Writing from Natalie Barber, Janet Bayliss, Sue Blything-Smith, Tricia Gilbey, Hannah Gold, Keith Jones, Jacquie Knott, Simon Knott, Gill Lowe

Book recommendations from Jeremy Page and Fiona Sampson

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BookTalk

Spring 2021

suffolkbooktalk

Suffolk Book League

Created by Andrew Burton,
Tricia Gilbey and Gill Lowe

about us

Suffolk Book League is a registered charity that has encouraged a love of reading since 1982 and supports a range of local initiatives across the county.

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Registered Charity no. 296783

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We're pleased to partner with Woodbridge Emporium bookshop. SBL members receive 10% discount.

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from the chair...

Welcome to what is hopefully the last BookTalk of lockdown. We hope you enjoy it. Our committee members have written about what they have been reading during this peculiar year. Don't forget, we are always pleased to receive members' reviews and other contributions to this magazine.

I'm very happy to share the news that we have a new treasurer, Paris Warren, who is joining us to take over this role. I am confident her professional accountancy experience as well as her experience of working with other charities will make her a valuable addition to our team. I would like to thank Helen MacNaughton, our outgoing Treasurer, for all she has done to help manage our finances. Anyone else who would like to join us on the committee would be warmly welcomed. If you think you might be interested but would like to know more, let me know and I'd be really happy to chat about what we do to keep SBL running. There are spaces for people with a whole range of skills.

We have a programme of online events running up until the summer that continue to be free for members at www.sbl.org.uk/events. If you miss them on the day that they go live, you can watch them from that date onwards. These interviews are free for our members - whenever you decide to watch them - in the section 'Online Author Interviews'. Just make sure you are logged in first. In the future we hope to make individual events available to non-members who would pay.

After the August break I look forward to meeting you all again. Till then, keep well and safe, and keep reading!

Jacquie Knott

forthcoming suffolk book league online events...

Fiona Sampson on Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Thursday 25 March 2021, 7:30pm

Hannah Gold
Tuesday 13 April 2021, 7.30m

George Szirtes
Friday 21 May 2021, 7.30pm

Andy Friend
Thursday 17 June 2021, 7.30pm

Francesca Wade
Thursday 15 July 2021, 7.30pm

Free to members
Log on at www.sbl.org.uk

what a blessing reading has been during lockdown

by Jacquie Knott

What a blessing reading has been during lockdown! When it started I was drawn to titles that reflected that feeling of isolation: *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson, (2006: Penguin) and of disease: *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Earth Abides* by George R. Stewart (1999: Gateway) and the mighty *Who was Changed and Who was Dead* by Barbara Comyns (2021: Daunt Books Publishing). As it has gone on though, I have used reading as both an escape and to be in community with other readers. Not just my beloved SBL friends, but the whole reading world out there. '24in48', a challenge in which participants pledge to read for 24 hours of a weekend, putting aside the trivialities of housework to really work on that goal and then sharing results with their fellow readers across the world, is great fun.

My big escape has been to Norway. After getting two particularly splendid books for Christmas, my mind spent January there. I have now read everything available by Jenny Hval and Vigdis Hjorth. I particularly recommend *Broken* by the crime writer Karin Fossum, (2010: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) which begins when she is woken in the night by the person who is currently second on the list of the potential characters queuing outside her house, waiting for her to write them into existence, who begs her to make him real. Not since the women's book group read books from South America for a year has my imagination and curiosity taken me so successfully elsewhere. No travel restrictions on the mind, thankfully.

Turn to page 11 to discover what other Suffolk Book League committee members have been reading during lockdown...

five books

by Simon Knott

It's always interesting when writers tell us about the books which are important to them. Over the last ten years the fivebooks.com website, based in Oxford, has built up an extraordinary archive of experts discussing books from their field which they feel are important and significant. Each article consists of an interview with a writer and their personal choice of five books. The articles are split roughly equally between fiction and non-fiction subjects, although of course many interviewees choose books from both.

