

Quick reads

The Beauty And The Sorrow: An Intimate History Of The First World War
Peter Englund
Profile Books, £25

To find a book this well written and detailed about the First World War, written by a professor from a country that was not involved, is both rare and refreshing. Swedish academic Peter Englund takes the words gathered from 20 participants from various countries, and lets the reader see the mosaic of conflicting thoughts, ideas, fears and hopes of a generation that would be butchered and damned in the trenches, in the air and in the depths of the sea. His use of diaries and letters gives the real edge to this superb work; the words of a 12-year-old child jar against the voices of horror heard in the memories of soldiers and sailors. All the players have a unique perspective in this epic tale. It's thought-provoking and superb.

David McLoughlin

On Booze
F Scott Fitzgerald
Picador, £9.99

This slim hardback gathers up sketches and fragments from letters and memoirs inspired by the American writer's life-long affair with alcohol. We get glamorous glimpses of travels through Europe as F Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda dip in and out of expensive hotels and cheap bars in search of the next party. Best of all is a love letter to the bright lights of the New York of his youth before he found fame as the man who gave the world *The Great Gatsby*. But all the sparkling prose comes with a big twist of melancholy as he starts to regret the days spent looking at the world through the bottom of a glass and wonders what might have been. The beautiful-looking book is an ideal introduction for new readers, but probably best of all for devoted Fitzgerald fans.

Robert Dex

Everywhere We Went: Top Tales From Cricket's Barmy Army
Ben Dirs
Simon and Schuster, £16.99

Sports journalist Ben Dirs - who some of you may recognise from his live blogging of Test cricket on the BBC website - has compiled stories and interviews from cricket's 12th team member, the Barmy Army. Starting from the 1994-95 Ashes tour, and finishing with the Ashes tour of 2010-11, Dirs regales us with tales and anecdotes from cricket legends, giving a real insight into how players felt about the Barmy Army (including some of the more negative views). Plus, he gives us an insight into the players' celebrations that weren't seen on TV. This is a brilliant book for any cricket enthusiast out there - it reveals the players' state of mind through the winning (and the losing), and is stuffed full of laughs. Thoroughly enjoyable.

Emma Everingham



In short, lively second helping of storytelling

Unthology No. 2
Edited by Robin Jones and Ashley Stokes
Unthank Books, £12

R M Bond-Webster

In their introduction to *Unthology* No. 1, published last year, Robin Jones and Ashley Stokes lamented the declining market for, and readership of, short stories. They quoted J G Ballard who claimed that people had "lost the knack of reading short stories... They feel - when they buy a volume of short stories, if it's slightly on the slim side - they're somehow being cheated. They want a big fat read, represented by a novel." *Unthology* No. 1, Jones and Stokes hoped, would help reverse the trend and offer an outlet for unpredictable and unconventional stories that are "unafraid to chase a few clouds [and] to play with chronology and form".

Their new collection, *Unthology* No. 2, continues this mission. They have gathered 13 stories by a range of writers only two of whom were represented in the first collection (Ashley Stokes and Tessa West). The stories range widely in length and style from the short, poignant drama of a man contemplating his upcoming wedding (Stuck by Sarah Evans) to the long, speculative exploration of the fate of poetry in a dystopian future (Poets in a Radial City by Paul A Green); from the mysterious allegory of Tessa West's *Hours of Darkness* to the complex and elegiac recall of a moment 20 years previously in Ashley Stokes' *The Swan King*, and the alienated nightmare of the tourist in M Pinchuk's *Siramina*. Although an eclectic gathering without a specific theme, the shade of J G Ballard hovers over many

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Ashley Stokes: Co-editor, with Robin Jones, of a second collection of short stories from Norwich-based Unthank Books.

of the stories in *Unthology* No. 2. Many of them have for their setting the bleak, dehumanised streets of cities somewhere in the near future, streets that even when recognisable - the Birmingham of Charles Wilkinson's *Recovery*, for example - are often disturbingly changed: "The cry of gulls. I do not remember that sound here. Birmingham become Brighton beach. For a second I feel as if I am on the coast, the sharp salt in the air, the shingle under my feet. Then it's gone..." The figures who populate these landscapes are most often isolated and estranged from each other. In this Ashley Stokes' *Swan King* - alone, watching from his window as the world goes about its business outside - is a representative figure. In Stephanie Reid's *127 Permutations* this alienation is carried wittily to an extreme, her seven

nameless characters reduced to their initials, A-G - mere ciphers.

