

## Art in Isolation - a new page for strange times

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### Part 3: Books

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To those members who recommended books, here are the responses, thank you all.

I thought that the collection would be enhanced by including some illustrations so, if you did not include one, I have selected one on your behalf, usually a portrait of the author or a picture of the cover of an edition of the book. Do please let me know if you dislike or wish to change any of these.

Once again, although not numerous, I think these form a most interesting and stimulating collection. I have already read one of the books and bought two others. Do please send any comments to the proposer and/or to me. I wish we could get together for more personal discussion.

With kind regards to you all

“Stay alert” – and stay well

Nick

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### The Books

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## A Time of Gifts

### Walking the Woods and the Water

### The Broken Road

A trilogy by Patrick Leigh Fermor

In 1933, at the age of eighteen, Patrick Leigh Fermor set off to walk through Europe from the Hook of Holland, determined to reach Constantinople. He had been expelled from his public school and, feeling a failure and disillusioned with his life in



London, he set off on this epic journey with an allowance from his parents of £1 a week and a rucksack containing copies of Horace's Odes and The Oxford Book of English Verse. He followed the Rhine and then the Danube, crossed the Great Hungarian Plain and reached Constantinople a year later. The books were not written until over forty years afterwards, an astonishing feat of memory as his diaries were either stolen or destroyed early on; the third was published posthumously in 2013. They

are a vivid and fascinating account of life in pre-war Europe as he experienced the highs and lows of society, sleeping in hovels, shacks and castles of benevolent aristocrats in turn; his prose is mesmerising. When "A Time of Gifts" was published in 1977 he had already achieved fame as a writer with books on Greece, where he settled after wartime service with the SOE in occupied Crete, culminating in his legendary kidnapping of General Kreipe.

This is a wonderfully absorbing read by and about an extraordinary man undertaking a great adventure, something of which we can only dream in these locked down times!

Judy Nightingale

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## The Secret History Sebastian Barry



The book I have enjoyed most recently is *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry. I was particularly struck by the way 'history' is not fixed but depends so much on who is telling the story. The worry of course is that those who shout the loudest are not necessarily the most objective.

Gill Thurlby

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## The Salt Path, Raynor Winn

This book by an unknown author rapidly became a bestseller largely by word of mouth. It recounts the extraordinary story of a couple who, through a series of



disasters, find themselves homeless and totally impoverished. Although the author's husband has a serious neurological disease they make the extraordinary decision to walk the South West Coast Path.

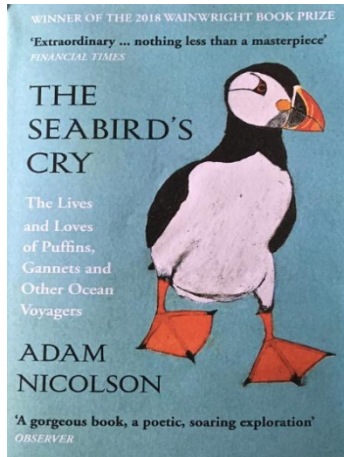
The *Salt Path* describes their walk from Minehead to Dorset, a long and very challenging route. I feel that there are at least four books contained within the covers of this small volume. One it is about nature and the natural beauty of the path and the south-west; the second is about the structure of our society and the experience of outsiders; the third is about adversity, disability and the courage to overcome them, and the fourth, and most important of all, is about the love two people can have for each other in a lifetime together.

This lovely linocut by Angela Harding is used for the book cover

Jo Barnes

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## The Seabird's Cry, Adam Nicolson



Books are so often associated with time and place and here in locked down, landlocked Cambridgeshire I need to escape. At this glorious time of year the coasts of our island kingdom are alive for only a bare few months with the hustle, bustle and noise of seabird colonies. The ocean voyagers, such as Puffins, Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Fulmars return to nest and bring up their young. Sitting on a cliff and watching the cut and thrust of life on the near vertical rock ledges below one was a regular pastime for a small boy growing up in Devon during and just after the war. It is something that I need to return to whenever possible but when housebound the pleasure can be



evoked vividly by Adam Nicolson's book "The Seabird's Cry". Nicolson, a winner of numerous literary awards, spent many holidays in his youth with his father visiting the Shiant Isles off the northwest coast of Scotland, which left him with an abiding interest, as well as a considerable knowledge, of

seabirds. All is expressed beautifully in this book; an evocation of the way that seabirds exert their hold on the human imagination. Reading it I am transported to another world – just what a good book should do.