The website has well over a thousand interviews so far. As an example, East Anglia's D. J. Taylor discusses the life and works of George Orwell, talks about his own biography of Orwell, and chooses what he feels are the five most significant books by Orwell. These are *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Whilst these are not surprising choices, what makes the articles fascinating is each writer's exploration of their chosen books.

Austen scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks chooses five Jane Austen books, Tim Parks five Italian novels, Adam Roberts discusses five classic science fiction novels, Samira Shackle chooses her five best narrative non-fiction books. Whilst in some cases you may disagree with the choices that the fivebooks.com writers make, there are surprises in store. It is possible to search the site by subject, writer and even by individual book. The most recommended book of all over the thousand-plus interviews? It's *Jane Eyre*.

from the archives: suffolk book league's first formal marking of black history month

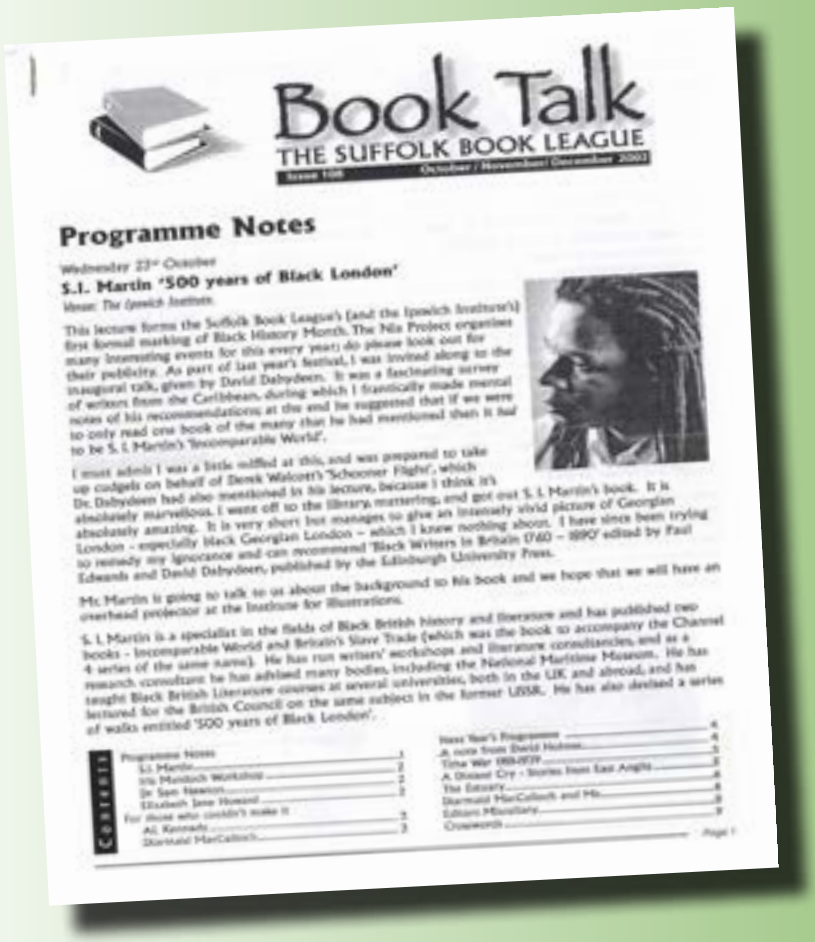
by Janet Bayliss

The first celebration of Black History Month in the UK was as long ago as 1987, but it was not until October 2002 that Suffolk Book League first invited a speaker to mark it. The date was Wednesday 23 October at the Ipswich Institute. That speaker was S. I. Martin (Steve Ian Martin in full). His talk was entitled '500 years of Black London' (1997: Quartet Books), based on his research for his 1996 novel *Incomparable World*. Following the writing of this book, he devised a series of walks along the same theme of 500 years in Black London (around 1999-2000). *Incomparable World* itself is a short book, set in Georgian London, which charts the story of three black exiles. According to the review of the talk in our journal Book Talk, the book is 'intensely vivid' and 'crammed with detail'. It is further stated that the talk (and book) threw light on an area of history that the reviewer said they knew nothing about, but clearly found fascinating.

