

THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

Slightly Foxed



NO.88 WINTER 2025

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'Pure Magic'



NO.88 WINTER 2025

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Contents

<i>From the Editors</i>	5
Pure Magic • SAM LEITH T. H. White, <i>The Once and Future King</i>	7
Travelling for Kicks • BRAD BIGELOW Constance Tomkinson, <i>Les Girls</i>	13
Northern Lights • JONATHAN LAW Peter Davidson, <i>The Idea of North</i>	19
An Affair to Remember • FIONA MCKENZIE JOHNSTON Rosamond Lehmann, <i>The Weather in the Streets</i>	25
Village Voices • NED VESSEY Adam Thorpe, <i>Ulverton</i>	30
Hats Off to P. D. James • DAISY HAY P. D. James's Adam Dalgliesh novels	35
Sweet Sounds Together • MAGGIE FERGUSON The poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins	41
Bats and Belfries • WILLIAM DAVIES Peter Ross, <i>Steeple Chasing</i>	47
Living in Someone Else's Life • JO RODGERS Nina Stibbe, <i>Love, Nina</i>	52
A Kind of Psychosis • BRYAN APPLEYARD Benjamin Labatut, <i>When We Cease to Understand the World</i>	57

Contents

Travels with Tarquin • LAURIE GRAHAM John Lanchester, <i>The Debt to Pleasure</i>	62
Telling It Straight • ANTHONY WELLS John Braine, <i>Room at the Top</i>	67
A Story of Love Denied • CHRIS SAUNDERS Jem Poster, <i>Courting Shadows</i>	72
How to Marry an Earl • EMILY SCHROEDER Eva Ibbotson, <i>A Countess below Stairs</i>	77
An Insatiable Appetite • JUSTIN MAROZZI A. J. Liebling, <i>Between Meals</i>	81
Lost Moments in Time • DAVID FLEMING The <i>Batsford Colour Books</i>	86
The Secret Life of Second-hand Books • SARAH LONSDALE Mini-archives of the past	90
<i>Bibliography</i>	95

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From the Editors

Here in the Slightly Foxed office the passage of the seasons is marked not so much by changes in the weather as changes in the number of books and issues piled up in what seems like an ever-diminishing space. At the beginning of each quarter it's often quite tricky to negotiate a way round piles of the latest issue and the accompanying Slightly Foxed Edition, newly delivered by Smith Settle, our printers in Yorkshire. Our lovely office staff, Rebecca, Isabel, Edie and Ruth, run a very tight ship, but it's a relief when the piles begin to shrink as new orders arrive and books and issues are sent out.

The months leading up to Christmas are usually, of course, the



Lou Tonkin

busiest and this year *Les Girls*, our Winter Slightly Foxed Edition (see p.13), is highly recommended as light relief in anxious times. Its author Constance Tomkinson, the daughter of a Canadian Nonconformist minister who had already tried her luck as an actor after drama school in New York, was only 18 when, in 1937, she decided to try her luck again in London. Constance was broke, hungry and inexperienced but she was up for anything and was delighted and frankly astonished to be offered a place in the chorus line of a touring company called the Millerettes which was about to leave for Sweden. Her delicious memoir tells the story of her year touring European cities, and is not only a wryly observed and very funny

picture of the seedy world of the chorus line and the touching esprit de corps that kept the girls going, but also an unusual glimpse of Europe on the eve of the Second World War, not long before the curtain finally came down.

On 1 November we published another gloom-breaker, *Love Divine*, a first foray into fiction by Ysenda Maxtone Graham, already known to many readers for her hilarious bestseller *Terms and Conditions*. With an unsolved mystery at its heart, her sharply funny new novella takes us through the Church year, from New Year to Christmas, in Lamley Green, a leafy village on the edge of London which is temporarily without a rector. How the parish copes is told via a deft mixture of extracts from letters, texts, emails, prayers, sermons and Parish Council Minutes that hit the nail on the head every time. If you haven't already ordered, now's the moment.

It's the moment too for our annual Christmas crossword, which you'll find in the winter catalogue – good for those familiar moments over the festive season when, for some reason, there really seems nothing left to do. Entries should arrive with us by 15 January 2026 and the author of the first correct one drawn out of a hat will receive a free annual subscription.

