

Books

These notes are mainly for my own interest. They help me to recall books that I have read. I have no pretensions to be a literary critic. I started keeping this record after reading three-quarters of the way through a novel and then remembering the end; I had read it before.

1998

Ian McEwan **Enduring Love** **Jonathan Cape** **1997**

This is written in a very compelling style, with a tension that is taut from the very first few sentences and continues relentlessly. It is nonetheless written with a lot of eloquence: another book which makes me feel "I wish I could write like this".

In the story the narrator is pursued by another man who has an obsession for him, believing that there is love shared between them. The effect which this has on the narrator and his relationship with his partner is told with great conviction. A doubt is sown in the mind of the reader as to which of the two of them is really the deluded one; indeed, the narrator's partner begins to doubt the existence of the prowler. Is he a figment of the narrator's imagination? An appendix reveals that the novel is based on a real psychiatric case history.

Robert Penn Warren **All the King's Men** **Harcourt Brace** **1946**

Rather heavy going, this. "Extended" style of writing, in American patois. Politically incorrect language is unintended I think but shocks today. It is the fictionalised story of an American politician on his way to becoming president.

Scott Adams **The Dilbert Future** **Boxtree/Harper
Collins** **1997**

The usual humorous mixture of cynical and accurate observations on management practice in a modern office environment.

Dava Sobel **Longitude** **Fourth Estate** **1995/7**

This is a popularised account of the search in the eighteenth century for a means of constructing an accurate chronometer which would enable navigators at sea to calculate their longitudinal position, by the clock-maker, John Harrison. I found this a surprisingly gripping account and read it all at one sitting. I only wished it had gone into some more technical details; I would have been interested to know how much of the design was done by trial and error and how much by a more fundamental analysis. It is quite a short book, 184 small format pages.

Michael W. Shields **Semantics of
Parallelism** **Springer** **1997**

This is a wonderful tour de force. I am little more than 10% of the way through this book and I don't know if I shall ever finish it. The mathematics is beautifully expressed and the exposition not without some wit, as anyone who knows the author would expect. There are ingenious quotations at the beginning of every chapter, including some from the famous mythical figure, Professor F.X. Reid, to whom serious references are made in the bibliography. I was most surprised and gratified to find an acknowledgement to myself in the preface.

Lindsay Clarke **Sunday Whiteman** **Picador** **1987**

The story of an ideologically obsessed and rigid Englishman who takes up a teaching post in Africa. His wife leaves him because he puts his obstinate ideology before her and his relationship with her. He then takes up with a young African woman who has a delightful personality, but his loyalty and respect for her fails too. Eventually his failure to place his own needs and the needs of those close to him before his moral but hidebound principles allows darker forces ever-present around him, eventually personified in a

community of African women, to take possession of him. A mildly disturbing and somewhat depressing book; I continually felt exasperation with the anti-hero, Palmer, and his ultimate inherent selfishness. I think he gets his just deserts.

For one brief chapter the third person narrative shifts from Palmer to another in the story, then back again. This felt awkward after being held by Palmer as the implicit narrator for most of the book. But I think it is a significant novel and I am surprised that it has not received more acclaim. I plan to re-read Lindsay Clarke's other two books, *The Chymical Wedding* and *Alice's Masque*, in preparation for a seminar which he is giving to Re•Vision.

Robert Cowart **Mastering Windows** **Sybex** **1995**
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This book is a copious and helpful coverage of the Microsoft Windows 95 operating system. Diagrams are in effective black and white reproductions of screen views etc. and the level of explanation is complete without being patronising. It took me about forty minutes to compare and choose this from its rivals, and I believe it is a good choice. It is pretty comprehensive.

Lindsay Clarke **The Chymical** **Picador** **1989**
Wedding

I am re-reading this. A poet takes some time out in a friend's cottage called "The Pightle" in rural Norfolk. Soon after he arrives he sees an elderly domineering man and a much younger woman naked and playing games of sexual conflict in the open air. The poet also dreams of being surrounded by a band of malignant women; this is reminiscent of the last stages Sunday Whiteman. I wonder if this is a favourite theme for the author.

The narrative follows two parallel tracks, one in the present day and the other in the middle of the nineteenth century where a new incumbent, Edwin Frère, is applying for a clergyman's post. The church has a pagan statue of a naked woman, called Gypsy May, holding open her sex organ. This is brought to the attention of the poet, Alex Darken, by one of the locals in the contemporary narrative. The 19th century characters are prominently buried in the churchyard.

The parallelism of the two tracks intensifies as the narrative proceeds, with correspondences of time, places and roles of characters. Alex meets a curmudgeon of an older poet, Edward, who has a younger woman, Laura, in tow, the two he observed right at the beginning. She has senses of the characters in the past and both she and Edward are examining the alchemical writings of her "predecessor", Louisa. Laura and Alex suddenly have sex, leaving him feeling guilty and confused. Louisa in the past is writing a prose account of her father's work, and the vicar Frère's wife has left him after a miscarriage and returned to their previous home in Cambridge. Alex is from Cambridge and Edward gives him the nickname of "Cambridge". Frère is getting obsessed with his sexual feelings and finding them troubling and guilt provoking. I recall from the first time I read the book that he focuses his guilt on to his sex organ and himself amputates it. I am looking forward with a little trepidation to reading this account again.

I admire the way the author writes in a nineteenth century and a twentieth century style for the respective two narratives. The first twelve chapters alternate between the two. Then the penultimate chapter 13, "The Keepers of the Keys", so named after a dream Alex Darken has in which the keys of the world's nuclear bombs are placed in the hands of the Quakers, includes both narratives in alternate passages, as if the interaction between them was speeding up to a climax.

In the final chapter, "The Gesture of the Secret", Alex, Laura and Ralph (the descendant of the family which included Louisa etc.), interact. Laura starts irritatingly to speak like a psychotherapist but on the other hand Alex reveals a lot of sympathy with a feminine view of the world, something he has been doing to an extent throughout the story. All the characters seem to be coming to some kind of terms with the events and realisations of their explorations. Edward has a heart attack, while in the process of showing Alex the razor with which Frère performed his self-mutilation. He recovers, saved by Alex and a local, Bob Hoskins. At the end he and Alex ritually cast the razor into the lake from a rowing boat.

Edward is rather reluctant to be alive, having had a joyful post-death experience. He is not too grateful for having been saved.

Matt Ridley The Origins of Virtue Penguin 1996

This book examines the reasons for which humans and other animals co-operate and are “nice” to each other, from genetic and evolutionary perspectives, including an analysis using game theory. Many examples are drawn from animals and anthropology. An interesting (?) fact in passing is that humans are not the only primates to have intercourse face to face; bonobos (pygmy chimpanzees) and orang utangs do so too. Orang utangs also regularly have intercourse in many different positions (27 have been recorded) and spend an average of 14 minutes doing so, compared to the 4 minutes average from surveys of humans. But the really interesting aspect of the book is its thorough analysis of the survival mechanisms which lead to co-operative, social behaviour. As it says at one point, the puzzling thing about criminal behaviour is not, why do criminals behave so, but why doesn’t everybody all the time.

Steven Pinker The Language Penguin 1994
Instinct

This is a populist book on linguistics, which is, I am informed, approved by specialists in the discipline. The author’s thesis is that much of the syntactic structure of language is instinctive. The book is erudite without being obscure or in the least bit intellectually elitist, and is to my mind most convincing. It is also humanly interesting. Most recommended!

Lindsay Clarke Alice’s Masque Jonathan Cape 1994

I am re-reading this book too, in preparation for a seminar given by Lindsay Clarke tomorrow. Three women, Alice in her 70s, Leah and Amy live in a cottage belonging to Alice. It used to be a mill but Alice has changed it into a place for weaving. Two rivals, Stephen and Ronan, are seeking Leah, neither of them welcome. A young woman has been murdered on the beach. Ronan could be a suspect. At first the others think Leah might be the victim, but they are soon relieved to discover this is not the case. Ronan turns up at the mill. A cove with a cave and water spout plays a pivotal part in the story. Both Alice and Ronan have visions there.

Ronan is suspected of complicity in the murder by the police, but Alice tells some undisclosed tale to them which allays their suspicions. His recollections become phantasmagorical and confusing, and one begins to wonder if he has in fact done the deed. Stephen seems to have disappeared from the story completely, but reappears briefly. Ronan increasingly inhabits a fantasy world, “The Land of Women” in which he is judged by the “Court of Love”.

Margaret Forster Hidden Lives Penguin 1995

An autobiography of the author’s family, especially her grandmother Margaret Anne and the search for a missing sister Alice. Quite a graphic social comment and an interesting account of the surprising variety to be found in the human condition. I found the style of writing irritating. The author is clearly articulate and intelligent but her use of an extremely limited vocabulary implied, for me, that she was patronising her readership by continually writing down to them.

Ben Okri Dangerous Love Phoenix House 1996

The hero, Omovo, is a young artist who is disconnected from his immediate fellows and local society, treating many of his associates and the neighbouring community with some contempt, although he has a few firm friends. He holds some imprecisely defined political views with considerable passion.

Omovo develops a love for a local young woman who is unhappily and inappropriately married to a much older man. Their developing affair leads ultimately to tragic consequences but also some kind of resolution for Omovo.

The style is unembellished, mostly short sentences, at times almost immature, but carries a emotional honesty, authenticity and lyricism. There is a description of intercourse that is the most sensual and

beautiful that I think I have ever read. The narrative of the individual characters is set against a backdrop of political corruption and cruelty. Hope survives despite the tragic losses, in that the individuals retain and strengthen their identities.

Nicholas Evans The Horse Whisperer Dell 1995

This book has recently been made into a film which I have not seen. Surprisingly, it is the author's first novel.

An accident causes vast damage to a horse and its fourteen year old rider Grace, who has to have her leg amputated. Both are traumatised, but the girl's mother insists against all advice on having the horse, which has become psychologically very alienated, saved. She engages the help of an expert horse "psychologist", Tom, and they fall in love. Their liaison threatens to undo all the good work which has so painstakingly been achieved, but this is saved at the end by Tom apparently sacrificing himself so that the others can be healed.

This plot, which sounds completely corny when spelt out, is in fact quite believable as narrated. The prose is eloquent without being erudite, but the surpassing redeeming feature is the depth of observation with which the author describes the human interactions and behaviour of his characters. I feel it is a pity that such skill is wasted on a plot which at the end of the day is emotionally facile. The book is nonetheless enjoyable and compelling to read.

Ian McEwan The Cement Garden Vintage 1997 (1978)

This is a short and gripping book written in the now characteristic sparse style of Ian McEwan. It tells of a family whose mythology and consequent practices are seriously disturbed: a kind of "Lord of the Flies" applied to a single family unit. Like his other books, this has an ambience which is oppressively foreboding, and with reason. Three children are first deprived of their father and then their mother, and their subsequent attempts to deal with their situation are inevitably perverted and doomed.

The style and writing of this book are excellently atmospheric and much to be admired, but that seems to be all that there is of ultimate merit. Possibly the message is that, given the circumstances, we could all go this barbaric way, as in William Golding's "Lord of the Flies", but I am left with the feeling that the impact is in the end gratuitous.

**Ian McEwan The Comfort of
Strangers Vintage 1997 (1981)**

This short and again gripping book relates a story about a couple, Colin and Mary, who are on holiday in Venice. They are befriended by stranger, Robert, who becomes tenacious and insists on their accepting his hospitality. As I read this book I suddenly realised that I had seen the film of the story, the film also being called "The Comfort of Strangers". As a result I knew how the book was going to end, and that the end was rather horrible. This gave me a perhaps stronger feeling of premonition and foreboding than I might otherwise have had while reading the book.

Robert turns out to have had a tortured childhood, leaving him a warped character. As the story unfolds, we slowly and quite subtly learn further details of the relationship between Colin and Mary, that they are not married, not cohabiting, but are lovers, although their relationship displays some of the dysfunctions more typical of a long marriage which has fallen into unexamined habits of behaviour. Robert has a wife, Caroline, who is disabled and has difficulty in walking. She implies that she is a prisoner in their sumptuous house. Robert describes intimate and terrible details of his childhood to Colin and Mary at an unnaturally early stage in their acquaintance, and shows other signs of obsessive behaviour: keeping his father's library and memorabilia as they were, and suddenly punching Colin in the solar plexus and winding him for little reason. Colin and Mary make half-hearted attempts to avoid Robert's attentions, but to no avail. Just before the dénouement we learn that Robert has been taking hundreds of photographs of Colin and that Robert and Caroline have been jointly and pathologically plotting the downfall of Colin and Mary.

Like “The Cement Garden”, this novel is about people who are disconnected from parts of their own histories, with catastrophic results.

Peter Høeg **Tales of the Night** **Harvill Press** **1997**

This is a collection of three stories translated from the Danish by Barbara Haveland. Somewhat idiosyncratic in style and almost stilted, there is an eccentricity about them which nonetheless carries conviction. The author, I notice, quite likes to have as his principal character someone who is a mathematician or scientist, something I particularly sympathise with.

Ian McEwan **The Child in Time** **Vintage** **1997 (1987)**

There are rather a lot of threads running through this narrative. The hero, Steven, loses his three year old child while shopping in a supermarket; she is kidnapped, never to be seen again. The account of this is harrowing and dramatic, very well depicted. The effect that this calamity has on the relationship between Steven and his wife, Julie, is exquisitely and convincingly portrayed. The whole narrative, or rather set of narratives, are set in a time in which there is great poverty, intensive government control, licensed beggars, crime, and a perceived solution that the country must produce the next generation of children to be responsible and effective citizens. To this end there is a HMSO published “Authorised Child-care Handbook”. Steven hunts his lost daughter compulsively and to no purpose, while his wife Julie buries herself in her work and lives a hermetic existence. Steven has written a very successful children’s book, “Lemonade”, and as a result is active in a government committee on formulating child-care policy. His publisher, a great admirer of Steven’s book, enters politics but then retreats and himself pathologically reverts to childhood.

These numerous threads begin to come together as one reads the book, through the common theme of seeking a lost childhood. One remarkable thing given that the book was written in 1987 is that it predicts in exaggerated form a time in which an ostensibly benign government has become ruthlessly authoritarian and seeking to solve social problems by means of rules of public behaviour. I can see our present government beginning to exhibit some dangers along these lines.

There is a moderately happy ending, for Ian McEwan. Of the novels of his I have read to date, this is the second most impressive after “Enduring Love”, and I am surprised it has not had greater acclaim.

Ian McEwan **The Innocent** **Vintage** **1998 (1990)**

This is a “spy” story, and also a love story. The hero, Leonard Markham, is a very young and inexperienced Post Office engineer who is asked to install equipment in a tunnel which runs under the Berlin wall. He gets into an awkward relationship with his American superior, and at the same time falls in love with a German divorcee, Maria, who has a violent ex-husband. He ends up accidentally killing the ex-husband, and the two of them dispose of the body in a grisly but also hilarious manner. The narrative includes a gruesome account, which seems to be a frequent feature of Ian McEwan’s novels. There is a lot of tension and suspense in the narrative, but the theme is also the love between Leonard and Maria.

Ted Hughes **Tales from Ovid** **Faber and Faber** **1997**

This book consists of twenty four passages from Ovid’s Metamorphoses translated by Ted Hughes. His translation is superb, fiery and passionate, using modern language in a judicious and telling manner. Where the myths tell of the emotions of the gods, especially acts of revenge, these are struck onto the page with a total conviction and lack of compromise which can be shocking. This book has received widespread praise and deservedly so. It won the 1997 Whitbread book of the year.

Oliver Sacks **The Island of the
Colour Blind** **Picador** **1996**

The full title of this book is “The Island of the Colour Blind and Cycad Island”, and it is in fact two accounts. The first is of a congenital colour blindness which is experienced by the inhabitants of the tiny atoll of Pingelap. One person in twelve suffers from achromatopsia on Pingelap compared with one in 30,000 elsewhere in the world. Various other visual symptoms accompany this condition, but Oliver

Sacks interviews and gets to know many of the sufferers, showing his usual close and sympathetic interest.

The second account is of the islands of Guam and Rota where a disease has been observed since the 1950s, which presents itself in a variety of ways, as various kinds of paralysis or Parkinsonism. This appears possibly to be the result of eating the fruit of cycads which grow on Guam. The different forms of the disease are fascinating, and bring into relief the complexity of what we regard as the normal brain and body functions. Again Oliver Sacks investigates with his customary observation of detail and sympathy.

1999

Ian McEwan Amsterdam Jonathan Cape 1998

This book won Ian McEwan the 1998 Booker prize, although there is a widespread opinion that it was his "Enduring Love" which really brought him the prize.

I found that it was not until very near the end of the book that the significance of the title became clear, and then it becomes a denotation for the dénouement, which is both dark and hilarious. Indeed the whole tenor of the narrative is one of black humour. When I heard that Ian McEwan had written a humorous book, I was puzzled because his previous novels have always had a foreboding and depressive air about them. This dark humour is the solution to that conundrum.

Two friends, Clive and Vernon, each famous, commit ethical transgressions for which each lambastes the other. This generates an equally balanced pathological hatred, each for the other. The result is again a precisely balanced kind of poetic justice.

The reader is carried along by the narrative and persuaded both of the justice of both Clive's and Vernon's positions, and at the same time of the immorality of their actions. The way the reader is absuemed into these dual judgements is done with an ultimate skill which Ian McEwan has been developing over his current eight novels.

Barry Unsworth Sacred Hunger Hamish Hamilton 1992

This is a long, at first somewhat gruelling, but enthralling account of a slave ship, its construction, embarkation from Liverpool and maiden voyage. The second half of the account moves some years later when it transpires that the ship, crew and human cargo have not perished at sea as was thought but have arrived on the East coast of America and formed a loose and somewhat outlawed community. The narrative explores the working but rather uneasy alliance between the erstwhile crew, officers and slaves. Despite efforts on the parts of the crew members, the original relationships of oppression persist in tarnishing the potential equality between them. Eventually the damage of enslavement becomes a sombre metaphor for parts of the human condition of conventional society.

Brian Denvir Egremont's Bequest 1996/1999

I am making this entry with my tongue slightly in cheek. I have re-read the whole of Egremont's Bequest, making yet again some changes, with a view to submitting it to Faber. Alas they did not accept it. I shall soon send it to another publisher.

It has been a long time since I have reached for my novel and I was afraid I would recoil on reading it. I was surprised to find it mostly very agreeable, a reaction which I found cheering.

If I was reviewing Egremont's Bequest, what would I say about it? First, an outline of the narrative: four friends who have not been in contact for thirty years are brought together by a fifth, Egremont, who has kept in touch with all of them individually. He invites them to a long weekend in his newly acquired retreat in the Lake District. The narrative occupies about four days and traces the development of the progressive restoration of the relationships between them all. Egremont remains almost aloof, controlling the situation and manipulating the others preposterously, to the reader's probable and intended irritation.

As the story unfolds, the characters reveal their personal explorations of destiny and sexuality. Questions in these areas are brought into relief by the situation artificially contrived by Egremont, and all of them move forward a little during their arranged episode. Finally Egremont leaves all of them with a gift of astonishing magnitude.

This novel is about complex facets of personality, and the paradox of tyranny implicit in generosity. It is something of a chamber piece. Some readers may find the characters all of a set too intellectual and polished, but these are the people whom the author knows. Despite superficial irregularities of the behaviour of the characters, this is a very moral novel. Dignity, the environment, preservation of self and others are all respected. I believe that authors of fiction in various media can have an influence over reality and therefore we have a responsibility. There is more here of how people might be than of gritty reality.

Roy Hattersley Buster's Diaries Little, Brown & Co. 1998

I had seen this book in book-shops and heard readings from it by Roy Hattersley. I was given this book for Christmas. It turned out to be much better than I had feared. He shows a considerable insight into the "viewpoint" of a dog and is quite amusing with it. Maybe I was put off by the radio readings because Roy Hattersley does not have a good reciting voice! I was afraid that the book would be twee, but it just, or perhaps almost, succeeds in avoiding being so.

Ian McEwan First love, last rites Vintage 1997(1975)

This is a volume of eight short stories. The tension is, as usual with Ian McEwan, relentless. He seems to have a number of favourite themes: children trying to look after themselves after the death of both their parents, always with horribly tragic consequences; incest between pubescent children, and the consequences of horrendous psychological damage to people.

The stories grip, are compelling yet the tension is so great I find I have to keep putting the book down, as if hiding one's face while watching a horror film. Oddly, one of the most horrifying I found was the superficially less macabre stories, "Disguises". The end is far less awful than the build-up threatens. I think he could have composed a more devastating ending.

Ian McEwan In between the sheets Vintage 1997(1978)

This is another volume of short stories by Ian McEwan. I think they are earlier. Nearly all of them have a sexual theme. "Pornography" is about a seedy unattractive man engaged in selling pornography through his brother's book-shop. He strings along two women who eventually exact a gruesome revenge on his feckless infidelity. "Reflections of a kept ape" is a rather curious piece about an intelligent and articulate ape who is kept as a lover by a female novelist. She discards him, reverting the relationship to that of a pet once again. The story is the ape's consequent soliloquy on his abandonment.

"Two fragments" are indeed two fragments about a man and his young daughter who live in a world whose civil and economic infrastructure have broken down; the Thames has dried up, there is no water or other services, and the population has partially reverted to barbarism. This kind of theme is the backdrop to his novel "A Child in Time". It is disturbing, reminding us of the fragility of civilisation, its material and social systems, and our own behaviour. "Dead as they come" tells of a man's insane love of, and ultimate jealousy for a tailor's dummy. Another reminder of how narrow is the dividing line between normal if perverse behaviour and disconnection from reality.

"In between the sheets" is a more "normal" story about a man and wife, separated, and their painful negotiations over his having their daughter to stay. "Psychopolis" is set in Los Angeles, a group of slightly eccentric friends, and a dinner party conversation with its alternating aggression and politeness.

Ian McEwan The Daydreamer Vintage 1995(1994)

This is a book for children, or rather designed for adults to read to children. Ian McEwan's plan was to write a book that would be interesting for adults to read and for children to hear. It therefore had to be in

a language sufficiently simple for children to understand. I think he has reached that objective with this small volume of seven related stories about a boy called Peter. He is, of course, the daydreamer of the title. The stories are charming, sunny, bright, optimistic, very unlike his usual writing. Many of them have quite a strong moral message, too.

Iain Banks Complicity Abacus 1994 (1993)

This book contains scenes of violence that make “The Clockwork Orange” read like the proverbial vicar’s tea party. The style is clever and manipulative. For example, the violent scenes, perpetrated by an unknown character and intermixed with the rest of the narrative, are related in the second person as well as the present tense, so that the reader feels a sense of first-hand witness to these atrocities. Indeed, the book starts with one of these scenes.

This book is a thriller, with a mystery to be solved, and a hero who is less than moral or admirable, in the tradition of Mickey Spillane or Damon Runyan. The writer is at ease with up-to-the minute technological gadgetry and playthings, and displays at times a power of beautiful description. Scenes of explicit sex with seemingly little love add to the personality limitations of the hero, but in due course the fallibility of the characters become recognisable as part of us all.

My only quibble is that the political arguments between Iain Banks’s characters become rather tedious and mundane at times. But the reader by then has sufficient momentum to speed rapidly through them.

