

Quick reads

Briefs Encountered
Julian Clary
Ebury Press, £12.99.

Known more for his acerbic humour than his writing, Julian Clary's third novel is a wondrous and witty story that rises crescendo-like into a magnificently sculpted piece of dark horror.

Set over two periods of time, the book introduces Richard, a successful actor of stage and screen, and Noel Coward, the high society playwright. Richard rose to fame playing Noel, so when the opportunity arises to buy a bolt-hole in the country previously owned by Coward he jumps at the chance.

His devoted personal assistant Jess accompanies him, alongside his long-term partner Richard. But what appears to be the perfect idyll begins to harbour feelings of things going bump in the night ... Briefs Encountered is a twisting tale of families, lovers, mysterious deaths and obsession.
Rachel Howdle



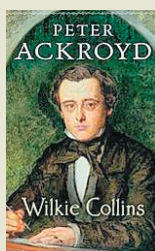
Funny How Things Turn Out
Judith Bruce
Simon & Schuster, £14.99.

Former BBC producer Judith Bruce has put together a fascinating and beautiful biography-memoir that spans two generations and two world wars, collating her mother's recollections of childhood and early adult life with her own. Her mother, Muriel, was born in Highgate, north London in 1903 and died in 2009, at the grand age of 106. Bruce, born in 1936, worked her way up the BBC, first as a clerk in 1960, later writing stories for Play School. Poignant and insightful, the book is split into two accounts that reveal their personal experiences but also tell a wider story about the changes in British society and culture. From Muriel's delightfully naive stories of growing up, to Bruce's sweet and painful memories of the last years of her mother's life, this book emphasises just how important it is to keep our history alive.
Laura Temple



Wilkie Collins
Peter Ackroyd
Chatto & Windus, £12.99.

Family man, addict, associate of the Pre-Raphaelites, close friend of Charles Dickens and the man who created one of the first fictional detectives in Sergeant Cuff, Wilkie Collins' own story is just as convoluted as his most successful novel, *The Woman in White*, must have seemed to the British public who bought it in their thousands. It is an extraordinary life, told with glee and relish by the writer who has come to be the voice of London's incredible past, historian Peter Ackroyd. Attention to detail and a genuine passion for the subject matter are hallmarks of Ackroyd's writing. Such qualities were also possessed by Collins, as well as an artist's eye. Ackroyd points out: "His novels resemble a series of pictures rather than a sequence of scenes."
David McLoughlin



Exhaustive account of city's darkest hours

Norwich: A Shattered City – The Story of Hitler's Blitz on Norwich and Its People 1942
Steve Snelling
Halsgrove, £19.99

Keith Simpson

In retaliation for RAF bombing of Rostock and Lubeck in April 1942, Hitler ordered raids on some of Britain's oldest cities. Known as the "Baedeker Blitz" because the cities had at least two stars in the German guide book, the Luftwaffe's raids in the last week of April and the first of May 1942 attacked Exeter, Bath, Norwich, York and Canterbury.

Norwich was bombed on April 27-28 and then on April 29-30, followed by a raid on May 8 and one on June 26-27.

My mother has vivid recollections of these raids living in Old Catton and going into the centre of Norwich to work. I am old enough to remember bomb sites still remaining in the 1950s.

Steve Snelling has researched these raids and in this book combines more than 170 photographs with first-hand accounts by local people, Mass-Observation diaries and official reports.

As he points out in his introduction this is not the first account, but his book is the first to bring together such a comprehensive range of information.

These Baedeker Raids in 1942 were not as devastating as some of the raids on London and the big industrial cities but the level of casualties and the devastation had a major local impact.

The combined casualties for raids on Norwich in 1942 were 258 killed and 784 injured with hundreds of public buildings and houses destroyed and thousands damaged.

As Snelling shows, there had been several raids on Norwich before 1942 but these had been relatively limited, and civil defence preparations were not prepared for the cumulative impact of the Baedeker raids. Norwich had few war industries but a lot of firms worked for the war effort.

The strength of this book is the first-hand accounts by ordinary people living in Norwich, including members of the civil defence.

Hundreds of ordinary men and women

“The strength of this book is the first-hand accounts by ordinary people living in Norwich.”



City blitzed: St Stephens pictured after a raid in 1942. Steve Snelling's book is the first to bring together such a comprehensive range of detail about the raids on Norwich.

acted as fire watchers who braved bombs to put out incendiaries and rescue people. Some of the most vivid photos were taken by George Swain, a local photographer.

Snelling doesn't avoid mentioning cases where some people, understandably, abandoned their posts, and also where there were cases of looting. But a contemporary generation living in Norwich should think about the impact of such air raids on local communities.

Real heroes consisted of teenagers

who acted as messengers biking through the bombing; the nurses at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital saving patients; and the clergy and schoolboys fighting incendiaries to save the cathedral.

Steve Snelling has brought the raids on Norwich to life, and the only criticism of this book, perhaps due to constraints by the publisher, is that a few specific maps of Norwich highlighting the impact of the blitz and centres of conflagration would have been useful.

Poems that are beautifully weighted

Coming in at Ringaskiddy
Philip Michael Goodman
Geo R Reeve Ltd, £7

Simon Proctor

Philip Goodman's poems have a wide geographical sweep – settings name-checked include his home county of Norfolk, London, Marrakesh, Mykonos and Ireland.

What unites a good number of them is an emotional terrain that beautifully balances "the weight of the dark upstairs" (from *A Night in Co. Kildare*) with vividly sketched moments of quiet epiphany. And so the same poem, in which those gathered in a room with a turf fire "talk about whether

anything matters", concludes: "And we decide nothing matters at all, / And owls hoot as we drink the night away, / And before the first of us falls down blotto, / We celebrate a marriage."

Celebrations can also bloom in unexpected places. In *Violets*, the eponymous flowers endure, "discreet and determined", in a "raked over, mowed and walked upon" part of the poet's garden. He invites the postwoman to take some and is in turn invited to lunch, finding she lives in a house with a medieval kingpost and has a degree in cinematography.

That sense of another's whole other life is skilfully evoked in just a few, carefully chosen words. Brevity, again, is the watchword in *Kissing Gate*, which could

almost have been written by an early 20th century Imagist poet, such as TE Hulme.

A kissing gate
hung between oak rails
with a dedication
to a young man who's dead;

The path leads on, shadowed,
alder and birch bowing over;
an honour guard, attentive,
as if someone had just walked by.

The book takes its title from a beautiful sequence of love poems. This is Goodman's third collection; its predecessor, *The Spinney*, was shortlisted in the East Anglian Book of the Year awards.