

Eileen Battersby's books of 2014

Our Literary Correspondent picks her favourite titles from a year's reading



The Zone of Interest, by Martin Amis (Cape): Still the bravest of contemporary British writers, Amis for once suppresses his linguistic panache and attempts to make sense of the impossible by means of an unlikely love story set in a Nazi concentration camp

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Fiction

1 *Iza's Ballad*, by Magda Szabo, translated by George Szirtes (Harvill Secker) Ettie's world dies with her beloved hapless husband, leaving her at the mercy of their only daughter, a divorced doctor, and her clinical kindness. Szabo, author of *The Door* (1987, translated 2005), is a rare voice, and this novel about the death of

tradition and hope is a marvel of empathy.

2 All is Silence, by Manuel Rivas, translated by Jonathan Dunne (Vintage) Galician poet Rivas has a gleeful field day with narrative in this textured morality play cum thriller that ricochets between politics, intellectual games, emotion and regret. With a coastal setting that could be the west of Ireland and a cast of characters that could be Irish, it also has flashes of the mighty American, William Gaddis – no need to say more.



Eileen Battersby gives thanks for the great American novels



Five Irish novels on Impac longlist



12 great German works to mark Reformation Day

3 Iron Gustav, by Hans Fallada, translated by Philip Owens, completed by Nicholas Jacobs (Penguin) Gustav Hackendahl is tough, yet life proves even harder as he sees his adult children and his small empire, a successful Berlin cab business, falter. Finally available with the Nazi-censored cuts reinstated, this is Fallada at his most Dickensian.

4 A Meal in Winter, by Hubert Mingarelli, translated by Sam Taylor (Portobello) Three battle-hardened German soldiers set out to track down a Jew in the Polish countryside and then take shelter from the bitter cold in a derelict shack. There they prepare a meal of strange resonance in a narrative of bleak genius.

5 Beside the Sea, by Veronique Olmi, translated by Adriana Hunter (Peirene Press) Olmi's devastating study of a mother battling poverty and mental illness, which was also adapted for stage by the Irish actor Lisa Dwan, is a modern-day Greek tragedy whose narrator holds us with her truth and humanity.

6 The Giraffe's Neck, by Judith Schalansky, translated by Shaun Whiteside (Bloomsbury) An angry biology teacher is at war with the world, while her husband has taken to breeding ostriches and their only daughter has left to study in California. Schalansky, born in 1982 in Hans Fallada's home town, is another German original and this brilliant, multilayered novel features a flawed anti-heroine all too human in her failures.

7 F, by Daniel Kehlmann, translated by Carol Brown Janeway (Quercus) Poised and knowing, Munich-born Kehlmann takes the theme of dysfunctional families and makes it his own, along with exploiting the hidden symbolism of a Rubik cube.

8 Gilgi, by Irmgard Keun, translated by Geoff Wilkes (Melville House) A

one-time companion of Joseph Roth, Keun was a formidable literary talent. In *Gilgi*, her first novel, published in 1931 when she was 26, the young heroine sets out to take charge of her own destiny and makes plans, only to see them falter when she falls in love. Sharp yet naive, she is utterly human and Wilkes's inspired translation renders her in bold three-dimensional focus.

9 On Leave, by Daniel Anselme, translated by David Bellos (Penguin Classics) A trio of soldiers make their way home to France to celebrate Christmas 1956. Anselme's truth-teller's lost classic, published in 1957, told far too much about the French involvement in Algeria.

10 Strange Weather in Tokyo, by Hiromi Kawakami, translated by Allison Markin Powell (Portobello) True love is celebrated with humour, grace and pathos as the wary narrator recalls her unusual approach to dealing with an overwhelming passion.

11 The Narrow Road to the Deep North, by Richard Flanagan (Chatto & Windus) One of the strongest-ever Booker winners, Flanagan's story of an outsider doomed to live a long, lonely life triumphs in the vivid sequences describing the horrific suffering endured by Australian prisoners of war building Burma's Death Railway.

12 In the Beginning was the Sea, by Tomás González, translated by Frank Wynne (Pushkin Press) When an arrogantly intellectual couple decide to settle for a self-sufficient existence on Colombia's tropical coast, it all goes appallingly wrong. González places it in laconic context. Superb.

13 The Woman Who Borrowed Memories: Selected Stories, by Tove Jansson, translated by Thomas Teal and Silvester Mazzarella (New York Review Books) In her centenary year, the unique Swedish-speaking Finnish author Jansson, a daughter of two artists, continues to dazzle in singular narratives filtered through her sharp wit and beguiling imagination.

14 Red Cavalry, by Isaac Babel, translated by Boris Dralyuk (Pushkin Press) As a journalist with the Soviet first cavalry during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, Babel kept a diary and later wrote these unforgettable stories, lyrical and earthy, through the eyes of a bewildered Russian-Jewish narrator.

