

It is that time of year again when people look back in reflection, take stock, and make lists. Here is my list of books that I have enjoyed reading this year.

I was absolutely blown away by the two novels which top my list. Mark Haddon's **The curious incident of the dog in the night-time** is narrated by an autistic teenage boy - a mathematical genius who is unable to understand and relate to human emotions. As we read between the lines of his story, we come to understand the unwitting heartbreak and havoc this causes in those closest to him.

Twenty years ago, Shirley Hazzard wrote a wonderful novel, **The transit of Venus**, which won the American National Book Critics Circle Award. Her most recent work, **The great fire**, won the same award in 2003, and has also been shortlisted for this year's Orange Prize. Set mainly in Japan and China in the



BETWEEN THE LINES

Cecily van Gend

aftermath of World War II, it is a haunting love story, which looks at the way human relationships are affected by war, peace, illness and death. Hazzard's subtly nuanced prose is spare and understated: she writes with superb economy in which every word reverberates.

I am cheating a little by including the next book - I actually read it in 2003, but too late to include in last year's list. Imraan Coovadia's **The wedding** is based on family stories which he heard as a child. The author, now living in the United States, was born in Durban, and his novel recounts the tale of the courtship and marriage of his grandparents, in which the action moves from Bombay to Durban. Ismet glimpses his future wife, Khateja from the window of the train on which he is travelling, and falls instantly in love. The shrewish Khateja agrees to marry him, but warns him that she will make his life hell, which she then proceeds to do. This love story is at the same time both hugely comic and deeply poignant, with some comments on the theme of migration and exile.

I was thrilled to discover that Penelope Lively, before she died, had written one last book which I had not read. In **The photograph**, as in her other novels, she is preoccupied with history, and with the varying perceptions of the past, which shift according to one's knowledge of events. Here the life of a breathtakingly beautiful young woman who has died, is examined by those left behind, particularly her husband and her older sister, both of whom assumed that they had known her.

The setting for Jonathan Raban's **Waxwings** is Seattle, where the author himself has relocated. It is a portrait of contemporary America as seen through the eyes of two recent arrivals, and details their experiences in the 'new found land'. Tom Janeaway, an English academic, married with a small son, leads what he believes to be an idyllic existence until things begin to unravel in a world where virtual dotcom existence has become a substitute for reality. For the illegal immigrant and ever-resourceful Chick, on the other hand, America proves to be the land of opportunity.

Recently I have read two works by South African expatriates which combine autobiographical details with an obsession: Rob Nixon, now an English academic living in the States, originally left South Africa to escape the draft. In **Dreambirds**, he interweaves a fascinating account of the history of Oudtshoorn's ostrich boom with details of his Port Elizabeth childhood and a poignant portrait of his journalist father.

Stanley Balfour left South Africa with his girlfriend in his twenties, driving through Africa, eventually reaching London, where he stayed on. Somewhere in Africa his interest in crossword puzzles was aroused, and this developed into a lifelong preoccupation. In **Pretty**

girl in crimson rose (8): a memoir of love, exile and crosswords, he intersperses details of his life with fascinating snippets of information on crossword puzzles, their history and the secrets of their compilation.

A summer school course on the origins of words, Root Awakenings, led to a revival of interest in the evolution of the English language. Besides re-reading Bill Bryson's two works on language - **Mother tongue** and **Made in America** - I found Melvyn Bragg's **The adventure of English** an absorbing account of the way the language developed from a conglomeration of tribal dialects into the wonderfully rich and flexible means of expression it is today.

A new Le Carré is always welcome, and his most recent, **Absolute friends**, is as gripping, penetrating and thought provoking as ever, as he analyses and exposes the latest War on Terror. The **Publishers Weekly** reviewer described it as 'a book that offers a bitter warning even as it delivers immense reading pleasure'. Shortly after reading it, I picked up Sarah Paretsky's **Blacklist**, and was struck by the similar views of the two authors on the current world situation.

I make no excuses for the fact that a large part of my reading is devoted to crime novels. They have moved a long way from the somewhat stylised classic murder mystery genre made famous by Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, into the world of social commentary. Ian Rankin said in a recent interview: 'Literary critics still have that knee-jerk reaction that the crime novel looks pre-planned, geometric, everything's worked out, everything's tied up at the end.' He goes on to say: 'The crime novel is supposed to be structured but it has a mind of its own, and that's why it often attracts literary writers too, like Martin Amis or Julian Barnes. Plenty of them are intrigued by the form.'

Today's crime novels have a gritty toughness and a realism reflecting our dislocated, modern society. This is as true of the work of Rankin himself as it is for the crime fiction of PD James, Ruth Rendell, Peter Robinson and Elizabeth George. 'I'm very interested in the effect crime has on the community around it, not so much the mechanics of the whodunit', says Rankin. 'I do think of crime novels as novels about society - if I was going to visit a foreign country, and I wanted to get a picture of what was going on, I'd read their crime writers.'

I have long been a fan of Michael Dibdin for the very reason that his novels mirror and interpret Italian society for the outsider. Andrea Camilleri has created the streetwise Sicilian Inspector Salvo Montalbano who does the same thing, wittily reflecting the sense of farce and despair which characterises modern Italy. Last year I discovered Henning Mankell, whose bleak, gritty novels, featuring the cynical Inspector Wallender, are portrayals of contemporary Swedish reality. I have just read **Firewall**, and I believe there is yet another just out. And in South America there is Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza, whose world-weary Inspector Espinosa performs the same service for the city of Rio de Janeiro in **The silence of the rain**.

I have often wondered why we do not have more local crime writers - after all, we have a past full of dark secrets just waiting to be exposed, and daily the newspapers are filled with any number of superb plots. This seems to be happening on the small screen, where there have recently been a number of good local crime series. With Deon Meyer's taut Afrikaans thrillers now translated into English, I think we have the beginnings of a local genre. **Dead at daybreak** and **Dead before dying** are as gritty and noirish as the best of their overseas counterparts. Although I have not yet read Richard Kunzmann's **Bloody harvests**, I look forward to doing so, having read the reviews, which hail him as a 'fresh new talent'.

This does not pretend to be a list of Best Books of the Year. These titles are not necessarily recent publications. As I do usually see them in paperback, many of these are last year's publications, and some are even older, although only recently discovered by me. They are titles that I found worth reading, however, and all worth sharing.