And finally, dear readers, we send you every good wish for Christmas and the year to come. If, like some readers who write to us, you're suffering withdrawal symptoms between issues, do tune in to our quarterly Slightly Foxed podcast. All past episodes of these lively personal conversations with authors and other literary folk are available to hear on our website. The most recent, which went out on 15 October, is about the Brontës, with Ann Dinsdale, principal curator of the Parsonage Museum at Haworth, as our guest.

GAIL PIRKIS & HAZEL WOOD

Pure Magic

SAM LEITH

‘I have laughed at White’s great Arthurian novel and cried over it and loved it all my life,’ wrote Ursula Le Guin of the tetralogy of novels by T. H. White now known as *The Once and Future King*. She encapsulates not only what’s so ravishing and so distinctive about it – its jagged blend of pathos and humour – but also the way in which White’s eccentric riff on Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* can speak to children and grown-ups, in different voices, over the course of a whole life.

Certainly that was my experience. When I came to write my book about children’s literature, *The Haunted Wood*, I knew I would want to include White because I remembered reading and loving the first book, *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), when I was a child myself. Reading through the whole sequence as an adult I was more moved, and more flabbergasted by its brilliance, than by anything else I read during my research. There’s so much there for a child reader; and so much more besides. White himself didn’t quite know who it was for: ‘It seems impossible to determine whether it is for grown-ups or children,’ he wrote to a friend in 1938. ‘It is more or less a kind of wish-fulfilment of things I should like to have happened to me when I was a boy.’

The wish-fulfilment is most pronounced in that first book. Though its successors build on it wonderfully, *The Sword in the Stone* works

T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* comprises *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (1939), *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940) and *The Candle in the Wind* (1958): HarperCollins • Pb • 864pp • £14.99 • ISBN 9780008108588.

happily as a stand-alone – and is, I think, the one that’s most clearly a children’s book. It is, on the face of it, a classic Harry Potter/Luke Skywalker/Moses fantasy: the tale of an orphan about whom there seems to be nothing very unusual at all, but who turns out to have a historic destiny.

The story is set in an alternative medieval England called Gramarye, where Uther Pendragon led the Norman Conquest and the historical kings of England are creatures of legend. It combines Monty Python-style absurdist gags, gleeful anachronisms and (occasionally) smutty jokes. When we first meet the tragicomic Sir Pellinore, he seems to belong to the chivalric sublime: ‘a knight in full armour, standing still and silent and unearthly, among the majestic trunks . . . All was moonlit, all silver, too beautiful to describe.’

But then he gets spooked, nearly falls off his horse, makes an undignified ‘baa’ like a sheep inside his helmet, lifts his visor to reveal fogged-up spectacles which he tries to wipe on his horse’s mane, ‘which only made them worse’, before fumbling with both spectacles and lance on the ground: ‘Oh dear!’ Later, he has a set-piece battle with a rival knight – ‘Traitor knight! Yield, recreant, what!’ – which is a sublimely funny and absurd piece of slapstick; as well, I suspect, as being slyly realistic about what it’s really like trying to fight in full plate armour.

White has tremendous fun with the court wizard Merlyn, too. As well as sporting a proper wizard’s hat (‘a pointed hat like a dunce’s cap, or like the headgear worn by ladies of the time, except that the ladies were accustomed to have a bit of veil floating from the top of it’), Merlyn lives ‘backwards through time’. He mutters about psychoanalysis and plastic surgery and is forever scattering anachronistic knick-knacks such as ‘a complete set of cigarette cards depicting wild fowl by Peter Scott’ or ‘the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (marred as it was by the sensationalism of the popular plates)’.

The book’s protagonist, though, is Wart, who is being brought up

in Castle Sauvage under the loving care of his adopted father Sir Ector. His destiny, as he thinks, is to be the squire of his useless but likeable half-brother Kay. Much of the book's action – amid all those camp cod-medieval hijinks – is the description of Wart's education at the feet of Merlyn.

Merlyn favours an immersive style of pedagogy: he uses his magic to turn Wart into a succession of animals for a few hours: he becomes a fish, an owl, a wild goose and an ant. (Is that, perhaps, a little tip of the cap to the idea that imagining what it is like to be someone else is the wellspring of empathy and the basic project of fiction?) The absolute otherness of those animals' worldviews is brilliantly captured. As with the introduction of Sir Pellinore, White can turn on a pin between low comedy and writing of huge grace, beauty and seriousness. As an owl, for instance,

He felt the castle walls streaking past him, and the ground and the moat swimming up. He kicked with his wings, and the ground sank again, like water in a leaking well. In a second that kick of his wings had lost its effect, and the ground was welling up. He kicked again. It was strange, going forward with the earth ebbing and flowing beneath him, in the utter silence of his down-fringed feathers.

