

The Handheld Newsletter

September 2023

Our Hilda is almost published

We'll be publishing our next book on 19th September, the tremendous double biography *Hilda Matheson*, on 19th September. Kate and one of the co-authors, ex-BBC producer Kate Murphy, will be in conversation about Hilda and the book for the Guildhall Library that afternoon, and you can now [register for that talk now here](#). Kate Murphy will also be giving a talk about the book at the Women's Library in London, 20th September at 2.15pm. You can [watch the talk live at this link](#).

We had a very nice review of *Hilda Matheson* in *The Telegraph* on 2 September ('The Spy who Remade the BBC'). The *Daily Mail* are planning to feature extracts from the book on 23rd September, so we'll let you know how that went. We don't know what it is about 1920s lesbian lives that attracts British newspapers of the right: two years ago the reviews of *Valentine Ackland* were heavy on that end of the political reading spectrum as well.

Some Newsletter readers might feel affronted that we are even talking to conservative newspapers. Our position is that we need the publicity to sell books – good lord we need the publicity – and if information about our benign and progressive books fills their pages that's a good thing.



The How Publishing Works podcast

How Publishing Works is now releasing episodes weekly, and [you can listen to it here](#). It tracks the progress of a book, from the twinkle in an author's eye to being put on a bookshop shelf and is available in all the usual podcast providers: Spotify and Apple (we now actually have followers on Apple, which is very heartening). Podcast Addict still doesn't list it, so that's one of our measures of success: to get *How Publishing Works* popular enough for even the minor podcast suppliers to stock it. Please do hunt for it and subscribe! And if you like it, please leave a review: this makes us feel it was worth doing.

Here is the episode release schedule:

- Already out: The Author, Alice Jolly
- Already out: The Agent, Eli Keren of United Agents
- 15th September: The Publisher, Eloise Millar of Galley Beggar Press
- 22nd September: The Rights, Lisa Dowdeswell, Head of Literary Estates at the Society of Authors (who gives us lots of good advice)
- 29th September: The Editor, Simon Spanton of Angry Robot Books and Black + White Publishing
- 6th October: The Index, Dennis Duncan of University College London (author of *Index, A History of the*)
- 13th October: The Marketer, Ceris Jones, formerly of Sandstone Press
- 20th October: The Printer, Mark Couch from Short Run Press (who print most of our books)
- 27th October: The Distributor, Nick Parker, Head of Two Rivers, of Ingram Publishing Services (they distribute our books)
- 3rd November: The Audiobook, Arran Dutton of Audiofactory
- 10th November: The Booksellers, Janet Brakspear and Helen Simmons from The Corsham Bookshop (one of our locals).



Autumn talks and book stalls

As well as the Hilda talk mentioned above, Kate has these other online talks scheduled with the Guildhall Library London, and a couple of events where Handheld will be selling books.

Tuesday 11th October, 2-3pm: Book cover art and how it works: [you can register here](#).

In a repeat of her Clevedon Literary Festival talk, Kate explores why and how Handheld chooses its book cover artwork, with some forays into how book cover art works, trends and pitfalls in different genres and how a gorgeous book cover can disguise a terrible novel (obviously not any of Handheld's).

Saturday 21st October: we'll be having our regular stall at [BristolCon](#), in Bristol. So if you're already planning to go for a day of wallowing in science fiction and fantasy talks, stalls, and beer, please come and say hello. We've donated a few boxes of books to be given away (one book each) to each BristolCon registree.

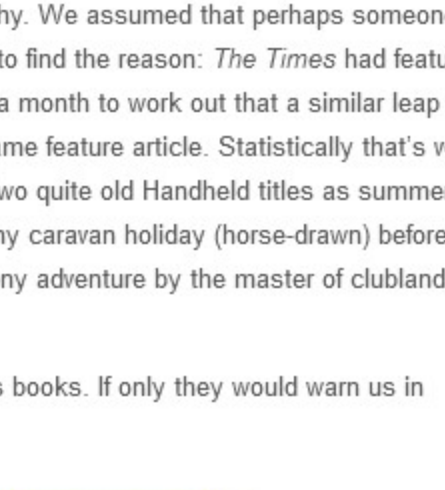
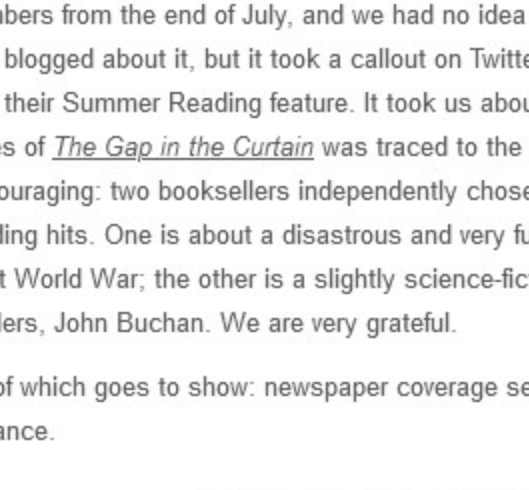
Tuesday 31st October, 2-3pm: Kate will be in conversation with Henry Bartholomew, editor of *The Living Stone*, on its publication day. You can [register for this free talk here](#).

