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READERS of fiction are sometimes at a loss to know what to select. Despite a willingness on the part of many to seek the advice of the staff (which is always readily given) there are those who hesitate to make this approach. A more formal guide is therefore also needed.

Some years ago we issued a comprehensive guide to good fiction : this is now undergoing revision and remodelling, and in the meantime we are issuing this guide to the writings of twelve novelists who are generally recognised as having achieved the heights of their profession. In order to make it of greater value to our readers we have asked the authors to say which they themselves consider their best novel.

It will be noticed that whilst the majority of our contributors prefer to discuss the relative merits of a number of their novels, others give their reasons for stating quite simply one favoured title. It is interesting to note, too, that at least three writers decide that their best effort takes the form of a short story, and one believes his best imaginative work to be a long epic poem.

We offer our grateful acknowledgements to the authors, who, despite the heavy calls on their limited spare time, have so willingly responded to our invitation.

Our readers are reminded that copies of all the novels listed are available in each of the libraries as an integral part of our comprehensive stock of modern fiction.

L. M. HARROD
Chief Librarian and Curator

January, 1950

It has always seemed to me a strange supposition that a writer should have a favourite among his own books. It never seems to occur to the public that a writer may dislike, or even loathe, his finished product ; yet it remains a curious and common anomaly among all artists that many of them cannot bear the sight or sound of their own creation after the heat of the creative moment has passed and yet at the same time remain deeply sensitive and resentful of the slightest criticism of them in others.

For exactly this reason I have never read one of my own novels. Even proof-reading, for me, has always been a painful affair, made bearable only by a process of experienced detachment that amounts to a sort of semi-blindness to all but the mere coherence and literal sense of the book. The most I have been able to do is to read a short story or two, notably *The Mill* from the volume *Cut and come again*, and an even longer story, published as a short novel by itself, *The Cruise of the Breadwinner*. These two stories remain the works of whose quality I am most jealous and on which, in bad moments, I feel I shall never be able to improve.

But of novels : *The Two sisters*, written at the age of nineteen, never fails to astonish me, whenever I open it, by its intuitive maturity. Among later books, both *The Purple plain* and *The Jacaranda tree* will always remain things of special attachment, possibly because it continually seems a miracle that I was ever given the opportunity to write them and an even greater miracle that, after the briefest possible spell in Burma, I ever wrote them at all ; and partly because they too are works which, except by some further and unlikely miracle of circumstance, I am unlikely to repeat.

Other fiction by H. E. Bates includes :

Spella Ho	The Poacher
Country tales	My Uncle Silas
Catherine Foster	The Flying goat
The Fallow land	A House of women
The Bride comes to Evensford	Fair stood the wind for France

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

It is not easy for me to write on this subject, because to me all my novels seem to form a unit, a living whole from which it is difficult to tear out a part for separate consideration.

What I call my "West Riding Series" is an attempt to portray the life of men and women in the textile trade of the West Riding of Yorkshire, during the last three hundred years.

Take courage tells of the Civil War in 1642, when the yeomen clothiers of the Yorkshire towns fought for Parliament against the Royalists. *Manhold* tells a story of greed overreaching itself, in the great trade expansion of the eighteenth century. *Inheritance* depicts the coming of the Industrial Revolution in 1812, and its consequences through more than a hundred years. The people of *A Modern tragedy* suffer the post-war slump of the 1920's, while *Sleep in peace* and *The Rise of Henry Morcar* portray, and try to explain, the generation which was born in the last years of Queen Victoria's reign, lived through two wars and is in middle life today. Other novels deal with private lives rather than public themes, but serve to illustrate the problems of mind and heart, current in their day: *Carr* and *Life story* the nineteenth, *The Spinner of the years*, *The Partnership* and *Trio* the twentieth century in Yorkshire.

I think my best novel is *Inheritance*. This is so, partly because it has a story to tell which is so exciting and of such ample scope, and partly because this story is so important to the economic and sociological understanding of our present time. But partly, too, it is because the characters, my Oldroyds and Bamforths and Mellors, seem to me especially warm with life.

Other fiction by Phyllis Bentley includes:

Freedom, farewell! The Whole of the story

ELIZABETH BOWEN

It's exceedingly difficult—or so I find—for an author to be objective when comparing his or her different books. One of them may be dear for subjective reasons; another may rank as the nearest possible realisation of a concept. Again, is an author's "best" novel to be taken to be his most honourably ambitious, or, his most successful? The degree of success is, of course, a matter for the outside world to decide.