Iain Banks The Wasp Factory Abacus 1990 (1984)

This is a short book. It is the tale of an insanely disjunct and alienated Scottish family, centred on the character of the younger sixteen year old son Frank who enacts an impressively imaginative and destructively creative fantasy life of his own. Violence, cruelty, sadism and disgust are bound together with an unbreakable thread of fascination. It is a book which you have to keep on putting down and then pick up again.

The bizarre acts of Frank and his older and more seriously insane brother are in the end explained and seen in a more compassionate setting by the even more aberrant misdeeds of parenting by their father. In one sense it has a relatively happy ending.

The extreme reviews, bad and good, are printed side by side in the end covers and make for amusing reading.

Iain M. Banks Use of Weapons Orbit 1992 (1990)

Iain M. Banks is the science fiction literary persona of Ian Banks, the more conventional novelist. As the small change in nom de plume suggests, the two personae are only slightly different. His “conventional” novels often have an element of science fiction about them. This work, about warfare set in a far, far distant future scenario, combines political cold-bloodedness with psychological suppression and, as the title indicates, weapons of extreme sophistication. The ending is, for me, incomprehensible.

Iain Banks Walking on Glass Abacus 1985 (1990)

This is the second non-genre novel of Iain Banks’s, although it is partially science fiction. There are three narratives, their chapters interleaved. Graham Park is in love with Sara ffitich. His agonised and unstoppable feelings of desire and protection for her are implied by an unembellished account that is totally convincing and skilfully written. Steven Grout is a paranoid near-simpleton who nonetheless devours books. His own delusions end in his demise or, in another sense, his salvation. The divorced and fatalistic Sara turns out to be more than she pretends, as does her and Graham’s mutual off-beat friend, Richard Slater. A final coincidental sequence of events links these two narratives towards the end of the book.

The third narrative concerns the attempts of Quiss and Ajayi to free themselves from their imprisonment. They are in another world, reminiscent of Gormenghast or Kafka’s “Trial”. Their world

can perceive the experiences of ours, and is to a degree constructed out of its books. The link between the third narrative and the other two is, to say the least, tenuous. The whole novel reads as if the author wrote three short novelettes and then spliced them together with some rather unsatisfactory devices. I would have preferred if the consequences of the road accident at the end were elaborated, namely the fact that the lorry driver would have reported the motor-cyclist's number-plate to the police and the repercussions which would follow. But it is a very good read and convinced me to read all Iain Banks' other novels (as well as those of Iain M. Banks).

Iain M. Banks Consider Phlebas Orbit 1999 (1987)

This is the first of Iain Banks's science fiction novels, written under the name of Iain M. Banks. It is in the classical tradition of Asimov, Ballard, Blish, etc., ranging rapidly over far flung systems, a space odyssey, equipped with intelligent and capable machines. Characteristic of Banks, the hero is not an admirable character, violence is a precondition, lives are cheap, and there is a full measure of the bizarre. There is also a love element, for once tenderly expressed.

Altogether, this is an enjoyable piece of science fiction in a traditional mould. It does not quite reach the standard of his non-genre fiction that I have read so far, but I shall certainly read more of this.

Iain Banks The Bridge Abacus 1990 (1986)

A man, Orr, has had an accident, which leaves him amnesiac. He tells his dreams to the doctor in the institution where he is staying. The first two dreams are set in the past, and related in a corresponding literary style of a century ago. The descriptive writing is extremely good.

<The remainder of this review and of the following were lost in the Great (hard disc) Crash>

Iain Banks Espedaire Street Abacus 1990 (1987)

Iain M. Banks The State of the Art Orbit 1993 (1991)

Iain Banks Canal Dreams Abacus 1990 (1989)

**Iain M. Banks Against a Dark
Background Orbit 1995 (1993)**

Ruth Rendell Harm Done Hutchinson 1999

2000

Andrew O'Hagan Our Fathers Faber 1999

This book was short-listed for the 1999 Booker prize. It is related in the first person and tells of the lives and relationships of the narrator's father and grandfather. The grandfather, Hugh Bawn, was a pioneer of municipal housing in his time and largely responsible for moving Glasgow slum dwellers into high-rise flats, considered a great improvement at the time. The grandson and narrator, Jamie, has the job of demolishing the high-rise buildings as his grandfather is dying. His father died of alcoholism some time before and a third "father" who occasionally makes an appearance is an interfering Catholic priest whom the narrator forgives.

The book is over-written, especially for the first eighty or so pages. This style irks, but calms down later in the narrative as the events and politics of the story begin to take hold. Throughout, however, I found it

necessary to read the book at speed. I think it is a good piece of writing but will not be regarded as a significant piece of literature in the course of time.

Colm Toibin **The Blackwater** **Picador** **1999**
Lightship

This book was short-listed for the 1999 Booker prize. It is beautifully written in a sparse and unembellished style, which neither overburdens the reader with literary devices nor talks down. The book captures the claustrophobic conflicts within a family and deals with AIDS with sympathy and apparent realism. The narrative is seen through the eyes and thoughts of one character, Helen, the sister of the AIDS sufferer, but without being written in the first person. The long-standing antagonism between mother and daughter is brought out and confronted, with the grandmother acting the role of a more accepting character. This is a powerful book, not a little gruelling, and another Irish novel. It is a far better contender for the Booker prize than my previous read, *Our Fathers*, noted above.

Iain M. Banks **Inversions** **Orbit** **1998**

Iain Banks writes as Iain M. Banks when writing science fiction. However, this book is scarcely in that genre; it is more of a Gothic fantasy set on an alien planet that has two suns and two moons. The pace is quite slow for much of the book as the plot shuttles back and forth around various characters, the king, his bodyguard, various barons, the doctor. The Bodyguard and the female Doctor are central to the story, as is the narrator who is the Doctor's assistant. There are a number of assassination attempts, some of them thwarted. The pace heats up towards the end as a plot is in progress against the Doctor. She finally avoids this by means of mysterious powers; indeed I was expecting that her rusty knife would turn out to be one of Iain Banks's favourite weapons, a knife missile, and that she is in fact from a very different world, but this is never articulated. This is OK, worth reading, but not the best of his SF novels.

Frank McCourt **'Tis** **Flamingo** **1999**

This sequel to *Angela's Ashes* begins rather slowly, seeming to relish its own style. However, it picks up in interest and three quarters of the way through it becomes a cheerful and funny book. The author reflects on and complains about his own condition a little more than in *Angela's Ashes*. He also behaves rather badly, a reflection of his father's character. Towards the end, with him and his brothers attending the funeral of his father in Belfast, there is a kind of redemption.

Ken Follett **The Pillars of the** **Signet** **1990 (1989)**
Earth

This is a long book – 985 closely printed pages. It is well constructed, starting and ending with a hanging, and relates the building of a cathedral, the fortunes of three families, political intrigue and skulduggery, and good eventually overcoming evil. The whole story is set in the twelfth century and the atmosphere is well set. The whole narrative appears to be pretty well researched, but the language is so-so. The book is not all that well written, although the pace and interest are well maintained. One aspect annoyed me quite often was that there were a lot of anachronisms in the language with the characters suddenly breaking into idioms that are too present-day colloquial, and perhaps also expressing ideas and views that might be too up-to-date. But on the whole it is an easy and enjoyable read.

Iain Banks **Whit** **Abacus** **1996 (1995)**

This book tells of Isis Whit, a nineteen year old Elect who belongs to a recluse sect whose community live in a remote part of Scotland. She sets out to recover and bring back an apostate, her cousin Morag, and in so doing uncovers the truth about the origins of her grandfather, who started the sect, a plot to subvert both the sect and her rightful inheritance of its leadership, and the whereabouts of her two grandmothers.

The sect is reminiscent of some real ones that eschew life's complexities, but with a refreshing lack of Puritanism, even to the extent of a limited sexual freedom and licence to take mind-altering drugs. Towards the beginning the resourceful Isis explains the theology of her religion, which has a lot of attractive features.

This is a most engaging book, written from the point of view of Isis Whit herself. The old fashioned style of writing, with its sententious exactitude, reflects her outlook and strict moral principles. It nonetheless remains gripping and highly enjoyable, a considerable achievement of writing skill. This novel adds yet more to the variety of styles of novel that Iain Banks has produced.

Iain M. Banks **Feersum Enjinn** **Orbit** **1998 (1994)**

This, Iain Banks's sixth science fiction novel is wildly imaginative. The plot is very complex because four narratives take place in parallel with only occasional linkages. I get the impression, like with one of his other books, that he started off with four rather long short stories and decided to combine them together into a novel.

The novel is set in the very far distant future, on earth amongst the humans who remain after having lost the craft of space travel, and at the time when the sun is starting to go supernova, in other words, in about 3,000 million years time.

One of the characters, Bascule, can only write phonetically, a sort of dyslexia. This makes reading him very slow at first. I found I had to say the words in my mind in order to understand the writing. It made me sympathise with someone who struggles to read.

The book is stunningly inventive, however. A crypt which is a world of dead people whose brains can nonetheless be linked into other people's via implants, including those of animals; an ancient abandoned castle, which was once occupied by giants, whose walls and towers are kilometres high; a world in which virtual reality is more real than basic reality, etc. I think this is the best of Iain M. Banks's science fiction novels I have read so far.

Iain Banks **A Song of Stone** **Abacus** **1998 (1997)**

This is a dark and depressing book. However, it is written in a grandiloquent style, which reveals that Iain Banks can vary his form of writing at will. The hero aggravates, by being ineffective, by being foolish and insufficiently calculating, by being passive and by being unfeeling. There is a deeply foreboding atmosphere to the story, which depicts a scenario near our present time and yet which is anarchistic and chaotic. A civil war is taking place in Britain, with looting, plunder, vandalism and casual cruelty. The whole effect is unpleasant and disturbing, but nonetheless very well written.

Iain M. Banks **Excession** **Orbit** **1998 (1996)**

This is the best of the "Culture" stories. The main characters are the ships, whose minds are far superior to those of human beings and other naturally occurring intelligent species. The ships have a benevolent, slightly despotic approach to the humans, but in this story they are concerned about an occurrence that they have called the "Excession", a powerful discontinuity in the space-time fabric, which resists all analysis and exploration. On the way there are an enormous number of most imaginative science fiction ideas: voluntary suspension of life to wait until a preferred later date, frequent sex changes with couples producing offspring both ways round, and many more. The book is better written than many others of his SF novels and holds the attention throughout.

Iain Banks **The Business** **Abacus** **2000 (1999)**

"The Business" is perhaps Iain Banks's best "straight" novel, on a par with "Whit". Like that other book, his hero is female and the narrative is in the first person. The setting is a huge, powerful multinational company, which has been in existence longer than Christianity. The hero, Kate, is a level 3 executive, a high flyer and highly paid, especially for her tender age of 38. Rescued from her humble beginnings, Kate

moves in increasingly high-powered circles and deals deftly with company intrigue and betrayal, and sorts out her own love-life at the same time. An enchanting, bizarre romance with fast adventure thrown in.

Charles Handy The Empty Raincoat Arrow 1995 (1994)

This is a generally optimistic, affirming book about the nature and world of work, economics and life priorities in general. It ranges over thoughts about society, how and what we should measure to assess our national wealth, what do or should we mean by success in our lives. He writes with humility as well as optimism. Despite having been an oil executive and management guru, he comes out as saying that material wealth is not a high priority. Money is like sugar: so long as we have enough, there is no point in hoarding more than we need or making endless cakes to use it up. He ends by saying that there are three senses we should have: a sense of continuity, of direction and of connection. We need a sense of continuity with the past and the future. We need a sense of connection with the communities we live in. We need a sense of direction to give us moral purpose. He is in favour of Europe too! I wish I had read the book with a stack of post-it stickers to mark the many wise remarks and observations I found.

**A. S. Byatt The Biographer's Chatto and Windus 2000
Tale**

This is an odd novel. It is a story about a biographer who is trying to write the biography of a biographer. In the end he tells more of his own story than that of his subject, although we are led through the exploits of his subject, Scholes Destry-Scholes, and something of his quests and biographical subjects, in particular, the writer and academic explorer, Elmer Bole. This recursive depth of narrative becomes quite confusing at times and I had to keep reminding myself of what the book was about, namely the tale of the hero, the post-modernist literary philosopher turned biographer, Phineas G. Nanson. At last, about three quarters of the way through the book, some action suddenly begins to take place. Phineas takes on a part-time job in a curious shop run by a pair of camp travel agents, Erik and Christophe, he becomes harassed by one of their customers who has highly suspect proclivities, and he suddenly starts a relationship with the only known relative of his biographical subject, Destry-Scholes's niece, Vera. Despite the hero, Phineas Nanson, being a somewhat nihilistic, empty and preciously effeminate character, he is later seduced by a further academic contact, the Swedish Fulla Biefeld, whose speciality is bee ecology.

If the whole book had been in this vein, instead of just the last quarter, it would have rivalled a work by Iris Murdoch. As it is, however, it will remain, I believe, a curiosity and not one of A. S. Byatt's better works.

Don Cupitt The Religion of Being SCM Press 1998

This is a very stimulating and, to me, reassuring book. Don Cupitt continues on his personal path of theistic non-realism and concludes that experiments in religious thought are an artwork rather than a search for a truth. Therefore his conclusion is, paradoxically, an "in-conclusion". Some extensive quotes may be the best summary of my strongest impressions from the book:

"The difference between 'profane' and 'sacred' love can now be sketched. Profane love singles out and fixes upon a single finite object. One loves this-and-not-that. Sacred love is universal and objectless. In a Buddhist culture one may say that *metta*, religious love, is love for 'all beings', unrestricted. In a theistic culture one may say that to love God is to love in a cosmic, objectless way. Paradoxically, in our own culture the decline of religion often produces a certain fetishism about religious ideas, so that a person may fancy that in loving God one directs loving feelings towards a mental image of a large, old, quasi-human person. But religious love for a finite object is idolatry. So, in practice, the metaphysical nontheist whose heart is filled with cosmic feelings of love and gratitude is likely to be the person whose love of God and thanksgiving to God are the most pure and uncorrupt.

In short, only the person who thinks that God does not exist can really know how to praise God, worship God, love God and thank God aright."

In his final chapter, “In-conclusion”, Don Cupitt contemplates the course over the years of his own religious thought:

“Until 1981 I did believe that there was such a thing as getting it right by discovering the correct answer. I believed the journey had a destination, because I believed that there was an intelligent systematic order of things out there that might be successfully represented in a text. When I found it, I need only copy it down. But of course as I went first into non-realism, and then radicalised it into anti-realism and postmodernism, I had to give up that idea. It became apparent that the project was not a search for a ready-made truth of Things, waiting out there for somebody to find it and put it into writing, but something more like an art-project. So it was during the later 1980s that I began to think of my task as a kind of artwork and to use the slogan: ‘the truth is in the movement’. I no longer expected to discover a pre-existent and ready-made Answer that would satisfy me, and I wasn’t even supposing that I could ever write a book that would satisfy me for long. Instead, I hoped that the movement itself, the course I was taking, might turn out to be the point.”

I wonder if Don Cupitt would agree with two thoughts of mine: first, a converse of the Whorffian hypothesis, that linguistic constructs in a language can trick us into reifying abstractions that have no business being entities. Words like democracy, joy and beauty refer to the way a country governs its people, an attribute of our state of mind, and the aesthetic attribute of an object. By turning an adverb or adjective into a noun, we are tempted to think of that abstraction as actually existing, which leads us to ask non-questions like “did democracy, beauty, joy exist before there were human beings in the world?” The same applies to “God”. I have always liked the Quaker phrase, “that of God” in each individual: it turns God back into an adjective or an adverb, which is where, linguistically, God belongs: not “God” but “Godly”.

My second thought is that there may be a pragmatic reason to suspend disbelief and treat God as a finite object. Two analogies occur to me, one from physics and the other from the philosophy of science. We all know that Newtonian mechanics is an insufficient explanation of the way physical objects move. For very large objects such as Mercury rotating around the sun, one needs relativity to account for the motion. For very small objects at a subatomic level one needs quantum theory. But it is still perfectly possible to use Newtonian mechanics for the serious projects of designing a bridge or an aeroplane. In the philosophy of science, most (but not all alas) competent scientists do not believe in a Platonic reality of physical laws; they acknowledge that physical theories like quantum mechanics are essentially linguistic conveniences we find useful for discourse. But in pursuing scientific developments it is again pragmatic and successful to act as if one were seeking the best explanations that are Platonically “out there”, always knowing at the back of our minds that the search is really a linguistic endeavour of some kind. So could the same apply to religious thoughts: that while indeed worshipping a finite concept of a God out there is idolatry, it is a pragmatic approximation which can work for people, even for some of those who do not believe it.

But I have to admit I am not sure about this second idea. It does smack slightly of condescension.

Iain M. Banks Look to Windward Orbit 2000

This is another of the “Culture” stories and a very good one. It is quite well written, holds the attention and is full of brilliant SF inventiveness. For example, computers have become so ultra miniaturised that a small slice the size of a thumbnail is amply able to capture the state of a human brain. As a result, it is common practice to back oneself up periodically in case of death. Also, some have found the ability to inscribe in pure energy the same range of information, and so many people have transformed themselves into forms of energy on their deaths, thereby achieving immortality. These beings are known as “sublimes”. Hence, immortality has been achieved, and heaven, all by technological means! The story is quite complex with several threads as usual running through. One of his best SF books, as good I think as “Excession”.

Homer H. Hickham October Sky Fourth Estate 1999 (1998)

This is the story of a boy from a West Virginian mining community who, fired by the USSR Sputnik, has an ambition to build rockets. He succeeds and eventually works for NASA. It is a good read and is clearly meant to illustrate the USA dream that anyone can succeed, no matter from what background they come. His boyhood is set in the late 1950s – early 1960s. I found the degree of male chauvinism depicted extraordinary, even for then. For example, it was an insult to refer to a boy as a “sister”.

Guy Burt **After the Hole** **Black Swan** **1993**

This is a short novel written by a twenty-one year old, who has subsequently read English at Balliol.

The plot is of a few young people about to leave their co-educational public school and who have agreed to spend time in a locked cellar for three days, as an experiment. But their accomplice who has the key never turns up to release them. The outcome is surprising and reminiscent of Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*. There are some beautiful pieces of writing in the book, and I found it quite gripping once I had overcome an irritation I felt with the precocity of the characters. But it is short enough not to be a real novel; it is a carefully constructed whole. The story does not, in Graham Greene’s words, “find its own way home”. Nonetheless, the story is powerful, atmospheric, foreboding.

The book belongs to Matthew Hussey, I believe. I must try to give it back to him sometime.

A Warning to the Curious, A Thin Ghost and other stories **M. R. James** **Arnold** **1927 (1925), 1925**

Both these books came from my aunt Nell’s collection. Both contained stories that I had already read in “The Ghost Stories of M. R. James”, but both also contained stories I had not read before.

M. R. James continues to impress me with his calm, unsensational style that nonetheless proposes weird goings on in an engaging yet sober manner. Superior entertainment.

2002

Under the Net **Iris Murdoch** **Vintage Classics** **2002 (1954)**

This is Iris Murdoch’s first novel, and I was prompted to reread it after seeing the biographical film “Iris”. I also realised I did not have a copy so I bought a new one.

I had forgotten how good this novel is. It is as engaging as when I first read it, full of wit. The characters, especially the hero Jake Donaghue, are drifters who lead a temporary existence, eschewing permanent jobs or habitations. They are bohemian, or beatnik in character. I also realised that Iris Murdoch’s characters almost never have any personal histories, which makes them somewhat cardboard, ciphers. This book has tinges of Dostoyevsky’s “The Idiot”. I now propose to reread the others, or at least those that I have not reread recently.

The Flight from the Enchanter **Iris Murdoch** **Penguin** **1952 (1956)**

This is Iris Murdoch’s second novel, which I have just reread. Again the characters are somewhat odd, not so much drifters as in *Under the Net*, but again somewhat disconnected from “normal” society, either through wealth, poverty or inclination to pursue an artistic or, in this case, a literary lifestyle. The characters are linked together, not so much by relationships as by compulsion and obsession. Again they have very little in the way of histories, giving them ephemeral and unreal quality. The descriptive writing

is excellent, without being prosy or obtrusive. But, as in I think all Iris Murdoch's novels, I do not feel connected to the characters.

The Sandcastle **Iris Murdoch** **Penguin** **1960 (1957)**

Parts of the plot began to come back to me as I reread this, but not enough to spoil it. It really is very good, a lovely book. I had forgotten how good it was. A middle-aged married school-teacher and a young portrait painter fall in love, and there are consequential difficulties. The characters are well, strongly portrayed, but again they have no histories except the children, who therefore seem more real and understandable. We never know why Mor is so submissive, why Nan is so unpleasant. Also, Iris Murdoch's habit of giving her characters strange names – the artist's first name is Rain, and Rain always addresses her would be lover by his surname, "Mor". The other characters are also strongly portayed, the irascible ex-head Demoyte, the art master Bledyard, etc., all with only surnames. I noticed she also disobeys several of the rules of good writing Lindsay Clarke taught us: "It was the following day" at the start of a chapter, telling and explaining quite a lot of stuff to the reader. But it all works very well. Maybe her characters should have more history, but hers never do.

Headlong **Michael Frayn** **Faber & Faber** **2000 (1999)**

This novel is peppered with a lot of tutorial about art history, which gets a bit heavy at times. An aspiring art historian, Martin Clay, tries to make a large sum of money buying and selling a picture from one of his rural neighbours. He ends up getting his fingers badly burned financially, is almost lured into infidelity, and a nerdy neighbouring academic does make a financial coup. The whole narrative is very tense. I am reminded of Dostoyevsky's Idiot: one gathers increasing impatience with the hero's actions and prevarications. The book was short-listed for the Booker prize, but I think this is just because of the intense threading of the art history lectures into the narrative. This in a sense makes the book "intellectual", but I don't think that is sufficient to make it good literature.

Thinks **David Lodge** **Penguin** **2002 (2001)**

This, by contrast with Headlong, is very successful in combining expositions of an academic subject with the narrative of a story. It is set in a modern university campus (the "University of Gloucester") and revolves around two main characters, the appalling and arrogant Ralph Messenger, a "TV don" and expert in cognitive science, and Helen Reed, a newly appointed writer in residence. Messenger is completely unwilling to entertain any ideas different from his own line, is a compulsive womaniser and totally egocentric. Helen is by contrast a very sympathetic character who struggles to recover from her recent widowhood and to take over a course in creative writing. There are the usual farcical and saucy elements and the pace is supremely set. David Lodge uses the technique of alternating between the thoughts of his two main characters, interspersed by straight present tense narrative. I found the use of the present tense slightly "off", but on the whole this was an effective formula. His presentation of the thoughts of Ralph and Helen is done by a slight contrivance: Helen's are a journal that she is keeping, and Ralph's are more obscurely an experiment in cognition that he is supposedly carrying out as part of his researches. There are of course other interesting and believable characters in the story.

An appendix gives a list of books and individuals that he studied in order to provide the cognitive science background of the novel. I have already read two of these and have actually bought two more, "How the

mind works” by Stephen Pinker and “Consciousness explained” by Daniel Dennet. The titles of these two books are ambitious in the extreme and I trust a bit of tongue in cheek. At least I hope so.

How the Mind Works **Steven Pinker** **Penguin** **1999 (1997)**

Steven Pinker examines problems in cognitive psychology through a number of steps. He spends some time on definitions, then considers the question of thinking machines, shows the great power of evolutionary forces and looks at the extreme complexity that has evolved, concentrating on vision processes. He also spends a lot of, for me unnecessary, time in distinguishing between explaining characteristics and justifying them.