Monday 27th November (4-8pm) and Tuesday 28th November (9am-3pm): Handheld will have a stall at the rather fancy Bowood Festive Food and Gift Fair at Bowood House, Wiltshire. We've been instructed to dress our table with the correct kind of tablecloths: this is a first for us. Not likely to sell many of our Weird books here, but you never know: the Marquess of Sandowne may have a secret passion for classic supernatural stories.

Tuesday 12th December, 2-3pm: Our changing tastes in reading. A journey along the library shelves: [register here](#).

In a repeat for the Guildhall Library of an illustrated talk given for the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution in the summer, Kate unpicks the mysteries of changing literary taste in twentieth-century British fiction, and reveals some unfortunate truths about the publishing industry. The collapse of the three-decker novel, the rise of the cheap series, and the passion for escapism all affected what and how our grandparents and great-grandparents read for pleasure.

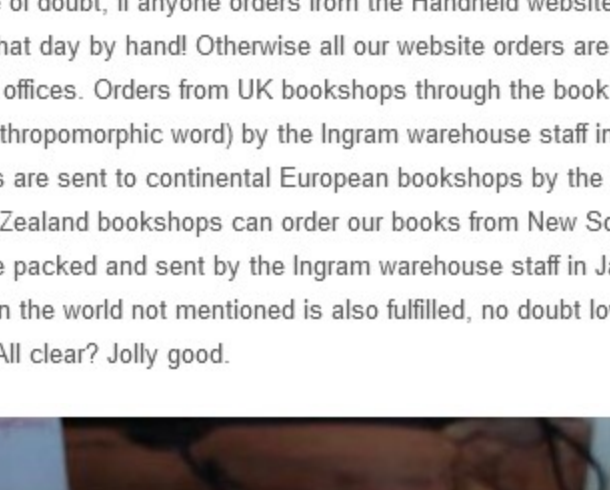
Our changing tastes in reading: a journey along the library shelves with Kate Macdonald from Handheld Press



Stealth publicity sells books

One of the ways in which news of Handheld titles reaches the public is when national newspapers do their Best Summer Reading columns. The randomness of the choices gets wild when guest booksellers are invited to supply the newspaper with their recommendations. We found this out when we saw that *The Caravaners* was suddenly selling in unexpectedly high numbers from the end of July, and we had no idea why. We assumed that perhaps someone had blogged about it, but it took a callout on Twitter to find the reason: *The Times* featured it in their Summer Reading feature. It took us about a month to work out that a similar leap in sales of *The Gap in the Curtain* was traced to the same feature article. Statistically that's very encouraging: two booksellers independently chose two quite old Handheld titles as summer reading hits. One is about a disastrous and very funny caravan holiday (horse-club) before the First World War; the other is a slightly science-fictiony adventure by the master of clubland thrillers, John Buchan. We are very grateful.

All of which goes to show: newspaper coverage sells books. If only they would warn us in advance.