I did some checking on the internet to try to bring the story up-to-date. The author was born in 1961 in Bedford. He has published four books, the most recent being the novel *Jupiter Amidships* (2009: Hodder Children's Books) and he also wrote *Britain and the Slave Trade* (1999: Channel 4) to accompany a Channel 4 series of the same name. His website http://simartin.org.uk shows that he is still very active as a teacher and speaker, working with schools, libraries, museums and other organisations in the heritage sector. He is clearly still committed to the elucidation and promotion of Black history and talks of the 'power of archives as an agent of positive change'. At a time when the Record Offices in Suffolk (including the new building called 'The Hold' in Ipswich)

remain resolutely closed to the public, this seems a poignant statement indeed.

With discussion around issues of Black history and racism more prominent than ever, I wonder whether it would be worth inviting S. I. Martin back again: from the sound of it we would be guaranteed a lively, thought-provoking talk.



Book Talk

THE SUFFOLK BOOK LEAGUE

Issue 108 October / November / December 2003

Programme Notes

Wednesday 22nd October

S.I. Martin '500 years of Black London'

Venue: The Ipswich Institute.

This lecture forms the Suffolk Book League's (and the Ipswich Institute's) first formal marking of Black History Month. The Nia Project organises many interesting events for this every year; do please look out for their publicity. As part of last year's festival, I was invited along to the inaugural talk, given by David Dabydeen. It was a fascinating survey of writers from the Caribbean, during which I frantically made mental notes of his recommendations; at the end he suggested that if we were to only read one book of the many that he had mentioned then it had to be S. I. Martin's 'Incomparable World'.

I must admit I was a little miffed at this, and was prepared to take up cudgels on behalf of Derek Walcott's 'Schooner Flight', which Dr. Dabydeen had also mentioned in his lecture, because I think it's absolutely marvellous. I went off to the library, rearranging, and got out S. I. Martin's book. It is absolutely amazing. It is very short but manages to give an intensely vivid picture of Georgian London - especially black Georgian London – which I knew nothing about. I have since been trying to remedy my ignorance and can recommend 'Black Writers in Britain 1760 – 1890' edited by Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen, published by the Edinburgh University Press.

Mr. Martin is going to talk to us about the background to his book and we hope that we will have an overhead projector at the Institute for illustrations.

S. I. Martin is a specialist in the fields of Black British history and literature and has published two books - Incomparable World and Britain's Slave Trade (which was the book to accompany the Channel 4 series of the same name). He has run writers' workshops and literature consultancies, and as a research consultant he has advised many bodies, including the National Maritime Museum. He has taught Black British Literature courses at several universities, both in the UK and abroad, and has lectured for the British Council on the same subject in the former USSR. He has also devised a series of walks entitled '500 years of Black London'.

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In February this year Penguin reissued S. I. Martin's *Incomparable World* with an Introduction by Booker Prize winner, Bernadine Evaristo. It is part of a new series Black Britain Writing Back that 'rediscovers and celebrates pioneering books that remap the nation'.

'The trick is to invent the truth'

The Photographer at Sixteen by George Szirtes (2019: MacLehose Press)

For years George Szirtes wrote poems about his mother, trying to capture her mind and spirit. Here, in prose, he acknowledges the impossibility of recovering her: 'I am interested in her so I go on inventing her, inventing a truth I can believe in. I invent nothing factual' (142). He seeks to understand her contradictory, fascinating complexity. Identity is at the centre of this book. Each time the Transylvanian city where Magda Nussbächer was born is mentioned, it is in three languages: Cluj (Romanian); Kolozsvár (Hungarian); Klausenburg (German). These diverse names represent shifting territorial and political power. As a young girl, Magda left Romania to train as a photographer in Budapest. Here she met László Schwarz. Arrested as a Jew in 1944, she was interned in Ravensbrück and, later, in Penig, Buchenwald. Surviving terrible suffering, she and László were reunited, married, and George and András were born. Having changed their name to Szirtes, the family escaped the 1956 Hungarian uprising, fleeing to England.

