**Tony Holden book reviews in A/Z order of surname**

**RAB1 [2008-2013] was a ‘recommend-a-book e-mail project’ edited Tony and Barbara Holden 3 times/ year.**

Ackroyd - Peter Ackroyd ‘The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein’ 2008 [Tony Holden Issue 12, February 2012] – Peter Ackroyd is a biographer and historical novelist. I found his London biography, Hawksmoor, Blake and Chaucer very good. This novel is set in the years before 1822. In it Victor Frankenstein meets up with the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and finds himself part of his world [Among his TV work there is the three-part ‘The Romantics’ http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/romantics]. Throughout the novel major historical issues surface: radical politics, atheism, women’s rights and science. I must say I prefer biography to historical novels because, as here, I find my concern for historical or even literary truth gets in the way! Anyhow, given the title name and other details we are into a version of Mary Shelley’s’ ‘Frankenstein’ [plus all the films]. So this well-written and strong story is of Romantic poets together with ‘resurrectionists’ getting corpses for medical research and the dissection of the dead. It is also about Frankenstein, the experimental anatomist, who desires not only to understand life but also to create it: hence the creature-monster! In the novel we have life-force, energy, electricity and biology: in our time we have the search for the Higgs particle and ‘dark matter’ and we have organ transplants and stem-cell research. This is not a book for anyone who dislikes horror, killing or what we now call forensic pathology. But it is powerful as well as entertaining – the big issues remain, “what is life, what is its meaning, what can we make of and with imagination?”

Addison - Paul Addison ‘Churchill the unexpected hero’ 2005 [Tony Holden Issue 6 January 2010] - This short book is some 300pages [including notes, bibliography and index]. I say short because the period covered is world political history in Churchill’s lifetime [1874 – 1965] and because the material by and on Churchill is vast. From my limited knowledge I’d say Addison makes a good attempt at compression and judgement. His thesis is in the subtitle namely that throughout his life Churchill was often found wanting, in the wrong, heavily criticised and that even so he was at the heart of British politics for much of his life and, in his age, was the hero of WW2. It is not only Churchill [with his aristocratic background, his unending dreams of destiny, his lifelong marriage to Clemmie and his ‘black dog’ of depression] but most/ all leaders who have feet of clay, are complex and sometimes fail to put their strengths and weaknesses to good use. Asked what was hardest in governing, was it McMillan who replied, “Events dear boy”? The scale and complexity of these events is mind-numbing: especially in terms of the exercise of power, war as a strategy, the attempt to build domestic prosperity and, not least, the trade-off between values and pragmatism! Given current events the thing that strikes me most strongly about the book is that so many of the issues, problems, alternative solutions, mistakes and ongoing false assumptions are still mightily in play!

Art Fund Quarterly Magazine [Tony Holden Issue 13, June 2012] – You can find all about the Art Fund card with its free and reduced entry to UK museums and galleries, saving art for the UK, buying and supporting art in UK galleries and museums. My personal preference is contemporary art but the Art Fund covers all ages and styles from [in the spring 2012 issue] the St Cuthbert Gospel to Titian to video installations by Jane and Louise Wilson. The Quarterly magazine is such an interesting read including Art Fund news and activities; their competition for museums and galleries; what’s on around the UK [not only London by any means]; art to be bought and sold! In this issue I especially liked Chris Smith on ‘what makes a good museum?;’ Calotte Mullin interviewing Rachel Whiteread on her new frieze [tree of life] for the Whitechapel Gallery in East London; Jonathan Conlin reflecting on John Berger’s ‘Ways of Seeing’ TV series in 1972; and Richard Long on what got him into his ways of doing art. I enjoy the Tate Magazine http://www.tate.org.uk but this has a much wider range and is less ‘academic’ with shorter punchier information and insights. Well worth a look – RAB advertising now closes down!

Auster - Paul Auster ‘Travels in the scriptorium’ 2006 [Tony Holden Issue 10, June 2011] - Auster writes of multiple-situations with complex characters: he enjoys being many-layered. Critics say he indulges in post-modern games! I find his approach to ‘writing’ attractive but more importantly he draws me into, and he rehearses for me, some serious experiences, alternatives and feelings. Here we have Mr Blank, an old man, in an almost empty [possibly locked] room where he is limited, forgetful, frail and receiving some ‘treatment.’ He reads a typescript by Sigmund Graf who is a prisoner in a different time and place and later Blank gets the opportunity to add to Graf’s report or fiction. He has some three dozen photographs of people. He knows he is on camera and tape. There is much about moving around the room, bodily functions, sex, love and remembering. There are also conversations with several visitors who are in the photographs, whose names he lists and for whom he has some guilty responsibility. As you get into reading him there is a sense of it all being constructed word upon word. There’s something strange, out of sync, being carefully translated: think maybe Orwell, Beckett or Pinter, though Auster is very distinctive both in his anguish and his hope.

Bacon - Charlotte Bacon ‘Lost Geography’ 2000 [Tony Holden Issue 17, October 2013] – This novel of some 260 pages covers sixty years [1933-1991], several generations and families at six or more locations: the Hebrides, Saskatchewan, Toronto, Paris, London, and New York. One definition of ‘epic’ is “a long series of events characterized by adventures or struggle.” I got into thinking about ‘epic’ because Charlotte Bacon’s wonderfully titled first novel certainly charts such territory. Epic writing is, I assume, to do with scale and the mix of detail and distance. Too distant and you end with genealogy and death comes too thick and too fast! Too detailed and you get more information that you would ever wish to know! Within this account there is clear and interesting characterization and a shifting sense of place. It is held together by some realistic yet dramatic events and by her arts of story-telling. I found the book persuasive and gently encouraging especially about the tough business of being human, bringing up children, learning languages, earning a living for example in dealing in carpets, moving house and being migrants. The title teases since all of us lose our way and sometimes feel far from home. But ‘lost geography’ sounds much more serious than losing your house keys or your mobile phone.

Banks - Iain Banks ‘The Crow Road’ 1992 [Tony Holden Issue 17, October 2013] – Our Sainsbury’s has a second-hand bookstall for I think a local hospice. If you can find the bucket and have money you put it in or in my case pay next time because you don’t have any change. The great thing about it is there are some seats next to the box! So, having shopped, I usually sit [recover my balance] and, if I can, work my way through the titles. And there was Iain Banks and I thought, ‘he died only the other day.’ A woman [a stranger of course] was looking through the books so, as I usually do, I said, ‘do you know this writer?’ ‘Oh it’s excellent,’ she said: ‘it’s sort of Science Fiction and mainstream and set in Edinburgh’ [‘a bit like Rebus,’ I added]. Anyhow it’s worth a read. It’s style is more like this review – plus sex, earthy language and strange goings-on - than you would ever imagine!

Barry - Sebastian Barry ‘The Secret Scriptures’ 2008 [Tony Holden] – I found this an emotionally tough read. It’s set in Ireland with its civil war between the Catholic and Protestant communities and its wider struggles. There are two main ‘narrator-writers’ though, as you’d expect in a traditional society, there is much about families and religion. Roseanne about 100 years old has been long-term in the psychiatric hospital and is secretly writing her story. Dr Green is the psychiatrist who, knowing the hospital is to close, decides to assess her to see if she can be released into the community. On one level it’s almost investigative journalism: at another it is a very good take on how history is written and told. At times the hurt and melancholy is like reading Beckett [“They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more].” But at other times it is a gripping, passionate, healing and hopeful story. We always wonder how people in the past could treat each other so badly: hospitalizing, killing, executing, mistreating women and generally misusing authority for the sake of some ‘I’m OK you are not OK’ ideology: and then we look at what is happening today. But this is a fine book. I don’t think it’s about fate [though some of the story twists go well beyond serendipity]. I think it is about people making choices that take them beyond ignorance, prejudice and cruelty: yet again we are reminded how often women bear the brunt of such injustices.

Bowles - Paul Bowles ‘The Sheltering Sky’ 1949/ 1993 or 2005 [Tony Holden RAB issue 15, February 2013] - I enjoyed the 1990 film. Then I came across this much darker novel. I’d never heard of him! He died in 1999 having lived for 52 years in Tangiers. He was American, a writer, composer, married to Jane Auer [died 1973]. He was a protagonist for Morocco. After several readings I found the novel serious, complex, demanding, entertaining as a story, and utterly gripping about the business of being human. He is vivid on the Sahara with its cities, the handful of travellers, the people they encounter and the many dramas that makeup the novel’s three-parts. Whatever commentators made or make of it and whatever his part in literary history I see this as an exceptional story about ‘place.’ It is about the impact of the places in which we live - here extremely as the North African [pre-independence] Sahara with its sun, sand, sky and diverse peoples and cultures. And it’s about that inner-place where we each work at our language, consciousness, sexuality, being: and to which, in crisis, we either succeed or fail in ‘getting back.’ The ‘way back’ here involves serious illness and sexual experience as a route to being saved or breaking down. I wonder if the narrative about ‘white woman’ and ‘black men’ is a metaphor for his life as a bisexual man. Some emphasize the book’s ‘existentialist anxiety.’ But for me ‘the desert’ [as Sahara and as the ‘desert of our hearts’ in ‘desert fathers’ language] is terrible, wonderful, shifting and multi-layered, like humans.

