to live outside Lytton and society, but must she be condemned for this? That Hetty is judged by others, and that Frankie comes to question these judgements, is the point of **Hetty Dorval**. But many will want to read this book twice before reaching a conclusion.

When asked about the influence of writers such as Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Willa Cather, Ethel Wilson said that indeed they were 'fine writers who are the objects of my admiration, but they do not affect me so strongly as some others. I find parts of *Howards End* and *A Room with a View* so flooded with light that that compels the little fever of admiration that I speak of.' In our view Ethel Wilson's work is flooded with a similar light.



Recently there was a revival of one of the greatest of C20th stage plays, *Journey's End* (1929). It was wonderfully acted and produced, prompting us to search out the author's other work. R C Sherriff (1896-1975) had served in WWI; when he returned to his job as an insurance clerk he wrote plays for his local amateur dramatic club and, eventually,

*Journey's End*, based on his letters home from the Front. During the 1930s he worked in Hollywood, writing screenplays for films such as *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1933) and *The Four Feathers* (1938); meanwhile he wrote novels, including *A Fortnight in September* (1931), which we publish in 2006, and a 1939 catastrophe novel 'written' by 'Edgar Hopkins'.

In *The Hopkins Manuscript* we watch through his eyes as the moon veers off course, draws slowly closer to the earth, and finally crashes into it on May 3rd 1946. Because it falls into the Atlantic much of humanity survives – only to generate new disasters. But this is not science fiction in the mode of H G Wells's *The War of the Worlds*; it is a novel about human nature.



One of the London stations in 1939



The 'manuscript' was named after its 'author', a retired Hampshire schoolmaster whose greatest interest in life is his Bantam hens; rather self-important and lacking much sense of humour, Edgar Hopkins nevertheless emerges as an increasingly sympathetic and credible character, the ordinary man with whom we very much identify as Sherriff describes the small Hampshire village trying to prepare itself in its last days. In *Journey's End* he evoked the trench experience as he had lived it; in **The Hopkins Manuscript** he describes the catastrophe as he might have lived it.

But the book is also a superbly written novel in its own right, one which we are sure Persephone readers will find as unforgettable as any of our other titles. We defy

anyone not to be overwhelmed by the scene when the villagers staunchly play a last game of cricket by the light of the moon that 'hung like a great amber, pock-marked lamp above a billiard-table, so vast and enveloping that the little white-clad cricketers moved without shadows to their appointed places on the field.'

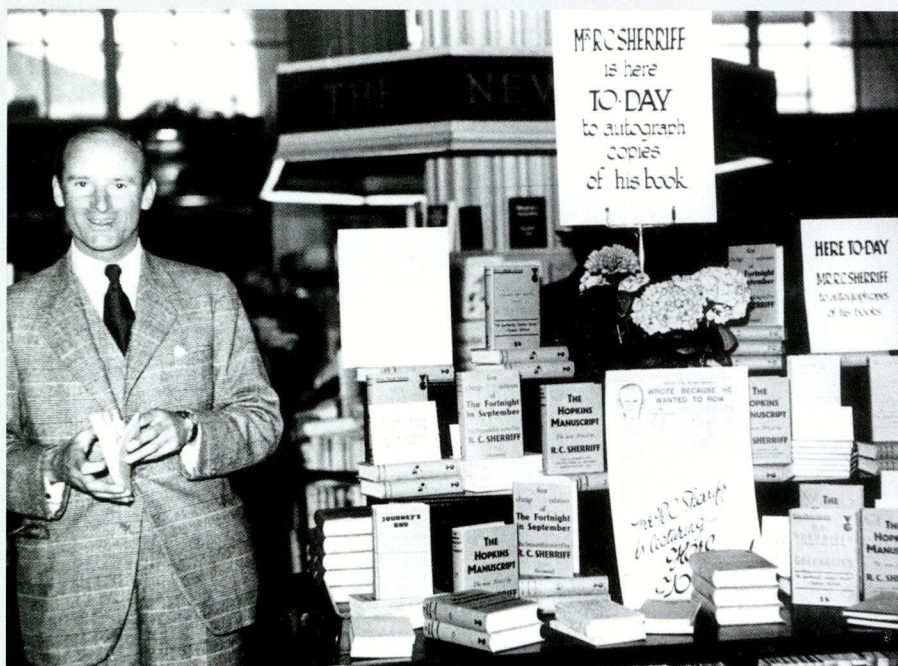
So how did 'the destruction of the Western civilisation' happen? In 1945 (and there is a wonderful irony that, writing in 1939, Sherriff anticipated that our civilisation might be destroyed then) scientists discovered, during an eclipse of the sun, that the moon was twelve seconds late in its arrival and had drawn nearer to the earth by 3,583 miles; subsequent observations showed that it was continuing to approach at a speed increasing

steadily by eight miles a day. Disaster had become inevitable.

R C Sherriff made the scientific aspect of **The Hopkins Manuscript** strangely plausible even though, as Michael Moorcock writes in his Preface, 'he did not believe that there was any immediate likelihood of the moon crashing into the Earth. We write such books not because we are convinced that they describe the future, but because we hope they do not.' Nonetheless, Sherriff's writing is so convincing that we have added a scientific explanation of the events in the book; this was written by the Big Bang scientist George Gamow for a 1963 US reprint.