Here, in this fascination with the escape from human consciousness that the animal world offers, is the T. H. White of *The Goshawk*, who was so available to Helen Macdonald when she wrote *H Is for Hawk*; and also the T. H. White whose letters written in grief after the death of his Irish setter Brownie are so moving: 'Now I am writing with her dead head in my lap. I will sit up with her tonight, but tomorrow we must bury her. I don't know what to do after that . . . I am certain I am not going to kill myself about it, as I thought I might once . . . She was all I had.'

What Wart doesn't know as he proceeds through his adventures is that he is the secret son and heir of Uther Pendragon – and in the

closing pages he will fulfil the prophecy, draw the sword from the stone and become King Arthur. There's a moving bit in the moment after the sword is pulled when Sir Ector falls to his knees before his new king – and Wart is distraught. 'Please do not do this, father,' he says, kneeling himself. 'Let me help you up, Sir Ector, because you are making me unhappy.'

What sweetness there is in that first book; and what longing. Wart, even before he embraces his destiny, is surrounded by love – as T. H. White was not. It's *that*, rather than the idea of becoming king, that's the real fantasy here. White, like so many children's authors, was a deeply troubled and unhappy man. As described in Sylvia Townsend Warner's wonderful 1963 biography, the trauma of his life was the break-up of his parents' marriage when he was 14, and his whole emotional temperament was blighted by his alternately unfeeling and smothering mother. He later writes, of Lancelot (one of many avatars of White in the books): 'It is fatally easy to make young children believe they are horrible.'

I think that psychological torque is what gives the sequence such an intense charge of feeling. The books that follow chart the course of Arthur's reign, the life of the Round Table, the anguished love-triangle with Guenever and Lancelot (which dominates the third book, *The Ill-Made Knight*) and, in *The Candle in the Wind*, which brings the sequence to its close, the rising evil of Arthur's bastard son Mordred. Here, Mordred's gang are very obviously Nazis. The books have become statelier, graver and more adult. There are still jokes, though. Sir Pellinore is on a never-ending pursuit of the Beast Glatisant, and when it vanishes at one point in *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, he becomes positively depressed. To cheer him up, a pair of knights dress up pantomime-horse-style as the Beast – but their costume is too convincing. The real Beast Glatisant shows up and starts trying to, ahem, make love to them.

But there's much darker material in these later books too. White's mother appears as Arthur's half-sister and in due course seducer, the



Ella Balaam

witch-queen Morgause. She is one of the most memorably cruel monsters in all children's literature. When we first meet Morgause in the second book, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, she's boiling a cat alive to make a magic spell, and there's an awful sequence in which her sons, desperate to please her, kill and mutilate a unicorn. What a complexity

of feeling is here: '[Gawaine] hated it for being dead, for having been beautiful, for making him feel a beast. He had loved it and helped to trap it, so now there was nothing to be done except to vent his shame and hatred of himself upon the corpse.'

And then, later:

She was, she discovered with a change of posture, interested in nothing but her darling boys. She was the best mother to them in the world! Her heart ached for them, her maternal bosom swelled. When Gareth nervously brought white heather to her bedroom as *an apology for being whipped*, she covered him with kisses, *glancing in the mirror* [my italics].

Through these stories White not only entertains, but – like Merlyn – he also instructs. They blend knockabout physical comedy with deep psychological insight and a grave seriousness about the duties of friendship, the moral governance of a state, and the lonely eminence of a king. One moment you're hooting with laughter; the next, you're pierced or moved or horrified.

Is *The Once and Future King* for children? In its epic sweep, it never loses sight – as White was never able to – of the child buried in the sorrowing adult. When near the end of the story Lancelot sees

Pure Magic

the ageing Guenever using make-up to look younger ‘the heart-sack broke in his wame’:

Her stupid finery was not vulgar to him, but touching. The girl was still there, still appealing from behind the breaking barricade of rouge. She had made the bravest protest: I will not be vanquished. Under the clumsy coquetry, the undignified clothes, there was the human cry for help. The young eyes were puzzled, saying: It is I, inside here – what have they done to me? I will not submit.

