

BLOOMSBURY

GOODREADING GUIDE

DISCOVER YOUR NEXT GREAT READ...



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struck by the sight of the roadway thronged with vehicles and of
the pavement crowded with men and women. He was in a long
straight street, bounded by a mere fraction of an immense wall
but all round him, on and on, even to the limits of the horizon hidden
by the enormous piles of bricks, he felt the mass of swarming beings
in its surges. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like
ants, thoughtful like a natural force, pushing on blind and un-
aided, absorbed, impatient to surrender, to logic, to science, to
perhaps.

That was the form of doubt he feared most, impervious to Kurt
Olsen while walking abroad, when he happened also to note one of
himself, he had such moments of despair and even terror of
something. What if nothing could save them? Such moments come
to all men whose ambition aims at a close group upon humanity —
to artists, politicians, thinkers, reformers, or even. A deplorable
emotional state this, against which nothing builds a superior
character and with some exceptions the ordinary thought of the
slight to his cause, such as political captives, but in a wilderness
of poor houses, the heritage of the earlier struggle. In order to
reach sooner the point where he could take his breath, he turned
travels out of the populous street into a narrow and dusky alley
paved with flagstones. On one side the low brick houses had in their
dusty windows the slightest, unobtrusive look of incipient decay —
empty shells awaiting destruction. From the other side he had not
departed wholly as yet. Facing the only gas-lamp yanked the mouth
of a narrow-limbed furniture dealer, whose, deep in the gloom of a sort
of narrow passage winding through a bizarre forest of wardrobes,
with an undergrowth tangle of table legs, a tall pine-glass illuminated
him a pool of water in a wood. An unhappy, homeless couch
accompanied by two wretched chairs, stood in the open. The only
human being making use of the alley besides the Professor, coming
sharply and erect from the opposite direction, checked his swinging
pace suddenly.

"Hello!" he said, and stood a little on one side watching.

The Professor had already stopped, with a ready half turn which
brought his shoulders very near the other wall. His right hand fell
lightly on the back of the nearest couch, the left remained purpose-
fully plunged deep in the trouser pocket, and the swiftness of the

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EIGHTH EDITION

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide seeks to answer two main questions: 'Which book should I read?' and 'Which book should I read next?' The bulk of the text consists of articles on more than 400 authors, describing the kind of books they wrote, listing titles and suggesting books (by the same authors and by others) which might make interesting follow-ups. For the first time I have included a section (**Five for the Future**) at the beginning of the A–Z entries which draws attention to five authors who have recently published first novels that suggest they have remarkable careers ahead of them. Scattered through this guide are over a hundred **Read on a Theme** menus of suggested reading. These are straightforward lists of between six and twelve books of a similar kind, from *Adolescence* to *The Wilderness*. There are also eleven double-page features, **Startpoints**, each of which covers a particular category of reading, with a large number of suggestions and follow-ups. In alphabetical sequence, they are: *Autobiography*, *Biography*, *Crime*, *Historical Novels*, *History*, *Letters and Diaries*, *Poetry*, *Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *Science Writing*, *Thrillers* and *Travel*. In addition there are a dozen **Hidden Gems** highlighted, books which have been undeservedly forgotten over the years. At random points you will also find **Literary Trivia** lists, ranging from *Five Authors Who Were Jailbirds* to *Ten Fictional Places*. These have no particular connection to the entries and are intended solely as (hopefully) entertaining interludes. The book concludes with several lists of winners of major literary prizes, including the Man Booker and the Pulitzer.

The text contains no literary criticism. I wanted to describe books, not to be clever at their expense. In particular, I have tried to avoid ranking authors by 'literary merit', on assessments of whether their work is 'great' or 'light'.

All books mentioned in the *Good Reading Guide* were written in English or are widely available in translation. I have tried to cover as wide a range of writers of English as possible, and have included authors from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa and the USA, as well as the UK. Books originally written in a foreign language are listed by their English titles. Original titles follow in brackets where they may be familiar to readers or where they may be used from some English editions.

In this eighth edition of the *Good Reading Guide* I have updated entries to include books that have been published (and alas, deaths that have occurred) since the last edition, and I have revised entries (some substantially), included new titles and menus and added nearly fifty authors new to the guide. To accommodate these changes I have, regrettably, excluded a small number of writers who appeared in earlier editions but whose popularity has waned significantly. I welcome ideas, comments and suggestions for any future editions. Please write to me, care of the publishers.

KEY TO THE SYMBOLS

- ◆ Other books by the same author
- Similar books by other authors
- »» A book by an author who features in the *Good Reading Guide*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The cut-off date for inclusion in this eighth edition of the *Good Reading Guide* was June 2009. The final choice of books and authors, the comments and the text have been my responsibility. I take the blame. But many people have helped. This is the fourth edition of the *Good Reading Guide* in which the revisions and changes have not been made by the original author, the late Kenneth McLeish. However, a great deal of the book remains, in essence, his work. Many of the entries he wrote for earlier editions were so concise, witty, informative and insightful that it has always seemed both presumptuous and unnecessary to change them. Susan Osborne has a knowledge of contemporary fiction second to none and the Read on a Theme menus have benefited enormously from her many suggestions. Steve Andrews is a walking encyclopedia of information and opinion about science fiction, and I am grateful for his advice and suggestions in a genre where I make no claims to expertise. Richard Shephard contributed many suggestions for Read Ons in American fiction and outlined the entries on half a dozen contemporary American novelists for me. I am very grateful to all three of them and to the many other people who have, over the years, suggested new authors and books to me. To name Eve Gorton, Noel Murphy, Hugh Pemberton, Gordon Kerr, Travis Elborough, Niamh Marnham, John Magrath, Kevin Chappell, Linda Pattenden, Peter French, Brian Grist, Lucinda Rennison and Paul Skinner is to mention only a few. To name more would be to run the risk of sounding like an Oscar-winning actor thanking his entire acquaintance for contributions to his career. But many others have done for

me what this *Good Reading Guide* hopes to do for anybody who uses it – pointed me in the direction of rewarding and enjoyable books which I would not otherwise have had the good fortune to read. At A&C Black Jenny Ridout and Inderjeet Garcha have been excellent and supportive editors on this project. *The Good Reading Guide* is a book that demands great skill and patience from the person copy-editing it. On this eighth edition I have been lucky to have had the help of Judy Tither and her work on it is much appreciated. Without her editing skills the book would not have appeared on bookshop shelves in time and I am very grateful for all she did.

Nick Rennison

July 2009

INTRODUCTION

There are more books published each year than ever before. Walk into any large branch of the major book retailers and the shelves stretch into the distance, great vistas of novels and biographies, histories and whodunits, romances and fantasies searching for a readership. The sight is stimulating to any lover of books but also daunting. How are the keenest of readers to choose from the vast numbers of books on offer? Like explorers in some limitless, landmarkless new continent, they hardly know where to turn. *The Good Reading Guide* is an attempt to provide signposts and indicate pathways through the landscape.

Paradoxically, despite the fact that more titles appear than ever before, there are those who claim that books may be an endangered species. They are not under threat in the way they have been before. Books have regularly faced the wrath of cultural dictators in past centuries. The Nazis were by no means the only burners of books. Ideologues of all kinds have seen books as potentially subversive and attempted to curb their influence. Yet books and literature have survived their attentions.

Today's threat to books, it is said, is twofold. Both parts come in the shape of technology. First, it may be that the printed page is set to go the way of the illuminated manuscript in the fifteenth century. The interactive CDs of the early 1990s were only the harbingers of momentous changes in the ways in which words and information can be accessed. The extraordinary growth of the internet has seen more and more texts available through a PC screen. It is no longer necessary to go to a bookshop or a library to track down literature as different as a Shakespeare play and a novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs, a poem by Tennyson and a Sherlock Holmes short story. You can locate, if you wish, the work of the Church Fathers or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the *Book of Mormon* or Cervantes in Spanish in a matter of moments. They are all out there in the rapidly expanding realm of cyberspace. The way in which we read may well be changing. The latest generation of small book-sized e-readers enable you to read in an armchair, or sitting in bed, instead of bolt upright at a table. Today's children, brought up from infancy to use computers as tools for both learning and entertainment, may well find scrolling a handier way to move through a text than turning pages. So books themselves, as physical objects, may be about to change but this is not a cause for overmuch

alarmist hand-wringing. They have changed before. If they change again, there will be those who cling to the old ways just as there were doubtless those in the late Middle Ages who swore by the handwritten manuscript and refused to countenance the new-fangled creations of Gutenberg and Caxton. Yet, for the majority who embrace the new technologies, the content will be the same. It will only be the form in which that content is presented that has changed.

The second way in which technology might be viewed as a threat to the book in general, and the novel in particular, may seem more insidious. It is safe to assume that there will never come a time when we don't need and demand stories of some kind. There have been many attempts to define the essential qualities of *Homo sapiens* – man the tool-maker, man the hunter and so on. A better way might be to talk of man the storyteller. Every human culture that has ever existed has needed stories and narratives to help its members give meaning and coherence to their lives. Books have been one effective way of presenting these stories but, Jeremiahs insist, the last hundred years have seen the development of others which have overtaken the printed word. We live in an age where 'fiction' means, mainly, films, TV soaps, drama series, sitcoms, computer games. These new media fulfil our inherent need for stories. Literary fiction, fiction in the written word, is a minority pleasure and will soon be as dead as a dodo.

So it is claimed. But it seems unlikely. There are many ways in which the stories we have always told ourselves give meaning to our lives. In mythology and religious texts, for example, they provide an explanation for our place and purpose in the world. Just as importantly, stories can engage the emotions and draw us out of the narrow sphere of self into an engagement with others. The usual way to 'live' our emotions, to release their potential, is by sharing them, by communication with other people. Each individual's emotional make-up is as unique – as personal – as a gene pattern, but we spend our whole lives trying to match them with others, and we draw strength and comfort both from the similarities we find and from the differences. Two of the most exciting activities of human life are finding occasions for such emotional dialogue, and pondering the results. We talk to parents, lovers, children, friends, strangers, in a constant attempt to find out their feelings, to measure our response to life against theirs. It is a form of growth, of education. The more we find in common with others, the more we learn about ourselves. Stories, and particularly the stories we read, form a parallel path to this understanding of ourselves and others. As long as this remains true, fiction in the form of written texts, however they are presented to us, seems safe.