The reason **The Hopkins Manuscript** was reprinted then was because of the near-catastrophe of the Cuban Missile Crisis the year before; the previous reprint had been in 1958,

at the height of the world's desperate anxieties about the H-Bomb; and the original publication was in the spring of 1939 when many believed that, once war was declared, Hitler would destroy civilisation as they knew it. And the 2005 reprint? The largest threat facing mankind today is global warming – we write about this on page 7.





# 'COOKING UP A STORM'

**In response to a comment by the editors of a new anthology of contemporary writing that 'on the whole the submissions from women were disappointingly domestic', Kirsty Gunn wrote in the Guardian:** Domesticity has always been quietly present in literature. Kitchens and dining rooms, mealtimes and parties. Rows of beds in the nursery, nanny sitting in her chair... Think of the glorious hominess that enriches and pacifies the turbulence of drama and war in Tolstoy's great novels. Natasha nursing her new baby at the end of *War and Peace*, Kitty and Levin in *Anna Karenina* playing a quiet game of cards on a winter's night. The same peaceful scenes, moments of calm by the fireside, gild the darkness in *Jane Eyre*, and provide chapter endings throughout Jane Austen.

Often the domestic serves as a backdrop, a jumping-off point. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, an early feminist classic about a woman waking up in the morning and deciding that she's going to leave everything she thought was important – her husband, her family, her home – is a fine example. It is not surprising when women, in particular, have struggled for so long to free themselves from what many see as the captivity of

home, that fiction should want to see them escape out of the window.

Yet for those who have chosen to stay at home and have babies, look after husbands and families, the domestic world is a place not of stifling limitations but of possibilities. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote of the necessity of writing that covers all aspects of our lives, and of women, in particular, making the subject of what they know an honourable and serious one. 'I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial.'

But where are all these books now, that hesitate at 'no subject however trivial'? Despite the huge interest in houses, gardens and cooking on television, in non-fiction and a certain kind of popular novel, in literature it seems we continue to gloss over the significance of home...

I would like to single out three women writers working now who place the domestic at the moral centre of their books: Tessa Hadley, Jayne Anne Phillips and Helen Simpson. In the latter's stories, for example, there's a sense, amid the sorting of the dirty laundry, of a character exultant, soaring, alive, as a moment with a toddler reveals: 'Abruptly she put the iron down on its heel and swooped down

on him, scooped him up and buried her nose in his neck with throaty growling noises. He huffed and shouted and laughed as they swayed struggling by the vegetable rack.'

Where else can we read about such delight in maternal love? Why are there not more books like this? Has anything really changed since Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own* eighty years ago that: 'Speaking crudely, football and sport are "important"; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes "trivial". And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room.'

**We were asked to comment on this debate on the Guardian website, and wrote:** For years, Jane Austen's novels were not in print, male publishers deeming them a) not new b) domestic c) dull d) depressing. Critical response to fiction usually equates the excellent with the new and the dull with the domestic; hence we at Persephone Books are completely used to being in the samizdat corner.

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# WEBSITES AND PERSEPHONE

Like all voracious readers, I have my own particular likes and dislikes,' Colleen Mondor wrote on [bookslut.com](http://bookslut.com). 'I don't consider myself particularly highbrow or lowbrow, the one thing I have never been, though, is a slave to a certain publisher. Even the smallest of houses have published titles that I do not like as often as they have turned out those that I enjoy. So I'm choosy all the time, making sure a book sounds exactly right before I pick it up. That was how I used to be however, before I discovered Persephone Books. Now I know exactly what I want to buy four times a year, because it's whatever they are publishing ...Last summer, as they published their fiftieth book, I was struck by the vast difference in the latest offerings discussed in the *Quarterly*. **The World that was Ours** is a memoir by Hilda Bernstein whose husband was arrested and tried with Nelson Mandela as one of the "men of Rivonia" in 1963. This book is about the days after his arrest and the trial that followed in what was one of South Africa's darkest hours. The other summer book was **Bricks and Mortar** by Helen Ashton, a popular but now unknown inter-war author about the life of a

London architect over 35 years. Could there be two books less alike? And yet they fit so squarely in the Persephone mould. Its collection is eclectic, unusual and often surprising. The beauty of it is that their readers have happily fallen in love with each successive publication. Personally, I'm so glad I discovered them and I can hardly wait for my next delivery.'

We are glad to say that this is also one of the themes of the discussion forum on [www.chicklit.com](http://www.chicklit.com) – the people who log on look forward to their next consignment of our books and then write about them. Member 633: 'I just finished Julia Strachey's **Cheerful Weather for the Wedding**, which was a lovely read. It's a short novella and it captures quite beautifully all of the conflicted emotions running during the few hours before a wedding... Jocelyn Playfair's **A House in the Country** is a beautiful gem. It's the story of a woman named Cressida who takes in boarders in a country house during WW11. It's a beautiful look at the Home Front, but also has a lot to say about how and why a second world war occurred so soon after the first one. And it's not overly

sentimental (like *Mrs Miniver*). Strongly recommended.'