Boyd - William Boyd ‘Waiting for sunrise’ 2012 [Tony Holden Issue 15, February-2013] - I recently re-read and enjoyed William Boyd’s ‘Restless’ [2006] after watching the equally enjoyable BBC 1 two-part film [December 2012]. These led me on to ‘Waiting for sunrise.’ There we have Vienna and psychoanalysis; World War 1, London and spying; settings in art and the theatre; love and sex – in other words splendid characters, entertaining narrative and well-paced action. Boyd gives us all of this plus some varied and clever writing. The novel was a great place for hibernation!

Bryson - Bill Bryson ‘A short history of nearly everything’ 2003 [Tony Holden May 2009] - 574 pages plus notes! This is a difficult, important and intriguing history of science. Bryson is humorous, tells a great story, and popularises vast tracts of many academic disciplines. The quickening pace of our grasp, through the dateable achievements of science, of how ‘nearly everything’ works is awesome. Rarely has the search been in a straight line but it has included brilliance, mendacity, greed and carelessness towards other people and the planet. The story is told in the English language not in the specialist languages of the sciences or in maths-physics. There are serious difficulties as to how anyone can handle so much diverse and specialist knowledge: this is not helped by the speed with which new facts replace old ones. And, as Bryson often notes, however well-read we understand little about most things. The currently dominant scientific world-view is a challenge to all that is important in other world-views be they political, cultural or religious: though within it we persist in searching for and verifying what is true. But not surprisingly many questions surface. How can we judge what is true and false? How do the findings of these many disciplines relate to each other? Are we being given descriptions but no explanation? What difference does all this scientific world-view make to me? I value such an account and hope for the political will to put such science, with its explanations and technologies, to uses for the common good.

Byatt - A S Byatt ‘The Biographer’s Tale’ 2000 [Tony Holden Issue 14, October 2012] – I usually find Byatt hard going but rewarding. She says, “I write novels because I am passionately interested in language.” http://literature.britishcouncil.org/a-s-byatt. I know something of the obsessiveness and sensuousness that can inlay writing. But of course you can overdose and arguably Byatt does! Nonetheless it’s worth reading especially if you relish looking words up in a dictionary, checking out inter-cultural references and banking arcane information. Enjoy the clever game but follow the story! Phineas feels “an urgent need for a life full of ‘things.’” So he sets out to write the biography of a biographer and in so doing gets into research about the historical Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen; works in a travel shop with dodgy people; becomes involved with a couple of women. This is “a dazzling fiction [woven] out of one man’s search for fact,” as the sleeve has it. We are invited to privilege scientific and historical research and not religion, magic, myth, traveller’s-tales, or post-modernist literary theory, though we get both! This is a novel [or a biography or most probably an autobiography] about how we use writing to relate to the world; to deal with the myriad of overwhelming interpretations; to handle our own well-being [or indeed our lack of it – consider ‘cleverness’ or ‘madness’ as alternatives]. Throughout this enjoyable and combative read [the sleeve has, ‘tantalising, comic and rueful’] I kept feeling, “this is first rate entertainment but, ‘is she taking the piss?’” Well, between post-modernism and [real] life ‘falls the shadow!’

Byatt - A. S. Byatt ‘The Matisse Stories’ 1993 [Tony Holden Issue 16, June 2013] - There are three stories each with a Matisse painting that is reproduced on the cover. The first is the ‘rosy nude’ [‘Large reclining nude’ or ‘the pink nude’ 1935] and the story is ‘Medusa’s ankles.’ It is about a middle aged woman and a hairdresser: how we perceive each other’s bodies or hair-does! The second Matisse is ‘Le silence habité des maisons’ [1947] and the title is ‘Art Work.’ This concerns two artists and their cleaning lady and is ‘about’ colour and its appreciation. The third Matisse is ‘La Porte noir’ [1942] and the title is the Chinese Lobster.’ This features a woman dean meeting a male art professor to discuss the protest-work of a woman student and her charge of sexual harassment. It’s the toughest story combining Matisse, art and issues to do with self-worth and suicide. Byatt’s creative imagination merges looking, drawing and writing to great effect. The question “Why Matisse?” runs through the stories: you might equally wonder how art shows human life to such effect. This is very good on art, Matisse, people and story-telling.

Cage - John Cage ‘A biography of John Cage’ by Kenneth Silverman 2010 [Tony Holden Issue 14, October 2012] – I’m not the person to review a 500 page book on music. But this birthday present [from musician son Adam http://soundcloud.com/adam-holden-1] has had me intrigued. John Cage [1912-1992] was American; an avant-garde composer, writer and artist; a life-long partner with choreographer Merce Cunningham. His long career placed him close to a heady-list of artists, musicians and world-changers and he often collaborated with them. I ask myself - how is it possible to do so much work? How can you sustain so many diverse interests? How do you engage with so many people? How do you become so famous? His disciplined-experiments are often seeded by a passion for the work of exceptional people. Somehow he combined his own understanding of sound and noise with his use of the I-Ching as, if I’ve got it right, a means of introducing chance. His motto - “I try over and over to begin all over again.” Audiences have loved and hated his work: some might scream, ‘charlatan’ others have venerated his brilliance and inventiveness. I wonder at the identity and sexuality and imagination that are in play. Here is an exhilarating appetite and energy that seeks to heal the world. He says, “I am basically an [American] Protestant, not a Zen purist. So I want to do things.” He certainly did many fine things. I don’t understand the music; with my hearing-loss some sound is noise; but I do relish his life-affirming, generous, influential and future-orientated ways.

Callow - Philip Callow ‘Black Rainbow’ 1999 [Tony Holden Issue 11, October 2011] – Why choose this particular book from the charity shop shelves? I liked the cover; the ‘Shoestring Press’ name; the quote from Paul Celan: “Black milk of dawn we drink you at dusk;” and the cover recommendation “[his] writing is like nothing but itself [Angela Carter].” All of these suggested he was an unusual and interesting writer. ‘Never heard of him,’ but clearly I should have! It has an ‘ordinariness’ that is quietly demanding. There is something excellent and yet not mainstream about him. Eventually I looked him up on the web and found his obituaries [1924-2007]: “Philip Callow was a novelist, short story writer, poet, memoirist and biographer. He was perhaps best known for a trilogy of novels about working-class life in the Midlands [The Times 25 September 2007].” This novel [his 15th], set in the Cotswolds and the West Country, is the story of a man who loses his wife in a car accident. He moves to a fairly solitary life in the countryside. The story charts a withdrawal from grief. This happens because of his journal and poetry writing, memories and his encounters with family, friends and locals. But what ‘got me’ was his tone, his earthiness, his exceptional directness. His main character says of appreciating poetry, “it was never literature, it was the spark of life jumping into him from certain writers” that he valued. And I have a sense that this search for ‘the spark of life’ animated all Callow’s writing.

Carey - Peter Carey ‘The Chemistry of tears’ 2012 [Tony Holden Issue 17, October 2013] – Our book group decided that in addition to our shared reading we would select a summer [best] read. I’ve read a few by Peter Carey. I have understood his deserved reputation as twice winner of the Booker Prize. But I have never before enjoyed one greatly. Andrew Motion gives a review and summary - http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/06/chemistry-tears-peter-carey-review. There are two narratives identified in chapter headings as Catherine and Henry – 2010 and 1854. There is a luxury and sensuousness in his attention to details: some of places, others of people, some humorous, others cultural, some [without writing a spoiler] under the name of Charles Babbage. The interwoven stories concern people with their loves, loss and grief; museums with their clocks, automatons and machines – ducks swans abacus; ill-health and bodies; science and the meaning of our world. Motion writes: “Specifically, it is a vision of how to discover order in a random universe - something that runs the risk of seeming crackpot, or being proved unworkable, and yet preserves a kind of nobility.” And beneath the surface, as it were, runs an oil slick of apocalyptic dimension. For me a ‘close reading’ means drawing lines on the text and in the margin. It means not being able to put the book down. It means finding myself moved by words, images and feelings. ‘The Chemistry of tears’ does all of this! PS – I also read his very different but enjoyable ‘His illegal self’ [2008].

Carver - Raymond Carver ‘Elephant and other stories’ 1988 [Tony Holden Issue 10, June 2011] - I’ve never been a great fan of short stories but I got into reading RC via his poems which he says was one influence on his style as was Babel, Chekhov, O’Connor and VS Pritchett. Carver [1938-1988] born Oregon 1938; grew up in Yakima Washington; later worked in a saw mill with his father in California. So, he was blue collar American, married early with children, got into a creative writing course. In 1977, after a first success with his writing, he gave up alcohol through AA and met Tess Gallagher [a poet]. They were together till his death 11 years later. By then he had three collections of stories plus essays an poetry. He has a distinctive and recognizable style that is marked by immediacy, short sentences, first person narration, dialogue [without quotation marks] + a strong story-line. He quotes VS Pritchett’s definition of a short story as, “something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing.” His subjects are everyday life, basic family relationships, ultimate issues, and a somewhat brutally realist take on ordinary lives. Though serious [indeed heavy] he also has pace, variety and imagination. He is insightful on the twists and turns, fortunes and misfortunes, together with the intensity, of ordinary domestic lives.