The BBC poll for the Big Read in 2003 proved the point. The response was enormous and the range of books in the list the BBC released showed just how many different types of fiction continued to engage our attention. Look down the list (see page 494) and the evidence is clear. There are the classics (Dickens, Tolstoy, Jane Austen and, among twentieth-century writers, Orwell, Steinbeck and F. Scott Fitzgerald), which have proved themselves over many years and seem likely to occur in such polls for as long as pollsters continue to invite our suggestions for the world's greatest books. There are the books which exemplify that much-discussed crossover between adult and children's literature such as the Harry Potter books and the Philip Pullman trilogy. Like the children's classics (*The Wind in the Willows* and *Alice in Wonderland*) that also appear in the list, they win their place because of the ways in which they delight and enthrall us with the very basic power of narrative, of storytelling. And there are, happily, the one-off books which resist all the ebbs and flows of fashion and continue to find an audience. Who would have thought that a 1914 novel about the trials and tribulations of a group of painters and decorators in Edwardian England, the only fiction by an Irish socialist called Robert Noonan, would still inspire readers in the twenty-first century? Yet there sits Noonan's book, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (published under his pseudonym Robert Tressell), alongside the Brontës, Salman Rushdie and Dostoevsky.

As Tressell's book shows, fiction is the ideal way to enter the emotional experience of a vast range of people, from all countries, all periods, all kinds of society. I know Dickens's London, R.K. Narayan's India, Peter Carey's Australia, the 'mean streets' walked by American private eyes, even the future dystopias of William Gibson, as well as I know my own neighbourhood – not because I've been there but because I recognize the way people feel in them and the way the authors distil those feelings into words. This is not cosy escapism, nor living one's life 'vicariously'. It is an enlargement of the necessarily narrow horizons of our own small lives. The world of books is boundless, and is crammed with human beings of every profession, viewpoint, character, moral and ethical persuasion. It covers not only everything that has happened in 'real' human existence, but the infinite possibilities of the imagination. To anyone standing outside, this can seem bewildering. But, as any reader knows, once you start exploring, the experience becomes ever more addictive and enriching. *The Good Reading Guide* aims to offer as large a range of entry paths into undiscovered worlds as possible.

FIVE FOR THE FUTURE

ADAMSON, Gil (born 1961)

Canadian poet and novelist

Gil Adamson is a Canadian poet whose verse has been widely published in the last twenty years but her first novel, *The Outlander*, was not published in the UK until the beginning of 2009. With its originality of expression and its disdain for cliché and the commonplace, it immediately marked Adamson out as a writer to watch. The year is 1903 and Mary Boulton has just shot her husband. Young and half-dereanged by the tragedy, the widow (as the narrative insistently describes her) flees from civilization and into the Canadian backwoods. She is chased relentlessly by her husband's brothers, red-haired twins intent on revenge. After joining forces with a reclusive mountain man, and enjoying an unexpectedly intense relationship with him, she settles in a remote mining township where an eccentric minister, the Reverend Bonnycastle, becomes her protector. However, her new-found home is built (literally) on shifting ground and the hunters have not given up the chase. The widow's difficult journey is not yet over. What makes *The Outlander* so memorable is not so much the tale of Mary Boulton's troubled journey through the wilderness (although that is compelling enough) but the language in which it is described. Adamson's first novel is recognisably the work of someone who loves language and savours its ability to re-imagine the world.

Read on

▣ Stef Penney, *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Guy Vanderhaeghe, *The Last Crossing*.

HARKAWAY, Nick (born 1972)

British novelist

Nick Harkaway is the pseudonym adopted by Nicholas Cornwell, the son of ►► John Le Carré when, after a successful career as a screenwriter, he published his first novel, *The Gone Away World*, in 2008. The book is an enormously ambitious work

of post-apocalyptic SF. Most of the world has been rendered uninhabitable in the Go Away War. Survivors of the war huddle together in the Livable Zone, narrow strips of land which hug the sides of the Jorgmund Pipe. The Pipe is a network of life-support systems pumping out FOX, the mysterious substance which counteracts the bad effects of the devastating superweapon which made the world uninhabitable in the first place. The Civil Freebooting Company, a gang of libertarian troubleshooters led by a charismatic hero called Gonzo Lubitsch, is given the task of extinguishing a fire which threatens the integrity of the Pipe. As they set off to douse the flames, the book abruptly changes direction and plunges readers into the past histories of Gonzo and his men and into the story of how the Go Away War made them who they are. Madly inventive and often very funny, Harkaway's novel was probably the only one published in 2008 that could be legitimately compared (as it was) to both the work of Salman Rushdie and a Mad Max movie.

Read on

■ >> China Miéville, *The City and the City*; >> Neal Stephenson, *Anthem*.

JONES, Sadie (born 1968)

British novelist

Sadie Jones worked for a number of years as a screenwriter before she published her first novel, *The Outcast*, in 2008. The book is set in the 1950s and focuses on Lewis Aldridge who becomes a victim of the hypocrisy and repression that characterise Waterford, the small commuter belt town in the Home Counties where he grows up. As a boy, Lewis is traumatised by his mother's accidental drowning but he discovers that his father, who soon remarries, has little understanding of his grief. The neighbours want only to ignore the whole messy business. As he grows up, Lewis becomes increasingly disaffected and estranged from his father and stepmother. His grief and rage can only be expressed through self-harming, boozing and acts of minor juvenile delinquency which eventually land him in jail. When he emerges from prison and returns to Waterford, the stage is set for another series of confrontations with the small-minded community which has already condemned him. Jones's elegantly written debut novel brings to vivid life both her alienated and damaged protagonist and the people, intent only on maintaining the social status quo, who turn their backs on him.

 **Read on**

▣ >> Ian McEwan, *Atonement*; Kate Morton, *The House at Riverton*.

RAISIN, Ross (born 1979)

British novelist

Sam Marsdyke is a gangling misfit, nicknamed 'Lankenstein' at school, who works for his father on his isolated Yorkshire hill farm. Expelled from school after what might or might not have been a sexual assault on a fellow pupil, he spends much of his time trudging the hills and brooding on the frustrations and indignities of his life. When a new family moves into the area, the teenage daughter takes centre stage in Marsdyke's fantasies. The girl is lonely herself, exiled from the world she has previously known, and unwittingly she encourages Sam in his delusions. She confides in him her own unhappiness and her plans of escape. The two abscond across the moors and idle teenage disaffection begins to transform itself into something more sinister. *God's Own Country*, which was published in 2008, is the first novel by Ross Raisin, a Yorkshire-born author who won the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award the following year. What distinguishes Raisin's book from other first novels of recent years is the narrative voice in which it is told. His odd, isolated and eventually unbalanced protagonist tells his own story and Sam Marsdyke, who blends Yorkshire dialect and colloquialism with flights of imagination and verbal fancy, is like no other character in contemporary fiction. He is both very funny and very disturbing. Raisin's act of fictional ventriloquism in first creating and then sustaining Marsdyke's inner voice suggests that he is a writer with an exciting future ahead of him.

 **Read on**

▣ Sarah Hall, *Haweswater*; Edward Hogan, *Blackmoor*; Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy*.

WROBLEWSKI, David (born 1959)

US novelist

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle was published in 2008 but its author, David Wroblewski, had been working on it for more than a decade. The work shows in the masterly way he unfolds the narrative of his first novel and in the beauty of its prose. Edgar Sawtelle is a mute teenager with an affinity for the dogs which his family breeds on a remote Wisconsin farm. His world is shattered by the sudden and mysterious death of his father and by the affair that later develops between his mother and his uncle. The suspicion that his uncle had something to do with his father's death grows until Edgar can no longer bear to remain at home. He makes the decision to head for Canada with three of the dogs. They never quite make it to the border but, in self-imposed exile from the farm, they discover how to fend for themselves. Joining forces with an eccentric loner named Henry Lamb, Edgar and the dogs seem to have found a new home but the pull of the old one proves too much for the boy. He returns for a final Oedipal confrontation with his mother and her lover. With its echoes of works from *Hamlet* to *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* is a book that pays tribute to the literary past but it is also a novel of refreshing originality.

**Read on**

▣ >> Peter Matthiessen, *Shadow Country*; Ron Rash, *Serena*.

AUTHORENTRIESA–Z

ACKROYD, Peter (born 1949)

British writer

Ackroyd is a biographer as well as a novelist – his much-acclaimed *Dickens* is a rich reconstruction of the novelist's life – and his fiction benefits from a researcher's eye for extraordinary and revealing detail about the past. Often, he blends a modern story with a historical one, and characters from the past move in and out of the contemporary narrative like ghosts. He sets many stories in London (he is the author of *London: A Biography*), and superbly evokes its people and atmosphere, both today and in different periods of the past.

HAWKSMOOR (1985)

This remains the most exhilarating and adventurous of Ackroyd's explorations of a London in which past and present endlessly intertwine. A contemporary detective (the namesake of the seventeenth-century architect) is driven towards a mystical encounter with forces from the past through his investigations of a series of murders in London churches. Part of the narrative is written in a prose which demonstrates Ackroyd's chameleon-like ability to mimic the English of past centuries and its rhythms.

Ackroyd's other novels include Chatterton (about the eighteenth-century literary forger who committed suicide at the age of 17), The House of Doctor Dee (in which the central character inherits a Clerkenwell house once owned by the Elizabethan magus John Dee), Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem (blending the stories of the real Dan Leno, 'the funniest man in England' in nineteenth-century music hall, such literary figures as George Gissing and Karl Marx, and the mysterious serial killer of the 1890s nicknamed the Limehouse Golem), The Lambs of London (in which he provides his own fictional version of the lives of Charles and Mary Lamb) and The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein (an offbeat retelling of Mary Shelley's story). He has also written poetry, biographies of T.S. Eliot, William Blake, Sir Thomas More, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe and, in addition to his London 'biography', a characteristically idiosyncratic investigation of the English imagination entitled Albion.

Read on

- to *Hawksmoor*: David Liss, *A Conspiracy of Paper*; Iain Pears, *An Instance of the Fingerpost*; » Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*.
- to Ackroyd's work in general: » Michael Moorcock, *Mother London*; » Iain Sinclair, *Downriver*; » Rose Tremain, *Restoration*; » Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*.

