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Five  
Dials

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Dials

# ABOUT FIVE DIALS 58

EDITOR  
Craig Taylor

ILLUSTRATION  
Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun

FEATURED ART  
Jackie Morris

ASSISTANT EDITORS  
Hannah Chukwu  
Hermione Thompson

PUBLISHER  
Simon Prosser

DIGITAL CONTENT  
PRODUCER  
Zainab Juma

FIVE DIALS STAFFERS  
Ellie Smith  
Caroline Pretty

THANKS TO  
Anna Ridley  
Benjamin Wood  
Rosanna Safaty  
Isabel Wall

DESIGN  
Andrew LeClair

@fivedials  
@hamishh1931

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# CONTRIBUTORS

AMY-JANE BEER is a biologist and writer who lives in North Yorkshire. She has written more than thirty books about science and natural history, including *Cool Nature* and *The A-Z of Wildlife Watching*.

ROB BUSHBY isn't an author. He writes occasional blogs and case studies about links between people and place, about policy and practice, and about nature, education and culture. Lancashire-born and Edinburgh-based, he ran the John Muir Award, an environmental engagement scheme for all ages, for eighteen years. Rob is helping to develop Urban Nature maps in Scotland and a UK-wide Slow Ways network of walking routes.

GWENFAIR GILLICK is a thirteen-year-old student at a Steiner Waldorf school in Herefordshire. Her main interests are drawing, writing and singing. She is currently working on a project at home and in school in which she has chosen to study illustration and books. In this project she will produce a handmade book of her illustrated poetry. This will help her, she feels, when she grows up because she wants to be a writer and illustrator.

ERIKA HAGELBERG is a molecular biologist, specializing in ancient DNA and human evolution. She pioneered the use of bone DNA in human identification, and worked on the identification of the skeletons of Auschwitz physician Josef Mengele

and of the Romanov family. In 2020 she co-authored the *Nature* article *Native American Gene Flow Into Polynesia Predating Easter Island Settlement*. She lives in Cambridge and is writing a family memoir.

ANTONIA HARRISON is a freelance curator and writer with a particular interest in exhibitions that explore our cultural connection to the natural world and social history. At Compton Verney, where she was previously the senior curator, she curated exhibitions including: *Mary Newcomb: Nature's Canvas* (to open 2021); *The Lost Words*; *A Tea Journey: From the Mountains to the Table*; *The Arts & Crafts House: Then & Now*; *The Marvellous Mechanical Museum*; and *The Fabric of Myth*. She is currently developing a programme about the cultural history of the apple with The National Trust and The Cider Museum entitled *The Apple: The Art, Science and History of Humanity's Fruit*. Her Instagram account can be found at: [antonia\\_harrison\\_](https://www.instagram.com/antonia_harrison_)

JAKE HOPE is a reading development and children's book consultant with a keen interest in librarianship, visual literacy, diversity and children's books. Named as one of top ten librarians of the future in the United Kingdom's 'Love Libraries Campaign', he has been a regular reviewer and commentator on children's books for numerous publications and websites, including *Books for Keeps* and *The Bookseller*. As Reading and Learning Development Manager for Lancashire County Council,

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he designed and delivered a year-long promotion of visual literacy as well as the ‘Lancashire Reading Trail’, an illustrated scheme aimed at encouraging children to read while fostering an awareness of local geography and culture. He has judged numerous book awards, including the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals, for whom he now chairs the Working Party.

MERERID HOPWOOD is an award-winning Welsh poet and translator of *Geiriau Diflanedig*, a Welsh-language version of Jackie Morris and Robert Macfarlane’s *The Lost Words*.

EVA JOHN was formerly a teacher and then Adviser for Literacy for Pembrokeshire. She is now an independent literacy consultant who writes teaching notes.

JAMIE NORMINGTON has lived and worked in Cumbria for over ten years, for a nature conservation charity that aims to inspire people to learn about wildlife and the importance of conservation. He grew up in a rural Yorkshire village but the hills, lakes and woodlands of Cumbria won him over.

PHILIP Ó CEALLAIGH, a native of County Waterford, currently lives in Bucharest. His first collection of stories, *Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse*, won the Glen Dimplex New Writers Award for fiction and was shortlisted for the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award. Philip won the Rooney Prize, which is awarded

annually to an Irish writer under forty, in 2006.

STEFANO DOMINGUES DE CASTRO PACHI is a second-year student at King’s College London’s PhD in Creative Writing, working under novelist Benjamin Wood’s supervision. His current project, *The Family Forest*, is a debut novel following a couple of Brazilian ex-pats as they face deforestation in the contemporary Amazon. After growing up in São Paulo and spending some formative years in Heidelberg, he now calls Oxford home.

CAROLINE SLOUGH’s background is in art history, art galleries and curating. She transferred away from curating exhibitions to help build the production company JSL Productions with her husband, which led on to the creation of the Folk by the Oak festival. Following on from the success of the first *Spell Songs* album, a second album is planned for 2021. New music will be woven into a special live-streamed *Spell Songs* concert from London’s Natural History Museum on February 2nd. The concert will raise money for the museum’s Urban Nature Project.

SB. SMITH (she and they) is a fat, genderqueer, bisexual, mad, and disabled person of poor, chronically-ill Scottish/Irish descent living on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh land (known as Vancouver, Canada). They were the editor of *Disabled Voices Anthology* (Rebel Mountain

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Press, 2020), and her work has been published in *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *Maclean's*, *antlang.*, *Burning Jade*, *Rooted in Rights*, *Portal*, *Sad Girl Review*, *Navigator Student Press*, and more.

ELIZABETH STROUT is the Pulitzer prize-winning author of *Olive Kitteridge*, as well as *The Burgess Boys*, a *New York Times* bestseller, *Abide With Me* and *Amy and Isabelle*, which won the *Los Angeles Times* Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction and the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize. She has also been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize. She lives in New York City and Portland, Maine.

HARRY WHINNEY is the founder of Gorsebush, a design studio, and the creator of the *Lost Words* map.

ELIOT WHITE-HILL, KWULASULTUN, is an Indigenous artist and storyteller from the Snuneymuxw First Nation in Nanaimo, Canada. His art practice is in traditional Coast Salish style. He works to preserve and pass down the teachings he has been given and to share his appreciation of the Coast Salish teachings and world view with others.

MISSOURI WILLIAMS has written for *The Baffler*, *The Believer*, and *Another Gaze*. Her first novel, *The Doloriad*, will be published by Dead Ink Books and FSG.





THE CHANGING SEASONS

# On Time

Ali Smith's Quartet  
for All Seasons

Stefano Domingues  
de Castro Pachi

‘[S]ummer’s surely really all about an imagined end. We head for it instinctually like it must mean something. [...] Like there really is a kinder finale and it’s not just possible but assured.’

These thoughts flicker through Grace’s mind towards the end of Ali Smith’s *Summer*. The year’s 1989, the Second Summer of Love, and our future mother of two is then a young actor out for a wander, hoping to find in the bounteous weather outside some escape from the drama of her own love life. Instead, a Nick Drake song lures her to a church, where she meets a man restoring a pew, reads a poem etched on a nameless gravestone, and helps age the repaired wooden seat. In that uncomplicated resolution to Grace’s emotional struggle *Summer* teaches us two things. There is a possibility of peace in things as small as a chance encounter and the idiosyncrasies of an old church. And if you were expecting this to be the end you haven’t been paying attention.

*Summer* is the concluding volume in Smith’s Seasonal Quartet, a project started partially in response to the Brexit referendum in 2016. The intent: to tell ‘an old story so new that it’s still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it’ll end’. A story about time and memory, about Brexit and Britain, about Shakespeare and a whole host of visionary female artists. A story, as it turned out, about Trump and the Grenfell Tower fire, about Covid-19 and the

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George Floyd protests.

No matter the actual state of the nation, the best and worst of times have long been a literary obsession: Dickens was serially publishing *Bleak House* in 1852–3, Eliot *Middlemarch* in 1872, Trollope the aptly named *The Way We Live Now* in 1875. Yet if some have bemoaned a lack of such novels from British writers more recently, have yearned for a local response to Roth's *American Pastoral* or DeLillo's *Underworld*—never mind the publication of novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* in 2000 or McEwan's *Saturday* in 2005—then Smith's recent efforts should more than satisfy. The state-of-the-nation novel has come in many forms, from serialized behemoth to self-contained three-hundred-pager, it has exuded in the minutia of life and lost track of its characters in its own schematic concerns. Inevitably, some have worn their ambitions as a drowning man would an anchor, others found in the scaffolding of its scenes a higher vantage point from which to survey the land. Even among the latter, Smith's achievement with the Seasonal Quartet is unprecedented.

To begin with, it would be a disservice to ignore how different the Quartet's production has been to everything that preceded it. *Bleak House* depicts events set two decades earlier, *Middlemarch* roughly four. *Saturday* may seem like a quicker turnaround, coming out only four years after 9/11 and two years after the invasion of Iraq, but that is a veritably glacial pace compared to Smith's *Autumn*

hitting the shelves a mere four months after the Brexit referendum. Thirteen months later and bookshops would be graced by *Winter*, sixteen more and it would be *Spring*'s turn. Had *Summer* arrived on its original release date the whole endeavour would have been completed in a bit more than four years. As it stands, with an actual release on 6 August, it did so in under four and a half.

This delay allowed Smith to incorporate—among other developments—what the novel's blurb refers to as 'the real meltdown': the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. A draft of *Summer* likely exists where this was not the case, where the official departure of the UK from the European Union is the putative climax. As with so many other plans this year, Smith's had to adapt, and it's to her credit that the experience is incredibly smooth, the ghost of that alternative draft hardly imaginable in the final version. As with history, even the most unexpected developments become familiar, almost logical in retrospect, and one can only imagine how many times Smith has needed to react to events as they developed over the course of these past four years. A story still in the middle of happening, indeed.

As far as stories go, it's a sizeable one too. At 1297 pages, the Quartet may seem a daunting prospect, but spread out in four volumes it remains remarkably accessible, thanks largely to the gentle trance Smith's prose inspires. Similarly, it is not strictly necessary to read any of the other volumes in order to appreciate a particular season, though

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familiarity with the accompanying novels helps them transcend their boundaries. Still, none of that in and of itself—the promptness of its release, the speed of its writing, its intimidating length, or separation into volumes—would be particularly impressive for their own sake. It would not mean a thing, if the Quartet itself were not a hypnotic masterpiece.

When writing on the state of the novel in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Jonathan Coe—who wrote his own state-of-the-nation novel in 1994 with *What a Carve Up!*—mentioned a need to move beyond ‘the 19th-century model’, highlighting how ‘[i]t induces the stolid consolation of closure and catharsis and I’m beginning to think that these are not what our present difficulties require’. One must imagine Coe happy, then, that Smith has chosen to chronicle our troubled times with her modernist sensibilities and postmodern humour.

Puns abound, as do a variety of diegetic and narrative modes. From the surreal dreamscapes of Daniel’s coma in *Autumn* to the artistic journal entries of miraculous Florence in *Spring*, from the eeriness of the floating head haunting Sophia in *Winter* to the epistolary communications between Sacha and Hero in *Summer*. The scope of references is similarly broad. The Shakespeares: *The Tempest* in *Autumn*; *Cymbeline* in *Winter*; *Pericles* in *Spring*; *The Winter’s Tale* in *Summer*. The respective patron saints, so to speak: pop artist Pauline Boty; abstract sculptor

Barbara Hepworth; visual experimenter Tacita Dean; and avant-garde filmmaker Lorenza Mazzetti. And of course, all the history, from the Battle of Culloden in *Spring* to the Profumo affair in *Autumn*, the Greenham Common's Women's Peace Camp in *Winter* to the Isle of Man's Second World War internment camps in *Summer*.

All a bit much, one might imagine, and when listed like that it may seem impossible for all these dots to meaningfully connect, to somehow coalesce into a sensible and understandable form. Yet that is both the crux of it and entirely beside the point. As Art(hur), a nature writer, expounds in *Summer*, art is 'something to do with coming to terms with and understanding all the things we can't say or explain or articulate [...] even at times like this when feeling and thinking and saying anything about anything are under impossible pressure.'

A noble sentiment, but how successfully does Smith's Seasonal Quartet accomplish this? Entire PhD dissertations could—and likely should—be written on just the Shakespeare references, let alone the Dickens ones, which are similarly pervasive if less diagrammatic. In the meantime, a particular moment from *Spring* provides a framework for understanding not just what the Quartet is doing, but how Smith undertakes it. 'What if, [Florence] says. Instead of saying, this border divides these places. We said, this border *unites* these places.'

Perhaps too naive an ideal for our jaded age, though surely some forgiveness is earned by the fact

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this it is expressed by a twelve-year-old girl with the seemingly magical power of walking into a refugee detention centre and convincing the administration to properly clean up their bathrooms. As a character, Florence often serves to reset people to a more inherently human mode of existence, one where the limitations imposed on them by their personal economics and institutional commitments are treated as the immateriality they essentially are.

