BETWEEN THE LINES

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Traditionally, the December *Between the Lines* is when I discuss my best reads of the year, but this year it appears a little earlier to assist in planning holiday reading or Christmas shopping. Please bear in mind that these are not necessarily books published this year, simply books I have read and enjoyed during the year. There seem to have been so many, that I am tempted to emulate the Canadian Professor Elaine Newton, who regularly lectures at the UCT Summer School on the subject of contemporary fiction. She always has interesting and stimulating ideas on recently published novels, and an added bonus of attending her lectures is the list she hands out of the best novels of the previous year. I could just produce a list, but since this column is meant to be more than a mere catalogue of titles, however, I have had to be very selective: I have pared the list down to what, in my opinion, are the absolute musts, and have restricted my comments to a very brief indication of what they are about.

Right at the top are two novels examining contemporary Western life and its attitude towards morality: Ian McEwan's **Saturday**, and Justin Cartwright's **The promise of happiness**. Both look at the everyday lives of ordinary citizens and how they are affected by contemporary events, raising a number of thought-provoking issues, questioning our moral principles and our expectations of happiness.

The winner of last year's Booker, Allan Hollinghurst's **In the line of beauty**, has similar themes, but is set in Thatcher's Britain, producing a wickedly clever portrait of the materialism and hypocrisy of that time. Be warned, however, it is not for the prudish or homophobic as it also examines gay relationships in quite graphic detail.

The other main contender for the Booker in 1994 was Colm Toibin's **The master**, a fascinating and powerful recreation of the closing years in the life of Henry James, which is also an exploration of his art. In this beautifully drawn portrait of the master and his times, Toibin comes so close to James's style that it is difficult to believe that he is not quoting verbatim from the diaries of the great man.

On the local scene there has been a proliferation of new writing. It is very gratifying to see that there are new novels pouring off the press - titles appear almost every month, and the standard of writing is excellent. Achmat Dangor's **Bitter fruit**, also a contender for last year's Booker, examines the post-1990 situation of a former revolutionary. It is a piercing examination of the way everyone is haunted by the past, and of how principle becomes translated into reality.

In a very different vein is a first novel by Russell Brownlee, **Garden of the plagues.** It is set in the Cape at the time of Simon van der Stel, although it is not an historical novel in the usually accepted sense of the word. Michiel Heyns, writing in the **Sunday Independent**, calls the author a 'major new talent', going on to say: 'The novel's style is not the least of its delights; it has a wry humour, a clipped utterance that is laconic and matter-of-fact and can yet rise to lyricism…'

Finuala Dowling's **What poets need** is set in Kalk Bay and takes the form of a series of letters by a poet to his (married) mistress, detailing his day-to-day life as he writes verse for restaurant menus, edits a poetry anthology, cares for his young niece and worries about the state of their crumbling house.

I found myself absolutely riveted by two post-colonial novels: Chimamandie Ngozi Adichie's **Purple hibiscus**, and **Small island** by Andrea Levy. **Purple hibiscus** is a poignant account of Nigeria in the 80s seen through the eyes of a young girl growing up with an abusive, Christian fundamentalist father. It is both a coming of age novel and an indictment of the role of the missionaries in colonialism. **Small island** is set in Jamaica and London during and just after the Second World War: a wry, funny but nevertheless damning examination of the hardships and racism encountered by Jamaican immigrants to post-war Britain.

A novel in a class of its own is David Mitchell's **Cloud atlas**. The novel comprises six riveting tales, set in different periods, narrated in different styles, each narrative being broken off halfway through, to begin the next, providing tantalising clues and references to the other narratives throughout. The sixth story is complete, and then the strands of the preceding stories are knitted up, with everything falling into place in the last tale, so that reader finally understands what it is all about.

On the crime front, all the usual suspects have provided me with good, reliable escapist reading. I will not mention them again, because they are the same names I repeat every year. For those who have not encountered him before, I should just mention Lawrence Block and his PI, Matthew Scudder, who battles with alcoholism. In novels with titles like **When the sacred Ginmill closes**, **A ticket to the boneyard**, **A dance at the slaughterhouse** and **A walk among the tombstones**, Block does for New York what Ian Rankin has done for Edinburgh.

A new name for me is Massimo Carlotta, whose **Columbian mule**, translated from the Italian, is a gritty, cynically realistic view of the dark underbelly of Italian society, where the goodies and baddies are not always distinguishable from each other.

I was totally absorbed by two historical thrillers: Patricia Finney's **Gloriana's torch**, and **Dissolution**, by CJ Sansom. The latter, as its title suggests, is set during the time of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, involving a London lawyer sent to investigate a murder in a remote monastery. A little meatier than Ellis Peters's mysteries, this is reminiscent of **The name of the rose**. The author of **Gloriana's torch** has been described as 'and Elizabethan John le Carré', and she paints a riveting picture of Europe during the time of the Spanish Armada, with fascinating details on such topics as the manufacture of gunpowder, the casting of cannons, and life aboard a slave galley.

In the field of non-fiction, two works by Simon Winchester held my attention: **The Surgeon of Crowthorne**, and **The meaning of everything**. Both give detailed accounts of the monumental task of compiling the Oxford English Dictionary, which took almost seventy years, from when it was first conceived to the appearance of the first complete edition in 1928. In an earlier column, I looked at the making of Johnson's Dictionary, information on which I first encountered in these works. In the new year I hope to devote a column to the fascinating story, and the people behind, the making of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).

In the small space I have left, I would now like to express an opinion on this year's **Sunday Times** prize for fiction: both what was included on the shortlist and what was not. I have always been under the impression that the purpose of local literary prizes is to encourage local writing and publishing. So it seems to me that the inclusion on the shortlist, and subsequent award of the prize, to Justin Cartwright's **Promise of happiness** rather defeats the object of the whole exercise. I am not knocking the **Promise of happiness**: it is a terrific book, as I think I made clear earlier, but I do feel it was a great pity to nominate it for this award, particularly at the expense of another very fine local work. So I think that this year's judges missed the point of the prize, and with it an opportunity to recognise and boost the work of local writers and publishers.

There will be more about prizes in the next issue.