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Books of the Year 2021

Our contributors select their favourite books of 2021



"Discarded Treasures" by John Frederick Peto, 1904 © Francis G. Mayer/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

November 26, 2021

[...]

MICHAEL HOFMANN

The Paper Lantern by the poet Will Burns (Weidenfeld) is an early post-2020 book, not really a novel, or as much or as little a novel as *The Rings of Saturn* or *The Enigma of Arrival*. A deep dysphoria radiates from the writer, as he surveys the cultural rubble around the Buckinghamshire village where he grew up, and the village pub (called The Paper Lantern) kept by his parents, where he shelters in place. Iain Sinclair would doubtless find a ravel of leylines beneath it; Burns peoples it with birds and bees, "Red kites. A single, languid buzzard", with developers, with a smattering of "Petes", with the Prime Ministerial retreat Chequers, with the Rothschilds, so foolishly rich they used zebras for horses, with random statues of David Bowie and Ronnie Barker, who were never even there. It is a book of rare delicacy, sweetness and honesty. When future generations come to ask themselves when England lost it and what it lost, they will pick up *The Paper Lantern*.

ROBERT IRWIN

I came late to **Thomas Bauer's** provocatively brilliant reinterpretation of pre-modern Islamic culture, its literature, laws, political discourse and sexual ethics. Bauer also denounced the way that European scholars imposed western definitions and paradigms on Islam that have contributed to the wholesale misreading of its culture, not just by western scholars, politicians and journalists, but also, from the nineteenth century onwards, by Muslim religious leaders and scholars. The

results have been disastrous. Bauer's book was first published in German in 2011 and only this year has a translation been published by Columbia University Press under the title *A Culture of Ambiguity: An alternative history of Islam*. Ambiguity and alternative readings were pervasive in the medieval Arab lands. "Difference of opinion is a mercy for my community", according to a saying attributed to the Prophet. The unfathomable quality of the Qur'an was similarly a blessing. Though grand and pious religious scholars might write poems about beautiful youths, they wrote about love, not sex. And there is more ...

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

My book of the year has to be Proust's *Les Soixante-Quinze Feuilles et autres manuscrits inédits*, edited by Nathalie Mauriac-Dyer (Gallimard). The fabled pages, long considered lost, turned up in 2018, and now Mauriac-Dyer has edited them and other early jottings with scrupulous scholarship and an abundance of essay-long appendices and notes, revealing how, slowly and yet relentlessly, Proust turned memory into an imaginative construct, removing his brother from the story, for example, and allowing himself to explore the taboo subjects of his Jewish background and his homosexuality through the creation of Swann and Charlus. This splendid volume does nothing less than reveal the beating heart at the centre of the massive work.

Three publications from small presses shows the European modernism Proust helped bring to birth flourishing in a country that by and large shows little appetite for it: Philip Terry's fertile Oulipian imagination is evident on every hilarious page of *From From* (Pamenar); Paul Griffiths's *The Tomb Guardians* (Henningham Family) movingly explores the primary need for attentiveness in our lives, how impossible that is for us to maintain and how art can help us grasp the contradiction; and Rod Mengham's wonderfully titled *Midnight in the Kant Hotel* (Little Island) brings an awareness of the philosophical and political dimension of both eastern and western Europe to bear on the art of today. All three provide rich grounds for reflection.

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