Children’s science books [Angela Aldred January 2009] - Dear J, B asked me to send you details of the book 'Big Sister Little Sister', which my granddaughters love and which I gave S’s little girls. The author is Gillian Shields, illustrator Georgie Birkett, Igloo books Ltd.2007. Another recent find of mine is a series of four science books for young children. Our R, aged six, loves trying out a few experiments when mum or dad have time. There is a set of four, (found by her other Gran) but she has only been given one so far, called 'Fizz in the Kitchen.' Probably all four would be a bit much for one child if they are pretty young, but great for giving as family presents to Infant/Junior School siblings, one or two books each. That's what I've just done. Details are: ‘Science Around You’ books by Susan Martineau, www.bsmall.co.uk at £4.99 each: ‘Fizz in the Kitchen,’ ‘Bugs in the Garden,’ ‘Bubbles in the Bathroom’ and ‘Shadows in the Bedroom.’ I believe they were very cheap with The Book People or some other book club. However it is no trouble to order from the local book-shop. I'm a great believer in getting books when you see them, because so often wonderful publications just cease to exist. It's so frustrating and SAD when they are no longer available. Hope this is helpful. I'll send details of any further gems I find, and perhaps you would do the same, with all best wishes.

Critchley - Simon Critchley ‘Infinitely demanding - ethics of commitment, politics of resistance’ 2007/8 [Tony Holden Issue 6 January 2010] - This is a short, difficult, worthwhile read. SC is concerned with religious disappointment about meaning, nihilism and the death of God. He is mainly concerned with political disappointment caused by our post-9/11 ‘violently unjust world.’ He sees the West’s ‘present age’ as one of ‘secular liberal democracy’. He regards it as having a ‘motivational deficit.’ He critiques continental philosophers in a way that opens up atheism, secularism, Christianity and Judaism. Chapter [1] argues that “ethical experience begins with the experience of demand to which I give approval.” [2] Looks at ‘how to build an ethical subject.’ He reviews Badiou [situated universality and fidelity to an event]; Løgstrop [love your neighbour / enemy]; Levinas [responsibility for the other as traumatic demand]; and Lacan [the moral command is that through which the real [the neighbour] is actualized]. [3] Takes us into Freud and sublimation [through happiness, beauty, the art of tragedy, conscience and humour]. [4] Does politics through Marx and alternate anarchistic groups. [5] Seeks to understand, through the Bush Government, how to win! Sometimes SC is just plain wrong [!]; sometimes the move from academic to denunciatory language is uneven; but he is full of running. Personally – I resist disappointment because of language and consciousness; a few people for whom I care disproportionately; my commitment to a radical way of living [that includes the Jesus of the Gospels and works against violence in all its forms] and a passion for ideas that has always been fuelled by people like Critchley.

Cunningham - Michael Cunningham ‘Specimen Days’ 2005 [Tony Holden January 2009] - I enjoyed MC’s ‘The Hours’ [1999 Pulitzer Prize] with its ‘take’ on Virginia Woolf’s ‘Mrs Dalloway.’ In an add-on essay to this novel, he writes, “What is it about Whitman [1819-1892] that led me to include him in a novel, and not, at that, a fictional biography of the man but rather a complex book that involves not only Whitman but a malformed boy who believes the souls of the dead are trapped in machinery, a forensic psychologist is trying to apprehended a band of [child suicide] terrorists, and {OK, just say it} a cyborg in love with an alien woman.” The three parts are: ‘In the machine’ set in nineteenth century Industrial Revolution New York; ‘The Children’s crusade’ in the present; ‘Like Beauty’ “a future where otherworldly life had arrived.” And we have Catherine, Lucas and Simon [and Walt of ‘Leaves of Grass’]. The parts are trilogy and interwoven stories. But each of them is about books and writing; cities and urban living; resisting machines and government; attempting to live post 9/11 where fear and shame shadow America’s subsequent actions. We all live with the certainty of death and the prospect of suffering and violence and this book works as a complex response somewhere between valuing ‘graciousness’ and Yeats’ “terrible beauty.” It is not at all for the faint- hearted! But it is an extraordinary read not least in terms of its vivid detail, sheer imagining and emotional tenor.

Dibdin - Michael Dibdin ‘Ratking’ 1988/ 2010 [Tony Holden Issue 10, June 2011] - I enjoyed the three Zen stories on BBC TV. My book-group jokes that I all too often speak of films and books in the same breath! [1] Dibdin wrote 11 Zen stories plus another 7 books, so there are plenty to go at. He died in 2007 aged 60. There are many website, reviews and obituaries about Dibdin and his work. [2] Anyhow this is the first Aurelio Zen story: he is Venetian and a detective. It is the story of a kidnapping of the head of a rich family. There are many strong characters in addition to Zen. It is exciting and well-constructed and lends itself to hard reading. [3] The story is set in Perugia in Umbria and the Italian context is important and detailed. Given the background of Mussolini, the Mafia and the Vatican you might think a critical view is somewhat perilous. Accurate or not, he certainly wasn’t into over-praising Italy a culture and society. [4]There is also so much about the criminal, legal and police systems’ corruption that the word ‘paranoid’ comes to mind. Regarding a state system in such a negative way may be true or false but it leads neither to a happy life nor to an upbeat ending! [5] Like the image of the ‘Ratking’ itself there is much here that is dark, depressed, violent and distasteful. Nonetheless it’s a very good read!

Diski - Jenny Diski ‘The Dream Mistress’ 1996 [Tony Holden September 2008] - We saw and enjoyed her at last year’s Loughton book festival and I’ve read a few of her books. She often combines autobiography and story-telling and in some cases travel. As with others there is an element of mystification in the telling. She has memorable, odd but interesting characters. She describes sex erotically. Often there is some Jewish + east London aspect. She is troubled by loss and the absence of mother and/or father. This ends up in the depths of anxiety, despair and the threat of suicide: sometimes leading to humour. She is troubled by the absence of God and the presence of, what she calls, faith [perhaps influenced by Jabès’ form of French philosophy and Jewish mysticism]. But in fact it is to do with pain and loneliness and bleakness. So, “She did have a vocation. It was a driving need to find shape and space for her wilderness, geometry, to place her self within it, and to devote her days to its blank, black mystery [page 79].”

Drabble - Margaret Drabble ‘The Red Queen’ 2004 [Tony Holden Issue 7 May 2010] - Our library sells books off [10p novels 30p non-fiction!] and this was one of the several I bought. She uses an eighteenth century court memoir about a Korean princess for Part One and then follows a female academic to Seoul: the academic is reading the memoir and amongst her ‘adventures’ visits places linked to the Princess. I enjoyed it enormously – layers on layers, not least about writing and text! As someone who still strives to write I liked the front piece by Alexander Sokurov, “The dead weep with joy when their books are reprinted.” This is a great, full-on, dramatic story [though not all reviews agreed!]. I so got into tracing the original memoir on the web that I ended up on an academic Korean site! [‘The Memoirs of Lady Hyegong: the autobiographical writings of a Crown Princess of Eighteenth Century Korea by Hyegyonggunt Hong Ssi’ translated by JaHyun Kim Haboush 1996].’ Anyhow Drabble is very, very good.

Dunmore - Helen Dunmore ‘Zennor in darkness’ 1993 [Tony Holden May 2009] - This is a first novel from an established poet: [see her website at Helen Dunmore]. It’s set in rural Cornwall in 1917 and World War 1. It’s a strong story with many vivid moments. The key characters and families are in a very realistic context. We are shown their daily lives, religions, work, house keeping, interests in botany and art together with the swings and roundabouts of being a small community. It gives a strong sense of World War 1. The community worries over who is fit for active service and the lists and telegrams of the injured and dead. She gives a sense of the horror, the class conflict, the official lies and the shortage of food. And woven into the novel you have DH Lawrence and Frieda [who were in Cornwall and were forced to leave on the accusation that they were spies]. Here they are part of the main family stories and add to this very personal and close up take on WW1 and the extent to which the war affected people in Cornwall.

Duras - Marguerite Duras ‘Emily L’ 1987/89 [Tony Holden Issue 10, June 2011] - I’ve read this short novel several times and it links with her biography [1914-1996 Indochina and then France], her other books, her films [‘Moderato Cantabile’ 1958, ‘Hiroshima mon amour’ 1960, ‘The lover’1984], and most recently to her ‘Wartime notebooks and other texts’2008. But here an elderly English couple are in a bar in Quillebeuf-sur-Seine. This is both their story and also the story [and the written story] of the couple observing them. The two have spent their lives travelling in their own boat around the world. Perhaps they did this so as to escape loss: the loss of parents, a dead baby, a love, and their own different upbringings. Perhaps above all it was about the loss of some poems and a letter. The story itself, with its time-shifts to and from the bar, is straight forward enough by the end: the lovers missed each other but lived their lives the woman with the Captain on their boat and the caretaker with his family in [Latin America]. The language and style is sparse and Duras, however you describe the originality of her writing, comes back to names and descriptions. The writing, to me, has enormous emotional force quite beyond what I understand or feel. I think it is excellent as a novel. But I also sense that somehow it digs very deep into human experience and how we relate and write our stories: how we each need and desire to put them down.