Enter, then, Robert, *Summer's* own prodigious child—a Smith staple if there ever was one—only unlike Florence or even his environmentally minded sister, Sacha, this is a boy whose history of being bullied has hardened him into a supercilious proto-Boris Johnson. The boy's shock tactics range from the relatively harmless—turning their old TV on to a very loud volume and shipping the remote to Desolation Island in Antarctica using part of his father's stamp collection—to the downright horrifying – saying women 'are only useful for sex and having children, especially children you don't admit to having, because being a man is all about spreading your seed' at school. Although Robert has clearly internalized the idea that offence is the best defence, underneath all his cynicism and ill will are shards of a kinder self, one obsessed with words and science, who worships Einstein like no other. '[T]he only real religion humans can have,' Robert paraphrases in conversation with *Autumn's* Daniel, 'is the matter of freeing ourselves from the delusion first that we're separated from each other and



second that we're separate from the universe.'

Now, one can look at these two ideas, borders uniting and Einstein's freedom, and consider them distinct notions, wholly separate statements that could only be made to relate through an excess of interpretive bias. *Summer* itself opens with this idea, the dreadful power of those who say *So?*, who disavow arguments, statistics and even history with a sheer preference for indifference. But if one is willing to engage, to follow Florence and Einstein's ideal, to see the space between not as separation but as union, then one may finally start to fully grasp the scope of Smith's Seasonal Quartet. It does not hold forth on such a richness of topics to obfuscate or patronize, but rather to offer the reader the cognitive space with which to break those boundaries.

At the core of the Quartet's success is how Smith not only leaves enough such readerly spaces but also draws sufficient connections so that one is encouraged to sketch out patterns of their own design. In practice, this works a bit like Smith's puns: the reader is so bombarded by her playful ways their brain is trained to look for connections everywhere. So when *Winter* brings up that Sophia's name means wisdom, and then that her sister Iris called her Philo not in the reference to philosophy but to the airy quality of filo pastries, you cannot help but notice the further echo when in the middle of an argument Iris calls Sophia a sophist. There are layers upon layers of meaning there, softly buttered in

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humour. All puns very much intended.

The same occurs at a larger, more abstract scale in the Quartet. There are, naturally enough, all the connections between the characters in each novel, introduced first tentatively in *Winter* but then more clearly in *Spring* and almost overwhelmingly in *Summer*. Thus we discover that *Winter*'s Arthur is secretly the son of *Autumn*'s Daniel, that *Spring*'s Richard is *Autumn*'s Elisabeth's father. The connections multiply, to the point where even talking about any particular character belonging to a single novel becomes senseless. It hardly matters that one first meets Hero from Brit's perspective in *Spring* before he becomes Sacha's penpal in *Summer*. Any straightforward chronology or temporal causality is sundered, revealed as no more than an illusion. As Daniel says, '[t]ime travel is real [...]. We do it all the time. Moment to moment, minute to minute.'

Yet that is not all, for we also do it in our memories. We do it through fiction, and then through the memory of fiction—or, Smith might add, the fiction of memory. Moments in the Quartet, but more noticeably so in *Summer*, hint towards that transcending power. Take, for example, when Daniel's sister, Hannah, mistakes a stranger for her brother: 'Of course it's not her brother. That's obvious almost immediately. / But there is a fragment of a second when her brother was there in front of her even though he wasn't, isn't [...]. / It's so nice to see him! / Even though it's not him.'

Her joy at that moment of reconnection is real, as is Daniel's, almost eighty years later, when he mistakes a visiting Robert for a returned Hannah.

This is treated not so much as a delusion from the century-old man as a higher truth, for there are a variety of ways—from their prodigious intelligence to snarky sense of humour—in which Robert and Hannah are rather similar. What is questioned here is not the very nature of reality, but our identification of it. Throughout the Quartet characters complain about the seasons, yearning for 'the essentiality of winter, not this half-season grey sameness', or then claiming a season to be '[o]ne of the worst springs I can remember'. Yet despite all that they continue to identify the seasons as a cycle. Even a bad summer is still summer, regardless that it ends every time, as all seasons do, as all seasons must. That which Daniel loved in Hannah is present in Robert, whatever else may have been lost or added to the mix. Robert himself puts it perfectly when he asks 'What if you're a mix of *all* the things. And it's not possible to be just *one* of them?'

This notion of cyclicity, of intermingling, of the borders uniting is reinforced by the very structure of the quartet. *Summer*, culminating as the novel may be, is neither an end nor a beginning. One might as well follow it up with *Autumn*, and then *Winter*, *Spring*, all over again. Cycle through the seasons, and accumulate their meaning. For all the clear political references, the to-the-moment nature of the Quartet, it re-establishes the old adage of art

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touching the universal, not merely on an aesthetic level but a structural one. In talking about Brexit it evokes both the Scottish referendum that shortly preceded it and the Acts of Union from 1707. In enquiring about the refugee crisis it reflects the displacements and horrors of the Second World War. In depicting the climate crisis it ponders on anti-nuclear activism. Above all, it connects. Through wordplay and coincidence, through intertexts and echoes. Through a love of words, of art, and yes, of people. Whatever daunting questions it asks about how we ‘come to understand what time is, what we’ll do with it, what it’ll do with us’, it ultimately has the foresight to remind us that the way to handle the seasons’ passing, or to write a novel, or simply to live in a world insistent on tearing itself apart remains the same: ‘You have to go with it and make something of what it makes of you.’ ♦



*The Lost Words*  
Phenomenon

How does a  
book become a  
movement?  
Ten extraordinary  
people offer their  
accounts

When *The Lost Words: A Spell Book* was published in October 2017, there was a solid chance it would live the life of a very good book. It would be praised, read from cover to cover, passed from bookseller to reader, librarian to child. Readers would most likely pore over the rhymes conjured by Rob Macfarlane and the illustrations that swept across each page, thanks to the imagination of Jackie Morris. There was a high probability the book would occupy a place of pride on bookshelves around the world. But a funny thing happened with *The Lost Words*—something uncommon and extramundane, even magical. The book is, after all, comprised of twenty spells that celebrate words that describe nature. These words were excised from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* because, the gatekeepers of the dictionary implied, kids just weren't really saying things like 'acorn', 'wren', 'dandelion' and 'conker' any more. Kids were using other words. They were happy with words like 'spreadsheet' instead, weren't they? It turns out they were not. The loss of these words was not, readers and book lovers across the UK decided, a small issue that should be ignored.

Since its publication, the book has been gifted through Crowdfunder to a vast swathe of the UK's primary schools. It's being used as a teaching aid by dementia charities. 'It dwells in hospices and care homes,' I was told by one of its fiercest proponents, a project manager named Caroline Slough. 'It has been translated into other languages, formed the

## THE LOST WORDS PHENOMENON

basis of countless school workshops and projects, been transformed into theatre, been spoken and sung at environmentally attuned protests, formed the inspiration for orchestral and choral work internationally, inspired a tree-planting project (The Lost Woods), become a Lost Words Prom and deeply influenced the eco-cultural community who have raised their voices to sing, play, rap, beatbox, act, recite and perform *The Lost Words*. Palliative care specialists are using the book with patients. The whole surge of interest has led to Jackie Morris being commissioned to provide the interior murals and text for three floors of an orthopaedic hospital in London, as well as artwork for a hospice in Oxfordshire.

The book broke out from the usual fate of printed matter. After a while, the phenomenon couldn't be stopped. This spirit, this momentum, has continued on to the publication of Macfarlane and Morris's latest collaboration, *The Lost Spells*, but the artist and the writer are both keen to stress that the books alone will not provide a solution to all problems. As Macfarlane noted in a recent interview, 'Perhaps we shouldn't think of books as saving the world, but rather as catalysing uncountable small unknown acts of good.' He goes on to describe 'the ways in which small acts can together, cumulatively, grow into change. In this way we might think of writing as like the work of a coral reef, slowly building its structures through many small interventions, rather than like a single thunderclap or bullet.'



## Five Dials

The movement behind the book has swept up along with it a crowd of fascinating people – readers, admirers, advocates, patients. ‘When you’ve got people in a hospice spending the last moments of their lives in your book,’ said Jackie Morris in an interview, ‘you can win every prize under the sun, but it doesn’t even touch that honour. People are using the book, every day, and every day teaching us more about it.’

We at *Five Dials* decided to track down some of the people whose lives have been changed by the two books. Here are the stories of ten individuals who interacted with *The Lost Words* in their own way, spread its message, translated its words, took inspiration from its rhymes, turned its poetry into music, ensured it found its way into schools, or just simply used it to enjoy the view from their own secret getaway in nature. From all the initiatives spread across the country, here are ten ways of looking at *The Lost Words*.



Mererid Hopwood

*A poet who served as the translator of Geiriau Diflanedig —a Welsh-language version of The Lost Words.*

As a speaker of Cymraeg (known in English as ‘Welsh’) I’m very aware of the danger of losing words, a whole language of them in fact. Perhaps it’s not surprising therefore that the book and its

## THE LOST WORDS PHENOMENON

whole concept struck a deep chord with me. Jackie Morris, who lives in Wales and who is acutely aware of the predicament of our language, was passionate about ensuring that a Welsh version of the spells was created. I was delighted to take part in that.

I still think that translating an acrostic poem about a newt, when the translated word for ‘newt’ is ‘madfall y dŵr’, was quite a challenge! Mercifully for me, the original took more than the usual ‘one line per letter’.

I love all the spells. The double-page spread of the owl over the bluebell fields took my breath away. I know a lane that leads to the sea and is owned by such bluebells each spring. But also ‘Dandelion’. Poor ‘Dandelion’. The dandelion regains its dignity through Rob Macfarlane’s words and Jackie’s paintings. In Welsh, as in English, it’s chiefly known as the ‘tooth of the lion’—‘dant y llew’—though the same etymology is obscured slightly in English through the French ‘dent de lion’. (Just as ‘daisy’, which is in essence the ‘day’s eye’, has lost its origin in English but has kept it very clearly in the Welsh: ‘llygad y dydd’, where ‘llygad’ is ‘eye’, ‘y’ is ‘of the’ and ‘dydd’ is ‘day’.)

And as the original English spell reveals, we too have many names for this stunning yellow flower, from ‘bruised leaves’ to ‘pee in bed’ and even one version that could be understood as ‘the posh people’s flower’ . . . but that’s another story. The important thing, as Rob’s poem implores us, is never to call it a weed!

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I'm sure that it was through this book that I was inspired during the early months of the lockdown to learn the names of wild flowers. I was utterly amazed to find when I looked, and I mean, really looked, the small differences that make all the difference. What may at first sight look like a thistle, let's say, isn't quite a thistle after all.

I hope the book will reach everybody. It would be particularly good if it were to filter down to those who have to sit in front of their computer screens and churn out phrases that have no soul and no meaning, yet somehow or other gain currency as they turn 'patients' into 'consumers', 'results' into 'outputs', and 'tomorrow' into a 'moving forward'.

I hope it will help children to stop and stare, to note names and love them. If we can name something it makes it so much easier somehow to respect it, cherish it, know it.

I keep my copy of the book on the little bookshelf just behind my desk. I have it there in three languages. I've given a copy to each of my grandchildren.

Do I feel optimistic about the message of the book? We might as well give up if we have no optimism. There is always hope.







# THE LOST WORDS PHENOMENON

Caroline Slough

*A director of Folk by the Oak Festival, who organised the Spell Songs musical collaboration.*

When I opened the book for the first time it was a revelation. I'd never seen or read anything quite like it. It felt like stepping out into nature and breathing the fresh air. You were given permission to slow down and contemplate each creature and plant—its character and form. *The Lost Words* and its new sibling *The Lost Spells* are like exquisitely curated fine art exhibitions where word and artwork resonate. The spaciousness of the paintings and the poetry is so inviting, as though they are making room for you to join them.

Also, the word 'Lost' chimes with the times—loss of biodiversity, loss of wild places and a loss of compassion. All these things are greatly concerning to me. This book seemed to sum up the desperate position we are in without any feeling of preaching or whipping up alarm. Beauty, poignancy and heartfelt compassion are hugely motivating.

In December 2017, I attended a *Lost Words* talk by Robert and Jackie at Hay Festival and saw a stunning video of composer and author Kerry Andrew's musical interpretation of the 'Wren' Spell. I realized that the book would be a trove of inspiration for a musical ensemble. I help organize a folk festival called Folk by the Oak, which allows us to commission collaborative musical projects. So I took this idea back to our team and read them

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the ‘Otter’ Spell. There was a sudden joint intake of breath and a meaningful silence. These spells had woven their magic.

It felt so natural to make this our next commission. With the full support of the Folk by the Oak Festival team I immediately approached Robert and Jackie’s agent, Jessica Woolard. I was on tenterhooks, but amazingly I did not have to wait very long for a reply.

At first our involvement grew from the sense of wonder and intrigue which emanates from the book. I hoped to sing out the individuality of these plants and creatures, their importance, their crucial place in the ecosystem, their quirks, dramas and character. We wanted the musical compositions, like the book itself, to pay homage to the natural world, to help us know and love the wild again and to sing straight to our ‘animal hearts’—a description taken from Robert’s new ‘Red Fox’ Spell.

It felt important to take up this project—like being fired up by the spark of an idea, which, once kindled, could not be calmed. It is always important to sing in dark times, it is always important to retain hope. The musicians felt this too. Their collaborative professionalism allowed the space for the ideas of each member of the group to flow and grow.

We deliberately chose musicians who were skilled in different genres of music so that, in the end, the music became hard to classify. There is a fusion of styles and experience. Foremost there’s folk, but you will also find world music, classical,

## THE LOST WORDS PHENOMENON

jazz and experimental elements. We hoped the music would appeal to a wide variety of musical tastes. Five of the musicians are either Scottish or live in Scotland and this opened the possibilities of integrating the Gaelic language and accented song into the mix. One of the most interesting combinations is a duet in both Gaelic and Mandinka—languages that are themselves being lost.