I write this some time after reading the book, but, while a good piece of work, I think “consciousness explained” by Daniel Dennet is considerably better. Both authors incidentally disclaim the arrogance of their respective titles.

Consciousness Explained **Daniel Dennett** **Penguin** **1993 (1991)**

This is a brilliant book. It examines the idea of consciousness and in particular the inherent contradiction in the idea that we all have, that “we” are a witness to our own sense data. He introduces the idea of a “Cartesian theatre”, based on the notion of Descartes, that the essential “I” or self sits in a theatre witnessing and making judgements about and acting on what is shown in the theatre, which are the stimuli produced by the senses. Then he demolishes this idea and goes to suggest a way that the illusion of this phenomenon, which is a common experience of us all, may come about. An illustration of this suggestion, which I found rather convincing, is that of a grazing animal, which is on a kind of autopilot, grazing and chewing away to provide itself with nutrition, until it hears a noise. Suddenly it is all alert, it looks up, all sense are focussed on analysing this noise and assessing whether it betokens danger. Its consciousness is raised and for that moment it has an awareness that comes close to our own. After a moment it judges that there is no danger and it reverts to its normal autopilot mode. This scenario is very close to the varying levels of consciousness that we all experience, from being on autopilot, cruising so to speak, when for example actually driving a vehicle that requires a necessary level of attention that precludes deep assessment and judgement, or passively watching an engaging film that totally absorbs one, to assessing all one’s inner experiences of the moment, feelings, intellectual assessments, long and short term objectives and desires, and making a life-changing decision.

I find this book very convincing. However, I am not sure whether it is “science”. Does it propose a theory or hypothesis? It seems so, but no way could one devise experiments to deny or even confirm it.

I want to read a subsequent book that Daniel Dennett wrote, and which I gave to James for a birthday present, “Kinds of Minds”.

Meditations on a first philosophy **René Descartes** **Cambridge UP** **1996 (1986) (1641)**

Descartes’ first meditation rejects all current beliefs as a method of starting with a clean sheet to investigate the nature of thought, existence, humankind and the nature of self. In his second meditation

he examines the nature of thought, the mind and the body. So far he shows exemplary objectivity. In his third meditation he concludes that there is a distinction between mind and body, that god exists, and it seems reverts to his previous views hampered by religious doctrine.

In meditation 3, he thinks that if he does not know that god exists, he cannot be sure of anything. Yet in the previous meditation he becomes certain that he himself exists: “Je pense, donc je suis”. Later in meditation 3 he comes close to the idea of abstraction being a non-thing, not a real entity. His example is a fairly practical one – heat and cold. Is cold just the absence of heat or possibly vice versa? But it brings to my mind even more that even the familiar notion of heat or energy being something real, a physical entity, is just again an abstraction from “hot”, an adjective, like “democracy” or “justice”, “joy”, “beauty”, etc., a linguistic description, “Whorff” again.

He returns over and over again to the solipsistic attitude: the only thing he can be certain of is his own existence. Everything else could be an illusion generated by himself, or planted in him by a deceitful exterior party, e.g. god. But he seems to deduce the existence of god from the argument that some agency must have caused him to exist, and this he defines as “god”. He sees it as a matter of derivation.

I am not sure what he means by his frequent references to “the natural light”.

The end of III 49:- “what caused me is itself a thinking thing” – I have to disagree with. A purely mechanical thing could produce us, for example the processes of evolution.

At the end of the third meditation he starts getting rather pious!

The fourth meditation is more along the same lines, a crude theistic (almost) theology. It is rather Jesuitical in its style of argument and brings to my mind prepubescent and early adolescent thinking, expressed in a more erudite linguistic style, some rather raw and primitive theological ideas. For example, his rapid transition from the power of god to his beneficence, and so forth. Loads of questions are sidestepped and glossed over.

So I am just puzzled that Descartes started with a strictly rational point of view, questioning every assumption in an impressive radical and linguistic way, to acceptance and almost naivety.

I suppose one must not be too hard on him. The influence of religious teaching at that time was inordinately strong and it is to his credit that he went as far as he did along objective analytical lines. He was the inventor of the concept of the “ghost in the machine”.

Surely I must have read more books in 2002?

2003

A Whistling Woman A. S. Byatt Chatto and Windus 2002

This is a beautiful, gripping book, one which I think deserves far more discussion and publicity than it appears to have received. It is also beautifully presented, with elegant front and back pages illustrating the natural history motifs that permeate the tale, insects, snails and such like. It is very well written, as one

1 See review of Don Cupitt’s *Religion of Being* above.

would expect from A.S. Byatt, although I notice that she has used the modern approach of short, part-sentences, a deliberately ungrammatical device started in earlier books. I wonder if this is an acknowledgement of the principle, observed by Fowler, that the use of English and what is accepted as correct, evolves. The events in the book are set in 1968.

Although this book deserves acclaim, I did find some difficulties. Just once, near the beginning, the narrator becomes not just an observer but a judge, with her own views and subjectivity. This jars, especially because it occurs very suddenly and unexpectedly. However, it lasts just less than a page and occurs only once.

There are an inordinate number of characters. I frequently had to turn back many pages to discover where someone had been introduced and their relation to the context of the others and the narrative. The character of Ruth, for example, is introduced briefly in the first letter from Brenda Pincher to Avram Snitkin, and then not mentioned again for some 50-70 pages when she re-enters the story as if one were expected to recall exactly who she is.

This is exacerbated by the fact that there are four parallel narratives taking place, which intersect only loosely. The first narrative is that of Frederica Potter, her son Leo by her ended marriage, and their ménage with Agatha and the other children. Daniel Orton, Frederica's widowed brother in law, also comes on the scene. These characters arise from the previous novels in what is now a quartet, *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*. Although there are references to events in *A Whistling Woman's* predecessors, the whole is largely self-contained.

The second narrative is the events at the university, variously referred to as the UNY and the NYU, without an expansion of these letters ever being explained. Since all the events clearly take place in Britain, these abbreviations clearly do not refer to the University of New York, something that might confuse American readers. An "anti-university" springs up and its antics are taken with some tolerance and acceptance by the UNY.

The third narrative is about a spiritual community, into which a charismatic mental patient, Josh Ramsden, from a therapeutic institution and the emotionally damaged wife of an abusive farmer are introduced. These two become significant members of the community, Josh Ramsden indeed becoming its leader.

The fourth narrative, not in order of introduction, concerns two academic researchers into the genetics and biological diversity of snails. Luk and Jacqueline become emotionally embroiled and then part again after a miscarriage. The nature of this and other attachments reflects rather well the mode of the time in the sixties.

The spiritual community comes to an end in a fire, and the anti-university fades away into nothing without strife, despite its considerable previous aggressive stance. These two demises seemed to me to be forward references to the later Branch Davidian cult and the Tiannenman Square demonstrations, the latter without the final violence.

If I was to read the book again I would start with building a list of the characters as they were introduced, just to help me keep track. I suppose I also feel that the rather loose connections between the four

narratives seem a bit unsatisfactory, but I think there may be stronger connections between them on a deeper level. I hope there will be sequels.

The Sciences of the Artificial **Herbert A. Simon** **MIT Press** **1996 (Third edition); (1969)**

Natural Science pursues knowledge of the natural world. “Artificial” Science is a study of the “artificial” world, computer science, medicine, economics, computer science, engineering. Simon spends some time elaborating the distinction between the natural and artificial worlds, and dwells on “economic rationality” in the second chapter. In chapters three and four he examines the processes of human thought. Apparently this is complex enough that he regards it as part of the artificial world. This seems a bit surprising given that human beings are surely part of the natural world, but then if one extends that argument, nothing is artificial: we are natural, therefore everything we make is natural. Losing the distinction is clearly not helpful, so the boundary between natural and artificial is bound to be fuzzy. Would a study of the social behaviour of chimpanzees be part of natural science, but sociology be artificial science? If so why? Simon appears to regard the study of human cognition as artificial science. I am not sure I would want to draw the line there, but the choice has to be one of taste and “semantic” in the popular sense of the word, i.e. depending on the meaning one ascribes to the words “natural” and “artificial”. Simon’s approach to human cognition is heavily behaviourist, ignoring any reports of analysis by contemplation, another matter of preference. Daniel Dennett’s work is in great contrast to this, but to my mind the more effective for it. (But the downside is a lack of experimental testability).

Chapter five, “The Science of Design”, is the one which I think I shall find most useful for my purposes. Traditional scientific disciplines have the task of discovering and teaching how natural things work. The professions by contrast are engaged in designing and producing artefacts that meet a desired goal or purpose. Thus architecture, business, law, medicine as well as engineering are all concerned with the process of design. Simon defines the artificial world as centred on the interface between the inner environment, how the artefact works, and the outer environment, the goals and constraints it has to meet. He dwells for a long time on logic and the logical processes required to solve the problems presented by this interface, and goes a great deal into artificial intelligence. This seems a bit of a red herring to me, but not a particularly harmful one. A point he emphasises a lot is that people are essentially simple; their behaviour is complex only insofar as they react to a complex environment. I must say I am not convinced of this. I think it comes from a behaviouristic approach to psychology.

Another thing that strikes me is the effect that the existence of an artefact has on the demand for it: “technology push” as opposed to pull. For example, there was little demand for mobile phones or computers until they became available, but now computers, and probably both, are virtually indispensable.

In chapter 6, Social Planning, the author gives examples of social design, e.g. regulations for fuel emissions, and demonstrates the impossibility of exact goals to be met, but the usefulness “satisficing”, making designs that are satisfactory in terms of the goals.

He also raises the question of “who is the client?” and gives examples of architects asked to design town plans and the social design this entails, engineers having to consider the consequences of their designs, and psychiatrists starting with therapy for an individual having to consider a whole family.

He advocates “designing without final goals”, instead using goals to motivate design activity, which will in turn generate new goals, through the (partial) design as it is developed. He compares the process to artistic ones, painting and music composition. Can this approach be applied to engineering design, I wonder? It seems feasible in architecture, so possibly the approach could suit certain kinds of system design.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with complexity. He differentiates between state and process descriptions: examples include DNA which contains a description of how to reproduce itself. This reminds me of some mathematical ideas such as surds, i.e. numbers with an infinite non-repeating decimal expansion that are nonetheless representable by a finite formula or algorithm, in contrast to Turing’s non-computable numbers, and my “very large numbers indeed”.

Kinds of Minds Daniel Dennett Phoenix 1996 (2001)

This was not as good as “Consciousness Explained”, I thought, despite a very encouraging start. He shows two additional ideas, however. One is that the mind is contained in the whole nervous system, not just concentrated in the brain. So that does make me rethink what I used to consider the case, that the whole of one’s sensations are perceived in the brain and that the location of a feeling in say a finger is a delusion. Perhaps not after all. The second idea is more detailed analysis of how consciousness and intentionality may have come about through evolutionary means.

The Origin of Charles Darwin OUP 1859 (1998)
Species

The first thing that struck me about the origin of Species was how easy to read and “modern” in approach it was. There was less mass of experimental evidence than I was expecting; the author refers often to experimental data, but usually says that he has not time to record it in detail.

The usual idea of scientific method is that one conceives a theory and then makes experimental observations designed to refute or confirm the theory. However, there is an additional intermediate step. From the experimental evidence one goes through a deductive process to determine whether the theory is supported or refuted. Most of the text in Origin of Species consists of this deductive argument, rebutting counterarguments etc.

It had not occurred to me that this deductive process might dominate the activities of classical scientific method.

Six easy Pieces Richard P. Feynman Penguin 1995/1963 (1998)

These are six lectures published as chapters, which start with atoms and go through basic physics and mechanics to quantum mechanics in the last chapter. This is presented almost as a potted history of the discovery, along with the difficulties and shortcomings of the earlier theories. The pace is fast yet very easy to follow. I found this book gripping! I finished it in a few days. It has given me some ideas about how to present formal semantics; allowing the reader’s ontogenetic path of discovery to follow the phylogenesis of the subject.

I also learned a few things that I did not know before. First, and maybe I did know this before, Einstein’s equation $E = mc^2$ defines the energy that would be released if one were to annihilate something of mass m . Second, the energy in a photon is the product of Planck’s constant h and the photon’s frequency.

Thirdly, and this is Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the product of the uncertainty of an object's momentum and the uncertainty of its position is h . Planck's constant is about $6.6 \cdot 10^{-34}$.

Ian Stewart **Natural Numbers** **Phoenix** **1995 (1996)**

This is a very readable propaganda piece for maths and mathematicians. Although published in the UK it has US spelling.

John Macleod **History of the Gaels,** **Sceptre** **1969 (1997)**
A

I have read two thirds of this book and somewhat ground to a halt. It is a bit heavy going. I learned two things, apart from numerous details. Religion, in its split between Scottish Presbyterian and Episcopal, was inextricably intertwined with politics. Religion is not portrayed in a good light by the author. Secondly, the clearances were, according to the author, to a large extent voluntary, and also exploited by various Scottish dignitaries. They took place from about 1780 to 1860; I thought they were later. I might yet finish the book.

Steven Pinker **Blank Slate** **Penguin** **2002**

This book argues fiercely against something I didn't know was in dispute, at least not in informed circles: that we are not blank slates, with our opinions and personalities entirely formed by our upbringing and environment. He argues that heredity plays a large part too. I did not know anyone thought the reverse, but it seems so. I found his arguments entirely convincing, although he does seem to go slightly over the top at times, and displays some bias like referring to people with whom he agrees as "experts" and to those he does not more neutrally. Part III has four chapters titled "Fear of ..." which were particularly good, debunking the alleged need for each of the three fallacies because otherwise one may be led to unacceptable conclusions: determinism and hence lack of responsibility and hope, inequality between people and hence allowing discrimination, nihilism (there's no point or high purpose any more), imperfectability – the dread of a permanent wickedness and hence no hope of improvement. Best of all he lists in Fear of Nihilism pp 186 – 190 a wonderful critique of religion, which I would like to list and expand on in my own words some day.

He also argues excellently (i.e. something I have always thought myself all along!) that there is no sudden boundary between life and non-life, but that nature develops the brain's facility gradually both in the individual's development and likewise in the evolutionary change from animals to humans pp223 – 229. He also argues against the existence of a soul and religious explanations along those lines. Also he seems to argue pro the citizen's right to choose whether to eat e.g. GM food.

Part V gives evolutionary explanations of politics, gender differences, violence, how we should treat children, and the arts. In the Arts, he quotes from A.S. Byatt quoting Pascal saying that "life is like living in a prison where every day fellow prisoners are taken away to be executed". What a bleak view of the human condition!

Brian Greene **Elegant Universe,** **Vintage** **1999 (2000)**
The

A lucid and readable account of the theory of superstrings, which sets out to be a “theory of everything”. Brian Greene relates the string theory to quantum theory and both special and general relativity. I found one or two things irritating about his presentation. In an attempt to avoid being “mathematical” the author bends over backwards too far. He won’t even write a number like 10^{15} , but instead writes “a million billion” and so on, which I think is no more graphic or accessible. In general I would have preferred a bit more mathematical analysis, but then I have more mathematical literacy than most I suppose. Also, he goes to some lengths to acknowledge researchers who have worked in the field, with result that one meets long lists of names that don’t mean anything to one who is unfamiliar with it. These could have been relegated to the Notes. But all in all, an interesting book and one which gives me some ideas about how and how not to write a popularised account of something highly technical.

2004

Iain Banks

Dead Air

Abacus

2002 (2003)

The hero of this story, Kenneth Nott, is a disc jockey on a commercial radio station, which he heartily despises – I think. At first I found some difficulty with this book, for several reasons. One was that the supposedly London urban patois with its abbreviations and numerous passing references slowed down my reading speed very substantially, as I had to decode the words and phrases of the first person narrative and dialogue. Does anyone really talk like this? However, after the first fifty or a hundred pages I seemed to have speeded up and found it easier to read. I don’t know whether this is because the style becomes less contrived or because I got used to it, but I suspect the author begins to forget to be trendy after he has got stuck into the writing process himself. A second reason was the large number of characters, most of whom have both full names and unconventional abbreviated forms as nicknames. A third reason was that I found I had little in common with the characters, their lifestyle, preferences in music, and their wealth and careless habits of expenditure and waste. However, once Kenneth starts his liaison with Celia (Ceel), with its attendant dangers, the plot becomes exciting and compelling.

Iain Banks transfers some of his political and other views, such as those on footballers, Big Brother and much else onto his hero and launches into long diatribes through his character’s mouth, something he does quite often in his more normal novels. I find this irritating and want to tell him to get on with things and not to waste time with these interludes. However, I find myself totally in agreement with Kenneth’s views, and this ameliorates these passages a bit.

The pace increases as the narrative moves on, and I get the impression that the author is beginning to enjoy the book himself as he writes it. After about 250 pages I thought to myself “This is a thriller! That has only just become apparent”. But further on still, I realised that it is also a love story. Iain Banks has written just a few of these; the other one that springs to mind is *Espedair Street*. The book almost has a happy ending, with a “happily ever after” theme. But it is also quite tough and gruelling, with only a threat of horrible violence that nonetheless leaves me feeling a bit grim.

Peter Singer

Practical Ethics

Cambridge U P

1993(1995)

This is the second edition of a book first published in 1979. There are substantial additions and changes since the first edition.

I had heard of Peter Singer as an Australian philosopher and proponent of animal rights. I had heard that he defended the rights of animals to the extent of equating them with human rights and I was interested to see if this was the case and if so how he defended such a position. I found this book on a charity stall in Hawes near Hazel's house in High Bentham.

Overall I am very impressed by the good sense and analytical objectivity of this book. It is not what I had expected of it, for no very good reason other than his conclusions had seemed extreme and I therefore expected a campaigning and blinkered style. There is none of that, and the book is far superior and more convincing than Stephen Clark's "Moral Status of Animals", which I read some time ago.

This book deals with many more issues than animal rights: ethics in general, equality, equality for animals, the killing of animals, embryos, foetus and humans, divisions of wealth between rich and poor, asylum seeking, and the environment.

I have some small issues which I would raise with him if I were ever have an opportunity, and these follow, in no particular order other than as they occur. He uses a *reductio ad absurdum* type of argument quite often, along the lines of "if we were to extend this idea we would conclude (some generally unaccepted moral conclusion)". However, quite a few of his own conclusions are not generally accepted, especially those concerned with infanticide (e.g. page 170, top, he questions that the life of a new born baby is as sacrosanct as that of an adult) and some of euthanasia. One such conclusion (p 129 line 24) is that "it would be better if none of us had been born". I don't see anything very wrong with that conclusion, given the net suffering and infamous abuses people have inflicted on each other over the centuries.

Much as I agree with him, on page 169 he introduces a completely new consideration out of the blue, without any supporting arguments, a "resistance to the creeping commercialisation of every aspect of our lives".

Page 250, two paragraphs concerning asylum have particular relevance to today. Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution". He questions the distinction usually made between someone fleeing from political persecution and one fleeing from a land made uninhabitable by prolonged drought, and points out that most refugees leave their countries at great risk and peril to their lives, crossing seas in leaky boats etc. On page 257, §2 he captures succinctly and eloquently the counterarguments to xenophobic prejudice against refugees. He points out that the nation receiving refugees may well benefit from doing so. The economy may receive a boost and many residents may find business opportunities in catering for the incomers' needs. Others may enjoy the cosmopolitan atmosphere created by new arrivals from other countries: exotic food shops and restaurants, and in the longer run, benefits of different ideas and ways of living. In many ways refugees make the best immigrants. They have nowhere else to go and must commit themselves totally to their new country, unlike immigrants who can go home whenever they please. The fact that they have survived and escaped from hardship suggests stamina, initiative and resources that would be of great benefit to any receiving country. Certainly some refugee groups, for instance the Indo-Chinese, have displayed great entrepreneurial vigour when resettled in countries like Australia or the United States (and the UK).

On page 297 he weighs the reasons for obeying and disobeying the law, “civil disobedience”, and says that “we must assess each case on its merits”. This seems a bit dodgy to me and rather close to a principle of the ends justifying the means. Later on page 298 he justifies sidestepping or going outside the law because of the slow and painful progress, or none at all, that results if one sticks to proper procedures. This is relevant to the recent publishing of photos of British troops abusing Iraqi prisoners by the Daily Mirror (7 May 2004). It has also transpired that the ICRC had brought those matters to the attention of the Foreign Office two months ago, with no result.

Page 323: “In other words, we can never get people to act morally by providing reasons of self-interest, because if they accept what we say and act on the reasons given, they will only be acting self interestedly, not morally.” Yes!! This is one of the reasons I lost my faith in Catholicism 45 years ago. The Church told us there was a heaven and hell, and urged one to act morally for reasons of self-interest, invalidating the “moral” act.

Ian Rankin A Question of Blood Orion 2003(2004)

An excellent thriller by Ian Rankin, although the plot and number of characters is a bit confusing. There are several interwoven chains of events, with at least one of them not connected with the others. But the story holds one throughout, especially as it gathers momentum. Rebus is as usual his alienated self, but his detective intuition is eventually justified and everything more or less comes right in the end.

As usual his characters play and discuss numerous bands and singers, none of whom I have heard of; indeed, I am beginning to wonder whether they actually exist: possibly not.

Robin Dunbar The Human Story Faber & Faber 2004

“A history of mankind’s (sic) evolution”. Robin Dunbar is Professor of evolutionary psychology at Liverpool University. This is a short book, accessibly written without being patronising. Each chapter starts with a short imaginary narrative about how various ancient events, such as cave paintings, one of the first carved figures, etc., arose. I found these slightly off-putting and not particularly relevant, but the main text is very good. He describes the trace of human origins from homo erectus etc. I learned a lot that I didn’t know before on this topic, like, for example, the fact that it is only in the last 28,000 years that we have been the only species of hominid on the earth. Before that, over the previous 5 million years, there were always at least two and possibly up to five hominid species coexisting. In fact I would have liked the author to have gone into a bit more detail in this area, and to draw out more clearly which species exactly appear to have had language etc. I might seek out his other two books, “The Trouble with Science”, and “Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language”. Also, “Human Evolutionary Psychology” by Barrett, Dunbar and Lycett seems interesting.

Ted Hughes The Iron Man Faber & Faber 1968 (1985)

This is a delightful book. I saw it at a book sale in Killin and realised I had never read it. Although the book is for children, it is a most pleasurable read for adults too. The Iron Man falls into the sea, but slowly reassembles himself and comes out of the sea onto the land. He alarms the country people and makes them angry by eating all their farm implements and fences – anything made of metal. They capture him in a large pit and bury him. But he eventually escapes and a boy called Hogarth befriends him and persuades him to stop eating people’s property and instead to consume the contents of a scrap yard.

Finally the Iron Man saves the people of earth from a space dragon and persuades the dragon to become peaceful and to sing to the people. Everyone becomes peaceful under the influence of the dragon's song and they stop fighting and making weapons.

This is a charming morality play, written in an elegant, easy for young minds to access, economic style.

James Joyce Ulysses Bodley Head 1922 (1960)

I have made many attempts to read Ulysses. I first bought this book in St. Albans in 1963. I had never managed to read more than a hundred or so pages before. But now at last, spurred on perhaps by the centenary of "Bloom's day", the day in 1904 during which the action of the book is supposed to take place, I have now made a serious start and am at present over half way through at about page 500.