Durrell - Lawrence Durrell ‘The Avignon Quintet’ [1974-1985 and as one book 1992] [Tony Holden Issue 8 Sept. 2010 - there are 5 novels hence the longer review] - Durrell is a favourite ever since I read ‘the Alexandrian Quartet’ as a young man. This summer I re-read MacNiven’s biography of Durrell’s rich and complex life and that, plus a second visit to Provence, led me at last, to these 1367 pages. / It is a massive and difficult read. I found myself rereading, scrawling marginal notes, despairing over many hot summer days of ever getting to grips with it! It is a ‘non-serial’ experimental novel [think for example Joyce, Proust, Pessoa, or Margaret Duras]. He moves the reader within space-time [stream of consciousness-like] and between imagined, memorized, dreamed, lived, written characters [oft repeated with multiple names and multiple styles]. But of course ‘it is all written and everything is real.’ / It is set around World War 2 in Avignon, European cities, Egypt where we follow a small group of people in their vivid worlds; their sexual lives; their losses; their engagement with good and evil; their search for meaning. In addition to people and places there are powerful themes and back stories: a veritable ‘archaeology of ideas’ - a history of philosophy. We have Gnosticism, Cathars and Templars; Christian and eastern religions; the Jews of Europe + the gipsies of the Camargue; Nazism, fascism + Hitler; psychiatry, Freud and Jung; quantum mechanics and relativity; Tantric sex; yoga + meditation. / For ‘black comedy’ to work you need to laugh. For an experimental novel to work you have to be able to read it! This is often wonderful story-telling but he does parody, overreach, is excessive, is wilfully confusing. At times the writing simply comes apart and breaks up: it is definitely ‘head-banging’ though also powerful, clever, wise and funny! / His aim is to ‘show’ rather than ‘explain’ [Wittgenstein]: it is an attack [at times sophisticated at times coarse] rather as a Zen Koan is an attack. In this sense it is a dangerous and unbalancing book. First because he constantly breaks the convention between written and lived lives within a novel. Then he threatens the readers’ sense of identity. Further in that he digs deep into suffering, contingency [entropy], the unconscious and the certainty of death - trailing as he does so much murder, suicide, sex and madness! / His aim is to get at [to find the treasure] of the human search for meaning, sense, purpose in spite of all anxieties. So he makes the experience of reading the novel one in which the reader has to face up to the world as it is: he says, ‘This’ [novel] ‘shows’ what human life is like. It is, for example, non-serial, difficult, complex, with identity as multiple selves, with relationships and sexual relationships that are whole and incomplete at the same time, with the struggle with good and evil unresolved. / It is well worth reading but I would give a health warning - ‘stay strong!’ If we are fortunate in our lives there are certain direct moments when we meet and experience ‘being-reality’ [however variously named, described and interpreted]. You might call it “a transforming search” [Gurdjieff]. Some people use the word ‘God.’ My word for this experience is ‘meditative-focus.’ I’m reminded of Jung, “The individuation process is sometimes described as a psychological journey; it can be a tortuous and slippery path -- If s/he is fortunate s/he will in the end find ‘the treasure hard to attain,’ the diamond body, the Golden Flower, the lapis, or whatever name and guise have been chosen to designate the archetype of wholeness, the self. One cannot be certain that the goal will be reached, there are too many hazards by the way.” / Out of this experience, [and I found that extraordinarily Durrell’s book creates such moments], our life values and choices emerge. For me they include that life is to be valued; that whatever the newness, plurality and interpretations truth-telling matters; that, “The awareness that you are here, right now, is the ultimate fact [Shunryu Suzuki].”

Faulks - Sebastian Faulks ‘Human Traces’ 2005 [Tony Holden Issue 7 May 2010] - If epic means long [600 or so very readable pages]; with a wide time-span [say 1876-1920]; set in many countries; involving both personal intimacy and sweeping issues: then this is epic! The main concern is with what it means to be human. This is worked at through story, a few people, science and philosophy. Wikipedia has the novel, “tells of two friends who set up a pioneering asylum in 19th-century Austria in tandem with the evolution of psychiatry and the start of WW1.” A cover quote has, the two friends “find themselves united by a determination to understand how the mind works and whether madness is the price we pay for being human.” [Bicameralism makes a link between evolution, introspection and schizophrenia {Julian Jaynes/ Tim Crow}]. So how does our intellectual capacity, language and consciousness relate to our susceptibility to madness and psychiatric illness? The novel gives us a history of medicine and psychiatry as understood in its infancy [with many early practioners developing ideas pre-Freud!]. It is also concerned with how homo-sapiens evolved [with much about both Darwin and Wallace]. It is an emotionally strong read with a mix of researched history into psychiatry [sometimes too didactic] and powerful imagination. Don’t read it if you can’t cope with illness, post-mortems, explicit sex or madness. Don’t read it if you can’t bear driving at persistent even self-damaging questioning. But if you want narrative, energy, real-life, ultimate issues – this is a fine book and worth the long read.

Follett - Ken Follett ‘The pillars of the earth’ 1989 [Tony Holden Issue 11, October 2011] – One of life’s many pleasures is a long, straightforward, captivating read. Follett in a short introduction writes of his love of English mediaeval cathedrals, how he came to write this 1076 page book [plus a sequel in 2007], and about how books sell. “This was a word-of-mouth book. It’s a truism of the book business that the best advertising is the kind you can’t buy: the personal recommendation of one reader to another.” RAB I thought! When buying the book the charity shop workers got into discussion with me as to whether the book was better than the TV/film version – see http://www.the-pillars-of-the-earth.tv/. I must say I can enjoy both. Set between 1123 and 1174 I assume there is much historical accuracy [Henry 1 son drowned in 1120; Henry 2 reigned 1154-1189; Thomas a Beckett 1118-1170]. He is strong on how State, people and Church contest and is good at detailing politics and warfare. He gives a great deal of attention to how monastic Benedictine life worked and also how cathedral building developed in France and England. Not surprisingly there is much to do with sex, love, death and families. Though a long read I rarely lost interest and overall it is splendidly enjoyable story-telling.

Foulds - Adam Foulds ‘The quickening maze’ on the life of John Clare 2009 [Tony Holden Issue 14, October 2012] – Historical novels combine research and imagining. This is set in 1837-1841 and the High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest – very near where we live! Allen is in charge of the asylum and arguable an ‘enlightened pioneer’ in mental health when not trying to develop a woodcarving machine. John Clare the Northampton poet is a patient with serious delusions and a backlog of publishing success combined with attritional poverty. Alfred Tennyson [later Lord and Poet Laureate] lives nearby because his brother Septimus is a patient. The narrative and action is to do with these relationships. Foulds’ approach is very ambitious. The novel shows us Epping Forest with its ecology and people; the Asylum with its inmates, keepers and treatments; the deluded mind of John Clare with its naturalist poetry; the early life of Tennyson as a public figure and poet and as a person whose immediate family loses its money because of Allen’s scheme. Around these players there are other family members including seventeen year old Hannah, the doctor’s daughter with her fantasies and hopes of marriage. So those who enjoy history and novels and those of us who love Epping Forest and its story will find this a very good read. For a long detailed account of Clare’s whole fascinating life together with a survey of life between 1793 and 1864, try Jonathan Bate ‘John Clare: A Biography’ 2003. For the feel of the period think French Revolution through to the Great Exhibition [and Census] of 1851.

Frost - Brian Frost ‘Pioneers of Social Passion’ 2006 [Tony Holden September 2008] - If you want to know what I, and many others, got up to in our work for the Methodist Church in London then Brian’s book gives a good account both of the history and the updating of that history. Although the social passion is seen through Methodist experience the story has much wider appeal. When I reviewed it more formally I said it’s a good read because it is an accomplished record; understands London; identifies some of the key issues; values our past; and it monitors significant change.

Gale - Patrick Gale ‘Notes from an exhibition’ 2007 [Tony Holden January 2009] - If we define a writer, for example, as gay or black or feminist we almost always undervalue them. This is, not least, because none of us are only one thing, one role or one identity. I hadn’t read or come across any Patrick Gale before this charity shop buy. He is gay and his book is about, as he says in the end notes, families and death. Set in Cornwall and with a fascinating take on religion as Quakerism his main focus is art, creativity and bi-polar within his characters and their families. The structure uses the exhibition-notes of the title together with the changing viewpoint of the players. This makes it strong on time sequences and the notion of a series [as in a series of paintings]. It has really stayed with me not least because, though emotionally demanding, there’s an emotional seriousness about it [what some call an emotional intelligence] that is very attractive.

Galgut - Damon Galgut ‘In a strange room – three journeys’ 2010 [Tony Holden Issue 11, October 2011] – DG is South African and born 1963. The central character travels from S Africa to Europe, other parts of Africa and to India. The Financial Times cover-quote has, “A powerful three part meditation on the relationship between travel, love and an off-kilter self.” At some level it is about the purpose of travel; the places and landscapes; the people met and the conflict that sometimes follows. There is a palpable sense of alienation, unresolved sexuality and failure. The distancing is somehow reinforced by the extra space around paragraphs. The roles [?] the narrator takes [in the 1st and 3rd person] are those of follower, lover and guardian according to the three parts. It is a very good novel and I agree with those reviewers who rate it. William Skidelsky in the Observer gives a positive summary – http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jul/25/in-a-strange-room-review. But I found it an extremely unpleasant and negative read. How do you go about accumulating so much defeat, hurt and meaninglessness? In contrast I’m reminded of the Tao’s phrase “on the way without leaving home” and the meditation instruction “and be at home there.” I agree with the reviewers’ words it is ‘bleak,’ ‘dark,’ ‘disquieting’ and I’d add ‘ugly.’ At root the central person/ writer is seriously damaged – “I am writing about myself alone, it’s all I know, and for this reason I have always failed in every love, which is to say at the very heart of my life [page 106].”