ADAMS, Douglas (1952–2001)

British novelist

Adams began his career as a radio joke-writer, and also worked for the TV science fiction series *Doctor Who*. He made his name with a series of genial science fiction spoofs, beginning with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979). In this, Earthman Arthur Dent, informed that his planet is about to be vapourized to make room for a hyperspace bypass, escapes by stowing away on an alien spacecraft. This is the beginning of a wild journey through time and space, in the course of which he meets the super-cool President of the Galaxy, Zaphod Beeblebrox, discusses the coastline of Norway with Slartibartfast (who won prizes for designing it), watches the apocalyptic floor-show in the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, and discovers the answer to the 'ultimate question about life, the universe and everything'. The other Hitchhiker books (self-contained sequels) are *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*; *Life, the Universe and Everything*; *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish* and *Mostly Harmless*.

In 1987 Adams began a second series, this time starring an intergalactic private eye named Dirk Gently. The Gently books are *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* and *The Long Dark Teatime of the Soul*. In his later years Adams largely turned away from the printed page to concentrate on projects in other media but the Hitchhiker books remain as the most inspired of all science fiction spoofs.

Read on

- science fiction spoofs in similarly lunatic vein: » Harry Harrison, *The Stainless Steel Rat*; Robert Asprin, *Phules Company*.
- fantasy spoofs: » Terry Pratchett, *The Colour of Magic*; Robert Asprin, *Another Fine Myth*; Robert Rankin, *The Anti-Pope* (and others in the Brentford series); Jasper Fforde, *The Eyre Affair*.

READONATHEME:**ADOLESCENCE**

- Alain-Fournier, *Le Grand Meaulnes*
- » Beryl Bainbridge, *A Quiet Life*
 - Colette, *The Ripening Seed*
 - Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*
 - Jane Gardam, *Bilgewater*
 - Lesley Glaister, *Digging to Australia*
 - S.E. Hinton, *That Was Then, This is Now*
 - » Rose Tremain, *The Way I Found Her*
 - » Antonia White, *Frost in May*
 - » Edmund White, *A Boy's Own Story*

See also: Children; Eccentric Families; Parents and Children; Schools; Teenagers

READONATHEME:**AFRICA**

- Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
- Ronan Bennett, *The Catastrophist*
- Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*
- » William Boyd, *A Good Man in Africa*
 - Justin Cartwright, *Masai Dreaming*
 - Giles Foden, *The Last King of Scotland*
 - » Nadine Gordimer, *None to Accompany Me*
 - Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise*
 - » Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*
 - » V.S. Naipaul, *In a Free State*
 - Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*
 - Wole Soyinka, *The Season of Anomie*
 - » Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop*

AKUNIN, Boris (born 1956)

Russian novelist

Working under the pseudonym of Boris Akunin, the Russian academic Grigory Chkhartishvili (an expert on Japanese culture) has written a series of crime novels that have become wildly popular not only in his own country but around the world. In Erast Fandorin, government special investigator in late nineteenth century Imperial Russia, Akunin has created a character so protean that he can play his part in almost any type of crime fiction from imitation Agatha Christie to espionage thriller. Refusing to take the improbable twists and turns of his plots too seriously, the Russian writer has produced stories which not only pay tongue-in-cheek homage to genre fiction of the past but also have their own individual charm.

THE WINTER QUEEN (2003)

Fandorin made his first appearance, as a naive young police investigator, in a story that begins dramatically with a public suicide in a Moscow park, and he is soon propelled into the company of enigmatic and beautiful women, devious conspirators and a most unlikely Svengali intent on world domination. He is sent to London and there uncovers what he believes to be treachery on an epic scale. Hastening back to Russia he finds that he has got everything upside down and back to front. In a breathless denouement he defeats the forces arrayed against him but only at great personal cost.

The other Fandorin novels to appear in English (there are more awaiting translation) are The Turkish Gambit, Murder on the Leviathan, The Death of Achilles, Special Assignments, The State Counsellor, The Coronation *and* The She Lover of Death. *He has also written three novels about a gauche but resourceful nun in late nineteenth-century Russia who finds herself at the centre of a series of mysteries* – Pelagia and the White Bulldog, Pelagia and the Black Monk *and* Pelagia and the Red Rooster.

Read on

- ◆ *Pelagia and the White Bulldog* (on a ramshackle family estate where Chekhovian characters idle away their days, the owner's prized white bulldogs are found dead and only Sister Pelagia can work out what their deaths portend).
- David Dickinson, *Death on the Nevskii Prospekt*; Jason Goodwin, *The Janissary Tree*; Frank Tallis, *Mortal Mischief*.

ALI, Monica (born 1967)

Bangladeshi-born British novelist

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, the story of a young Bangladeshi woman arriving in London to face an arranged marriage with a man twenty years her senior, became a bestseller when it was first published in 2003. It was not difficult to see why it was so successful. Here was an ambitious and absorbing narrative, filled with characters that engaged readers' emotions and attentions, set against the backdrop of a community which had hitherto been inadequately represented in British fiction. *Brick Lane* had many of the reassuring qualities of old-fashioned fiction but it also provided the shock of the new in that it gave a voice to people who had been voiceless. Nazneen, isolated in an East End tower block, speaking no English and obliged to rely on her ineffectual husband, is a character to whom readers can respond and her evolution from shy, tongue-tied teenager to strong and independent woman is at the heart of the book. Since *Brick Lane* propelled her into the limelight, Ali has published two further novels. *Alentejo Blue* took her a long way from Brick Lane with its stories of the assorted inhabitants, both native and ex-pat English, of a Portuguese village named Mamarrosa; *In the Kitchen* returned her to polyglot London in a narrative that focused on a chef in a posh hotel, presiding over a melting pot of staff from all over the world.

Read on

▣ Nadeem Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*; Romesh Gunsekera, *The Match*; ►► Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*; Meera Syal, *Anita and Me*.

ALLENDE, Isabel (born 1942)

Peruvian-born Chilean novelist

Allende's first novel, *The House of the Spirits* (1985), was a glowing family tapestry in the magic-realist manner of ►► Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, spanning five generations and thronged with larger-than-life characters and supernatural events. She followed this vein in *Eva Luna*, which is particularly evocative of life on a decaying hacienda deep in the tropical bush. *Of Love and Shadows* (see below) added politics to the magic-realist mixture, to devastating effect. *Paula* is a moving account of the death of Allende's daughter which opens

out into the story of her own life and the political tragedies of Chile. *The Sum of Our Days* is a memoir of family and friends.

OF LOVE AND SHADOWS (1987)

Irene Beltrán, a journalist, and her photographer-lover Francisco Leal are investigating the disappearance of a disturbed, possibly saintly adolescent. In the jackbooted dictatorship in which they live, however, the child is not simply missing but ‘disappeared’, one of thousands snatched by the authorities who will never be seen again. Allende surrounds her main characters with a web of fantastic personal history in true magic-realist style. But the further the investigators thread their way through the sadism and ruthlessness of the labyrinthine fascist state, the more fact begins to swallow fairytale. The investigators themselves begin to lose reality – their love affair becomes a swooning parody of romantic fiction – but what they discover grows more and more uncomfortably like real South American life, like nightmare fleshed.

Allende's other books include The Stories of Eva Luna (*a set of long short stories which forms a pendant to Eva Luna*), Daughter of Fortune, Portrait in Sepia (*two novels which have the same setting and some of the same characters as The House of the Spirits*), City of the Beasts and Zorro, *her own take on the legend of the swashbuckling, masked hero.*

Read on

Alejo Carpentier, *The Chase*; Stephen Dobyns, *The Two Deaths of Señora Puccini*; Oscar Hijuelos, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*; » Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*; » Mario Vargas Llosa, *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* gives a more farcical view of Allende's terrifying, haunted world.

ALLINGHAM, Margery (1905–66)

British novelist

Allingham wrote ‘crime fiction’ only in the sense that each of her books contains the step-by-step solution of a crime, and that their hero, Albert Campion, is an amateur detective whose amiable manner conceals laser intelligence and ironclad moral integrity. But instead of confining Campion within the boundaries of the detective-

story genre, Allingham put him in whatever kind of novel she felt like writing. Her best book is *The Tiger in the Smoke*, set in an atmospheric, cobble-stones-and-alleyways London filled with low-life characters as vivid as any in » Dickens. Like all Allingham's novels, it is not a conventional whodunit, although it contains plenty of mysteries that demand solutions. Jack Havoc, the 'tiger' of the title, escapes from jail and the hunt for this violent convict takes place in an eerie and fog-enshrouded London that Allingham brilliantly evokes.

Allingham's other Campion books include More Work for the Undertakers, Sweet Danger, Traitor's Purse, Police at the Funeral, Hide My Eyes, Look to the Lady *and the short-story collections* Mr Campion and Others *and* Take Two at Bedtime.

Read on

◆ *Death of a Ghost* (set in London's eccentric art community and involving – what else? – forged paintings); *The Beckoning Lady*.

■ Michael Innes, *The Daffodil Affair*; Edmund Crispin, *The Case of the Gilded Fly*; H.R.F. Keating, *A Rush on the Ultimate*; » P.D. James, *A Taste for Death*.

READONATHEME:

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE (books about theatre)

- » Beryl Bainbridge, *An Awfully Big Adventure*
Caryl Brahms and S.J. Simon, *A Bullet in the Ballet*
- » Angela Carter, *Wise Children*
- » Robertson Davies, *Tempest-Tost*
- » Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Nicholas's adventures with the Crummies)
- » Thomas Keneally, *The Playmaker*
- » Ngaio Marsh, *Opening Night*
- » J.B. Priestley, *The Good Companions*
- » Mary Renault, *The Mask of Apollo*
- » Barry Unsworth, *Morality Play*

READONATHEME:

ALTERED STATES (CHEMICAL FICTION)

- M. Ageyev, *Novel with Cocaine*
 Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm*
- » J.G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights*
 - » William S. Burroughs, *Junky*
 - » Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*
 Donald Goines, *Dopefiend*
 - » Jay McInerney, *The Story of My Life*
 Kevin Sampson, *Powder*
 Hubert Selby Jr, *Requiem for a Dream*
 Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book*
 - » Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*

AMIS, Kingsley (1922–95)

British writer of novels, poems and non-fiction

In the 1950s, when Amis's writing career began, British writers of all kinds – the 'angry young men' – had begun to rant in plays, films and novels about the unfairness, snobbishness and priggishness of life. Whingeing became an artistic form – and Amis's novels showed its funny side. The working-class hero of *Lucky Jim* (1954) tries to conform with his madrigal-singing, right-newspaper-reading, wine-savouring university colleagues, and in the process shows them up for the pretentious fools they are. The central character of *That Uncertain Feeling*, a small-town librarian, thinks that devastating sexual charm will carry him to the pinnacle of local society; the results are farcical. The hero of *Take a Girl Like You* (1960) finds it hard to persuade anyone else in his circle that 'free love' and 'the swinging sixties' are the good things glossy magazines crack them up to be. In the 1960s and 1970s Amis's farcical fires burned low. He began to affect a ponderous, self-consciously right-wing fuddy-duddiness, and abandoned satire for books of other kinds (a ghost story, a James Bond spy story and several science fiction books). In the 1980s, however, he returned to the satirical muttering he always did better than any of his imitators – and his later books (beginning with *The Old Devils*, see below) are among his funniest.