In some ways the book is like a prose poem, of extreme length. Much of the action seems to take place in pubs, with conversations between Leopold Bloom, Stephen Dedalus, his father Simon Dedalus, and various other characters. The narrative consists of dialogues and "mind dumps", rather like morning pages, of Bloom and possibly others; it is not always easy to tell to whom these unprocessed soliloquies belong. Bloom drops into his office at least once and a substantial part of the conversations revolve around the funeral and wake of their mutual friend, Pat Dignam. Bloom's wife Molly and daughter Milly are mentioned several times. There are also passages consisting of narrative accounts of the events, but these seem strongly to be from the point of view of one of the characters, probably Bloom, though it is never clearly stated. One gets this impression from the idiosyncratic prose style used; it seems to be laced with the humour and individual eccentricity of the character. At page 561 the narrative takes the form of the script of a play for some 142 pages. There is some surrealism about this; the action acquires a fantastical form. Characters instantly change clothes, spontaneously change sex, there is a ceremony akin to a black mass, and Stephen Dedalus gets into a fight with an English soldier.

Part II was the longest part of the book, running from page 65 to page 703.

Part III picks up the narrative again with Bloom and Stephen Dedalus and others seemingly in a pub or possibly a brothel. At page 871 there starts the final subsection. This is a long soliloquy on the part of Molly Bloom. It is never clear what she is doing while having these thoughts; many of them are graphically sexual, and others are more simply recollections of her encounters. She finishes by recalling when she induced Bloom to propose marriage to her and she accepts. At least, I think that's what it is about.

I feel a certain sense of satisfaction having completed this book. I also feel that, somehow, my knowledge has increased.

Susan Greenfield The Private Life of Penguin 2000 (2002)
the Brain

My interest in this book followed on from my readings of books on evolutionary psychology. I wanted to see what Susan Greenfield had to say about the more reductionist explanation of the workings of the mind from the standpoint of neuroscience. I did not understand before how the connections in the brain could be reconfigured by the presence of chemicals: connections can be made and broken, information

and eloping with Emma's companion, Lindsay, by means of a huge dowry, so he is highly manipulative too. The book becomes increasingly gripping as it nears its finale. In the end not much changes, and the destiny of several of the characters is uncertain.

Iris Murdoch portrays the emotions of her characters as being driving forces, outside the ambit of their wills. She also depicts the destinies of everyone as being subject to wild and random, almost fragile, whim and happenstance. One character, Douglas Swann, a minister of religion and some kind of spiritual adviser to Ann and Fanny, Hugh's recently deceased wife, says "Goodness is a state of unconsciousness". I am a little uncertain of what is meant by this, but actions prompted by emotions seem to be likewise unconscious, outside the control of the rationality of the players. So Iris Murdoch's characters seem to be almost like some kind of emotional robots, without will.

Mark Haddon The Curious Vintage 2003 (2004)
Incident of the Dog
in the Night-time

This is an extraordinary and astounding book. The narrator and hero is a teenage boy who has Asperger's syndrome, which is a form of autism. He discovers a neighbour's dog impaled and killed with a garden fork. He determines to discover who has committed this crime. The book reveals the working of his mind; how he hates being touched, how he cannot understand other people's feelings or very often what they mean, and the nature of his extremely literal interpretations of what is said to him. It shows how infrequently any normal person actually tells the complete truth or says what they mean. Indeed, at times I felt that the hero, Christopher, is the normal individual in the world and the rest of us are insane.

The narrative is peppered with bits of mathematics, including a construction of John Conway's (Conway's soldiers), and an interesting theorem in Euclidean geometry to do with right angled triangles, namely that all triangles with sides whose lengths are expressible as n^2+1 , n^2-1 and $2n$ where $n \geq 2$ are right angled. This is easy to prove, as is its converse fairly easy to prove false, but less easy is that not all right angled triangles are similar to one with sides whose lengths are so expressible, and much less easy (I haven't done so yet) is whether all triangles with sides of rational (or equivalently, integral) lengths are similar to one such.

About two thirds of the way through the book the narrative becomes very tense and I feared for the outcome. But all comes out pretty well in the end, with some difficulties remaining. I had to admire the understanding persona of Christopher's teacher, Siobhan, and had sympathy for both his parents who in their different ways had amazing patience with Christopher, although they had plenty of human frailties too. I don't know how I would fare with such a problem child twenty-four hours a day. His father seemed to have got it mostly right, although he loses it disastrously from time to time.

Christopher is an extraordinary but entirely plausible mixture of extreme naivety and high intelligence. Altogether a most thought provoking piece of work. I was pleased to see from the credits that Oliver Sacks had endorsed it.

Robert Winston The Human Mind Bantam 2003 (2004)

This is an eloquent and very readable account of the workings of the brain, from a mostly biological point of view. Other books I have read on the subject have been more from standpoints of psychology, philosophy and evolution, so this complements those others. On pages 50-54 he makes an impassioned plea for continuing research using animals, citing the benefits to human health knowledge and declaring how well treated the animals are, especially in the UK. Indeed, he makes a good point that animals used in farming are far less subject to regulations and in far greater numbers. But when he later refers to research done on monkeys to measure responses in parts of the brain to various stimuli, I am uneasy. Some of these experiments seem to be very intrusive indeed, and to be done just to satisfy intellectual curiosity.

However, I found the book instructive. I cannot possibly remember all the different bits of the brain he refers to, but one thing I learn is that connections between different parts are very flexible. They can be made or broken by the supply or otherwise of various chemicals like dopamine. I did not realise that the brain was so reconfigurable.

Iris Murdoch The Unicorn Penguin 1963 (1967)

In my course of rereading Iris Murdoch this is the first book of which I remember snatches. Maybe I shan't be able to continue much more after this volume. Marian, a schoolteacher, applies for a job as a governess in a remote part of the country and accepts the offer. Bizarrely, she has not asked, nor been told, anything about the children she is to teach. When she arrives, she discovers that in fact she is to be a companion to a woman scarcely older than herself, Hannah Crean-Smith, who lives with a household of servants or distant relations on Gaze Castle. The whole style of Iris Murdoch's writing at the start of the book generates a profound and disturbing feeling of foreboding, in a very subtle and clever manner. There is a sense of something secret and sinister in the background. Also, against the normal rules of narrative writing, she describes the feelings of the principal character, Marian, in considerable depth and detail, as an omniscient narrator. Yet this normally taboo approach does not generate the usual response of there being an unnatural relationship between the reader and the narrator. It feels somehow natural and easy. I do not know how Iris Murdoch achieves this, but it clearly indicates a most unusual authorial skill.

There is another large house with occupants, Alice Lejour and her family, and Effingham Cooper, who live in Riders. There seems to be a slight antagonism or certainly a distance between the two households. The secret is revealed about page 60. Hannah's husband, Peter Crean-Smith, is permanently absent in the USA, but exerts a control over the household through the servants, especially Gerald Scottow, who is a sort of gaoler. Hannah is not allowed to leave the house. When Marian learns this from Denis Nolan, she determines to try to rescue Hannah and take her away. Her plan goes wrong, but she is forgiven.

Other complex relationships emerge. Effingham Cooper is enamoured of Hannah, and Alice of Effingham. But everyone is powerless to change anything, constrained by both their own natures and the artificial social conventions of the isolated society of the two houses. Their isolation emphasises the arbitrary nature of social pressures, and also demonstrates its power. In the end the spell is broken, but only through deaths of several of the principal players and the destruction of the society in miniature to which they belong.

This is the fifth of Iris Murdoch's books I have read, in chronological order. I think it is the first that displays the character so prevalent in the later books of putting characters in bizarre situations and conflicts, to show the human in stark relief.

Iris Murdoch The Italian Girl Penguin 1964 (1968)

In my course of rereading Iris Murdoch this is the first book which is written in such a positively lyrical and beautiful style. The narrator, first person, is a man. I have never been too sure how well IM manages to do this, although she has made several attempts. They never ring quite true – her “men” seem a bit too femininely sensitive to others and self-aware; perhaps not that exactly, but too open about it, as if it were natural and not an exception.

The story is brilliant, without too many characters to remember: the first person narrator, Edmund, his ox-like brother Otto, Otto's wife Isabel, their daughter Flora (16), Otto and Edmund's deceased mother Lydia, Otto and Edmund's ex-nurse, now general family helpmate, Maggie (the “Italian Girl” of the title), Otto's apprentice David Levkin and his sister Elsa. Lydia has just died and Edmund has travelled to the family home, in which all the others still live, for the funeral. Otto collapses with drunken laughter during his mother's funeral and has to be escorted out. Flora appeals to Edmund for help in getting an abortion: she is pregnant with David Levkin's child. Edmund fails to help her, and she escapes and has the abortion with Maggie's help. As the story moves on it transpires that Otto is having a liaison with Elsa and that Isabel is also having an affair with David. Maggie eventually reveals that Lydia has left everything to her in her will, causing disruption and consternation in the whole family, which finally breaks up.

Although this is an engaging book, exceedingly well written, I am unsure what it signifies. This family is dysfunctional to extremes: the influence, overpowering and crippling, of Lydia continues, surviving her death. The two sons have several personality defects and are generally lacking in “success”. Love in general seems to have a negative and pernicious effect on everyone and, as in other IM novels, is out of the control of those possessed of it. But what general observations or depictions the book has to say of the human condition I am not clear.

Ian McEwan Saturday Jonathan Cape 2005

This book is extremely well written and observed. The writing generates a very intense sense of apprehension. Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, is assaulted on his way to play a game of squash with a colleague. The assault followed on from a minor collision with a BMW (I always said they were crooks' cars). We are taken through Perowne's family, his lawyer wife Rosalind, his son jazz playing Theodore, his poet daughter Daisy and father-in-law John Grammaticus, a poet of renown. Baxter, his assailant, follows him to his house and holds the family to ransom. At first he threatens to rape Daisy, but becomes entranced by the poetry. This unlikely scenario does not read as absurdly as it sounds. Eventually Baxter is overcome and suffers a head injury, which Perowne ultimately operates on. I found this development rather unbelievable. Perowne is taking a huge risk of being accused of revenge or negligence if the operation is not successful. But he is astonishingly forgiving, partly because he knows that Baxter suffers from an incurable brain condition and is under sentence already.

So Perowne is unbelievably moral, given that the thug Baxter holds a knife to his wife's throat, breaks his elderly father in law's nose and threatens to rape his daughter. But everything is described in enormous

detail, Perowne's analysis, his skilful performance at the operating table, his house and family relations. In a way, it is also something of a charming love story about Henry and Rosalind. Above all, the writing is superb and immensely powerful; one of the best books I have read in a long time.

Agatha Christie The ABC Murders Fontana 1936 (1973)

It is a long time since I read an Agatha Christie novel. This is a Hercule Poirot story. It has the usual ingredients, a mysterious sequence of murders, an unexpected twist, and Poirot solves it in the end, although not before several deaths have occurred. The characters are a bit more characterful than I was expecting. A short, entertaining, light read.

Iris Murdoch The Time of the Penguin 1966 (1969)
Angels

This is the one about the mad rector, Carel Fisher, new incumbent at St. Eustace, Watergate, London EC. The other characters are Marcus Fisher, Carel's younger brother, Julian, Carel's youngest, deceased brother, Elizabeth, Julian's daughter, ward of Carel and Marcus, nineteen years old and disabled. She lives with Carel. The household also contains Muriel, Carel's daughter, Pattie O'Driscoll, Carel's servant and mistress, Eugene Peshkov, porter at the rectory, Leo, Eugene's son and Marcus's ex-pupil. Clara, deceased wife of Carel and Sheila, deceased wife of Julian also figure in the story, as does Norah Shaddox-Brown, a family friend and Mrs. Barlow, a parishioner. The story is written mainly from Marcus's viewpoint. Some of Iris Murdoch's philosophical musings come through as the rector Carel argues about morality with his brother Marcus. Carel has a gross controlling influence over everyone, his daughter Muriel, Marcus, Pattie, and most of all over Elizabeth, with whom he turns out to be having a sexual relationship. This becomes all the more shocking when it is revealed that Elizabeth is in fact Carel's own daughter, not Julian's, and that Julian had committed suicide on learning about the affair between his brother Carel and his wife Sheila. At the end, Carel too kills himself, leaving Muriel to look after her disabled half sister Elizabeth, a final act of manipulation.

Raymond Chandler Farewell My Lovely Penguin 1940 (1961)

I thought I would try rereading a Raymond Chandler novel, after forty years or so. The style is racy and witty, as I realised when dipping into one or two of his books. "He was a big man not more than six feet five inches tall and not wider than a beer truck". Another good, entertaining, light read, but the plot is complicated and if I read another I might try to keep track of the characters on a post-it sticker like I have done for one or two of the Iris Murdoch novels. Philip Marlowe, the private detective and hero of the Chandler novels, is unaccountably attractive to women and on surprisingly friendly terms with the official police. He also seems to work without getting paid anything.

Iain M Banks The Algebraist Orbit 2004 (2005)

This is the latest of Iain Banks' science fiction novels. It is long! 534 pages and drags quite a lot. But it is full of many ingenious sci-fi ideas, like gel suits that fill all your orifices with clever gel that enables you to absorb oxygen into your lungs, deals with waste products and translates signals into speech in your ears etc. The plot moves rather slowly and is complicated. The story is set mainly amongst dwellers of gas giants, an intriguing variation since most works of science fiction assume that aliens are either based on

solid planets or occasionally free floating in space. He also endows his aliens with very human traits, wryness, sarcasm, use of expletives and so on. Very Iain M Banks.

Max Beerbohm Zuleika Dobson Penguin 1911 (1983)

A pleasant piece of literary frippery, this is the only novel by Max Beerbohm, who was more of an essayist, drama critic, wit and satirist. I had thought this story was a short story rather than a novel, and I think it might have been better in such a format – in other words, it is a bit long. Max Beerbohm plays with words like toys. Many of the words are made up, but with a plausible etymology. I bought this book off the internet for 1 p + p & p. I believe it was a favourite of my deceased friend Tony Broomhead's.

2006

David Lodge Author, Author Penguin 2004 (2005)

A fictionalised biography of the author Henry James, this is, as one would expect, a well written account, full of detail. David Lodge gives welcome and comprehensive information in an appendix about what is fact and what is speculation or invention. The book is quite long and a bit slow moving in places. But one ends up with a vivid picture of the various characters.

P. D. James Lighthouse, The Faber & Faber 2005

A somewhat formulaic but very well written Adam Dalgleish story in P. D. James's style. Towards the end it gets exciting and difficult to put down. I find it difficult to believe in such highly educated police, but the remarkable thing is that P. D. James was born in 1920, so she was eighty five when she published this book. The story shows a comprehensive grasp of modern life and up to date narrative style. Most enjoyable.

Ian Rankin Fleshmarket Close Orion 2004 (2005)

A characteristically fine Ian Rankin story, with Rebus, his respected but somewhat alienated detective antihero. The tale has various twists and unexpected connections between its several story threads, gathered together towards the end. Rankin introduces current contemporary themes, racism, illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, and shows his welcome sympathy to these issues via his characters. DS Siobhan Clarke and John Rebus work together as almost equal colleagues in this novel. A recent encounter with the real Fleshmarket Close and Cockburn Street in Edinburgh, the centre of some of the action, gave me some added realism.

Karen Armstrong A History of God Vintage 1993 (1999)

This book traces the history of belief in God from the earliest times to the present day. All the main religions are covered including their variations over the years. I found interesting the fact that in the past Judaism and Islam shared many theological ideas, and that Islam has championed scientific discovery and theory probably more than any other religion. Islam seems to have found no problem of any clash between science and religion, because facts and causes is not the discourse of religion. Karen Armstrong emphasises the need of humanity for religion. "Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good

substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.” Faith and religion should be distinguished from belief, which Armstrong considers is not what religion is about. I found this very striking and illuminating, although some of the chapters seemed rather long with trends appearing to repeat themselves frequently within the various periods into which she divides the “history”.

One unfortunate feature of this book is its very poor standard of printing. This seems unnecessary as the first few pages of title and publication information are far superior. The Index in particular is scarcely readable.

William Burroughs The Naked Lunch Calder 1959 (1964/5)

I came to read this book by a circuitous route. The author had recently been in the literary “pages” of the Independent and Radio 4, following some anniversary event. I had met William Burroughs in 1960 when he came to give a talk to the Cambridge Heretics, and I also knew his friend Ian Sommerville, whose photograph of Burroughs appears on the front cover of the Calder 1964 edition. “The Naked Lunch” was much talked about at that time amongst some of my contemporaries, but I had never read it. So when I saw a copy of a close to first edition in a second hand bookshop in London’s West End I went inside to ask its price. “Two-fifty” they said. It was in reasonable condition and seemed a very good price, so I said I would buy it. They apologetically explained that their credit card machine was out of order. A bit puzzled, I said “That’s all right, I’ll pay by cash” and started to get some change out of my pocket. “It’s £250” they explained. A bit embarrassed I hurriedly returned the book to them, treating it like a precious object, with apologies and left. However, now my curiosity was fired and I looked for the book on the internet. I bought a copy of exactly the same edition, in slightly better condition, for £22.

This book is based on notes written down by William Burroughs during his fifteen year drug addiction. It is, as he says himself in his introduction, “brutal, obscene and disgusting”. It consists of a series of fantasies, mostly of a sexual nature, involving homosexuality, pederasty, rape, necrophilia, excitement occasioned by mutilation and slaughter, abuse of power, warped, deranged and corrupt officialdom and more. On its own it would be a piece of admittedly well if idiosyncratically written pornography. But the Introduction and Appendix by Burroughs give the work an entirely different context. In his introduction he urges readers not to go down the path of addiction to drugs. “Look down LOOK DOWN along that junk road before you travel there and get in with the Wrong Mob.... A Word to the wise guy” he advises. And the Appendix is a paper published by Burroughs in the British Journal of Addiction, volume 53 no. 2, 1956, in which he dispassionately details a huge range of drugs with which he has experimented, the attempts at cure, and the effects, sometimes gruesome, that these have had.

However, this book is not just a cautionary tale. On reflection, and I came to this conclusion only after I had completed it, it is a stirring literary work. The brackets of Introduction and Appendix are still essential, but the work itself is in the tradition of James Joyce and Henry Miller. Despite this it is original and unique. “A book of beauty, great difficulty and maniacally exquisite insight. William Burroughs... may conceivably be possessed by genius” writes Norman Mailer amongst the eulogies on the back cover. I think I might agree.

Eckhart Tolle The Power of Now Hodder and 1999 (2005)

Stoughton

Hazel recommended this book to me. I must say I agree with the author's thesis, which is simply that the constant linguistic voice in our minds can be a curse and it is much better to live for the present moment; living in the past or forever looking to the future is a waste of life. The continuous analytical language-intensive mode of thinking, the "mind" as he calls it, can be a source of great mental pain. To find ways of silencing this inner voice is a way of avoiding this pain.

What I found intensely irritating about this book and its author is his utter arrogance and total contempt for his readers. He writes as if he alone has thought of this idea and proclaims it as a solution to personal problems which the rest of the population is too stupid to have thought of. The whole format of the book consists of FAQ – Frequently Asked Questions. He frequently derides and criticises this hypothetical questioner – an easy thing to do since the author has himself devised the questions! His own preface, which he has written himself, is an overt piece of advertising for the book. Its first sentence is "Six years after it was published, *The Power of Now* continues to play its part in the urgent task of the transformation of human consciousness", and continues in that vein. I read the first fifty pages of the book, struggling to ignore the arrogance of the author, but in the end had to give up. Does he not realise that almost everyone has strategies for silencing the linguistic inner voice? People plug personal stereos into their ears, listen to music, dig the garden (an activity well known for its therapeutic value), watch escapist plays and films, go for walks in the countryside, and dance. Susan Greenfield in her book *The Private Life of the Brain* identifies everybody's need for suspending intellectual activity. "A drug, a dance, or a bungee jump temporarily obliterates your mind" (opening, chapter 8).

In short, although *The Power of Now* contains truths, it is grossly over-hyped, especially by its own author.

Harry Harrison A Transatlantic Gollancz 1972 (2000)
Tunnel, Hurrah!

Quite a fun piece of SF, this book imagines a different history in which the USA is still a British colony, George Washington was even executed as a traitor, and Victorian values and attitudes have continued into the present, which is 1973, a year after the book was first written. These extend into the kind of scientific and technological progress that has been made, in some ways in advance of our own and in other ways much behind. The story centres round the efforts to complete a transatlantic railway tunnel. Railways are the way to travel, and have superbly luxurious trains with en suite cabins, stewards, cocktail lounges and so on. There is a bit of skulduggery, mixing in a little crime with the SF. Although very pro-British, Harry Harrison is from the USA. The book might not have been very acceptable if written by a Brit!

Iris Murdoch The Nice and the Penguin 1968
Good

This is a superb work by Iris Murdoch. One keeps finding gems of observation of human behaviour and nature. The controlling, "nice" couple Octavian and Kate collect their friends and keep them like animals in a zoo. Kate and John Ducane are having a long term sexless affair of the heart, in which Ducane feels trapped and guilty about his other entanglements. Radeechy, a junior civil servant in the same department as Octavian and John, has committed suicide and John Ducane is asked to investigate it. More

entanglements emerge and develop, involving murder, blackmail and black masses. Eventually couples reform and there is almost a happy ending. For the only time I can recall in an Iris Murdoch novel, there is an element of crime mystery to be solved.

Iris Murdoch **Bruno's dream** **World Books (Chatto 1969 (1970)**
& Windus)

Bruno is a bedridden old man slowly dying. He is surrounded by reluctant servants and relations, Nigel, his nurse, Danby, his son-in-law, Adelaide the maid, Nigel's cousin, and Will, Nigel's twin brother. Gradually others come on the scene: Miles, Bruno's son, Diana, Miles's second wife and Lisa, Diana's sister who lives with Miles and Diana. A host of other absent or dead relations and attached people appear to hover in the background exerting their influence. This novel is sombre and a little depressing, having as it does the spectre of death hanging over it. But soon there is plenty of action. Love plays a strong rôle, and as usual with Iris Murdoch drives people to manic behaviour, especially Miles. Iris Murdoch seems to regard love as a complex philosophical question, a phenomenon with deep significance. I must say, this aspect of love has always escaped me; I have always regarded it as an evolutionarily generated human behaviour, intense and overwhelming though it can be, but nothing more than that in the end. I began to enjoy this book immensely and did not want it to end. Bruno's stamp collection, worth twenty thousand pounds, plays a large part and causes tensions amongst his relatives who want to inherit it. He pours over it and frequently gets the stamps in a muddle, but always knows what is there.

Ian Rankin **Watchman** **Orion** **1988 (2004)**

This is an early Ian Rankin, not featuring Rebus but an espionage novel. Rankin displays his skill in writing even here, at the age of 26. Miles Flint, the hero, is like Rebus, not a heroic character, but in the end overcomes the complex plots to get at him. A good read.

Iris Murdoch **A Fairly Honourable** **Penguin** **1970 (1972)**
Defeat

This is the story of the devious Julius who wrecks the marriage between Rupert and Hilda by a series of tricks played by stealing their previous love letters and resending them to others.

What strikes me the second time round is that no-one blames or criticises even the most atrocious behaviour in each other. Thus morality is in abeyance, although morality and "goodness" and its nature is a theme throughout the book; e.g. Rupert is writing a book on goodness (which is continually being criticised by the other characters). There is also the curious character of Tallis, Morgan's husband (Morgan being Hilda's sister). Morgan ran off with Julius, was abandoned by him, and Tallis acted in a rather wimpish way, not claiming her or getting angry with Julius. But on the other hand Tallis is the only one who takes action, e.g. He is the one to realise that the deception orchestrated by Julius must be broken, and does so. Also he overpowers some youths who are beating up a Jamaican visitor. But he cannot take action on his own behalf, and he lives in utter squalor, which he seems unable to clean up.