The Once and Future King was the work of an affectionate, troubled, conscientious, scholarly man who loved jokes, felt cruelty deeply and poured himself in all his contradictions and strivings on to every page of it. It’s a masterpiece, and it’s like nothing else. If my own book, or this article, contribute in any way to keeping these books in print and on the bookshelves of the readers who will respond to them, I’ll consider my job well done.

SAM LEITH is literary editor of the *Spectator* and the author of *The Haunted Wood: A History of Childhood Reading*, published in 2024.



Travelling for Kicks

BRAD BIGELOW

'Do chorus girls think?' asked the headline of a newspaper article that appeared around the time that Constance Tomkinson won a spot in her first chorus line. As one soon discovers from her gloriously comical *Les Girls* (1956), they not only thought but were experts in navigating the rackets worlds of show business, finance and sex while defending their virtue as energetically as a Samuel Richardson heroine.

Not that a spot in a chorus line was Constance's goal when she started out in show business. Born the daughter of a Canadian Nonconformist minister, she headed to New York in 1933 at the age of 18, hoping to become 'the Toast of Broadway'. Instead, she joined the mass of unemployed actors turned away from countless casting calls. She and a friend toured churches around the East Coast performing Biblical dramas for a few months, but then the friend quit, declaring: 'I've had enough of pulling curtains with one hand and playing God with the other.'

So Constance decided to try her luck in England. Despite its legendary theatre scene, London proved even tougher than New York when it came to making it past the first audition. Growing hungry and desperate, she answered an ad for chorus girls, part of a touring revue known as the Millerettes which was scheduled to depart on a tour of Scandinavia. Blonde, pretty and roughly capable of dancing in sync with the other girls, she got the job. The troupe was, she admits, the Export Model, as there were several more proficient Millerette ensembles busy touring theatres around Britain.

Two days into their first engagement in Gothenburg, Sweden, she

was rudely reminded of her shortcomings as a dancer. While spinning around in an ersatz Viennese waltz,

with every turn I became shakier. The faces in the audience were swimming, as I reeled stage right towards a gap in the footlights. Suddenly I was in mid-air and sinking fast. With a muffled thud and a faint tinkle of cymbals I landed on the bass drum. The drummer, muttering Swedish curses, untangled me from the cymbals, pulled me off the drum, propped me up with his right hand and went on drumming with his left.

Most of the other Millerettes were working-class girls happy to be employed and dutifully sending their spare pennies home. Although grateful for gifts of cheap jewellery or offers of a free meal from admirers, they guarded their virtue with care, if only to avoid a rapid slide out of the chorus and into a more dubious profession. If a girl wanted to go further and ‘sleep casual’, however, the others reserved judgement: ‘It was a rather-you-than-me-dear attitude,’ Constance recalls.

Gothenburg was the beginning and end of the Millerettes’ Scandinavian tour. No other bookings materialized, and the troupe had to extract their fares home from the promoter. As they sat in a café bemoaning their fate, one of the girls had an inspired idea: ‘Why not go to Paris? We could all get jobs there.’ Constance and five other girls exchanged their second-class tickets to England for third-class tickets to Paris. What with missed connections and a dwindling supply of funds, the journey proved more challenging than expected, but a few days later they arrived at the Gare du Nord ‘visibly thinner, our faces smeared with dirt’, but still laughing.

The laughter died quickly, though, when it became apparent that jobs were as hard to get in Paris as they had been in England. The group filed down to the stage door of the Folies-Bergère to audition for the chorus *mâtresse*, Madam Bluebell. The first pair entered and were promptly rejected. So were the second pair. Constance and the

last remaining girl, Angela, approached Madam Bluebell, expecting the same reception. 'I'm afraid not, dear,' Bluebell told Angela. Turning to go, Constance was startled to be asked, 'Do you want a job?' 'Yes,' she answered cautiously, to which the reply was, 'When can you start?'

