

Writing from **Janet Bayliss, Tricia Gilbey, Keith Jones, Gill Lowe, Esther Morgan, Mike Tunstill**

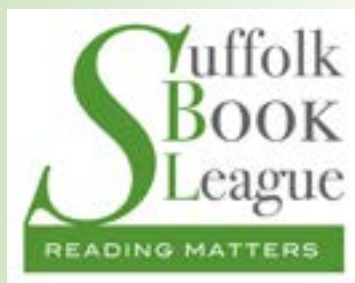
Book recommendations from **Andy Friend, John Preston and Francesca Wade**

no. 177

The journal of

Suffolk Book League

sbl.org.uk



BookTalk

Autumn 2021



[suffolkbooktalk](https://twitter.com/suffolkbooktalk)



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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.

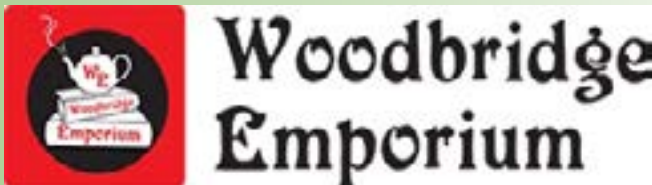
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from the chair...

Dear Members,

D. H. Lawrence entitled his first collection of poems *Look! We Have Come Through!*, and a hundred years on we wish we could say the same. We have been deprived of our usual meetings, made to rely on Zoom, Facebook and Twitter, and have much missed the easy interchange of views which make a society such as ours so rewarding. But we are aiming to resume our meetings in September. So keep in touch via the website, Facebook etc.

We are pleased to have been able to meet authors through Zoom. Since I took the Chair in the spring of this year I have had the pleasure of conducting an interview with Andy Friend by way of his biography of the painter John Nash, and look forward to my conversation with John Preston who visits us in person on 16 September to talk about his novel *The Dig*. If you haven't yet pre-booked a ticket for the John Preston event, please

do so and we look forward hugely to welcoming you back to meeting our speakers in person!

The online life of SBL is now as essential to us as our face-to-face meetings. Registering as a member, and having paid your subscription you have immediate access to past events, and *BookTalk* as it is published at <https://www.suffolkbookleague.org>. We are aware that some people are reluctant to use electronic gadgetry, in which case we will do our best to assist you. If you can manage to contact enquiries@suffolkbookleague.org we will gladly assist you. If you quail even at that, leave a message for the Chair of the Suffolk Book League on 07505 467878 giving an indication of the sort of help you need.

In 2022 we shall mark the 40th anniversary of the Suffolk Book League. Without Covid we would have by now been able to announce more details of special events, but we are working on a special edition of *BookTalk* to mark the occasion. Do you have memories to share of SBL across the years? We should love to hear from you.

Keith Jones

forthcoming suffolk book league events...in person!

John Preston

Thursday 16 Sep 2021, 7:30pm

Esther Morgan

Thursday 21 Oct 2021, 7.30m

Marina Warner

Thursday 18 Nov 2021, 7.30pm

Kate Sawyer

Wednesday 1 Dec 2021, 7.30pm

**Find out more and book your tickets
at www.sbl.org.uk**

U is for unicorn

U is for Unicorn

People will believe in anything
to ward off harm
will grind the whole world to a powder
worth more than gold

until the far away grasslands
are littered with the bodies of horses
their foreheads thumbed
with bindis of blood.

Truth is, it was always painful –
this spiral of bone
its slow corkscrew through skin
like a nagging thought –

how to keep you safe, for example,
or the way your own daughter might one day wish
that an elephant, a tiger, an otter
were real.

Esther Morgan



Esther Morgan. Photo courtesy of Bloodaxe Books

Esther Morgan is coming to the Suffolk Book League on Thursday 21st October 2021. She generously allowed the unpublished poem opposite to be included in this edition of *BookTalk*. Esther wrote: 'It's from a sequence based on a children's alphabet (A is for Apple, B is for Ball and so on).'

Requests for your contributions

For future *BookTalk* editions we would greatly appreciate having our Suffolk Book League members submit pieces about a writer they admire or think is underrated. See the piece on D. H. Lawrence by Isla Clough on pages 7 and 8 of this edition.

