

5 BOOKS ABOUT REAL PEOPLE... EVERYONE SHOULD READ BEFORE THEY DIE



DIANA SOUAMI

1 THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS Giorgio Bassani

An elegiac, haunting novel set in Ferrara, Italy, in the late 1930s. The Finzi-Continis – an aristocratic, cultured, affluent, assimilated Sephardic-Jewish family – open their garden to young Jews banned by racial laws from using the town's tennis club. Fascism sweeps into their lives and blows them "light as leaves" into the Holocaust.



2 DE PROFUNDIS Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde's epistle – written "from the depths" in 1897 while imprisoned in Reading Gaol, to Lord Alfred Douglas – is one of the great love letters. "I don't write to put bitterness into your heart but to pluck it out of mine," he wrote to Douglas who had betrayed and forsaken him.



3 THE JOURNALS OF ANAIS NIN

She began her diary in 1914 aged 11 and continued it till her death in 1977. Bigamously married, lover of Henry Miller, friend of Gore Vidal and John Steinbeck, one page of her unexpurgated journals contains more sex, confession, melodrama and entanglement than *Fifty Shades of Grey*.



4 DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON George Orwell

Written 80 years ago, its scorn of careless affluence seems even more relevant now. After a year of washing dishes and sleeping rough, Orwell vows he will never again expect gratitude from a street dweller when he gives him money or enjoy a meal at a smart restaurant.

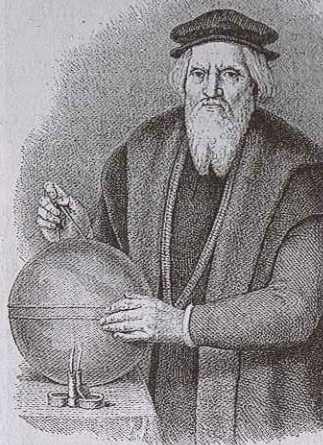


5 A MOVEABLE FEAST Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway's sketches of Paris in the 1920s bring to life Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and other creators of modernism. He captures the joy of that era, in the city of light, between two world wars when ideas and creativity were vibrant, rents and food were cheap and romance was in the air.



Diana Souhami's novel *Gwendolen*, about the main protagonist of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, is out now (Quercus £16.99)



SEBASTIAN CABOT

AUTHOR FIRST PERSON

JAMES EVANS

Adventurers who set sail for a fabled north-east passage

"IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO APPRECIATE WHAT THEY ATTEMPTED. THEY WERE WARNED OF SAVAGE AND EXTRAORDINARY CREATURES"

Throughout history Britain has been a seafaring nation – or so we tend to assume. 'Britannia', as the inhabitants of our larger island learned to sing, 'Rules the Waves'. The only trouble is: for much of our history, it has simply not been true. Henry VIII might have been large and loud but the country he ruled was small and rather backward. It had a long coastline, dented with countless harbours and havens. But it had little maritime expertise or experience. Regarding geography and navigation, one observer admitted, "ignorance has been among us", while another lamented "our former gross ignorance in marine causes".

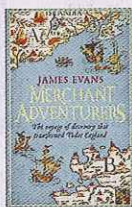
Those who did sail tended to be illiterate and resistant to innovation. They stuck to familiar routes and kept the shore in view when they could, navigating by sight and by experience. "Them that were ancient masters of ships", it was noted, "derided and mocked" any who pored over charts or sought to find their way by the stars. Most commerce was conducted by foreigners – "stranger merchants". English sailors had little interest in venturing into the open ocean. Like their king, they cared little "for such an enterprise".

Only during the reign of Henry's young son Edward did things change. A man called **Sebastian Cabot**, who for long had overseen navigation in the huge Spanish Empire, was lured back to England. He had lived here as a boy, and now he was to help push the country outward. It was under his guidance, in 1553, a major exploration was organised. That May, three ships, led by Sir Hugh Willoughby and the brilliant young sailor Richard Chancellor, set out from London and headed north east. They rounded Scandinavia and looked for a passage along the northern fringe of Asia to China or Japan – lands whose wealth was legendary in Europe since Marco Polo had written about them centuries earlier.

It is impossible now to appreciate what these men attempted. Nearly 120 were on board, with little idea what was in store. Sailing was a risky business – venturing into unknown waters much more so. For seamen, life expectancy was low even given the dismal averages of the period. Many had family, with whom they could not stay in touch (Chancellor had two young sons whose mother had already died and who would be left as orphans if he did not return). Maps were hopelessly inaccurate. Was there a north-east passage? Nobody knew. Sceptics insisted the Arctic climate was too bitter for human life: the sea all ice and the cold "so great that none can suffer it". Most expected, at the least, a "hard and difficult matter".

Men warned of savage and extraordinary creatures. While their countrymen stayed at home, declared one who knew Chancellor well, crew on the expedition would encounter "barbarous and cruel people" and risk their lives "amongst the monstrous and terrible beasts of the sea". Maps spoke of evil 'night-people', skulking in the darkness of northern Asia, who robbed and killed any who tried to pass. Further east, men were told, lived monsters with the bodies of men and heads of pigs, and others with ears so large they covered their bodies.

There is simply no modern parallel. Even astronauts who first went to the moon knew what to expect and remained in radio contact. It was a voyage of quite extraordinary events and adventure. One ship made it back the following summer after visiting the court of a great emperor (even if it was not the one crew had expected). It was months before anyone knew what had become of the other two. While there was disaster there were also momentous achievements whose influence on British history were profound. Perhaps most of all the men deserve, emphatically, not to be forgotten. ●



Merchant Adventurers (Phoenix, £9.99) is out in paperback