Chris Flower

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## Educated, Tara Westover



A multimillion bestseller and one of Barack Obama's favourite books of 2018, Tara Westover is a young woman who has written a beautiful, vulnerable, honest and sometimes harrowing account of growing up in the wilds of Idaho in a large and unusual fundamentalist/survivalist family. Home-schooled because her father believed that the

government were trying to take away their freedom and religion, she never found out what her birthday was – she never had a birth certificate. Her childhood was mostly spent working in her father's dangerous scrapyard – I won't mention the accidents – or helping her mum deliver babies to women also refusing scientific/conventional ('Satanic') medicine. In her late teens she decides she wants to go to university but has never studied maths or history. In the teeth of her father's opposition and with only old books for help, she eventually succeeds, but her account of a history class in her first year is painfully revealing: her classmates are mortified when she asks, because she has never heard of it, 'What is the Holocaust?'

Her manifest abilities as a student are shown by her writing, which propels us along like a thriller. I won't say much more except that she finds her way over to Cambridge. She is particularly heart-warming about the reception she gets here – not as one of those who feel it is their natural habitat, but as an uncomfortable outsider whose talent is movingly recognised, valued and nurtured. Her supervisor, David Runciman, has done a fascinating podcast with her as part of his excellent 'Talking Politics' series: <https://www.talkingpoliticspodcast.com/blog/2020/232-tara-westover-educated>.

I am sometimes mystified by the way American politics reflects views of people I simply don't understand – this book is a compelling, humane glimpse into the day-to-day lives of a few of those people. There's also some log cabin to White House all-American belief here in our ability, through our own efforts, to transform our lives – but in this book it comes at some cost too.

David Williams

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## **The Mirror & the Light, Hilary Mantel**

I have just finished reading this, the third book in her trilogy about Thomas Cromwell. Having read *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* this book does not disappoint. It is



800 pages long so perfect for a lockdown read. You will need Wikipedia to hand as well as there are many names one needs to bone up on!

This book picks up from the demise of Anne Boleyn and has Thomas Cromwell arranging Henry's third marriage to Jane Seymour. We are absorbed into Tudor life under Henry VIII and invited to share all the 'comings and goings' of courtly life and witness the continued ambition of Thomas Cromwell. He is clever and has sometimes been ruthless but *The*

*Mirror & the Light* shows you his soul and leaves you saddened.

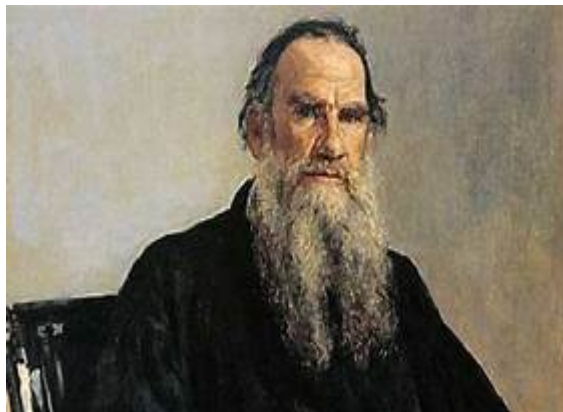
The BBC is currently re-running *Wolf Hall* starring the wonderful Mark Rylance as Thomas Cromwell. If you haven't read the books I do recommend watching the BBC series, it is excellent. Happy reading everyone!

Sarah Chieppa

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## **War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy**

Over my long life I have often wondered about what book, apart from the Bible and Shakespeare, I would like to have with me on the famous Desert Island!



In the end it comes down to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

I have read it several times since I was a teenager and by now I feel I know some of the characters in it so well that they are old friends. My most frustrating reading was in France. I had brought a £1 copy with me, it was very very wet and the light in our hotel room terrible. I was forced to sit on the

edge of the bath where the electricity seemed to shine somewhat brighter. Even then, Tolstoy kept me going!

Robert and Rosemarie Hill

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## Mister Pip, Lloyd Jones

What a daunting task this was! As an avid reader, to pick one book from the wealth



of the canon seemed at first an impossible task. With so many favourites to choose from, classics old and new and so many more besides, I vowed to defer the decision until some gut feeling arrived. It came! ( If one leaves the unconscious to its own devices, it often reveals the truth), so it was gratifying to realise my choice referenced one of the giants of the

past, whilst spinning an unusual and rather unforgettable read which I should very much like to recommend to anyone who has not yet encountered it.....