As we were spending time re-reading D. H. Lawrence and thinking about his legacy, we came across this very positive quotation, pertinent in 1928 and also relevant for 2021:

‘Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We’ve got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.’

— From *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D. H. Lawrence

Have you got a favourite quotation or notable short passage from an author that you would like to share with fellow SBL members? You might like to say how you came across your choice and, perhaps, its effect or what it means to you.

‘The best moments in reading are when you come across something — a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things — which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.’

— From *The History Boys* by Alan Bennett

Please email your quotes and passages to secretary@suffolkbookleague.org

SBL in the beginning...

It was not just Prince Philip who was born on a kitchen table ... Suffolk Book League, in legend, had its first origins somewhere in the vicinity of the novelist Margaret Drabble's kitchen table in 1982. SBL's actual inaugural meeting was 7th June 1982 in the Corn Exchange Film Theatre in Ipswich. The meeting included Margaret Drabble, the humourist Frank Muir and the famous man of letters Sir Angus Wilson, along with the distinguished local writer Norman Scarfe. The meeting was described as crowded — were you there?

As we approach our 40th anniversary in 2022 we are anxious to contact Suffolk Book League's long-standing members for their memories of SBL past and present. I am also in the process of trying to build the SBL archive. If you have any recollections or even relics to pass along, please contact me at janet@suffolkbay.net and I would be very happy to hear from you.

Janet Bayliss



Margaret Drabble. Photo courtesy of British Council

d. h. lawrence reconsidered

If, as Oscar Wilde said, ‘when critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself’, then D. H. Lawrence must count as one of the most harmonious of writers.

For many years as a member of the SBL I have held a torch for D. H. Lawrence, against his many detractors. There are many who would agree with me so I address these thoughts to them. Without reflecting on any particular theme the pieces of his writing which spring to mind were, as I remember reading them as a teenager: *Sons and Lovers* (1913) (the first novel I read) followed by *Women in Love* (1920) and *The Rainbow* (1915).

Recently my U3A reader’s group read some of Lawrence’s short stories, so I enjoyed re-reading ‘The Odour of Chrysanthemums’ and ‘The Rocking Horse Winner’, among others.

We discussed his poetry. ‘Snake’ appears to be a memorable poem, probably for the atmosphere and the compassion. It’s interesting to read analysis of ‘Snake’, which some suggest is a biblical reflection on the devil in the Garden of Eden, and sexual imagery, but we viewed the love of the natural world as significant. Does this mean interpretations of art can adapt to the period in which they are read?

What was it about *Sons and Lovers* that I enjoyed so much in my teens? I would suggest the descriptions of a mining town contrasted with the surrounding countryside. Lawrence describes the plot. It follows this idea: a woman of character and refinement marries into the lower class, and has no satisfaction in her life. She has had a passion for her husband. However her sons are urged into life by their reciprocal love of their mother — urged on and on. But when they come to manhood, they can’t love, because their mother is the strongest power in their lives, and holds them. It’s rather like Goethe and his mother, and Frau von Stein and Christiana — as soon as the young men come into contact with women, there’s a split.

I could not say now this is anything like how I remember the

book.

Women in Love, also read in my teens, I thought was wonderful, especially followed by Ken Russell's film. As we were on the cusp of the women's liberation movement it must have appeared to us that Lawrence's women were independent free spirits. This philosophy appealed in theory, maybe not in practice.

'The Odour of Chrysanthemums' left a lasting impression: the horror of the wife washing the dead miner and finding his shredded fingernails so she knew how he'd tried to escape his live burial. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* I do not remember reading, but maybe I did. Christopher Tugendhat referred to the Lady Chatterley trial in his Felixstowe Book Festival talk recently. He suggested social class was not a significant factor; Mellors, far from being Lady Constance's 'bit of rough' had been an officer in World War 1 and would have behaved as such.

The interconnectedness of death, sex, the natural world and class were Lawrence's preoccupations, reflected in his writings by individual men and women's lived experience.