Member 66: 'I just finished **Kitchen Essays**. What fun! It was written in the early 1920s and is full of things about making do with only one servant and the like.' Member 2723: 'The best Persephone book I've read so far is **Little Boy Lost**. It's just shattering, so moving, and a real page-turner as you are desperate for everything to work out.'

There is also a website which was directly inspired by Persephone Books: [dovegreyreaders](mailto:dovegreyreaders) (write to [dovegreyreader@yahoo.com](mailto:dovegreyreader@yahoo.com) to become a 'dove'). They read a Persephone book every other month, suggest 'companion' reads ie books related to the discussion book, and exchange views about related topics.

Lastly: we have decided that our website should be more interactive. On the 1st of every month, starting on September 1st, four new pages will go up. We will follow the doves' lead and write about one of our books every month; have pieces for which there was no room in the PQ; and possibly have interviews or competitions or pieces sent in by readers. We would love to have your ideas.



# IS THE EARTH FINISHED?

**R**C Sherriff's 1939 novel **The Hopkins Manuscript** is a catastrophe novel about the moon crashing into the earth. It starts in February 1945 with a meeting of scientists who are among the first to learn the terrible fate awaiting the planet. In February 2005 a group of scientists convened by the British Government met in Exeter to discuss the latest findings about climate change.

'It was the inevitability of what was going to happen, I think, that for the first time struck us with real force,' wrote the *Independent's* Michael McCarthy in *The Tablet*. 'Whatever flapping, floundering efforts humankind eventually makes to try to stop it all, the great ice sheets will melt, the seas will turn acid, and the land will burn...So many environmental scare stories over the years; I never dreamed of such a one as this.'

What had he and the other scientists and journalists heard? On the first day of the Exeter meeting the Director of the British Antarctic Survey had warned that the vast ice sheet covering the western side of the Antarctic may be beginning to break up; were it to collapse into the sea, this sheet would raise global sea levels by at least fifteen feet.

Another group described their

research into the acidification of the oceans: carbon dioxide is already beginning to erode the alkaline of the world's seas and in the end the world's small marine organisms will not be able to live in this acid sea.

A group of American scientists reviewed the probability of global warming bringing about the collapse of the Gulf Stream and a new ice age in Europe. And some British scientists presented a paper on the Greenland ice-sheet; they believe that it will start to melt once temperatures rise 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels (we are already 0.7 above) and that this in itself will cause sea levels to rise over time by twenty feet.

In general, wrote McCarthy, there was a strong sense that climate change was proceeding much more quickly than had been anticipated. Even if carbon dioxide emissions stop dead tomorrow, much of the predicted future is inevitable. But in practice, these emissions will go on increasing as, for example, the Chinese and Indian economies continue to flourish, and governments refuse to act to limit air travel.

At the end of the three-day conference Michael McCarthy returned to London with Paul Brown from the *Guardian*. 'I

said, "The earth is finished." He said, "It is, yes." We both shook our heads and gave that half-laugh sparked by incredulity.'

But is the earth finished? Not necessarily, even now. For individuals the answer lies in energy efficiency at home and at work and in reducing travel, and especially air travel. For governments it lies in redesigned cars, in renewable energy (wind, wave, solar), in hydrogen as a source of energy, in redesigning coal-fired power stations to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and perhaps in nuclear energy.

By 2050 the UK aims to reduce its carbon emissions by at least 60 per cent, which means reducing our dependence on these emissions by over three-quarters. It may still be possible to do this. What we have to fear is mankind failing to work together to overcome a catastrophe that is so vastly worse than war and famine. We should stop fooling ourselves that re-cycling or getting rid of the gas-guzzler is an adequate response to the potential horrors of global warming.

We have yet to wake up to the reality of the threat that pervaded the Exeter conference. Could it be that this republication of **The Hopkins Manuscript** will help someone, somewhere to do so?



