
Editorial

Editorial: In This Issue; In This Issue – Reviews; EJIL Roll of Honour; 2023 EJIL Peer Reviewer Prize; 10 Good Reads 2023

In This Issue

The Editorial in this issue looks back on the year in peer reviewing, with gratitude to all those colleagues who took on manuscript reviews, with some perplexity about the ongoing difficulties in peer reviewing and with congratulations to our Peer Reviewer Prize winner. In addition, as is our custom in the period leading to the Holiday Season, we are publishing ‘good reads’ recommendations by our co-Editor in Chief. There is more to life than law alone!

This issue opens with three Afterwords to Antony Anghie’s Foreword, ‘Rethinking International Law: A TWAIL Retrospective’, published in issue 34-1. *Ratna Kapur* reflects on the tension between critique and redemption in TWAIL’s engagement with human rights and argues that TWAIL, embracing subaltern epistemes, creates the possibility for transformative, alternative visions of human rights to counter the liberal hegemony. *Arnulf Becker Lorca* claims that, over the past three decades, TWAIL has successfully become part of international law’s mainstream. While ‘civilizing’ international law, TWAIL’s success also means that, according to Becker Lorca, new approaches are needed to account for more diverse and multifaceted Third World experiences irreducible to the unidirectional relationship of North-South oppression. In his Afterword, *Andreas von Arnault* presents a more pluralist and complex picture of international law in the Western world and calls for building international law on international solidarity which transcends the simple North-South division to redress historical and contemporary injustices.

The Articles section of this issue features two contributions. *Hanna Eklund* delves into archival materials of the Treaty of Rome and reveals the colonial origin of the European Union through a close reading of key terms such as ‘associated countries and territories’ and ‘peoples of Europe’. In his article, *Joris Larik* observes that the UK’s trade continuity programme significantly replicates EU trade agreements, which retains favourable trade terms and demonstrates the internalization of EU norms by the UK. The trade continuity programme, Larik argues, should be deemed a success for both the UK and the EU.

This issue continues with the last installment of the ‘Year-Long Symposium: Re-Theorizing International Organizations Law: Reconsiderations, Hidden Gems,

and New Perspectives'. *Chen Yifeng's* contribution features Rao Geping, a leading figure in international organizations law in China. Positioning Rao's academic contributions in the broader background of China's integration into the world economy, Chen shows a unique disciplinary trajectory of international organizations law in a post-revolutionary China. *Kristina Daugiridas* revisits Dame Rosalyn Higgins' trailblazing work on international organizations law and considers the lasting significance of her methodological innovation and policy-orientated approach.

This symposium ends with an epilogue by the convenors, *Devika Hovell, Jan Klabbers* and *Guy Fiti Sinclair*. Summing up the two symposia on international organizations law published in EJIL, the convenors observe that, despite a variety of portraits of scholars and their invaluable insights, there have yet to emerge alternative theories to replace functionalism.

Our Roaming Charges for this issue, contributed by *Michelle Burgis-Kasthala* and *Marya al-Hindi*, offers a telling postscript to the article by Burgis-Kasthala published in our 33-4 issue.

This issue continues with the Critical Review of Governance rubric. *Anna Sophia Tiedeke* and *Martin Fertmann* look into the Oversight Board created by the social media platform Meta and the Board's interactions with Meta and international human rights institutions when interpreting human rights. In his contribution, *André Nollkaemper* argues that relieving the suffering of animals in industrial meat production requires complex and fundamental normative and institutional changes involving broad issues such as global trade, health, biodiversity and climate change. This section ends with a contribution by *Armin Steinbach*, who dissects various policy objectives the EU pursues under the buzzword 'strategic autonomy' and assesses their compatibility with EU and international law.

The Legal/Illegal rubric of this issue focuses on the freezing of the Russian Central Bank's assets. *Anton Moiseienko* and *Ron van der Horst* disagree over whether the executive freezing violates state immunity, but they agree that these sanctions can be justified as countermeasures.

The Last Page features a poem by Fernando Pessoa (writing as Ricardo Reis), 'How Great a Sadness and Bitterness'.

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In This Issue – Reviews

Sigrid Boysen opens the section with her review of Marie-Catherine Petersmann's *When Environmental Protection and Human Rights Collide*. Boysen finds much to agree with in Petersmann's account and notably praises her challenge to the 'mantra of synergy' according to which human rights protection and international environmental law are in a mutually supportive relationship.