THE OLD DEVILS (1986)

A group of old men, acquaintances for over forty years, meet daily in a Welsh bar to grumble. They are obsessed by failure, their own and the world's. They are especially vitriolic about other people's success – and their discomfort with the world is brought to a peak when one of their 'friends', a famous TV Welshman and an expert on a Dylan-Thomasish poet, comes to settle in the town.

The best of Amis's comic novels not mentioned above are One Fat Englishman, Ending Up, The Folks Who Live on the Hill, Jake's Thing, Stanley and the Women *and* Difficulties With Girls (*a 1988 sequel to* Take a Girl Like You). The Anti-Death League *is about a top-secret army unit whose aim is to abolish death and* The Alteration *is set in a fantasy contemporary Britain in which the Reformation never happened and the Catholic Church is all-powerful. His Memoirs contain gleefully malicious pen portraits of two dozen former friends.*

Read on

◆ *Jake's Thing; Stanley and the Women.*

■ Malcolm Bradbury, *Eating People is Wrong*; ► A.N. Wilson, *Love Unknown*; Christopher Hope, *Serenity House*; ► Tom Sharpe, *Porterhouse Blue*; ► William Boyd, *A Good Man in Africa*; ► Howard Jacobson, *Peeping Tom*; William Cooper, *Scenes from Provincial Life.*

AMIS, Martin (born 1949)

British novelist

The novels of Amis *files* are icily satirical, cold with rage at the physical and moral sleaziness of the human race. His characters' preoccupations are sex, drugs, money and success, and they are tormented by failure to win, or keep, all four. ► F. Scott Fitzgerald found similar prancing emptiness in the 'gay young things' of the 1920s. Amis matches those writers' bilious wit and parades his dazzlingly inventive prose style in his pages but adds a pungent view of his own: that the entire generation born after the creation of nuclear weapons is maimed beyond cure, a race of psychotic moral mutants. Few contemporary writers treat such repulsive subject matter so dazzlingly. Amis's novels are compulsively nasty, superbly hard to like.

MONEY (1984)

This is the 'suicide note' of an obese, deranged and despairing film director, stumbling through a New York inferno of fast food, pornography, violence and moronic greed. He is a lunatic in a world that has gone mad; when he opens his mouth to scream, his voice is drowned in the mega-metropolitan carnival, the dance of death that is (for Amis, at least) contemporary America.

Amis's other novels are The Rachel Papers, Dead Babies, Other People, London Fields, Success, Time's Arrow, The Information, Night Train, Yellow Dog *and* House of Meetings. The Moronic Inferno *is a bilious travelogue about the USA, a marvellously raw, non-fiction counterpart to Money. Experience is a remarkable memoir, particularly affecting and moving (not words usually applied to Amis's work) in its portrait of his relationship with his father, » Kingsley Amis. War Against Cliché is a collection from thirty years of literary journalism. Koba the Dread is a curious and not very successful work of non-fiction in which an appalled account of Stalin's career is mingled with Amis's ongoing debate with his late father. The Second Plane collects his writings about 9/11 and its aftermath.*

Read on

- ◆ *London Fields* (about a man in apocalypse-hurling 1999 London trying to write a novel about a woman trying to arrange her murder by a slob of a man fantasizing about winning the world darts championship).
- Terence Blacker, *Fixx*; » Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*; Madison Smartt Bell, *The Year of Silence*; » Saul Bellow, *Mr Sammler's Planet*; » Jay McInerney, *Model Behaviour*; » Will Self, *My Idea of Fun*; » Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair*.

READONATHEME:

ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME

Greece:

- Hilary Bailey, *Cassandra, Princess of Troy*
- » William Golding, *The Double Tongue*
 - Tom Holt, *Olympiad*
 - Naomi Mitchison, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*
 - Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*
 - » Mary Renault, *The King Must Die*
 - » Gore Vidal, *Creation*

Rome:

- » Lindsey Davis, *The Iron Hand of Mars*
- » Robert Graves, *I, Claudius*
- Allan Massie, *Tiberius*
- » Steven Saylor, *Roman Blood*
- Thornton Wilder, *The Ides of March*
- David Wishart, *Ovid*
- Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*

See also: The Bible; The Middle Ages; Other Peoples, Other Times; Renaissance Europe

ANGELOU, Maya (born 1928)

American autobiographer and poet

As a young woman, Maya Angelou was a singer and actress, touring the world in *Porgy and Bess* and working in New York nightclubs. In the 1960s she became a civil rights activist and spent five years in Africa as a journalist and teacher. Today she is one of America's most respected poets and writers. Her finest work is the reconstruction of her own past life she has made in her volumes of autobiography. Angelou has triumphed in these not only because she has a lively prose style and writes of extraordinary characters and unusual locations, but because she has succeeded in making her own life seem somehow emblematic of an entire black

generation's progress from the segregation and oppression of the 1930s through the campaign for civil rights to the present day.

I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS (1969)

The first of Maya Angelou's five volumes of autobiography records the traumas and tribulations of her upbringing in the American Deep South during the 1930s. Poignantly recording her struggle to forge her own identity and to triumph over the obstacles of being black and poor in a racist society, the book is a scathing indictment of injustice which also manages to be a document of hope and conviction that even the worst of circumstances can be left behind.

Maya Angelou's other autobiographical works are Gather Together in My Name, Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas, The Heart of a Woman *and* All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.

Read on

▣ Alex Haley, *Roots*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (a novel first published in the 1930s which tells the story of a strong black woman triumphing over the odds); >> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*.

READONATHEME:

THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

Aeron Clement, *The Cold Moons*

>> Louis de Bernières, *Red Dog*

Paul Gallico, *The Snow Goose*

>> Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*

>> Ernest Hemingway, *Fiesta/The Sun Also Rises*

William Horwood, *Duncton Wood*

Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*

Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter*

ARNOTT, Jake (born 1961)

British novelist

Pulp fiction combines with immaculately researched social history in Jake Arnott's trilogy of novels set in London's gangster underworld and featuring the homosexual East End racketeer, Harry Starks. Harry first appeared in *The Long Firm* (1999) which made use of five different narrators, each with a different perspective on the gangster, to chart his rise and fall. Arnott's second novel, *He Kills Coppers*, opens in the summer of 1966, as London basks in the sun and enjoys the aftermath of England's World Cup victory. Again making use of several different narrators, Arnott unfolds a gripping story of the seedier side of the swinging sixties. In *truecrime* the setting is the 1990s but the effects of Harry Sparks's gangland reign are still being felt as a young actress, discovering that her father was one of the crime boss's victims, decides she wants revenge on him. The three books have very varied stories to tell but they are held together as a trilogy by the recurring characters (Harry Sparks is only one of many) whose lives we witness, by the pace of Arnott's narrative and by his time-travelling ability to resurrect the sights, sounds and smells of the recent past.

 **Read on**

- ◆ *Johnny Come Home* (set in a 1970s London where glam rock and political activism meet and collide); *The Devil's Paintbrush* (Arnott travels further back into the past in this story of an encounter between legendary occultist Aleister Crowley and a disgraced imperial hero in the Paris of 1903 and its consequences).
- » Christopher Brookmyre, *Quite Ugly One Morning*; Ken Bruen, *London Boulevard*; Simon Kernick, *The Murder Exchange*.

READONATHEME:**ART FOR ART'S SAKE**

Books about art, artists and the art world

- » Margery Allingham, *Death of a Ghost*
- Joyce Cary, *The Horse's Mouth*
- » Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*
- » Michael Frayn, *Headlong*

Lesley Glaister, *Sheer Blue Bliss*

- » Alan Hollinghurst, *The Folding Star*
- Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr*
- Shena Mackay, *The Artist's Widow*
- » W. Somerset Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence*
- » Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *The Flanders Panel*
- Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*

ASIMOV, Isaac (1920–92)

US writer of novels, short stories and non-fiction

Asimov published his first story at nineteen, and went on to write over three hundred books, ranging from Bible guides and history textbooks to the science fiction novels and stories for which he is best known. Much of his most seminal science fiction work was written in the 1940s when he (and others) came under the editorial wing of John W. Campbell, the pulp magazine man under whose aegis Golden Age science fiction developed. Strongly plotted and concentrating on ideas more than style, Asimov's novels and stories invite the reader to collaborate in the unfolding of concepts like the famous 'three laws of robotics'.

THE FOUNDATION SAGA (1951–93)

The first three books, a self-contained trilogy, appeared in the 1950s; Asimov added the remaining volumes thirty years later. The Saga is 'space opera' (science fiction soap opera) on a huge scale, an account of political manoeuvrings among nations and civilizations of the far future. Hari Seldon, a professor of psychohistory (statistical and psychological prediction of the future) foresees a disastrous era of war in the galactic empire, and establishes two Foundations on the galaxy's edge, dedicated to safeguarding civilized knowledge until it is again required. The Saga describes the nature and work of each Foundation, their uniting to defeat external threat (from an alien intelligence, the Mule) and their subsequent internecine struggles.

The Foundation novels are Foundation, Foundation and Empire *and* Second Foundation. *Books in the continuation series are* Prelude to Foundation, Foundation's Edge, Foundation and Earth *and the posthumous* Forward the

Foundation. *Asimov's other science fiction novels include* Pebble in the Sky, The Stars Like Dust *and* The Currents of Space.

Read on

- ◆ Asimov's other major achievement is the robot sequence of books: *I, Robot*, *The Rest of the Robots*, *The Caves of Steel*, *The Naked Sun* and *The Robots of Dawn*.
- to the Foundation Saga: ➤ Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (and the other Culture novels); Gordon R. Dickson, *Tactics of Mistake* (and others in the Dorsai sequence); ➤ Robert Heinlein, *The Man Who Sold the Moon*; Peter F. Hamilton, *The Reality Dysfunction*.
- other examples of Golden Age, John W. Campbell-inspired science fiction: ➤ Robert Heinlein, *Methuselah's Children*; A.E. Van Vogt, *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*.