The book's subtitle 'The Death and Life of a Fighter' sets out Szirtes' organisational choice. He reconstructs the chronology of his mother's life by telling it backwards. He starts by quoting from the poet Anthony Hecht who imagines a diver emerging feet first from 'water/ That closes itself like a healed wound' (5). Rewinding a film is the analogy. Szirtes hopes working backwards might allow healing and begins in 1975 with his mother's death by suicide.
At the end of the book he reprises the figure of the diver reeling backwards and upwards onto the high diving board; the water has miraculously healed, 'the hole has closed' (201). He likens this re-wind to a conjuring trick. His mother seemed to say 'Conjure me' but he cannot recreate her; to do this would be magic. He knows he is often guessing, checking facts but filling in where there are gaps, imagining where there is no certainty ('ever more maybes

and perhapses' 173). He takes on this challenge with a grave sense of responsibility, care and love, wishing to return to an innocent 'perfect unwounded beginning' (5).

Looking is central in this book. Szirtes scrutinises the photographs he has of Magda, speculating about her character, observing that these images fade but that they oust live ones; 'they stand still and never change' (20). He includes a poem about a photograph 'filled with retrospect' (61) which captures only one still moment in his parent's life.

Reviewed by Gill Lowe

Photograph c.1957/8 courtesy of George Szirtes

In the poem, 'A PICTURE OF MY PARENTS WITH THEIR FIRST TELEVISION' he writes:

'Now they're caught
and solemn. Slowly they become
the stillness by which they are both possessed.'

John Nash: The Landscape of Love and Solace (2021: Thames and Hudson)

John Nash: The Landscape of Love and Solace is about an artist who made the mid-Stour valley as much 'Nash country' as Dedham is 'Constable country'. The ancient house, Bottengoms, which became home to him and his wife Christine from 1944 to 1977 was a place they loved deeply, and when they died, within one year, they left Bottengoms to a man whom they had come to regard almost as a member of their family, Ronald Blythe. It was a happy continuity.

Andy Friend's copiously illustrated biography tells the story of John and Christine Nash, paying close attention to the works and their special quality. Landscapes of every kind fascinated him. He loved broad fields which heave among the verdure of the woodland, East Anglian cloudscapes and the clayland pools. Sometimes he leads our eye along wandering walls and past unpeopled windows or workplaces. And most hauntingly there are John Nash's trees, lifting their branches, alive or dead, as if probing the high spaces of the sky. There is something unsettling and subtly alive in these silent scenes.

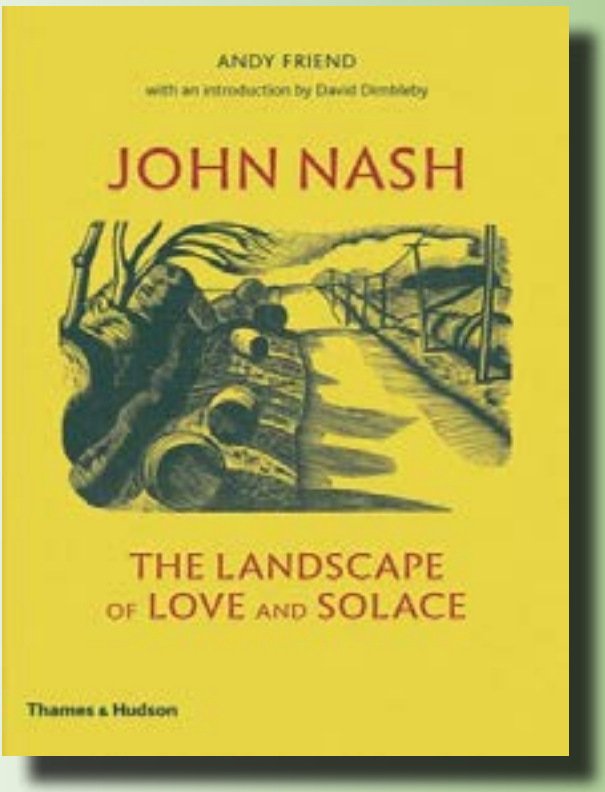
The same might be said of John Nash's life. His generation endured two world wars and seismic social changes. His mother died young with mental illness. He served in the trenches and was lucky to survive. Later in life he served on the home front in World War II. Nor was domestic peace untroubled. John and Christine settled in various places, were rarely financially secure, and were sometimes involved in extramarital liaisons, which in Christine's case involved women as well as men. Their marriage, however, survived these, and most remarkably, the worst of tragedies. For their son William, an enchanting four-year-old, was killed by falling out of the door of their car one day. Christine, alas, was driving.