I write this at, perhaps, the end of a global pandemic. For Lawrence the experience of a pandemic followed a world war. Over 6 million soldiers were killed, but Spanish flu killed 10-20 million people globally. Living through this period must have influenced Lawrence and his writing because in the 1920s there was a surge of freedom: women getting the vote, released from the strictures of convention, and the crumbling of social class structures.

D. H. Lawrence died in 1930, before the rise of fascism. I believe as Britain moved into the 1960s his ideas were significant in contributing to the release of social and sexual barriers. Is his thinking significant now with the threat of climate change? He did express compassion for all life within the natural environment against the violence of the industrial world.

Isla Clough

d. h. lawrence, literary phoenix

Lawrence has been accused of having proto-fascist tendencies, of being a misogynist, a misanthropist, a colonialist, a racist and anti-Semite. Devotees have celebrated his distinctive prose, poetry, essays and travel writing. He has been read as a homophobe, but biographers write of his desire for same-sex intimacy, for blood-brotherhood. His acute sensibility towards the lives of animals and affinity with nature has been seen as prescient. His Utopian spirit and eco-consciousness have been regarded as prophetic. He has been idolised for a liberating approach to sexual freedom, praised for his sensitive depiction of emotions — particularly his empathy towards women.

Lady Chatterley's Lover (1928) was prosecuted in the US for obscenity in 1929 and again in the UK, in 1960, when Penguin Books were on trial for re-publishing it. But, after he died in 1930, his reputation rose. In an obituary, E. M. Forster called him 'the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation', commending his 'irradiation of the universe and the objects that compose it'. Contemporary writers such as Katherine Mansfield supported him; T. S. Eliot was less positive. Ottoline Morrell hosted Lawrence at Garsington Manor, along with conscientious objectors and others who were invalided out of war service. Virginia Woolf felt he had betrayed this friendship with his portrait of Hermione Roddice in *Women in Love* (1920), writing to Vita Sackville-West in 1932: 'Genius I admit: but not a first rate genius. No. And such a cad to Ottoline. My word, what a cheap little bounder he was, taking her money, books, food, lodging and then writing that book'.

In *The Great Tradition* (1948), F. R. Leavis championed Lawrence's novels canonising him as a major moralist, alongside Austen, James, Eliot and Conrad. Lawrence's novels chimed with the countercultural 1960s. The less controversial works became A-level set texts and he was widely studied on undergraduate English courses. Philip Larkin admired him as 'the greatest writer

of the century'. However, Lawrence's standing was severely compromised when second-wave feminist Kate Millett published *Sexual Politics* (1970). She attacked his work as phallogocentric; his portrayal of women as oppressive and exploitative. After Millett's influential assault, Lawrence studies dipped in academia.

New fiction, critical and biographical work suggests that Lawrence is ready to rise again — phoenix-like. The 2021 International Lawrence Symposium has papers on his writings with reference to male femininity, disability, feminine consciousness, humanism, postcolonialism, technology, psychogeography, ecology and the non-human. Authors' reputations ascend and descend in accord with the mores of the day and, as Isla Clough argues, there are signs that Lawrence is due for a revival.

Gill Lowe

Recent work on D. H. Lawrence

Jackson, Kevin. (2 June 2021) 'The High Priest of Loathe' [D. H. Lawrence: a Digital Pilgrimage](#)

MacLeod, Alison. (September 2021) *Tenderness*. London: Bloomsbury Circus.

Marshall Griffiths, Linda and Kershaw, Ian. (June-July 2021) [D. H. Lawrence: Tainted Love : The Rainbow and Women in Love](#) 4-part radio adaptation. BBC Radio 4

Mitchinson, John and Miller, Andy. (7 January 2019) '[Backlisted](#)' [podcast about The Rainbow](#)

Sweet, Matthew. (8 July 2021) [Free Thinking: Mining, Coal and D. H. Lawrence](#) BBC Radio 3.

Wilson, Frances. (May 2021) *Burning Man: the Ascent of D. H. Lawrence*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

from the archives:

SBL's 25th anniversary event 11th September 2007

2022 will be Suffolk Book League's 40th anniversary. How many of us remember the 25th anniversary celebrations of 2007? Brian Morron, our then Chair, wrote to all members on 5 March 2007 informing them of the proposal to celebrate the anniversary 'in style', when the actress Jenny Agutter would be reading passages from Jane Austen and her contemporaries, accompanied by Diana Ambache on piano and Jeremy Polmear on oboe. The venue was the newly opened Seckford Theatre, and the date, 11th September.