ATKINSON, Kate (born 1951)

British novelist

Kate Atkinson writes family sagas but they are family sagas unlike any others to be found on the shelves of a library or bookshop. The narrative bounces back and forth between decades, the language and imagery are often poetical and allusive, boundaries between what is real and what is unreal blur. Eccentricity and quirkiness intrude on ordinary lower-middle-class domesticity and the books are often very funny. Her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1994), is the story of Ruby Lennox, growing up in the family home above a pet shop in York in the 1950s and 1960s. Her womanizing father and her disgruntled mother, dreaming of a Hollywood glamour that would have been preferable to Yorkshire home life, are strongly created characters, as are the other members of the family. Ruby reaches back into the past in search of explanations for family flaws and frailties and the narrative zigzags between the generations, from her great-grandmother's affair with a French photographer to the unruly circumstances of her own life. Kate Atkinson has since written five further novels – *Human Croquet*, the extravagantly told story of a family whose glory days are in the past, *Emotionally Weird*, about a mother and daughter holed up in a decaying family home and telling one another stories of their own and others' lives, and *Case Histories*, *One Good Turn* and *When Will There Be Good News*, three idiosyncratic but gripping crime novels featuring private investigator Jackson Brodie. *Not the End of the World* is a collection of short stories.

 **Read on**

◆ *Human Croquet; Case Histories*

■ >> Angela Carter, *Wise Children*; >> Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*; Esther Freud, *Gaglow*; Liz Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*; >> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*.

LITERARY TRIVIA 1:

FIVE STRANGE AUTHORIAL DEATHS

Pietro Aretino

The sixteenth-century Italian satirist is said to have fallen off his theatre seat laughing and banged his head on the floor with fatal consequences.

>> **Arnold Bennett**

The author of novels set in his native Potteries died of typhoid as a result of drinking water in a French hotel in a failed attempt to prove it was safe to drink it.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The German poet died of blood poisoning after pricking himself on the thorn of a rose he had picked for a woman friend.

Tennessee Williams

The American playwright choked to death on the plastic top from a nasal spray.

Aeschylus

According to an ancient tradition, the Greek playwright died in Sicily in 456 BC when an eagle, flying high in the sky, mistook his bald head for a stone and dropped a tortoise on it in the hope of breaking open the shell.

ATWOOD, Margaret (born 1939)

Canadian writer of novels, short stories and poems

Atwood is a poet as well as a novelist, and her gifts of precise observation and exact description illuminate all her work. She is fascinated by the balance of power between person and person, and by the way our apparently coherent actions and sayings actually float on a sea of turbulent unseen emotion. Her books often follow the progress of relationships, or of one person's self-discovery. The heroine of *Life Before Man*, for example, is caught up in a sexual quadrilateral (one of whose members, her lover, has just committed suicide), and our interest is as much in seeing how she copes with her own chaotic feelings as in the progress of the affair itself. In *Cat's Eye* a middle-aged painter returns to Toronto, remembers her dismal childhood and adolescence there, and finally comes to terms with the bully who made her life miserable as a schoolchild and with that bully's appalling, manipulative mother. In *The Blind Assassin* an elderly woman attempts to understand the secret history of her family and to unravel the enigma of her sister's death many decades before. Many writers have tackled similar themes, but Atwood's books give a unique impression that each moment, each feeling, is being looked at through a microscope, as if the swirling, nagging 'real' world has been momentarily put aside for something more urgent which may just – her characters consistently put hope above experience – make sense of it.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE (1985)

This dazzling dystopian novel, at once Atwood's most savage book and a departure from her usual Canadian stamping grounds, is set in the twenty-first-century Republic of Gilead. In this benighted state, fundamentalist Christianity rules and the laws are those of Genesis. Women are chattels: they have no identity, no privacy and no happiness except what men permit them. Offred, for example, is a Handmaid, and her life is devoted to one duty only: breeding. In Gilead public prayers and hangings are the norm; individuality – even looking openly into a man's face or reading a woman's magazine – is punished by mutilation, banishment or death. The book shows Offred's struggle to keep her sanity and her identity in such a situation, and her equivocal relationship with the feminist Underground which may be Gilead's only hope.

Atwood's other novels include *Surfacing*, *The Edible Woman*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *Oryx and Crake*, *in which she returns to the dystopian*

science fiction of The Handmaid's Tale, and The Penelopiad, a playful retelling of the myth of Odysseus and Penelope. Dancing Girls, Wilderness Tips, Bluebeard's Egg *and* Moral Disorder *contain short stories.* The Journals of Susannah Moodie *and* True Stories *are poetry collections, and her Selected Poems are also available.*

Read on

◆ *Alias Grace* (an exploration of women's sexuality and social roles wrapped up in a gripping story of a nineteenth-century housemaid who may or may not have been a murderess).

■ to *The Handmaid's Tale*: ► George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

■ to *Cat's Eye*: ► Bernice Rubens, *Our Father*; Lynne Reid Banks, *Children at the Gate*; ► Alison Lurie, *Imaginary Friends*.

■ to Atwood's work in general: ► Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest*; ► Nadine Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature*; ► Saul Bellow, *Herzog*.

AUSTEN, Jane (1775–1817)

British novelist

Austen loved the theatre, and the nearest equivalents to her novels, for pace and verve, are the social comedies of such writers as Sheridan or Goldsmith. The kind of novels popular at the time were epic panoramas (like those of ► Sir Walter Scott), showing the human race strutting and swaggering amid stormy weather in vast, romantic landscapes. Austen preferred a narrower focus, concentrating on a handful of people busy about their own domestic concerns. Her books are about the bonds which draw families together and the ambitions and feelings (usually caused by grown-up children seeking marriage partners) which divide them. Her plots fall into 'acts', like plays, and her dialogue is as precise and witty as in any comedy of the time. But she offers a delight available to no playwright: that of the author's own voice, setting the scene, commenting on and shaping events. She is like a bright-eyed, sharp-tongued relative sitting in a corner of the room watching the rest of the family bustle.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (1813)

Genteel Mr and Mrs Bennet and their five grown-up daughters are thrown into confusion when two rich, marriageable young men come to live in the neighbour-

hood. The comedy of the story comes from Mrs Bennet's mother-hen-like attempts at matchmaking, and the way fate and the young people's own inclinations make things turn out entirely differently from her plans. The more serious sections of the novel show the developing relationship between Elizabeth Bennet, the second daughter, and cold, proud Mr Darcy. Although secondary characters (henpecked Mr Bennet, snobbish Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Elizabeth's romantic younger sister Lydia, the dashing army officer Wickham and the toady Mr Collins) steal the limelight whenever they appear, the book hinges on half a dozen magnificent set-piece scenes between Elizabeth and Darcy, the two headstrong young people the reader longs to see realizing their love for one another and falling into one another's arms.

Austen's completed novels are: Northanger Abbey (*a spoof of romantic melodrama, unlike any of her other books*), Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma *and* Persuasion. *She also left a number of unfinished works, including* The Watsons (*completed by Joan Aiken*) *and* Sanditon (*finished by Marie Dobbs*).

Read on

◆ *Emma* (about a young woman so eager to manage other people's lives that she fails, for a long time, to realize where her own true happiness lies); *Mansfield Park* (a darker comedy about a girl brought up by a rich, charming family who is at first dazzled by their easy brilliance, then comes to see that they are selfish and foolish, and finally, by unassuming persistence, wins through to the happiness we have hoped for her).

■ to *Pride and Prejudice*: Emma Tennant, *Pemberley* (riperly romantic sequel, not terribly Austenish but fun for Elizabeth/Darcy lovers); ►► Mrs Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*.

■ to *Mansfield Park*: Joan Aiken, *Mansfield Revisited* – the best of many attempts to use Austen's characters and equal Austen's style.

■ to Austen's work in general: ►► William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*; ►► E.M. Forster, *A Room With a View*; ►► Alison Lurie, *Only Children*; ►► Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women*; the short stories of ►► Anton Chekhov and ►► Katherine Mansfield.

AUSTER, Paul (born 1947)

US writer

Auster's first book, *Squeeze Play* (1982), was a pastiche of a crime novel and his key work, *The New York Trilogy* (1987, although the individual books appeared separately in 1985 and 1986 as *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*), is also a sly deconstruction job on the detective novel. The trilogy is a more complex narrative than *Squeeze Play*, one in which reader, author and sleuth seem to exchange roles in a strange kind of free-for-all. In the first segment, Quinn, a writer of detective stories, is summoned by someone who wants to get hold of a character called Paul Auster. *Ghosts* sees a detective named Blue hired by White to tail Black and, again, identities seem elastic and fluid. The third volume has the narrator following a friend, the writer Fanshawe, who has vanished, leaving behind not only his writing but also his wife and child. Before long, the mysterious Fanshawe is the one doing the following and the narrator the one being pursued.

Auster's other novels include *In the Country of Last Things (in which a woman searches for her brother in a crumbling, post-apocalyptic city)*, *The Music of Chance (in which a professional gambler drifts across America winning and losing at cards)*, *Mr Vertigo*, *Moon Palace*, *The Invention of Solitude*, *Oracle Night*, *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Travels in the Scriptorium*. *The Art of Hunger consists of essays, largely on literary subjects*. *True Tales of American Life, edited by Auster, is a compelling selection of autobiographical accounts by 'ordinary' Americans*.

Read on

- ◆ *The Invention of Solitude; Man in the Dark* (in which the central character imagines a dystopian version of recent American history).
- Robert Coover, *Ghost Town* (undermines the Western genre just as Auster undermines the detective story); ►► Don DeLillo, *Running Dog*; ►► Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*; ►► Michael Chabon, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*; Cameron McCabe, *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor* (very different in style and setting but also takes apart the conventions of the detective story to great effect).