We move on to *Prisca Feihle*, who reviews Alice Ollino's *Due Diligence Obligations in International Law*. Feihle offers an insightful overview of both the book and the 'janus-faced' concept of due diligence in international law today.

Feihle's review is followed by one by *Sanna Lehtinen*, who begins with the 'cultural phenomenon' that is Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* movie in her review of Emily Jones' *Feminist Theory and International Law: Posthuman Perspectives*. Lehtinen compliments the 'combined approaches' Jones adopts in the book, which all 'have a common ethos of challenging power, dismantling and rethinking damaging power structures', making a 'fresh contribution' to legal theory.

Finally, *Christian J. Tams* reviews Tommaso Soave's *The Everyday Makers of International Law*: an unusual mix of academic analysis and 'plausible fiction' that introduces readers to the people behind the scenes – the judges' clerks and legal assistants – who keep the machinery of international justice running, and casts light on the inner workings of international courts and tribunals.

GCL and CJT

EJIL Roll of Honour

EJIL relies on the good will of colleagues in the international law community who generously devote their time and energy to act as peer reviewers for the large number of submissions we receive. Without their efforts, our Journal would not be able to maintain the excellent standards to which we strive.

We have published a number of Editorials (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) on the crucial and still-undervalued role of peer review in academic scholarship. Yet our statistics continue to speak clearly about 'the crisis in peer review' (referring to our 2012 Editorial): in 2023, 156 colleagues delivered an *EJIL* review, whilst 144 invited reviewers declined, were unavailable or did not respond.

That said, the reviews we did receive were often of outstanding quality. We are truly grateful to the very many colleagues who devote their time and energy in seriously engaging with manuscripts under review, offering helpful suggestions and pathways towards improvement.

We thank the following colleagues for their contribution to *EJIL*'s peer review process in 2023:

Christiane Ahlborn, Paola Andrea Acosta-Alvarado, Tilmann Altwicker, Siena Anstis, Constantine Antonopoulos, Julian Arato, Freya Baetens, Catherine Barnard, Lorand Bartels, Jinan Bastaki, Jose-Miguel Bello Villarino, Antal Berkes, Nehal Bhuta, Regis Bismuth, Andrea Bjorklund, Daniel Bodansky, Gleb Bogush, Laurence Boisson de Chazournes, Sigrid Boysen, Eva Brems, Catherine Brölmann, Megan Brown, Jutta Brunnée, Michelle Burgis-Kasthala, Salvatore Caserta, Emmanuel Castellarin, Claire Charters, Madelaine Chiam, Steve Cornelius, Fabio Costa Morosini, Matthew Craven, Hanne Cuyckens, Pierre D'Argent, Tsilly Dagan, Kristina Daugirdas, Francisco de Abreu Duarte, Giovanni De Gregorio, Ignacio de la Rasilla del Moral, Talita de Souza Dias, Emmanuel Decaux, Julia Dehm, Rossana Deplano, Sara Dezalay, Janina Dill, Sanja Dragić, Antoine Duval, Julia Emtseva, Tracey Epps, Michael Fakhri, Ole Kristian Fauchald, Malgosia Fitzmaurice, Mark Gibney, Chiara Giorgetti, Zuzanna Godzimirska, Ben Golder, Carmen G. Gonzalez, Peter Goodrich, Christopher Greenwood,