Gombrich - E. H. Gombrich ‘A little history of the world’ 1936, 2005 paperback 2008 [Tony Holden Issue 12, February 2012] - In 40 chapters [284 pages in my Yale University Press edition] he gives a credible, enjoyable, fascinating history of the world – for children! There have been other attempts at such an overview for example H G Wells’ ‘A short history of the world’ [1922] or of a different kind Neil McGregor ‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’ [2010]. Gombrich has a similar breath-taking grasp of information and yet it has the quality of a story being told [to children perhaps early teens and for adults]. The genesis of this remarkable book is told in the preface by his grand-daughter, Leonie Gombrich. It is that this polymath wrote it in 6 weeks as a young man in Vienna in 1935! Since then it appeared in many languages. But it was only a short time before his death in 2001 [born 1909] that a revised and English translation was produced [Caroline Mustill translator and research assistant from 1995-200: illustrations by Clifford Harper]. This is ‘the’ E. H. Gombrich of ‘The Story of Art’ [1950 and many editions: Chris Jones RAB Issue 1, May 2008]. Somehow he achieves a sense of scale and distance about dates, events, rulers and ideas that is consistent. And, to pick a few accurate words from the cover-recommendations, he is passionate, humane and generous of spirit. The test of its veracity is that when you read sections you think you know something about [!] you find him at once judicious and fresh.

Grayling - A C Grayling ‘The heart of things’ 2005 [Tony Holden Issue 9, February 2011] - This is the fourth in a ‘series of essay miscellanies.” The short, stimulating, informative essays are set within personal themes, public concerns, people, ideas and concluding thoughts. [1] Grayling is a fine philosopher with a particular liking for classical sources. There is much to enjoy and learn even for someone who once wrote a University entrance essay on, ‘dead languages ought to be buried.” [2] He focuses on current issues and he applauds those who make the difficult journey from academia to the world as it is. He is very good at backing ‘the good:’ and he comes across as a ‘humanist’ of sincerity and compassion. [3] He’s rightly committed to Socrates’ approach: “we must follow the argument wherever it leads:” and he works hard to show the value of [what I know as Popper’s] an ‘open mind and open society.’ [4] As a ‘new atheist’ [2006] he is sometimes harsh about anything which smacks of religion or spirituality [the two pages on Jung are grossly wrong and ungenerous]. But he knows well enough that not all religious people are fundamentalists and that indeed “no one is just one person” or indeed only a rational person! [5] The final essay is on Russell’s 1945 ‘History of Western Philosophy’ which, with its often cited flaws, he values greatly. I read it when I was seventeen in Nelson Grammar School library and was, as they used to say, “Blown away:” reading Grayling has some of that engagement and excitement.

Grosz - Stephen Grosz ‘The examined life’ 2013 [Tony Holden Issue 16, June 2013] - Stephen Grosz writes some thirty stories from his 50,000-hour psychoanalytic experience. He makes it clear that he is writing-up these stories. It is easy to read, lightly written, professionally worked through and painfully and insightfully lived. There are many moments in the book [moments from the lives of people] that make you want to take hold of the insight and use it for your own good. His main theme is about ‘how we lose and find ourselves’ – for SG change and loss go together. I found him convincing in showing the limitations and successes of psychoanalysis. He offers a much smoother and less subversive read than Adam Phillips in ‘Terrors and Experts’ [1995]! He covers a wide-range of human situations and unhappiness. At times people struggle with all that happens to them; at times people, one way or another, self-harm; at times people find the hurt they cause others loops back on them. There is so much out there set to kill us that I frequently wonder that [we] so carelessly ‘do harm’ and violence. If you are into self-realization [in all its forms] or you are into the use of language and stories this is a question-raising and stimulating read.

Hans Fallada ‘Alone in Berlin’1947 / 2009 [Conchita Navarro Saez Issue 8 Sept. 2010]

Haushofer - Marlen Haushofer ‘The Wall’ 1962 translated 1990 [Tony Holden Issue 12, February 2012] – Marlen Haushofer [1920-1970] was a married, Austrian, award-winning writer. This is her only novel translated into English. The novel is an account of one woman living alone with her few animals in the forest and alpine pastures growing food, fishing, reluctantly hunting and in the end facing a major crisis. A mysterious wall isolates her from all else, probably for ever. Interpretations include that she might be: exemplifying the human condition, living in a post-apocalyptic world, stranded Robinson Crusoe-like, a woman in a man’s world, ill or in prison. It’s not a ‘Berlin’ Wall! She is alone, knowing loss and plentitude. Reading the story is to enter a world of astonishing detail and extraordinary effort. She uses everyday detail to be matter of fact; to revisit lived events, memories and to do time-shifts; to write her record of events. She fantasizes that her diary will one day be read by another human. The tone is of candour, warmth, richness, hope even. Yet there is killing and she ends with the words, “Memories, mourning and fear will remain, and hard work, as long as I live.” I found the writing and story fine and compelling. What is it about? That life is hard. That we have to cope with a wide range of feelings, memories, dreams and events. That if you seriously attend to daily-living you can survive. It certainly isn’t about understanding or removing the wall.

Hockney - David Hockney - Martin Gayford ‘A bigger message conversations with David Hockney’ 2011[Tony Holden Issue 12, February 2012] – I’ve enjoyed David Hockney for many years. I’ve looked at his work, visited exhibitions, read books, and watched TV. I’ve even nodded to him outside Tate Modern! This is an excellent read with fine illustrations. The journey from Los Angeles, where he lived for so many years, to Bridlington, his current base, is worth taking. He is good at the whole process of art especially the relation between drawing-painting and photography-technology. Some prolific artists work through many stages or styles: Hockney is one such. His recent watercolour landscapes and trees set in east Yorkshire explore what used to be called ‘the sublime:’ here explored in a northern light. He understands well enough that there are many ‘layers’ of facts, ideas, values, interpretations and stories between us and what I call being-reality. Moreover he has such a strong take on living that I find him a serious encouragement. Hockney says something like, if you attend, remember, draw [depict], you will discover that our world is one of pleasure and excitement. He shows yet again in these conversations with Martin Gayford that he knows about epistemology [the study of knowledge] and perception! I just love and connect with how Hockney deals with drawing and painting; creativity; his deafness [and mine]; his fascination with northern light [for me Shetland], his love of trees [for us Epping Forest], the size and scale of his ambition [for me expressed as fear and wonder and ordinary ecstasy]. This is such a good book: for art lovers and life-affirmers!

Hustvedt - Siri Hustvedt ‘The sorrows of an American’ 2008 [Tony Holden] - I liked her novel ‘What I loved’ [2003] very much. Wikipedia mentions the “use of repetitive themes or symbols throughout her work. Most notably the use of certain types of voyeurism -- and the exploration of identity.” Certainly there is a great deal about self and other and seeing! It’s also to do with ordinary writing in memoirs, notebooks and letters. But it is also to do with professional writers, journalists, artists, photographers and the impact being famous has on family. This is a multi-generational family story especially about a brother and sister. The setting is Minnesota and New York: Norwegian-American. It’s all about the loss, threats, traumas and secrets that have to be worked out within relationships. I like the psychiatrist and his attempts to keep himself together; his work with his patients; his commitment to his family and friends. The forward quotes Rumi [Persian Sufi 1207-1273]: “Don’t turn away, Keep looking at the bandaged place. That’s where the light enters you.” It is also a post-9/11 novel and one layer or weave is all about people falling, jumping, and burning: and not only from twin-towers. She doesn’t quite get the right ‘weight’ between the family suffering and the sorrows of Americans at 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. But maybe no number of individual stories of suffering can relate to or be a metaphor for 9/11: it was just so traumatic for those of us who saw it on TV and even more for those who survived.

Hustvedt - Siri Hustvedt ‘The summer without women’ 2011 [Tony Holden Issue 10, June 2011] - Siri Hustvedt’s first novel was in 1992. I’ve enjoyed: ‘What I loved’ [2003] and ‘The sorrows of an American’ [2008 and see RAB5]. Her husband is Paul Auster. Such American writers only sharpen the love-hate relationship we Europeans have with America. I’m amazed at how two such brilliant people can inhabit the same house! ‘The summer without women’ is about what happens to one woman when ‘two such people’ move apart. You can read 216 pages in one sitting and then re-read over several days. Though easy to read it is complex, literary and, a strange phrase, ‘ferociously clever.’ She embodies universal themes [children and parents, sex and loving, ageing and death, faithfulness and betrayal, madness and breakthrough, creativity and writing] in likeable characters. It is set in her own home region of Minnesota: but mainly it is in a land without men and to do with the women she meets there. She is “a novelist of great intelligence. She knows the ways of the world and of the heart. She also knows a great deal about literature, art, philosophy, psychoanalysis and the neurosciences [Lisa Appignanesi Observer 20 February 2011].” Hustvedt draws attention, by various literary means, to the truth that her people are ‘written’ yet part of the reader’s reality. Her pacey story is engaging, funny, filmic, insightful and wholly entertaining. This is first class writing.