These days, when I hear a lark, for example, I always start speaking the ‘Lark’ Spell. When I see a hooded crow or if I’m lucky, a raven, I am reminded of the wildly dark raven artwork Jackie created.

But the books have also made me look more, notice what is around me and what is not. Jackie’s art not only draws you into the book, but it also makes you look afresh at the wildlife around you—almost with an artist’s investigative eye. This more keenly attuned observation or awareness of the nature around me has made me more conscious of how we go about our daily lives and what effect we have on the earth. I feel grateful to have a little plot of land we’ve turned into a wild-flower meadow with ponds over the last two years. There is an abundance of life, from newts, tadpoles, grass snakes, slow worms, wild flowers and insects.

The book has pride of place sitting atop my breakfast bar amid *Lost Words* postcards, the *Spell Songs* album, and my children’s paintings. I believe in seeing beautiful books rather than hiding them away in a bookshelf. I also have a copy of *The Lost*



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*Words* which has lost its words! There's no title printed on the cover. It is really beautiful and unusual, especially as Jackie has drawn wrens and oak leaves on the inside cover. This one lives on our mantelpiece.

My sons' school now has multiple copies that I gifted, which inspired a felted *Lost Words* wall hanging made by the whole school, and some glowing gold-and-blue kingfisher art.

Most important to me was giving copies to the care home where my father lived out his last days. I spent a memorable afternoon there with everyone, reading the poetry and playing them the corresponding Spell Songs.



Antonia Harrison

*A freelance curator and formerly the senior curator at Compton Verney where The Lost Words exhibition originated.*

When I first heard about plans for *The Lost Words*, I remember being struck by the sound of such a unique project—a transformative and evocative call to arms. Working as a visual-arts curator, I saw the huge potential of both imagery and words to create an immersive exhibition. The book was like a gift—a fully formed exhibition between the pages.

I had the great pleasure of visiting Jackie at her studio in Pembrokeshire and learning more

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about the project as it was evolving, set against the backdrop of where she lives and works. Looking through her early drawings and paintings and reading Robert's words, it was clear what a unique creative process they were undertaking and how perfectly matched both word and image were in this process.

I wanted to create an exhibition that would in many ways feel like stepping into the pages of the book at the same time as going beyond it into nature with a new sensibility and vocabulary. The collaboration had the ability to reach everyone and inspire them to look at and articulate the natural world in such a poetic (rather than didactic) way. It was cross-generational and life-affirming, and the visitor experience from the exhibition was hugely positive.

We aimed the exhibition at adults and children and found, as we had hoped, that it reached both. Grandparents brought their grandchildren; after seeing the exhibition, parents bought the book for both their children and their own parents.

*The Lost Words* has been like a creative snowball which keeps gaining and inspiring people. I saw the exhibition tour to so many venues after its initial showing at Compton Verney, and it was particularly meaningful seeing every venue respond to the project each time. From the visitor feedback I saw how the project really touched people and re-tuned them into nature in the most life-affirming way. There were also a lot who found it a wonderful

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antidote to the frenetic pace of life.

The book is on my nine-year-old daughter's bookshelf but I often borrow it. Since my first reading of it, my view of nature has been richer and more nuanced. *The Lost Words* gave time to the small details and the wonder of nature, stressing the importance of seeking it out, looking at those details, naming them.

I have only seen a kingfisher once. The spell in the book perfectly captures the fleeting essence of that moment.



Amy-Jane Beer

*A biologist and writer who crowdfunded to raise money to distribute the book in North Yorkshire.*

Why did *The Lost Words* strike a chord? It was the wildness of it. There was nothing cutesy or 'do-good' or lecturing about it—and not a whiff of the well-meaning earnestness or dumbed-down banality I see in a lot of supposedly educational material generated by the truckload for children. *TLW* doesn't belittle a child's understanding, or their capacity to connect, or to make vast leaps, as from a skylark flight to the edge of the universe.

'Wren' captured me first—but over time others have chimed with experiences, or burst on my imagination in new ways. Hearing and seeing them performed by different people—read or

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sung, danced or interpreted with ink and paint—has often brought something new. I saw ‘Weasel’ performed in Makaton on YouTube and now I can’t hear it without seeing that beautiful physical interpretation in my mind’s eye. At the moment, as I write my own book about rivers, ‘Otter’ is especially powerful. It’s a daunting thing putting my heart and soul on a page and—I haven’t told Rob or Jackie this—when I get stuck or nervous about it I whisper to myself, ‘Enter now as Otter, without falter into water.’ It could be a mantra for all things.

I got involved when I saw the pioneering Scottish campaign, started by a woman named Jane Beaton, gallop away, and kept thinking what a wonderful thing it was, and that I would willingly donate to an English one. Then a few county-scale projects were launched and I thought, Great, when someone does North Yorkshire I’ll contribute to that. But the months ticked by, and eventually I found myself wondering why no one had picked up the baton. The answer was obvious – other people were doing the same as me, just waiting for someone else to act. I knew it would be no small undertaking—North Yorkshire is enormous, but it was doable, I could see that. And if you think something is important and you are able to do it, then you should do it, right?

Why? Is it too much to say I want to save the world and every beautiful thing in it? We are heading the wrong way, and we are betraying children by letting them grow up not knowing

what they are losing.

I have a scientific background and while I'd been coming round to a much more connected view of the natural world for a few years, this book with its blend of natural history, art, language and protest just wrapped itself around all of that—it blurred the lines between communication and communion, between human and more than human. It made me feel part of something bigger than any one species.

As for specific moments, hitting our financial target was a big day. It was extraordinarily hot, and so I posted a video on Twitter saying I wanted to go and jump in the river (where I swim regularly), but I couldn't go until we hit £9,000, which we then did, very fast! Perhaps they were expecting me to leap in naked or something . . . But actually the greatest satisfactions were the approaches from other people who'd been inspired to launch their own campaigns. And the community that has been built between different groups and individuals has been a joy—I've met several of them in the two years since, and formed some heartfelt friendships. They feel like kinships.

I am an optimist, by nature but also by necessity. I meet more and more people who do understand and who are making change of one kind or another—but I'm also aware that I live in a bubble. The bubble is growing. The message is getting through to some, but simultaneously it's becoming ever more urgent. Optimism has to mean

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action. Time is not on anyone's side and doing less than one can with that time is no way to spend a life.



Harry Whinney

*Founder of Gorsebush and a Lost-Wordian cartographer who raised funds to place the book in every Lincolnshire school.*

I keep my copy resting against the foot of my desk, alongside a book of Leonardo da Vinci drawings. Having tidied my studio during Covid lockdown, I was delighted to discover two more copies. This book transcends age groups, welcomed and savoured by all who open it.

Why did it strike a chord? Because the book is beautiful in aim as well as beautiful physically. Opening the large, hard-backed covers is like taking a deep-dive into a gloriously gilded world of words and wonder.

*Newt, O newt, you are too cute!  
Emoted the coot to the too-cute newt.*

This is sheer joy to read: a tripping tongue-twister delight. Due to the gorse—the name of my company—I like ‘Wren’.

I had read about *The Lost Words* in March 2018, so when I received a birthday book token

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soon afterwards I bought a copy. Within five seconds of opening it, I knew it had to be given away. As it was too important to keep to myself, I thought of donating it to the village school; then I thought, why not every school in the county of Lincolnshire?

I wanted to get involved to help highlight the fading away of knowledge and the loss of connection to the natural world – in a small way, to remedy this. The loss of the power of description, of understanding, is a loss of humanity. I'm reminded of what Rob Macfarlane once said: 'As a species, we will not save what we do not love, and we rarely love what we cannot name.'

The loss of words, of birds, the loss of insects, mammals and species—the more thought I give it, even now, the more important it becomes.

Initially, we hoped to reach every primary school-aged child in the historic county of Lincolnshire—which includes North Lincs and North East Lincs. But as the generous donations started rolling in, it became every schoolchild. As our second aim was met, we didn't want any child to be left out. Finally, we were even able to reach those who'd been excluded from school (for poor behaviour) by giving a copy to all thirty-four tutors that visit these children at home.

As the books get passed from class to class or are taken out from the school library shelves, a moment of wonder and intrigue occurs. By sowing

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*Lost Words* seeds and hoping they germinate, grow and flourish within the lives of the next generation.

The natural world has always been important to me—the book has not changed my need to walk or run in the countryside. However, when roaming I now mentally write more poetry. Perhaps I am more careful in my descriptions of the natural world. In my work as a painter and designer, it has influenced a typographic linocut series I am slowly creating.

There were three great moments in the process. First, right at the beginning, persuading the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust to become a partner and their agreeing to launch the appeal at their annual awards, hosted by a well-known local radio presenter. I could not have asked for a better start.

Second, the firepower of the Wildlife Trust led to their many groups of local volunteers spreading the word in their area. Not only that, but they volunteered to deliver the books to schools after the successful campaign. By English standards, Lincolnshire is a large county, with some volunteers driving hundreds of miles to and from to many schools in their area.

Third—and especially wonderful—was meeting the network of truly kind and generous people involved in different *Lost Words* campaigns across the country. The sharing of advice, fundraising techniques, encouragement and support was almost overwhelming.

Richard from *Lost Words* Dorset, a campaign



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which preceded us, plus Patrick from *Lost Words* Nottinghamshire and Amy from *Lost Words* North & East Yorkshire, whose campaigns ran concurrently and bordered mine in Lincs, were all tremendous helpers.

Donations of artworks by Jackie and others to act as rewards for financial donations were so kind. Such was the level of generosity of many, it made me think I had almost gained more from the experience than the children who received the book at their schools.

In many ways this book—or as it has become, this movement—is investing in the future.

The exhibitions, the stunning *Spell Songs*, the theatre group, the media interviews and recently the sister publication, *The Lost Spells*, are all further seeds for this encouragement to embrace our decreasing wildlife.

These seeds scattered across the country will grow, or not, depending on their conditions. We may have a meadow, a wood, a forest of understanding and positive action from this upcoming generation.

I gave a copy to my late mother-in-law. She suffered from severe dementia, but seemed calmer for those few minutes she leafed through.







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Rob Bushby

*A freelance consultant on education and environment matters who helped with resources and momentum during the acorn and sapling stages of The Lost Words.*

I've known Rob Macfarlane for a few years through the John Muir Trust—him as a very supportive life member, me running its John Muir Award engagement scheme from 2001 to 2018. I'd been highlighting a debate since early 2015 in the John Muir Award newsletter about fifty or so nature words dropping out of the *Oxford University Press Junior Dictionary* and quoting from Rob's 'The word-hoard' *Guardian* essay in the process.

I'm not sure how our initial exchange about *The Lost Words* occurred, but Rob let me know it was a work in progress. My first encounters with Jackie were through her amusingly mischievous pre-publication blogs. The scope of this unique publication to advance the *#naturewords* campaign as 'a beautiful protest' was clear at an early stage. Rob and I e-spoke of its potential, how to make links with teachers and wider audiences, of 'nearby nature', and discussed how it might contribute to a 'greater good' of nature connection in education. 'If it were possible to buy shares in acrostic poems,' I told him then, 'I'd remortgage my house right now.'

If anything, the book—coupled with Rob and Jackie's generosity of spirit and open communication around it—has been a stimulant rather than a project in its own right, sparking ideas

and activity in multiple directions. It's elevated a simple 'nature' agenda of awareness and naming, of course, at the same time influencing creative communication, education practice, effective campaigning, and placemaking. Whilst its creators are acutely aware that 'perhaps we shouldn't think of books as saving the world, but catalysing uncountable small unknown acts of good', the responses to *The Lost Words* are evidence that 'small acts can together, cumulatively, grow into change'.

There's been an alchemy of sorts, with the book serving as the key ingredient. Many other elements have also featured in 'the phenomenon', from individuals to organizations, to locations of sharing and reading, to use of the #*TheLostWords* hashtag, to UK-wide Crowdfunder campaigns, to associated resources that have emerged, to the book's spells and images being a part of wider experiences. *The Lost Words* has been featured as a component of literacy and nature workshops for educators; its posters and the artwork it has inspired have brightened school noticeboards.

Why *has* the book resonated so powerfully? This has been of particular interest. Writer Daegan Miller, in an interview with Rob and Jackie entitled 'Protest Can Be Beautiful', reflects on why 'a book has broken out of its usual bounds and . . . become a focal point for the powerful hopes and fears that circulate around the questions of our relationship with the living world, our relationships with children and childhood, and our relationship

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to ... the era of planetary-scale environmental degradation’.

Some reasons are offered. Its interest is in the familiar and accessible: ‘nearby nature’. It doesn’t hector. It isn’t didactic, whilst raising vital issues about what we are losing and how we might save it. It trusts the reader and their intelligence, whatever their age: ‘I love that there isn’t anything like a key on how to use *The Lost Words*,’ says Jackie in the interview with Miller. The emotional response and concern that it invites is clearly present in society, maybe less suppressed now than at the time of publication. Three quarters of eleven- to twenty-five-year-olds enjoy spending time in nature and consider nature to be important to them. The proportion of adults visiting nature at least once a week increased from 54 per cent in 2010 to 62 per cent in 2018.