My recently-published novel, *The Heat of the day* is the one of mine I esteem most: I have put into it, as into no other, my sense of the world, and of the world at a particular time. As far as I am concerned, it is still too near to me to be judged by me; and, as a "new novel" it is still in the course of judgment by readers. . . . I am most fond of an early novel of mine, *The Last September*, of which the scene is laid in Ireland. I think, if it be not presumptuous to say so, that *The House in Paris* appeals to me most as a work of art—perhaps, because of all my novels it seems to me most foreign to myself; almost as though someone else had written it. I have, on the whole, been given to understand that *The Death of the heart* is the novel of mine for which readers feel most affection. Oddly enough, perhaps, I now find it rather too sad—apart from the riotous middle seaside section, which I confess to re-reading occasionally, with amusement. I always enjoy comedy, whether by myself or anyone else.

I think I get most certain and lasting pleasure (of the kind one seeks in a fellow-author's work) from four or five of my longer short stories—e.g., *The Disinherited* (published in the collection *The Cat jumps*); *Summer night*, and *A Love story* (published in *Look at all those roses*), and *The Happy autumn fields* and *Mysterious Kor* (published in *The Demon Lover*). Like many prose writers, I probably would wish to have been a poet, and it is agreed that the short story, with its unity of mood and possible lyricism, approaches most nearly to the condition of poetry.

Other fiction by Elizabeth Bowen includes:

The Hotel
Encounters To the North

ARTHUR CALDER-MARSHALL

"My Best Novel" has not yet been written. Having been writing for twenty years, I am satisfied only with four short stories. Three of these, (*Rosie, Straw hat* and *Pickle my bones*), are contained in the collection *A Date with a duchess*. The fourth, *El Bobito*, won the Third Programme Short Story Competition.

The idea for *About Levy*, the study of a group of characters in the mirror of the plight of a man on trial for murder, is an original one. But the treatment is too complex and the characterisation very uneven.

Pie in the sky, a sprawling novel of the middle thirties, seems to me to have moments, such as the death of Charley in Deal, which will stand scrutiny still; but the construction of the book is weak.

My last novel, *A Man reprieved*, still seems to me a good book. Perhaps this is because what I intended to do in that book is quite clear to me; (it was meant as the first of a trilogy, of which each volume should take place in a different decade); in *A Man reprieved*, I have deliberately slanted my narrative so that it is not objective, but reflects the state of mind of the character who at that moment takes the centre of the stage. No novel of mine has been so attacked by critics. Partly, this is for the obvious reason that the conclusion of the first part of a longer work cannot be complete and convincing in itself, and partly because few critics understood the method of narrative distortion which I employed, and thought that I was guilty of clumsy writing and morbidity. A few readers have written to me, who have really understood and enjoyed the book. On the other hand, an anonymous reader has telephoned me to call me a 'a sewer-rat'! *A man reprieved* is certainly not my best novel as it is only a third of a novel.

In my view, my best novel to-date is *Dead centre*, a cross-section of life in a not-very-good public school. It is simple and in its separate parts convincing. It has, however, the faults of its method (that of selecting from the lives of a number of characters the one episode which will be remembered in later life). School life is a broad plain with few hillocks for most schoolboys. The collection together of these hillocks gives the false impression of a far more uneven surface than is true in fact.

Other novels by Arthur Calder-Marshall include:

Two of a kind The Way to Santiago

NORMAN COLLINS

When an author finds himself asked the question of what he considers to be his favourite novel or what he regards as his best work, he naturally pauses to take stock of himself and the answer is very often a surprise even to himself. For example, in my own case, I would say that a short and comparatively unimportant novel of mine *Love in our time* is my favourite book whereas I would certainly say that *London belongs to me* is my best one.

