

Tracy Quan

picks the eight books she'd take to the ends of the earth with her

Chloe Marr

A A Milne

(Methren, 1946)

When I discovered that A A Milne had written a novel for adults, I was shocked. It was like discovering a parent's illicit love affair. Adult Milne is very adult. Whether writing about a plane crash, a child's death, a difficult marriage, or a woman's right to sleep around, Milne can touch upon a subject lightly. But not too lightly. Whenever real sex was hinted at, I re-read the passage. None of this stuff is physically arousing, mind you – Milne wasn't that kind of writer – and yet, every reference to the bed is enticing.

The Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies

Robertson Davies

(McClelland & Stewart, 1979)

This delightful collection of book reviews and biographical sketches covers four decades, starting in the 1940s. Casanova, Lolita, Somerset Maugham and Skittles (a renowned Victorian courtesan) are among his edgier subjects. Hans Christian Andersen also comes to life as the houseguest from hell and you end up feeling glad not to be Charles Dickens (Andersen's host). Essays are the oysters of literature, and this batch is fresh, perfect, juicy and varied.

The Jerusalem Bible

(Doubleday, 1966)

Read the King James if you want to be impressed by the dense, poetic language – that 'moth-eaten brocade', as Larkin puts it. Then compare it to the Jerusalem. This Catholic translation manages to be clear, direct and modern enough for reference without subjecting you to the humiliation of being spotted with a copy of the *Good News Bible* – and, as a bonus celebrity angle, J R R Tolkien is responsible for the translation of 'Jonah and the Whale'. You'll be hooked, if not actively converted.

Little Stories of Married Life

Mary Stewart Cutting

(McClure, Phillips & Co, 1902)

I stumbled across Mary Stewart Cutting's short stories about New York suburbia at the New York Society Library. Expecting treacle, I was soon addicted to her dishy, suggestive voice. A happily married couple reads a magazine serial together, analogous to snuggling on the couch with a video, while Cutting dissects every excruciating nuance of their relationship. After reading these stories of middle-class life, you realise how many illusions you had. In one nightmarish tale, a travelling salesman is stressed out by his unstable job and his wife's letters. Twenty years ago, before email, these stories would have been called outdated, but now we no longer think of letter writing as quaint.

Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation

Silvia Federici

(Autonomedia, 2004)

Sylvia Federici pulls you in to the late Middle Ages, to the peasant revolts of Europe, and doesn't let go. We think of the 16th century witch-hunts as something irrational, but Federici points out that careers and incomes were built on widespread torture and persecution, debunking a lot of conventional wisdom about religious versus secular authority. Witch-hunts, unfortunately for us, are part of what it means to be modern: think Gitmo, corporate prisons, and the current wave of anti-prostitution campaigns.

The Painter of Signs

R K Narayan

(Viking Press, 1976)

This short novel, set in India, isn't really about love getting in the way of progress (as the jacket claims) – it's the other way around. Daisy is a perfectly-drawn 20th-century woman, preoccupied with birth control, overpopulation and the standard of living. In her chaste, clinical way, Daisy is obsessed with sex, while Raman, her susceptible admirer, is more enchanted, enlightened and quietly

thoughtful. He's not as ideological as the modern woman he's attracted to, but he'll take his chances with her.

I Capture the Castle

Dodie Smith

(Heinemann, 1949)

Classic chick-lit, this is a charming novel about entering womanhood under precarious circumstances (are there any other kind?). Dodie Smith had a knack for creating bestsellers about eccentric characters, and here she manages to be both genteel and daring – an emotionally seductive combination. She handles the harrowing aspects of marrying for money with a brilliant lightness.

Moll Flanders

Daniel Defoe

(first published in London, 1722)

I was your typical alienated call girl, out of step with the world, or so I thought, when I began reading Moll's life story. This was my 'aha!' moment. Despite the archaic language, Moll's tricks and traits are amusingly familiar. To write this novel, a male pamphleteer 'became' a female prostitute and gave us one of our first modern hookers. Defoe wouldn't be surprised to learn that women are using the internet to sell sex. Through blogging, many prostitutes have also become pamphleteers. Is that what he had in mind? ■

Tracy Quan's latest novel, *Diary of a Jetsetting Call Girl*, is out in paperback from HarperPerennial

