

Writing from     John Ellison  
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Peter Labdon  
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no.

169

The journal of

# Suffolk Book League

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# BookTalk

SPRING 2018

Created by Andrea Clark,  
Charlotte Daniels and Jeff Taylor

# about us

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

Aside from bringing a range of popular and distinguished writers to Suffolk, we have held short story competitions, donated books to hospital & hospice libraries, supported literacy groups & partner events, including the Suffolk Libraries School Book Mastermind competition.

Past speakers include Terry Pratchett, Doris Lessing, Sarah Waters, Hilary Mantel & Wendy Cope.

If you would like to be part of the next issue of BookTalk, or just fancy a chat, please send your contributions, thoughts, ramblings & comments to:

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# from the chair

Welcome to our first Booktalk of 2018. Last year saw quite a few changes for the Suffolk Book League. After an unfortunate wait we had a change of format for this magazine, which has been well received by members. Many thanks for your feedback, it is always good to know what people think. We also said a welcome goodbye to our old sound system. The new system makes a huge difference to the comfort of our speakers, as well as improving the meeting for our audience, so I am really pleased that we made the decision to make this outlay. I would also like to say thank you to the generous Book League member who made an anonymous donation to support this cost.

I hope you will agree that we kept up a varied and enjoyable programme too, and that this year's programme looks just as exciting. I am looking forward to hearing and meeting people who are familiar to me, and others who are currently strangers, and I'm sure you are too. Thank you all as ever for your support. Please do consider writing for this magazine, we would love to have lots of the voices of our members. Also please do enter the quiz and give Jean some more competition! In this issue, the subject is the brilliant Muriel Spark.

Jacque

# highlights

EVENTS YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED

# emma healey

BY JACQUIE KNOTT

We were fortunate to have Emma Healey visit us in September, and not just because she is such a good speaker. David Ryland had first invited her after her debut novel *Elizabeth is Missing* was published in 2014, and hearing nothing we thought we'd been unlucky. This would not have been a surprise, as the success of the book meant she was very much in demand. It won the Costa First Novel Award, and became the kind of book that readers recommend to their reading friends. However, just as we were putting the 2017 programme together she got in touch to apologise for not replying to our email, and wondering if we still wanted her to come. Her plans had been derailed, she told us, by the birth of her daughter, so there had been a longer gap before her second book than she had intended.

We were rewarded with a first public reading from *Whistle in the Dark*, which will be published in April

this year. It was a fascinating evening, as she speaks so well about being a writer, and her account of the bidding wars for her first novel were an absolute eye-opener. The life of the writer, solitary for so much of the time and then suddenly exposed in that way, came alive, as she spoke so naturally to us about it. By the end of the evening, it felt like we had all had a chat.

Like many speakers, she contacted me afterwards to say what a lovely audience we were, and how she had appreciated the intelligent questions she was asked.

## emma healey's recommended reads

Six novels which made me think differently about writing.

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### ***The Corner That Held Them***

by Sylvia Townsend Warner

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A book about a community of East Anglian nuns in the fourteenth century with no main character and no obvious structure shouldn't work. But the author uses it to explore every kind of human frailty and creates a fascinating, touching and uplifting novel.

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### ***Mrs Bridge***

by Evan S Connell

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Written in a series of vignettes which highlight small, but suggestive, moments over the course of one American housewife's life. A poignant, funny book to savour (and if you like it, there's a *Mr Bridge* too).

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### ***The Pumpkin Eater***

by Penelope Mortimer

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Quirky is an overused word, but it does sum up this brilliant book. It begins with an unusual metaphor in a therapist's office and continues

with strange images and surprising confessions. Undetailed and unchronological, but humorous and heart-breaking.

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### ***Larry's Party***

by Carol Shields

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Fabulous, confident writing, which slides between tenses and switches perspective, but is never inelegant or confusing. No character is left unexplored and the effect is warm, and brilliantly engaging.

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### ***The Accidental***

by Ali Smith

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An exhilarating read, and still my favourite of her novels. A family is tested by the arrival of a strange young woman, and the reader is tested in a similar way by the book's clever style and structure.

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### ***Dept. of Speculation***

by Jenny Offill

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Lively and full of factual asides about film stars, philosophers or scientists, this book engages with modern life while feeling like a classic. One of my favourite novels of the last few years.