15 Pedro Páramo, by Juan Rulfo, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden (Serpent's Tail) Honouring a last promise made to his dying mother, Juan Preciado sets off across Mexico to the ghost town once ruled over by his father. First published in 1955, Rulfo's only novel explores the thin line between the living and the dead.

16 The Sermon on the Fall of Rome, by Jerome Farrari, translated by Geoffrey Strachan (MacLehose Press) As expected, this is another masterful performance from the author of *Where I Left My Soul* (2010, translated 2012). Two graduates return home from Paris to their Corsican village to run a bar, and fun yields to menace.

17 Married Life, by David Vogel, translated by Dalya Bilu (Scribe) Written in Hebrew by Vogel, an Austrian Jew who perished in Auschwitz, this masterwork from 1929 is set in 1920s Vienna and looks at a sexual power struggle in which a hapless writer is manipulated by his vengeful wife.

18 Em and the Big Hoom, by Jerry Pinto (Viking) Ignore the stupid title; this is a heartbreakingly human account of a son's love for his father and fear of his beautiful mother's madness. Mumbai-born and based, Pinto has written a wonderful, very different, Indian novel.

19 Eyrie, by Tim Winton (Picador) In Winton's finest novel to date, Tom Keely, a good man in a crisis, who is holed up in a vile high-rise flat overlooking Fremantle, realises exactly how difficult life can be in a world gone mad.

20 The Zone of Interest, by Martin Amis (Cape) Still the bravest of contemporary British writers, Amis for once suppresses his linguistic panache and attempts to make sense of the impossible by means of an unlikely love story set in a Nazi concentration camp.

21 Uncertain Glory, by Joan Sales, translated by Peter Bush (MacLehose Press) The Spanish Civil War moves beyond chaotic politics in this richly vibrant, often comic, bird's-eye view of life during upheaval as the Catalan Sales calls upon various characters to describe their experience of how ordinary life staggered on as their country fell apart.

22 The Hunting Gun, by Yasushi Inoue, translated by Michael Emmerich (Pushkin Press) A chance invitation to write a poem causes the narrator to receive a letter from a middle-aged father and unfaithful husband. Yasushi Inoue began his long literary career in 1949 with two miraculous works, *Bullfight* and this poignant cautionary tale.

23 Death in the Museum of Modern Art, by Alma Lazarevska, translated by Celia Hawkesworth (Istros) Nothing, not even history itself, prepares the reader for the paralysing beauty of the images that emerge from these stories written by a Bosnian survivor of the siege of Sarajevo.

24 The Expedition to the Baobab Tree, by Wilma Stockenstrom, translated

by JM Coetzee (Archipelago Books) An escaped slave tells her story from the safety of a mythical tree. Stockenström's starkly dramatic tour de force is deftly translated from the Afrikaans by Coetzee, by whom it could as easily have been written.

25 Diary of the Fall, by Michel Laub, translated by Margaret Jull Costa (Harvill Secker) Chaotic lucidity as well as echoes of William Maxwell hover over Brazilian Michel Laub's moving exploration of a man's efforts to counter his guilt with the experiences of his grandfather during his struggle as a death-camp survivor.

Non-fiction

1 Pilgrims of the Air, by John Wilson Foster (Notting Hill Editions) This centenary year of the Great War also marks the death of a bird in Cincinnati Zoo. Named in honour of George Washington's wife, the 29-year-old "Martha" was the last passenger pigeon in existence. Once there had been between five and 10 billion of them, but when their habitat – the forests – were cut down, causing them to graze on crops, farmers opened fire and then professional hunters took over. Slaughter followed. Belfast academic and writer John Wilson Foster's masterful narrative is both cautionary tale and superb history writing. It is also an astute lament for the loss of an older, more noble America and, with it, a creature of great beauty.

More than 90 years since its first publication, the Australian classic *Mateship with Birds*, by AH Chisholm (Scribe), remains lively and has a powerful conservation message as well. As he celebrates Australia's rich bird life, Chisholm also mourns the demise of the paradise parrot.

2 Radio Benjamin, by Walter Benjamin, edited by Lecia Rosenthal, translated by Jonathan Lutes (Verso) The gifted German-Jewish Marxist literary critic and essayist was drawn to the radio as a means of cultural communication. Between 1927 and 1933 he wrote and presented 80 broadcasts on a range of subjects. Almost a third of them were specially written for children and each piece is hallmarked by his humour, humanity, originality and genius.

