

the Second World War, is a very fine novel – humane, interesting, well planned, well told. Patricia Craig's memoir *Asking for Trouble* belongs to the same time, with her native Ulster far from the vanguard of liberating change. It tells of her expulsion from school as a result of cuddles in the Gaeltacht, where apprentice Irish-speakers have gone to stay. Craig's book has the charity denied her by her nuns and Belfast neighbours, by the priests who scoured the bushes of Donegal with lights on the hunt for midnight flagrantcies. But it speaks its elegant mind, and it's good to have the case against the cruelty of the old Irish Catholic theocracy so firmly stated.

"My ambition is to solve intellectual problems and present solutions in satisfying aesthetic form", wrote Hugh Trevor-Roper. This describes what he achieved as a historian, and it describes his posthumous book, edited and assembled by Blair Worden, *Europe's Physician: The various life of Sir Theodore de Mayerne* (Yale). The book deals with the Hermetic inspiration of Mayerne's work, and shows the involvement of scientific inquiry, and of a thriving medical practice, with a powerful superstitious credulity. A Gibbonian inspiration is as ever discernible. "The cardinal insisted and called upon the Huguenot to retire before the emissary of the Crown. Persuasion still failing, the two ministers of Christ then fell to blows in the presence of the dying princess. But du Moulin clung to his principles and to the bedpost."

There must be few histories of literature that can be read through with pleasure from beginning to end. Robert Crawford's *Scotland's Books* (Penguin) is one. It owes as much to its writing as it does to its learning, and can be said to respond to the ambition embraced by Trevor-Roper. Crawford is alert to Scotland's Latin and Gaelic literatures, and writes to great effect about a wide variety of authors, including James Hogg, of whom a new biography has come from Gillian Hughes: *James Hogg: A Life* (Edinburgh). Her unrivalled knowledge of his domestic manners and publishing career makes this an important book.

FERDINAND MOUNT

Just as Darwin chose to spend his last years on his hands and knees digging up the earthworms whose habits he had first studied thirty years earlier, so Shakespeareans these days trowel ever deeper into well-trodden patches of biographical terrain. What is novel is the way they replant these familiar scraps of information into the surrounding habitat of Elizabethan England – the heraldry business, immigration panics, transport arrangements between London and Stratford, the fashion industry. Charles Nicholl in *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (Allen Lane) makes the most brilliantly productive use of Shakespeare's involvement in the lawsuit over the unpaid dowry of his landlord's daughter. Like Katherine Duncan-Jones in her *Ungentle Shakespeare*, he shows his subject perched on the crumbly edges of a rough, rowdy world. *The Lodger* goes nicely with A. D. Nuttall's *Shakespeare the Thinker* (Yale), the most illuminating close reading, play by play, I have come across since Harley Granville-Barker's *Prefaces*, to which it forms a kind of intellectual companion. Nut-

tall uncovers the thought behind the *coup de théâtre* so delicately and with so little fuss that you scarcely hear the key turn in the lock or the door swing open. Curiously, the tighter the focus of modern scholarship, the more it takes us back to the William Shakespeare we first thought of, the impulsive, curious, genial one described by Ben Jonson and John Aubrey.

PAUL MULDOON

The first of three books of Irish interest that will be interesting beyond Ireland is Ciarán Carson's riproaring, ruminative translation of *Táin Bo Cuailnge. The Táin* (Penguin Classics) is the story of the great cattle raid of Cooley and the series of pitched battles between the men of Ulster and the men of Connaught that culminates in the single combat of Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn and, then, a dust-up between two bulls. A version of such single combat is represented by the translation itself, where Carson goes toe-to-toe with Thomas Kinsella, easily beating out the version Kinsella published forty years ago that is now most memorable for its illustrations by Louis le Brocquy.

Louis le Brocquy first came to prominence in the 1943 *Irish Exhibition of Living Art*, a show notable for its having been held while Ireland itself held its neutral position on the Second World War. As Clair Wills points out in her wonderful study, *That Neutral Island: A cultural history of Ireland during the Second World War* (Faber), "it's easy to overlook the fact that Dublin's bid for the status of European cultural capital was in some ways given a boost by the war", as "writers, artists and musicians who might once have gravitated towards London now chose Dublin as their cultural metropolis".

In *Luck and the Irish: A brief history of change 1970–2000* (Allen Lane) R. F. Foster proves that being a great stylist doesn't mean there's any diminution of substance, as he gives a blow-by-blow account of the true neutrality – in the sense of "having no strongly marked characteristics or features" – of the early twenty-first-century Republic of Ireland, a country now led by that greyest of grey men, Bertie Ahern, who's on record as saying that "we can't change the past, but we can try to clean it up". This is the leader of an Irish government that has now launched an attack on its own soil in the form of driving a motorway close to the Hill of Tara. It'll be interesting to see how he proposes to clean up not only after that act of cultural terrorism but the carcass of the Celtic Tiger.

LES MURRAY

The West Australian David Cohen's *Feet of Tennis* (Melbourne, Black Pepper) stood out among novels I read. A sports-hating courtroom recordist enmeshes himself in high-tech athleticism to atone for an old wrong, and the rabbinical underpinnings of this original tale are discreetly conveyed. The finest poetry book I saw in Australia was the late Gary Catalano's *New and Selected Poems 1973–2002* (Indigo/Gininderra Press). I had a small editorial hand in its production, but that should not preclude my witnessing to the high quality of its writing. Catalano was a true master of the prose poem, and his best verse is exquisite. Two British poets who

gave me pleasure were Kent's rococo rhymers and hyperbolist John Whitworth, with his *Being the Bad Guy* (Peterloo Poets), and the half-Romany biologist and poet David Morley who, in *The Invisible Kings* (Carcanet), displays the language and the songlines of his ancient Indian heritage. The Gypsy names of English cities and towns, hitherto kept stumm and not translated for outsiders, are one of the book's many jewels.