Douglas Guilfoyle, Benton Heath, Wolff Heintschel von Heinegg, Mohamed Helal, Laurence Helfer, Kevin Heller, Niklas Helwig, Corina Heri, Ellen Hey, Johanna Hey, Jens Hillebrand Pohl, Jean Ho, Loveday Hodson, Anna Hood, Saskia Hufnagel, Stephen Humphreys, Alexandra Huneus, Aziz Z. Huq, Miles Jackson, Timothy Jacob-Owens, Dale Jamieson, Alison Jones, Machiko Kanetake, Michelle Kelsall, Jane Kelsey, Ido Kilovaty, Jan Klabbers, Nico Krisch, Andreas Kulick, Anne Lagerwall, Ginevra Le Moli, Andrea Leiter, Gabriel Lentner, Xuexia Liao, Kerttuli Lingenfelter, Melissa Loja, Noam Lubell, Doreen Lustig, Emily Lydgate, Gracia Marin Durán, Marjorie Marona, Maayan Menashe, Kate Miles, Anton Moiseienko, Florencia Montal, Anna Mosna, Samuel Moyn, Thérèse Murphy, Gerry Nagtzaam, Phillip Nichols, Aleydis Nissen, André Nollkaemper, Melanie O'Brien, Mary O'Connell, Roger O'Keefe, Federico Ortino, Nicola Palmer, Kiran Klaus Patel, Photini Pazartzis, Jacqueline Peel, Facundo Pérez Aznar, Anne Peters, Katharina Pistor, Lauge Poulsen, Joe Powderly, Sergio Puig, Surabhi Ranganathan, Akbar Rasulov, Catherine Redgwell, Niccolò Ridi, Cedric M.J. Ryngaert, Anne Saab, Urška Šadl, Peter H. Sand, Juan Scarfi, William Schabas, Omri Sender, Yuval Shany, Gerry Simpson, Guy Sinclair, Tommaso Soave, Muthucumaraswamy Sornarajah, Andrew Spalding, Oyvind Stiansen, Jinyuan Su, Yane Svetiev, Lex Takkenberg, Christian Tams, Nicholas Tsagourias, Harmen van der Wilt, Sergey Vasiliev, Jorge Vinuales, Christina Voigt, Jochen von Bernstorff, Margaretha Wewerinke-Singh, Hao Wu, Rumiana Yotova, Fuad Zarbiyev.

SMHN and JHHW

2023 EJIL Peer Reviewer Prize

The 2023 EJIL Peer Review Prize is awarded to Professor Anne Lagerwall. Professor Lagerwall takes an article on its own terms, thoroughly analyses whether the article lives up to its own ambitions and, if it does not, gives detailed, concrete and constructive suggestions as to how it could do so. Professor Lagerwall is the fifth EJIL Peer Review Prize winner since the Prize was instituted in 2019. She joins our earlier prize winners, Tilmann Altwicker, Megan Donaldson, Leena Grover and Jochen von Bernstorff.

SMHN and JHHW

10 Good Reads 2023

Here, again, is my pick of 'Good Reads' from the books I read in 2023. I want to remind you, as I do every year, that these are not 'book reviews', which also explains the relative paucity of law books or books about the law. Many excellent ones have come my way this year, as in previous years, but an excellent law book is not always, in fact rarely is, a 'good read' in the sense intended here: curl up on the sofa and enjoy a very good read, maybe even as a respite from an excellent law book. I should also point out that some of these 'good reads' are not necessarily literary masterpieces – and yet, still, they are very good reads.

**Yasushi Inoue, *The Hunting Gun* (猟銃 *Ryōjū*, 1949)
(Tuttle Publishers, 2001)**

I discovered Inoue this year (a gift from a loyal reader of my 10 Good Reads – practically all books I read are based on recommendations by trusted friends). ‘Better late than never’ is most apt in this case. Alongside his *The Bullfight*, it was published in 1949 and this duo earned him the Akutagawa Prize (the Japanese equivalent of the Booker Prize or the Goncourt).

It is a short novel – all of 72 pages in my English version. It is no less than stunning. It is framed with an opening and ending by the Narrator, but the heart of the book consists of three letters written by three women involved in a complex set of relationships with each other and with a background man (the carrier of the hunting gun). Don’t let this inadequate description put you off. It is not just a wonderful read – it is a true literary masterpiece. Don’t take my word for it: it has been adapted for the stage, for films, TV (more than once) and even the opera. I will not risk spoilers, but not only is the literary form (three letters) audacious and captivating, but there is a wonderful tension between the delicate literary style and the force of the emotions unfolding in the narrative. Equally captivating is Inoue’s ability to depict and bring to life through the letters three very different persons, in age, background and circumstances. It was my fortune to watch the play based on the book, which fortuitously played at the New York Baryshnikov Theatre shortly after I had read it. The inimitable Japanese actress Miki Nakatani played all three characters in a masterful performance – it was hard to believe that it was the same actress, her characterizations were so distinct. I assure you that once you start reading you will not put the book down, and its imprint will remain in your mind for a long, long time.