Andy Friend's subtitle for this biography suggests a therapeutic relationship between the art and the life. There are no religious references in these works, but the motionless landscapes

point the way to reconciliation and peacefulness beyond real suffering and toil. Nash himself was plagued by a probable congenital tendency to depression and found solace in the countryside he loved and in whose rivers he loved to fish.

Both John and Paul Nash can be counted among the *Romantic Moderns* of the past century described by Alexandra Harris (2010: Thames and Hudson), including among landscape painters the Nash brothers, Edward Bawden, Eric Ravilious, Graham Sutherland and John Piper. Two years after the major exhibition of his brother Paul Nash's work, it is a joy now to have John's wonderful pictures celebrated.

Reviewed by Keith Jones



reading in lockdown...

The coronavirus global pandemic has undoubtedly caused great anxiety, hardship and grief as well as economic uncertainty and ongoing concerns for the future. Despite this, some positive aspects of the year in lockdown have also emerged. These include slowing down; appreciating the beauty of the natural world; reconnecting with some of the simpler things in life such as home baking, gardening and spending more time with loved ones. One of the pursuits that has risen hugely in popularity during lockdown is reading.

Over the following pages, five members of Suffolk Book League's committee share details of the reading that has helped sustain them through this most challenging of years...

Natalie Barber

Those who know me will know I enjoy Tudor history. I veer towards books that are written about women, and more often than not, books that are written by women. One of my favourite authors is Philippa Gregory. In a change from her series of books on Tudor monarchy, during lockdown two, I have been reading *Tidelands* (2019: Simon and Schuster).

Tidelands is set in 1664, amidst the English civil war. King Charles I is imprisoned, and Cromwell's forces are in charge. Those who still say Mass must do so in private. It is an offence with a punishment of death, if discovered.

It is the story of Alinor Reekie, an abandoned wife, a mother to two teenage children, who lives an impoverished life, scraping a living as a midwife and herbalist. As an abandoned wife, she faces disgrace and the threat of not having a licence to act as a midwife. It would be better for her if she was a widow, but this is not the case. Described as a woman of physical beauty, she attracts attention from the local men, which sets her further apart from the women. She and her children strive for a better life, but it is a struggle that endures throughout the story. Throw in a priest as a lover, two pregnancies out of wedlock, theft and accusations of witchcraft; it has the makings of an engaging book. But disappointingly, I found this book hard to get into, and whilst I continued to the end, I was left feeling underwhelmed.

Whilst I enjoy breaking out from the norm, and either dipping into the works of a different author, or a different story from an author I am familiar with, on this occasion it wasn't one for me. Next on my list is *Alias Grace*, written by Margaret Atwood.

Janet Bayliss

Possibly the perfect choice for long winter evenings (especially if you are a fan of the Tudor period) *The Mirror and the Light* (Fourth Estate: 2020) is the meaty finale to Hilary Mantel's mighty 'Thomas Cromwell' trilogy, which began with *Wolf Hall* and continued with *Bring up the Bodies*. It covers the last five years of Cromwell's life (until his execution) as the chief adviser to Henry VIII and could be said to offer a fully rounded picture of the heart and soul of a man. Whether that man was the real Thomas Cromwell is another question.