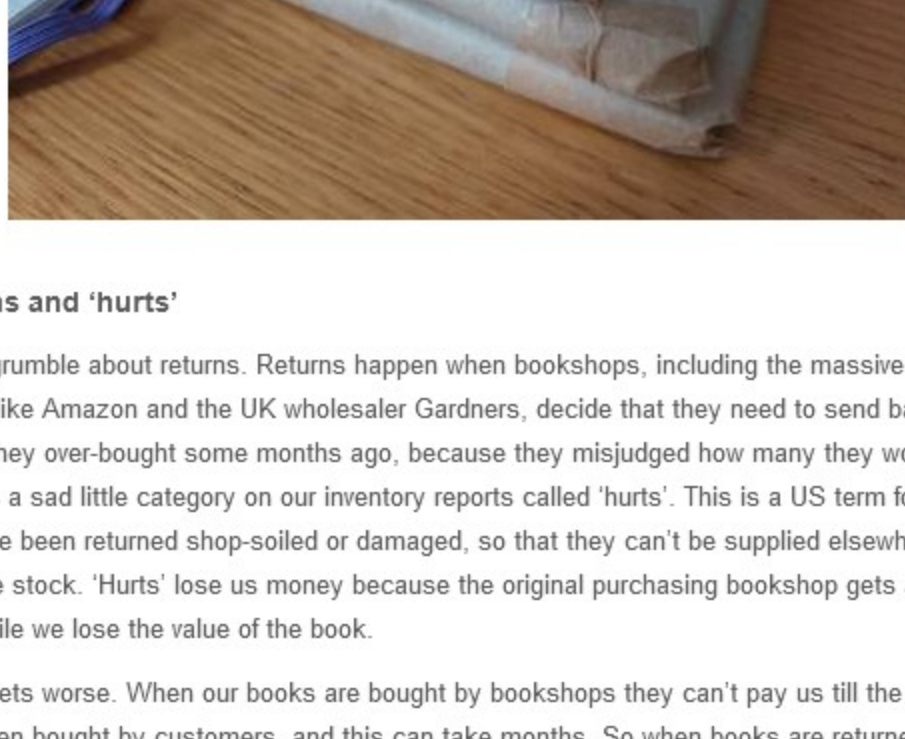


Fulfilment and deliveries

We had delivered a book order to a customer in Bath last week. She was delighted, but said that she'd been confused by remarks in the newsletter about our books being in a warehouse in Milton Keynes, and wasn't sure if we still delivered to local customers.

So for the avoidance of doubt, if anyone orders from the Handheld website from a BA2 address, the book will arrive that day by hand! Otherwise all our website orders are posted from the Bath or Bathampton post offices. Orders from UK bookshops through the book trade networks are 'fulfilled' (what an anthropomorphic word) by the Ingram warehouse staff in Milton Keynes.

Overseas, our books are sent to continental European bookshops by the Ingram warehouse staff. Australian and New Zealand bookshops can order our books from New South Books. US bookstore orders are packed and sent by the Ingram warehouse staff in Jackson, Tennessee, and anywhere else in the world not mentioned is also fulfilled, no doubt lovingly, by the Tennessee people. All clear? Jolly good.



Returns and 'hurts'

Let us grumble about returns. Returns happen when bookshops, including the massive over-buyers like Amazon and the UK wholesaler Gardners, decide that they need to send back the books they over-bought some months ago, because they misjudged how many they would sell. There is a sad little category on our inventory reports called 'hurts'. This is a US term for books that have been returned shop-soiled or damaged, so that they can't be supplied elsewhere as saleable stock. 'Hurts' lose us money because the original purchasing bookshop gets a credit note while we lose the value of the book.

And it gets worse. When our books are bought by bookshops they can't pay us till the books have been bought by customers, and this can take months. So when books are returned electronic credit notes flutter to and fro, and reconciling who owes what to whom is an absolute nightmare. In a perfect storm of 'hurts' and returns it is quite possible for their value to exceed the value of any sales that month. Remind us: why are we doing this?