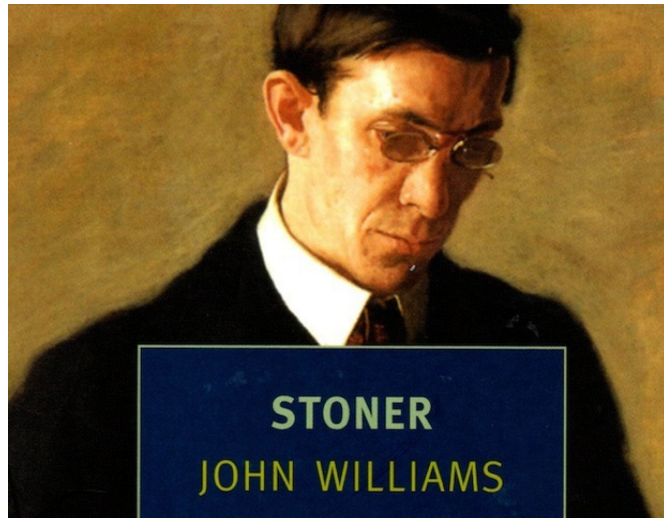
Lloyd Jones's book 'Mister Pip', written in 2006, was not only shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2007, but also won the Commonwealth Best Book award. The title is no coincidence since it weaves one of Dickens best loved novels into the poignant narrative, which is set on a tropical island where civil war lurks. Mr Watts, as the only white person, appoints himself as teacher of the tiny school where he finds that the only text book happens to be Great Expectations. What unfolds is memorable... so much so that, although I have not read it since it first came out, this was the book that came to mind to share.....

Jane Cursiter

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## Stoner, John Williams

I thought I would carry on the American theme. Stoner is my choice, written by John Williams. It was Waterstones novel of the year 2013. I loved this book. I suppose it



could be called a campus novel. It follows the life of William Stoner from Missouri farm boy to University professor. His great love literature burns brightly but he has a disastrous marriage and a difficult college political life. I liked the following quote:

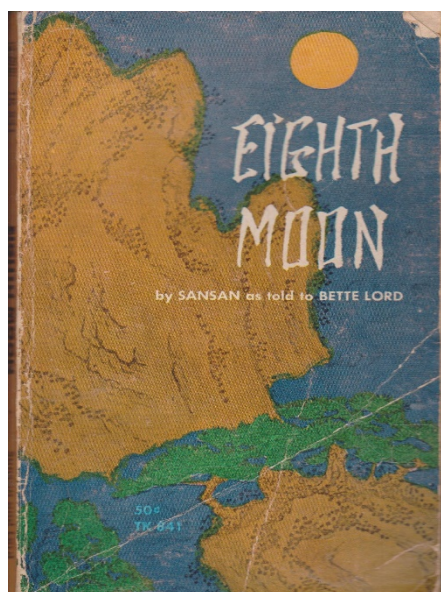
‘A lone man against the world choosing his life such as it is’. It’s a bit like a Hopper painting...wooden

houses casting dark shadows on blank green lawns. Much has been written about Williams writing with its clarity & flowing style. His theme very much echoed his own life. In the words of the New York Times “ the greatest novel you’ve never read”.

Enid Turner

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## Eighth Moon, San San as told to Bette Lord



This is a biography of a Chinese girl named SanSan. Unlike most biographies which are usually long and “celebrity” status, this book has only 183 pages with touching simplicity tells the tale of a young girl’s life in Communist China during 1950s and 1960s.

Lucy Winter

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## **A Fine Balance**, Rohinton Mistry

The book is a moving account of life in India beginning in 1947 through to the Emergency of 1975 -77, declared by Indira Gandhi. The Emergency is brought about because of the chaos and groundswell of disaffection in the subcontinent. The



story is of four main characters, all in financially difficult, precarious and seemingly irreversible situations, using their often tragic lives as a backdrop to the country as a whole. Born into the rigid caste system where they are known as “untouchables”, these characters' heroic and painfully optimistic

struggles to free themselves from their former lives are painted with searing details of the corruption, political upheavals and gross injustices inflicted upon the illiterate poor. For all the horror, our characters remain touchingly hopeful. Fascinating insights are given into working practices of the time through the tribal hierarchies, often based upon violence. A riveting account of a political rally, exposing ruthless exploitation, is described. Children of the poor are not excluded from this desperate need to earn a few rupees and the shocking use of one such group gives us the title. Throughout this beautifully written book, I felt a deeply spiritual author's love for his country shine.