I must admit to finding the book slightly repetitive in places and perhaps a little economical with description in other places (e.g. Cromwell's exact role in the dissolution of the monasteries), but I was gripped and kept reading: through the majestic sweep of the plot and the sustained power of Mantel's prose. I have sufficient grounding in the history of the period to be able to put the book down and pick it up again and still follow the story, but one or two of my friends found this difficult. The overriding character of Cromwell himself is sustained as the focus throughout, but I was intrigued by the description of other characters: Jane Seymour (Henry VIII's somewhat elusive third wife), Eustace Chapuys (the Imperial ambassador — sometimes an enemy, sometimes a friend but always fascinating) and the crude but arrogant Thomas Howard, third Duke of Norfolk (amongst others).

All in all, a remarkable work, although I have a suspicion that Mantel's Cromwell may just be a bit too sympathetic to be wholly believable and the real one may have been more of a bully (as depicted in the earlier novels of C. J. Sansom).

Sue Blything-Smith

I am still reading *Thin Places* (2021: Canongate) by Kerri ni Dochartaigh and I'm finding it difficult to put it down. I visited Northern Ireland during the Troubles and from the safety of family and friends heard about and observed some of the terror that Kerri writes about in a very intensely personal way. Hers is a moving account of a childhood spent in abject fear and poverty which caused her to withdraw into the natural world which becomes her salvation. A remarkable book and one I highly recommend.

The Well Gardened Mind by Sue Stuart-Smith (2020: William Collins) is a book that I shall forever keep by my bedside so that I may regularly dip into it. Sue is both a gardener and a clinician, and she cleverly reveals how the mind and the garden interact. At a time when many are concerned with how living through lockdown can affect our mental health, this book provides many insights. She explores experimental community gardening schemes and illuminates the joys of growing, weeding and watering plants, whether to eat or admire. Such activities all help the gardener to understand the realities of nature and the healing effects of gardening. It makes for compulsive reading.

A very different read is *Outlawed* by Anna North (2021: Weidenfeld and Nicholson) in which barren women are tried and hanged as witches. Set in 1894, North explores brutal times of superstition and inequality. The protagonist Ada has ambition to become a midwife with a passionate desire to create a safe haven for barren women like herself. Her journey takes her via a convent to living the life of a cowboy, taking part in robberies and acts of violence. An absorbing read.

Keith Jones

In the spaciousness of the Covid winter, there's been a chance to find both old and new treasures. Among the new must be counted Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020: Macmillan) which I found compelling. The portrayal of the women in the Pithead village where Shuggie grows up is astonishingly vivid, the recall of a difficult childhood accurate and moving, and the description of Glasgow near the end lyrical and inspiring. Unfaltering, and an astounding work.

Among old treasures, Emyr Humphreys's reprinted *Outside the House of Baal* (2019: Seren Books) remains the best portrayal of the culture of the Welsh chapels that I know. It is a largely disappeared culture which the English know next to nothing about, but Humphreys was a wonderful writer, full of humanity, and took seriously what people believed to be true, in a world so near and yet so far away.

Andrew Adonis's *Labour's Churchill* (2020: Biteback), is a life of Ernest Bevin whom he considers a man with a particular genius for leadership, first of all in the management of great unions, and then in the remarkable team which Attlee created during the Second World War. A simple and direct style of writing, telling a clear story of the man who saved Europe in the tense period after 1945, and who died too young.

Gill Lowe

Early in lockdown numerous articles featured books about pandemics, plagues and narratives employing disease as a metaphor. Following this trend, I dipped into Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Albert Camus' *The Plague*. I re-read Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* which refers to the 1918 global influenza outbreak. William Maxwell also wrote about the effects of that pandemic in his deeply affecting *They Came Like Swallows*. I was astonished by the beauty of Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, set during the Black Death. But I did not find these brilliant books especially comforting.

Lately I have sought stories of ordinary life to sustain me. The title of Anne Tyler's novel, *Redhead by the Side of the Road* (2020: Penguin Random House) promises, perhaps, something dramatic, but her focus is the mundane. Tyler is a gentle, empathetic observer of human nature; this story is character-driven. Her protagonist Micah, ('Tech Hermit'), leads an ordered, disciplined life but he knows there's a lack at the centre of it. His older sisters think of him, fondly, as 'a fussbudget'. This is a skilfully controlled novel, not demanding or self-consciously literary, but wonderfully comforting. Thoroughly engrossed, I read it in a few hours, hoping things would get better for Micah.