I suspect, moreover, that *London belongs to me* is my best one because I spent more years thinking about it before I as much as wrote a line than I have spent on any other book that I have ever written: *London belongs to me* was planned seven years before I started to write it and the fact that it contains a lot about wartime London, despite the fact that the war had not started when I was planning the novel, has nothing to do with it. The plain truth is that as I originally planned it, *London belongs to me* was simply a novel about six or seven widely diverse characters living in a much sub-let house in South London. By the time I came to write about them I felt that I knew them so intimately that it was the easiest thing in the world to adapt their own particular private lives to the conditions of war time. There is, however, an entirely different reason, which would probably commend itself more to a fellow writer than to the general reader: it occurred to me one day that though life itself goes on when one of the principal characters engaged in any particular section of it is suddenly removed through death or imprisonment or what not, most novels usually stop at that point. I therefore decided to see whether in the character of Percy Boon, the young man who gets himself arrested for murder, I could first of all build him up into something important and then discard him altogether without seeing the novel itself go to pieces in the process. On the whole I think it worked, and that is my own private reason for regarding *London belongs to me* as my best novel.

All that I would add is that there is a world of difference between one's best novel and a good novel and any novelist who seeks to provide the answer to the question should always remind himself that it is not the final answer.

Other novels by Norman Collins include:

Anna

The Three friends Trinity Town

Penang appointment Flames coming out of the top

LOUIS GOLDING

I know that the reproach might be uttered against me that in citing *Honey for the ghost*, my most recent novel, as being my best, I am showing a parent's partiality for his latest born.

I must confess I have had difficulty in deciding between *Miracle boy*, an early novel of 1925, *Five silver daughters*, an encyclopaedic novel that followed *Magnolia street*, and this latest work. But the point is that *Honey for the ghost* is not really my latest work. I started the book well over a quarter of a century ago, intending it to be my second novel, following my first, *Forward from Babylon*. But the issues it attempted to raise were too profound, the story it proposed to tell was too delicately poised on the borderline of credulity, for my apprentice hand to feel confidence in finishing the task, although I wrote well over two hundred pages before I abandoned it.

In *Honey for the ghost* I assail the problem of Good and Evil, of God and the Devil. There is a sense in which the novel might be called a modern attempt at the Faust story, though instead of Faust, my hero is a simple ex-soldier, ex-boxer, working-man from Islington, and the kingdoms that are offered to him are not the vast savannahs of learning, but nothing more than the health given back to him which he lost in the war. And for him, no Helen of Troy is the vision that deludes his eyes, but the thought of winning back, out of the pit that encompasses him, his little factory girl wife and his small boy.

The book has nothing like the historic and political scope of *Five silver daughters*. It has not the easy friendliness of *Magnolia Street*. But I do not believe that, in terms of sheer story, I have ever done anything as likely as *Honey for the ghost* to keep the reader reading from one page to the next.

The ultimate issue of the book is the triumph of Good over Evil, despite the infinite parade of facts and forces which would seem to make this a ludicrously callow proposition. And that, I hope, is an attempt worth making, and if I have succeeded in that, the book's long gestation, and the immensely painful accompaniment of four fires, four literal fires, that bedevilled my life during its composition, have all been worth while.

Other novels by Louis Golding include:

The Pursuer	Mr. Emmanuel
Day of atonement	Who's there within
No news from Helen	Three jolly gentlemen
The Camberwell beauty	The Glory of Elsie Silver

MARGARET IRWIN

The book I think my best is always my next ; and my last is generally the reason for my next. *Still she wished for company* made the present and the past simultaneous, and made me want to write about historical people ; so in *None so pretty* Charles II and his young sister Minette appeared in the background, but insisted on taking the centre of the stage in *Royal Flush*. Behind them towered the shadow of Montrose, who demanded a book to himself in *The Proud servant* ; as, with equal importunity, did Rupert of the Rhine in *The Stranger Prince* ; and then, with his brilliant artist sister, Louise, betrothed to Montrose, they rounded off in *The Bride* the stories of all those lives so curiously linked.

Those lives led me back to the century before, to the ancestress of many of them, Mary, Queen of Scots, in whose haunting memory lay much of the reasons for their stories. And inextricably, fatally, linked to her was her cousin, the rival Queen, Elizabeth of England.

If you like Mary you hate Elizabeth, and vice versa ; that is the accepted view. But it was while writing about Mary that I became fascinated by Elizabeth, Mary's most dangerous enemy, as Mary was Elizabeth's. Mary took danger as her lover, Bothwell, *The Gay Galliard*, took a Border raid ; but to Elizabeth it was the element in which she breathed. No-one else ever looked into "the bright eyes of danger" with so bright a gaze ; you see it in all her portraits, where she looks out, not at you, but at the gleam of axe or dagger behind your shoulder. The axe came very near her in my last two books, *Young Bess*, and *Elizabeth, captive princess* ; only her wits saved her from it, and her irrepressible power of flirtation.