# 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 very funny first novel describes 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 the tragic destruction of a formerly happy marriage (pub. 1953). Preface: Nina Bawden
- 4. Fidelity** by Susan Glaspell: 1915 novel by a Pulitzer-winning author brilliantly describing 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 in Amsterdam, 'the Anne Frank for grown-ups', wrote unique diaries and letters. Preface: Eva Hoffman
- 6. The Victorian Chaise-longue** by Marghanita Laski: A 'little jewel of horror': 'Melly' lies on a chaise-longue in the 1950s and wakes as 'Milly' 80 years before. Preface: PD James
- 7. The Home-Maker** by Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Ahead of its time 'remarkable and brave 1924 novel about being a house-husband' (Carol Shields). 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, wit and humanity. Preface: Jenny Hartley
- 10. Good Things in England** by Florence White: This comprehensive 1932 recipe collection inspired many, including Elizabeth David.
- 11. Julian Grenfell** by Nicholas Mosley: A biography of the First World War poet, and of his mother Ettie Desborough. Preface: author
- 12. It's Hard to be Hip over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life** by Judith Viorst: Funny, wise and weary 1960s poems about marriage, children and reality. Preface: author
- 13. Consequences** by EM Delafield: By the author of *The Diary of a Provincial Lady*, this 1919 novel is about a girl entering a convent after she fails to marry. Preface: Nicola Beauman
- 14. Farewell Leicester Square** by Betty Miller: Novel (by the mother of the more famous Jonathan) 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; they are funny, observant and bleak. Preface: AN Wilson
- 16. Saplings** by Noel Streatfeild: An adult novel by the well-known author of *Ballet Shoes*, about the destruction of a family during WW11; a R4 ten-part serial. Afterword: Jeremy Holmes
- 17. Marjory Fleming** by Oriel Malet: A deeply empathetic novel about the real life of the Scottish child prodigy who lived from 1803-11; published in France; a play on BBC Radio Scotland.
- 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 2004. Preface: Neville Braybrooke
- 19. They Knew Mr Knight** by Dorothy Whipple: An absorbing 1934 novel about a family man who commits fraud and goes to prison; 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 about a governess and a night-club singer. Read on R4 by Maureen Lipman; French translation shortly. 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 fierce 1880s satire on the London Jewish community by 'the Jewish Jane Austen' who was a friend of Oscar Wilde. Preface: Julia Neuberger.
- 24. Family Roundabout** by Richmal Crompton: By the *William* books author, 1948 family saga contrasting two matriarchs and 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: Novel about a father's search for his son in France in 1945, 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 interesting 1944 novel about a group of people living in the country during WW1. Preface: Ruth Gorb
- 32. The Carlyles at Home** by Thea Holme: A 1965 mixture of biography and social history which very entertainingly describes 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: a great Persephone favourite. '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 description of a young couple's first year of married life in a (real) street in Chelsea. Preface: Rebecca Cohen
- 36. Lettice Delmer** by Susan Miles: A unique 1920s novel in verse describing a girl's stormy adolescence and path to redemption, admired 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' (*Country Life*, 1936). 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 two cassettes 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 (daughter of the author)
- 40. The Priory** by Dorothy Whipple: A much-loved 1939 novel about three generations of a family, and their servants, living in a large country house. Preface: David Conville.
- 41. Hostages to Fortune** by Elizabeth Cambridge: 'Deals with domesticity without being in the least bit cosy' (Harriet Lane, *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' (Chandler). A 1947 thriller about a mother who shields her daughter from a blackmailer, filmed as both *The Reckless Moment* in 1949 and *The Deep End* in 2001.
- 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: magical and unsettling 1949 stories, a surprise favourite, which are unusually beautifully written; read on R4 in 2003. 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: An unsparing, wry 1946 novel by the creator of *Worzel Gummidge*. Miss Ranskill is shipwrecked and returns to wartime England. Preface: Wendy Pollard
- 47. The New House** by Lettice Cooper: 1936 portrayal of the day a family moves to a new house, and the resulting tensions and adjustments. Preface: Jilly Cooper.
- 48. The Casino** by Margaret Bonham: Short stories by a 1940s writer with a unique voice and dark sense of humour; read on Radio 4 in 2004 and 2005. Preface: Cary Bazalgette.
- 49. Bricks and Mortar** by Helen Ashton: A surprisingly well-written 1932 novel by a once very popular writer chronicling the life of a London architect over thirty-five years; and absorbing and informative read.
- 50. The World that was Ours** by Hilda Bernstein: An extraordinary memoir that reads like a novel of the events before and after the 1964 Rivonia Trial. Mandela was given a life sentence but the Bernsteins escaped to England. Preface and Afterword: the author
- 51. Operation Heartbreak** by Duff Cooper: A soldier misses going to war – until the end of his life. 'The novel I enjoyed more than any other in the immediate post-war years' (Nina Bawden). Afterword: Max Arthur
- 52. The Village** by Marghanita Laski: This 1952 comedy of manners describes post-war readjustments in village life when love ignores the class barrier. Afterword: Juliet Gardiner
- 53. Lady Rose and Mrs Memmery** by Ruby Ferguson: A romantic 1937 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 1940 cookery book about 'food for free', full of excellent (and now fashionable) recipes.
- 55. Flush** by Virginia Woolf: A light-hearted but surprisingly feminist 1933 'life' 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
- 57. The Hopkins Manuscript** by RC Sherriff: What might have happened if the moon crashed into the earth in 1946 – a 1939 catastrophe novel. Preface: Michael Moorcock, Afterword: the late George Gamow
- 58. Hetty Dorval** by Ethel Wilson: First novel (1947) by an English writer living in Canada, set in the beautiful landscape of British Columbia; a young girl becomes friends with the charismatic Mrs Dorval. Afterword: the late Northrop Frye



# SWAMP ANGEL: CHAPTER 1

by Ethel Wilson. This appeared on its own in *Queen's Quarterly* 60, Winter 1954

Then twenty fifty brown birds flew past the window and then a few stragglers, out of sight. A fringe of Mrs Vardoe's mind flew after them (what were they? – birds returning in migration, of course) and then was drawn back into the close fabric of her preoccupations. She looked out over the small green garden which would soon grow dark in evening. This garden led down a few steps to the wooden sidewalk; then there was the road, dusty in fine weather; next came the neighbours' houses across the road, not on a level with her but lower, as the hill declined, so that she was able to look over the roofs of these houses to Burrard Inlet far below, to the dark green promontory of Stanley Park, to the elegant curve of the Lions Gate Bridge which springs from the Park to the northern shore which is the base of the mountains; and to the mountains.