READONATHEME:

AUSTRALIA

- Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus*
- » Peter Carey, *The True History of the Kelly Gang*
 - » Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*
 - Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*
 - Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*
 - » Howard Jacobson, *Redback*
 - » Thomas Keneally, *Woman of the Inner Sea*
 - » David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*
 - H.H. Richardson, *The Getting of Wisdom*
 - » Jane Rogers, *Promised Lands*
 - Nevil Shute, *A Town Like Alice*
 - » Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*
 - » Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*

READONATHEME:

AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

Novels featuring famous writers

- » Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)
- » Anthony Burgess, *Nothing Like the Sun* (William Shakespeare)
- Frederick Busch, *The Night Inspector* (Herman Melville)
- » Tracy Chevalier, *Burning Bright* (William Blake)
- » Helen Dunmore, *Counting the Stars* (Catullus)
- Carlos Fuentes, *The Old Gringo* (Ambrose Bierce)
- » Michèle Roberts, *Fair Exchange* (William Wordsworth)
- » Steven Saylor, *A Twist at the End* (O. Henry)
- C. K. Stead, *Mansfield* (Katherine Mansfield)
- » Colm Toibin, *The Master* (Henry James)

READONATHEME:

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND MEMOIRS (GHOSTED!)

- Margaret George, *The Memoirs of Cleopatra*
- » Robert Graves, *I, Claudius*
 - » Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (King David of Israel)
 - Stephen Marlowe, *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus*
 - Rosalind Miles, *I, Elizabeth*
 - Jude Morgan, *The King's Touch* (Duke of Monmouth)
 - Robert Nye, *The Voyage of the Destiny* (Sir Walter Raleigh)
 - Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, The Supreme* (Francia, dictator of Paraguay)

STARTPOINT

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Writing an autobiography gives you the chance to relive your own life – and to edit it to suit yourself. Although we readers may think that an autobiography allows us inside the writer's head, this is an illusion. We see only what we are allowed to see, and who is to tell how much is fiction, how much is fact? Often the better known the person, the less interesting the book. Generals' and politicians' memories tend to rehash old battles; showbiz autobiographies tend to revive old triumphs and pay off old scores. Some writers, as different as Maya Angelou and Laurie Lee, have made a speciality out of autobiography and because their books concentrate on place and other people's characters as much as their own, they are often the most enjoyable of all.

» **Amis, Martin, *Experience* (2000).** The *enfant terrible* of English fiction has now reached middle age, and this reflective book, moving in its meditations on time and loss, is one of the results. Very candid, funny and revealing.

» **Angelou, Maya, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969).** Singer, dancer and black rights activist tells scathing story of growing up in racist Southern USA. Also: *Gather Together in My Name*; *Singin' and Swingin'*

and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas; The Heart of a Woman; All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.

Beah, Ishmael, *A Long Way Gone* (2007). Beah recalls his brutalised childhood and his experiences as a boy soldier in the civil wars in Sierra Leone. A mesmerising, eye-opening account of how he lost his true self amidst all the violence and struggled to regain it.

Brittain, Vera, *Testament of Youth* (1933). Upper-middle-class young woman becomes battlefield nurse in the First World War and finds her attitudes to herself and her society completely changed. Also: *Testament of Friendship; Testament of Experience.*

Burroughs, Augusten, *Running with Scissors* (2002). Memoir of growing up in a spectacularly dysfunctional American family, in which each potentially harrowing event in an alarming upbringing is transformed into a further episode in a kind of surreal sitcom.

Chang, Jung, *Wild Swans* (1991). The author grew up in Mao's China, only escaping to study abroad after the Cultural Revolution. Through her own story and those of her mother and grandmother, she tells the unhappy story of China in the twentieth century.

Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* (1845). Moving recollections of life as a slave in the pre-Civil War South by man who went on to become the first great African-American orator and leader.

Durrell, Gerald, *My Family and Other Animals* (1956). Idyllic childhood of young naturalist in 1930s Corfu. The animals are described with zestful seriousness; the humans (including brother »» Lawrence) are like the cast of some eccentric farce. Also: *A Zoo in My Luggage; Birds, Beasts and Relatives.*

Feynman, Richard, *Surely You're Joking, Mr Feynman* (1985). Endearing, entertaining and intellectually stretching memoir by Nobel Prize-winning physicist who added new realms of meaning to the word 'eccentric'.

Frame, Janet, *An Autobiography* (1990). Compendium of three books: *To the Island*, about growing up in rural New Zealand, *An Angel At My Table*, a scarring account of eight years in a mental hospital, and *The Envoy From Mirror City*, about trying to make a career as a writer, falling in love and finding happiness at last.

Gray, Simon, *The Smoking Diaries* (2004). The late playwright's journals, wickedly observant of the faults and foibles of himself and others, are addictively readable and mordantly funny. Followed by *The Year of the Jouncer* and *The Last Cigarette*.

Keenan, Brian, *An Evil Cradling* (1992). Keenan turns his terrible experiences as a hostage in Beirut into a luminous, beautifully written account of suffering, friendship and forgiveness.

» **Lee, Laurie, *Cider With Rosie* (1959).** A childhood in rural Gloucestershire is recalled with a loving exactness that never strays into unthinking nostalgia.

» **Levi, Primo, *If This is a Man* (1987).** Levi's unsparing memoir of life in Auschwitz forces us to contemplate both the depths and the heights of the human spirit.

McCourt, Frank, *Angela's Ashes* (1996). Compelling story of surviving, with humour and humanity intact, a childhood spent in poverty and deprivation in 1930s and 1940s Limerick. Sometimes harrowing, often very funny. *'Tis* is a sequel continuing McCourt's story after he emigrated to New York as a young man.

Wolff, Tobias, *This Boy's Life* (1999). How to survive the perils and pleasures of a typical American adolescence (in the 1950s) when you're living in a very untypical family.

Also recommended: Andrea Ashworth, *Once in a House on Fire*; Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End*; Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy*; » Bruce Chatwin, *What Am I Doing Here?*; Paula Fox, *Borrowed Finery*; » Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*; P.J. Kavanagh, *The Perfect Stranger*; Eric

Lomax, *The Railway Man*; » Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*; John Peel, *Margrave of the Marshes*; Gwen Raverat, *Period Piece*; Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood*; Wole Soyinka, *Ake*; Peter Ustinov, *Dear Me*; Joan Wyndham, *Love Lessons*.

HIDDEN GEM:

EDMUND GOSSE – FATHER AND SON (1907)

More than a century after its first publication this remains a classic account of two generations clashing and tells the story of Gosse's relationship with his God-fearing, terrifying father and his attempts to fashion his own character. Philip Gosse was a distinguished nineteenth-century zoologist who refused to accept the ideas of his contemporary Charles Darwin and clung tenaciously to the tenets of fundamental Christianity. As his son struggles to assert himself in the face of his father's formidable presence, an extraordinary portrait emerges of a Victorian family life like no other.

BAINBRIDGE, Beryl (born 1934)

British novelist

In British music-hall and stand-up comedy, there is a tradition of using flat, unemotional words to recount the disasters that happen to perfectly ordinary people, whose boring lives conceal passions and aspirations the speaker can only hint at. Bainbridge's short, dialogue-filled novels do the same thing in print. They are horror stories told like everyday gossip, and their downbeat wit and plain style are essential to the effect. *The Bottle-factory Outing*, for example, is about two women, pathologically jealous of one another, who share a flat and make plans for the seductions and other delights of a works outing – which turns out darkly different from anything either suspected. In several books, Bainbridge uses real historical characters, imagining for them the same kind of chance-ridden, often desperate lives as those of her invented people. *Young Adolf* sends Hitler to a tatty 1919 Liverpool boarding house filled with Bainbridge eccentrics. *The Birthday Boys* is a retelling, a chapter by each of the men involved, of Scott's disastrous 1910–12 Antarctic expedition.

MASTER GEORGIE (1998)

The best and bleakest of Bainbridge's historical fictions, this is the story of Liverpoolian surgeon and photographer George Hardy, who volunteers to take his medical skills to the war in the Crimea. Accompanied by an eccentric entourage of family and friends, including Myrtle, his adoring adoptive sister, and Dr Potter, his increasingly troubled brother-in-law, George flounders through the death and disease of the war in search of meanings that aren't there. Told in a series of narrative voices – including those of Myrtle and Dr Potter – this is a dark, laconic and moving story that long remains in the mind.

Bainbridge's other novels include A Quiet Life, Harriet Said, The Dressmaker, Sweet William, Injury Time, Watson's Apology *and* According to Queeney, *another of Bainbridge's offbeat historical fictions in which Dr Johnson is seen through the often unforgiving eyes of the daughter of a woman with whom he is conducting an intense but platonic relationship.*

Read on

- ◆ *An Awfully Big Adventure* (set in shabby provincial theatre in the bleak 1950s); *Every Man For Himself* (Bainbridge's typically idiosyncratic take on the Titanic disaster).
- Paul Bailey, *Sugar Cane*; ►► Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden*; Alice Thomas Ellis, *The Inn at the Edge of the World*; ►► Hilary Mantel, *The Giant O'Brien*.

LITERARYTRIVIA2:

THE FIRST TEN PENGUIN PAPERBACKS EVER PUBLISHED (in 1935)

- André Maurois: *Ariel* (a book about the poet Shelley that was actually numbered as the very first Penguin)
- Agatha Christie: *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*
Susan Ertz: *Madame Claire*
- Ernest Hemingway: *A Farewell to Arms*
Eric Linklater: *Poet's Pub*
Compton Mackenzie: *Carnival*
Beverley Nichols: *Twenty Five*
- Dorothy L. Sayers: *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*
Mary Webb: *Gone to Earth*
E.H. Young: *William*

BAKER, Nicholson (born 1957)

US writer

The minutiae of life, the tiny details that form the background to most fiction, are brought into the foreground in the early novels of Nicholson Baker. Little happens in a conventional narrative sense but the reader's interest is held by Baker's playfulness with language, his odd, oblique observations and his digressions. In *Room Temperature* the novel's only action (if that is the right word) is the feeding of a baby. *The Mezzanine* centres on the short escalator journey of an office worker to the floor on which he works. This makes the books sound dull and they are anything but. They are short books and Baker crams them with the most extraordinary, offbeat information and speculation, often contained in elaborate footnotes in which the word count substantially outmatches that in the main text. After his early novels, Baker gained a certain notoriety by turning his obsessive attention to sex. *Vox*, explicitly detailed about the delights of telephone sex, was followed by *The Fermata*, the story of an office temp, Arno Strine, who has the ability to freeze time at the snap of his fingers. He uses this ability to explore erotic possibilities not otherwise available to him, undressing women at will, playing sexual practical jokes on those frozen. Some readers will find Baker's knowing ironies and reflections, his stream of consciousness for the designer-label generation deeply irritating. Others will be beguiled by his wit, the attention he gives to the everyday and the way books like *Room Temperature* and *The Mezzanine* reveal the idle, insignificant internal monologues and debates we all conduct as we go about our lives.