The pre-event write-up in *Booktalk* mentions that Margaret Drabble would be attending as President. Jenny Agutter would read from works by Jane Austen and other contemporary writers such as Fanny Burney, while the included music would be pieces that 'we know Austen owned'. A comment is made about the 'important part music played in the social life of the times and how much it was a necessary accomplishment for young ladies in Austen's novels' (page 2). Tellingly, it also mentions a bar at the theatre ('unlike our usual venues') and suggests readers 'should be able to toast our continuing survival'.

I have not as yet found a review of the event in a later edition of *Booktalk*, (whether the presence of the bar is connected to this is unclear) but Committee minutes of 11th December 2007 state that the event was 'very successful' and then add the dread words 'although the induction loop system was not working properly in the Seckford Theatre'. How frequently sound has been an issue at SBL meetings over the years! I recall a very atmospheric and special evening and would be interested if anyone else has any memories?

Janet Bayliss

bookgroups in lockdown

How many of us in the SBL are also members of book groups? It would be interesting to know how book groups have managed during lockdown, some seem to have risen to the challenge successfully, others less so.

The reading group that I am a member of has had a mixed experience. We did not meet at all during the first lockdown, including virtual meetings — perhaps because we all hoped it would be a temporary matter and kept in touch via email. As it was a glorious summer and autumn in 2020, we had a couple of meetings in gardens and managed our annual walk. There was a flirtation with an afternoon meeting in two smaller groups in different houses — neither of which I attended as I was at work. We then moved onto Zoom — which has worked well when the technology is OK. With a limited time and no distractions of the food and drink variety (all my fellow members are good cooks and keen hostesses) discussion of the book has become much more focused and detailed. Unfortunately, the technology does not always work well, particularly for those members out in the sticks, which means that you end up participating in a meeting about having a Zoom meeting. I think we have all been to far too many of those in the last 18 months!

Getting hold of the books has also been a bit of a challenge, but as a promiscuous user of various library services I have been able to dot about without having to buy too many volumes! The suspensions of overdue charges have also been handy.

Janet Bayliss

Suffolk inspiration in *The Nightsilver Promise* (2021: Scholastic) by Annaliese Avery

Recently, I attended a talk by Annaliese Avery who spoke about the journey of her novel, from conception to publication. Annaliese is a former library manager and children's book editor who lives in Suffolk. Her Middle Grade debut, *The Nightsilver Promise*, was published by Scholastic UK in May 2021 and will be published in the US in November. *The Nightsilver Promise* is the first book in the epic Celestial Mechanism Cycle and, like all the best children's books, is not afraid to tackle big themes — for example, the role of free will in our lives.

The idea for *The Nightsilver Promise* came to Annaliese while she was working as Educational Lead at Framlingham and Orford Castles. She was reading Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, which showed her how richly imagined children's books could be, and gave her the assurance and confidence that she could write a story that was layered and detailed, and that books like this had a place in children's publishing. She began to invent her own world, sparked by medieval ideas about preordination. Her alternative London is governed by the science of Celestial Physicists, and everyone's life is foretold by the track tattooed on their wrists. When thirteen-year-old Paisley discovers from her track that she is destined to die, the race is on to protect her dragon-touched brother and find her missing mother.

Annaliese has built a world very different from our own, with a clockwork mechanism, floating boroughs, and people who are 'dragon-touched'. Yet some of her ideas come from places and things close to home. She built her universe around the idea of the orrery, inspired by her fascination with astronomy — she belongs to Darsham astronomical society, Dash Astro. Later, as she was writing the final draft, Annaliese remembered that during Victorian

renovations a rood screen was left overnight outside the church of Wenhaston, and the rain dissolved the whitewash to reveal an amazing medieval doom. Annaliese inserted a doom in her Celestial Mechanists' Chapel, as Paisley prepares to receive her 'track', a key moment at the beginning of the story.