Mrs Vardoe had become attached to, even absorbed into the sight from the front-room window of inlet and forest and mountains. She had come to love it, to dislike it, to hate it, and at seven-fifteen this evening she proposed to leave it and not to return. Everything was, she thought, in order.

Behind her unrevealing grey eyes of candour and peace she had arranged with herself that she would arrive at this very evening and at this place where, on Capitol Hill, she would stand waiting with everything ready. There had been time enough in which to prepare. She had endured humiliations and almost unbearable resentments and she had felt continual impatience at the slowness of time. Time, she knew, does irrevocably pass and would not fail her; rather she might in some unsuspected way fail time. Her look and habit had not betrayed her although she had lived more and more urgently through the last few weeks when an irrational fear had possessed her that she, or he, would become ill, would meet with an accident, that some car, some fall, some silly bodily ailment would, with the utmost indignity and indifference, interfere; but nothing had happened to interfere. The time was now half-past five. It was not likely that the unlikely – having so far held its hand – would happen within two hours, but, if it did, she was armed against revealing herself and she would build in time again, or again, like the bird who obstinately builds again its destroyed nest. So strong was the

intention to depart. She had been most vulnerable and desperate when, more than a year ago, she had taken a small box of fishing flies to the shop known by sportsmen up and down the Pacific coast. 'May I see Mr Thorpe or Mr Spencer?'

"There's no Mr Thorpe. I am Mr Spencer."

'Here are some flies, Mr Spencer.'

He picked up each fly and scrutinised it. Turning it this way and that he looked for flaws in the perfection of the body, the hackle, the wings. There were no flaws. He looked up at the pleasant young woman with less interest than he felt in the flies. There were small and large flies, dun-coloured flies, and flies with a flash of iridescent green, scarlet, silver.

'Who made these flies?'

'I did.'

'Who taught you?'

'My father.'

'Where did he learn?'

'At Hardy's.'

Mr Spencer now regarded the young woman with some respect. She was unpretentious. Her grey eyes, rimmed with dark lashes, were wide set and tranquil and her features were agreeably irregular. She was not beautiful; she was not plain. Yes, perhaps



she was beautiful. She took no pains to be beautiful. The drag of her cheap cloth coat and skirt intimidated large easy curves beneath.

'Would you like to sell us your flies?'

'Yes, but I have no more feathers.'

'We can arrange that. Have you a vice?'

'Yes, my father's vice.'

'We will take all the flies you can make. Would you like to work here?'

'I would rather work at home.'

'Where do you live?'

'Out Capitol Hill way.'

'And you come from...?'

'I have lived in Vancouver for some time.'

'Will you come to the desk? Sit down.'

He took up a pen. 'Your name?' 'Lloyd.' The word Vardoe died in her mouth.

He looked at her large capable hands and saw the ring.

He smiled. 'You won't mind me saying, Mrs Lloyd, but I always back large hands or even short stubby hands for tying flies.'

She looked down at her hands as if she had not noticed them before. 'Yes,' she said, 'they are large,' and then she looked up and smiled for the first time, a level easy smile.

'Your telephone number?'

'There is no telephone.'

'Oh, then your address?'

'I'd rather call on Mondays.'

He pushed his lips out and looked at her over his glasses.

'Oh,' she said, 'I know. The feathers. Please trust me the first few times and then I'll pay for my own.'

'No, no,' he protested. 'Oh no, you must do whatever suits you best.'

'It suits me best,' she said, colouring a very little, 'to call on Monday mornings and bring the flies I've made, and see what you want done for the next week and take away the material.'

That was how it had begun and she had been so clever: never a bright feather blew across the room; vice, hooks, jungle cock and peacock feathers were all ingeniously hidden, and Edward had never known. The curtains, drawn widely, now framed her in the window as she looked out and over the scene which she had loved and which she hoped not to see again.

In the woodshed by the lane was her canvas bag packed to a weight that she could carry, and a haversack that she could carry on her shoulders. There was her fishing rod. That was all. How often she had lived through these moments – which had now arrived and did not stay – of standing at the window; of turning; of walking through to the kitchen; of looking at the roast in the oven; of looking, once more, to see that her navy blue raincoat with the beret stuffed in the pocket hung by the kitchen door, easy to snatch on her way out into the dark; of picking up the bags and the rod

inside the woodshed door as quickly as if it were broad daylight because she had learned their place so well; of seeing the light in the Chinaman's taxi a few yards up the lane; of quickly entering the taxi on seeing the slant face of the Chinese boy; and then the movement forward. She had carefully planned the moment, early enough to arrive, too late to be seen, recognised, followed, and found.

Now she advanced, as planned, along these same minutes that had so often in imagination solaced her. When, in the night, as had soon happened after their marriage, she lay humiliated and angry, she had forced her mind forward to this moment. The secret knowledge of her advancing plan was her only restoration and solace. And last night she had lain for the last time beside her husband and he did not know that it was the last time.

She had once lived through three deaths, and – it really seemed – her own. Her country had regretted to inform her that her husband, Tom Lloyd, was killed in action; their child was stricken, and died; her father, who was her care, had died; and Maggie Lloyd, with no one to care for, had tried to save herself by an act of compassion and fatal stupidity. She had married Edward Vardoe.