Because I am still under her power, I think those two the best, with one exception : the book about her that I have not yet written.

Other fiction by Margaret Irwin includes:

These mortals	
Fire down below	Knock four times
Madame fears the dark	Mrs. Oliver Cromwell

JACK JONES

Of my five novels descriptive of life in South Wales I feel that my latest, *Some trust in chariots*, is my best. The late Dr. Joseph Parry, the famous Welsh musician whose life and work I dealt with in the novel *Off to Philadelphia in the morning*, was at all times perhaps too fondly inclined to the view that his latest composition was his best. Novelists, including myself, and irrespective of what reviewers say, are subject to that same natural weakness of judgment. Yet who is to say that it is a weakness?

Looking back, as an ex-miner whose writing career began at the age of fifty, I recall the pride of achievement with which each successive novel has thrilled me. In the shadowed 1930's I achieved a "hat-trick" of regional novels with which I was well pleased, and which were the foundation on which I felt my reputation as a novelist might be firmly established.

Bidden to the feast, the third of my pre-war novels, published in 1938, was my firm favourite for ten years. Then, with the publication of *Some trust in chariots* in 1948, it had to take second place in my affections. For *Some trust in chariots*, though perhaps not as sweet in characterisation has a far greater sweep and much more action than *Bidden to the feast*. It practically covers the life of Pontypridd as a mining centre and, without loss to the story as such, it reveals the development of the South Wales coalfield during more than sixty years up to the end of the second World War. For two years I was engrossed in the writing of it and, when it was finished, I felt I should never write anything better. Yet—and this is the travail of it—the novel on which I am at present working, a novel in which I hope to reveal the development of Cardiff from a "creek" to a city, is already sowing the belief that *this* will be by far my best novel. So there it is. Each successive novel in turn takes pride of place in the heart and mind from whence the life of the author flows into his books. But if, on a journey to some far distant country, I were allowed only one of my books, I feel I should take *Some trust in chariots*.

Other novels by Jack Jones include:

Black parade Rhondda roundabout

ERIC LINKLATER

I find it difficult to arrange my various books in an order of merit: so difficult as to be impossible. The most popular of my novels have been *Juan in America* and *Private Angelo*, the first published in 1931, the second in 1946; but in each case I had before me a vast amount of material—the United States could have given me a dozen *Juans*, the war in Italy a dozen *Angelos*—and the main problem of composition was the judicious selection of what was available. In some ways I prefer *Juan in China* to the American volume: I had more difficulty with his Chinese adventures.

Each of these novels, incidentally, has some small historical value: *Juan in America* offers some not inaccurate pictures of the United States in the tumultuous Prohibition era; *Juan in China* gives a fair impression of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and the fighting in Chapei; and *Private Angelo* shows, as far as I saw it, the Allied entry into Rome in 1944.

In Denmark a few weeks ago I was firmly told that *Magnus Merriman* was the best thing I had written, because it had more "feeling" in it than the other novels; but whether this is true or not I cannot say, for it is many years since I read it. There was certainly a lot of "feeling" in my most ambitious story, *The Impregnable women*, which, though I think there are some good passages in it, I have described elsewhere as a failure. It was a failure because, as a whole, it did not become the sort of book I had set out to make. There, from the writer's point of view, is the only standard of judgment.

By that standard, that professional view of success, I put fairly high in my modest catalogue *The Men of Ness* and *Judas*. They did not arouse any general enthusiasm, but they did, when they were written, approximate to what I had set out to write—and each firmly told a story.

But I have not yet answered the question: "What is your best novel?" Nor can I, for according to the standard of judgment that I previously set up—that the written page should approximate, both in style and matter, to the author's hope of it and prime intention—my best fiction is not a novel but a longish short story: *The Goose girl*, which comes first in a collection of short stories called *Sealskin trousers*.