JOYCE CAROL OATES

Of new books, I can recommend with much enthusiasm Mohsin Hamid's *cri de coeur The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Hamish Hamilton); Steve Martin's unexpectedly poignant/expectedly funny memoir *Born Standing Up* (Simon and Schuster); Edmund White's elegiac re-creation of the last days of the life of Stephen Crane, *Hotel de Dream: A New York novel* (Bloomsbury); Robert Stone's memoir of the hallucinogenic 60s, *Prime Green* (Harper Perennial); Bill Henderson's annual treasure trove anthology *Pushcart Prize: The best of the small presses 2008* (Norton); Stanley Plumly's tenderly tough-minded poetry collection *Old Heart* (Norton); Ian McEwan's tour de force of impassioned brevity *On Chesil Beach* (Picador); Miranda Seymour's *In My Father's House* (Simon and Schuster), a memoir that reads like a fairy tale gone wrong; Philip Davis's *Bernard Malamud: A writer's life* (Oxford), an exemplary literary biography; and the Chinese-Canadian Vincent Lam's wonderful story collection *Blood-Letting and Miraculous Cures* (Weinstein).

SEAN O'BRIEN

The novel I have most admired this year is Pawel Huelle's *Castorp* (Serpent's Tail), a breezy and ingenious comic prequel to *The Magic Mountain*, concerning Hans Castorp's student days in Danzig. In a strong year for poetry, Frances Leviston's *Public Dream* (Picador) is an excellent debut, as formally assured as it is imaginatively intriguing.

Lastly, the ever-enterprising Hesperus Press has assembled a trio of strange and memorable stories by Walter de la Mare in *Missing*.

MARJORIE PERLOFF

Two dazzling books, both just published, give me new hope for an avant-garde writing that also speaks to a larger audience. The Russian OBERIU poet Daniil Kharms, whose writings went unpublished in his lifetime (1905–42), was, as Marvei Yankelevich, the excellent editor and translator of *Today I Did Nothing: The selected writings* (Overlook Duckworth), remarks, much more than "Stalinist victim" or Soviet absurdist. In the single decade before he died of starvation on a psychiatric ward in Leningrad, Kharms produced a body of "micro-fiction", poetry, drama and autobiographical sketches – he himself referred to his works simply as *events* – that presents everyday life (*byt'*) in all its illogic, brutality and hyperreal humour, blending motifs from Russian fairy tale and Lewis Carroll, Dostoevsky and Dada. The surprise of these minimalist short stories is that there is no surprise. The horror of real life is that "things as they are" just go on.

Susan Howe's new collection of poems, *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (New Directions), would seem at first to be as otherworldly as Kharms's book is worldly, her language as visionary and lyrical as his is flat and demotic. Howe's title refers to the members of Jean de Labadie's utopian, quietist sect that came to the state of Maryland from the Netherlands in 1684 and was extinct by 1722, their only trace being the tree known as "lapadee poplar". "The wind", in Howe's epigraph from Wallace Stevens, "had seized the tree and ha, and ha", this enigmatic line providing a link to a second sequence of sonically charged mirror lyrics set in Stevens's lonely Hartford house, and to a third gradually shrinking visual poem, based on the writings of Jonathan Edwards.

PETER PORTER

In this year of flooding I was immersed in waves of published poetry. I scrambled ashore with three books which restored my proper land-legs. Anthony Thwaite's *Collected Poems* (Enitharmon) brings together many different sorts of invention and not once abandons reason, scrupulousness and a brilliant ear for sound. An example of how to not waste a natural gift. From my native Australia comes a remarkable poem, J. S. Harry's *Not Finding Wittgenstein* (Giramondo), a tragic and jokey mindscape exploring philosophy and contemporary politics in the company of a descendant of Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit. A witty newcomer is Tiffany Atkinson, whose *Kink and Particle* (Seren) humanizes theory and speculation, giving dumbing-up a new and attractive slant.

If there is life after poetry, then it must include Philip Gossett's *Divas and Scholars* (Chicago), the finest examination ever of nineteenth-century Italian opera, and the sincerely lamented Michael Dibdin's *End Games* (Faber), which also says farewell to his troubled star of the questura, Aurelio Zen.

CRAIG RAINE

Every year, the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* publishes a page of sanctimonious tut-tutting over collective nepotism in Books of the Year. As you'll see from my list, by the time I've read the books written by my friends (and "wasted" glorious hours reading my enemies), there isn't a lot of time left. Tina Brown's *The Diana Chronicles* (Century) was wonderful and wicked. (I am thanked in the acknowledgements.) Julie Kavanagh's *Rudolf Nureyev* (Fig Tree) was a terrific hybrid of cool dance analysis and unflinching gossip. (My wife is thanked in the acknowledgements.) Rosemary Hill's definitive biography of Pugin (Allen Lane) appeared at last. (I am thanked in the acknowledgements.) Adam Thirlwell's *Miss Herbert* (Cape) was thrilling even after a third or fourth reading. (Yes, I'm there in the acknowledgements.) Christopher Reid, my oldest friend, produced and published a brilliantly original sequence of poems, *Mr Mouth* (Ondt and Gracehoper). Julie Maxwell's *You Can Live Forever* was a fearless debut novel (a puff from me on the jacket). I read Joan Acoella's incomparable occasional criticism, *Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints* (Pantheon), with uninterrupted pleasure. (I sent her a fan letter about seven years ago, but we