Hustvedt - Siri Hustvedt ‘What I loved’ 2003 [Tony Holden Issue 12, February 2012] – I’ve written about Siri Hustvedt in RAB Issue 5 and 10. I read this again for our Book group. For me it’s too long [370 pages], too complex, it has too much about art and writing. But it is very good. It’s set around 1987. She’s good on the urban setting; on New York and America; on the New York / European Jewish context and heritage. I find her engaging, she cares about serious issues, she has something to say. By this I mean she knows and writes well about some of our big human issues: about what it’s like to be a person and more specifically about art, creativity, sex, relationships, psychiatric illnesses and violence. Mostly it is a very fine story which holds up: though I needed to do a sort of family tree in a desperate attempt to work out and remember who is who! She is so ‘knowing’ and interesting about art and writing. It is a very tough emotional read. Eventually we realize the narrator is looking back from old age; the dramatic action turns on the death of a child; she dwells on loss and grief; Whilst she goes into an underworld of crime, violence, drugs and illness she is at her most demanding in her examination of the darkness [the Jungian shadow] that is within us all.

In a London playground, children are talking about why they hate Germans. It’s not the first time. Let’s go back to post-war Germany. Hans Fallada is handed an old Nazi police file. It concerns a couple who are trapped by the evolving paranoia engineered by the Nazis. Fallada finds it compelling, and this book is the result. In it the Quangles have just lost their son. Herr Quangle is radicalized and he starts an anonymous postcard campaign, on which he writes anti-Nazi sentiments. Each postcard risks certain death. Around him, dangerous aberrations, forensic scrutiny. Ordinary Germans end up in concentration camps. If how you greet your neighbour is loaded (‘Heil Hitler’), so is everything else. It’s a deadly game Berliners endure daily. A disturbing story, written simply. However, a few technical issues: he tends to state the obvious and then state it again. He gets his tenses confused. Many characters are flat world caricatures. Presumably much of this is down to the speed at which he wrote it. But it would benefit from tighter editing. This is an important book for Germans, and also for us. Here, kids grow up on history lessons which are over simplified for easy assimilation. Simple enough so that our kids conflate the words ‘German’ and ‘Nazi.’ This is unhelpful and well past its sell-by-date. The story of Otto and Elsie Hempel, on whose lives this book is based, gives us a more complex picture. It’s time we told our kids.

Issue 13, June 2012 www.tonyholden.org please recommend to others.

Jones - Edward Jones and Christopher Woodward ‘Guide to the architecture of London’ 2013 [Tony Holden Issue 17, October 2013] – This is a guide in just over 500 pages with two columns of text and [coloured] photographs. The appendices include a large index. It is set out in mapped sections. I’ve only seen a small proportion of the 1000 buildings. I underlined architects I know by name and learnt many new ones. Some buildings I circled as worth a visit. Given the importance of chronology to the layout of the book I realized I gave more attention to contemporary architecture than say to Wren, Hawksmoor, Lutyens or Soane. This preference is in spite of the writers who “have been surprised and delighted by the amazing richness of London’s domestic and monumental architectural past and sanguine about the crass mindlessness of much recent residential and commercial work.” Opinions and judgements are fine but all too often they use belittling criticisms and clever perjoratives which make we wonder how they regard people and communities! Their pet-hates include high rise blocks, traffic roundabouts, and ‘student housing projects of the early 1960’s’: for my taste they are a tad ‘waspish.’ Still, it’s massively entertaining and knowledgeable and you can play the game of whether or not you agree with them on your favourite buildings. It’s felt more of a wrestling match than a read! Anyhow as I end I find myself thinking about my better-known terrain of urban geography, politics and the effect of architecture on the lives and politics of 10 million or so people.

Lanchester - John Lanchester ‘The Debt of Pleasure’ 1996 [Tony Holden Issue 8 Sept. 2010] - This first novel won the Whitbread Prize it is by the Observer restaurant critic and London Review of Books contributor [232 pages]. Tarquin Winot our narrator and guide tends to lists and being something of a show off. As for the genre it’s at once a book for foodies and gourmets; for Francophile travellers; a European culture essay [think Montaigne]; and a novel with a plot that is much hidden and somewhat dark. He’s into food; people; culture; language in all its word-play. He is very clever and astute [ferociously so] and wonderful on food and the human rituals around cooking and eating. If being side-tracked [however appropriately] was a sport he’d have an Olympic gold. You might wish at times that he’d eat up and simply enjoy it all, but the book is a serious pleasure. His tone of voice and his assured style means that class and snobbery are never far away. He has a sort of pulled-back irony that combines with a passion for detail or certainly with the details of passion and sensuality. I always think that anything that approaches self-mockery, or satire or ‘black humour’ must make you laugh: and he is laugh-aloud funny. But one cover comment describes Tarquin as, “a splendid creation, genuinely learned [the scholarship is dazzling], poisonously bigoted and wholly made,” he’s not wrong!

Larkin - Philip Larkin ‘A girl in winter’ 1947 [Tony Holden Issue 13, June 2012] – Philip Larkin was only 25 when he wrote this his second novel. I enjoyed ‘Jill’ [1946] but this makes you wish there had been more Larkin novels in addition to his poetry. It is a very fine, straightforward and deep novel. I was born in North Lancashire in 1940 and have no memory of ‘the war’ and no sense of how difficult things were from the end of the war to say 1951. I found reading this very affecting as though I was recovering some lost memories. The story is set in World War Two and earlier with interesting characters, descriptions, events, a mystery and true gravitas. Here is a summary by Carol Rumens: “The ‘girl’ in the second novel is named Katherine Lind. She detests her job as an assistant in a dim provincial library with an unpleasant boss. Two events set the story going. Katherine contacts her former pen pal, Robin Fennel, now on leave from the army, and a meeting ensues. On the day in question, a colleague has severe toothache, and Katherine escorts her home. She discovers that her nasty boss has a sad, secret relationship, thwarted by his girlfriend's family circumstances. And she discovers she no longer loves Robin. Larkin's evocation of the icy, claustrophobic, wartime town [perhaps Coventry] is heightened by flashbacks to the glowing summer when a younger, merrier Katherine stayed with the Fennels. Both seasons are vividly evoked. Katherine's eye is the poet's eye.”

Larsson - Stieg Larsson Millennium Trilogy 2008-2010 [Tony Holden Issue 8 Sept. 2010] - The three novels are a very good and lengthy [1853 pages] read. It fairly carries you along. It is strong on dialogue, summarising story-lines, action. I’d accept the cover description about Salander as the super hero girl except that there is a lively cast of hundreds. Yes Salander, but Blomkvist [plus other journalists, researchers and police] is a sort of identikit for the real life Stieg Larsson. I’ve read that he was an international expert against right wing groups [under threat with life partner Eva Gabrielsson]; a political journalist come novelist; and heavily involved in Science-fiction - who then goes and dies of a massive heart attack at 50! It is an action-packed crime thriller: given Sweden you think Mankell and Wallander. As well as being a very complex and engaging story it has many serious themes that include human rights and social morality; violence including violence against women as domestic, rape and prostitution; mental health and its misuse; journalists and their independence; computers and hacking; capitalism and state politics; and crime as organized, corporate, state. It’s said he wrote for relief from the day job; and no doubt for money; but it is a [popularizing] serious take on Swedish society. And it is, however you analyse it, a gripping and compulsive read: you really want to know what happens to the players.

Lawrence - D H Lawrence ‘Women in love’ 1921 [Tony Holden Issue 16, June 2013] – There is a particular pleasure in re-reading: in this case I was facing changes not only from when it was written in 1921 but also from when I first read it in about 1960. I still place DHL among the greats! As I read I easily set aside memories of literary theory and commentary: though film-memories persisted [I still have a copy of F R Leavis dated 1957 on DHL and Ken Russell’s 1969 film was outstanding]. So I read trying to take the book on page by page. There are dialogues that are both personal and reflective; descriptions that are vivid and detailed; and the whole story, with its many dramas and conflicts, seeps disturbingly into you. Somehow DHL finds the right combination of words; the compelling narrative; the worked-out comment; the striking take on ideas and art that make the novel live. He gets to grips with the complex and difficult business of being human. He’s strong on place both rural and industrial; on class with its coal-mines, schools and large houses; on sex and sexual politics; on relationships between parents and their adult children and the possibility of relationships between men and men. If you’ve never read him don’t miss this. If you read him many years ago now is a good time to look again. In writing this I came across Howard Jacobson at http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jun/14/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview33

Le Carré - John le Carré ‘A Perfect Spy’ 1986 [Tony Holden September 2008] - Le Carré has written some 20 spy-thrillers [see www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n02/tay101\_.html ]. This is an exceptional and enjoyable book: he has a very particular voice, humour and style together with his plots, places, interwoven timelines and detailed characters with their conversations, reported speech and reflections. It begins before WW2 and ranges over the United Kingdom, Europe and America. It’s about family life with an ambitious con-man crook for a father. It’s about politics, diplomacy and spying mostly during the Cold-War. Family and spying have skills in common and their ‘tradecraft’ is to do with lying, deception, disguise, betrayal and causing hurt. Indeed he becomes a ‘perfect spy’ because he is formed by and fixated on his father’s way of living. Frequent media stories cause us to wonder how and why, “such a nice person does such monstrous things.” Le Carré digs deep into the business of being authentic and, though he does it with English understatement, he is into the very cruel business of betrayal. \*\* His new book September 2008 is ‘A Most Wanted Man’ Hodder and Stoughton