It was fascinating to hear how the different parts of Annaliese's world came to her at different times, so that each draft of the book made her world richer. So, if you have a chance to read and discover the world within *The Nightsilver Promise*, look carefully and see if you can find anything else you might recognise from our corner of our world, here in Suffolk.

Reviewed by Tricia Gilbey



For more about the Wenhaston Doom, click [here](#)

Darsham Astronomical Society: <http://www.dash-astro.co.uk/>

The Lost Future of Pepperharrow **(2021: Bloomsbury Publishing)** **by Natasha Pulley**

Set in late 19th century Japan, the story is ambitious in scope, a steampunk narrative foreshadowing the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. Keita Mori is a samurai noble cursed with the ability to remember the future. The Japanese Prime Minister, Kuroda, seeks to harness Mori's powers for military ends. Through the unwitting agency of Mori's lover and Foreign Office functionary, Thaniel Steepleton, and his wife, former kabuki performer Takiko Pepperharrow, Mori moves to thwart Kuroda with the 'weapon to end all weapons'.

Mori is well drawn, an appealing main protagonist, at once powerful and vulnerable, dark and good. Pepperharrow is hardly less so, intelligent and courageous and noble if not of birth, then certainly spirit and intent. Six, a girl rescued from the workhouse, is a pastiche Dickensian delight straight out of Fagin's lodgings. Kuroda exudes evil, his secret policeman, the red-coated, omnipresent Tanaka, as cheerfully sinister as any denizen of Peake's Under-River. In a cast of otherwise accomplished players, only the character of Thaniel falls short. His back story (Lincolnshire lad/ Foreign Office) is unconvincing, his voice ('it's a drag'/ 'I was mugged') jarringly out of place in this setting. His musings are frequently affected and irritating.

Though there are the obligatory generic references to tin and Tesla-towers, cogs and mechanisms and electrographs, the book wears its steampunkery lightly. The imagery is in places quite stunning ('warm sherry candied almond smell'; 'tongue turns to paper'). The book is a genuine page-turner, the plot well-structured, drawing the main players apart, and then, towards the end, bringing them together again in a highly readable way. The pace builds quite masterfully but towards a climax, sadly, that feels rushed and careless. It runs out of steam. A pity.

In summary, the book (for this reviewer) is sometimes problematic. At times, the writing is sloppy. The writer has spent time in Japan, long enough to know that there are inns but no pubs. Americanisms from a Victorian Englishman's mouth ('a bunch of walrus', references to being 'beaten with a baseball bat') have no place in post-Edo Imperial Japan whether viewed from the past, present or future. The reader's willing suspension of disbelief is tested to fatigue. It grates. Yet the book as a whole stands up. The story, novel and compelling, rattles along nicely, building tension as it goes. Thaniel notwithstanding, the writer demonstrates she can people her work with characters who move satisfyingly and convincingly in three-dimensional space; characters the reader can care about. The language is at times breath-catchingly beautiful, the shunting of people and place from past to future — the elision of one world into another cogently and seamlessly resolved. It's a good book, one worth reading.

Comparable titles? *Past Conditional* (Guido Morselli); *Gormenghast* (Mervyn Peake).

Reviewed by Mike Tunstill

Square Haunting

(2020: Faber and Faber)
by Francesca Wade

Wade's book takes its title from a 1925 diary entry, in which Virginia Woolf extols the pleasures of 'street sauntering and square haunting'. In the 1930s five women flitted in and out of lodgings in London's Mecklenburgh Square.

These women were:

H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, American Modernist poet)

Jane Ellen Harrison (Classical scholar and linguist, once dubbed the cleverest woman in England)

Eileen Power (Economic historian and Medievalist)

Dorothy L. Sayers (creator of Lord Peter Wimsey and his crime solving sidekick, Harriet Vane)

Virginia Woolf (well we know all about her!)

These women were not all resident in Mecklenburgh Square at the same time, hence the additional sense of them 'haunting' the square. They took over rooms from each other and sometimes partners too. We hear as much about their romantic entanglements and their strivings for 'modern' unconventional relationships as their academic achievements.