**Javier Marías, *Berta Isla* (2017) (transl. Margaret Jull Costa)
(Penguin, 2018)**

After reading *The Hunting Gun* and *The Bullfight* (another masterpiece of a very different character), I of course bought a few later novels by Inoue – a hugely prolific author. But as in the case of Kazuo Ishiguro with his *Remains of the Day* or Anita Brookner with her *Hotel du Lac* (so here I have sneaked in some other very good reads if you have not yet read them) the entire oeuvre of both Marías and Inoue is of the highest quality but none of the subsequent novels match either in power or artistry the early books.

This is decidedly not the case with *Berta Isla* of the sadly missed Javier Marías, who died a year ago at the age of 71. In an earlier 10 Good Reads, I warmly recommended his *Corazón Tan Blanco*, published in 1992 – the novel that catapulted him to international fame. In *Berta Isla*, published in 2017, his penultimate novel, one sees the maturation of an enormous talent, a master at the height of his power in form and content.

The risk of spoilers in this case is acute. So I will just say that the book describes the relationship between Berta Isla and her English/Spanish husband Tomas Nevinson.

Nevinson is recruited into the British Secret Service, which obliges him to spend long periods away from his Madrid home and family, often incommunicado for months on end. *Nota bene*, secret service notwithstanding, this is not a John Le Carré novel, except perhaps in one vital detail that you will discover.

The bulk of this rather large novel (more than 400 pages in both Spanish and the excellent English translation) is the inner world of Berta Isla – finding herself in this situation. If the words ‘inner world’ put you off (who wants to read 300 pages of such?), perish the thought. It is part of the remarkable genius of Marías that the entire novel is a page-turner with huge momentum and growing suspense.

Avoiding, then, spoilers, I will say something about the craft. The beginning and the end of the book, which focus on Tomas, are written by an omniscient narrator – an all-knowing voice. Thus we know much about Tomas, including context and things that even he himself does not know – and much that Berta Isla, his wife, does not know. The Berta Isla central section is, instead, entirely narrated through her eyes and voice and thoughts – what we know about her is what she knows and tells us. It is not common for authors to mix these narrative genres in the same novel, and Marías does this with remarkable deftness and with an electrifying dramatic tension for the reader, since again and again we, who were privy to the all-knowing voice in the early Tomas parts, are haunted by an ‘if only she knew’ sentiment when reading Berta Isla’s first-person narration.

I should add that Marías manages, in my view, to capture admirably the sentiments and sensibilities of his female protagonist. (And save me the ‘How can a man know what a woman experiences and feels’ objection.) How? Just as countless great female authors capture to perfection the experiences and feelings of men. Be that as it may, let the female readers of the book judge for themselves.

One last comment on craft. As the book draws to its end, we the readers know things about Tomas that Berta does not know, and things about Berta that Tomas does not know. And being put in this God-like position by Marías, we are happy that this is the case.

A good read? It does not get better.

Marcela Prieto Rudolphy, *The Morality of the Laws of War: War, Law, and Murder* (Oxford University Press, 2023)

This is the book version of Prieto Rudolphy’s NYU University-Wide prize-winning doctoral dissertation and the subsequent recipient of the 2023 ABILA (American Branch of the International Law Association) New Authors Book Award.

Full disclosure: I insert here my habitual disclaimer when recommending a book by an author I know personally. The book was written in the doctoral programme of which I am director (though I was not the supervisor) and Marcela served as Associate Editor of *I•CON*, of which, alongside Gráinne de Búrca, I am Co-Editor in Chief. We are both thanked in the Acknowledgments. In a situation such as this, as I have explained before, I would recuse myself from writing a professional book

review in a legal journal. But I do not accept that this proximity should preclude me from recommending this as a 'good read'. I should also add that I have read this past year a handful of excellent legal scholarly books. *The Morality of the Laws of War* makes the list because, its legal quality apart, as evidenced by the awards, it is truly a good read.

By happenstance, it also is hugely timely, given the awful carnage that has taken place and at the time of writing continues to take place in various places in our fallen world, and the attendant fierce debates in which morality and law intersect. From this perspective, the book is practically indispensable.

You may agree or disagree with some of the moral arguments and legal analyses, but I assure you that even Law of War and IHL specialists will, time and again, be forced to think and rethink, and examine some hard-held convictions, and gain new perspectives and understandings.

