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## **Dusting off the forgotten gems**

**Waterstone's has compiled a list of 30 'lost' masterpieces by asking writers and booksellers to name the book they believe most deserves a much wider audience**

Some are titles whose star has simply waned. Others are books that never won the attention they deserved to begin with.

Now Waterstone's bookstores are giving them all a second chance in a promotion of books they think ought to be rediscovered. Thirty titles suggested by more than 200 of their own booksellers are on display, including the Kurt Vonnegut classic *Slaughterhouse 5* and *What We Walk About When We Talk About Love* by the short-story writer Raymond Carver. But most are by authors who are either no longer household names, or never were. Top of the booksellers' own selection was *Revenge of the Lawn*, a book of short stories by the late and eccentric American, Richard Brautigan, originally published in *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Other suggestions were *Death and the Penguin* by the contemporary Ukrainian surrealist Andrey Kurkov, and the *Dark is Rising* series for children, in which Susan Cooper, a British-born, America-based former journalist, mixes Arthurian legend and mythology. And the list has now been augmented with 25 suggestions from other authors and celebrities, from chefs to MPs, many of whom exhibited enormous passion for obscure tomes.

Alain de Botton raved about *Infrastructure* by Brian Hayes, which focuses on the industrial processes on which civilisation rests, as "one of the most magical books I've ever chanced upon". The comedian Alexei Sayle chose a book of short stories by Elizabeth Taylor, an English writer who died in 1975 aged 63, which he tracked down after hearing one read on the radio, while the novelist Ali Smith chose more short stories, by Grace Paley, a native New Yorker who is now 83.

Audrey Niffenegger, author of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, chose *The Bird Artist* by Howard Norman, while Carlos Ruiz Zafon, who wrote the hit *Shadow of the Wind*, selected *Falling Angel* by William Hjortsberg, which he described as "one of the greatest mysteries ever". The writer David Mitchell found his choice, *The following Story* by Cees Nooteboom, as he sheltered from bad weather in a bookstore in Amsterdam, while Dave Myers, one of TV's *Hairy Bikers*, was recommended Hans Ulrich's *Stuka Pilot* by a friend. There were a couple of pleas on behalf of W G Sebald, the acclaimed but little-read German who was killed in a car crash in Norfolk five years ago.

And some impassioned support for some other forgotten gems. The writer DJ Taylor described *The Rector's Daughter*, originally published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, as "one of the great lost novels of the 20th century". Hari Kunzru said *The Lonely Londoners* by Samuel Selvon, a story published in 1956 about new Caribbean immigrants in London, was "criminally neglected". And Carmen Callil, the Australian publisher and author, championed the late Sylvia Townsend Warner, whom she called "an English genius, an English treasure, and these days a forgotten one". Her favourite of the author's seven novels is *The Flint Anchor*.



Rodney Troubridge, Waterstone's fiction buyer, said: "Word of mouth is such a powerful recommendation and these books are ones that the authors and our booksellers love and passionately want more people to read." He was intrigued at how many of the booksellers' choices were a wry and astringent look at the world. "That fits with booksellers in a way," he said. "The selection is eclectic and surprising and settling down to read any one of these titles will be a real pleasure. If you read one of these books and love it, spread the word!"

**Ekow Eshun: VERTIGO, by W G SEBALD**

This is a beautiful, mysterious and poetic book about memory and forgetting and the strange acts of remembrance involved in writing. Although Sebald comes highly rated by the likes of Paul Auster, he has never had real popular acclaim. Yet his books are astonishingly poignant. I discovered Vertigo about six years ago, read it once, was utterly baffled, read it again and have always kept it close by me since. It blends biographical musing on the lives and loves of Stendahl and Kafka with Sebald's own journeys across Italy and Bavaria. It's hard to describe what exactly happens in the pages of the book - time and place are shifting all the time - but the effect is mesmerising and unforgettable.

**Alain de Botton: INFRASTRUCTURE, by BRIAN HAYES**

I've just finished one of the most magical books I've ever chanced upon. It's called Infrastructure, by an American science journalist, Brian Hayes, who spent 15 years putting it together. It provides a minute explanation of all the major industrial and technological processes on which our civilisation rests. Chapters bear such intriguing titles as Waterworks, Bridges and Tunnels, Oil and Gas, the Power Grid and Waste and Recycling. It lets you know how sewage gets around under the city streets. It answers all those questions that children are allowed to be excited about, but that disappear from polite conversation with puberty. The author is quite evangelical about his task. Pick up Jane Austen and everyone becomes a target for waspish satire. Pick up Brian Hayes and the power lines and drains reclaim their just share of beauty and significance.

**Carmen Callil: THE FLINT ANCHOR, by SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER**

The author was an English genius, and these days a forgotten one. This, the last of her novels, is my favourite. Set in 19th-century Norfolk, it is a family saga about John Barnard, his wife, his children and the people of their community. Witty, charming, intelligent, the author's unique way of looking at the world reached its apogee in this novel.

**David Mitchell: THE FOLLOWING STORY, by CEES NOOTEBOOM**

On a miserable afternoon in January, I was sheltering in Waterstone's in Amsterdam when I came across a slim volume called The Following Story by Cees Nooteboom, a Dutchman. I'd never heard of him, although the cover quote from A S Byatt - "one of the great modern European writers" - was good enough for me. The premise reeled me in immediately: the narrator, a dodgy art history lecturer, goes to bed as usual in his Amsterdam apartment, but he wakes up in the very same Lisbon hotel room where he committed adultery 20 years ago. What follows is a succulent, witty and contemplative novella on life and death I intend always to own.