Baker's other books (fiction and non-fiction) include U and I, The Size of Thoughts, The Everlasting Story of Nory, Double Fold, A Box of Matches (*in which he returns to the obsessive scrutiny of ephemera that characterized his first books*), Checkpoint and Human Smoke, a long and controversial volume which re-examines some of our myths about the Second World War.

Read on

- ▣ to *The Fermata*: » Will Self, *Cock and Bull*.
- ▣ to Baker's other fiction: » John Updike, *Couples*; » Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*; Donald Antrim, *The Hundred Brothers*; Gilbert Sorrentino, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*.

BALDWIN, James (1924–87)

US writer of novels, plays and non-fiction

In a series of non-fiction books (*Notes of a Native Son*, *The Fire Next Time*, *No Name in the Street*), Baldwin described the fury and despair of alienated American blacks, urging revolution as the only way to maintain racial identity in a hostile environment. His plays and novels tackle the same theme, but add two more, equally passionate: the way fundamentalist Christianity is a destructive force, and the quest for sexual identity in an amoral world. *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is a novel about a poor Harlem family torn apart by the pressures of born-again Christianity. *Another Country* shows people living lives of increasing desperation in a corrupt, all-engulfing and terrifying New York. *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is about an American in Paris, having to choose between his mistress and his (male) lover.

Baldwin's other novels are *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk* *and* *Just Above My Head*; *Going to Meet the Man* *is a collection of short stories*; *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* *is a book about a notorious series of child murders in Atlanta in the early 1980s.*

Read on

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (a rootless black American travels the USA in search of identity, and finally – as the book becomes increasingly surreal – continues his quest in hell); Richard Wright, *Native Son* (first published in 1940, the story of a young black man driven to crime and murder by racism and deprivation); Chester Himes, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and his other detective novels (set in a wildly vibrant and violent Harlem and, crime plots apart, are as unsparing as any of Baldwin's books); ➤ Maya Angelou's autobiographical sequence, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (sunnier reactions to equally abrasive Southern US black experience).
- books as bleak as Baldwin's about the conjunction of sex, violence and despair: Jean Genet, *Querelle of Brest*; John Rechy, *City of Night*; John Edgar Wideman, *A Glance Away*.

BALLARD, J.G. (James Graham) (1930–2009)

British novelist

Ballard's pessimism about the human race, with our capacity for violence and destruction, reveals itself in novels which are usually designated science fiction but which stretch the limits of the genre almost to breaking point. Each of these novels takes an aspect of the way we treat the planet, and each other, and extends it towards catastrophe. In some books (e.g. *The Drowned World*, about the melting of the polar ice-caps) human actions trigger natural disaster. In others (e.g. *Concrete Island*, about a man trapped on a motorway island, and *High Rise*, about the effects on human nature of living in ever-higher tower-blocks) we laboriously reconstruct the world as a single, megalopolitan prison cell. *Crash*, which gained a new notoriety as a consequence of David Cronenberg's 1996 film version, delves into dark realms of the psyche in its examination of the sexual allure of car crashes and adds new realms of meaning to the word 'auto-eroticism'. Apart from science fiction, Ballard is best known for *Empire of the Sun* (1984), a powerful autobiographical novel about a young teenager in a Second World War Japanese internment camp, and its sequel *The Kindness of Women* (1991), about the same boy as a young adult looking for love in post-war England. The novels of his later years straddle the gap between social analysis and social prediction in their depictions of sex and drugs-fuelled decadence. In *Cocaine Nights* the investigation of a fatal fire in an upmarket Spanish resort reveals violence and anarchy lurking beneath a civilized veneer. The apparently utopian business community in the south of France in *Super-Cannes*, 'an ideas laboratory for the new millennium', is the setting for unsettling mind-games and eventual violence.

Ballard's other novels include Hello America (*about European explorers of the future rediscovering a long-abandoned USA*), The Atrocity Exhibition, Millennium People *and* Kingdom Come. The Terminal Beach, Myths of the Near Future, Low-flying Aircraft *and the linked volume* The Vermilion Sands, *and War Fever are collections of short stories. Miracles of Life, subtitled 'Shanghai to Shepperton', is an autobiography published in the last year of his life.*

Read on

◆ *The Day of Creation* (about a scientist trying to find water in drought-stricken Africa, who sees a new river appear miraculously, becomes obsessed with it, and travels up it to find its source and hopefully understand himself); *Rushing to*

Paradise (about a post-apocalypse utopia run by a mad, fundamentalist feminist).

■ » William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*; » Will Self, *How the Dead Live*; » Philip K. Dick, *Valis*.

BALZAC, Honoré de (1799–1850)

French novelist

Photography was invented during Balzac's lifetime, and there was talk of using it to produce an encyclopedia of human types, catching each trade, profession and character in a suitable setting and at a particularly revealing moment. Balzac determined to do much the same thing in prose: to write a set of novels which would include people of every possible kind, described so minutely that the reader could envisage them as clearly as if they had been photographed. He called the project *The Human Comedy* (*La Comédie Humaine*), and although he died before completing it, it still runs to some 90 pieces of fiction – which can be read separately – and includes over 2,000 different characters.

OLD GORIOT (LE PÈRE GORIOT) (1834)

Goriot is a lonely old man obsessed by love for his two married daughters. He lives in a seedy Parisian boarding-house (whose contents and inhabitants Balzac meticulously describes), and gradually sells all his possessions, and even cuts down on food, to try to buy his daughters' love with presents. They treat him with a contempt he never notices – in fact everyone despises him except Rastignac, a student living in the same house. Goriot's death-bed scene, where he clutches Rastignac's hand thinking that his daughters have come to visit him at last, is one of Balzac's most moving passages, a deliberate evocation of King Lear's death in Shakespeare's play.

The best-known novels from The Human Comedy are César Birotteau (*about a shopkeeper destroyed by ambition*), Eugénie Grandet (*a love story, one of Balzac's few books with a happy ending*), Cousin Bette (*about a man whose obsessive philandering tears his family apart*) and its companion volume Cousin Pons. Droll Tales (Contes drolatiques) *is a set of farcical short stories, similar to those in Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron or The Arabian Nights.*

Read on

- ◆ *The Curé of Tours* (like *Le Père Goriot*, a detailed and moving study of desolate old age).
- to Balzac's power and emotional bleakness: >> Émile Zola, *Nana*; François Mauriac, *The Woman of the Pharisees*; Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*; >> Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.
- to his vision of the 'ant-hill of human aspiration', the senseless, self-destructive bustle of affairs: >> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*; >> George Gissing, *New Grub Street*.

BANKS, Iain (born 1954)

British novelist

As Iain Banks, Banks writes literary novels, each of them fuelled with dark, obsessive imaginings. His first novel, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), was a disturbing but compelling announcement of his themes. It is the story, in his own words, of Frank Cauldhame, a teenage killer, living with his father on a remote Scottish island where he practises bizarre sacrificial rituals to protect himself against perceived threats. Extremely graphic in its description of blood, death and violence, it is not a book for the queasy but creates its own imagined world with great power. *The Bridge* (1986) explores the fantasies of a man about to die after a car crash – and is set partly on a nightmarish Forth Bridge, partly in the hero's memories of his Scottish childhood, and partly in a mad sword-and-sorcery fantasy adventure into which his fevered imagination projects him. *The Business* (1999) is a tale of corruption and conspiracy in a shadowy, centuries-old organization devoted to the making of money. As Iain M. Banks, Banks writes science fiction, filled with the same wild humour and bizarre imagination. The Culture novels tell of a future society in which technological advance has created super-beings of great longevity and almost limitless capacities. The advanced inhabitants of the Culture come into contact and often conflict with other less-developed societies throughout the galaxies. Banks's science fiction is basically space opera but with an intelligence and sophistication space opera doesn't usually possess.

The other novels he has written as Iain Banks are *Walking on Glass*, *Canal Dreams*, *Espedair Street*, *The Crow Road*, *Complicity*, *Whit*, *A Song of Stone*, *Dead Air* and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*. *The Culture novels are* *Consider*

Phlebas, The Player of Games, Use of Weapons, Excession, Inversions, Look to Windward *and* Matter. Against a Dark Background, Feersum Endjinn *and* The Algebraist *are three SF novels not set in the Culture.*

Read on

▣ to Banks's literary novels: » Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*; » Martin Amis, *The Information*; Clive Barker, *The Damnation Game*; » Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*.

▣ to his science fiction: Peter F. Hamilton, *The Reality Dysfunction*; Ken McLeod, *The Star Fraction*.

BANVILLE, JOHN (born 1945)

Irish novelist

John Banville is one of the most inventive and intellectually exhilarating novelists of his generation. He uses his fiction to explore the intricate connections between past and present, our shifting and fluctuating sense of personal identity and the personalities of others, and the varying ways we interpret the world and create (or fail to create) our place in it. *Doctor Copernicus* brings to life the Polish/German priest whose theories undermined medieval ideas about man's position in the universe. It was followed by *Kepler* and *The Newton Letter*, a story largely set in contemporary Ireland but with a central character obsessed by writing a biography of Isaac Newton. In the twenty-five years since these three interconnected books (sometimes known as the 'Revolutions Trilogy') were published, Banville has continued to produce fiction which plays sophisticated games with its readers, often undermining or challenging our ideas about narratives and the reliability of narrators. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery, the narrator, is a man of culture, intelligence and self-awareness. He is also a murderer. The novel is Freddie's chilling dissection of his life and how it has led him to the killing. Half confession and half the self-conscious creation of a persona that may or may not reflect his inner self, Freddie's marshalling of the evidence in his case is another example of Banville's fascination with the unreliable narrator and with mysteries of human motivation.

THE SEA (2005)

Art historian Max Morden is in mourning for his wife, recently dead from cancer, and he returns to a small Irish seaside resort he had visited as a boy. Fastidious and ever so slightly pretentious, Max views the little town and its present-day inhabitants with morose disdain while travelling back in his own mind to the days of his marriage and to the summer in his boyhood when he met the much-admired Grace family. Slowly both narrative and narrator wind towards the revelation of what really happened in the past.