What they did have in common was a fierce and determined drive towards independence and the desire for, in Woolf's words, 'a room of one's own' where they could write and study. They strove to evade the expectations of marriage and children in favour of a career. The nearby London School of Economics was in its infancy at this time. Founded in 1895 by Beatrice and Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw, it admitted both men and women from its inception, at a time when women were struggling to have their degrees recognised at Cambridge — although Oxford did so, women were

not granted degrees at Cambridge until 1948!

I was fascinated to learn about the lives of these women, their thoughts, hopes, aspirations and not insignificant academic and literary achievements in a world where men very much still had the upper hand. In the final chapter Woolf's descriptions of blitzed London in wartime struck a chord as having much in common with a London living under the shadow of Covid in 2020.

In fact, so inspired was I by their stories that I rang my local bookshop: 'The Open Road' at Stoke by Nayland to enquire about the availability of Eileen Power's *Medieval People* and Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night*. Also, I almost felt the urge to commence learning Russian as did Jane Ellen Harrison in her seventies! These inspirational women gave me the sense that anything is possible if only one sets one's mind to it.

Reviewed by Ellie Mead

Editor's note:

Here we see how people can be inspired to find new reading via the authors who give our wonderful SBL talks. My friend, Ellie, is a new member of SBL and for her birthday I bought her a copy of Francesca Wade's *Square Haunting*, our speaker for July. I was so happy when she phoned to say how much she was enjoying it. By the time I invited her to write this article, Ellie had passed *Square Haunting* to a friend. The best books always pass through many hands and lead to further happy discoveries.

Tricia Gilbey

The Rising Cost of Staying Alive **(2021: independently published)** **by Marti Lauret**

This is a collection of short stories (and some poetry) by a fairly new voice. It is presented in an intriguing cover, with artwork that may be neurones connecting together in the brain, or perhaps something else entirely. The same applies to the contents within: an intriguing collection of narratives where little is quite what it seems. I am not a great reader of short stories, but I enjoyed these.

The author is from America (mainly South Carolina) but has lived in Britain for many years and has experience of a wide and rich hinterland which she uses to effect in her writing. Some of the stories reference her childhood and youth in the southern United States, while others refer to later periods of her life. Her political sympathies can perhaps be inferred from several of the items in the collection; she wears her heart on her sleeve but is not afraid to be irreverent and treat things with a strong sense of humour and a pinch of salt. A number of the tales are also notable in that the writer describes the issues of encroaching age with clarity and understanding; while creating characters that are believable, if fleeting, and you are left wanting to know more.

I wanted to have a continuation of the narratives of Frances and Daisy for example (from the titular story of the collection); while hoping that my book group does not resemble the one described in 'Monroe'. I found several stories at the end describing the experience of lockdown to be particularly apposite and they rang true, which is noteworthy considering the fiction of the pandemic is largely still being written.

Reviewed by Janet Bayliss



The Rising Cost
of Staying Alive

Marti Lauret

Five books recommended by Andy Friend

The Mermaid of Black Conch by Monique Roffey. I am not often attracted to magical realism but this winner of the 2020 Costa prize is a stunner — both the writing and the mythmaking are mesmerising and Roffey’s exploration of elemental realities and the melting pot that is Caribbean culture unforgettable.

A Fortunate Man by John Berger (with photography by Jean Mohr). Pandemic realities sent me back to this 1967 exploration of a rural GP and the Forest of Dean community he served. I found Berger’s stylish documentary writing as thought-provoking as ever.

Collected Poems by W. S. Graham. Graham’s elegies for the painters he knew in and around St Ives (Peter Lanyon, Bryan Wynter, Roger Hilton) are each distinct, but form a unique testament to friendship and creativity.

Peter Lanyon, Catalogue raisonné of the oil paintings by Toby Treves. To my mind — or eye! — Peter Lanyon is among the very best of 20th Century British painters and Toby Treves Modern Art Press publication is among the very best examples of this difficult genre.

Promise Me, Dad: a Year of Hope, Hardship and Purpose by Joe Biden. I read this autobiography before the inauguration, shortly after Trump’s attempted coup. Decency, humanity and competence are much in evidence — as well as a commitment to truth and honesty, a refreshing mix to find in a leader in power at any time, almost miraculous if you live in the Britain of 2021.