Fiona Sampson's five book recommendations:

Simone de Beauvoir, ***Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*** trans. James Kirkup (2006: Penguin).

John Berger, ***Portraits: John Berger on Artists*** ed. by Tom Overton (2015: Verso).

Annie Ernaux, ***The Years*** trans. Alison L. Strayer (2017: Fitzcarraldo) - an autobiography.

Mary Gabriel, ***Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*** (2018: Back Bay Books).

The five volumes of the complete ***The Letters of Virginia Woolf*** which I think are out of print but can be found on AbeBooks for sure.

Jeremy Page's five book recommendations:

Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey Through Britain by Roger Deakin
An all-time favourite, and a book I could read over and over again. I love the playful tone of his writing.

Of the Farm by John Updike
An early Updike, but full of wonderful writing and human observation.

The Spirit of the Hills by F. S. Smythe
Published in 1935, and evoking a previous age of mountaineering and climbing. I've really been enjoying its sense of enthusiasm and wonder.

The Shining Levels by John Wyatt
Similar to the last book, this was published in 1973. A real gem, about living in tune with nature and a countryside that has slightly vanished, and a beautiful relationship between a man and an orphaned deer.

After the Fire, a Still Small Voice by Evie Wyld
Have just read this, and was impressed by its range, as well as enjoying its location of hot Australia while I was in cold January.

The Last Bear written by Hannah Gold, illustrated by Levi Pinfold, (2021: HarperCollins Children's Books)

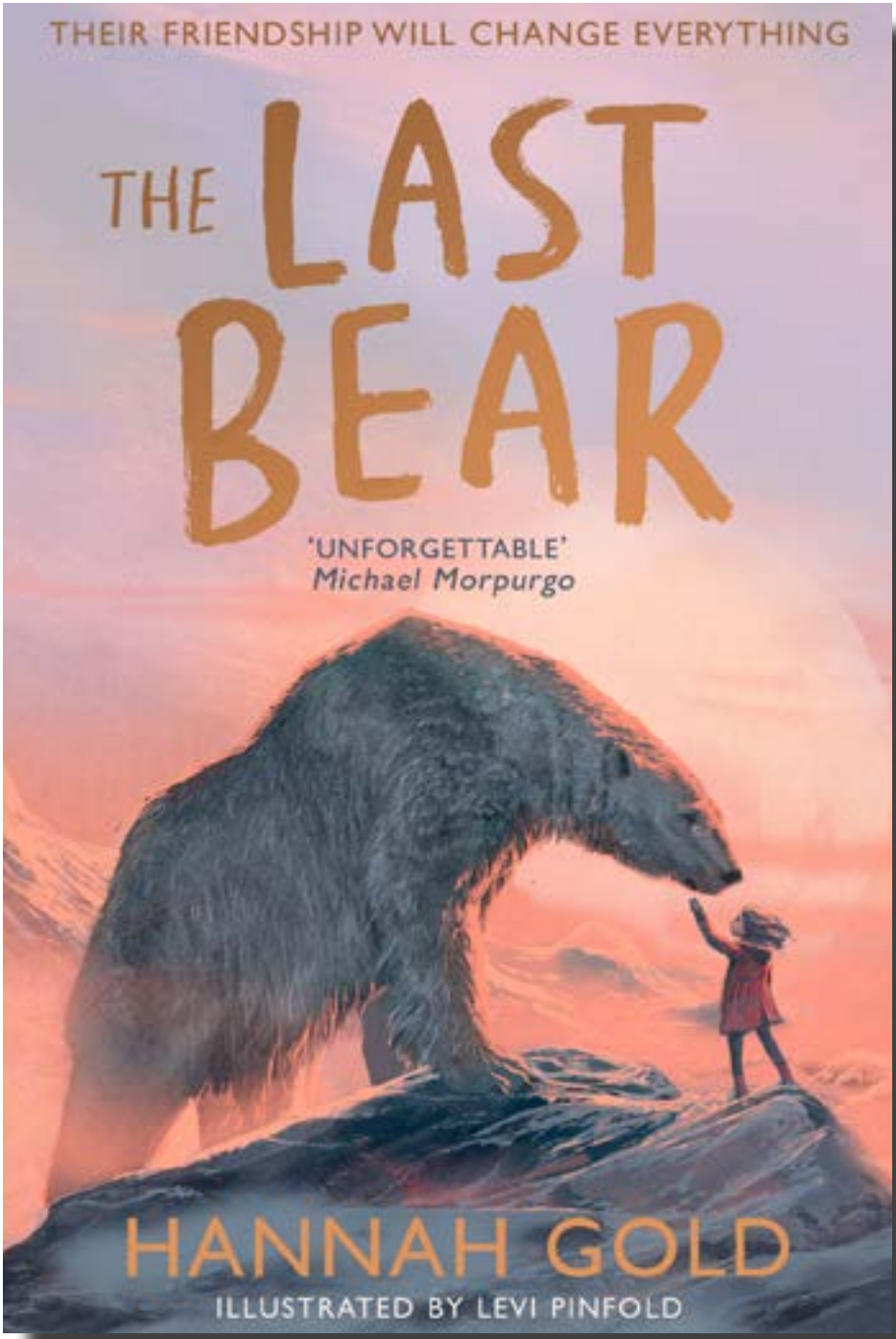
Time stopped as I read Hannah Gold's beautiful book, *The Last Bear*, and when I looked up darkness had fallen and the afternoon had melted away. I'd travelled through Hannah's story to Bear Island in the Arctic, where the melting sea ice is causing polar bears to become separated and stranded. And I was with April with every single step she took in her rainbow wellies.