3 The Burning of the World, by Bela Zombory-Moldovan, translated by Peter Zombory-Moldovan (New York Review of Books) In the late summer of 1914, Hungarian painter Bela Zombory-Moldovan was 29. In the course of a day, his life changed when he discovered he was bound for the Eastern Front. Stylish and languid, he writes with easy wit and gazes at the carnage with the eye of an artist. Translated by his grandson and now published for the first time, this is the literary discovery of the year and honours the dead of the Eastern Front.

4 My Crazy Century, by Ivan Klima, translated by Craig Cravens (Grove Press) The Czech writer Ivan Klima is one of the great witnesses: as a Jewish child he

was rounded up with his family by German troops and sent to the Terezin ghetto. Klima tells his story, and that of his country, with understatement and humility. To read it is to wonder at his stoicism.

The same must be said of *A Childhood*, by Jona Oberski, translated by Ralph Manheim (Pushkin Press). Far more oblique than Klima, Oberski, a Dutch scientist, recalls the horror of seeing his parents die in Bergen-Belsen. Told with the deadpan disbelief of a child, it is shocking as well as desperately beautiful in its simplicity.

5 Masterpieces in Detail: Early Netherlandish Art from van Eyck to Bosch, by Till Holger Borchert (Prestel) Spanning 200 years of art created during an explosive period of political and cultural change, this magnificent book is magic between covers and demonstrates the extraordinary influence that the art produced in Flanders, Brabant and the Hainault exerted throughout Europe.

6 The Third Tower: Journeys in Italy, by Antal Szerb, translated by Len Rix (Pushkin Press) In the summer of 1936, Hungarian writer Antal Szerb, then a teacher and aware of the changes in Europe, decided to visit Italy. It gave him time to think. This is travelogue as philosophical meditation. The melancholic tone proved prophetic: Szerb, baptised as a Catholic by his Jewish parents, was to die in 1945, beaten to death in a labour camp.

7 The Irish Hand: Scribes and Their Manuscripts, by Timothy O'Neil (Cork University Press) This elegant book celebrates the glory of the early Irish manuscripts and is dedicated to Columcille, "Saint, Scholar, Scribe".

8 Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh, by John Lahr (Bloomsbury Circus) My devotion to the tormented artist that was Williams helped me wade through this compelling, shocking, heavily overcooked if highly readable account, full of insight and unabashed gossip. The book is admittedly far from perfect, yet it does match the life while acknowledging the art.

Equally candid and gossipy, if far more charming, is *Inside a Pearl*, by Edmund White (Bloomsbury), in which the novelist, effortless prose stylist and intuitive cultural commentator recalls his time in Paris.

9 This House of Grief: The Story of a Murder Trial, by Helen Garner (Text Publishing) On Father's Day 2005, an estranged husband and father of three small sons drove along a suburban road outside Melbourne and deliberately plunged his car into a farm dam. He left his children to die and then began a litany of cock-eyed excuses. Helen Garner's account of the trial is a non-literary variation of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966). It is all the more shocking for her direct, no-nonsense, often horrified, approach.

10 Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies, edited by Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan and Werner Huber (Cork University Press) The many aspects of O'Brien's daring, originality and enduring literary influence are discussed in this volume of critical essays.

11 The Society of the Crossed Keys: Selections from the Writings of Stefan Zweig (Pushkin Press) draws on Zweig's famous memoir, *The World of Yesterday*, translated by Anthea Bell and available in a handsome clothbound edition, also from Pushkin Press. The Austrian writer's work was the inspiration for Wes Anderson's recent movie, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, starring Ralph Fiennes as a Zweig alter-ego. The memoir evokes the lost world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the death of which caused Zweig to take his own life in 1942, a day after delivering the manuscript.

12 Irish Brigades Abroad, by Stephen McGarry (The History Press Ireland) Inspired by John O'Callaghan's 19th-century account of the Irish brigades in France, this is the first standalone study in 150 years of the Irish soldiers who, far from being mercenaries for hire, were the embodiment of old-style honour, chivalry and loyalty, as well as a belief in sharing in times of great change.

Far less intense is *In These Times: Living in Britain Through Napoleon's Wars*, by Jenny Uglow (Faber & Faber), in which Uglow, biographer of artists William Hogarth and Thomas Bewick, brings her magpie's eye for colour and detail to the 22 years of thrilling chaos wreaked by Napoleon.

13 Youth: Autobiographical Writings, by Wolfgang Koeppen translated by Michael Hofmann (Dalkey Archive Press) Koeppen, author of major works such as *The Hothouse* and *Death in Rome*, was never a Nazi and risked staying in Germany. This late book, translated for the first time, is a valuable insight into his early life.

14 Parisian Sketches, by JK Huysmans, translated by Brendan King (Dedalus) The prose equivalent of a painting by Manet or Degas, this volume of prose pictures predates the journalism of Joseph Roth. Huysmans, the realist son of a Dutch artist, saw life as it is lived and captured it in prose of startling clarity.