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# megan bradbury

BY JEFF TAYLOR

On Wednesday October 11<sup>th</sup> an enthusiastic and knowledgeable audience welcomed a heavily pregnant Megan Bradbury to the Ipswich Institute to speak about her debut novel, *Everyone Is Watching*. Judicious questioning from the chair led to some fascinating insights into her life and the writing of her novel. Although born in the United States, Megan grew up in Norfolk, not far from Long Stratton, and obtained an MA in Creative Writing at UEA in 2005. For a while afterwards she wrote about 'random subjects' but an extended trip to New York City in 2008 provided her with the content for her novel; her feelings for the city 'felt like a crush' of energy and excitement.


A temporary move to Edinburgh allowed her to do much research on New York at the National Library which had 'a big American archive'. She made 'lots of research notes' and produced many 'fictional stories' including 'stream

of consciousness scenes about real characters'. Eventually, having disregarded such icons as Diane Arbus, she 'subconsciously' focused on four of the city's 'greatest creators, artists and thinkers' – Robert Mapplethorpe, Walt Whitman, Robert Moses and Edmund White with emphasis on 'urban space, sexuality and artistic expression' within 'a view of the characters' work'. Megan spoke about her use of 'rhythmical layering of textual images' in the work and how her mentor, the author Cathy Unsworth, helped by continuously questioning the methodology and 'always asking why'.

Megan acknowledged that the similarities between New York City and Edinburgh helped when she was writing the book. Although on a smaller scale Scotland's capital city was also 'exciting... proud of its heritage of education and self-improvement' and the people 'full of energy'. She was particularly curious about 'how places affect your insides'.

There were several interesting questions from the audience including one about how the physical structure of the novel had evolved into 'an organic collage of images reflecting the city'. Megan replied that she 'tried to forget about structure' until she had written the novel, then 'paragraph by paragraph' she looked at 'how themes fitted together' and saw how chapters 'rubbed up against each other'.





Megan mentioned that she was working on a new novel about 'women and the natural world... focused on America'. She kindly provided the following list of her favourite books on New York City:

***The Power Broker***

by Robert A. Caro

***Just Kids***

by Patti Smith

***The Basketball Diaries***

by Jim Carroll

***City Boy***

by Edmund White

***The Death and Life of Great American Cities***

by Jane Jacobs

***How the Other Half Lives***

by Jacob Riis

***Manhattan Transfer***

by John Dos Passos

***The Street***

by Ann Petry

***Times Square Red, Times Square Blue***

by Samuel R. Delany

***Underworld***

by Don DeLillo

# wendy cope

BY KEITH JONES

Poets at meetings of the Book League are rare visitors, but from the excellent attendance at the gathering, Wendy Cope proved to be popular with all ages. You know what to expect from her: to be surprised by familiar words in a fairly familiar order. The secret is in the wit. It was the eve of the publication of a new book published by Faber and Faber: *Christmas Poems* with illustrations by Michael Kirkham.

Wendy read several poems from the new book. A poem which begins with carefully crafted banality can suddenly knife you with an allusion, a memory, or a challenge. These poems are not exercises in filigree. Their pleasure is in the whole line or stanza rather than torturously juxtaposed words in the tradition of satirical poetry. This tradition balances with virtuosity on the highwire of bathos. It rejoices in its likeness to the jingle or cliché. Its success is in keeping its feet. You feel you could have written

this had you the time. And you would be wrong.

In the conversation following, Wendy said without much hesitation how much she admires the work of A.E. Housman and Philip Larkin. Yes, of course. But each of these is notable for having achieved a highly distinctive voice, full of regret and unachievable longings. Wendy's tone, even her deadly insights, emerge from a world in which she is at home in the uneasy way we may be ourselves: the world of *Life, Love and the Archers* (the title of her collected recollections and reviews published in 2014 by Two Roads). In that book she remarks that she likes to make the most of every day. That is, the everyday, which furnishes quite enough to be going on with, and through which there are glimpses of mystery.

**'Who cares about a traffic jam**

**While herald angels sing?**

**Each year the moment does arrive  
In spite of everything'**

In this particular poem the moment comes for the harassed driver who hears on the radio the choirs of heaven on the M25 'approaching Junction 7'. And facing this poem is a neat illustration by Michael Kirkham of a motorway lamp in the rain. They are black and grey with touches of yellow for the baubles and candles, and they are just right.



# robert lloyd- parry

BY JEFF TAYLOR

The last event of our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary year was a performance of two ghost stories by M.R. James (1862 - 1936) by actor and writer Robert Lloyd-Parry.