Mrs Vardoe raised her left hand and saw that the time was now a quarter to six. She turned



and went through to the kitchen. She took her large apron from the chair where she had thrown it, tied it so that it covered her, opened the oven door, took out the roast, put the roast and vegetables back into the oven, and began to make the gravy in the pan. These actions, which were familiar and almost mechanical, took on, tonight, the significance of movement forward, of time felt in the act of passing, of a moment being reached, (time always passes, but it is in the nature of things that we seldom observe it flowing, flying, past).

The front door opened and was shut with a bang and then there was silence. As she stirred the gravy she knew what Edward was doing. He was putting his topcoat on its hanger, turning his hat in his hand, regarding it, re-shaping it, and hanging them both up – the good topcoat and the respectable hat of Eddie Vardoe – E. Thompson Vardoe. It's a good thing I'm going *now*, she thought as she stirred the gravy. I'm always unfair, now, to Edward. I hate everything he does. He has only to hang up his hat and I despise him. Being near him is awful. I'm unfair to him in my heart always whatever he is doing, but tonight I shall be gone.

As he walked to the kitchen door she looked up from her stirring. He stood beside her, trim, prim, and jaunty in the little kitchen. He was in rare good humour, and excited.

'Well,' he said, 'I pretty near bought it. Guess I'll settle tomorrow. Four hundred cash and easy terms.'

She straightened herself and looked mildly at him. What was he talking about? Was it possible that what she was about to do was not written plain on her brow?

'If you gointa show people reel estate,' he said, 'you gotta have the right car. Something conservative but snappy. Snappy but refined. See.'

'Yes, oh yes,' she agreed. She had forgotten about the car.

He took off his coat, revealing a tie on which athletes argued in yellow and red. That tie, and other ties, were new signs of Edward's advancement and self-confidence. What a tie, thought Mrs Vardoe, stirring mechanically. When Edward took off his coat a strong sweet-sour smell was released. He took a paper from an inner pocket, went to the hall and hung up his coat. He came back to the kitchen and held out the paper to her

'Take a look at that, woodja,' he said with a smile of triumph. 'E Thompson Vardoe – sounds all right, doesn't it!'

'Just a minute till I put the roast on the table,' she said, picking up the hot platter.

He turned and followed her into the room. 'Well,' he said, aggrieved. 'I'd think you'd be interested in your husband starting in business for himself.'

She went with her usual light deliberation into the kitchen

again, brought in the vegetables, gravy and plates, took off her apron and sat down at the table.

'Let me see it,' she said.

Mr Vardoe, sitting down in his shirt-sleeves before the roast, passed her a piece of paper with a printed heading. She read aloud 'Webber and Vardoe – Real Estate – Specialists in Homes – West End, Point Grey and Southern Slope – Octavius Webber, E. Thompson Vardoe.'

'Oh, it does look nice! I hope that...'

'Say!' said Mr Vardoe in an affronted tone, holding the carving knife and fork above the roast of beef. 'Whatever got into you, buying this size roast for two people! Must be all of six pounds! Is it six pounds?'

'No,' said Mrs Vardoe, with her wide gentle look upon the roast, 'but it's all of five pounds.'

'And solid meat!' said Mr Vardoe, striking the roast with the carving knife. His voice rose shrill with anger. 'You buying six-pound roasts when I gotta get a new car and get started in a new business! Bet it wasn't far off a dollar a pound!'

'No, it wasn't,' admitted Mrs Vardoe. She gave a quick look down at her watch. The time was twenty minutes past six. It seemed to her that time stood still, or had died.

'It'll be nice cold,' she said, without self-defence.

'Nice *cold*!' he echoed. 'Who wants to eat cold meat that cost the earth for a week!'



If you only knew it, you will, thought Mrs Vardoe.

Edward Vardoe gave her one more glare. In annoyed silence he began to carve the roast.

As Mrs Vardoe put vegetables onto the two plates she dared to give another downward glance. Twenty-five minutes past six. The roast was delicious. When Edward Vardoe had shown enough displeasure and had satisfied himself that his wife had felt his displeasure he began eating and talking of his partner Octavius Webber. He at last pushed his plate aside. He continued to talk.

Mrs Vardoe got up and took away the meat course and brought in a pudding. Her husband looked at her strangely. He took his time to speak.

'Well, say,' he said at last, 'you got your good tweed suit on!'

'Yes, I have,' she said, looking down at it. The time was twenty minutes to seven. She had to control a trembling in her whole body,

'Cooking a dinner in your good suit!'

'I had my apron.'

'Well, what you got it *on* for! You never sit down in your good suit like that before! Wearing that suit round the house!'

She could conceal – how well she could conceal! – but she could not deceive and she did not need to deceive.

'I wanted to see Hilda and her mother. I went there and they weren't in. So I walked around for a bit and went back there and

they weren't in, so I came home.'

'And never took that suit off, and went and cooked dinner in that suit!' (That suit, that suit, that suit.)