2007

Karen Armstrong **Through the Narrow Flamingo** **1981 (1995, 1997)**
Gate

“Through the Narrow Gate” reminded me of the less reasoned aspects of Catholic teaching, of the Ignatian striving for perfection. The book was surprisingly gripping, and horrific. After reading it I could understand a little better the attractions of this monastic sort of life; there is the same sort of challenge as that which an athlete or the trainer of a bird of prey or a mediaeval knight has to undergo. But it is a chronicle of preposterous abuse too; the failure of the superiors to recognise illness, oppression, denial of human nature, long term damage to psyches, etc. Yet the author has no regrets at the end of it.

This was a revised edition altered for the USA market, with unfortunately American English usage that occasionally jarred: “candy”, “gotten”, American English spelling, etc. Also it didn’t seem to ring true, i.e. The overall style was British English despite this retrofitting of American usage, so this artificial editing was a bit annoying – but only a minor nuisance.

Ian Rankin **The Flood** **Flamingo** **1986 (2005, 2006)**

The first book by Ian Rankin, written when he was 26 and before he conceived of Rebus. It is a story of prejudice, hardship and oppression. There are many flashes of Rankin’s style and talent for writing.

Karen Armstrong **The Spiral Staircase** **Harper Perennial** **2005**

This memoir from Karen Armstrong is a sequel to “Through the Narrow Gate”. It tells of her having left the convent and continues with life as a student. She is supported in her transition by an amazing set of student friends and is awarded a Congratulatory First. She goes on to do a DPhil, but is unfairly failed by an external examiner who has an axe to grind with the University English Department. During her thesis she lodges for free with the Harts, a highly eccentric, intellectual family, dons, who have a six-year old autistic son. Part of the deal is that she looks after this son from time to time. They embrace her into the bosom of their family, taking her on holiday with them and so on. Then she has a bout of depression, loss of memory and other episodes. She sees a psychiatrist called Dr. Piet, who tries many different approaches but fails to alleviate her condition. She wakes up in hospital having taken an overdose. The Harts insist on taking her back into their home to recuperate. After failing her DPhil she gets an academic job at Royal Holloway College in London, but this lasts only for three years. She then reluctantly gets a job in a school, but although she likes the pupils well enough, she finds teaching unfulfilling. But meanwhile she has had another episode, a seizure, and is finally diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy. This is the explanation for all the episodes, seizures, losses of memory, hallucinations etc. that she has been plagued with since she was eighteen.

Finally, through her writings she is invited to take part in BBC TV programmes and she embarks on a career of philosophy of religion, broadcasting and writing.

Iris Murdoch **An Accidental Man** **Penguin** **1971 (1973)**

I found this story by Iris Murdoch less compelling than the others. Austin Gibson Grey is abandoned by his second wife, Dorina, and sacked from his job. His son Garth, a layabout who has befriended an American academic, Ludwig, despises his father but lives in his chaotic house. Dorina stays in Valmorana, a house for homeless women run by Charlotte. Overseeing everyone is Charlotte’s sister Clara, and her husband George, whom she calls “Pinkie”. They interfere everywhere with a tyrannical unctuous generosity. Their daughter Gracie and Ludwig fall in love and become engaged. Ludwig obtains an academic job at Oxford but is emotionally blackmailed by his father who disapproves of his avoidance of being drafted to fight in Vietnam. Austin’s elder brother Matthew arrives on the scene, dispensing occasional wisdom, for which he is much in demand. Ludwig lodges with the alcoholic ex-tennis-player

Mitzi Ricardo, who also loses her job and befriends Austin. Clara and Charlotte's mother Alison dies but, instead of leaving her house to the impecunious Charlotte who has been spending all her time caring for her, leaves all to Gracie. Other young people circulate on the periphery, and Ludwig begins to become disenchanted with Gracie's shallowness and lack of idealism.

Ian McEwan Atonement Jonathan Cape 2001

I bought this book when it first came out, and thought I had read it already. But then I realised I hadn't; I must have forgotten to read it! It is I think the best of Ian McEwan's books so far, although I found the first fifty or so pages annoying, because the author analyses the thoughts and motivations to an extreme degree, I thought. But after then it settles down, and maybe I had got accustomed to the style.

Briony Tallis is aged thirteen at the start of the story in 1935. She writes a play to be performed by herself and her visiting cousins whose parents have separated. The play does not get performed, and other events take priority. She sees her elder sister Cecilia, just down from Cambridge, in a clinch with the family's housekeeper's son, Robbie – in fact more than just a clinch. She misinterprets this as an attack, and later accuses Robbie of raping her fifteen year old cousin Lola. But in reality she cannot see the identity of Lola's attacker well. As a result of her misidentification, Robbie is imprisoned before going off to the second world war. Meanwhile he and Cecilia, who is now estranged from the rest of her family, are engaged. As she grows older Briony regrets her hasty action and aged eighteen she trains to be a wartime nurse instead of taking up an offered place at Cambridge. The rest of the book is the story of her atonement for the damage she caused her sister and her sister's fiancé.

**Iain Banks The Steep Approach Little, Brown 2007
to Garbadale**

I got this book signed at a do at the Watermill in Aberfeldy. Iain Banks read out a fairly long passage and then invited questions. One glass of wine was provided. This is a benign book by Iain Banks' standards. A love story, of a kind, set in the context of a family business which is dominated by a tartar of a grandmother and run by numerous relations all in the one extended family. The author uses several novelist's techniques: changes of tense, of voice etc. It is an easy, enjoyable read, not without some vicious scenes. There is love, sex, politics (Banks clearly does *not* like Americans!) and business skulduggery. But the main theme of the book is the rite of passage of a man's relinquishing his intense love for an early girlfriend and settling for a newer, more mature one, a process which, in this narrative, takes some twenty-five years. The family business is a background to this story of character development. Yet one also gets the feeling that the book consists of a lot of sketches cajoled together. There is a denouement, only to be guessed near the end. I think this might turn out to be my favourite Banks book.

**John Mullan How Novels Work Oxford University 2006
Press**

I found this book in the Watermill bookshop in Aberfeldy and, after browsing it a couple of times, bought it. It can both be a reference book and be read as a continuous text. John Mullan observes what techniques novelists use and also analyses, to a lesser extent, how they are effective. His chapters have titles corresponding to different aspects of a novel: Beginning, Narrating, Voices, Structure, Style, and so on to Ending. His examples and bibliography make me want to read some more novels which I have heard of but would not normally think of. The book is also, as one might hope, elegantly and attractively written. His examples come from some surprising sources: for example, *The curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Ian Fleming, Nick Hornby, Graham Swift, John le Carré. I think I might find it useful for my own writing, for many of the techniques can be applied not just to fiction.

Iris Murdoch The Black Prince Penguin 1973 (1975)

This is a very memorable book, and I recalled the gist of the story: that the hero, Bradley Pearson, falls in love with the daughter of a married couple, Rachel and Arnold, who are friends of his. At the end of the story, he finds that Rachel has murdered her husband. He unwisely helps her by washing the murder weapon free of her fingerprints. Unfortunately he leaves his own, gets accused and convicted of the murder himself. None of his friends believe in his innocence; even Rachel herself seems to have amnesia about the event and believes he is guilty.

So much I remember from the first time I read *The Black Prince*. What I had forgotten was the intense philosophical nature of the discussions and analyses carried out by the characters: about the nature of love (which, as viewed by the intellectual Bradley is nonetheless adolescent, almost prepubescent) in particular. One has to read this book slowly to get the best value from it.

The book is framed by a foreword and a postscript by an “editor”, P. Loxias, and is also ended by other postscripts by Bradley Pearson and the other dramatis personae. These postscripts combined with the main narrative combine to throw into exquisite doubt the question of whose view is the true one, and indeed nature of truth itself. Is there any true account of human social interactions?

Some minor intriguing details are the identity of P. Loxias, who always remains uncertain, and the fact that the object of Bradley’s love, Julian, and his wife, Christian, have men’s names. Suggesting this gender ambiguity is a favourite artifice of Iris Murdoch.

Robert Glass Software Runaways Prentice Hall 1998

This book is subtitled: *Lessons learned from Massive Software Project Failures*. He defines a runaway as a project that goes out of control because of difficulty of building the software needed by the system. It is an interesting read, although I note with interest that none of the failures are actually due to software not being correct. There are plenty of difficulties resulting from failure to reach essential performance requirements. Most of the failures recorded are those of “management”, although much could have been saved by the technical people recognising the difficulties and alerting or otherwise digging their heels in. In short, the large majority of his stories are tales of trying to produce the “wrong software” rather than producing the software wrong, and many of them are the result of trying to do too much at once, trying to achieve a “big bang” change instead of following a course of incremental development. His conclusions are not so much conclusions as a reflective epilogue.

Karen Armstrong A Short History of Canongate 2005
Myth

Hazel and I went to a lecture on myths by Karen Armstrong at the 2007 Edinburgh festival. This is the book of the lecture in essence, although somewhat filled out. Both lecture and book are very good. Towards the end of the book the author makes the interesting analogy between myths and novels. We read novels, knowing full well that they are fiction, but are engaged greatly by them nonetheless. The mental process requires a temporary suspension of disbelief in order to gain benefit and meaning from the myth/novel. She says that imagining that people really thought myths were factual is inept. But with the coming of western thought, starting with Plato and Aristotle, myths and alleged factual accounts began to be conflated. Some people mistakenly began to believe them as factual accounts, others mistakenly denouncing them as incorrect accounts. Their purpose is to provide meaning to our lives.

Patricia Highsmith The Talented Mr. Penguin 1955
Ripley

I borrowed this book from the library because John Mullan referred to it in his “How Novels Work” (q.v.). It has been made into a film. Once it gets going, the book is quite gripping and has the unusual feature for a thriller that the bad guy wins out at the end and continues, in this case, to commit again for further novels! Unfortunately the next few Ripley novels are not present in the Stirling library system, so

DTI and at Imperial College, necessarily because the latter was funded and sponsored by the DTI. His book is a little emotive, but sets out the reasons for rejecting SDI, on several different grounds. Much is made of the restraining and restrictive impact on British CS research if the UK agreed to participate in SDI, and of the government's lack of consultation with industry, academia and the House of Commons before signing up to the Memorandum of Understanding. His book is historically interesting, especially now in the context of its having "all blown over". It recalls how great expectations were placed on the development and importance of AI, how it would dominate the application of and technology of computing. It also gives useful background on the origins of ESPRIT, the Alvey programme and ICOT, the Japanese Institute for New Generation Computer Technology.

Gordon Plotkin, Proof, Language, MIT Press 2000
Colin Stirling, Mads and Interaction
Tofte (eds.)

I bought this book to help with background for my current book project, "Fiendish Designs". Proof, Language and Interaction is a book written in tribute to Robin Milner. I have not read the whole of this book, for it is 790 pages long, but I have read sufficient to feel justified in writing this review. One of the best parts of this book is the Introduction and Brief Biography of Robin Milner written by the editors. The biography not only summarises Milner's life but expands in an illuminating way on his several areas of achievement, Computer Assisted Theorem Proving, Standard ML and Concurrency, giving both historical details and an exemplary clear outline of their salient technical content and significance. The book is divided into semantic foundations, programming logic, programming languages, concurrency and mobility. Mike Gordon's chapter on LCF to HOL I found particularly useful, mainly because I was recalling LCF and ML for Fiendish Designs. There is much else of stimulating interest here.

Alice Miller The drama of being a child Virago 1979/1983 (1990)

I read this quite a long time ago, and have read it again. It is very thought provoking and brings home graphically the effect that parents have on their children and the extent to which we all are influenced by our parents' unwitting manipulations. Unfortunately, the lessons of the book are, I have found, too soon forgotten. The third chapter, The Vicious Circle of Contempt, is particularly striking. Everyone should read it, as Edna O'Brien says on the back cover, although some people may find the psychoanalytic language off-putting.

Phoebe Caldwell ? Jessica Kingsley 2008

I proof-read this short book on autism and its treatment for Hazel's friend, Phoebe. It was very readable and very interesting. I was again moved to the conclusion that I am somewhat autistic, "on the spectrum" in Phoebe's words. She says we all are. The observations of an autistic person's reaction to sensory overload were particularly relevant: withdrawal, which is what I do quite often. Also, she points out that when an autistic child reacts aggressively, it is to remove themselves from pain. I hope she gives me a copy when it is published, which should be before too long.

Nicolas Ostler Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World Harper Collins 2005

This book, by my ex-colleague, Nicolas Ostler, is a magnum opus. It is very comprehensive, covering languages from the earliest times to the dominance of Chinese Mandarin and English, the top two of the top twenty. He traces the development and transmission of languages from the earliest records in 3,300 BC (sic) via the media of conquest, literacy, trading and other influences. The book is extremely well researched and authoritative. I wonder about a few of his usages. He refers to native Americans as

“Indians”, and uses the BC and AD instead of the more recent, less religion-specific BCE and CE. I would also have preferred that he had used the Greek alphabet for quotations from Greek, instead of transliterations into the Roman alphabet, but I can see that many of his readers will not know the Greek alphabet. Fair enough: I don’t know the Hebrew or Cyrillic alphabets, still less Arabic script.

Ian Rankin Exit Music Orion 2007

This is I think the best of the Rebus novels. It keeps a tense, interested and good pace throughout. Once again we are left with at least one loose end undone. I suspect we have not seen the absolute end of Rebus even though he has had his retirement party.

**John le Carré The Constant Hodder & 2001
 Gardener Stoughton**

This is a very well written thriller by John le Carré, less depressing, slightly, than previous books of his which I have read. Gripping and tense, he puts the reader into the mind of the protagonist, Justin, the widowed diplomat husband of a volatile political activist in Kenya. No happy endings here, and a bleak commentary on the power of big pharmaceutical business. This copy I got from an Oxfam shop for £2.99 is a first, hardback, edition.

Susan Greenfield Tomorrow’s People Allen Lane 2003

This is rather a curious book, but an increasingly enjoyable one. Susan Greenfield starts by speculating what the future will be like, in particular in terms of our lifestyle, use of robots, work and leisure, means of reproduction, education and science. This has a science fiction flavour; indeed, in the preface she admits that she really wanted to write a novel. But then the book changes somewhat and she philosophises on terrorism, human nature and options for our future. This more philosophical mode towards the end of the book is, to my mind, much more interesting.

Martin Rees Our Final Century Heinemann 2003

This book by Martin Rees, the astronomer royal and master of Trinity, president of the Royal Society, is more popular than I was expecting. He explores in an easy style the various possibilities of this being our last century, and how it might not be. I was quite taken with it, and learned that he has written quite a number of popular science books, slightly to my surprise. I may well read some more.

Kingsley Amis Jake’s Thing Penguin 1978 (1979)

I bought this from a charity stall. I read many Kingsley Amis books in the distant past when they were first published, but I had never read this one. I haven’t finished it, and have deliberately abandoned it after 67 closely printed pages. Jake’s “thing” is a lack of sexual desire for his wife at age 40 or so. It is meant to be humorous, but I found it embarrassing and irrelevant. It made fun of something – a particular approach of psychiatrists – that is dated and no longer exists, I think.

**Scott Adams The Dilbert Boxtree 1996 (1997)
 Principle**

This is very funny, a mixture of more text than usual in a “Dilbert” book, and cartoons. The book aspires to mirror the Peter Principle, hence the title. There is much that is hilarious and close to the truth as I have experienced, and all very cynical.

Martin Rees Just six numbers Phoenix 1999

weekday of any date, capable of being calculated in one's head (just). He was keen on Euclid and logic, among other topics. He devised a fairer system of voting which has found its way into ballot systems used by the Electoral Reform Society today. He also devised a better way of holding tennis and other tournaments, but these have not been adopted. He invented Carroll diagrams for analysing logical statements. These were similar to Venn diagrams. This was an interesting book, but to do all the numerous problems one needs to read it with a pencil and paper. Some of them could do with some paraphrasing as they are couched in awkward or confusing language.

Ruth Rendell **Not in the Flesh** **2006**

A good Ruth Rendell thriller, an Inspector Wexford mystery. Alongside the main crime, there is the question of Somali female genital mutilation, in which his daughter is heavily involved as a campaigner. Very readable, but in the end easily forgettable: a book for entertainment on holidays.

Martin Rees **Our Cosmic Habitat** **Phoenix** **2001 (2003)**

This highly readable book explains the universe in which we live, planets, atoms, stars, galaxies, galaxy clusters, black holes, the micro-world, whether the universe is accelerating or decelerating, the multiverse and the long range future (chapter 8). I had a little difficulty with chapter eight, which I want to read again.

2009

James Hillman **The Dream and the** **Harper Perennial** **1979**
Underworld

I borrowed this book from Hazel, because Eleanor recommended this author's writing and said she found him inspiring. Hazel has several books by James Hillman. I found it hard going to read, if only because of the arcane language: lots of coined words, composed mainly from classical Greek words and psychotherapeutic technical terms. I frequently wished I had a Greek dictionary to hand, and an etymological English one too. However, I found the book most interesting and I was in sympathy with its thesis. This is that we should regard dreams not as a comment on our waking, life to be interpreted, but as an expression of the underworld, a stand-alone vision from the depths. This is perhaps most eloquently expressed by the author's own last paragraph:

“As the dream is guardian of sleep, so our dream-work, yours and mine, is protective of those depths from which dreams rise, the ancestral, the mythical, the imaginal, and all the hiding invisibilities that govern our lives. Dreams are sleep's watchful brother, of death's fraternity, heralds, watchmen of that coming night, and our attitude toward them may be modelled upon Hades, receiving, hospitable, yet relentlessly deepening, attuned to the nocturne, dusky, and with a fearful cold intelligence that gives permanent shelter in his house to the incurable conditions of human being.”

Martin Rees **Before the** **Free Press** **1997 (2002)**
Beginning

At first I thought that this book by Martin Rees was just a preliminary version of “Our Cosmic Habitat”, but it contains a lot of other material. He works progressively from the formation of galaxies, black holes, neutron stars and quasars, to the evidence that these observable objects give to theories of the beginnings of the universe. The frequency of occurrence of different chemical elements provides more evidence than I had realised. He proceeds from these considerations to arguments for the “multiverse”, discussing the place of teleological and anthropic lines of reasoning.

Very interesting, and leads me to hope that he will write more that is accessible to the general scientifically literate layman.

Karen Armstrong The Bible: The Atlantic Books 2007
Biography

This book, while most interesting, was not what I was quite expecting. Rather than a history and analysis of the origins of the bible, it was an account of the many ways in which people, sects, Jewish and Christian, and there are many of them, treated and interpreted the biblical texts, although there is a fair amount of bible history too. The book does, however, give chapter and verse of many things that Karen Armstrong has said without much support in her other books, that the bible has not always been given a literal interpretation, even in early times. I was reminded of much that the Jesuits told us when studying the bible in my early days at school, but there is much more too.

Iain M. Banks Matter Orbit 2008

The latest of Iain Banks' "Culture" novels. Well written, long but gripping, I read this in less than a week. This novel displays Banks' usual ingenuity, but also some of his political and ideological views expressed through his characters, polemics I find a bit irritating even though I agree with most of them. Science fiction novels, in particular those by Iain Banks, I find leave me feeling optimistic and excited, even when there may be some bleakness.

M. R. James Collected Ghost Wordsworth Classics 1992 (1994)
Stories

I picked this up in a charity shop, because it contained a number of M R James's stories that are not in my other collections, nine in total. I like the author's style of calmly describing the mundane surroundings to the later chilling events. Casting the Runes is a story I am sure I have heard of, but is not present in any of the other volumes I have. It is a particularly good tale, indeed. Reading these gives me some inspiration to write stories of my own experiences, not necessarily ghostly ones.

Sharon Blackie, Ed. Cleave Two Ravens Press 2008

This is an anthology of "new writing by women in Scotland", edited by Sharon Blackie, who ran a one-hour writing workshop at the Pitlochry festival theatre, which I attended. Like her own writing in "The Long Delirious Burning Blue", which I gave to Eleanor for her birthday, most of these pieces are very self-absorbed. There are one or two exceptions, which come as a relief. Nonetheless, these are interesting pieces, by and large, although I find the poems a bit inconsequential for the most part, this may be because most poems are not really suited for being read, silently, to oneself, but perhaps would be better read out loud.

Iris Murdoch The Sacred and Penguin 1974 (1981)
profane Love
Machine

A brilliant tale of four groups of people, all inextricably entangled. Psychotherapist Blaise Gavender has been having a secret affair, hidden from his wife Harriet, for many years with Emily McHugh, and has a second son by that liaison. Monty, their neighbour, has been cynically assisting Blaise by inventing a fictitious patient, Magnus Bowles, who needs frequent visits from Blaise. Harriet, deprived of Blaise's affections, consoles herself by acquiring numerous dogs. Monty is mourning the recent death of his wife Sofie, and Harriet is determined to console him. Monty's alcoholic friend

This is the first book by Sebastian Faulks that I have read. The eponymous anti-hero, Mike Engleby, comes from a deprived working class background, beaten by his father but academically successful. He wins a scholarship to a small second rate public school, Chatfield. The account of the bullying he suffers is gruelling and harrowing. This experience seems to knock out of him any sense of ethics that he might otherwise have had. The mood of the writing, which is in the first person and is essentially Engleby's journal, in some subtle way depicts him as dissociated and lacking life, disconnected from his fellow human beings. He wins a place at Cambridge where one of his fellow students, Jennifer Arkland, disappears. He is besotted with her but does not approach her in any normal way, but behaves a bit like a stalker and displays fetishist tendencies. By a series of accidental circumstances he becomes quite a successful journalist, but then the past begins to catch up. This book is a compelling read, very well written, and disturbing. I wonder just how much Engleby's musings on life reflect the actual opinions of the author, and how much, especially of the horrific school days, is autobiographical.

Peter Singer Animal Liberation Harper Perennial 2009

Peter Singer gives a sober, un-hysterical polemic on this subject. The book was first written in 1975, but has been updated. A lot of the accounts of animal mistreatment dates from earlier days and in the USA, where standards and practices are far less rigorous than in Britain or even Europe. He attributes this to the USA's political system being far more supported by large donations from industry and therefore senators being in the pockets of commercial interests: less democratic, in Singer's words. Nonetheless, there is a lot of more up to date material and it is relatively easy to place his more dated observations in a more modern context. His first chapter usefully establishes the basis for ethical treatment of animals on the principle of "equal consideration". This reflects some of his writing in "Practical ethics", reviewed above. There is much harrowing material in what follows, but he still does not fall into emotionalism or, as many animal activists do, anthropomorphisation of the feelings of animals etc. I find his arguments compelling. I also note that he interestingly does not include fish, molluscs or bivalves in his consideration of animals and I wonder if he eats fish (he is vegetarian).