Banville's other novels include Ghosts and Athena (two titles which link with The Book of Evidence to form a loose trilogy), Mefisto, The Untouchable, Eclipse and Shroud. In the last few years, using the pseudonym 'Benjamin Black', he has written two crime novels (Christine Falls and The Silver Swan) set in 1950s Dublin and a contemporary thriller, The Lemur.

Read on

- ◆ *The Untouchable* (a fictional version of the story of the Cambridge spy Anthony Blunt).
- to 'The Revolutions Trilogy': ► Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*; Malcolm Bradbury, *To the Hermitage*.
- to *The Book of Evidence*: ► John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure*; ► Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*.
- to Banville's fiction in general: John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*; ► Graham Swift, *Ever After*; ► W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*.

BARKER, Nicola (born 1966)

British novelist

A reviewer once described Nicola Barker as having 'a determinedly perverse and ungovernable imagination' and her novels and stories, unmistakably offbeat and quirky, are certainly unlike those of almost any other contemporary novelist. Usually set in some of the least glamorous and scenically attractive areas of contemporary Britain – Palmers Green, the Isle of Sheppey, Canvey Island – her books present a contrast between the mundane, if indefinably sinister, topography and the oddballs who people it: furtive pornographers, a teenage giantess, stalkers and pseudo-religious sages, a man who feeds his right hand to an owl. Her

characters are those who, through choice or fate, fail to fit in to society. They are all weirdly memorable, as is Barker's elaborate prose style which is rich in darkly comic metaphor and simile and packed with punning playfulness.

BEHINDLINGS (2002)

The *Behindlings*, a group of assorted misfits and grotesques, have their own guru in the shape of Wesley, the enigmatic central character. Half down-and-out and half charismatic trickster, Wesley shapes the lives of his followers through a bizarre kind of treasure hunt he is orchestrating. He hands out portentous clues; they track his nomadic wanderings around the country. Arriving in Canvey Island, with a selection of *Behindlings* in tow, Wesley begins his self-appointed task of turning the everyday world upside down.

Read on

◆ *Wide Open* (a roll-call of eccentrics and walking wounded gather on the Isle of Sheppey in search of redemption and escape from the demons that haunt them). Nicola Barker's other novels are *Reversed Forecast*, *Small Holdings*, *Five Miles from Outer Hope*, *Clear* and *Darkmans*. *The Three Button Trick* is a collection of short stories.

■ ➤➤ A.L. Kennedy, *So I Am Glad*; Magnus Mills, *The Restraint of Beasts*; Ali Smith, *The Accidental*.

BARKER, Pat (born 1943)

British novelist

Barker's early novels told, in a no-nonsense, brisk way, about the lives of ordinary people, usually women, poor and in the north of England. In the 1990s she used the same blunt precision on a completely different subject, the experience of fighting men in the First World War, and produced the award-winning trilogy of *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*. Mixing wholly fictional characters like the anti-heroic Billy Prior with real characters such as the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen and the psychiatrist William Rivers, Barker succeeded in re-imagining the First World War for a new generation of readers. These novels enter into the heads of young men forced to cause, endure and deal with horrors beyond imagining: in short, not the bravado but the waste of war. Our grandparents or great-grandparents brought back tales like these, and Owen

turned them into lacerating poems; Barker's books strip away time and distance, giving voices to shadows and the inarticulate, so that you feel that this is exactly what it must have been like to live these nightmares. After completing her First World War trilogy Pat Barker returned to something like the territory of her earlier fiction with *Another World* and *Border Crossing*, in which a child psychiatrist working in the north of England is drawn back into a terrible crime in the past. *Double Vision* again took war as its subject, in a story of a man struggling to come to terms with his experiences in 1990s Sarajevo. Her most recent novel, *Life Class* (2007), returns to the era of her famous trilogy in a story of students at the Slade School of Art in 1914 and their experiences of love and war.

Read on

- ◆ Barker's earlier novels include *Union Street* (filmed as *Stanley and Iris*, with Robert de Niro and Jane Fonda) and the particularly fine *Blow Your House Down*.
- to the trilogy: Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (renowned 1930s novel about German squaddies in the First World War); ►► Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong*; ►► Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (about bewildered young airmen in the Second World War).
- to Barker's work in general: ►► Helen Dunmore, *With Your Crooked Heart*; ►► Margaret Forster, *Mother Can You Hear Me?*; Jane Gardam, *Bilgewater*; Anne Fine, *Telling Liddy*.

BARNES, Julian (born 1946)

British novelist

Barnes worked as editorial assistant on the Oxford English Dictionary, and as a drama critic, before becoming a full-time writer in his early thirties. After two enjoyable but ordinary novels, *Metroland* and *Before She Met Me*, he hit form in 1984 with *Flaubert's Parrot*. This is a dazzlingly ironical book about a biographer of ►► Flaubert so obsessed with his subject, so eager to investigate every piece of fluff on Flaubert's carpet or tea-stain on his crockery, that the quest utterly and ludicrously swallows his own identity. Other cunningly contrived fictions have followed in the two decades since *Flaubert's Parrot*. In the linked stories of *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), Barnes describes a number of skin-of-the-teeth escapes for the human race, epic voyages from life-threatening reality to one mirage of the radiant future after another: Noah's Ark, the raft of the Medusa,

a boatful of Jewish refugees, a film crew in the Amazon rain forest. The book also meditates on love – which, in Barnes’s most ironical shift of all, may be the solution to the human dilemma, a solution all his characters are too self-obsessed to see.

England, England (1998) is a knowing, sophisticated and often very funny satire on ideas of Englishness. A megalomaniac tycoon creates a theme-park England on the Isle of Wight, filled with all those things deemed quintessentially English, and the fantasy land gradually supersedes the real England. In *Arthur and George* (2005), Barnes takes the real story of Arthur Conan Doyle and his attempts to win justice for George Edalji, a wrongly imprisoned solicitor, and creates an elegant narrative of two very different men whose lives collide.

As well as novels under his own name, Barnes has also written private-eye thrillers as Dan Kavanagh. They include Duffy, Going to the Dogs and Putting the Boot In. Cross Channel and The Lemon Table are collections of meaty short stories, Something to Declare a selection of essays which explore his delight in France and French culture; Nothing to Be Frightened Of is a memoir.

Read on

- to *Flaubert's Parrot*: » Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*; » A.S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*.
- to *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*: » Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah*.
- to Barnes's other works: » Jonathan Coe, *What a Carve Up!*; » Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*; » John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure*.

BECKETT, Samuel (1906–89)

Irish writer

Novelist, poet and playwright, Beckett produced work both in French and English, issuing translations as he went along. Most of his novels, and his best-known play *Waiting for Godot*, first appeared in French. As a young man he was » Joyce's secretary, and his work owes debts to the monologue which ends *Ulysses* and to the dream-narratives of *Finnegans Wake*. His subject is the futility of human existence, and his characters (the narrators of his books) are tramps, cripples and the insane. His works would be unendurably bleak – many readers find them so –

if they were not lit with a fantastical, death-defying black humour and marked by an almost obsessive interest in the potential and limits of language.

Beckett's main novels are Murphy, Watt *and the trilogy* Molloy, Malone Dies *and* The Unnameable. *His plays include* Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape *and* Happy Days. *His poems are in* Collected Poems in English and French. *More Pricks than Kicks is a collection of early, Joycean short stories.*

Read on

▣ >> James Joyce, *Ulysses*; Julio Cortazar, *Hopscotch*; Georges Perec, *A Void*; B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal*.

BEEVOR, Antony (born 1946)

British historian

Antony Beevor was in the army before becoming a writer and his non-fiction books (he also published four novels in the 1970s and 1980s) are often military history written with a profound sympathy for the ordinary soldiers forced to do the actual fighting in time of war. Beevor's two finest achievements to date deal with the Second World War. In both he provides a sweeping narrative of terrible events without ever losing sight of the individuals caught up in them. *Stalingrad* is a moving account of the ferocious battle for the Soviet city which became a turning point in the war. *Berlin – The Downfall 1945* looks at the bloody *Götterdämmerung* that brought the Second World War in Europe to an end as Allied armies closed in on Berlin from all sides. Both books will satisfy those readers interested in the large-scale tactics and strategy of warfare and those who are drawn to the small-scale human dramas of people struggling to survive in the worst of circumstances.

Antony Beevor's other books include The Battle for Spain, Crete: The Battle and the Resistance, Paris After the Liberation (*with Artemis Cooper*) *and* D-Day.

Read on

◆ *The Mystery of Olga Chekhova* (the intriguing story of a Russian woman who became a film star in Berlin and a spy for the Soviets).

▣ William Craig, *Enemy at the Gates: The Battle for Stalingrad*; Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany*; Richard Overy, *Russia's War*.

READONATHEME:

BEFORE THE NOVEL

The novel as we know it was perfected in the eighteenth century. These books preceded it – but are novels in all but name.

Apuleius (second century), *The Golden Ass*

John Bunyan (seventeenth century), *Pilgrim's Progress*

Miguel de Cervantes (sixteenth century), *Don Quixote*

Thomas Malory (fifteenth century), *Morte d'Arthur*

Thomas Nashe (sixteenth century), *The Unfortunate Traveller*

Petronius (first century), *Satyricon*

» François Rabelais (sixteenth century), *Gargantua and Pantagruel*

BELLOW, Saul (1915–2005)

US novelist and playwright

In Bellow's view, one of the most unexpected aspects of life in the modern world, and particularly in the post-Christian West, is that many people have lost all sense of psychological and philosophical identity. All Bellow's leading characters feel alienated from society. Some are content to suffer; others try to assert themselves, to invent an identity and live up to it – an attempt which is usually both bizarre and doomed. The hero of *The Adventures of Augie March*, trying to model himself on one of » Hemingway's men of action, takes his girlfriend lizard-hunting in Mexico with a tame eagle, and is amazed when she leaves him. The hero of *Henderson the Rain King* goes on safari to darkest Africa, only to be taken prisoner by a remote people who think him a god-king and mark him for sacrifice. All of Bellow's fiction is written in a rich and expansive prose and the exuberance of his imagination, clear both in description and in the creation of character, adds life and energy to what is already philosophically intriguing.

HUMBOLDT'S GIFT (1975)

The book's hero, Charlie Citrine, is a wisecracking, streetwise failure. He is a writer whose inspiration has run out, a husband whose wife is divorcing him and whose mistress despises him, an educated man terrified of brainwork. Unexpectedly, a