As an undergraduate at King's College Cambridge, James was a student of Sir Charles Walston, the first director of the Fitzwilliam Museum. James is described as a 'brilliant academic and prolific writer'. However, it is primarily as a ghost story writer that James is remembered today. Often referring to locations in East Anglia, he originally wrote his ghost stories for the choir boys at King's College. James later read them aloud to friends at Christmas and they continue to spook radio, theatre and TV audiences today. Robert Lloyd-Parry certainly 'spooked' the large audience at the Ipswich Institute, a place in which the actor was

keen to perform for the first time. Using only light from three large candles and some well-placed props including a well-used decanter of 'whisky' he transformed the room into James' college room, the audience playing the role of entranced friends and students.

James wrote 26 ghost stories published in four volumes between 1904 and 1925, and the actor chose two from the first volume, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, both of which have Suffolk settings. The first was *The Ash Tree*, a story involving Sir Richard Fell, who had just inherited Castringham, a country house cursed since the day his ancestor, Sir Matthew Fell, condemned a woman to death for witchcraft. It is soon discovered that the ancient ash tree outside his bedroom window is the root of the problem. After the interval came *Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You My Lad*, one of James' best known stories involving a Cambridge professor on holiday in a fictionalised Felixstowe who discovers an old whistle with a latin inscription. Blowing on it brings forth a ghostly pursuer.

Lloyd-Parry's resemblance to James is uncanny and his performance, including an imaginative use of background shadows, provided the audience with a night to remember.



# literature

REVIEWS AND COMMENT

II

# remembering laurence sterne

BY JOHN ELLISON

Two hundred and fifty years ago, in 1767, was published the ninth and last short volume of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, the great work of Irish-born and Yorkshire-settled clergyman Laurence Sterne, whose life was long-burdened with tuberculosis before he died at the age of 54 in March 1768. Though his passing came soon after the appearance of the final volume, the earlier parts of the work, appearing from 1759 onwards, had already made him famous. So, as I write this, in 2017, to celebrate the anniversary both in my head and on the page, I am also conscious that in March 2018 Sterne's life and work as a whole must be commemorated.

*Tristram Shandy* is an extraordinary book, full of wit and learning, humorous digressions, humanism and life. An imagined autobiography of early years, most of its content defies the usual expectation of fiction that the writer should get on

with the story. It runs to approaching 400 pages in the 1849-issued, faded, leather-bound edition of *Sterne's Works* which I am fortunate to possess. The first page recites narrator Tristram's expressed wish, regarding the earliest moment of his existence, that his parents-to-be had 'minded what they were about when they begot me'. Before this page ends, it is explained that at that very moment (or perhaps a moment before), his mother-to-be had asked his father-to-be if he had not forgotten to wind up the clock.

Then follows a disquisition on the subject of whether Tristram would have turned out rather differently had his parents 'minded what they were about', that is, had they concentrated single-mindedly on their task of conception. After that comes a precise calculation of the date of that conception, pin-pointing it on the first Sunday of each month when Mr. Shandy senior wound the clock and also attended to – as Tristram puts it coyly – 'some other little family concerns'.

In short, a mid-18th century Rabelais-influenced and Cervantes-besotted clergyman was beginning an idiosyncratic novel with jokey references to sexual intercourse and conception, any hopes of ecclesiastical advance already dashed by his having previously produced a work which lampooned fellow clergy.

A good distance into the narrative, not much has happened in Tristram's life other than that his birth has taken place, with his nose crushed flat by the 'new-invented forceps' operated by 'the man-midwife', Dr. Slop. But by then a good deal of space has been given to the subject of Tristram's Uncle Toby, a retired army officer slowly recovering from a groin wound sustained at the siege of Namur, obsessed by military matters, and easily persuaded by his servant, ex-corporal Trim, to build a private complex of fortifications for his own pleasure.

What keeps the narrative afloat and sparkling is the intricately expressed whimsicality, which includes many conversational remarks to the reader, sometimes addressed as 'Your worships', sometimes as 'Madam'. One example is gloriously theatrical: 'It is not half an hour ago, when (in the great hurry & precipitation of a poor devil's writing for daily bread) I threw a fair sheet, which I had just finished, and carefully wrote out, slap into the fire,

instead of the foul one.' Furious with himself, Tristram throws his wig to the ceiling, managing to catch it as it falls.