Other novels by Eric Linklater include:

The Sailor's holiday

Poet's pub Ripeness is all

J. B. PRIESTLEY

My own favourite among my novels is *Bright day*. There are many reasons for this. Although it is not autobiographical the pre-1914 background of the narrator is one that I remember myself. It was a very difficult novel to write from the technical point of view. First the complete separation, even reflected in the style, between the past and the present, and then the gradual linking up of these two very different backgrounds—all this was very tricky and delightful to bring off. I feel too, that in this novel I have achieved what seems to me a criticism of life. Finally, I have always been interested in Time and the problem it creates and this interest is fully reflected in *Bright day*. One final point—although this novel has sold nearly 300,000 copies in this country alone I cannot help feeling that it does not appear to have left the impression on the public mind that I hoped it would have made.

Other novels by J. B. Priestley include:

Faraway	Jenny Villiers
Wonder hero	Angel Pavement
The Doomsday Men	Let the people sing
Adam in moonshine	Black-out in Gretley
Daylight on Saturday	They walk in the city
The Good Companions	Three men in new suits

HENRY WILLIAMSON

As things are, my best novel is the half-million word *The Flax of dream*, which tells the story of cause and effect in the life of one English youth who went through the Great War and came out of it altered and who died in ironic circumstances—one of the effects of the causes—at the age of twenty-six. In his twenty-six years, he was born, he suffered, he died. But the point is that he was born into a commercially-based civilisation, so all his education was based as it were on the London Matriculation; and the trade-war for export markets (1914-18) that followed, was a true effect of that education. But William Maddison was not killed in the war; he survived, and in loneliness and self-imposed isolation began in his emotional way to trace back the causes of the effects in his living. So inevitably he came to reject the causes, to dream of a better world, and to seek to show how those causes were as bad as the effects. The effects on the battlefields were obvious, the causes in the past were invisible, perceived only, in revelation, by means of the imagination.

When I conceived my theme, I was ignorant of any literature; I did not know that my theme was not unique as I had thought, but was indeed the theme of all literature. Fortunately I saw the first performance of G. B. Shaw's *St. Joan* in 1924, and from that learned that tragedy was not the conflict between good and bad but of different ideas. Honest and even sensitive men could condemn others for their evil, or "wrong-headed" ideas. No villains—fools, yes, men lacking in imagination—but no villains. Maddison, hero of *The Flax* saw this at the end of his life. But it could not save him.

I have hoped for some years now to write a novel of which *The Flax* was an experimental work, the story of William Maddison's London cousin, Phillip Maddison. But it is a big undertaking, it requires thousands of hours of isolation and of sustained hope and determination which ordinary living, the bringing up of children, etc., does not permit. But I hope to achieve it, and that will be my best novel, perhaps. Ideas as such must not be, as it were, naked; they must always arise out of character and action, out of the living scene.

Other fiction by Henry Williamson includes:

The Gold falcon	
Tarka the Otter	The Star-born
The Phasian bird	Salar the Salmon
The Peregrine's saga	Scribbling Lark

FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

It is not easy for an author to say off-hand which of his books he considers to be the best. I am not sure that it is profitable to the reader. First of all it is very doubtful whether 'creative artists' are good critics of their own work though they are usually free enough in criticising that of their contemporaries. Again, I am inclined to think that an author's appraisal of the children of his imagination is coloured, as often as not, by personal prejudices, and that the books which we consider our best are often those which we associate with happy circumstances, or were, perhaps the most easy to write—or, perhaps the most difficult. So let me make it clear, to begin with, that my own judgment in this ticklish matter is completely valueless. Having said this, let me add at once that I have no doubt whatever that the best of my books is not a novel at all, but the long epic poem, *The Island*, which absorbed four years of my life and contains, as I firmly believe, more of what I have to give than all my twenty-seven novels put together. It is to my novels, however, that your question relates, and here I think I can say fairly safely that the best of my novels are those associated with the region of my birth and youth: that long series of novels, each with its West Midland—or as I would rather say Mercian background—which began with the *Young physician* and the *Black diamond* and ended with *Mr. Lucton's freedom* and *Dr. Bradley remembers*. There are no less than fourteen of them, and my own favourites (not necessarily the best) are *Portrait of Clare* and *The House under the water*.

Other novels by Francis Brett Young include:

Far forest	White Ladies
Jim Redlake	This little world
The Dark tower	The City of gold
Portrait of a village	They seek a country
My brother Jonathan	A Man about the house