Five books recommended by Francesca Wade

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*

Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*

Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*

Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc*

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Five books recommended by John Preston

Moon Palace by Paul Auster

I stole up on Paul Auster from the side, finding his hugely-acclaimed debut, *The New York Trilogy*, rather too tricky for my liking. However, I was, reluctantly, bowled over by his third novel which imbues that normally most doleful of quests — the search for identity — with a compelling delight in the imaginative possibilities of fiction. Doffing his hat to his great hero, Jules Verne, Auster sets his hero, Marco Fogg, off on a journey across America, from 1970s Manhattan to the timeless wastes of Utah, encountering a bunch of oddballs and grotesques along the way. 30 years on, I still pick it up whenever I want to recharge my creative batteries.

The Birthday Boys by Beryl Bainbridge

Towards the end of her writing career, Beryl Bainbridge wrote several books based on historical events. The best by far — in my opinion — is this extraordinary recreation of Scott's doomed 1912 expedition to the South Pole. It's hard to read *The Birthday Boys* and not imagine yourself sitting in a tent chewing on a piece of whale blubber with the arctic winds whistling outside. I once interviewed Bainbridge and asked her if she'd been to Antarctica as part of her research. She practically fell off her chair. 'Are you mad?' she told me. 'It's far too cold.'

Humboldt's Gift by Saul Bellow

If any one book made me want to become a writer, this was it. The story of the ill-fated friendship between Bellow's alter-ego narrator, Charlie Citrine and the self-destructive poet Von Humboldt Fischer — based on Delmore Schwarz — has all the hallmarks of vintage Bellow. There's the fizzing erudition,

the exuberant mashing together of high and low culture, as well as the hectic veering between hilarity and melancholy. Reading Bellow on top form is like inhaling pure oxygen at the same time as downing a very large gin and tonic.

The Sisters Brothers by Patrick Dewitt

Dewitt's second novel — like all his other books — is a true original: a kind-of road movie on horseback. Two brothers, Charlie and Eli Sisters are hired by a man known simply as the Commodore to murder a prospector. Instead they wind up helping their would-be quarry, who has invented a chemical that reveals the whereabouts of gold. The judges of the Man Booker Prize, who normally have the same reaction to enjoyable novels as a rabid dog does to water, got it right for once when they put this on their 2011 shortlist.

State of Wonder by Ann Patchett

I came late to Ann Patchett but have been trying to make up for lost time. In *State of Wonder*, a pharmacologist journeys to a remote tribe in Brazil where women are reputed to remain fertile until well into their seventies. There are shades of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* here, as well as Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*, but this is a book that easily transcends its influences. If you have a taste for buttock-clenchingly vivid action scenes, you'll find Patchett's account of a giant anaconda attacking a boatload of people very hard to beat. And by way of a bonus, I doubt if you'll ever read a better description of a dog's ears than 'limp chamois'.

Unlocking through Audio

I was lucky to go through the door of reading early in life. I didn't just have my head in a book, my whole self became absorbed in stories. This absorption has thankfully always been an escape, a solace, a joy and an education. So, during lockdown I hoped that, despite being separated from friends and family, my mental health would be protected by that invisible library that lives inside me.

But as weeks extended into months, I needed to travel, to live in other worlds for a time. Luckily, for the last two Christmases I've received two excellent presents — an iPad, and Bluetooth headphones. And through the amazing BorrowBox and Libby apps, audiobooks come free, included with the ticket that has taken me furthest in life, my library card.

I travelled to North Carolina with Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* and to Scotland with Tamsin Calidas' *I am an Island*. I attempted to solve a terrible crime in *West Cork*. I cried over Alan Cummings' suffering at the hands of his brutal father in *Not My Father's Son*. I saw a boy jump out of a whale in Struan Murray's *Orphans of the Tide*. I lived many lives in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*, and I am still travelling onwards.

Reading by listening is intimate, in some ways more so than in ordinary reading, as you must surrender to the voice of the book; and as readers we seek a feeling of spending time in another's presence, a feeling which can be enhanced by audio.

I know that even as we begin to emerge from these dark days, part of me will stay in this forever unlocked place inside, listening to the volumes of my expanding inner anthology.

Tricia Gilbey