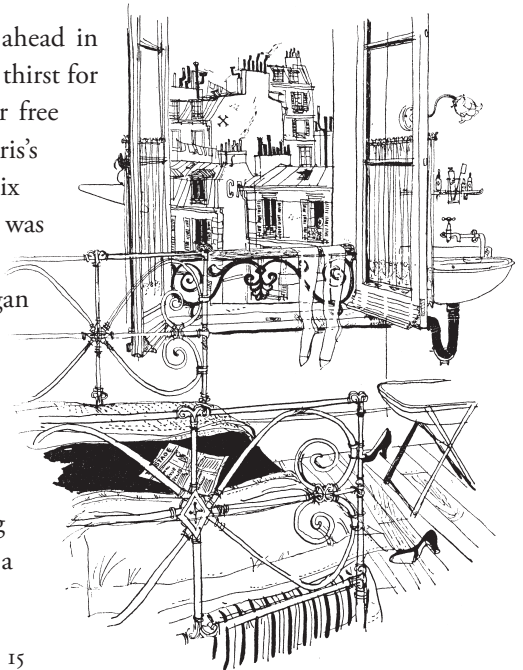
And so Constance found herself one of *Les Girls*, appearing on stage with the great Josephine Baker. The show was not the precision machine she'd anticipated:

I learned that every night there seemed to be a crisis at the Folies. There were great dash and *élan* backstage, but little apparent co-ordination. Many orders were given, but few taken. I expected the organization to fall apart at any moment, but miraculously it held together. I decided it must be the French way.

The French way did not extend to the chorus members. Madam Bluebell hired few French dancers, finding them too inclined to improvisation compared with their more disciplined Northern European sisters.

Constance's ambition to get ahead in show business was balanced by a thirst for self-improvement. She spent her free time conscientiously visiting Paris's museums and churches. After six months, though, she realized she was now 'scraping the bottom of the Baedeker barrel', so she began to look for other opportunities. Luck – and politics – soon presented one.

The Basil Beauties, managed by Reginald Basil and considered the glamour girls of the touring revues, came to the Folies for a



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We hope you enjoyed this extract. A full bibliography for this issue appears on the following page. To read more please purchase this issue or take out a subscription.

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'*Slightly Foxed* is a perfect readers' periodical and every issue is a joy. In its pages, books you don't yet know come to light and books you already love come to life.' **Adam Foulds**

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Bibliography

The <i>Batsford Colour Books</i>	86
John Braine, <i>Room at the Top</i>	67
Peter Davidson, <i>The Idea of North</i>	19
The poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins	41
Eva Ibbotson, <i>A Countess below Stairs (The Secret Countess)</i>	77
P. D. James's Adam Dalgliesh novels	35
Benjamin Labatut, <i>When We Cease to Understand the World</i>	57
John Lanchester, <i>The Debt to Pleasure</i>	62
Rosamond Lehmann, <i>The Weather in the Streets</i>	25
A. J. Liebling, <i>Between Meals</i>	81
Jem Poster, <i>Courting Shadows</i>	72
Peter Ross, <i>Steeple Chasing</i>	47
Second-hand books, discoveries in	90
Nina Stibbe, <i>Love, Nina</i>	52
Adam Thorpe, <i>Ulverton</i>	30
Constance Tomkinson, <i>Les Girls</i>	13
T. H. White, <i>The Once and Future King</i>	7

Coming attractions

STEPHEN BAYLEY looks back with Edward Gibbon • SARAH HARKNESS listens in to the wartime BBC • ROGER HUDSON enjoys the letters of a great Whig lady • FRANCES DONNELLY takes *A Late Call* from Angus Wilson • TIM BLANCHARD meets the family of the Yorkshire Ripper • SUZI FEAY joins the Pickwick Club • JAMES RUNCIE discovers the short stories of Stacy Aumonier • OLIVIA POTTS remembers the cookery writers' cookery writer • ALEX WOODCOCK wanders through Venice with Joseph Brodsky • URSULA BUCHAN gardens with *An Ear to the Ground*

Slightly Foxed

‘Sometimes deep, sometimes surprising, often eccentric,
but always unputdownable’

Posy Simmonds

In this issue

Laurie Graham relishes a story of mushrooms and murder •

Sam Leith pays homage to *The Once and Future King* •

Maggie Fergusson is comforted by Gerard Manley Hopkins •

Bryan Appleyard finds hope in a terrifying novel • **Jo Rodgers** has

fun with the North London literati • **Justin Marozzi** discovers *An*

Appetite for Paris • **William Davies** goes *Steeple Chasing* • **Anthony**

Wells discovers there’s *Room at the Top* • **Daisy Hay** admits she’s in

love with Adam Dalgliesh



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