Earlier, his musings extend to the question of whether authorial self-promotion is acceptable. He puts it in different terms, quoting 'that it is an abominable thing for a man to commend himself.' While agreeing with this principle, he asserts as follows: 'when a thing is executed in a masterly fashion, which thing is not likely to be found out; - I think it is full as abominable, that a man should lose the honour of it, and go out of the world with the conceit of it rotting in his head.' A fair point, one might say; and Tristram (a thinly disguised Sterne) – declares in addition: 'This is precisely my situation.'

Later on he expresses delight in his vocation: 'For my own part, I am but just set up in the business, so know little about it – but, in my opinion, to write a book is for all the world like humming a song...'

For two hundred and fifty years past, millions of readers have been justly captivated by Sterne's humming, and by his dexterous use of his quill pen and ink-horn – and future readers will be enchanted too.



# bryher: rebel & realist

BY PETER LABDON

Annie Wilfred Ellerman was born in 1894, the (technically illegitimate) daughter of John Ellerman & his common-law wife Harriet. Educated at home until she was sent to school in Surrey at the age of 15, intelligent, cultured, multi-lingual and very well travelled but essentially lonely, she knew early on that she was a lesbian. In 1920, determined to be recognised apart from her father's wealth & status, she took the name 'Bryher' by deed-poll & used no other for the rest of her life (Bryher is the western-most inhabited island of the Scillies, which she loved).

On her father's death in 1933 she inherited today's equivalent of £56 million. Never financially constrained, she increasingly continued to support a wide range of writers & artists, knew most of the modernists in 1930s Parisian literary society & dabbled in psychiatry in Germany & America at the

highest (Freudian) level. She married twice for social convenience; neither union was ever consummated. With her second husband she made avant-garde films, including an anti-racism feature, *Borderline*, in which she acted with Paul Robeson, financed a film magazine entitled *Close Up*, designed & built an art-deco house by the shores of Lake Geneva, supported & housed over 100 refugees from Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, fled Switzerland in 1940 after violating her neutrality and spent the war years in London with her lifelong lover, heterosexual American writer Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) before returning to her lakeside house in 1946.

In the 1940s she wrote a novel about Londoners during the Blitz entitled *Beowulf* (a symbolic plaster bulldog which survived the bombings) and continued to write from Switzerland; 2 autobiographies, 8 historical novels & 1 futuristic novella. Bryher's contemporary reputation, now largely dormant, was made by her historical stories, which appeared at roughly two-year intervals between