MacCulloch - Diarmaid MacCulloch ‘Silence a Christian History’ 2013 [Tony Holden Issue 16, June 2013] - In ‘A History of Christianity - the first three thousand years’ [2009] and here DM gives us an impressive demonstration of the critical historical method [see his 100 pages of further reading, notes and index]. Overall it’s a good, lively, thought-provoking, worthwhile read. He’s sound on the complexity, diversity, the untidiness of European Christianity set as it has been in relation to Judaism and Islam. His range and depth and judgements are to be valued. There are four sections: [1] the Bible: Tanakh [the Christian Old Testament] and New Testament [2] Monastic [3] three Reformations [4] is headed ‘reaching behind noise in Christian history.’ At a personal level I found his double use [his metaphors?] of the words ‘silence’ and ‘noise’ unhelpful. ‘Silence’ as part of mysticism or self-realization is a very different reality to ‘being silent’ in the face of injustice and violence. Nonetheless several themes stand out. Since I have a hearing-loss silence and noise are a daily business. Since I value meditation the possibility of silence as a source of ‘energy’ is creative. Since I care about human rights and politics his description of occasions when people ‘kept silent’ is challenging. He writes “There are three very important themes on which my own experience has led me to see the majority of mood-music in the New Testament as just plain wrong: on homosexuality, anti-Semitism and slavery.” There’s no doubt that Western [and therefore Christendom’s] intolerance, cruelty and killing has been and still is woeful.

MacKinnon - Donald MacKinnon [1913-1994] ‘Explorations in Theology 5’ 1979 [Tony Holden Issue 16, June 2013] – He died in 1994 and his obituaries are worth reading. He can summarize very difficult ideas and classical philosophers, be academic, and fail to translate from Greek or Latin with the best of them! He knows that most of us ‘don’t do’ either higher maths or logic. He is a master at qualifying sub-clauses that spell out the limitations of his complex arguments. Having said this, he has an uncanny habit of being direct, vivid and quotable. My only personal memory of him is as one of the lecturers on ‘Objections to Christian belief’ [Cambridge 1963 published 1967]. If you want a ‘workout’ on the philosophy of religion pre-1980 this is worth the strenuous effort. Here are two examples: [1] “If Christianity survives it will be in part at least because the lonely figure, dying in agony upon the cross, crying out in dereliction to the Father, whom he believes to have forsaken him, remains ceaselessly interrogating men and women, outside as much as within the Christian churches, concerning his significance and that of his supreme hour [1.10].” [2] “So if one insists on [God’s] existence as distinct from his non-existence, one is advertising one’s adherence to the problem of the transcendent, allowing this as set to us by the world’s existence. Moreover one is insisting that this problem, this bewilderment, this unease is about something [it is a real problem] [5. 80-81].”

Mankell - Henning Mankell ‘Italian shoes’ 2006/ 2009 [Tony Holden Issue 9, February 2011] - As a young man I was into Ingmar Bergmann’s films. I had no idea whether this was a caricature, or prejudice or something to do with ‘national traits.’ As a Lancashire man I’m reminded of words by Peter Levi, “There exists a special Lancashire melancholy which I have never seen elsewhere except in Sweden. Is that a matter of tribal character, or does it come from the climate?” This novel links with Bergmann and Mankell’s ‘Wallander series’ and Stieg Larsson’s ‘Millennium Trilogy.’ Here we have relatively isolated people each with their own complex history. Some are met whilst journeying. Others are strangers, eccentrics, drop-outs. Some are examples of unexpected human brilliance. Some are world migrants. Others are bound by family and long time-lines. It’s a story of age, dying, love, change: of snow and islands and forests. The twists and turns are surprising and audacious. I got an extremely strong sense of place: yet it feels close to the heart of human living with all its joy and energy – with all its pain and regret. A key line is, “It’s just as easy to lose your way inside yourself as it is to get lost in the woods or in a city.” This is not a Mankell crime-story though it is about the crimes we commit against people we love and those for whom we have a duty of care.

Marr - Andrew Marr ‘The diamond Queen – Elizabeth and her people’ 2011 [Tony Holden Issue 13, June 2012] – In about 430 pages Marr offers reflections on 60 years of the Queen and life in the United Kingdom. I read much of it whilst watching four days of Jubilee celebrations on TV plus being at a small neighbourhood street party! People split as being royalist or republican. Most of us, I suspect, wish, given the state of the world and the ill-effects of the financial systems, that power in our society could be used more justly. I found this is a good read. But then I’ve always admired Marr and truth-to-tell the Queen. As the cover has it I found Marr good on the history; the people involved [often only known through the media]; ‘the political aspects of constitutional monarchy;’ the contribution of the monarchy. I’m still turning over Archbishop Rowan Williams’s words at St Paul’s to do with dedication - “We are marking six decades of living proof that public service is possible and that it is a place where happiness can be found. To seek one’s own good and one’s own well-being in the health of the community is sacrificially hard work – but it is this search that is truly natural to the human heart.” Anyhow back to Marr! As with his TV programmes and his books on Modern Britain there is much to stimulate and much to enjoy.

McGregor - Jon McGregor ‘If nobody speaks of remarkable things’ 2002 [Tony Holden Issue 14, October 2012] – This first novel was on the long list for the Booker Prize. The thing that first strikes you is the layout of the pages which present sentences and paragraphs in an unusual way. Further it is all narrated with reported speech. Most people are described rather than named. The writing-style suggests that JM aims to be different and poetic. Much of the novel is about intimacy between people and the lives of those people on one street. The key actions are to do with a pregnancy and a car accident. It’s about streets and strangers and neighbours and intimacy and living and dying. It homes in on the strangeness and contingency of urban life where routine lives meet extraordinary events. The first time I read the book I was unable to take in all the people or all the twists and turns of the story. On a second reading [3 years later] I found it compelling, though sometimes fragmented. All of us who seek to represent and interpret the world, be it in art or writing or music, face the same set of problems. There is too much of it. We don’t understand sufficiently. It won’t fit! You could say that the narrative can’t quite bear the weight of JM’s writing! Or you might feel the writing can’t adequately express the weight of the reality. Either way it’s well worth reading.

Melly - Diana Melly ‘Take a girl like me - life with George’ 2005 [Tony Holden Issue 7 May 2010] - Why did I enjoy it so much? Perhaps out of perversity because it is such a different life to mine - mine hasn’t been obviously marked by promiscuity, drugs or rock and roll! It faces up to why humans stay together ‘through thick and thin.’ It is a ‘woman’s life’ [born 1937] and so many women get airbrushed out of history. On another level it is a story of coping with personal trauma and disasters often with serious humour. It’s also about living with George Melly [1926-2007]. We once saw ‘Goodtime George’ perform his jazz at Stratford Theatre Royal and whilst concerts haven’t been high on my list of things to do it was fabulous entertainment. Furthermore he knew a lot about surrealism and we read or saw some of his media outings [definitely a ‘polymath’]. Diana says he went from being ‘fat and fairly famous’ to ‘fat and famous!’ His life as husband, bisexual lover, father of children and so on was almost certainly best observed from a distance. And yet Diana tells of homes, breakdowns, the lives of children, of famous and ordinary people, of great and small events with such directness and zest. It has black and white photographs and a front piece quoting Montaigne [1580] “A simply crude [person] is a character fit to bear true witness; for clever people observe many things and more curiously, but they interpret them; and to lend weight and conviction to their interpretation, they cannot help altering history a little.”

Seldon - Anthony Seldon ‘Blair’ 2004 [Tony Holden September 2008] - Seldon as a biographer and historian has some 25 books listed in 2004. This is written with his co-authors, researchers and interviewers. It is a very detailed account of Tony Blair up to his tenth year as leader of the Labour Party. It is primarily about Blair but there are also some 20 chapter-biographies on other major players. It is structured around “ideas, circumstances [episodes], interests and individuals.” It is based upon some 600 interviews. Prime Minister Blair as a person, Prime Minister and world-leader has been greatly criticised. On one level the story is full of privileged, privately educated, relatively rich people running the UK. But, if this account is anywhere true, many of the players, and Blair and Brown in particular, had a cross-section of human failings and weaknesses. They seem mired in a lack of basic skills; an excess of self-interest/ power; and a tendency to seriously damage important relationships. But, if you are impatient with over-simple judgements, negativity and personalized aggression [against leaders of all hues]; or you want to get some insight into 1971-2004 politics [nuts and bolts: warts and all]; or you think, as I do, that Blair [for all his mistakes] achieved so much [give and take my opposition to the Iraq war], this is well worth the long read.

Shamdasani - Sonu Shamdasani and Jung [Tony Holden Issue 15, February 2013] – Since University days I’ve kept an interest in reading psychology and psychiatry: nothing professional just passion and self-help! In 2010 we heard Sonu Shamdasani at the Cheltenham literary festival and there I bought, read and very much enjoyed his ‘Jung stripped bare by his biographers, even’ [2005]. I was impressed by his ‘contemporary historical approach’ and his attempt to re-position Jung within the history of psychology. I re-read it in 2012 and decided [not on impulse] to buy myself the Red Book [2009] as a facsimile edition [serious money, I had to give up on the toy train for Christmas]: see http://www.philemonfoundation.org/publications/red\_book. So you have the paintings and calligraphy by Jung plus an English translation of the German. Then there is an essay by Sonu Shamdasani plus many academic footnotes all of which plunged me into the Jung I’d known and used over the years. Sonu Shamdasani has continued his biographical work in ‘C G Jung a biography in books’ [2011] which I haven’t read. The book I have found so useful over the years is now titled ‘The Essential Jung: Selected Writings Introduced by Anthony Storr’ [1983/1999]. So it sounds heavy and difficult and some of it undoubtedly is but if part of being fully human is ‘knowing yourself’ Jung is right up there with the best of them and Sonu Shamdasani is a very impressive academic and promoter.