The book embraces much of the environmental step-change good practice guidance from Common Cause, global leaders in values and framing. Engage people as though they are interested in and committed to making things better; be rooted in the broad range of ‘compassionate’ values and avoid appealing to ‘self-interest’ values; ‘bring creative flair to tailor your communications to resonate with different audiences’; collaborate beyond the environmental sector. Tick, tick, tick and tick again.

Inevitably perhaps, in my view, some of the profile and presence of the book has been a tad

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over-attached to its folksy connections, to some bucolic PR and campaigning, to a Radio 2/3/4 demographic. Some of the greatest impact I've seen has been with inner-city youngsters and refugees whose 'lost word' might be 'Sister' or a left-behind foodstuff. Its diversity of audience and breadth of reach is, to me, one of its unique facets. A lasting impression is a YouTube clip of Knoxland Primary pupils bringing their joyously creative musical interpretations of 'Bumblebee', 'Nessie', 'Fox' and 'Eagle' to an insignificant patch of scrubland near their urban school.

All that said, I really don't think of *The Lost Words* as a 'children's book'. It's had an impact with older readers, with those suffering from dementia or a stroke. It's been inspirationally located into diverse health settings, images and words as relevant in hospices and with octogenarians as in primary schools. It's been an effective tool in teacher training and inter-generational connections. (In supporting Crowdfunder campaigns I was keen to see them include secondary and special schools, not just target under-elevens.) It's limiting for both the book and its messages to be overly pitched as such. Jackie has spoken powerfully on this. A huge failing of the conservation movement, and society, is to keep foisting global responsibilities onto children to understand and resolve better than older generations who currently have the power, influence and experience to do something about it now.

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For me, the ‘hope’ that it engenders applies equally to outdoor and education professionals/teachers, to artists and scientists, to parents and politicians. I hope it helps with cross-generational and cross-cultural exchanges, with interdisciplinary learning, positioning nature across the curriculum as a pervasive context and feature, rather than in a sector-specific ‘natural history’ box. As an essentially simple resource it can stimulate interest, learning, looking, curiosity, creativity, awe, agitation, provocation, inspiration.

It’s been a pleasure and privilege to collate and host *The Lost Words* resources with John Muir Trust colleagues, to design and produce the *Explorer’s Guide* from Eva John’s activities content, to help bring the original artwork exhibition to Inverleith House in Edinburgh’s Royal Botanic Garden, and to see the success of UK-wide Crowdfunders following the inaugural one in Scotland.

The *Lost Words* spells themselves have resonated at different times, in different places, with different people. A too-cute ‘Newt’ reading overlooking Ullswater by John Muir Award training participants. The wonder stimulated for a group of ‘mature’ and well-travelled American tourists on a Smithsonian tour of Scotland, choosing their own spells on a Hebridean beach, re-discovering ‘Acorn’ and ‘Otter’, ‘Goldfinch’ powerful, poignant, pertinent. Reading ‘Lark’ to the same group on the Glen Sligachan path on Skye as, yes, you’ve guessed it, a ‘little astronaut’—as is mentioned in the spell—



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started rising-singing at about line two. As I write this now, I'm looking at a magpie strutting beyond my kitchen window and thinking that it wants to 'Pick a fight in an empty room.'



Eva John

*A literacy consultant who wrote The Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words.*

I love the different voices you hear in the poems, with no two alike. I particularly like 'Wren', because we have a shy, quick wren in our garden and the wordplay and images capture the spirit of that bird. Another favourite is 'Otter'—the way the elusive, sinuous nature of the creature is evoked, and it is totally mesmerising watching Jackie paint otters as she recites the words.

The concept of the book is so perfect, with three spreads dedicated to each spell: the first image suggesting the loss of a word from nature, the glorious gold leaf icon alongside the summoning spell on the next page, and the final, wonderfully immersive painting, where the word is magically conjured back to its natural habitat.

The quality and interconnection of words and images works beautifully. Gaps are left for the reader, of whatever age, to fill, making it a creative reading experience. It provides an invitation to stop and observe and ponder.

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I was very fortunate because Jackie shared the artwork and spells with me when she and Rob first began working on them, and it was clear that they were developing something that was special. Acrostics are not actually my favourite form when teaching poetry in schools—the products can be very clunky and awkward—but Rob has transformed the structure, taking a fresh approach with each subject. What I liked, particularly from a teaching point of view, was that he wasn't constrained by the form. The language and wordplay are rich, and the mood of each poem is varied. Jackie asked me if I'd like to write teaching notes and I was very happy to be involved.

I have always loved nature. We had a wonderful primary school teacher when I was eight, who opened our eyes through nature rambles, poetry, novels, art and gardening. We were given time to look, identify, research and respond to the countryside around us. With the pressures of educational reform, that leisurely, gentle, enabling approach has largely been lost and many people have somehow become distanced from the natural world. I hoped that my teaching notes, entitled *An Explorer's Guide to the Lost Words*, would facilitate a response to the book by providing open-ended prompts, helping to develop curiosity and creativity. Also finding good-quality resources can be very time-consuming for educational providers and I hoped to provide them with shortcuts.

From a purely personal point of view, working

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on the *Explorer's Guide* gave me the opportunity for total immersion in art and words, which was beneficial at that particular time because a young family member was very ill. It encouraged me to focus outside myself and look afresh at different aspects of the world.

There has been something of a disconnect in parts of society: families are more fractured, people are more focused on screens but not necessarily as a shared experience—each living in their own electronic bubble. I remember my father, who left school at fourteen, being able to recite poems to me at bedtime. It didn't matter that not all the the words were familiar to me. The music of the language and the connection was the point. It was a gift many of his generation shared, though they might not have appreciated having to learn the poems at the time.

An old aunt, in hospital and suffering from dementia, found great pleasure in hearing and joining in with poems that she had learned as a child. This project has been so far-reaching, providing a sense of connection in schools, families, hospitals, care homes. The initiative taken by Crowdfunders has been remarkable and it's wonderful to think that *The Lost Words* is giving us a shared cultural experience, linking us more closely to nature, particularly in the current deeply troubling times, when we need that highly developed sense of community.

Originally, I was developing ideas for use in schools, as that has always been my job, but the

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connection with the John Muir Trust opened the project out to a much wider community and the title, *Explorer's Guide*, suggested by Rob, takes it out of the confines of the classroom. I don't think responding creatively should have any age limitations.

As for myself, I now realize how much more there is to notice and learn. I have become more attentive and observant, which makes nature's vulnerability all the more poignant. It's disturbing to see how, when pursuing profit, vested interests can have a complete disregard for nature and the bigger, more important picture. I feel that we all have an urgent responsibility to act together to protect our natural world.

The huge public response has been astonishing and the quality and quantity of the creative work from children has been a delight. A lot of it has been showcased on Padlet, and this has been effective in sharing ideas and different approaches. I think the children have understood, having heard the spells and examined the paintings, that in order to paint or write well about something you have to have a level of knowledge—so they have been happy to observe and research in order to have more ideas to feed their creativity.

There have been many special moments. Whole-school projects and exhibitions have been very impressive and have involved parents and the wider community. In one school, a child who didn't consider herself a writer produced a beautifully

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thoughtful and atmospheric blackout poem. Later that year, her teacher observed that this had been a turning point in giving the child a belief in her own ability.

I had a really enjoyable time working with reception children in one school, just looking very closely at dandelions. One five-year-old was particularly fascinated by dandelion seeds and spontaneously composed: *You float through the air, delicate as a swan's feather.*

Another wonderful moment was when children from different schools attended a workshop. In one group, there was a girl who had only arrived from Malawi the previous week. The first task they were given was to read the different spells and guess the words which had been blacked out. She took the lead in her group, reading the 'Conker' spell with beautiful expression, and was the first to guess all of the words. She had a real appreciation of the nuances of language which she was able to share with enormous enthusiasm.

It's not only the children who have benefited. I think the wonderful illustrations have drawn people in and made poetry more accessible to those who might normally shy away from it. On one of the courses that Jackie and I led, the teachers were encouraged to write their own poems and one man, who was particularly quiet and lacking in confidence at the outset, saying he didn't really 'do' poetry, astounded himself by independently producing a beautifully crafted poem, innovating

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on one of the spells. He was happy to read his work aloud and said that it was the first time that he had felt proud of his own creative writing.

The book was published at exactly the right time. It has raised, and continues to raise, people's awareness. We now find ourselves in the midst of a perfect storm and the pandemic has reinforced how important our connection with the natural world is. *The Lost Words* is a gift in terms of developing our appreciation of what has been taken for granted, hopefully before it disappears for ever. I think this book has timeless relevance and appeal.



Jake Hope

*A librarian and reading development consultant who helped promote the book through networks and events.*

It's difficult to choose just one spell from the book. Like the downy seeds of the dandelions featured within it, many of the spells billow and blow through our lives having particular relevance or resonance at specific phases or stages. I grew up in a garden that was bordered by enormous horse chestnut trees and so 'Conker' conjures particular memories for me. I love the way the illustrations showcase the spiky geometry of the casing, the velvety interior and the burnished browns and umber of the conker itself. The way the verse is told almost as a dialogue; it has a real directness and

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a viewpoint that is at once intricate and intimate through both words and pictures.

There's something deeply special about the ways in which some books connect with readers, capturing both hearts and minds. This is definitely true of *The Lost Words*, which powerfully evokes the majesty, awe and magic of the natural world, conveyed through both visual and verbal means. The book won the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal for Illustration, 2019. To my mind it epitomizes what we look for in this with the story growing out of an understanding that how we see the world around us affects how we think and feel. The size of the book makes it utterly immersive. There's such thought and understanding in the triptychs of images which showcase ideas of absence and presence, and which detail habitats and life cycles, that its scope is remarkably broad.

My job involves working with libraries, schools, families and related groups to help promote reading. I'd been aware of the news story around the removal of some words from the junior dictionary and as a long-term admirer of Jackie Morris's work and her dedication to bringing fine-art aesthetics to her books for children, the prospect of her book felt extremely exciting. Jackie kindly gave me a sneak peek at some of the artwork and it became clear this was going to be a deeply special book, with profound comments on our views on the natural world, language, art and indeed upon childhood.

It felt as though there were many different

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layers of meaning and relevance to the book, and I hoped to be able to introduce it to more librarians and teachers who in turn would be able to introduce it to the children and young people they work with.

Funding cuts, efficiencies and increasingly restrictive health-and-safety legislation have meant that opportunities for children and young people seem to have been restricted more and more over the past decade. Astrid Lindgren Prize-winning author Meg Rosoff has described this as an ‘assault upon childhood’. What feels special about *The Lost Words* is that it encourages us to explore and to be excited by the everyday wonders that so many of us can encounter. It encourages us to be more rooted in the natural world and all of its messaging is positive and celebratory despite having grown out of an absence.

I was predominantly hoping to reach librarians and teachers, people who could introduce the book to wider audiences, so that its seeds would be sown far and wide and so that discussion and creative actions could be undertaken.

*The Lost Words* demonstrates the dynamism of the relationship that can exist between words and pictures. In a book about visual literacy for librarians and gatekeepers which I worked on, I was pleased to be able to feature an overview of the conception of *The Lost Words* and the different expertise that was brought to bear in creating it.

If anything, the importance of nature and



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its impact have become all the more valuable and relevant throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, reminding us of the importance of the wild and helping provide a different perspective.

The fact that the spells can so easily be read and shared as incantations, and that the book has stimulated so many artistic and creative responses, means I feel optimistic both about its message and about its ability to continue advocating and championing for changes in attitudes and understanding.

My copy resides on a bookshelf close to my bed where it can be pulled out and reflected upon with ease when sleep feels elusive, or first thing in the morning when motivation might be needed.



Jamie Normington

*A conservationist who hiked 200 miles to raise funds for both the 200 schools in Cumbria and for autism.*

I'd been aware of *The Lost Words* for about a year, but it was only when I took a copy of the book whilst leading a nature walk with a group of adults as part of a walking festival that it struck a chord. Their reactions to the illustrations and the number of Lost Words we actually found that day—from the common but unseen wren to the everyday dandelion and even the extremely rare adder—were what convinced me that the book had real power to

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engage anyone, quickly and deeply. It encouraged discussion among strangers, more mindful walking and a feeling that ‘something must be done’. The next day one of the group came to see me at work just to tell me they’d bought the book and would be sharing it with their grandchildren.

I immediately liked the illustration for ‘Heather’ and ‘Bluebell’ the best. I grew up in and around heather moors, but the ‘hidden treasure’ of moorland wildlife was only revealed to me much later in life. It’s heavily persecuted where driven grouse shooting takes place, so I appreciated the chance to show people what should be out there. Bluebell woodlands are one of very few natural sights in the UK that are worthy of being world-famous so I also felt proud of them and pleased to live near them now.

I’ve read ‘Acorn’ aloud to crowds at climate strike events, as it captures the power of the small—the young people who are all like acorns and capable, by joining together with others, of becoming a mighty thing with a lasting legacy and a beautiful wood and ‘world’.

My involvement was what we’d call putting the cart before the horse. I’d decided to walk the English Coast to Coast route and a friend said I should include a charity appeal if I did, as I’d ‘be surprised what might happen’.

It took me weeks to decide on an appeal, inspired by seeing an impressive campaign in Yorkshire by a scientist and writer I admired, Amy-

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Jane Beer. The final push came from an artist named Harry Whinney who drew a gilded map of the UK highlighting places that had run similar campaigns to provide the book to schools and others, but in my eyes his map also highlighted where nothing had been done—or rather, places waiting for someone to do something.