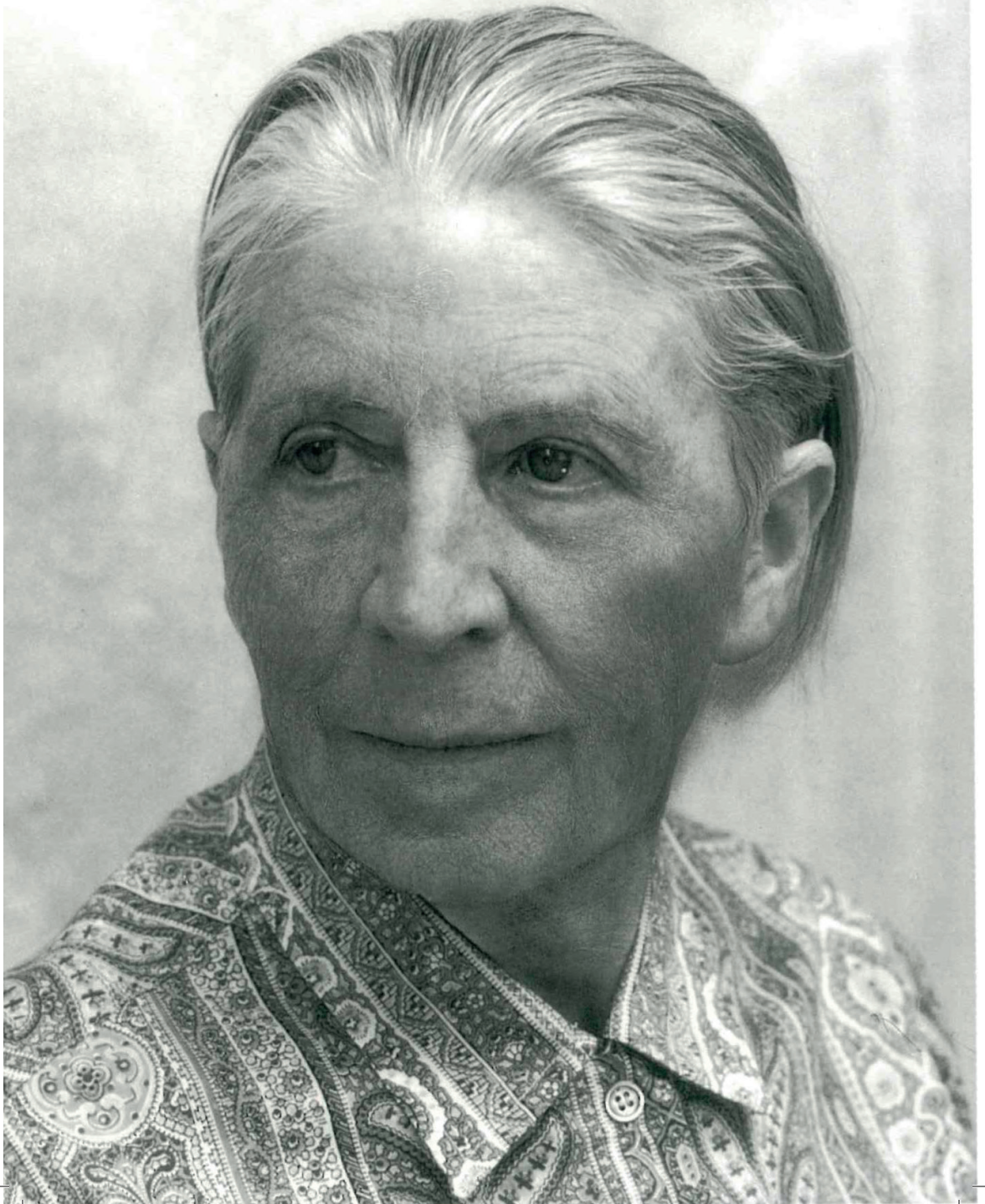
1958 & 1969. Her subjects ranged widely, from the expulsion of the Greek communities of Italy in the 4th Century to 18th Century social unrest in the Swiss canton in which she lived.

None of the books are lengthy or introspective; they are plain tales simply told & make no concession to the idiom of the times in which they are set, *The Player's Boy* excepted. Historically they are as accurate as mid 20th Century research permitted them to be. Her strength as a storyteller lies in an extraordinary ability to convey an unerring immediacy upon the reader, a most curious sensation of 'being there' without moving from one's environment. The effect is created partly by detail and perhaps mainly by the congruence of the setting with action. There are no idiosyncrasies in Bryher's storytelling, only straightforward narrative. Bryher does not 'do' action; generally she eschewed violence in her prose (*The Player's Boy* again excepted). In *The Fourteenth of October*, the Battle of Hastings is described only by the flight of Saxonian levies. In *The Coin of Carthage* the discipline of Hannibal's army is exemplified by its appearance, not its performance. The novels reflect the characteristics of their author; emotionally restrained, acutely observed, culturally aware & meticulously detailed.

Before she turned to history, Bryher had written 3 rather soppy autobiographical novels & was a prolific contributor to the journals of the 1930's that reflected her interests. Towards the end of her historical period she produced a curious anomaly: a half-breed novella entitled *Visa for Avalon*, first published in 1965. It owes a lot to *Brave New World* insofar as it concerns a future in which flight from an oppressive regime becomes imperative, and *1984* in its description of dictatorship. But it is not science fiction, merely the reactions of a group of ordinary people to the politically worsening conditions in which they live. It reflects their experience of 1930s Nazism & her own flight from Switzerland in 1940; she could have gone anywhere in the world but chose the dangers of her native country.

In 1963 Bryher published an account of her life up to 1940, *The Heart to Artemis: A Writer's Memories*. A second volume, *The Days of Mars: A Memoir 1940 - 1946* appeared in 1972. She wrote no more fiction, travelled as always from her house near Montreux and died there in 1983, almost 90 years old, ending a life of achievement, excitement & philanthropy in the only true home she had ever known.

Bryher by Islay Lyons



# quiz

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CONGRATULATIONS TO LAST ISSUE'S  
WINNER, **LYNNE BLOOMFIELD**

**LAST ISSUE'S ANSWER:**  
ANNUS MIRABILIS



# events

IN THE COMMUNITY

# aldeburgh literary festival

BY JEFF TAYLOR

Suffolk has a growing number of festivals devoted to literature including The Aldeburgh Literary Festival at the beginning of the year, the Felixstowe Book Festival in the summer, the Flipside Festival at Snape in October and the Lavenham Literary Festival in November. Last year also saw the emergence of the first ever literary festival based in Bury St Edmunds. This year the 17th Aldeburgh Literary Festival, organised by John and Mary James of The Aldeburgh Bookshop is being held between Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> to Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March.