**Alexei Sayle: HESTER LILLY, by ELIZABETH TAYLOR**

Although a successful novelist, it is with the short story that Elizabeth Taylor really excelled. I heard one of the stories from Hester Lilly, entitled Spry Old Character, being read on the radio a year or two ago and it so moved and chilled me at the same time that I immediately sought out the collection from which it was taken. What is impressive about Elizabeth Taylor is that she is consistently able to look unflinchingly on things that most would turn away from, yet there is always an underlying compassion and humanity to her work. Also, like me, she was a Communist for part of her life so if we had ever met we would have had lots to talk about.



**Audrey Niffenegger: THE BIRD ARTIST, by HOWARD NORMAN**

There are quite a lot of books kicking around my place that I would love to extol, but when forced to choose only one I pick *The Bird Artist* by Howard Norman. It's set in Newfoundland in 1911, and it is the story of Fabian Vas, who paints birds. Fabian tells us in the first paragraph that he is also a murderer. The rest of the book is an explanation of why he is, and a recounting of his affair with a rather odd woman named Margaret Handle (Fabian's mother describes Margaret as "better to visit than to marry"). Norman is wonderful at creating characters who are a bit ornery, who behave with integrity but often in ways that annoy or perplex each other. His women are especially interesting and independent, and men are driven to distraction by them. Everything about Norman's books is vivid and strange (*The Museum Guard* is also great).

**Julie Myerson: PROPERTY OF, by ALICE HOFFMAN**

It's not exactly underrated because it was acclaimed in the states when it first came out in 1974, but the wonderful Alice Hoffman's first novel *Property Of* - written when she was just 22 years old - deserves to be much better known here. It's a Westside Story-type tale of first love. It has gangland wars, drugs, sex and chivalry, and is set mostly at night on the edge of the New York suburbs. It's fresh, daring, angry and utterly original. It really ought to be a cult book yet no one I know has read it.

**Gwyneth Lewis: STONES OF ARAN, by TIM ROBINSON**

Tim Robinson is an artist and mapmaker and has spent years charting the coasts of Connemara and the Burren. I came across his books in a Galway shop. In typical Irish fashion, somebody told me where he lived and that I should call by. So I did, met Robinson, bought one of his black-and-white maps and went off walking. His remarkable book is a fascinating meditation on the geology, spatial and mythical life of the islands and makes you feel that Robinson has personally met and considered every boulder in the place.

**Ali Smith: COLLECTED STORIES, by GRACE PALEY**

I promise you, if you like short stories at all, and if you love writing that's totally alive to voice and craft and readers, and if you like things to be original, and if you're the kind of human who likes other humans, then this is the book for you. A pure life-force of a collection.

**Tracey Cox: SHE MAY NOT LEAVE, by FAY WELDON**

"Be careful who you invite into the bosom of your family", the book cover warns, and if I had children, this would put me off having a nanny for life. Or would it? Like most Fay Weldon tales, there's a diabolically clever twist, which alters your original perception. But plot is secondary for me with Fay's titles. I read them for her provocative, razor-sharp observations on women succeeding and surviving in a contemporary world. I'm not a strident feminist, but I like an author who makes me think and challenges my perceptions. I relish her books and read them as slowly as I can, but still couldn't put this one down. I've recommended it to all my single friends, but only to women with children if they promise me they'll read it right through to the very last page. It would provoke paranoia pandemonium otherwise!

**Toby Litt: FOXY-T, by TONY WHITE**

It's written in a style that I can only describe as "100 per cent Pure London", meaning a mix of here, there and everywhere. It tells the story of Foxy-T and Ruji-Babes, two streetwise girls who are not without their troubles. Although not a long book, *Foxy-T* encapsulates an astonishing amount of now - and it does it funnily, honestly, sexily and tenderly.



**Carlos Ruiz Zafon: FALLING ANGEL, by WILLIAM HJORSTBERG**

One of the greatest mysteries ever written, Falling Angel brilliantly blends the classic noir novel à la Raymond Chandler and the dark fantasy hues of the modern gothic. Stephen King defined it as "The Exorcist rewritten by Raymond Chandler" and that intrigued me. It belongs with Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird and Dickens' David Copperfield, or Bleak House, books that present the art of storytelling at its most brilliant and refined. Sometimes it is better the devil you don't know. Enjoy, and hold on to your soul.

**Hari Kunzru: THE LONELY LONDONERS, by SAMUEL SELVON**

This is a criminally neglected book. Published in 1956 it's a series of connected vignettes about Caribbean immigrants in London. It shows a world which people occasionally glimpse through newsreels or by listening to Lord Kitchener calypsos, where young men live hand to mouth. It's written in clean, spare prose, oscillating between comedy and despair.

**Michelle Paver: THE GIANT UNDER THE SNOW, by JOHN GORDON**

I borrowed this from a library when I was nine, and loved it so much that I saved up for my own copy. Three teenagers are locked in a battle with an ancient warlord, while the everyday world carries on unawares. The writing is vivid as a lightning flash, and so compelling that you just can't stop turning the pages. I've read it so often that my copy is falling apart.....**THE END**

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