I was looking forward to trying to walk the 200 miles anyway—it was a personal adventure I wanted to attempt, as I had never done anything like that. I wasn't afraid of doing it alone, but I thought involving others via talks would make it a more interesting experience. Another friend said it would be a lot of work, which made me think of schools as a ready-made audience and venue, rather than a touring lecture to be marketed in some way. That also brought it back to *The Lost Words*, as it's great to present at schools as well as to gift it to them. Another example of how I arrived at what seems an obvious idea but somehow only came about from me thinking through the whole thing backwards.

Rather than 'How do I provide this book?' it really just started with 'I'm off for a long walk ... what could happen?'

The project became important when I told a handful of friends. They all got really excited in different ways but it also meant I had to do it now. There was a great sense of a supportive community but also, in my mind at least, the responsibility not to let *The Lost Words* or Cumbria down.

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My target was 200 schools, representing tens of thousands of children but equally importantly, their teachers. I chose to present the book alongside a school visit to ensure I'd done all I could to launch *The Lost Words* with them. I worried it might otherwise just end up as a coffee-table book in the staffrooms of our overwhelmed schools, who receive so much interference and information from the government . . . it would have been awful if *The Lost Words* was just another unexpected thing in their in-tray.

The book has absolutely had a lasting effect. It proves the power of art to express feelings and memories about nature, the enjoyment of wordplay and talking about wildlife, and in a very positive way it addresses the sense of gradual loss, to alerting others to the declining biodiversity, the weakening of their connection to their local place and the wider world.

Every single donation felt like a triumph. From the change tipped out of a purse by a waitress, to a young boy called Finlay Pringle who sent me his 'wee bit of pocket money' on the same day that celebrated naturalist Chris Packham personally shared my campaign via his social media. I never knew I'd get anywhere, and I finally reached my target about three quarters of the way into my walk.

My daily school assemblies also felt incredible. I told stories and played 'The Lost Words Blessing' song, a phenomenally moving anthem, whether with twenty or two hundred children. They were

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usually in the morning before I set off, and gave me the most amazing inspiration whatever the weather or challenge that awaited me that day.

I carried the same copy of the book I had borrowed for that very first walk in May. I occasionally still take it up mountains with me even now. It's marked from the rain and the rocks I've dropped it on, and is also now signed by Jackie Morris, who I met during the walk, and Robert Macfarlane, who I met afterwards.

It's probably important to say that Jackie and Robert's personal responses to my very first online contact with them were also key to this whole thing. They made me think, 'They seem nice. And a bit crazy. I think I can probably do this.'

With the help of children at Patterdale School, I gave the book to Kate and William, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, for their family when they coincidentally visited the Lake District during my Coast to Coast walk. They were on a nature walk of their own along that very route, guided by writer Beth Pipe.

Prince William said those responsible for removing the lost words from children's dictionaries would 'be receiving a very strong letter in the morning.'







# THE LOST WORDS PHENOMENON

Gwenfair Gillick

*A school student who read the book at age eleven.*

I have a very special place that I go to in nature. My siblings and I have named it Foxy Hollow because of the fox setts that we discovered there. It is a small copse of trees with a stream running through it and banks on either side. In the copse are live jays, foxes, rabbits and loads of different wild birds. Watercress grows in the stream, and on the banks there are cowslips, Spanish and English bluebells, nettles, of course, and rosehips and blackberries. The trees are varied: ash, elder, oak, ivy, holly, birch and hundreds of different species of grasses and fungi. There is also wild garlic growing down to the water. The stream used to be muddy and sluggish but we cleared it so now it runs clear. We sometimes take secateurs and garden gloves to clear the nettles and brambles. Another great thing about Foxy Hollow is that to get to it you have to cross some big fields and walk down beautiful country lanes.

I live in the countryside so not only have I heard of all the animals in *The Lost Words*, I've seen nearly all of them too, in the wild.

I have a few favourite spells. They are: 'Bluebell' because of the way it says '*Enter the wood with care, my love / Lest you are pulled down by the hue / Lost in the depths, drowned in blue.*' And I love how it describes the animal's movements in 'Adder' and 'Weasel'. The book did not really change the way I look at particular animals, but it did make me see



## Five Dials

the way they hunt (like the picture of the weasel holding its prey) as more of a skill and less of just one animal killing another.

I am thirteen now but I was eleven when I was given the book for Christmas. Personally I think Jackie Morris is the best illustrator ever and I would like to be an illustrator when I grow up. Adults should definitely read this book because it will help them remember that they need to show their children these things otherwise the children will not know or learn about them.

It's important that children of my age read it because many may have never heard of, seen, or noticed, these creatures or plants, and they should be taught about them before they are so old that they will never learn about them. They should know about these things as many may disappear for ever.

I do think optimistically about the message of this book because so many people I speak to know of it and what it is about. I know that many schools have a copy. But I still think more people should know about it.

I keep my copy of *The Lost Words* in my bedroom along with my big drawing book. These are my most precious books. ◇

READING DIARY

# The Year of Reading Darkness

Erika Hagelberg

In his 1994 book, published in English in 1997 as *Literature or Life*, Jorge Semprún recalls how, a few days after his liberation from Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945, he joined a conversation between several fellow former prisoners, while they awaited repatriation to their home countries. In a scene which he recounts in detail, they wondered how they were going to tell people about their experiences in the camp.

They agreed that talking would not be the problem. The issue was, would anyone want to listen? The discussion became heated. Most agreed that people would listen if the story was well told.

Someone said, '*You have to tell things the way they are, with no fancy stuff!*' The others nodded approvingly, but Semprún objected:

*'Listen, guys! The truth we have to tell, [. . .] isn't easily believable[. . .]. It's even unimaginable –'*

He went on: '*How do you tell such an unlikely truth, how do you foster the imagination of the unimaginable, if not by elaborating, by reworking reality, by putting it in perspective? With a bit of artifice, then!*'

The men talked at once, interrupting each other, but someone made himself heard; Semprún did not know his name but thought he was an academic, a professor from Strasbourg.

*'I imagine there'll be a flood of accounts,'* said the professor. *[. . .] 'And then there will be documents. [. . .] Later, historians will collect, classify, analyze this material, drawing on it for scholarly works. [. . .] Everything in these*

## READING DIARY

*books will be true [. . .] except that they won't contain the essential truth, which no historical reconstruction will ever be able to grasp, no matter how thorough and all-inclusive it may be.'*

The others nodded, relieved that someone could express their doubts so clearly.

*'The other kind of understanding, the essential truth of the experience, cannot be imparted. [. . .] Or should I say, it can be imparted only through literary writing.'*

Raw truth was not enough to make people listen and take note. One had to shape the truth with the devices of storytelling to convey its full meaning. Semprún followed this precept for the rest of his life, blending fiction even into his memoirs. He was criticized by those who believed his inventions were self-aggrandizing and called into question the accounts of all eyewitnesses, and the debate continues to this day. How to tell the truth about horror, when the horror is repetitive and meaningless, or beyond the imagination? Semprún chose life over literature, and did not write about his experiences for sixteen years after his release from Buchenwald.

Semprún's first book, *The Long Voyage*, was published in 1963; it won two literary prizes and was translated from its original French into a dozen languages. Later, he wrote screenplays, novels and memoirs characterized by a fragmentary style and melding truth and inventions. Another memoir/novel is *What a Beautiful Sunday!*, the account of one Sunday in Buchenwald, inspired by Alexander

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Here, Semprún wove incidents from life in the camp with autobiographical anecdotes, and literary musings on the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and other writers and intellectuals. Buchenwald was built on the Ettersberg, a hill frequented by Goethe; a large tree in the camp was thought to have been one of his oaks. Semprún wondered what Goethe and his Enlightenment contemporaries would make of Buchenwald, that place with a beautiful name (beech forest), where through brutal conditions, overwork and executions more than 56,000 people lost their lives

Semprún was wise to delay telling his story. After the war, people were not disposed to listen to tales of horror. Another camp survivor, Primo Levi, was unable to suppress his need to write about his experiences in Auschwitz. In contrast to Semprún, writing for Levi was the only way to become reconciled with his memories, to return to life. His first book, *If This is a Man*, was rejected by several major publishing houses. Eventually, it was accepted by a minor publisher. It sold poorly and, thwarted in his literary aspirations, Levi returned to his pre-war occupation as an industrial chemist. The world was not ready to listen to his account until much later. We should be grateful he did not give up writing for good, as he produced some of the most limpid, beautiful and unsentimental literature on the Holocaust.

Now, two generations later, we are still

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debating what stories can be told by whom, and how, and when. A number of fictionalized accounts of the Holocaust have become bestsellers and been made into Hollywood movies, while being criticized as kitsch or for distorting the truth. I try to avoid such popular books, probably out of unconscious snobbery (if they are popular they must be bad), although I do read many books on the Second World War and concentration camps. I wonder at my reaction, and fear that I may have succumbed to a fashionable disapproval of cultural appropriation. But this is not the case. I do not believe that only survivors should be allowed to write about their experiences. Anyone should write about anything as long as the writing is good, or make a film about anything if the film is good, whether or not they have lived through the historical events in their own skin. When the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates was asked in an interview on BBC Radio 4 (*Today* programme, 12 February 2020) whether he believed white people were entitled to write about the experiences of African slaves, he replied with a categorical 'yes'. As long as the writing was good, he emphasized.

What makes a book or film good is another matter. Artistic merit is a complicated subject and I will not concern myself with it here. The focus of my interest is on how stories are told and what makes people want to listen. How to be truthful while using artifice, the tricks of the storyteller. I have a vested interest: I am writing a family

memoir of my Berlin-born father and grandfather, whose lives spanned the twentieth century.

They both escaped the Holocaust, my father on a Kindertransport to England in 1939, and my grandfather by a circuitous journey to New York in 1941. To understand their life and times, and aid my writing, I am reading books on European history, German society, the war and the Holocaust. I also read memoirs and novels to learn how other authors have tackled these subjects and find out what literary devices they have used. It is not until I made a list of the authors and titles of the books I read last year that I became aware of my obsession.

All of the books on my list are by men, and most are about war, death camps or labour camps. I am not a systematic reader and have often found a book by accident, which led me to another book, and so on. The first on my list is *The Seventh Well*, by the Austrian Jewish writer Fred Wander. My copy is second-hand. I saw it in the window of the Amnesty Bookshop in Mill Road, Cambridge, on a cold January morning when killing time between dentist appointments. The English translation by Michael Hofmann has a black-and-white photograph on the front, showing the legs of two men sitting side by side on a step. One can imagine the men waiting patiently, with all the time in the world. I had never heard of Fred Wander, but I went into the shop and bought the book for its cover. Torn between horror and wonderment, I read *The Seventh Well* in one

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sitting. Here was a collection of tales, almost fairy tales, about people encountered by the narrator when he was imprisoned in a Nazi camp. We learn of the fates of his doomed companions, the death march, the snow, and how those who lagged behind were shot. There is something almost biblical in the dignity and simplicity of the writing and the fundamental love of life and humanity.

I searched for other books by Wander, and found a few in German, out of print. He was unknown in the English-speaking world before the 2008 translation of *The Seventh Well*. One reason is because he spent a large proportion of his life after the war in East Germany, where he earned a living as a writer and photographer. He could not be reconciled to post-war Vienna, watching former Nazis living with impunity. In the German Democratic Republic he found camaraderie among other writers and peace to work and write. Also bureaucracy and restrictions but, as he wrote in his memoir *Das Gute Leben (A Good Life)*, you get used to everything, and what matters in life is the everyday: friends, family, security and a good view out of the window. Of course, with an Austrian passport and the right to travel he was one of the privileged few, but we should not forget that there is much to be commended in the ideals of socialism, however unfashionable they have become. My father too returned to live in the GDR, probably for the same idealistic reasons as Wander, and my recollections of the cultural life, excellent education



system, social services, and good beer and rye bread are far from all bad.

It is disappointing that such an important European author is not known widely in the English-speaking world. Wander's *Das Gute Leben* remains untranslated. The situation is changing, however, and more and more foreign-language books are being translated into English or reprinted in fresh editions. The *New York Review of Books* Classics series has been instrumental in this area. My bookshelves are full of *NYRB* Classics with their lovely covers; one of my first was Vasily Grossman's magisterial novel *Life and Fate*, which I read in one sitting on its publication in 2006 (for a week I did nothing other than read, eat and sleep). Robert and Elizabeth Chandler's translation of Grossman's *Stalingrad*, the prequel to *Life and Fate*, was issued by *NYRB* Classics in June 2019, and I bought it immediately but have not even opened it, for fear it will grip me and I won't be able to put it down until it's finished. I am saving it for a special occasion when I have no distractions. Instead, I read *A Writer at War*, a compilation of Grossman's war notebooks from 1941 to 1945, edited and translated by Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova. Here, I learned how the fat, bespectacled Grossman was rejected from active service after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. He badgered the political department of the Red Army until he was conscripted as a special correspondent for *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*), the official newspaper of the Soviet army, and sent to

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the front in August 1941. For the next four years he reported from Stalingrad, Kursk and many other battles. He described the advance of the Red Army and the liberation of formerly occupied areas, and recorded Holocaust atrocities in his home town Berdichev and the Treblinka death camp, as well as the fall of Berlin. He would use these experiences in his books.