Not unexpectedly, the virtue that I wish to underline is Prieto Rudolph's great skill in presenting the most intricate moral and legal arguments with remarkable perspicacity. Not once do you have to stop and wonder 'What does she mean here?', a habitual *deformation professionnelle* of German-style legal theory. In what is perhaps an apocryphal anecdote, Hegel is reputed to have said on his death bed: 'Only one man ever understood me, and even he did not understand me.' All too often one gets the impression that all too many have a secret wish to be able to say such on their death bed. Not Marcela Prieto Rudolph. The book is reasonably short (276 pp) and yes, very readable. Good read.

Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind – Intellectuals in Politics* (New York Review of Books, 2nd ed. 2016)

The original book was published back in 2001 and I took it down from my shelves to reread, given the recent spate of interest in scholactivism, including in the pages of I•CON (see the Editorial Reflection by Tarunabh Khaitan and responses by Thomas Bustamante, Jan Komárek, Liora Lazarus and Alberto Alemanno). I then discovered that a more recent edition was published in 2016 with a new Afterword. Of course, rereading the book after so many years was like reading it for the first time.

For the intellectually minded (excuse the pun) this would be a perfect Christmas-break read. Most of the chapters of the book are rewrites of articles by Lilla published in the *New York Review of Books* – a guarantee of 'readability', with the added advantage that they are addressed to a general (intellectually minded – there's that word again...) audience, and not specialists. If you follow my recommendation and decide to read this book you will see for yourselves what a fluid read (in the best sense of the word) the various chapters are.

The book discusses the interaction – sometimes disastrous – of notable scholars with the political world: the execrable Heidegger, Hannah Arendt (and the relationship between the two – not gossipy) and Karl Jaspers feature in the first

chapter. Lilla then covers, one by one, the even more execrable Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Alexandre Kojève, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, respectively. (If you think I am exaggerating in my characterization of Schmitt, ‘treat’ yourself to his Glossarium – his *post-WWII* diaries. If you are not a German reader, there is a Spanish translation, but I could not find one in English. For Heidegger, take a look at Richard Wolin’s *The Heidegger Controversy*.)

I am sure that some experts on any of these persons might cavil with Lilla’s description and analysis of their scholarship and life. But it would be the kind of griping that is inevitable when dealing with a *divulgazione* addressed to non-specialists. Even in disagreement I found each and every chapter well worth the read. The added value is their positioning side by side and the specific angle with which he addresses these canonical scholars.

The final chapter, Lilla’s quiet, even serene, conclusion, ‘The Lure of Syracuse’, uses the famous episode from the life of Plato: his involvement with the tyrannical rulers Dionysius the Elder and Younger. In his writing on this, Plato himself was conflicted – and this provides a perfect starting point for Lilla’s reflections. He is not the hectoring type. It will leave you appropriately pensive and conflicted. A good and rewarding read.

Carson McCullers (née Smith), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Houghton Mifflin, 1941)

If the name does not ring a bell, recall her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (the name alone merits an Oscar), which I had read eons ago and which catapulted her to fame. It was a tad too sentimental and tear-jerky for my taste then (and now), though her sensitivity to class, alienation, loneliness and the plight of those whom society defines as ‘misfits’ is clearly in evidence.

By accident I came across the brief *Golden Eye* this year and read it in a gulp. She wrote it, too, in a gulp – two months – at the age of 24, almost beating Stendhal’s 52 days record for *La Chartreuse de Parme*.

It is not Great Literature, but it is decidedly a very good read. I mention McCullers’ age because the novel displays an uncommon maturity for someone so young in both her characterizations and the restrained style. It is a story of a murder in an American Army barracks in the deep South. It is not a Whodunit but rather a Whydunit. Brevity notwithstanding, the novel is hugely successful in allowing us a deep understanding of the various characters, mostly through a deft telling of the facts without too much authorial explanation. Practically all the protagonists are flawed, some deeply flawed (but then, who isn’t?), but she writes with remarkable empathy and, where appropriate, sympathy, and leaves any judgement to the reader.

The story is set in the 1930s–1940s (prior to the entry of the USA into WWII), though if you did not know this fact you could easily believe it is contemporary – another sign of McCullers’ skill, not to say genius. Out of curiosity I tracked down some

reviews that accompanied the publication of the book. They were not favourable – I was not impressed by them. It (and she) had a revival in the 1960s, not least due to the book's cinematic adaptation in 1967 (the year of her untimely death) in a film bearing the same name and directed by no less than John Huston and 'starring' no less than, *inter alia*, the underrated Elizabeth Taylor and Marlon Brando as well as the hugely underrated Robert Forster in his breakout role (he who played alongside Pam Grier in Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* – a must see).