Iris Murdoch Henry and Cato Triad Grafton 1976 (1977)

Two families live in adjacent houses, one built on the land of the other. One, the Marshalsons, is headed by matriarch Gerda. She lives in a grand Hall with ageing paramour Lucius. Sandy, her eldest son, has been killed in a car crash and Henry, her younger son, comes to claim and dispose of his inheritance, the Hall. The other family, the Forbes, is headed by patriarch John. His two children are Colette, who has to his dismay just left her university course, and Cato, who contrary to John's atheist wishes, has been ordained as a Catholic priest. Cato falls in love with delinquent Joe, who manipulates him and pursues a criminal lifestyle. Henry falls for Sandy's ex-mistress, Stephanie, reformed prostitute and stripper, who is not what she seems. Colette pines for Henry, whom she has admired since childhood. Cato has a religious crisis and loses his faith. Many theological discussions take place between Cato and his mentor, Fr. Brendan Craddock.

Ian Rankin Doors Open Orion 2008 (2009)

This is a thriller by Ian Rankin, robbers and cops, but not a Rebus novel. The action centres on the villains, with only occasional appearances by Ransome, the detective inspector. This is a very tense tale; one has a sympathy with the League of Gentlemen style crooks, although not for the gangster bully Chib Calloway. The tension is achieved by following the fates of the villains, getting close to being detected and then seeming to escape again. A finely crafted crime thriller.

Daniel Dennett Breaking the Spell Penguin 2006

The subtitle of this book is “Religion as a natural phenomenon”. The author goes to lengths to show how religion may have evolved to become what it is, as a social phenomenon. He explains at the beginning that the book is aimed at audiences in the USA, where religion is rife (my word). On the whole, Daniel Dennett’s exposition is convincing, although he doesn’t explain why religion has turned out to be so universal, to my mind. For example, even when individuals these days do not have a religion, they often seek a substitute, “new age” beliefs in crystals, the effectiveness of rituals and so on, even magic and witchcraft. I was hoping for a more solid explanation of how it all evolved from necessity in terms of evolutionary psychology. I even find myself subject to this urge, despite being not a believer in God. But perhaps this will come some day. The book is detailed, very thoroughly researched and very readable.

Iris Murdoch The Sea, The Sea Vintage 1978 (1999)

This won the Booker Prize. I can quite see why, and this summary will not do it justice. I found this book a bit of a struggle to get into for the first 50 or so pages, but after that it was compelling. The hero, Charles Arrowby, is an appalling self centred naïve character, misusing all around him. He discovers quite accidentally a childhood sweetheart, whom he calls Hartley, her middle name, but she is normally known as Mary. He pursues her, despite all indications that she and her husband do not want him around. Charles, a retired actor, is himself pursued by other women, many of whom he has treated appallingly, but all of whom he eschews. The “action” centres round his ramshackle cottage by the sea, hence the title. Iris Murdoch breaks many of the rules of writing, dwelling in the mind of the hero, attributing to him many soliloquies of a philosophical nature, writing in an implied first person. Really, this takes up most of the textual quantity of the book, so that you, the reader, are forced into the mind of the hero, or rather, perhaps, anti-hero. This textual quantity is considerable. so that the page count is large, 500 pages each of 400 words, i.e., 200,000 words in all. The introduction by John Burnside makes parallels with Shakespeare’s Prospero.

Alan Simpson Windows XP Bible, Wiley 2005
Second Edition

This is an excellent reference and tutorial on the windows XP operating system. It is very long: 1156 pages! But one doesn’t have to read all of it, and I have probably got through about 1/3 of it. Nonetheless, I periodically reach for it to look something up.

2010

Daniel Dennett Freedom Evolves Penguin 2003 (2004)

Daniel Dennett argues that our free will is independent of any sense of determinacy and explores how it has evolved through the process of evolution. He goes into great detail and is carrying a banner for the mind being a product of the brain, as he does in his earlier “Consciousness Explained”. He is, to my mind, entirely convincing, but perhaps I did not need convincing! He does explain how our sense of our freedom is a consequence of our natural autonomy, and how this may have come about. His arguments are quite hard to follow in places, especially on account of his use of unexplained metaphors. I still don’t know to what his frequent parenthetic italicised phrase “*stop that crow!*” refers. I found it quite hard work to read, unlike his earlier books. Still, a stimulating and thoughtful book. His earlier book, which I have not read, “Elbow Room”, is apparently a precursor (a “pilot” in his own words) to this one so is probably not worth reading (just as “Kinds of Minds” was to “Consciousness Explained”).

Philip Pullman The Good Man Canongate 2010
Jesus and the
Scoundrel Christ

This is a retelling of the story of Jesus Christ by Philip Pullman. Jesus is split into two twin brothers, Jesus and Christ. Jesus is the more charismatic of the two, gathers followers and eventually gets crucified. Christ champions him from the sidelines, guided by an “angel”, who might be a fallen one. Christ records all of Jesus’ exploits for posterity, encouraged by the angel, and is briefly mistaken for Jesus after the crucifixion. Christ founds the Christian church, against Jesus’ wishes.

So much for the story. The book is written in a simple style very similar to that of the gospels, if anything even simpler in literary terms. It is easy and quite compelling to read and I finished it within a week. The theme of the book is how myths and stories come into being, and is a take on how the Jesus story might have evolved. I was partly prompted to buy and read this by hearing a discussion on Radio 4 between Philip Pullman and Rowan Williams on the book, and Rowan Williams’ evident approval of it. Rowan Williams thought that Philip Pullman was a deeply “spiritual” man.

Samuel Richardson Pamela Penguin 1740, revised 1801 (1980)

I read this book because it was mentioned a number of times in John Mullan’s *How Novels Work*. It is considered to be the first genuine novel in English. Samuel Richardson lived from 1689-1781. This is a very long book, which I found repetitive for much of its length. I discovered an explanation for this: the book was originally published in episodes. So when Richardson found that a theme or incident was popular, he followed it with several more such themes. The book was very popular when it was published, it seems, a best seller in fact. By coincidence, Richardson’s other novel, *Clarissa*, was broadcast on Radio 4. The two plots are very similar. In *Pamela*, the eponymous servant girl is pursued by her licentious master; in *Clarissa*, a young woman of high rank is similarly pursued and deceived by a wealthy libertine. Then the two plots diverge: in *Clarissa* the consequence is tragedy and deaths, but in *Pamela* the wicked abuser inconceivably reforms, although retaining an irritatingly arrogant, overbearing and petulant character. Despite the popularity, perceived high regard and significance of *Pamela*, I did not find it a good piece of literature. It seemed to me to be a naïve love story worthy of *Mills and Boon*. The book is also inordinately long. Perhaps I am missing something.

This is the first e-book that I have read on my Sony e-reader. I plan to download some more books in due course.

Tom Bingham The Rule of Law Allen Lane 2010

This is an accessible book, addressed to a general intelligent public rather than to lawyers, by a senior lawyer, former Lord Chief Justice, Senior Law Lord and Master of the Rolls. He discusses what might be the definition of the Rule of Law, examines some history and relates it to democracy, human rights, the idea of a fair trial, and finally considers the relation between these principles and anti-terrorist legislation. There is a danger that the latter can whittle away the desirable advantages of the former.

Iris Murdoch Nuns and Soldiers Penguin 1980 (1981)

This was the next book of Iris Murdoch’s in my course of rereading her novels. Gertrude, intensely bereaved after the death of her husband Guy, suddenly and unexpectedly falls in love with Tim Reede, a feckless unsuccessful young painter. Her friend from undergraduate days, Anne Cavidge, has equally suddenly returned from being a nun and she and Gertrude regenerate their old intimate friendship. Meanwhile Peter, the Polish “Count”, fostered by Guy, has secretly been harbouring a

A further chapter goes into detail about the classification and history of the tables, which I found interesting too. The role of the “Tops” becomes clearer, and I can understand much better why some people prefer to bag all the Tops and not just the Munros, which A.E Robertson first defined. Indeed, the term “Bagging” tops and hills was in currency over 100 years ago, to my surprise. Another chapter contains early technical advice on navigation and route finding in mist etc. Much use was made of portable aneroid barometers to check altitude and thence aid route finding, something rarely done now I think. Yet another chapter contains pieces by early pioneers on predicaments, losses of route etc., which is comforting to read. I found the book more interesting than I expected and read every bit of it.

Martin Gayford **Man with a Blue** **Thames & Hudson** **2010**
Scarf: On Sitting for
a Portrait by Lucian
Freud

I bought this book on impulse after browsing through it in the Watermill Gallery and bookshop. Martin Gayford is an art critic and curator. The book is like an edited diary recording his sitting for Lucian Freud from 28th November 2003 to 4th July 2004. He describes the long drawn out process of LF producing the painting, and one gets an enormous insight into the way LF works and his approach. It was clearly a long, sometimes tedious, sometimes seeming interminable, procedure but also providing deep insight, largely due to the perceptiveness of the sitter/author. It becomes clear that the success, even possibility, of the painting depends on the relationship between sitter and painter, although comparisons with other painters, notably Francis Bacon, show that LF’s approach is by no means universal. After the painting is finished, an etching is done, which takes just as long, August 2004 to April 2005, but which is described in far fewer pages.

As well as being most insightful, this book is beautifully produced, with good quality paper and print, and excellently reproduced illustrations comprising paintings and photographs. I was interested to note that it was printed in China.

Iain Banks **Transition** **Hachette** **2009**
Digital/Little,
Brown

I read this as a digital book on my e-reader. I find it a bit surprising that it is not published under the authorship of Iain M. Banks, since it is set in, if not a future, at least an alternative reality. It relates a tale of conflict amongst members of an organisation called the Concern. Members of this have the ability, through the use of a drug called septus, to move to alternative realities and inhabit the bodies of other people. The story is about an internal struggle within the Concern, where a few “goodies” attempt to thwart the designs of a few who are trying, so far successfully, to impose their own totalitarian rule over the organisation. They attempt to affect the future by interfering with it, often by assassination. As in many of Iain Banks’ books, he displays a penchant for large, powerful and sinister organisations. He also humorously throws in a band of “Christian terrorists”. This is an entertaining, well enough written read, but not great literature.

J. D. G. Evans **A Plato Primer** **Acumen** **2010**

I bought this book partly in homage to the author, David Evans, who died in September 2009. He and I were undergraduates at Cambridge and we worked together for a year on the committee of the Heretics, a philosophical society founded after a remark by Bertrand Russell, “Progress springs from Heresy”; David was Secretary, I was Chairman. It was hard and at times anxious work putting

Hugh Leonard Rover and other cats André Deutsch 1992

This is a gem of a book in several ways. The author pokes fun in an entirely affectionate way at his several cats. Seguing between the feline characters he takes in local human ones, the Irish approach to life and language, several habitats and rural life. The writing, sprinkled with erudition, made me laugh out loud. The line drawings by William Geddart match the text in polish and wit, and the book is produced in fine quality paper and print. An exceptional quality charcoal? drawing by “NFH” is reproduced at the end.

Watts S. Humphrey Managing the Addison Wesley 1989 (1990)
Software Process

This book by Watts S. Humphrey is an expansion of his SEI research papers outlining the famous Capability Maturity Model. The expansion is not just padding, however; the extra material consists of relevant detail. thoroughly good stuff.

2012

A. S. Byatt Ragnarok: The End Cannongate 2011
of the Gods

I bought this book at the 2011 Edinburgh Book Festival, after hearing A. S. Byatt give a talk on it. The Norse/German myth is told as being recalled by “the thin child”, contemporaneous with the author’s own childhood, having read the stories herself and reacting to them. This is rather an odd means of narrative, but at first the whole is very engaging. However, I found the narrative of the myths themselves began to pall and become repetitive after a while. So, in total, I am unsure of the merit of this book. I will be interested to see what literary critics have to say about it.

Julian Barnes The Sense of an Jonathan Cape 2011
Ending

This is a gripping book. The start focusses on the protagonist’s school days; they all were young men at a public school and they competed and reassured each other with cynicism, intellectuality, and analytical discovery. Then the scenes leaps several times to the protagonist’s university days, especially his pursuit of a young woman, and again to his retirement time, when a letter containing a bequest leads to shocking revelations. The book is supremely written and I wonder whether to read any more by Julian Barnes.

Iain M. Banks Surface Detail Hachette 2010
Digital/Little,
Brown

The latest Culture novel from Iain M. Banks. In previous novels he explains how “heaven” can be achieved by entirely technological means. Here, conversely, “hell” is reified by the same method, that of downloading a person’s mind-state into an electronic environment, suspending the actual body and creating an artificial hellish experience that can appear to continue for centuries, although the passage of actual time may be at a quite different pace. Much else sociological is produced as supporting background, and the Culture act as the usual benevolent despots, although for the most part non-interfering.

**Franca: English
Until the Return of
Babel**

This latest book by Nicolas Ostler presents a thesis: namely that English is the last lingua franca, a lingua franca being, according to Ostler's definition, a language which is not a mother tongue, but which is spoken widely within a community out of convenience. The book ranges over a wide area, rigorously relating to history, empires, politics and conquest. It is something of a heavy read, but the second last chapter (11) is particularly interesting, showing how technology, in the shape of computer-automated translation, is rendering the need for lingua francas obsolescent.

The subject matter of chapter 11 is something I have been exposed to: for many years the European Commission funded a long international project (Eurotra) to explore the technology of computer-automated translation by means of automating the grammatical, syntactic and semantic structure of languages and thereby constructing "rational", scientific if you will, language translation systems. These researches did not produce very successful results, despite a considerable, one might say huge, amount of time and expenditure on the project. Then other, unfunded initiatives, notably done by Google, attacked the problem in a completely different way, by using a statistical approach, comparing a huge corpus of texts and their translations, and automatically developing ad hoc rules. This approach has been far more successful, more rapid and cheaper in terms of effort, and furthermore has not been funded by public money, as far as I know. One could compare the two approaches as similar to an adult trying to learn a foreign language and a child absorbing a language by being immersed in it from birth, without the formal teaching of grammar and so forth.

Lynne Alexander The Sister Sandstone Press 2012

This novel is a fictionalised biography of the life of Alice James, sister of Henry and William James. It is told in the first person of Alice herself. Alice is an invalid and lives a short life. The book is well crafted, well observed and based on a lot of research into biographical sources and letters. With two famous brothers, Alice is adumbrated and somewhat patronised. She benefits from the devotion of a companion, with whom she has a fluctuating relationship, as she does with the family servants. It is an enjoyable and rewarding read.

Clifford A. Pickover The Math Book Sterling, New York 2009

I bought this book on impulse in the Watermill bookshop and art gallery. It is beautifully produced, with a page devoted to each of 250 mathematical "milestones", each with a fine one-page illustration. The items are presented in chronological order, from naturally occurring phenomena ("Ant Odometer", primates counting, etc.) of 150 million years ago to 2007 (the Quest for Lie Groups). It is probably a book for dipping into and placing on a coffee table, but I read it from end to end. I wish I could remember all of it.

**Group Captain A. B. Soldier, Sailor & Grub Street, London 2008
Woodhall, ed.: Airman too
Martin Woodhall**

This is the autobiography of my uncle, Group Captain Alfred Basil Woodhall, almost universally known as "Woody", edited and brought to publication by my cousin Martin Woodhall. So, I have to admit, I have a bias in commenting on this book. Woody was not only a member of the RAF, but also earlier of the Army and the Navy as a Royal Marine. He wrote this autobiography but failed to get it published, so good for his son Martin in succeeding in doing so. There are forewords by notable people, and this no doubt helped to get the book into publication. My uncle, Woody, turns out to be

something of a ladies' man, having married three times and with intimations of other relationships. He was apparently a popular commander, relying on treating his subordinates with dignity and fairness, rather than strict discipline. In his postscript, Martin states that Woody ran away from home to join the military, because his parents were strict Quakers. I remember my mother, who was Woody's sister, saying that her father's family were "strict Quakers", but I got no impression that their family themselves were in any way brought up as Quakers. That may be true of Job's family of origin. But maybe Woody's determined adherence to the principles of equality and fairness reflect a Quaker inheritance.

There are a lot of typos and other trivial errors in the presentation of this book. The copy-editing could be a lot better. But the content is, I think, interesting. Reviews on Amazon indicate that it is of value to historians of war in the twentieth century. I found it particularly interesting, but find it difficult to distinguish my interest from that arising solely from a family connection. I am grateful to my cousin Martin Woodhall for bringing it to publication.

Virginia Button Ben Nicholson Tate Publishing 2007

This little book is one of the *St. Ives Artists* series. I bought it in the Belfast Museum shop. It is short but beautifully presented on high quality gloss paper, with excellent colour prints. I have read all the text and found it very illuminating about the St. Ives group of artists, who flourished from the 1930s to the 1960s and included Terry Frost, Victor Passmore and Barbara Hepworth; indeed, Barbara Hepworth was Ben Nicholson's second (of three) wife. One gets the impression of an emotionally turbulent and inconstant man, who has many relationships. This seems to be a pattern among artistic people.

Christopher God is not Great Atlantic Books 2007
Hitchens

This is an splendid, articulate, erudite, informed and excellently argued rant. Richard Dawkins describes it as "a splendid, boisterously virile broadside of a book", an apposite description. I finished the book feeling entirely convinced; but I still want to go to Quaker meetings for the sense of community and sharing with like-minded people.

Ian McEwan Sweet Tooth Jonathan Cape 2011

A spy story about a young woman, who is the heroine. I think this is the first time Ian McEwan has written as a woman and I *think* he has done it well. She is commissioned to lure a writer into a funded enterprise, in order to promote a suitable political climate. She and her quarry fall in love, and the book becomes a philosophical study of the effects of trust and mistrust, and whether love can survive. Intriguing and very enjoyable.

Andrew Jolly Lie Down in Me New English Library 1972 (1970)

This is a beautiful, short, and very lyrical story about a man in Mexico who is trying to bury his wife, who has recently died, according to her traditions. He is beset by prejudice of his village, relations and the church, and also hampered by bandits, with whom he establishes an uneasy relationship. The writing style is extremely simple, with short simply constructed sentences. This emphasises the character of the protagonist and his social environs. Delightful.

2013

Hilary Mantel Wolf Hall Fourth Estate 2010 (2009)

inventiveness of Adams very well. However, despite a fast-moving dialogue and stream of wit, the plot actually moves very slowly until the last couple of chapters. One gets a sense of repetition. Furthermore, Colfer simply does not write quite as well as Douglas Adams, and as a result this novel does not shine as brightly as its authentic predecessors. A good try, though.

Ali Smith **Ali Smith's** **Penguin** **2005**
Supersonic 70s

This little book was a freebie with the Saturday Guardian some years ago. I have only just got round to reading it. It consists of a few short stories and extracts from other pieces. Ali Smith has an interesting writing style, somewhat surrealistic at times. *The World with Love* tells of two ex-school friends meeting after a long time and exchanging a reminiscence about a teacher who lost her mind, then dwells in soliloquy of the first-person narrator. This is one of those short stories that make the inconsequential of consequence, by the power of the author's writing. Joycean, perhaps? *The Book Club* is in similar vein. Others in the collection (*The Theme is Power*, extract from *The Accidental*) are more phantasmagorical. Having found some reluctance to read this book when I first got it, I now found it a stimulating and easy journey.

Iain Banks **Transition** **Abacus** **2009**

I bought this book in the Watermill bookshop in Aberfeldy. I was actually looking for the latest SF book by Iain Banks, but it was only available in hardback, and I was told that the paperback edition would be out soon. I decided to wait for that. I didn't fancy the most recent non-genre novel of his, *The Quarry*, having browsed through it to some extent. Looking through *Transition*, I didn't recognise any of the narrative or characters and decided I couldn't have read it, so bought it.

It was only when I was well into this book that I began to recall one or two characters and small incidents. I did not have it already on my bookshelves, so I thought I must have read it before on my e-reader. Indeed, there is an account of it in this file, so I have deliberately not reread my earlier musings yet. I shall wait until I have written this piece, and then compare them.

I read to the end, and did not recall any of the plot, characters, or how it ended. It is quite a long book, and drags a bit in the central part, but gathers pace again. Iain Banks uses a frequent technique of his, that of having several parallel narratives, all of them seemingly independent until well into the book; in this case until nearly the end. So the structure is like a braided rope which has largely become unbraided, all apart from one end.

Rather like the *Culture* novels, this book centres on an organisation, *The Concern*, secretive, mysterious and dangerously powerful. (*The Business* has something similar too). Members of *The Concern* have the ability, with the help of a secret drug called "septus", to move between different parallel realities, temporarily inhabiting different bodies and taking over the personalities of their previous possessors for the interim. The declared aim of *The Concern* is to right wrongs and prevent disasters, but corruption has set in. After all, the members have enormous power, and power, as we know, corrupts. One member, however, a Mrs. Mulverhill, is determined to stop the rot and enlists the help of a new recruit. Oh yes, since the parallel realities are not perfectly synchronised, they experience slight time shifts when transiting too.

Despite these SF features, Iain Banks chose to write this book as – Iain Banks rather than Iain M. Banks, which is the name he uses for most of his SF genre books. I have often wondered how he made these choices, and now I think I have understood his algorithm. If the story involves any space travel or other planets, he writes as Iain M. Banks. Otherwise, even if the story is set in the future or in a hypothetical reality (dystopia is one of Banks's favourite themes), so long as it stays on Earth, which this one does, he writes as Iain Banks, without the "M". The members of *Concern*, when transitioning, always stay on this planet, even if they go to a version in an alternative universe.

The narrative includes a few episodes of Iain Banks's signature violence, and he coins a word, "fragre", to mean something like a mixture of ambience and fragrance, the feel of a place.

I quite enjoyed it. Reading it earlier on my e-reader seems not to have lodged it in my memory much at all, and this makes me think that the e-reader is a less satisfactory way of reading a book. E-readers and the like have their uses, however. I think that perhaps when one buys a hardback copy of a book one should get an electronic version thrown in for free. That way one can read the odd chapter on one's e-reader when commuting or on holiday, but return to the solid turning of pages when one gets home again.

Now, I shall see what I wrote about this book when I read it earlier. And yes, I have no quarrel with my previous remarks written in 2010.

Six Easy Pieces Richard P. Feynman Penguin 1995/1963 (1998)

I have reread this, the last three chapters in particular, which comprise the last half of the book, having read it ten years before, I see. Really, the whole thrust of the book is to demonstrate that quantum electrodynamics is necessary to explain the world; it does not actually embark on explaining it (QED, that is). I really like his style of exposition, and again wonder if I could adopt something like it in explaining formal semantics.

The Etymologicon Mark Forsyth Icon Books 2011

I first heard of this book on Start the Week, radio 4. I browsed through it at the Edinburgh Book Festival and bought it from the Watermill bookshop. It is much better than I feared, extremely witty and a compelling read. It would make a good present for certain people.

Seeing Voices Oliver Sacks Picador 1989 (2000)

Oliver Sacks wrote this book in 1989. In his preface he writes that three years before, he "knew nothing of the situation of the deaf". So this book is in many ways a chronicle of Sacks' own journey of discovery. Its main thesis is that the signing used by deaf people is indeed a fully fledged language with its own grammar and catalogue of nuances and styles. So, for example, if two or more deaf-signing people meet who have no spoken or written language in common, say American and Japanese (his example), within a day or two they are communicating fluently. The second half of the book, a chapter titled "The Revolution of the Deaf", is devoted to tracking a "revolution" at a university for deaf students who insist that the top academic positions should be occupied by deaf academics. Oliver Sacks champions this cause, becoming, to my mind, a touch uncomfortably evangelical: does he lose some objectivity? Nonetheless, "Seeing Voices" displays Sacks' trademark combination of compassion and deeply analytical insight.