Shields - Carol Shields ‘Unless’ 2001 [Tony Holden May 2009] - It’s set in Toronto starting in 1999. Reta Winters who is 43 is concerned about her family and especially their daughter Nora who is living on the streets begging [she has a sign with the word ‘goodness’]. I haven’t read her before but this novel is interestingly structured: with the story, much about writing itself and half a dozen letters. Reta is a writer who is a translator and promoter of an elderly and famous writer of poems and memoirs. Reta is a woman writer and as such faces the additional issues that are particular to women writers. Because of her own commitment to power for women she assumes that Nora is making some symbolic and powerful action to do with her own powerlessness as a woman. But it’s about how we deal with what is going on in the world: and about parenting and when parents should not intervene. I won’t give away the shock centre of the story. The key passage is on the word unless: “It flies like a moth around the ear, you hardly hear it, and yet everything depends on its breathy promise. Unless- that’s the little subjunctive mineral you carry along in your pocket crease. It’s always there, or else not there. --- unless you are lucky, unless you’re healthy, fertile, unless you’re loved and fed, unless you’re clear about your sexual direction, unless you are offered what others are offered, you go down into the darkness, into despair.”

Swift - Graham Swift ‘The Light of Day’ 2003 [Tony Holden May 2008] - I’ve read a few novels by Graham Swift including ‘Waterland’ [1983] and ‘Last Orders’ [1996 and as a TV film in 2001]. This is set in 1997 and placed in Wimbledon and Chislehurst. It’s in the private detective genre and at first reading seems quite modest. In fact he has a wonderfully clear ‘voice’ and attends in several ways to the business of writing. It’s repetitious in details, events and ideas: they circle and flashback in the telling, almost in a stream of consciousness manner. The main story line is about in an interlinked group of people and a murder. It’s a ‘why dunnit’ rather than a ‘who dunnit.’ It carefully steps its way around the complex question, ‘how do we choose to fall in love or commit a murder?’ It is excellent on how a dagger can strike the heart! It’s simply written, “easy to read but difficult to think].”

Tanning - Dorothea Tanning ‘Between Lives’ 2001 [Tony Holden May 2008] - Recently I saw the Duchamp, Man Ray and Picabia exhibition at Tate Modern and being about dada and surrealism it led me to re-read Dorothy Tanning ‘Between Lives’ 2001. She was born in 1910 and is alive. Her husband Max Ernst [they married in 1946] was born in 1891 and died in1976. She is a painter who was a woman who happened to be married for many years to a world famous painter. She survived with Ernst’s encouragement rather than influence in spite of all media and art-critic attempts to diminish her. The book ranges from World War 1 across Europe and America and includes encounters with famous people, landscapes, events, her own often insightful and well-told reflections and of course art. She excels at story telling, imagination, reflection on painting and, to her own surprise, being a writer as well as a painter-sculptor. The book is first rate and though I’ve only seen two of her paintings [at Tate Modern] her work is worth looking up on the World Wide Web.

The RAB ‘recommend a book’ Project [e-mail book reviews of up to 250 words: issues February June and October]

Thomas - Rosie Thomas ‘Iris and Ruby’ 2006 [Tony Holden Issue 17, October 2013] – I find when new people join the small book group I belong to they often say, ‘one reason for joining is to read books you wouldn’t otherwise read.’ Well this is my first ‘Romantic Novel of the Year Award’ read. It shifts between Cairo in 1941-42 and the WW2 desert war and the present when Iris [82] is visited by granddaughter Rosie [19] and contacted by her London-based mother Lesley. It is a straight-forward enjoyable story with more than enough detail, characterization, action and story-telling. It is easy to read – why would we wish it to be otherwise – and there are many serious issues not least of love and loss. But above all it is to do with what we remember and forget both about people and cities. See for example - http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1023518.Iris\_And\_Ruby and http://rachel-catherine.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/book-review-iris-ruby-rosie-thomas.html

Thubron - Colin Thubron ‘To a mountain in Tibet’ 2012 [Tony Holden RAB issue 15, February 2013] - Thubron is rated as travel writer and novelist and he is deeply and vividly into walking, mountains, places, people and physical effort. His detailed account is graphic and imaginative. I am not a traveller, but I am compelled by the desire to give meaning to our lives. Thubron’s book is as much about Buddhism and associated faiths, China and Tibet, the history of Westerners in Tibet, personal bereavement and our human quest, as it is about travel! It made me go back to Andrew Harvey: “You must want to be ready; you must put yourself patiently, again and again, in a position for [enlightenment] to happen. You must study, and meditate, and travel [‘A Journey to Ladakh’ 1983].” There are many ways of living and interpreting – to risk life and limb in physical effort; to travel and describe that experience; to reflect both personally and from chosen world-views; to learn the journey of inner-space so that “without going outside, you may know the whole world [Lao Tsu ‘Tao te Ching’ 47].” Thubron uses all these routes. It is very fine – in its writing, its story, its examination of cultures with their religions, and its engagement with being human. Translating from one language and culture to another is difficult. Making sense of one’s own life, that truly is an epic journey and all too often the air becomes thin.

Waal - Edmund de Waal 'The hare with amber eyes - a hidden inheritance' 2010 [Tony Holden Issue 10, June 2011] - Edmund de Waal is a potter with ceramics in “many museum collections round the world.” His CV includes: teachers linked with Bernard Leach, time in Japan, English at Cambridge, and presently Professor of Ceramics at the University of Westminster. This is mainly a history of a family in Paris and Vienna [1871-1945]: it is then brought into the present in links with Tokyo, Odessa and England. It is also an account of a collection of ‘264 netsuke’ that he has inherited. He wants to know their provenance; to experience the journeys; to touch and handle where they have been: [netsuke are Japanese, small, wood or ivory carvings: try the V+A collection]. His forebears are ‘staggeringly rich:’ grain exporters; owner of banks, properties, collections; operating at the very highest level of society and culture. They sought to be an assimilated Jewish family but encountered the effects of the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and the relentless anti-Semitism which culminated in Hitler and the camps. The book is very fine and beautifully written. Yet there is a underlying moral unease in it. It’s as though de Waal in doing research and engaging living relatives is unsurprisingly overwhelmed by what happened to his family. For all his materiality [as a pot maker and lover of netsuke] it is simply too much to handle.

Winterson - Jeanette Winterson ‘Lighthousekeeping’ 2004 [Tony Holden Issue 6 January 2010] - I’ve read a few of her novels plus the excellent ‘Art Objects’ [1995]. This novel is all about story-telling and in the end-notes she explains that she regards “retelling” other people’s texts as a “way of making an oral tradition out of a literary tradition.” And she sees that “story-telling teaches us to be unafraid of our imaginative power and I think it teaches us to be unafraid of the exuberance and the unruly, untamed nature of life, our lives.” So this is a story with many stories, many views, many dates and many beginnings [there’s no such thing as an ending!]. She is ferociously imaginative and often wrong-foots the reader in ways that are both troubling and laugh-aloud funny. But at the centre is the girl Silver who is apprentice to the Cape Wrath light house in the far north of Scotland. There are many people and events: Mr Pew the timeless keeper of the lighthouse; Miss Pinch a school teacher; Babel Dark a nineteenth century clergyman and his two lives; the Great Exhibition of 1851; Robert Louis Stevenson ‘Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’, Darwin ‘the Origin of Species,’ Wagner ‘Tristan and Isolde’ and Captain Scott ‘Diaries’; and many more, not forgetting DogJim. The undercurrents are all about light and darkness within our seeing and our blindness and about our search [within living and dying] for meaning and love and sexual loving. It is truly wonderful stuff!

Winterson - Jeanette Winterson ‘The PowerBook’ 2000 [Tony Holden Issue 10, June 2011] - Her overall themes are to do with being on a quest; boundaries and desire, redemptive love and transformation. ‘The PowerBook’ she says it is “a summation [of seven books] a gaudy, baroque, extravagant book.” It’s at once an internal story and a love story. It is set in Paris, the Middle-Ages, Capri, Lancashire, Spitalfields London and cyberspace. It has many styles and layers and viewpoints – not only does she weave so many different strands but she keeps on breaking through ‘formal’ styles. She sees that “story-telling teaches us to be unafraid of our imaginative power [and] unafraid of the exuberance and the unruly, untamed nature of life, our lives.” She includes other people’s written stories and regards the “retelling” as a “way of making an oral tradition out of a literary tradition.” They are also ‘timeless.’ There are often many stories, many views, many dates and many beginnings but there’s no such thing as an ending! She is greatly concerned with fact, fiction and truth and with reality and realism. “She rightly calls realism a device not a place [Jules Smith].” She writes, “There is no such thing as autobiography only art and lies.” She is filmic, internet-age, erotic, visceral, funny, audacious.