The film is, perhaps, worth watching, but decidedly only after having read the novel. It does not do justice to the book and the very refined and subtle virtues of the novel and its author are almost entirely lost.

To repeat, not a masterpiece, but I am confident you will consider it a good read and will not regret the trouble of putting your hands on a copy.

Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (Granta Books, 1997)

It should not surprise you that the discipline of History (the river into which all other social science disciplines eventually flow) has experienced all the internal methodological and ontological debates and controversies which we law scholars have faced and continue to face, not least since the publication back in 1930(!) of Karl Llewellyn's evergreen, still-in-print *The Bramble Bush*, and returning regularly with the advent of Critical Legal Studies, post-modernism, empirical legal scholarship – the list goes on.

I am not entirely innocent of these Battles of Historians, nor even of the wonderful Richard Evans. I read his Third Reich Trilogy, his famous *Rereading German History: From Unification to Reunification* (in which his interest in how history is written is so much in evidence) and, more recently, a riveting account of his role as an expert witness in the trial brought by the pseudo-historian David Irving (*Lying About Hitler*) – which might have been entitled 'Historians on Trial' – and which prompted me to buy and read *In Defense of History*.

Like many of my generation, I was shaped by E.H. Carr's *What Is History?*, but I somehow skipped this book. I wish I had read it in 1997 when it was originally published. Yet, again, better late than never. Consider the opening line of the Introduction: 'This book is not about history, but about how we study it.' This prepares you for the treats to come. Consider some of the other chapter titles if you are not convinced: The History of History; History, Science and Morality; Historians and Their Facts; Knowledge and Power; Objectivity and Its Limits.

If you are a professional historian, you will most certainly have read the book and there is no point in your telling us that much has happened in the field in the last 25 years. But if you have not read this book, you will find it most rewarding, and yes, even if you are not a historian – maybe especially if, like me, you are not a historian. As a bonus, so much of it is relevant to our discipline too. Needless to say, important and useful as the book may be, it would not have made it to my

list if it were not so well-written. In all Evans' books he is conversational, rich in examples, talking to his readers rather than lecturing them, and all this without compromising the seriousness, even profundity, of his themes. A veritable good read.

David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1988)

I came across this book while re(reading) something by David Foster Wallace – who praised it to the hilt. That was a warning to proceed with caution. The book consists of a first-person narrative by Kate, who finds herself (or, perhaps, believes to find herself) alone in the world. The style is 'experimental' – meaning in this case a kind of stream of consciousness of entries that Kate types on her typewriter (remember those?). So now you might definitely be tempted to move to my next recommendation. Don't! It is a very good, even compelling read. You will not struggle with this book. It will draw you in. And this is not only a good read, but serious literature too, as one would expect from Markson.

Alone in the world, the last person living, conjures up the kind of dystopian novels à la Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. It is not that kind of book at all. There are no scenes of devastation, rotting corpses or anything like that. Fear is not the dominant mood – it is more anxiety, sadness, even at times understandable despair, but never oppressiveness. Just suspend your disbelief and stop wondering how Kate can find herself alone in a world that shows no sign of devastation or apocalypse. Travelling hither and thither, she comes slowly to realize that indeed she is alone in the world.

As you would expect, loneliness and adjustment thereto are clear themes, but also relationship to nature, which is left intact, and a hopeless and doomed search for others – she leaves notes here and there. Kate was involved in the world of art and is cultured. You will recognize many of the cultural allusions, be frustrated by those you do not recognize and, I imagine, even be unaware of some.

Her thoughts range from the metaphysical to the quotidian – the small details of washing, laundering, dealing with menstruation and the onset of menopause, foraging for food and the like. Memory, and the lapses thereof, are another central preoccupation bridging the metaphysical and the quotidian and bringing to the fore, as only her situation can, the importance of memory in our sense of being – I remember, therefore I am.

The genius of the book is that these heavy and serious themes are dealt with through the ruminations of a living person, towards whom willy-nilly one finds oneself attached. Both she and her tale become credible and authentic. This is achieved by another truly remarkable literary device – Kate is writing for her reader, not just for herself. It works. You care about her. It takes some adjustment, but as you move along it becomes a captivating tale that sticks in the mind. Do not be put off by the experimentalism of both premise and form. It is a remarkable novel and a remarkably good read.

Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (Riverhead, 2017)

This recent novel by Hamid could be read as a wrenching (not sufficiently wrenching in the eyes of some) portrayal of how the plight of war and civil war forced migrants from a conflict-torn city – the name of which is never specified, but could easily be Damascus – through Europe (Greece, London) and ending up on the West Coast of the United States. He uses a literary device – supposed Magical Doors – which open and offer hope to those fleeing. Do not be put off by this (as some reviewers have been). It is a clever shortcut to spare us detailed descriptions of the travails of finding an exit and instead focus on the internal world of his two protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, throughout their travels. Typically, a novella has one principal developed character, with everyone else providing background and context. *Exit West* is one of those rare novellas that has two, rather than one, protagonists, and without expanding the canvas Hamid successfully achieves depth with both.

The first half of the novella takes place in the imploding city, where violence and oppression are dealt out with equal measure and the Exit impulse slowly builds up, with all the difficulties of leaving family, friends and one's cultural habitat. But, within this turmoil, there is a most delicate unfolding of the love that develops between the prudent, rather conservative, religious Saeed and the fiercely independent Nadia. Extremely well narrated, avoiding clichés and with an occasional light touch and humour, it is a gentle and convincing tale. But that is not the reason it made it into my 10 Good Reads. Without detracting at all from the literary achievement of this part of *Exit West*, there is no dearth, in the annals of literature of love in the time of cholera narrations.

It is the second part of the novella, when Saeed and Nadia go through the Magic Door and find themselves first in London and then on the west coast of the USA, which distinguishes this novella. It is a second-to-none narrative, equally gentle, equally penetrating, redolent with empathy and sympathy towards both protagonists, of the slow, organic process of falling out of love. There is no drama, nor is there a cataclysmic betrayal. There is sadness, of both woman and man, but no recriminations. And if there is catharsis, it is of the most muted kind.

I do not recall ever reading such a careful and attentive recounting of this emotional migration from love to non-love. There will be those who will think that this ending was overdetermined from the outset, given the very different emotional and cultural makeup of Nadia and Saeed. I, for one, did not anticipate this and I suspect such a reading is only hindsight cleverness. But even if so, I doubt that many readers will question the depth and authenticity of the earlier emotions. There will be some who will want to read the novella in ideological terms – East West, North South, etc. Such a reading would, in my view, diminish what is best in this book and detract from the careful study of the human condition which is on such fine display.

There will be yet others who will claim that it is an idealized account of falling out of love. It is hard to tell because this belongs to that part of the human experience about which people tend to be guarded and it is a condition which in the world of letters is typically described as immensely painful, to at least one of the parties, and is often

infused in drama. Hamid's careful attention to emotional nuance and detail militates against such a reading. It is a good read.

Graphic Novels

It is possible to like wine without being a connoisseur (of the sniff sniff, roll it around the mouth and then gravely pronounce 'this is from the sunny side of the hill' variety) and that is my relationship to graphic novels. I like them without being a connoisseur. One genre among many is the graphic novel that retells a famous novel graphically. Connoisseur or not, there is I believe one hard rule in relation to this genre – only read/watch them if you have read the original source which the graphic novel then reimagines graphically. They cannot be a substitute for the 'original'. To do otherwise is to diminish the original and, no less so, to diminish the graphic adaptation, since the interest in, and creativity of, the graphic novel of this genre rests precisely in the graphic adaptation. This creativity rests not only in the graphics deployed but also in the textual 'snippets' or bubbles that accompany the graphics.

This year, three such graphic novels were added to that part of my book collection: adaptations of Orwell's *1984* (adapted and illustrated by Fido Nesti; Mariner Books, 2021), of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (adapted and illustrated by Fred Fordham; Harper, 2018) and of, no less, Proust's first volume of *In Search of Lost Time, Swann's Way* (adapted and illustrated by Stephane Heuet, translated by Arthur Goldhammer; Gallic Books, 2016)! All three are beautifully produced (not always the case with graphic novels) and if I express a preference it is of the 'I prefer Barolo to Vino Nobile di Montepulciano' type; I would not say that one is 'better' than the other. Question of taste.