Yes, but, her mind said, if I didn't wear my suit I hadn't room to pack it. That was all arranged. Long ago that was arranged, arranged by night, arranged by day. I won't tell him any lies. I can stay quiet a little longer whatever he says. She ate her pudding mechanically, hardly knowing what she did or what he said. It all depends on me, now, she thought. If I can manage the next quarter of an hour, I'm all right. What's a quarter of an hour? Oh God help me. Just this quarter of an hour. Time could kill a person, standing still like this. A person could die.

'Any more pudding?' she said. He shook his head. Ill temper made his face peevish.

'Gimme the paper,' he said sourly.

'It's here.' She passed it to him and her heart beat like a clock.

He turned himself from the table and seemed to settle to the paper. A weight lifted a little from her. She took out the plates, cleared the table, and went into the kitchen, closing the door behind her. She ran the water into the dishpan. Water makes more noise than anything but crumpling paper, doesn't it, she thought. I must have things quiet, so that I can listen both ways. She piled the dishes, one on one, very quietly. It was seven o'clock. She

began to wash the dishes, silently enough. The moments became intolerable. A person could die, waiting for a minute to come. She could not bear it. She dried her hands on her apron and threw off the apron. It dropped to the floor. She snatched the raincoat off the peg by the door. She slipped on the raincoat and went out into the dark. If it's not there, she thought in her fluttering mind, what shall I do? If he comes into the kitchen and I have to go back in, what'll I do? I'll have been to the garbage, that's what I'll do. The taxi might be two or three minutes early. It *might*. She walked quickly down the little back garden path to the lane where the woodshed stood. The air, cool and fresh and dark after the warm lighted kitchen, blew upon her face. She saw up the dark lane a car standing, its engine running. The absurd fear nearly choked her that this might not, after all, be her car. Some other car might be standing there. Ducking into the woodshed, she picked up the two bags and the thin fishing rod in its case, slung the haversack over her shoulder, and began to run. She reached the taxi and looked eagerly in. She saw the Chinese face. Before the driver could reach the door handle, she wrenched the door open, sprang in and closed it.

'Drive,' she said, and leaned back in the car with a relief that made her for a moment dizzy.

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# OUR REVIEWERS WRITE

In the *Independent on Sunday* Charlie Lee-Potter reviewed **They Were Sisters**: 'It exerts a menacing force from start to finish. I eavesdropped on the lives of Lucy, Charlotte and Vera, compelled to go on but with a sense of simmering dread... By the time Dorothy Whipple came to write her final novel in 1953, the appetite for her subtle, acutely psychologically observed novels had gone but it is satisfying to think that the woman who believed how important it was to live your life well should be enjoying a posthumous triumph. She deserves it.' In *The Spectator* Salley Vickers wrote about 'the sparkling achievements of this accomplished novelist, not the least of which is the ability – rarer today than it should be – simply to entertain. I read this diverting novel on the plane to Australia and the journey flew by... The most original, and compelling, part of the story concerns Charlotte's treatment at the hands of her husband, Geoffrey. The subtle way in which a misplaced devotion will often fuel its own destruction, and fire its object to renewed cruelties, is a truth revealed by Whipple with chilling accuracy. A moralist, in the line, if less augustly, of Jane Austen and George Eliot, in her universe

unkindness and selfishness and, above all, self-centredness do not escape retribution.'

And in *Image* magazine Anna Carey commented: 'Although this compulsively readable novel was first published in 1943, its depiction of an abusive marriage feels unsettlingly modern. Dorothy Whipple has the ability to make her readers care about almost every character.' In the same review she described Virginia Woolf's **Flush** as 'a very enjoyable retelling of a famous love story as well as a smart feminist critique of gender roles... it is a seriously witty, angry examination of the way Victorian women were treated like petted lapdogs'; and the *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* praised our **Flush** with its 'excellent preface by Sally Beauman... what she is demonstrating is that there is much autobiography in the biography – there are notable parallels between Barrett's and Woolf's illness, their domineering fathers and their watchful husbands.'

On the Penguin website Caro Fraser said: 'I read a lovely book called **The Priority** by Dorothy Whipple. Reading it was rather like watching an old black-and-

white movie. It was a joy, and gives fascinating insights into family life and class structures in the period just before the Second World War.' While on the *Guardian* readers web page Chris Scarlett from Sheffield wrote about her 'discovery of Persephone Books. **Someone at a Distance, Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day** and **Fidelity** all enraptured. Coming from a different place from Virago and Women's Press books, I found these novels addressing universal issues of women's lives, albeit from a quieter and apparently less politicised stance – but don't be fooled...'

Finally: last winter Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, based the Romanes Lecture at Oxford on the life of Etty Hillesum (**An Interrupted Life**: Diaries and Letters 1941-3, Persephone Book No. 5). 'She died in Auschwitz in 1943 and left behind her a journal for the two years before her deportation and death, an extraordinarily full and absorbing document which chronicles a complex sexual and emotional life, a deepening immersion in Rilke and Dostoevsky and a religious conversion of a very unconventional order.' The full text is at: [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons).