Grossman impresses me with his concern for epic themes of social justice and heroism, while noting the smallest details of individual lives and deaths. He writes with equal humanity and compassion about Soviets and Germans. In May 1945, there are thousands of corpses on the streets of Berlin and the city is mostly in ruins. Starvation and disease threaten civilians, soldiers and displaced persons. Colonel-General Berzarin of the Red Army, the first town mayor of the Soviet-occupied zone, summoned the 'directors of Berlin's electricity supply, Berlin water, sewerage, underground, trams, gas, factory owners . . .', all former Nazis, and gave them positions in his new office. Berlin needed to function again as a city and people had to get on with life, at whatever cost. Grossman sees a couple on a park bench: a wounded German soldier hugging a nurse. They are still there when he walks past again an hour later. 'The world does not exist for them, they are happy.'

Grossman wrote on the parallels between Stalinism and Hitlerism, and of course the two dictators became allies after the signing of the non-

aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in August 1939. In September, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west, and the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east. The Poles were now enemies of both sides, and Polish men active in the fight against the invading Nazis were arrested by the Red Army and sent to Soviet prison camps. Among them was the multilingual aristocrat and artist Józef Czapski, who was to be one of the few survivors of the massacre of more than 20,000 Polish officers and soldiers at Katyn and other Soviet camps. After the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Czapski was freed under the Soviet 'amnesty' of Polish prisoners, and joined Anders' Army, the name given to the Polish Armed Forces under General Władysław Anders.

NYRB Classics has issued two books by Czapski. The first, *Lost Time: Lectures on Proust in a Soviet Prison Camp*, is a mere ninety pages, of which almost a third are the introduction and glossary. The remaining sixty pages are a record, after the event, of lectures given by Czapski to his fellow officers in the Soviet prison camp. Without books or writing materials, he conveyed the essence of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* to his freezing and starving fellows, making the work relevant to their daily lives in the camp.

If in *Lost Time* Czapski can be likened to Scheherazade, weaving beautiful tales from memory, he could also be compared to Odysseus for the long and difficult journey he took after his release from

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prison camp. This is told in *Inhuman Land: Searching for the Truth in Soviet Russia 1941–1942*, a detailed account of Czapski's return to the Polish army in the Soviet Union, newly formed with uniforms and equipment supplied by Western Allies and the Polish Government in Exile. Tens of thousands of starving, sick and ragged men made their way from prisons and labour camps in the Soviet Union to join Anders' Army, whose headquarters were established in Tashkent. The growing army crossed to Iran together with thousands of displaced Polish civilians and Jewish children. Czapski had a senior position in Anders' Army, responsible for propaganda and education. He made great efforts to locate the missing 20,000 officers and soldiers, without success.

*Inhuman Land* opened my eyes to historical events previously unknown to me. Later, in my own researches through my family tree, I discovered a cousin of my grandfather, whose family had chosen to remain in East Prussia some years earlier when it reverted to Poland after the First World War. Fritz Guttmann was a Jewish engineer and newspaper editor who devoted his life to keeping the German language and culture alive in his home town of Katowice, Upper Silesia. He and his teenage son Reuben fled east after the Nazi invasion of Poland, only to be arrested by the Red Army (as Polish men of fighting age) and sent to a Soviet labour camp in Asbest, in the Urals. Fritz died there of lung disease, but his son survived, joined a unit of Polish fighters

and was present at the fall of Berlin. There he found that his grandparents, my grandfather's aunt and uncle, had been deported to Theresienstadt, where they perished. Fritz's sister Eliese, also from Berlin, was luckier than her brother: in 1939 she and her teenage son managed to emigrate to Australia. However, her husband had been arrested by the Nazis on Kristallnacht in November 1938, and died a few days afterwards in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, just outside Berlin. I know this because it was Eliese who warned my grandfather not to return home on Kristallnacht, but instead to hide with my young father at another address until the danger of arrest had passed.

My reading feeds into these family stories, giving them context and new meaning. Last year, I reread W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*. I love Sebald for his melancholy, his sense of displacement and his obsessiveness, traits that mirror my own. Jacques Austerlitz grows up feeling that he does not belong in his dark home in Wales, and learns that he was sent to England at the age of four by his Czech mother, who probably perished in Theresienstadt or one of the extermination camps in the east. After spending decades unable to come to terms with his newly discovered identity, Austerlitz travels to Prague to discover his roots. When he arrives at his mother's former apartment after a lengthy search, he meets her former neighbour Vêra, who had been his

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nurserymaid, now a very old lady. She immediately recognizes the infant in the elderly man before her, and cries out, ‘Jaquot, is it really you?’ They hug and hold hands for several minutes. This passage, full of both sadness and joy, makes me weep when I recall it. There is something intensely poignant in the stories of the 11,000 Jewish children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia who were sent to England on the Kindertransports in 1939, about half of whom were never to see their parents again.

Still, these children were the lucky ones. Hundreds of thousands of others were sent to camps or killed by *Einsatzgruppen*, the Nazi death squads. Only a small proportion survived, among them the Hungarian writer and Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész. He was picked up and sent to Auschwitz as a fourteen-year-old, but avoided selection for the gas chambers by pretending to be sixteen. Children were gassed, and only the strongest and youngest men, and more rarely women, were kept alive as labourers. His novel *Fatelessness* is a fictionalized account of his experiences in the camp. My clearest memory is from the ending, when the boy, after the long journey back to Hungary following liberation, is thrown off the tram in Budapest for lacking the correct fare. People look at him, filthy and skeletal, in disgust, and he begins to miss the camaraderie of the camp.

The Communist authorities in Hungary hated the book for its presumed cynicism and lack of redemptive values, but I loved it for the same

reasons. It describes the world through the eyes of a callow boy, full of hunger and thirst, curiosity and desire for life, and without a socialist message of resistance or redemption. I was drawn to Kertész's ideas, and learned more about them from a little booklet called *The Holocaust as Culture*. It is here that I first heard of Jorge Semprún (whom I mentioned at the start), and got to know of the Austrian-born essayist and camp survivor Jean Améry, and about Kertész's views on the choices made by writers and survivors, including Améry's suicide. Despite their bleakness, I found these readings heartening. The Holocaust has no easy message of redemption. Nevertheless, for Kertész it has produced 'unmeasurable knowledge' and 'unmeasurable moral reserves'.

After reading about Jean Améry, I had to read him first-hand. He wrote relatively little, mostly essays, and not much of his work is in translation, although NYRB Classics has published *Charles Bovary, Country Doctor: Portrait of a Simple Man*, a rebuttal of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* from the point of view of her cuckolded husband. This is on my 'to read' list. Instead, I have read *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, a series of essays by Améry on subjects including resentment, torture and being Jewish. Difficult themes written in beautiful and accessible language.

I braced myself before reading *Torture*, knowing that once I read it I would not be able to unread it.

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Eventually, I read it at my desk, almost holding my breath. It is not ghoulish. It is about how the body and soul of a human being, somebody's son, can be broken by pleasant young men in the course of their daily work. Just like that. It is essential reading.

I worried about Améry's suicide, disappointed that someone of such supreme wisdom would reject life. But then Primo Levi, that exemplar of humanity who never lost faith in the beauty of poetry, even after Auschwitz, also took his own life in his sixties, the same age as Améry. Their deaths still trouble me. Reading Améry was probably the lowest point of my literary year, on account of the deep pessimism of some of his works.

All these books reinforced my sense of the fragility of peace, and of the danger of demonizing others, be it immigrants, Jews, Muslims or whichever group we choose to scapegoat. This dark mood deepened after I'd read Walter Kempowski's novel *All for Nothing*, and his *Swansong 1945*, a collective diary made up of a thousand extracts of diary entries and letters from four days at the end of the Third Reich: 20, 25 and 30 April and 8 May. Kempowski is another relatively little-known German writer who has recently come to prominence, and these two masterpieces (from his output of more than forty books in German) took over ten years to appear in the English-speaking world. In different ways, both works give a picture of the enormous destruction and upheaval caused by the war, not only through the fighting and



bombing raids, but through mass stupidity, cruelty, murder, rape and suicide.

*All for Nothing* takes the reader into a magical world of a country estate in East Prussia in the last days of the war, seen from the vantage point of a twelve-year-old boy. The cast of characters reminded me of those in a Chekhov play, fretting about their daily concerns and the housekeeping, while the Russians advance and long lines of refugees can be seen slogging west on the road just outside the gate. By the time the members of the household decide to join them, it is too late. All the beauty, culture and life are worth nothing.

Sadly, as time passes, the spectre of Holocaust denial continues to haunt the world. In one of my peregrinations through second-hand bookshops, I found *The Holocaust on Trial*, by journalist, writer and academic D. D. Guttenplan. Sometime last year, I was offered the pneumococcal vaccine by a nurse, and I accepted gladly. I did not know I would suffer a strong reaction and be confined to bed for a day, in total prostration. I picked up Guttenplan's book and found it so engrossing that I had finished it by the evening. It tells the story of the libel suit by Holocaust denier David Irving against the academic Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin, her British publisher, using first-hand testimonies from Irving, Lipstadt and the legal team, as well as the trial proceedings and reports. *The Holocaust on Trial* is one of the best books I have read about Holocaust denial, libel laws, and the

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power of fake news. Despite the serious themes, the book reads like a crime thriller; I loved the way the legal team carefully and without emotion ferreted out historical evidence, laying a trap for Irving. I was grateful to my fever for giving me the chance to devour the 300 pages of this book without interruption, and so have a heightened sense of the urgency of the trial.

Last year was an unusual one for me in terms of reading matter. It was also unusual in that it marked my resolution to turn my back on science and devote myself to writing. If asked the question ‘Why do you write?’ I can do no better than refer to the Czech writer Ivan Klíma, author of *The Spirit of Prague*, the last book on my list. After the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, Klíma and his parents were interned in Theresienstadt and only survived because his father was an electrical engineer, an occupation that made him invaluable in the camp. After the war, Klíma resolved to be a writer. While he admitted that he enjoyed making up stories and finding ways of telling them, his main reason was that, as the result of his experiences in the concentration camp and later in an unfree society, he felt an overwhelming compulsion to keep the memory of others alive, and to speak out the truth. ◇



AND NOW...

# Questions for Elizabeth Strout

Seriously, how  
does one invent  
Olive Kitteridge?

I            n *Olive, Again*, Elizabeth Strout’s finest fictional creation, the always blunt Olive Kitteridge, returns and over the course of the new novel is forced to adjust to a new life with a new husband. She experiences the inevitable loss and loneliness of aging. She’s also there to witness the triumphs and heartbreaks of her friends and neighbours in the small coastal town of Crosby, Maine. Unsurprisingly, Olive got a lot to say about this final phase of life.

5D

What would Olive say about her own successful reintroduction to the world?

ES

I imagine Olive would say, ‘Phooey,’ and just go about her business.

5D

Fantasy writers often talk of world building. How did Crosby, Maine take shape? Person by person or was there an overall scheme?

ES

Crosby, Maine arrived to me person by person. It started off as Olive’s town, and then I realized that to give people a break from Olive, I would go into the lives of other people in town—and see what Olive looked like from their different points of view. That’s how

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Crosby came to be.

5D

Were there types of people you knew wanted to include in your own fictional populace?

ES

I really write from some intuitive place, and characters come to me that way. So I think it might be wrong to say there were certain 'types' of people I wanted to write about. They each showed up in their own way, and yet there is a variety to them, according to the town itself. We have a class system here in America, and so there is the Irish young woman, working for the Congregationalists, and there is Denny Pelletier who was of Franco-American descent. This is just how it would be in a town like Crosby, and I am interested in all of their stories.

5D

You've described Olive initially appearing 'with a force'. Which of your characters have been more difficult to usher into the world?

ES

Susanne Larkin in the story 'Helped' was hard to get to. She kept slipping across the page, but I felt that I knew her, and I kept at it with her, but she took many drafts. It wasn't until I

realized that Bernie would get a point of view in that story, when I realized, Oh this works now.

5D

If a new character like Olive starts speaking to you, do you speak back? Or just listen?

ES

I never speak to my characters. I just wait for them to show themselves to me, and I listen and try and work with them. But I don't ever speak to them myself. They are who they are and my job is to record them with accuracy.

5D

What would you say Olive unlocks in other characters? What makes her an effective catalyst in different dramatic situations?

ES

Olive unlocks a variety of things in other people. She does this just by being Olive, and I think in many ways the best example is her marriage to Jack Kennison, who had a very different marriage before his to Olive. (As Olive had a very different marriage before Jack.). But she unlocks something in him, his natural honesty, which he has always sort of repressed, is free to come to the surface in her presence. I think this is because Olive in some

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way is fundamentally honest herself.

5D

Does her ability to provoke reaction change as she ages?

ES

I don't know if her ability to provoke reaction changes as she ages. *She* changes (slightly) as she ages, and her circumstances change, but I think she still provokes reactions.

5D

You examine loneliness in both *Olive* books. Why did you choose to examine spiritual loneliness in the latest book?

ES

In graduate school I studied gerontology and I became aware—and I have remained aware—of the loneliness that older people, particularly in our society, can go through. As Olive says in *Olive, Again*, 'You become invisible.' And I think there is truth to this. So I was interested in trying to capture Olive's own route through this process of aging. She experiences great loneliness, but I think she is brave, as many people are. She keeps going, and she finds her friend in the end.



5D

In *Olive, Again* the quality of light plays an important role, especially when Olive encounters Cindy, the young dying woman. Was this a conscious choice?