Low Life Jeremy Clarke Short Books 2011

This book is a collection of 77 pieces published by the author in the Spectator. It is well written, and the pieces are of a consistent short length, of a length that I like to write myself. Many of the pieces are humorous, but some are poignant, almost viciously so. I find it a reassuring book, but it makes me feel that I am glad I am me and not him. A very enjoyable read.

Stuff Matters Mark Miodownik Viking 2013

This is a popular science book about materials science. Each chapter is about a separate material. The chapters cover a wide variety of materials: steel, paper, concrete, chocolate, foam, plastic, glass, graphite, porcelain. There is a good introduction and an intelligent summing up, titled "Synthesis". I bought this book after hearing a talk from the author at a meeting of the Royal Society of Arts in

Edinburgh. It is well and engagingly written and might serve as a good Christmas present for someone.

The Hydrogen Sonata **Iain M. Banks** **Orbit** **2012**

The last SF book written by Iain Banks, although, as I have observed in earlier reviews, a number of Iain Banks' other, non-genre, books display an SF character. This is a *Culture* novel, with the Culture for the most part benignly, although here sometimes not very benignly, overseeing and controlling goings on everywhere. The heroine, Vyr Cossont, recruited to find the oldest man in the Culture, is rather obsessed with learning to play a piece of music, the *Hydrogen Sonata* of the title, written for a fiendishly difficult eleven string instrument, which requires the player to sit inside it. Also central to the story is a civilisation, the Gzilt, rather backward but nonetheless among the founders of the Culture, who are set upon *Subliming*, that is, having their whole population transferring into the electronically supported heaven, with 24 days to go at the start of the novel. The count-down proceeds as the story progresses.

This is a long book at 517 pages, and flags occasionally but always picks up pace again. Enjoyable, and a great title!

The Mind's Eye **Oliver Sacks** **Picador** **2010**

This excellent book by Oliver Sacks consists of seven case studies all concerning people who have some sight deficiency. The studies include one or two about Sacks himself, when he lost stereoscopic binocular vision. Surveys of other patients reveal a great variety amongst the extent to which different people rely on binocular vision and the sense of depth that it provides. Some, like Sacks himself, find the loss devastating, and others scarcely notice it. Another analysis involving several of the studies examines whether people who have lost their sight completely, or indeed who have never had sight, visualise objects and spaces in their own minds. Again there is enormous variation, from those, even who have never seen at all, who rely entirely on their mind's eye, and others who do not, abandoning or never experiencing internal visualisation, who internally represent the world around them with other senses and means of imagination. Modern brain-scanning techniques reveal different activity levels within the visual cortex amongst these different cases. These are questions I have often wondered about and as a result I found this book exceptionally interesting.

2014

The Elements of Eloquence **Mark Forsyth** **Icon Books** **2013**

This is a short book (205 pages, fairly large print, small page size) of 39 chapters plus a Preface and a couple of postscripts. Thus the chapters are very short, four or five pages mostly, and this all makes the book easy to read. Mark Forsyth writes in a witty and amusing style, but his material is very informative and useful. As well as the more well-known literary figures of speech such as Alliteration and Hyperbole, there are numerous ones I had never heard of: Polypoton, Merism, Aposiopesis, Anadiplosis, etc. etc. I think I shall read this again, perhaps skimming a bit, but making notes this time, so that I have a little lexicon of terms (Diacope, Hendiadys, Epistrophe, Tricolon, Epizeuxis...).

Glory Road **Robert Heinlein** **Four Square** **1965 (1963)**

This is a typical Robert Heinlein adolescent sexual Sci-Fi fantasy, full of adventure, like a musketeer tale set in a future time. Quite an enjoyable read, fairly well written, and a good way of passing some time without too much intellectual effort on holiday.

This is a very long book. The hardback edition weighs in at 1.71 kg, is 771 pages and some 340,000 words. Not easy to carry about; I think that new hardbacks should come with an electronic version thrown in for free, so that you can read them easily when commuting or on holiday, but can return to the beautiful tactile hard copy at home in the evening. Physical dimensions aside, one feels that Donna Tartt has put everything she has into this book. It is epic, full of analytical writing, life-examining, a morality tale, a love story, penetrating the underworld of society, a road-movie of a novel, a philosophical exploration, a study of adversity and friendship, wealth and poverty, descent and recovery. The book is extremely well written, and just avoids being over-written. It is literary, yet includes much American patois. Writing in the first person, the author successfully enters the mind of Theo, her young male protagonist, although his near-Oedipal obsession with his deceased mother gives me some pause: given that Theo is clearly not meant to be any kind of psychological freak, is his extreme attachment to his mother realistic? A rule of modern fiction is to be frugal with describing the thoughts of one's characters, but Donna Tartt breaks this rule with impunity: the reader is carried along with the extensive ruminations of her hero, entering his mind. This she does often by means of a single long sentence that flits from one image to another, conveying the hero's nihilistic sense of isolation:

“Hordes of people on the street, lighted Christmas trees sparkling high on penthouse balconies and complacent Christmas music floating out of shops, and weaving in and out of crowds I had a strange feeling of being already dead, of moving in a vaster pavement grayness than the street or even the city could encompass, my soul disconnected from my body and drifting among other souls in a mist somewhere between past and present, Walk Don't Walk, individual pedestrians floating up strangely isolated and lonely before my eyes, blank faces plugged into earbuds and staring straight ahead, lips moving silently, and the city noise dampened and deafened, under crushing, granite-colored skies that muffled the noise from the street, garbage and newsprint, concrete and drizzle, a dirty winter grayness weighing like stone.”

Then also, the author displays an in-depth understanding of art appreciation, mediated through the conversations and ruminations of her characters. Likewise, one is treated to a fascinating exposition of understanding antiques, valuing and preserving them, and, indeed, of faking them. Yet at no time did I feel that I was being lectured; these appreciations engage the reader with the excitement experienced by the accomplished enthusiasm of the fictional characters.

The narrative covers some twelve years in the life of the hero, Theo. I wondered why he is so compliant with the insane wishes of his bad but charismatic friend Boris. I found his ambivalent wavering love for his two childhood friends gripping. *The Goldfinch* is thoroughly in the tradition of fine American literature, but more than that: Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Kerouac's *On The Road* meet Dostoevsky's *Idiot*.

This is a prize winner of a book, and indeed it won the Pulitzer prize in 2014. I just wonder: has the author tried to accomplish too much in one book?

Eleanor lent me this book, thinking I would like it, which I did. It too is long, 656 pages plus Acknowledgements and other extra material. It is an easy read, jaunty, epic, like a road movie, and a fantasy. The hero, Shadow, is released from prison to find that his wife has died. He is accosted by the mysterious Wednesday, who engages him in a series of tasks. Altogether gripping and enjoyable. I don't normally go for fantasy, because I find it difficult to suspend my disbelief. But in this case I could do so, because the paranormal episodes are brief and lie within a seriously down-to-earth contextual narrative.

This 254 page book is a record of a series of some eleven events exploring the repercussions of Scotland's possible independence following the referendum in September 2014. Each event consisted of a discussion seminar to which academics and others made contributions, in a largely objective and unbiased way. The book begins with a very good introduction.

The first chapter discusses Scotland and the EU. An independent Scotland joining the EU would represent a unique situation, one of accession without enlargement. At the end of the day, there would be no real problems; the issue is not as problematic as the "No" campaign would like us to think. Ultimately, there would be no real change.

The second chapter considers Tax and Spending. In the end, there would be no real problems. Less expenditure on defence would be an advantage. There would be some costs, but nothing excessive.

The third chapter considers Defence and International Relations. This chapter contains a rather biased analysis by military contributors, but their agendas are all fairly obvious. It is one of the least satisfactory chapters.

Chapter 4 considers the Real Economy. This consists of non-monetary qualities like reputation, global market, trade and business destination, energy and labour markets. This chapter is relatively upbeat, suggesting quite good prospects.

Chapter 5 was about Currency, Banking and Financial services. There are some tricky questions, but again, no massive problems, even over currency, despite the recent heated debates on the matter. In practice, it would not be in the interests of the rest of the UK to be as obstructive as the No campaign and others threaten.

Chapter 6 dwelt on Culture and Broadcasting. Along with chapter 3 on defence, this had the least impressive contributors. The contributors expressed optimism, but lacked credibility in my view.

Chapter 7 was on Borders, Immigration and Citizenship. The contributors to this chapter laid out the policy options well. There is opportunity for more liberal policies, but there are pragmatic difficulties.

Chapter 8 considered Science and Higher education. Scotland has a high reputation in this area, but a decrease in global liaison would have some, perhaps small, negative effect on cooperative projects.

Chapter 9 analysed Welfare and Public Services. There were no noteworthy advantages or disadvantages identified.

The last chapter was on Scotland's Referendum and Britain's Future. Scotland would lose leverage in Westminster, having only a High Commissioner rather than a number of MPs. Despite the rhetoric, the EU has not succeeded in establishing common foreign or security policies; thus individual EU members, including Scotland and the rest of the UK, would continue to have some autonomy here. So, the conclusions slightly negative here, but not that much.

In conclusion (mine), independence for Scotland would bring no real or substantial pragmatic advantages for Scotland or for the rest of the UK. It might satisfy some people's desire for a Scottish identity, for example some Scots are fed up with being governed by a government that scarcely anyone in Scotland has voted for. But this again relates to their identifying with Scotland more than with the UK. So one might consider that the issues for the referendum are more to do with identity than economics.

This book is harder to read than Daniel Dennet’s more popular works that I have read – see *Consciousness Explained*, etc. above. It consists of a number of largely independent “Philosophical Essays (17) on Mind and Psychology”. I learned from it that a number of computer scientists, for example Arbib, play a rôle in the discussions of philosophers. A few chapters were particularly interesting, I found: *Are Dreams Experiences?*, *Towards a Common Theory of Consciousness*, *Why You Can’t Make a Computer that Feels Pain*, and all six chapters in Part IV, *Free Will and Personhood*. The last chapter, *Where Am I?* imagines a thought experiment in which the author is separated from his brain, but is remotely connected by efficient electrical wireless connections. Or, to beg the question of the chapter, he is separated from his body but remotely connected to it. This last chapter eases up in style and becomes quite colloquial, and thus easy to read. After a time I found I could more easily assimilate the earlier chapters by reading them faster. A stimulating and worthwhile read. Now I must return the book to the library of my late friend Prof. J David Evans.

Anthony Horowitz The Killing Joke Orion 2004

I bought this book in an amazing second-hand bookshop in Morecambe, *The Pier Bookshop*. I was prompted partly by the previous book by Anthony Horowitz, *The House of Silk*. This book is quite fun to read, an odd-ball story about a not-very-successful actor who starts on a quest to find the source of a bad joke that he hears in a pub. I read the last few chapters almost at a sitting, but the ending is alas rather lame.

Karen Joy Fowler We are All Serpent’s Tail 2014
Completely beside
Ourselves

This is an extraordinary book. there is a shock revelation on page 77, which I won’t spoil. For a time I thought that the narrative was so vivid it must be autobiographical, but from the notes by the author, it isn’t (don’t read this too much in advance – it *is* a spoiler). One disadvantage for me was the numerous Americanisms and references that I found perplexing: references to brands, foodstuffs and other slang. But it wasn’t enough to destroy the continuity. I would also say that the ending is a bit weak and inconclusive, but the book is well researched and convincing for that reason. It is both humorous and gruelling.

2015

Don Edward Beck & Spiral Dynamics: Blackwell 2006 (1996)
Christopher C. mastering values,
Cowan leadership and
change

Spiral Dynamics is “a framework for understanding the dynamic forces at work in human affairs”. It draws on Richard Dawkins’ idea of “memes” - characteristics of societal behaviour that arise through the pressures of survival of the fittest – and work of Clare W. Graves. There are interesting, thought provoking ideas in this book, but it carries the ideas into extraordinarily elaborate detail with no justification, assigning different colours, for example, to different levels of meme etc. I read section 1, the overview, and a bit of section 2, the first 70 pages, and then decided I had had enough; I did not want to go into any more detail of the authors’ theories. As I say, there are thought provoking ideas here, but a huge elaborate edifice is built on relatively very small foundations.

Ian McEwan The Children Act Jonathan Cape 2014

This is the story of a High Court judge, Fiona May, a leading light in the Family Court, who grapples with a case of a boy whose parents, because of religious convictions, do not want their 17 year old

son to have a blood transfusion. Without it he will die. The boy, who is only just under the age of majority when he can decide for himself, is like-minded. She has to decide. At the same time Fiona's marriage of thirty years is in sudden crisis.

So, the usual relaxed fare from Ian McEwan! He writes as well as always, the book is quite short at 213 pages of quite large type, very nicely produced and printed in the hardback edition. From the acknowledgements he has clearly researched the subject matter well. The ending, which I will not spoil, is a mixture of good and sad news, and the whole is not as gruelling as one might fear. More morally complex problems arise during the course of the narrative, which take one by surprise. Brilliant as usual for Ian McEwan.

Thomas Picketty **Capital in the** **Belknap, Harvard** **2014**
Twenty-First **University Press**
Century

This is the only book on economics I have read, to date. It is a marathon read, at 655 pages on a large format book. It is highly readable, entirely understandable for an intelligent lay reader, but I felt a sense of exhaustion, a feeling of achievement, when I finished it. The book is a translation from the French by Arthur Goldhammer, and a superb translation it is, too. The title in French is *Le Capital...* which suggests that the author is trying to bring Marx's *Das Kapital* up to date in the context of the 21st century. The first two parts, *Income and Capital*, and *The Dynamics of the Capital/Income Ratio* are a close historical analysis. The third part, *The Structure of Inequality*, analyses the causes of inequality. Only in the fourth part, *Regulating Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and Conclusion, does the author reveal his personal views and recommendations for the future, i.e., only then does he become "political".

I was not entirely convinced by his recommendations, which involve taxing capital in order to reduce inequality. I would also have liked him to spell out a philosophical justification of why inequality was something to be avoided. But in all I feel that I know and understand more than I did before I read the book.

Mohsin Hamid **The Reluctant** **Penguin** **2007/2013**
Fundamentalist

This is a rather extraordinary book, mainly on account of its "Voice". The whole narrative consists of a monologue from a Pakistani man who approaches an American tourist and engages him in conversation. The few responses from the tourist are implied in the monologue, as are their movements, location, drinking tea, eating food and so on. Yet this unusual means of conveying to the reader what transpires works well, and is quite gripping and easy to read. The narrator's monologue relates his history and a thwarted love, and his political and national leanings. The ending is surprising, deliberately ambiguous and foreboding. I am inclined to try one or two more books by this author.

Julian Barnes **Keeping an Eye** **Jonathan Cape** **2015**
Open

I bought this book after hearing the author on Radio 4's *Start the Week*. It is a finely produced paperback, quite a lot of high-quality illustrations, although most of them are extracts or details of the original paintings, and on better quality paper than you usually get with a paperback. The book consists of seventeen essays on different artists, covering their works and some aspects of their lives. However, the author does not routinely include hard factual biographical details, dates of birth and death, early background etc. He frequently discusses an individual painting at some length and depth, without that painting being displayed with the text, which I found rather frustrating. I was hesitant for some chapters about whether this was good or useful art criticism. Before reading this book I knew Julian Barnes only as an author of fiction. However, all these essays are reproduced from previously

printed versions in journals such as the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books*. Julian Barnes is clearly an accepted art critic. By the time I had reached about the tenth essay I was convinced of his credentials for this literary form, and I was enjoying what I read. I was particularly interested to read what he thought of Lucian Freud, and I found that essay both fair and illuminating. So, finally, my verdict is that this is an interesting and enjoyable book, written with considerable perception, even if the author's authority remains to be thoroughly established.

Charles Handy The Second Curve Random House 2015

I bought this book at the Edinburgh Book Festival after hearing Charles Handy give a talk with the same title. Much of what he writes here rang bells with my own experience of working in industry. The book is also written in a refreshingly easy and communicative style, considerably more so than the previous book of his that I read some years ago, *The Empty Raincoat*. I find little to disagree with here, and fell to writing notes recalling instances of of the author's claims that I had witnessed myself. He describes the book as a collection of essays, and I find that format most attractive: ideas for how I might eventually frame my own next work! I did not know that Charles handy was originally from Ireland. He comes across as an extremely nice person.

John Barnes Gems of Geometry Springer 2012
Second Edition

This, written by my friend and contemporary at Trinity, Cambridge, is a delightful book. He relates all manner of things such as Fibonacci's numbers, the fourth dimension, topology, relativity, chaos theory, bubbles, to good old Euclidean geometry. However, what I found most engaging about the book is the style in which John Barnes has written it: conversational, rather as if he had taken a transcript of the lectures on which the book is based (a series of lectures given as part of an adult continuing education course at Oxford University). For example, he inserts "Well," "Neat, huh?" and so on. I think more academic/text books should be written like this: there is nothing to lose and something to be gained in lack of pomposity etc. I tried to go a little towards this goal in my own book on discrete mathematics, and one of the initial reviewers found it highly irritating!

Ian McEwan Solar Vintage 2011 (2011)

I "missed" this novel by Ian McEwan, having read all his previous and subsequent ones, so caught up with it. It tells the story of a Nobel Prize winning physicist whose best work is behind him. He is on his fifth foundering marriage and is scarcely encouraging to his brilliant subordinates.

The first part of the book seems to me to be badly written. McEwan disobeys many of the rules of novel writing, casting the author in an omniscient role, through authorial commentary and explanation. However, after some sixty pages, suddenly the narrative comes to life, having been static and observational all that time. Then the tale gathers pace, and progressively becomes difficult to put down. So, potential readers, persist.

The anti-hero, Michael Beard, grows increasingly dislikeable, cheating academically, cheating on his wife for no plausible reasons, thoroughly weak and nasty. He put me in mind of a cross between Powell's *Kenneth Widmerpool* and Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. The cover scripts describe the book as "Savagely funny". I think the emphasis is on "savagely", if not cruel. As the end approaches one is in increasing suspense, and is left there. I don't think this is Ian McEwan's best novel by a long way, but it is enjoyable. As a scientist I am impressed by the depth of research he has clearly carried out in order to attain authenticity.

Iris Murdoch

The Good
Apprentice

Penguin

1985

I read this book thirty years ago when it was first published, and have just now re-read it. I have over a few years been re-reading Iris Murdoch's novels in sequence, omitting *The Red and the Green*, which I had never been able to get into. *The Good Apprentice* is the 21st of these, and I think it is perhaps the best so far in my thirty-year-later assessment.

The plot begins with Edward Baltram playing a catastrophically wicked prank on a fellow student, Mark Wilsden, by deceptively giving him a drug to see what effect it has on him. Mark would never knowingly agree to this, being morally averse to such things. Mark appears to be happy, falls asleep, and Edward is called away briefly by his girlfriend. When he returns Mark has opened the window and leapt to his death. Edward is devastated with guilt about this, but is exonerated, forgiven, by all who know him, and the courts and coroner, except for Mark's mother who continually writes vicious accusing letters to him full of hatred and spite. Edward seeks out his birth father whom he hasn't seen for many years, looking for some kind of forgiveness and redemption, but finds him in a semi demented state in a house with his latest wife and Edward's two half sisters. These three women are like earth-mothers, living a monastic routine, full of ritual, private traditions, and curious crypto-mysticism: home made vegetarian food (delicious), home-made clothes, home-done hair-dos; one might say a new-age, a phrase not yet coined at the time, existence. The account of them is familiar, funny, full of realism and yet a caricature. Indeed, there are a large number of characters, with complex inter-relationships, so many that I felt I had to make a list of the *dramatis personae* to keep track. Some of them are mentioned once, and then not again until many pages, in one case about four hundred pages, later. Many of the characters are extreme. Midge, Edward's aunt, seems scatterbrained, easily led, cries frequently, but listens to everyone who talks to her. Eventually she "does the right thing". Thomas, a psychiatrist, married to Midge, is obsessive but skilled in his therapeutic work. He talks to Edward, and to Stuart, Edward's stepbrother, as if in psychotherapeutic sessions. Iris Murdoch writes the dialogue of these sessions with great realism, so that I wonder if she has had such experiences herself. Harry, Stuart's father and Edward's stepfather, is having an affair with Midge, and is manipulating, overbearing and utterly self-centred. He demands that Midge loves him, should leave her husband, as if it were a duty to his love for her. Edward is impulsive, rash and rushes in where angels fear to tread. One is wanting to shout at him, No, don't do that!

The description of the characters is spare, simply descriptive, without interpretation or judgement, leaving the readers to form their own images. This is extremely effective, much better than the author having an all-knowing, authoritative explanatory role. Although, having said that, Iris Murdoch goes a little in that direction at other times, but guides the reader into the mind and soliloquies of her characters. Thus the narrative voice slides from the author's to one character after another. But a fine example of the effective spare description is this account of Thomas, the psychiatrist:

He sat for a while holding in his hand the comb which he had automatically brought, together with a clean white handkerchief, out of the drawer of his desk. Then he began very carefully to comb his hair, feeling for the crown of his head and sleeking the silky hair down with his other hand. After that he pulled a little bunch of errant hairs out of the comb and dropped them in the wastepaper basket, put the comb away, and cleaned his glasses with the handkerchief. He set things in order on his desk. He straightened the page of notes and the speckled stone which had come from Scotland. He set out his well-sharpened pencils in a neat row. He often wrote in pencil. He liked sharpening pencils and using different coloured ones.

Again, as is usual for Iris Murdoch, she chooses some hilarious names for her characters. "Please call me Mother May" says May Baltram, Edward's stepmother, the earth-mother, flanked by her two daughters, Ilona and Bettina. Harry's parents, long deceased, are Casimir and Romula Cuno. I'm sure the author has some fun with those.

The long (522 pages) story ends on a surprisingly happy note, after many premonitions of disaster, only some of which transpire.

From Maxwell to Higgs The Royal Society of Edinburgh 2015

This beautifully produced booklet has no acknowledged author, but has ISBN number 978 0 902198 62 3. The Introduction describes how in July 2012 the European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN) announced that two experiments with the Large Hadron Collider had revealed a new particle that was consistent with the Higgs boson. The RSE commemorated this discovery with an exhibition in its Upper Gallery. As the work of James Clerk Maxwell on classical electricity and magnetism had laid the foundations of modern physics, the exhibition and accompanying one-day conference was entitled “From Maxwell to Higgs”. The booklet takes us through the life of James Clerk Maxwell, his famous equations of electromagnetism, and moves on through Einstein and Special Relativity to the establishment of the Tait Institute of Mathematical Physics and Peter Higgs. It goes on to give a historical summary of the boson, from the original 1964 papers, through combining relativity and Quantum theory, which led to quantum electrodynamics, and the Standard Model. A publication history, awards to Peter Higgs, and then the experiments leading to confirmation of the Higgs boson. Experiments using the accelerators and detectors at CERN in 1983 confirmed the Standard Model to a high degree of precision winning the 1984 Nobel prize for Rubbia and van der Meer. The Large Hadron Collider enabled the Higgs boson to be confirmed, which was announced on 4th July 2012. An Appendix gives more historical details from the birth of sub-atomic physics and Quantum Mechanics to Field Theory, Gauge Symmetry, Quantum Chromodynamics and the Standard Model.

Anthony Horowitz Trigger Mortis Orion 2015

Anthony Horowitz wrote a Sherlock Holmes novel in the style of Conan Doyle, which was an excellent take on those timeless stories of the original author. I therefore thought that there was a good chance that he might make a fair attempt at writing in the style of Ian Fleming. I was not disappointed. This is a splendid romp, tongue-in-the cheek of course, but not so much as to detract from the pure enjoyment of the fantasy. I have to admire the skill of his writing, and I see from the end-note credits that he has written much material for television: *Midsomer Murders*, *Poirot*, etc. Light but creditable reading. I might get his *Moriarty*, which has apparently won a *Sunday Times* award.