# LISTS

## THE PERSEPHONE BESTSELLERS

Someone at a Distance  
Good Evening, Mrs Craven  
Few Eggs and No Oranges  
Good Things In England  
Saplings

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day  
Little Boy Lost  
The Making of a Marchioness  
Kitchen Essays  
The Far Cry

There is no publisher in the world who knows which of its books are going to be a bestseller. We had no idea that, after four years, **Miss Pettigrew** would have sold sixteen thousand copies. And we can only speculate why the other books have each sold over five thousand copies. Is **Little Boy Lost** a success just because of its dramatic tension or also because it appeals equally to men as to women? Is it the English obsession with India that has sold **The Far Cry**? **The Making of a Marchioness** is by an author everyone has heard of (Frances Hodgson Burnett). Could it be because **Few Eggs and No Oranges** is incredible value, being 650 pages, as well as being a unique diary of the war? (In fact one of the most crucial links between these ten books is that each one makes a good present.)

Books that have been read or dramatised on BBC Radio 4: **Good Evening, Mrs Craven**, **Tell It to a Stranger**, **Saplings**, **Every Eye**, **Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day**, **The Montana Stories**, **Little Boy Lost**, **The Far Cry**, **Tea with Mr Rochester**, **The Casino**

Books of which films have been made in the past: **The Home-Maker**, **They Knew Mr Knight**, **Little Boy Lost**, **The Blank Wall**, **Operation Heartbreak**, **They were Sisters**; films in development: **William – an Englishman**, **Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day**, **Cheerful Weather for the Wedding**

Six books about the Second World War: **Good Evening, Mrs Craven**, **Few Eggs and No Oranges**, **Saplings**, **A House in the Country**, **Miss Ranskill Comes Home**, **Operation Heartbreak**

## TEN BEST BOOKS FOR READING GROUPS

Someone at a Distance  
Fidelity  
The Home-Maker  
Consequences  
Saplings

Little Boy Lost  
A House in the Country  
Manja  
Hostages to Fortune  
The Wise Virgins



All our books for yourself or as a present are £495 including delivery – or £25 per person for twenty people clubbing together.

All twenty-five past **Persephone Quarterlies** cost £20 including postage; all fifty-eight bookmarks cost £25 including postage.

**The Persephone Notebook** (in which to write about the Persephone books you have read) is £10; it now has a matching bookmark, please ask for it if you bought a notebook before we had this in stock.

**The Persephone Book Bag** is £5 including postage: it is purple hessian with elegant bamboo handles.



# FINALLY

There are some places left for **The Persephone Weekend** at Newnham College, Cambridge from September 10-11. The £285 cost covers the entire weekend (from coffee at 10.30 on Saturday to the final drinks party at 6.00pm on Sunday) and includes excellent food and wine, a film on Saturday night and a book group. This is a chance to spend a night in Cambridge with other Persephone readers, to enjoy the Newnham atmosphere and to have 'a facial for the brain' (to quote a previous participant). The speakers are: Julia Briggs (Virginia Woolf: *The Written Evidence*), Amanda Craig (In Defence of the Disappointingly Domestic Novel), Elizabeth Crawford (*O Bella Liberta: English Women Writers in Italy*), Sue Gee (*The Space Between: Some C20th Painters and Writers*), Val Hennessy (*Can't Put it Down: Reminiscences of a Reviewer*), Eva Ibbotson (**Manja**: *The Vienna Connection*), Jessica Mann (**Doreen**: *The Evacuee Experience*) and Jan Marsh (*Writing Women's Lives*). (Nb: those who, in the past, have found the Newnham facilities a little austere could consider coming for the day or treating themselves to a hotel: each day costs £115.)

PERSEPHONE BOOKS  
020 7242 9292

The **First Persephone Annual Lecture** takes place on Wednesday October 5 when Salley Vickers will talk about **A Pride of Spinsters: Miss Pettigrew, Miss Garnet and Miss Ranskill**. This event will be at 6.00 for 6.30; wine and cheese



straws will be served beforehand and afterwards. The lecture will take place just round the corner from the shop in the magnificent 1914 Art Workers Hall at the Art Workers Guild 6 Queen Square WC1 ([www.artworkersguild.org](http://www.artworkersguild.org)); tickets are £15 (from us).

We now sell new books in the shop: **Fifty Persephone Favourites** or the **Fifty Books we Wish we had Published**. We hope that, by stocking these books, we will tempt people to use the shop somewhat as a feminist (albeit with a very small

'f') bookshop, since one no longer exists in London. There will be a basic, but slightly changing, stock of books we feel are 'must reads' for Persephone readers, and we can order books.

The Autumn 2005 books are: **There Were No Windows**, a funny, wise and touching 1944 novel by the Anglo-Irish novelist Norah Hoult about an elderly woman (based on the writer Violet Hunt) living in Kensington. Preface: Julia Briggs. The other September book is **Doreen** by Barbara Noble, an excellent 1946 novel published partly to coincide with the Imperial War Museum exhibition *The Children's War*. *Doreen* is evacuated to the country but the couple she goes to stay with do not want to give her up. Preface: Jessica Mann.

**Books without Fuss**: to have one book a month arriving through your (or someone else's) letterbox every month for twelve months costs £132; or £66 for six months.

Lastly: the June books will be sent wrapped in cellophane covers at no extra charge. So many people have said, oh, Persephone books are too nice to take on holiday, that we thought we would give them this protection from sun and sand; when you get home you can remove the cellophane cover.

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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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