Of the three, the one I like least was the adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and this for a simple reason. Graphically, Scout, Gem and even Dill are too static, and I don't think I spotted a single instance of a smile on their faces. This is true for all the adults as well. To some extent, though perhaps with more justification, it is also the case with Winston Smith and all others in *1984*. One doesn't look for big ha ha laughs or broad toothy smiles, but nuance is important also in the graphics and this was missing in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *1984*. Where *1984* is distinctly superior to the Harper Lee adaptation is in creating the dystopic atmosphere of 'London' in *1984*, and this is true both for the macro- and micro-representations – the city and Winston Smith's apartment. Both graphic novels are successful in capturing not just the plot line of the two novels but also their cultural and moral messages. So decidedly not a Do Not Buy recommendation.

Proust would, of course, be the most challenging to adapt and I approached it with a heavy dose of scepticism. What a success it is. In choice of text, in plot dynamic and in characterization, it comes to life. Heuet stays consistently on the right side of the caricature nature of the graphic. His graphic characterizations of the protagonists are lively, creative, appropriately expressive. You find yourself chuckling and you might even have the feeling that the morose Proust would not object. Is it similar to reading *Swann's Way*? No. Is it meant to be similar? Another No. It is a different way to

see *Swann's Way*, and in its own way, the right way. Can one say of a graphic novel – a good read? Do we ‘read’ such a novel?

Duncan Minshull (ed.), *Sauntering: Writers Walk Europe* (Notting Hill Editions, 2021)

This is a book-lover's book in a double sense.

One sense is the physicality of the book, something that is ever more precious in the digital age, when so much reading is done on a screen and where the aesthetics of the book tends to take second place to its content. The book is part of Notting Hill Editions, a series dedicated entirely to ‘essayistic’ writing. The books in the series are simply beautifully and carefully produced – from the cloth-clad hard covers, to the quality of the paper, the careful selection of the font, the old-style ribbon marker integral to the book, the careful and distinct cover designs and more. The books in the series are small in size, which increases the feeling of holding an *objet d'art* in one's hands. You can take a look here: <https://www.nottinghilleditions.com/catalogue/books/> (screen again...) but not until you hold one of their titles in your hand will you truly appreciate the charm of these books.

It is a book-lover's book as regards the content too. It is an exquisitely selected anthology of some of the greatest authors, men and women, writing about their particular spots of beauty and interest in Europe. The list is dazzling: Petrarch (Gazing to the West); Edith Wharton (Dense, Dripping, Febrile); Franz Kafka (Mountains!); Katherine Mansfield (Indiscreet at Bandol); Anatole France (Shopping); Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Southern Life).

Need I continue? The entries are personal, of different styles and they display different aesthetic sensibilities. I had to look up some of the places in the Atlas (actually googling, sigh). It is not a book you will read from cover to cover in one or more sittings. Its place is on the proverbial ‘coffee table’ (or the bathroom) to be picked up like a precious liquor or a sinful praline. In fact, it is hard to imagine a better moment than one combining all three: the liquor, the praline and one or two passages from this book.

Indulge, enjoy. Happy Christmas!

P.S.

Last year I recommended **P.D. James'** (she of Inspector Dalgliesh fame) *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (Faber & Faber, 1972), which was her first book featuring Cordelia Gray. Since then I have read her second (and, alas, last) Cordelia Gray novel, *The Skull Beneath the Skin*. If you are tempted to read a first-class ‘Krimi’, I would pick the second – Cordelia Gray truly comes into her own.

Likewise, I recommended enthusiastically **Jean-Philippe Toussaint**, *La Salle de bain* (Les éditions du minuit, 1985), *The Bathroom* (transl. Nancy Amphoux and Paul De Angelis, Dalkey Archive Press, 2008); and *L'appareil photo* (Les éditions du minuit, 1989), *Camera* (transl. Matthew B. Smith, Dalkey Archive Press, 2008). Since then I have read a lot more Toussaint and recommend two of his Marie cycle: *Fuir* (*Running Away*) and *La vérité sur Marie* (*The Truth about Marie*). If this is your first foray into the

captivating world of Toussaint, I recommend you start with Marie. It is essential to read *Fuir* and *Verité* in sequence. They are extraordinary.

If you are interested in previous Good Reads recommendations, see [here](#).

Postscript: Give Books, Not Boxes



Neoliberal Christmas