Gentle, empathetic but determined April must travel to Bear Island with her scientist father so that her Dad can log the weather conditions to monitor the melting ice. April is used to being ignored by her father since her mother's death, but she thinks that perhaps their solitude will bring them closer. Sadly, it's not to be, and as April roams the deserted, snowy island alone, she meets a polar bear who is starving and all by himself too.

Bravely, April tries to help, and I was captivated by the way their friendship grows as Bear begins to trust her. I found April's efforts to overcome all obstacles to get food to him, involving raiding their own carefully rationed store cupboard, amusing and moving. Levi Pinfold's illustrations show this wonderful friendship unfold in gorgeous detail as April explores the island and has a wonderful time with Bear. April wishes her father would DO something rather than just measure things though, because she needs help to help Bear. Finally, she finds her bravest, loudest ROAR and sets out to solve her problems herself.

This book says to children that they can do things to save this beautiful planet we live on, and its many creatures and habitats, however small they may feel. I felt moved by April's determination and stubbornness and ability to use her imagination to solve problems and make herself and Bear and her father happy again. A magical, heart-warming, transporting read.

Reviewed by Tricia Gilbey


THEIR FRIENDSHIP WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING
THE LAST BEAR
'UNFORGETTABLE'
Michael Morpurgo
HANNAH GOLD
ILLUSTRATED BY LEVI PINFOLD

endnote...

Hannah Gold's Childhood Reading

We asked Hannah which books were an influence on her as she was growing up. She said: 'As a child, I was a huge bookworm and would eagerly look forward to visits to the library with my mum so I could return home with a towering stack of books. As a shy, sensitive child, in those days books were some of my best friends and as an animal lover, I particularly enjoyed any books which placed a child/animal relationship at the heart of them. It's that magical, almost spiritual friendship I have tried to capture in *The Last Bear*. Growing up, my love affair with books continued and even as I progressed onto older fiction, I never lost my affection for my childhood friends such as *Charlotte's Web*, *The Animals of Farthing Wood*, and *Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. They are and always will be a formative part of my life and have shaped the person and the author I am today.'

Illustration: Levi Penfold