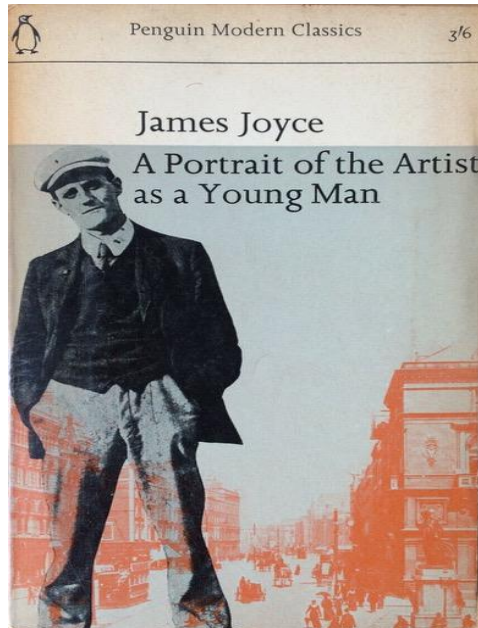
Lynn Dowson

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## A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, James Joyce

When I was a teenager I used to catch the West Yorkshire bus into Leeds.

Sometimes a dishevelled old man would board the bus when it stopped in the middle



of the village. He was known locally because he

wrote about literary topics for the Yorkshire Post,

nom de plume: Ratz. He was blind and almost

deaf, with hearing aids and a white stick.

Occasionally I would help him cross the road and

once he took my arm and we walked very slowly

to the Yorkshire Post building. On this long

journey we discussed a televised version of

James Joyce's "Ulysses". In his high pitched

insistent voice he told me that it was a great book,

which I should read. However he was very clear

that to make sense of "Ulysses" I should first read

Joyce's autobiographical novel, "Portrait of the

Artist as a Young Man". Of course I did as I was told and of course he was right. I

particularly remember a passage that I read on the - West Yorkshire - bus on the way

home from school. A Jesuit priest delivers a sermon about the torments of hell to

Stephen Dedalus (Joyce) and his classmates; it goes on for several pages and

explains powerfully why Roman Catholicism had such a strong hold on those young

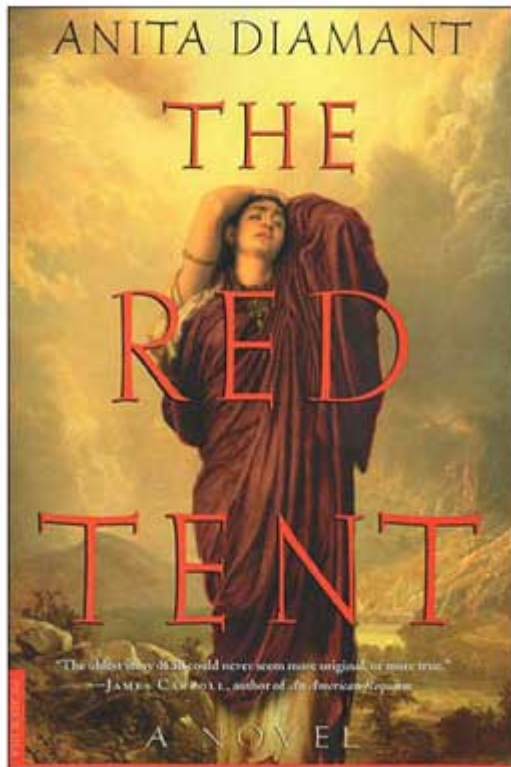
minds.

Chris Verity

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## The Red Tent, Anita Diamant

The book choice is the hardest yet: I've been an avid reader since pre-school, and I find it really difficult to choose. So I decided to leave my go-to comfort reads (Dickens, George Elliot, Austen etc.) and plump for a book I came across around 15 years ago, and have re-read several times.



This is the story of Dinah, a little-known character from The Book of Genesis, which paints a fascinating picture of life in those times. It weaves a beautiful tapestry of traditions of womanhood, incorporating love, betrayal, grief and the myriad of emotions that are timeless. The book is written from a female perspective, with warmth and humour, and, I suppose, could be dismissed as a "woman's read". However, there is nothing "chick-lit" about it, and I would hope that it

might be appreciated by a suitably "woke" man!

Gloria Reed

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## The Raj Quartet, Paul Scott

and also the BBC dramatisation 'The Jewel in the Crown'

I was born in India before Partition so that extraordinary political event has special significance for me. Nonetheless I didn't tackle this four volume sequence until I was facing a period of relative isolation working in Libya, which was for me a strange and



disturbing environment. I thought I might need some distraction and in the event these brilliant books provided distraction so intense that I felt more as though I was in India in 1945 than in Libya in 1985. As an added bonus (and straying a little outside my brief) the BBC dramatisation of the books is the best television series I have ever seen; the

powerful storylines are intercut with contemporary Pathe news clips and the varied caste is portrayed in many brilliant acting performances. If you haven't time for the books you can simply to watch the series, no background knowledge is needed.

This picture of Queen Victoria and some of her subjects has a special role in the books.

Nick Barnes

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