Fiction has taken a back seat during this year's 18 events with the emphasis on memoir, biography, history and politics. The first evening is concerned with biography but of two contrasting styles. The festival kicks off with Jenny Uglow talking about her 'beautifully illustrated' biography of Edward Lear, *Mr Lear: A Life of Art*

and *Nonsense* followed by *Private Eye* satirist Craig Brown presenting *Ma'am Darling*, his 'dazzling kaleidoscopic experiment in biography' - a portrait of Princess Margaret. Other biographers attending include A.N. Wilson (*Charles Darwin, Victorian Mythmaker*) and James Hamilton (*Gainsborough, A Portrait*). Two biographers appearing, who have turned their hand to historical fiction, are Lucy Hughes-Hallett (*Peculiar Ground*) and Francis Spufford (*Golden Hill*). They will be in conversation with Claire Armitstead.

Two memoirists brought together are a bound to be very popular. Penelope Lively (*Life in the Garden*) will be in conversation with Alex Preston (*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*). On his own William Blacker discusses his book *Along the Enchanted Way: A Story of Love and Life in Romania*.

History and politics have a strong presence. Sir Jeremy Greenstock is in conversation with Nick Robinson on the subject of the Greenstock's recently published book *Iraq: The*

*Cost of War* while historian Margaret Macmillan will be discussing the *End of the First World War*. Bringing things more up to date, Roger Scruton will be describing his new book *Where Are We: The State of Britain Now* and economist Ann Pettifor will be talking about money, where it comes from, and who controls it in the context of her book *The Production of Money: How to Break the Power of the Bankers*.

Other authors appearing include Patrick McGuinness on Proust, Dave Goulson on bees, Nicholas Crane on *The Making of the British Landscape*, Eamonn McCabe on *A Career in Photographs and a History of Photography*, William Sieghart (*Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving*) and Natalie Haynes on her new novel *The Children of Jocasta*. An extra event has been organised for the last evening of the festival. Andy Kershaw will be presenting his one-man show and signing copies of his autobiography *No Off Switch*.

All tickets are priced at £12 except for Andy Kershaw (£14) and can be ordered by post using a booking form available via The Aldeburgh Bookshop. You can visit their website for further information on buying tickets.

[aldeburghbookshop.co.uk](http://aldeburghbookshop.co.uk)

# new angle prize dinner

BY JACQUIE KNOTT

One of the privileges of being in the Suffolk Book League is of becoming involved in the New Angle Prize. This award is for a book of literary merit which is set in, or influenced by, East Anglia. The Ipswich Institute awards this prize, along with Suffolk Libraries and the *East Anglian Daily Times*, and with sponsorship from Gotelee Solicitors and Scrutton Bland, so it is an event of some significance locally. 2017 was the fifth year in which this biennial prize has been given. The long process of awarding the prize began early in the year when, along with some other members of the SBL committee, I was one of the filter judges who narrowed down the longlist to create a shortlist for the final judging panel. Given that all books of literary merit which meet the local criteria may be included, this meant reading a surprising range of work, which included memoirs, comic books,

biography, letters and poetry, as well as novels of course.

When faced with this, you suddenly realise quite how much we self-select when we read, and it was exciting to be exposed to books that I would not usually have picked up. Another joy was in putting forward a book which I thought was especially good, and waiting to see if the judges agreed.

Our shortlist was, in the end, mostly novels. Long time friend of the Book League Julia Blackburn won with her beautiful book about John Craske, *Threads*. This book is a lovely object in itself, as it contains images of Craske's embroidered pictures. The book is a biography, but it is also a personal memoir, and a reflection on the time during which Julia was researching Craske, for this was when she lost her beloved husband, the artist Herman Makkink.

Jill Dawson, our first speaker this year, won the runner-up prize with *The Crime Writer*, and Rosy Thornton won the Suffolk Libraries Readers' Vote with her book of short stories *Sandlands*. The journey ended with a dinner at Hintlesham Golf Club, where we were able to meet all of the shortlisted authors over dinner, and hear the results live, which was very exciting.



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