Nicolas Ostler Ad Infinitum Harper Press 2007

This excellent work, a biography of Latin, by my former colleague Nicolas Ostler is a comprehensive, erudite, highly informative read. I learned quite a bit from it, and it corroborated the high regard the Jesuit teachers of my youth had for this, now almost dead, language. The author emphasises, among many other things, the great influence the Catholic church has had on the survival of the language beyond its natural life span. I was reminded of how I was convinced by their then strongly held view that Latin would survive when other more modern languages may come and go, and of the Jesuits’ high regard for the Romans and their civilisation, despite its, at times, brutality (crucifixions etc.). One does not have to know Latin to read this book, but an even rusty knowledge helps, and by the end I was reminded of quite a lot that I had forgotten. This is far from a rapid read, but it is very readable, and served as my bedtime reading for a month or so. I am looking forward to the author’s next work, which I hear is in the offing.

Charles Handy The Age of Unreason Arrow Books 2002 (1989)

Charles Handy’s thesis in this book is: have courage to learn and change. He applies this to both individuals and organisations. Work and leisure time are merging. He positively advocates a work style in which the majority of workers are on contract. I am very unsure about the desirability of this:

ok, when your dependants and mortgage are off your hands, but before that one needs security? And for the lesser echelons of support staff, cleaners etc., there is opportunity for abuse with contracts and contract agencies.

Finally, he defines the triple-I organisation – Intelligence, Information, Ideas. These are what will give added value. Yes, that is already happening. Many of his predictions from 1989 have already happened. He finally indulges in predictions about the future, of education, portfolio careers, and society. He is an idealist, with a socially healthy set of ideals.

I have to say that the standard of print in this Arrow Books edition is atrocious. The pages are displeasing to the eye and the miserable print quality substantially increases the effort of transferring the words from the page to the mind.

Arthur C Clark 2061 Odyssey Three Harper Collins 1997 (1988)

A good, very readable, typical Arthur C Clark SF novel; as usual the characters do not somehow have real personalities, although he writes quite well. I find it difficult to put my finger on quite why this is so. (I bought the book for 50p at the Old Mill in Killin, along with a David Lodge novel, which I shall read next). ‘2061’ envisages Jupiter turning into a sun and enabling Europa to transform and support life. A spacecraft is hijacked. and another comes to rescue it. Thus there are two crews, and I found it difficult to separate the two groups of individuals in the two crews, as the narrative switched between them.

David Lodge The Picturegoers Penguin 1993 (1960)

This is David Lodge’s first book. He wrote it at the age of 21, but did not publish it until he was 25. This edition contains an introduction by David Lodge, written when the publisher asked him to re-publish his early novels. It seems he had not read it himself for over 30 years and was reluctant to resurrect it. However, he had a “steady trickle of letters” asking for help in obtaining copies of this novel, and so he relented. Eventually in 1991 he took the novel down from the shelves and read it in a couple of sittings.

David Lodge describes this novel as a very young man’s book. Having read half a dozen of his more recent books, including his biography of Henry James, I can see what he means, but do not find this youthfulness a detraction from the literary quality of the book. Lodge writes of it, “If there are people who wish to read the book, I no longer feel sufficiently embarrassed by it any longer to want to stop them; but it is offered as a curiosity, a piece of apprentice work, a document of its time, with all its original flaws and blemishes untouched. On re-reading the novel I was somewhat surprised by the prominence of the religious element, and the seriousness with which the hero’s ‘conversion’ is treated”.

I too was surprised by the religious element of the novel. I had not realised that David Lodge was, or at least had been, a Catholic. It is not apparent from his later works. I found the book very enjoyable, at least for the first 175 pages or so. After that, I wrote whilst reading the book, it begins to fall apart with the main character Mark soliloquising about religion. It did not ring convincingly, to my mind, and a narrator suddenly seems to appear, making omniscient observations, whereas until that point the narration had been accomplished through the eyes and ears of one character after another.

The novel is in three untitled parts. Reading Part III, I wrote: “I think the narrative deteriorates and becomes unbelievable, not matching the realism of the characters as previously drawn. However, as I am nearing the end, I think the style improves”. In fact I think the book becomes redeemed by its finale, its action, a certain amount of tension, and a kind of modern resolution, not too pat, leaving a few, now customary, loose ends for the reader to cogitate upon. The principal character does not resolve everything in a perfectly honourable or satisfactory way, but it is difficult to see, given his state of emotional and experiential development, whether he could have done any better.

2016

Iris Murdoch

**The Book and the
Brotherhood**

Chatto & Windus

1987

Attempting to write seems to have an influence on the way that one reads. In reading, for the second time, Iris Murdoch's *The Book and the Brotherhood*, I become aware of trying to perceive in greater analytical detail exactly what the author is doing with her words. Long gone are the days when the Victorian narrator addressed the reader directly, "And now, Gentle Reader...". Yet how do we read a book? We can react to it, letting ourselves be engrossed into the world of the author's construction, and enjoying, even wallowing, in that, reflecting at the end whether it has been a pleasant experience. We can go a little further, and make judgements on the actions of the characters, their wisdom, effectiveness, guile, sanity, intelligence, morality. At a more emotional level we can decide whether we like, admire, empathise with or detest the characters. Then, standing back a little further still, we observe the author's descriptive skills, how well she paints the landscapes, captures the ambiances, creates tensions, achieves a realism.

When we write something for other people to read, we want to engage their interest. The writer is creating a world, either a fictional world or, in for example biographies or travelogues, a reconstruction of one which is distant, historically or spatially. The characters come to life more easily if the reader feels their feelings, experiences their thoughts. The trend through the twentieth century has been to set the all-knowing narrator-who-is-not-a-character at a distance, unobtrusive, rarely making an appearance, if at all. The most obvious, blunt way of doing this is to use the first person. "I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of *York*, of good Family..." begins Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or as in the original full title, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Written by Himself*; the eponymous hero is, or purports to be, at the same time the narrator. One does not have to use the first person to imply or suggest that the hero or another character is communicating with the reader. "She even wondered whether Crimond imagined that Lily was actually *bringing a message* from Jean" [B&B p150]. Although this is syntactically in the third person, one is brought into the mind of Lily. Having been introduced, so to speak, into the mind of a character, further narrated speculations and musings are easily attributed to her or him, for, possibly some paragraphs. However, one can be brought back abruptly to the "reality" of the overseeing, omniscient narrator, by a give-away phrase such as "this was not to be", or "this was not to be the first time that..."; the fictional characters, inhabiting their own universe, cannot know its future, but only the narrator, as author and as it were, god of this fictional creation, can.

The Book and The Brotherhood starts with a party, an Oxford University Commemoration Ball. This goes on for nearly 70 pages, with numerous interactions among the numerous characters, and I found it rather tedious, but after that my interest in the players and the events improved quickly, with Iris Murdoch's clever dialogues and increasingly lyrical scenic descriptions. At the same time, the many conversations become intense, searching and intellectually demanding. At one point, I wonder if Iris Murdoch is playing a joke on us. For a few pages Gerard and Crimond are having a fierce and intense intellectual discussion. Part way through, their positions appear to reverse, each taking up the other's point of view.

Two of the characters behave atrociously. Crimond, author of the Book in the title, arrogant in the extreme, assumes he is right about everything and the rest of the world is foolish and incapable of understanding his superior intelligence. Furthermore, asserting the supremacy of romantic feelings, he seduces Jean, who is in the process of trying to mend her fragile marriage. Violet is the worst imaginable mother, refusing to go out to work and morally blackmails her daughter Tamar into abandoning her Oxford degree course just as, having performed successfully and enjoyed every minute of it, she embarks on her final year. Violet demands that Tamar get a job and support her. Yet in the end these wrongs fall into some sort of perspective, and a kind of moral stability prevails.

to escape the country. Despite their respective affinities for the communist ideology, both Burgess (Guy Francis de Moncy Burgess) and Maclean liked to move in upper-class circles, frequenting the Reform Club, staying at Claridges, and were strongly attached to the “English” way of life. Despite his often preposterous behaviour, for example continuously wearing scruffy food-stained clothes and, once, pretending to urinate in the fireplace at a high-society cocktail party which he had, furthermore, gatecrashed, almost everyone seemed delighted by his charm, and he held down good jobs with blue-chip employers (BBC, Foreign Office, diplomatic service etc.). I could not understand how Guy Burgess sustained his high-living style on his salary, even though it was supplemented by payments from the Russians.

This is an interesting, often fascinating, book, although at times it palls a little; towards the end one gets the impression that the author is scraping the barrel for snippets of information: a brief meeting here, a remark in conversation there. But the book is easily redeemed by the quality of its writing and its graphic depiction of a thoroughly English, muddled and incompetent Establishment.

Wilfrid Hodges Logic Penguin Books 1978 (1977)
(Pelican)

I was browsing a street second hand book stall in Holloway Road, London, and after some time the proprietor began to eye me suspiciously; I had been there some time. I spotted Wilfrid Hodges' book, and having met him and talked to him, I bought it. The stall-holder was impressed when I told him that I knew the author!

“Logic” approaches the subject from a philosophical viewpoint to begin with: belief, the nature of truth, ambiguity, misleading sentences. Most of the initial chapters are very accessible and focus on the logical analysis of language. It moves on, with the more difficult material identified by + sign, into more formal topics, tableaux, propositional calculus, quantifiers and predicate logic. I found it a satisfying and readable book which was, in my case, a useful and pleasant revision.

Iris Murdoch Message to the Chatto & Windus 1989
Planet

A group of friends are worried about two of their number: Patrick, the Irish poet, is ill, at death's door, and the doctor and priest are preparing for him to slip away naturally. Marcus Vallar is a “mathematician”, very brilliant, who all expect to write a great book. Ludens believes implicitly in Marcus' skills and almost pursues him, indeed persuades him to “cure” Patrick, which Marcus does. Jack Sheerwater, a reasonably successful painter, is married to Franca but has a series of mistresses, the latest, Alison being unprecedentedly serious . Franca still lives in the marital home, which with the arrival of Alison has become a ménage à trois. Jack is a preposterous cad but gets away with it with his charm and persuasive talk. While the central character is ostensibly Marcus, it is perhaps Alfred Ludens, a fool who rushes in, perhaps reminiscent of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. Marcus lives with his long-suffering daughter Irina, who is convinced that he is insane; indeed, we the readers, may wonder the same thing. Marcus and Irina move about from one strange house to another, eventually to a kind of psychiatric institution run by a grossly autocratic Dr. Marzillian. Three women fall for Ludens, Irina, who Ludens immediately rejects, Franca and Alison; Ludens at first rejects all of them, then wishes to marry Irina, who keeps him at arm's length; suddenly and unexpectedly Irina is engaged to a young earl. Vallar dies by his own hand, or will-power, and all the women who chased Ludens pull away leaving him alone.

Ian McEwan Nutshell Jonathan Cape 2016

This book is written entirely from the viewpoint of a foetus, almost at term, who hears and cogitates upon his mother's life and those of her husband and lover. It is witty and tense, and very short at 99

lot about Joyce that I did not know before: his chaotic lifestyle and impecunious disdain for money, constantly sponging off friends and relations, moving from one city to another. I knew he had spent significant time in Paris, but he and his family also lived in Trieste and Zurich. War, the preparations for it, the Nazi persecution of Jewish people, all had an impact on the Joyce family. At the same time, Joyce's original family in Dublin, his brother Stanislaus, his father John and three sisters, all held a magnetism of affection and duty for James. Italo Svevo, the author of this work expounds, was a model for Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* and something of a father figure for Joyce.

Ian Rankin Rather be the Devil Orion Books 2016

Ian Rankin's anti-hero Rebus, retired and crotchety with declining health and fitness, cannot resist keeping his hand in by muscling in on a case or two, to the annoyance of his ex-colleagues. The pace and interest moves up a notch after 70 pages or so and compels the attention. The arch-criminal Cafferty also returns to the scene, and Rebus displays a curious affinity for his old nemesis, saving his neck even when he has committed murder.

A E Van Vogt The Battle of New English Library 1973 (1971)
Forever

I picked this book out of my bookshelves, just browsing. The hero is a human, but they have been mutated to consist of brains with tiny bodies assisted by insect servants. The hero regains his normal human body form and lives among animal men, which are animals mutated to near human form and having simple intelligence, and the controllers. The latter are in turn subservient to Z, the "committee".

The book contains many metaphors, among which is the question of whether being peaceful is altogether good. I enjoyed this revisit to Van Vogt, after many years. His writing is competent and engaging, and thought-provoking, not just a piece of SF.

J M Coetzee Disgrace Vintage 2000 (1999)

I read this at Rosemary's prompting. It is very well written, as should be expected from a Booker Prize (1999) winner. The principal character, David Lurie, is a jaded academic, teaching English literature under the title of *Professor of Communications*, at a university which does not specialise in the finer arts; so a somewhat lower grade institution. In his late 50s, he is obsessed with sex, having liaisons with prostitutes and, now, with one of his students. A complaint is made, he resigns, goes to stay with his daughter who runs a remote shelter for abandoned dogs. They are both attacked by three strangers, his daughter sexually, and the social, psychological and emotional consequences are explored.

This is in parts a gruelling book to read, but highly thought-provoking. The author's character seems to lack moral sense and judgement, and I wonder to what extent he reflects the author's own personality, seeing that they both have the same occupation, that of an academic in English literature. But it did give me a bit more insight into what it means to be a white South-African.

Nicholas Ostler Passwords to Bloomsbury Press 2016
Paradise

This is a thorough, scholarly piece of work by Nicholas Ostler. It traces the influence that language has had over religions over the centuries. It concentrates mostly on Christianity, but also deals with Islam, Buddhism and Judaism in particular. The book is somewhat heavy going, more so than Ostler's previous works, *Empires of the Word*, *Ad Infinitum*, etc. I found one of the difficulties in its accessibility was that numerous references are made to ancient languages and extinct countries that I had not heard of, and I think many other readers will find the same. However, the book is highly

instructive and a rewarding read. A glossary would have been helpful, for example, in locating Sogda in relation to modern countries.

Jack Copeland, Jonathan Bowen et al **The Turing Guide** **OUP** **2017**

A compendium of 42 diverse chapters written by 33 authors, with a foreword by Andrew Hodges, who wrote a biography of Turing in 1983. The book is a bit of a marathon read, with 474 pages of main text, and an index, references etc. bringing the total to 546. It is wide ranging and instructive. Jack Copeland has contributed to it substantially, as sole author of eight chapters and joint author of a further eight. I hear that the biography by Hodges is very good, so might read it sometime.

Jostein Gaarder **Sophie's World** **Orion** **1997**

I borrowed this book from the library on board the Fred. Olsen *Black Watch*. This is a history of philosophy written in the form of a novel. The plot and pace seem a bit clunky to me, but that may be because it is aimed at young teenagers. The format of the philosophy exposition is a conversation between Sophie Amundsen, who has just turned 15, and a strange figure who after a time reveals himself. He asks Sophie questions and then explains how various philosophers viewed the matters. It certainly gives a useful outline of the thinking of Hume, Locke, Berkeley and the rest. I could have done without the narrative containment, but perhaps that is because I am an adult.

A. Alvarez **Offshore: a North Sea Journey** **Hodder & Stoughton** **1986**

I bought this in a thrift shop. I always quite admired A. Alvarez' journalistic writing, which once upon a time was regular and worth reading, and I invited him to talk at the Cambridge *Heretics* when I was chairman in 1961-2. This book describes the life on oil rigs in the North Sea, where the author spent some considerable time it seems. His descriptive writing is good, I won't go so far as to say gripping, but he gives a very good flavour of the lives and characters, their expertise, fierce motivation and tribulations. To the end of it I feel I know about oil rig life a lot better. The pencil illustrations by Bill Le Ferer are graphic and sensitive.

L. J. Waguespack **Thriving Systems Theory and metaphor-driven Modeling** **Springer** **2010**

The publisher, Springer, originally sent me the text of this book to review in late 2009. Now that they have published the book, I feel free to note on it here. The author is an experienced academic, having a good record of academic papers over the last 15 years, but this appears to be his first book. The text is well written and easy to read. The book is relatively short: about 67,000 words. This book is not in the usual run of computer science or software engineering. As the author admits at the end of Chapter 1, Introduction, one does not find the kind of formulae and other technical content familiar to readers of books on software engineering or theoretical computer science. The subject is software architecture. This covers the large-scale design of systems, including requirements capture and engineering, the very front end of the development cycle. It is related to Object Orientation, and includes a chapter on that topic (Chapter 12), but O-O is not the principal topic of the book.

This book is highly interdisciplinary. This leads to an unfamiliarity which, at first, may seem eccentric to many of those whose experience is in the traditional software engineering or computer science disciplines, and could be a turn-off. But the more I read of the material, the more I found it convincing. The author adapts ideas of design from the architect Christopher Alexander, and ideas on

the use of metaphor in forming concepts and communicating them which have been pioneered by the philosopher and cognitive linguist George Lakoff. In general I am all in favour of transferring wisdom from one discipline to another, and so I for one was interested to read on. The architect Christopher Alexander is a very well respected, avant-garde, architect, who has won many prizes and honours, including Member of the Swedish Royal Academy and Trustee of the Prince of Wales' Institute for Architecture. He has designed 200 buildings in many countries, but more to the point here perhaps, he has a following amongst the Object-Oriented design community. (See, amongst many examples, Christopher Alexander: An Introduction for Object-Oriented Designers, by Doug Lea, ACM SW Engineering Notes 1994.) Some of the most popular books on O-O refer to Alexander's work, for example the best-selling Erich Gamma et al: Design Patterns, Addison-Wesley 1995. So there is an accepted connection between ideas in architecture and software engineering. On the other hand, I have not come across any authors in software engineering who have made connections to the work of George Lakoff. (However, by sheer co-incidence at the time of my review for Springer I was reading a book by the philosopher Daniel Dennett, a writer I much admire, and he refers to and clearly thinks very highly of George Lakoff.) I also observe that Lakoff has done work on formal logic and Chomsky grammars, generative syntax and semantics, all topics strongly related to computer science. So the idea of making connections between software engineering and Lakoff's work is not far-fetched but at least intriguing. I found the pervasive use of italics for his key terms a bit off-putting at first, as if the reader was being press-ganged into accepting a dogma.

His exposition in Chapter V struck me as according well with the principle of incremental development. If more people had taken these ideas on board we would not have had some of the worst and most expensive examples of software disasters.

I ended my review for Springer by recommending that the author write a sequel to develop his ideas further, into a more prescriptive text. I was intrigued to see that eight years later, he did precisely that!

Yuval Noah Harari Sapiens: A Brief Vintage Books 2014 (2011)
History of
Humankind

This is one of the most interesting books I have read in a very long time; indeed I am tempted to say, that I have ever read. It relates the history of Homo Sapiens (Homo is the genus, Sapiens is the species). The author provides a timeline at the beginning of the book, starting with the beginning of physics and continuing to the present. After the first common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees 6 million years ago, genus homo evolved in Africa 2.5 million years ago. Humans migrated to Eurasia 2 million years ago, and the Neanderthals in Europe and the Middle East 500,000 years ago. Sapiens evolved in East Africa 200,000 years ago and spread out of Africa 70,000 years ago.

The author, Harari, is a historian with an Oxford PhD (shouldn't that be a DPhil?) and lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The first edition of this book was in Hebrew in 2011. However, he writes with assured competence in areas beyond history, economics, evolutionary psychology, and anthropology. He writes with a pleasing cynicism, pessimistic but cheerfully humorous nonetheless. There is much that I found instructive here, and the author gives the most convincing account of why and how religion has evolved that I have read. Slightly surprisingly, in his comprehensive and informed account of religions, he says little about Judaism. Also, I get a strong impression that he is atheist. I am in the process of ordering the sequel, *Homo Deus*.

Haruki Murakami The Wind-up Bird Vintage Books 2003 (1997/1994)
Chronicle

This long novel (607 pages) is written in the first person and is the account of Toru Okada. His cat has disappeared, his wife has suddenly left him without explanation, he befriends a sixteen year old

girl who is surprisingly mature, he also befriends a wealthy woman in a park who begins to play a significant part in his life, and he has a visit from Lieutenant Mamiya who brings him a keepsake from a recently deceased mutual friend. He also receives phone calls from a strange woman, Malta Kano and meets both her and her sister Creta. It was surprising to me that, as the incidental story seems to reveal, the urban Japanese way of life seems very American: the food that the hero eats and cooks, the music he listens to, the clothes he wears. Even the conversations seem to have a modern U.S. character to them. There is a good deal of acceptable whimsy in the narrative: characters seem to influence and take part in each other's dreams, the hero is transported to other, fictitious places while in a kind of trance, and out of the blue he acquires a black mark on his face which enables him to have healing powers. There is an appalling, gruesome account in chapter 13 of Book 1 which describes in cold unforgiving detail the cruellest imaginable way of someone being put to death, compared to which crucifixion would be a walk in the park. This description stayed with me uncomfortably for a couple of weeks and I feel that it warrants a warning on the back cover. Part of the narrative relates to the real-life events of the Japanese-Russian war of 1939 in Nomonhan, which I knew nothing about. One feels that there is some meandering and repetition in the course of the narrative, as if the book is the result of an episodic publication where the author is encouraged and prompted by reader reaction as he writes one episode after another, but I do not think this is how the book originated. Despite these reservations, this is a compelling book, easy to read, and its whimsy and imagination all add to its entrancing intoxication.

George Lakey Viking Economics Melville House 2017 (2016)

I read this book after hearing a presentation by the author when he was on a tour in the UK. George Lakey is an American Quaker who when a young man married a Norwegian fellow student and moved to Norway. He champions "Nordic" attitudes and approaches to life, equality, welfare, liberalisation, standards of living and general ways of life. At times in his book one wonders if he overstates his case, and indeed, towards the end he admits that Norwegians have their problems of racism and prejudice too, like any other society, which leaves one with a question or two. However, his book is well written, engaging, an easy read and thought-provoking. One curiosity is that apparently this is the author's ninth book, but there is no mention in the preliminary pages here of his other publications, or indeed much about the author, only in the personal narratives occurring within his discourse.

2018

Yuval Noah Harari Homo Deus Vintage 2017 (2015)

A sequel to his *Sapiens*, this does not disappoint. The first introductory chapter, at 78 pages, drags slightly but then into Part 1 of 3, one feels well engaged. There is lots to think about, and the author provides unexpected viewpoints on many aspects of life. He is an amusing but good hearted cynic, offering both bleakness and humour. Religion, liberalism, humanism, and the ascendance and possible tyranny of information all get forensically scrutinised. This book has profoundly changed my view of politics.

Henning Mankell Quicksand Vintage 2017 (2016)

Henning Mankell is the author of the *Wallander* series which have been made into the well-known T series. He was born in 1948 and died of cancer in 2015, a year before writing this book of 67 essays. He shows perceptive observation, extracting significance and thought from the smallest (and sometimes immense) events. Only a few of the essays are related to his cancer diagnosis, although he talks of this, in particular the uncertainty of the rapidity of its course. But the most striking thing for me about these pieces is the way he seems to have felt an urge to extract the utmost value from the minutiae of his memories. Reading the book made me feel impelled to write myself and organise my writing into some sort of order.