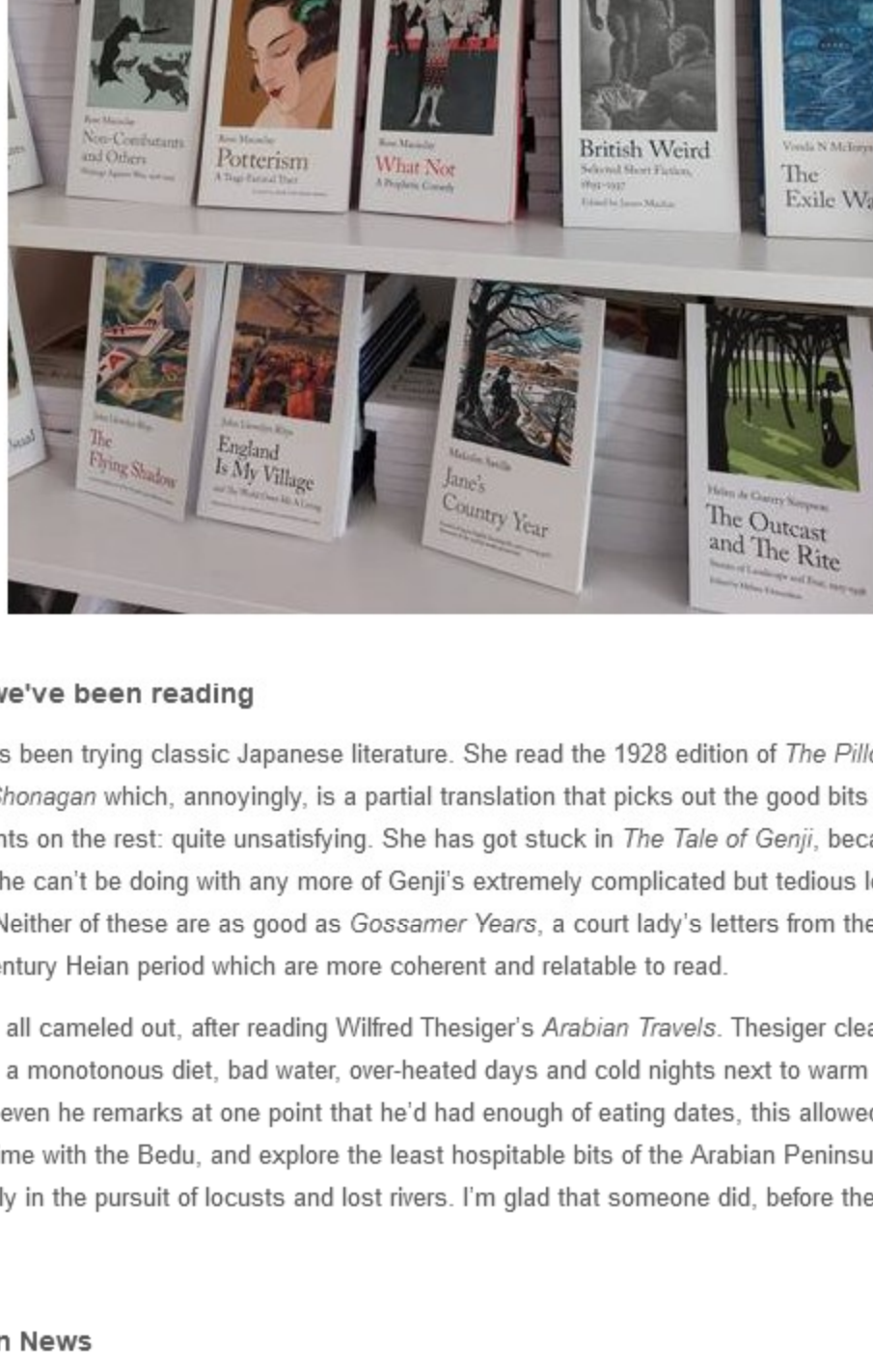
Bouncing social media icons

We've had a couple of complaints that the bouncing row of our social media icons on the mobile phone version of our website was preventing customers from buying books on their phones, as the icons obscured the buttons to click. We have solved this by only having the icons on the home page: they will not decorate any other of our website pages, so purchases can be made without holding your phone upside down.

Three for two is back!

So, let's give it a test. On **September 28th**, we offer a one-day Three for Two on all titles in our website. Place an order for two of our books, and let us know in the notes on the order page (or by email separately) which book you'd like as your third title. (Outside the UK we'll have to charge you postage for the third book.)

Enjoy!



What we've been reading

Kate has been trying classic Japanese literature. She read the 1928 edition of *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagan which, annoyingly, is a partial translation that picks out the good bits and comments on the rest: quite unsatisfying. She has got stuck in *The Tale of Genji*, because really, she can't be doing with any more of Genji's extremely complicated but tedious love affairs. Neither of these are as good as *Gossamer Years*, a court lady's letters from the same tenth-century Heian period which are more coherent and relatable to read.

David is all cameled out, after reading Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Travels*. His next to warm camel enjoyed a monotonous diet, bad water, over-heated days and cold nights next to warm camels. Though even he remarks at one point that he'd had enough of eating dates, this allowed him to spend time with the Bedu, and explore the least hospitable bits of the Arabian Peninsula, nominally in the pursuit of locusts and lost rivers. I'm glad that someone did, before the oil rigs arrived.

Garden News

This month began with the great ants' nest excavation. On a hot August day Kate noticed that the flying ants were beginning to prepare for take-off on the drive. David went down to have a look, and, probably driven by an atavistic memory of playing in sandpits, was soon digging up the long drainage plates that lie at the foot of the drive, expecting to find a small ants nest. He found a very long conurbation of ants' nests, completely filling the trench where drainage rainwater is supposed to go with earth and egg chambers. It's all cleared now.

The garden has been very productive, in variety rather than quantity. Our home-made compost has given the gift of sprightly new tomato plants absolutely everywhere, and some of these have given forth fruit. Bigger fruit came from the plants we expected to harvest, but oddly many of these are going rotten while they ripen. The damson tree gave us its usual half-full mixing bowl, now converted into three large jars of jam. We had two figs! And ate them as a sticky jam with ice-cream. The rhubarb was bigger and better than last year, and to our amazement we have several peppers growing. We think they won't make the transformation from green to red as we don't yet have the greenhouse we thought we'd have, and the heatwave is now over, but they're certainly growing. But we won't have much of an apple harvest this year: the old tree, that bends so far forward it looks as if it's about to break, had very little blossom in the spring, so it's much less burdened by apples. We'll leave them up for as long as seems safe. Deer are already eating the windfalls.

We're going to have to muck out the pond soon. The hot weather accelerated the sticky pond weed growth so we have begun doing a little howling out each time we pass the pond on the way to the compost heap. The only life in there now seems to be pond skaters and snails, but there will be sleeping larvae and maybe some newts in the darker corners.

Time to look through your sock drawer: autumn is here.

Kate & David

Handheld Press