ES

The quality of light in the story of the woman who is ill (we do not know for sure that she is dying, she told Olive her chances are fifty/fifty and I deliberately said at the end of the story “For the rest of her life” so that people could decide themselves how long or short that life would be)—the quality of light is very important, and I was entirely conscious of it, almost as a character in the story. That quality of light in Maine in February is really very striking and I thought it would be a perfect thing to unite them.

5D

Why was it important to depict a friendship between two older people?

ES

I am not sure there is enough written about friendships between old people, and it is absolutely essential, as friendship is for every single age group. To have Olive become friends with Isabelle Goodrow was thrilling for me; they finally get to meet! I thought

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in many ways they were the perfect match, both married to pharmacists, both from New England, and Isabelle is able to be honest with Olive about her own life, which Olive would very much appreciate. To be old does not mean that a person is any different from other people, except they are old. They still have the same desires and wishes to be seen and known (and hopefully loved) that all people have.

5D

Not every writer could find humour and humanity when dealing with incontinence, nursing homes, and other bodily breakdowns. Why is humour important when writing about the elderly?

ES

To my way of thinking humor goes hand in hand with pathos. One can hardly write one without the other. Bodily functions and breakdowns are natural, they are nothing to be ashamed of, and yet we seem to feel ashamed, and when I can write about them with humor, it is my hope that people will realize: Oh, right, it's just the way it is.

5D

Why did you want to write about Olive growing older instead of focusing on one or two points in her life? Why was it important to

see Olive on this journey to the end?

ES

People get older. It happens. Maybe we think we won't, but if we don't die, then we will get old. I have always had an interest in older people, and I think I wanted to be with Olive as she made her way into that time of her life. I did not want to shy away from it. It's real, and I think it should be written about. ◇

A SINGLE BOOK

*Bodymap* by Leah  
Lakshmi Piepzna-  
Samarasinha

Can a book  
help describe the  
experience  
of being  
chronically ill?  
sb. smith

S o far, I have spent life trying to wiggle into places and spaces where I am unwanted. When I was a teenager, I converted to evangelical Christianity. The idea of community and a (heavenly) father figure appealed to me, but I felt like a black sheep among the herd of lambs, especially when my mental health began to plummet.

I entered the town's psychiatric ward for a stint. After later attempting to become a saintly hospital volunteer as an outpatient, I realized I was experiencing PTSD from violent mistreatment as an inpatient.

I was released shortly before coming of legal drinking age. This birthday marked my moment—à la *Bangerz*-era Miley Cyrus—to ditch church, chop my hair off, and live my baddy truth loud and proud by becoming a party girl. I frequented the only half-decent club in town where I stood up for the girls on the dance floor who were being preyed upon. More than one hulking gym rat was forcibly removed for pushing me down. This was all too exhausting. After nights of dancing, I came home to my old cat and a single One Direction poster. I had to move on.

In 2014, I applied for a Creative Writing programme at the university in town and got accepted. When my pain and fatigue worsened to the point where I had to quit work, I deferred my acceptance for a year. Then another year. Finally, in 2016, I began the programme and was sure I'd

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found my people. In my first-year English course, we studied pop culture from a feminist and socialist perspective. When we examined misogynistic undertones of video games and the Catholic girl who sat next to me proclaimed that Mario was ‘harmless’, my rebuttal began with, ‘It’s interesting you would say that . . .’ Moments like that separated me from the old religious naivety.

For a year I had been a certified disabled person—someone to whom the government offers a meagre income supplement after using their own definition to deem them disabled. But it wasn’t until I started connecting with other disabled people that I realized Disability might be something beyond an institutional categorization—an identity, community, culture and more. I remember Google-searching ‘books about disability’ and finding *Bodymap* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha after hours of wading through titles like *Me Before You*—books that perpetuate eugenics-inspired narratives about disability. ‘Better off dead than disabled,’ these books whisper.

When I began reading *Bodymap* late one evening in my thrift-store recliner, I had no idea what was about to open up for me. The section titled ‘crip world’, with poems like ‘everyone thinks you’re so lazy. don’t let them’, gave me a new language for talking about my experiences of being chronically ill. Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s words were mirrors held up to me. In the poem *Sick?* she writes: ‘When I was in my early twenties

I was supposed to be like Zadie Smith or Saul Williams, famous and accomplished at 21 with a book or a CD, or a spoken-word celebrity. Instead, my early twenties went away. I spent them sleeping. 15, 17, 19 hours a day. That was my accomplishment.'

After I was introduced to Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's work, I turned to the online disability community for more. I wanted to learn about the cultures and histories of people like me. I discovered collectives like Sins Invalid, the disability justice popular movement, and more. The writers I came to admire are not household names—Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Mordecai Cohen Ettinger, Alice Wong. At some point while on the web, I'd happened upon the late Tai Trehwella's cripple punk blog where I found the stimulating discourse about disability and illness I'd been deprived of in my university classes.

Cripple punk helped me see myself as worthy and whole while the abled world continued to place expectations on me about what I was or wasn't allowed to write, say, do or think. Trehwella writes, 'cripple punk rejects the "good cripple" mythos. cripple punk is here for the bitter cripple, the uninspirational cripple, the smoking cripple, the drinking cripple, the addict cripple, the cripple who hasn't "tried everything".'

Even though I was (and still am, for that matter) operating off an itty-bitty online platform of my own, I began to feel welcomed in by other disabled people living by this ethos. In other areas

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of life, I realized I no longer had the option to pass as abled. My illnesses manifested in an increasingly visible way and impacted my ability to do work more than ever before. I no longer wanted to be invisible and the community taught me I should build pride about the body I've been given—even if it functions like a skin suit stuffed with gremlins. My survival depends on valuing myself in a world that, for example, deemed being visibly disabled in public illegal (with ugly laws) all the way up to 1974 in parts of the United States.

As I became increasingly aware of my identity and crip culture and history, I grew increasingly vocal about it in academic settings and began writing on it in my classes. From what I could tell, professors validated and encouraged others to write about their marginal identities and I figured I would be validated and encouraged in similar ways. However, the more I lifted the veil, the more I felt othered. Several times I was told ableism isn't a real word. Even though disability-rights old-timers have been using it since the sixties to describe an oppressive force that has permeated Western thought since at least the time of Aristotle, most abled people have never heard of it. I hadn't heard the word until 2017 when at the Women's March I was offered a pin by a member of a local student union group. I fished into their canvas bag and pulled out at random a pin emblazoned with the slogan 'Unlearn Ableism'. I didn't need a dictionary to define the word for me. I had never heard that



particular term but the harm it represented had been hurled at me when I was harassed for using my accessible parking emblem or when I was told by strangers that I didn't 'look disabled'. I felt the power of crip wisdom swell inside me as I fixed the pin to my backpack. My disabled ancestors had offered me a word to describe my experience in the world.

Still, according to those around me, my writing was 'too medical' or 'didn't make sense' and I would have to make my work marketable to abled audiences if I wanted any success in the publishing industry. I felt clouded with insecurity. *If my work isn't being recognized or awarded like everyone else's, it must not be any good*, I repeated to myself.

I felt stunted—I didn't want to make my trauma palatable and beautiful but I was told it would never sell, never win awards any other way. I soon found myself struggling with the decision to quit university, giving up writing and editing for good.

Around this time, I attended a workshop held by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha at Growing Room in Vancouver. When I left my hotel in the morning, I spotted Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha getting into the rental car parked next to mine in our hotel's parking lot. I had no idea we were staying in the same Best Western. *Well, damn*, I thought to myself. *This is going to complicate how much I can fangirl when I ask her to sign my books.*

I arrived early because I needed to be close to

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the door in case anyone wore too much perfume and made me sick. I was unsure of the seating situation, so I needed time to source a comfortable seat, maybe an office chair. When Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha arrived, coffee in hand, to a nearly empty room, I avoided eye contact and texted memes to my partner, who was waiting at a café down the road. Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha set up an altar at the front of the room and placed on it femme and disabled poetry books by writers like Amber Dawn and Kai Cheng Thom. She laid out tinctures and snacks for us to help ourselves to before starting.

She opened the workshop by asking all participants to share their names, pronouns and access needs. We were encouraged to take into consideration each other's access needs and to act according to our own. I was taught how to locate and invoke my stories through prompts and instructions which Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha offered. She asked us to jot down our answers to the question: 'What are my —— stories?' We filled in the blank with whatever part of our identities needed a nudge and considered what unique stories those parts of us hold. I examined which crip stories might be mine to tell, and was given tools to confront the emotional pain that might come with unearthing the more difficult shit. 'Setting up an altar where you write can help,' Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha nodded toward the altar beside her.

It was a completely different literary

experience than what I'd been accustomed to. Here, no one was turned away for lack of funds, access was prioritized, everyone was allowed to be loud and proud in their own way, and all bodies were welcomed.

In Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's workshop, difference was honoured and respected, partly through the presence of access intimacy with other crips and partly through the acceptance of varying experiences. No one was told what they were saying didn't 'make sense' or was 'too this, too that'. The invitation into a community not your own was honoured as most sacred, not dismissed or minimized. After years of opening the doors to my identity and community for peers and mentors to witness and engage with, I never thought this was possible for any literary scene. The experience made me realize I wasn't a bitter defeatist after all: I had almost quit university because I was treated unequally. I had yelled so loudly because I had been silenced. The vulnerability I'd exposed myself to calloused my spirit but Growing Room was a salve.

After the workshop, I sat crying in the parking lot outside, peering through the tall windows of the venue to the hustle and bustle of the festival. The lifelong experience of not being wanted was finally turning on its head. 'This is where I need to be,' I told my partner. I didn't realize I was reciting a prayer.

I spent the summer writing my best work yet. I hadn't known that what I needed was to be told,

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for once, I had a voice worth listening to. Now, a year later, I'm still making sense of my place in the world. I've moved. The writing of Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and others holds me and gives me space to dream. I live a block away from that very same parking lot. I know it's not the final stop to finding my place, but my crip dreaming keeps me afloat. ◇



FICTION

# The Writer's Daughter

Missouri Williams

O n finding Dolores alone in her uncle's library late one afternoon, the Writer began to talk. At the root of the family's legendary self-regard, he said, was the fact that his own mother had perished in a singular expression of fury. The Writer's mother had died in the act of reprimanding her quiet, submissive husband, the Writer's father. Her words had grown more and more heated until all of a sudden she dropped dead, cut off mid-sentence. Later the doctor told the Writer that the elderly woman had suffered an enormous aneurysm. His father, inured to his oppression, soon followed her. If the Writer's psyche had passed through the experience relatively unscathed his system of values had not. After burying his parents in two graveyards on opposite sides of the city, the Writer decided to become a family man.

Sitting in the armchair opposite, Dolores was not looking at the Writer but at the window behind him, a square of yellowing sky. In the lower two quadrants she could see a line of black rooftops. Even though her gaze only skimmed over his bony shoulder, the Writer nevertheless perceived Dolores as attentive. In the town he cut a commanding figure, and besides, he was old friend of Dolores's uncle. He straightened up in his seat. The Writer had been determined to rid his own family of all ugliness and cruelty. The family, he thought, could become a citadel, a unity. On returning to the capacious house that he shared with his wife

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and four children the Writer had tried his hardest. He arranged theatre tickets, trips to the botanical gardens, and placed a great emphasis on a shared dinnertime. He asked the children about their studies at the university and tried to involve them in his work. The problem, he explained to Dolores, was that up to this point in time his family had been like many other families: a loose arrangement of interests which was capable of coming together but which just as often didn't. Consequently, the Writer's transformation was neither understood nor reciprocated. Although he tried to foster a sense of togetherness his attempts were for the most part met with confusion. His children were bored, lazy and self-absorbed. His wife, too, could not be trusted to give her support to his plans.

As he spoke the Writer made darting movements with his hands, as if he were sketching out the route his story would follow or trying to keep hold of words already gone by. The sun slipped behind a town house and the shadows in the square outside began to green. A bird arced across the changing sky and Dolores's eyes followed it.

The Writer looked at the problem from all angles, rotating the family around in his mind like an enormous prism of glass, observing how it interpreted the light. The family was hierarchical. The family was prone to distortion. The family was simply not ready to understand or appreciate itself as a family. That was, the Writer told Dolores, until he began to make them into one.



The Writer decided to write the myth of the family so convincingly and seductively that neither his children nor his wife would be able to resist his depictions of them. He began immediately: the family was parachuted into his stories, and the Writer, a man of significant means who was regarded locally as something of a 'literary success', let it be known that the matter of his fiction was now being drawn from life, glossed over with only the thinnest of possible disguises. These portraits were compelling, flattering but truthful: he showed them in their favoured settings, whittling their speeches down into elegant *bon mots*; he edited them, slashed them down to size. Each member of the family was represented in the most ideal of their possible forms. Above all, the Writer concentrated on communal scenes in which each member of the family functioned as a highly individual part in a well-oiled machine. In this way he hoped to encourage the behaviour that he wanted to see.

Of course, the Writer's plan worked. His wife and children were delighted with themselves, how he'd shaped them. They accepted the image as a rule and moulded themselves to it. Slowly, they began to prune whatever needed pruning before he himself was able to. The jovial domestic scenes for which the Writer was becoming famous needed to be edited less and less. He would sit at the family table and chronicle what passed in real-time, reading out extracts for the pleasure of the assembled characters, who would follow up with their own suggestions,

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or even give mutual compliments. There were so many shepherds, the Writer explained, that no single sheep could be lost. All events were mined as currency! Nothing escaped their grasp! And finally, the family became the family of his dreams, a collective enterprise, and the terrible disunity that the death of his incensed mother had represented for the Writer was banished: each individual family member relied on the health of the whole for the continuity of their own success and well-being; that is to say, their story.