It is perhaps inevitable in a collection of this sort that some of the stories misfire, but the best of them - *Siramina*, *Hours of Darkness*, *The Swan King*, *Recovery* - demonstrate the strength and vitality of the short form. Taken together, the stories gathered in this latest *Unthology*, as in its predecessor, reaffirm the very great pleasures to be had from the "traditional" realist story and push us to consider the range of possibilities for experiment and innovation that short fiction affords. With submissions to *Unthology* 3 already being gathered, the publisher and editors are to be highly commended for their continuing commitment to literature's most beleaguered and undervalued 'poor relative'.

Strong UEA link to vibrant collections

New poetry books: Simon Proctor

The UEA's reputation as a leading centre for nurturing new writers dates back to the early 1970s when Sir Angus Wilson and Prof Malcolm Bradbury founded the trail-blazing MA course in Creative Writing.

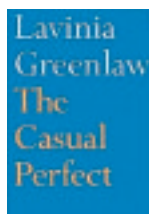
In those days it concentrated on long and short fiction but, in the mid-1990s when Andrew Motion succeeded Malcolm Bradbury, a poetry MA was set up.

Its reputation has grown steadily and today the course convenor is the poet Lavinia Greenlaw.

Her latest book, *The Casual Perfect* (Faber and Faber, £12.99), is her fourth collection of poems. Early in her career, critics tended to dwell on her treatment of scientific subject matter - poetry inspired by the lab, particularly from medical and technological fields. It is, however, perception - how we interpret the external world - that may be detected as a more over-arching concern in her poetry.

The invented tense of her book's title is a nod to Robert Lowell's description of fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop and her insistence on the moment at which perception is formed.

Greenlaw's poems display a striking intelligence. She avoids the too-easy epiphany, but there is poetry in what the title poem dubs the "achievement



of the provisional." In *Blakeney Point*, she writes: "The fires we build along the northern edge / are no more upsetting to the air / than breath. Is this love? / A cure for the visible. / Fern seed gathered this midsummer midnight/ would render us as clear."

Another poet with a strong UEA link is Esther Morgan - she completed the MA and went on to teach on the undergraduate creative writing course. Her latest collection, *Grace* (Bloodaxe Books, £8.95), is her third with the publisher.

Her previous work has found poetry in boundaries - that which lies hidden or at the margins, of places and sensory experiences. In *Grace*, quiet moments of lyrical beauty are achieved through marvellously-weighted lines in which no words are wasted.

In *Spare Room in Summer*, she writes: "The light hasn't caught me yet, / is too absorbed / persuading each simple object / of its existence."

And further on: "A door handle gleams / like the foot of an icon / rubbed into brightness."

Such moments of grace - of how things are invested with significance - are superbly caught. And so, in *Things Left Out All Night*, we see objects acquiring "a gravitas - / the spade presiding over rows of lettuces / grown solemn as a cross."

It is not just the religious echoes that evoke the gleams of sudden significance, but the poetic precision and concentration with which they are rendered.

And so back to the UEA's creative writing students themselves. Its latest poetry anthology (*UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011: Four Poets*, Egg Box Publishing, £8.99) features four fresh voices from around the world who have studied at the university in 2010/11 - Rosie Breese, Dwight Dunston, Petra Kamula and Rouan Wilsenach - with a foreword by established poets Moniza Alvi and George Szirtes and featuring an interview with Alice Oswald.

Any idea of a single 'school' is quickly dispelled by the sheer diversity and range of styles and subject matter.

Breese includes poems that play fruitfully with typography - as both theme and presentation. Dunston displays a quiet precision with images such as "In falling, the wind provides / one last chance / for the leaf / to sip the sky. / The closest the two / have ever been / before."

Kamula, from Australia, has an eye for strikingly visceral images that delight in their inventiveness, while Wilsenach, from South Africa, is as at home, poetically, with landscape as with human relationships: "Roads and rivers are thin veins / on the surface of a broad brown thigh."