The citizens lapped it up. They were infatuated with the family, which came out in instalments. The Writer's trajectory was astronomical. The family was able to move to a bigger house, near the town hall, with an enclosed garden. There, the Writer's wife planted flowers that came up in sheets, while the interior walls were thick with ivy. The branches of an old fig tree fanned out overhead, and so the shady garden felt claustal, despite the fact that by now almost nothing about the family was secret. There was talk, too, of buying a place out in the country, where the Writer's family would be able to grow vegetables and keep chickens. In his mind's eye the Writer saw a kingdom of white polytunnels, and a windmill clattering on a distant hill. And, somewhere beyond the edge of his vision, a deep blue river was joined by many small tributaries . . .

Dolores's uncle paced around in his study upstairs like a wind-up toy soldier. She looked up at the ceiling and the Writer looked at her. The sun

had almost finished setting and the library was dark. The square outside blazed with orange light. As Dolores lit the candles the Writer's big rectangular face was thrown into a disparate arrangement of planes and angles. He shifted in his seat, folded one long leg over the other, and waited for her to return to her chair. He tried to make himself obliging. It was the case that Dolores had known his daughter. The cool mahogany table interpolated itself between them. When she sat down again her pale hands floated on its dark surface.

His daughter, the Writer hesitated, was the only member of the family who had not fallen in with his scheme. Although she was there she was never entirely present, and at dinner she was often silent. Her narrative contributions were always meagre. The Writer would try to tease a story out of her, try get her to show something of herself, but she smilingly resisted his efforts. In the narrative of the family his daughter was quiet and withdrawn. Her character had a certain reluctance to it, there only at the very edges of the scene, and his readers had noticed: in their letters they speculated, argued, gave up . . . And the more she hoarded her mystery the more the Writer was determined to pour it out: his books grew larger and larger, his chronicling more exhaustive. Struggling to capture something of his middle child he lost sight of the others, who were increasingly dissatisfied with his representations of them. He started to slip up, make mistakes. What had been charming and authentic

now felt messy, uncontrolled. Public enthusiasm for the family began to wane. Dolores placed her head in her hands and the points of her elbows rested on the dark wood of the table. The gloom of the library was interrupted by pockets of light.

After his daughter left home the situation worsened. The Writer had never valued her when he'd had her—it had been difficult for her to shine among the others, who were more vivacious, more inventive—but now that his daughter was gone he felt himself being drawn to the very mystery he had once derided, which seemed to him to be a commentary on his own lack of it. Next to her the other characters looked small and desperate to please. He understood that *she hadn't wanted* to shine in his eyes, far from it. A kind of shame slunk in. Soon enough the Writer was spending hours and hours of every day on the problem of his absent daughter, but her mind, or what he imagined to be her mind, was so unfathomable that he often felt as though he were drowning inside it. He combed through her own texts for clues, her clumsy childhood diaries already so full of ellipses that they threatened to swallow him up entirely, while the essays she had written during her time at the university had a cryptic flair that, he noted with surprise, made him feel inadequate, because he had always declared everything so openly . . . Seeing himself through his daughter's eyes, the Writer understood that his choreography of family was simply the extension of his manner and style as

a writer, a relentless, obstinate exposing of self. He had not improved the family but had reshaped it in his image. Its new-found love and respect for itself had been only the amplification of his own self-regard.

In the absence of his daughter, the citadel of the family crumbled. She had always favoured the enclosed garden with its promise of interiority, low light, shadows and enigma. And now the Writer found himself following in her wake: everything he wrote was inflected with what he thought to be her taste, her leanings, her secret soul. Gaps multiplied. He stumbled around omissions. He hid the family, wreathed it in ambiguity. The family began to appeal only to the narrowest of audiences and his former readers dropped away in droves. His children lost interest. In the evenings the Writer's wife retired early to her rooms. There were no more dinners or witty exchanges, and the family fell out of love with itself just as quickly as it had fallen into it. Worst of all, he began to associate his daughter with his dead father, and it occurred to him that what he had taken as submissiveness, as quietness, had in reality masked the same iron will; an incessant withholding. Their withdrawal, he now saw, had been a ruthless exercise in power.

At last the Writer took his mother's side. She had not been haranguing but desperate, ground down by a distance that was devastating because it was intentional, and it was not the case that she had been consumed by fury but by an endless,

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unbearable rejection; her grief had burned her up. All along his father had been the enemy. It would not even be an overstatement to say that he had been the cause of the Writer's mother's death, directly or indirectly, the Writer couldn't tell any more. And look at him—a grown man obsessed with his dull middle daughter! What if her mystery was her only virtue? If there were in fact nothing there to uncover, her mind impoverished, imprecise? The Writer tried to comfort himself with these thoughts, but still he couldn't get rid of his doubts, his shame, his leaking heart.

The Writer's hands were windmilling in front of him and his face was hectic with the same orange light that scoured the square beneath the open window. He was incontinent, slippery with feeling. His daughter, the country retreat, the clattering windmill, the chickens . . . The Writer's dreams had been carried away by the impenetrable blue waters of another river that had taken up alongside the first, parallel, nothing to do with it . . . The story, and his voice, trailed off, and now the Writer reached across the table for Dolores, cool, quiet Dolores, who watched him with her unreadable grey eyes and said nothing. ◇



AND FINALLY...

# Love, *Women*, and Romania

Philip Ó Ceallaigh  
explains the work  
of the great Mihail  
Sebastian



Mihail Sebastian is widely regarded as the most important Romanian writer of the 20th century. The four interlinked stories that make up his 1933 book, *Women*, offer nuanced and deeply moving portraits of romantic relationships in all their complexity, from unrequited love and passionate affairs to tepid marriages of convenience. After *Women*, Sebastian went on to write the classic, *For Two Thousand Years*, as well as *Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years*, in which he described both the mounting persecution he endured as well as ‘the disdain former friends began showing him in Romania’s increasingly antisemitic sociopolitical landscape,’ according to one reviewer.

*Five Dials* spoke with Philip Ó Ceallaigh, the Irish writer who translated both *For Two Thousand Years* and *Women*, about Sebastian’s style. We also asked Philip how he came to be the literary world’s go-to translator for Romanian literature.

5D

What are the challenges of translating from Romanian? How did you become familiar with the language?

POC

Romania was one of a string of countries I lived in during the nineties. When I decided to devote myself to writing I had to stop flitting from city to city and job to job. I came back to Bucharest in 2000 and bought

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a small apartment in an unfashionable neighbourhood. It was very cheap. That was the idea. I wrote my first book and then another but it didn't make me rich and I ended up staying. I'm able to do the work I want to do here and I've never been tempted to give up that freedom.

Along the way, I learned Romanian. I never wanted to translate any Romanian fiction until I came across Mihail Sebastian's *For Two Thousand Years*, in 2005. I hadn't heard of the author and it was a cheap edition brought out by an obscure Jewish press. The novel itself hadn't appeared during the communist years and I felt like I'd stumbled across lost treasure. I started translating it because I loved it and wanted to get closer to it. If he were alive I would have wanted to be in his company. I did the next best thing, I translated. I sent the completed translation out to a lot of publishers but nobody was interested. After about six or seven years I was ready to put it on the net for free, but an editor at Penguin Modern Classics read an essay I'd written about Sebastian and asked to see the translation.

A strange thing... Back in 2006-2008, when I was translating that book, I lived in an apartment overlooking a Jewish graveyard. But it wasn't until years later, after I'd moved to another area of town, that I went back

and visited the cemetery and discovered that Sebastian was buried there. I looked up and could see the balcony of my old ninth-floor apartment, a couple of hundred metres away from Sebastian's grave.

The challenge of translating from Romanian is the same as that of translating from any language; at a certain point you have to put aside the original text and just ensure that the new text is a good piece of writing. You cannot excuse poor writing with the claim that you were being loyal to the original words or construction. The text has to be born a second time.

#### 5D

In his introduction to *Women*, the author John Banville describes Sebastian's book *Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years* as a 'masterpiece'. How does the tone in *Women* differ from Sebastian's other works?

#### POC

Sebastian's *Journal* has the sweep and urgency of a great novel. But it's also a document that describes Romania's slide into fascism and the day-to-day life of a Jew during the Holocaust. Sebastian was at the centre of Bucharest's intellectual life, so the *Journal* is populated by such characters as Cioran, Eliade and Ionescu. We get to see antisemitism, in Sebastian's

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own circle, as a psychological and social phenomenon, as well as a political one. It's no wonder that the *Journal*, after its publication in English in 2000, was referenced by historians of the period such as Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder. The *Journal* is a diary that reads like a novel. *For Two Thousand Years*, a novel that reads like a diary, complements the *Journal* by covering the rise of antisemitism in the preceding decade. They form a unity.

*Women* is Sebastian's earliest fiction, and is apolitical, non-Romanian. There is no hint that the narrator might be a Jew; this is not relevant. He's recognizable as the same author, the voice is the same, and the interest in psychological depth is there, but the subject matter is the life of the heart and romantic and erotic complications. Sebastian has an uncanny capacity for not being judgmental. He is keen to know why people do things, whether it is falling in love or becoming a fascist, and seems to begin with the recognition could be his own, in another situation. The subject matter of *Women* shows the author Sebastian would have wished to be—an examiner of the surprises and complexities of the private, inner life. A Proust—with whom he corresponded—or perhaps even a Philip Roth. So *Women* is western European literature, of the kind the socialist realists would come to dismiss as 'bourgeois'. *For Two Thousand Years*,

published in 1934, is about the inability to have a private emotional life. The problems of the society around you become your personal problem; we see a young man struggling to preserve his individuality and ultimately failing. Not because he identifies himself as a Jew, but because the society around him identifies him by this alone. By the time we reach the *Journal*, Sebastian is legally classified as a Jew, awaiting his fate as one marked for slave labour, persecution, deportation, and extermination.

## 5D

The central character in the four linked stories is a Romanian medical student named Stefan Valeriu. He begins the book as a fresh-faced man ready to pursue love affairs. He's described as *un nouveau jeune homme*. How does his view of relationships change over the course of the book?

## POC

I don't see that it does. The book was published in the US as *Women — A Novel*. It's no such thing. The stories are linked and arranged chronologically but they could be read in any order. They are also a mix of narrative techniques, with Valeriu now a first person narrator, then appearing in third person, then as the recipient of a letter from a

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female friend... Personally I like the reduced pretension of short stories in their approach to narrative, and I agree with Shalamov that lengthy narratives tend to be aesthetized fabrications.

### 5D

The stories concern the lives of emigres in Paris. Why was the city such a draw for Romanians at the time?

### POC

For writers and artists, Paris was the centre of the world. Vienna had some claim prior to WWI, but that ended with the collapse of the central-European cultural space that was the Habsburg Empire. Paris had a particular draw for Romanian intellectuals. Romania at that time was a poor, backward country with a very up-to-date elite. There were few roads in the country, but there was air travel, artistic experimentation and art-deco architecture. Bucharest was also wildly hedonistic in those years, if you had any money. Patrick Leigh-Fermor gives a wonderful account of that in *The Broken Road*. And there were trips to Paris. And wild excitement about fascism, which was modern politics.

5D

Why do you think the book is called *Women* rather than *Young Men*?

POC

Allure. Young men are seldom mysterious. ◇

# Notes for the Illustrations



Eliot White-Hill,  
Kwulasultun



*Some Birds Strut*, 2020, digital  
A funky bird.

*Some Birds Strut II*, 2020, digital  
It's pretty late in the night now for that funky bird.

*Some Birds Strut III*, 2020, digital  
Same bird, different form. As Coast Salish peoples, our dances are transformational in nature. Much like our art, they are referential to our world and the beings of our world. They tell stories about our connections. They are existential statements about who we are, which are intrinsically tied to where we come from and the beings who have helped us.

*Shxwuweli (Family)*, 2020, digital  
I had been thinking about my family that day, on my birthday. They have shared so much love and teachings with me, made so many sacrifices to help me succeed and be who I am. I can't put into words how grateful I am to them. Huy ce:p qu si:em nu shxwuweli.

*Tutumiye' (Little Wren) Shrieks of Existential Dread*, 2020, digital  
Wise little Wren had realized that ignorance is bliss.

*Helpers*, 2020, digital  
All sorts of things can be helpers in this world. Sometimes it may not be as on the nose as a pair of wolves, or maybe it will, but it is important to keep an open mind. My great grandma, Dr. Ellen White, Kwulasulwut, would talk about how help is all around us. We need to open ourselves to the energy and the world to be able to receive it.

*Qule:qe' (Crow)*, 2020, digital and  
*Kwetun (Mouse)*, 2020, digital  
A young crow is given a treasure.  
A wise mouse and its sweeping tale guide the way.

These two works are from my first solo exhibition at White Rabbit Coffee Co. in October. The works from this show are very special to me, I wanted to honour our territory, really specifically the neighbourhood of the Old City Quarter, where I have been living for the past year, and the community of people there who have been an incredible source of support both for me personally and my art. These four block prints are the 'denizens of the old city quarter.' This crow in particular is a bit of a self portrait of myself as I engage with both Salish art and our history.



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