

# Holiday reading inspiration

Introducing some new texts for Edexcel's  
A level Literature 2015 specification...  
and great holiday reading



# The Murder Room, PD James

Recommended by **Dr. Siân Harris, Lecturer in English (Education and Scholarship) at the University of Exeter.**

*The Murder Room* is the twelfth of PD James's novels to feature her ascetic protagonist, Commander Adam Dalgliesh. A senior policeman who also publishes poetry, he has a meticulous eye for detail and an unerring instinct for the secrets of human behaviour. Here, he must draw on all his skill to uncover the truth behind a macabre murder at the Dupayne Museum. The museum is a shrine to criminology and tabloid scandal, but now it has inspired a new killer to recreate the brutal crimes that are commemorated in the exhibition. *The Murder Room* provides a classic 'whodunnit' plot with an archly self-referential twist, as reader and detective alike attempt to solve the case, whilst being forced to confront the extent of their own fascination with crime.

The added pleasure of reading a PD James detective story lies not just in attempting (however unsuccessfully!) to unravel the mystery, but also in being able to appreciate her literary technique. James combines the plotting expertise of Agatha Christie with the unapologetic intelligence of Dorothy Sayers, but she is also determined to keep pace with a changing world, and *The Murder Room* balances 'Golden Age' influences with more contemporary references to modern police procedure.

Having taught another, Dalgliesh mystery – *Unnatural Causes* (1967) – on my third-year advanced Detective Fiction module, I've found that students were also intrigued by the complexity of James's characters, as even minor bystanders will be made memorable with a few choice details. This is particularly evident in *The Murder Room*, which has a collection of the most unusual suspects. Studying *The Murder Room* is therefore a great opportunity for students to engage with a popular genre whilst also learning to analyse its components, and to thoroughly dissect the secret of its success.

## Further Reading

- PD James. *Talking About Detective Fiction*. Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2009.  
An engaging overview of the genre from the author herself, that offers some revealing insight into her influences and inspiration.
- Susan Rowland. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.  
An academic analysis of women detective writers, that is particularly interesting in terms of charting social and literary contexts.
- *The Guardian* online archive of PD James reviews and articles - <http://www.theguardian.com/books/pdjames>  
A wealth of readily available material, including interviews with James, and reviews of *The Murder Room*.



# The Home Place, Brian Friel

Recommended by **Professor Anne Varty**, Department of English, Royal Holloway, University of London.

The Home Place is set in the garden estate of a country house in Donegal, 1879, at the beginning of the Irish Home Rule movement. It explores how these emerging politics affect a network of domestic, family, and local relationships. The play observes the unities of time, place and action, and is rich in stage symbols, satisfyingly provocative to analyse. I particularly enjoyed the clarity of the story telling, and the sharpness of the dialogue. Although the issues addressed are serious and far-reaching, the glancing ease with which they are conveyed is pleasing. Race, territory, ownership, class, women, family loyalty, and belonging are the main themes; they have both direct and oblique reference to the politics of today and fit well with the global politics of postcolonial resistance. The play engages us with a kaleidoscope of emotions – savage comedy, pathos, gentle lyricism, and it serves as a microcosm of the themes Friel has addressed previously. Students in HE are likely to encounter his work, and he has been a popular subject for dissertations.

The action takes place in the shadow of the assassination of a local Anglo-Irish landlord, Lord Liffey: in historical terms this is an allusion to the assassination of the 3rd Earl of Leitrim on 2 April 1878. There are further intersections with historical figures and movements, e.g. to William Wilde, or eugenics – affording clear opportunities for contextual research. Equally available is debate of Friel's dramatic methods: e.g. why, when he clearly resists the classification of racial difference by type, does he use the stage Irishman for comic effect?

Reviews of the first production are available online (eg The Guardian, 27 May 2005).

## Further Reading

- Scott Boltwood, (*Brian Friel, Ireland, and The North*). Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Russell, Richard Rankin.: "Home, exile and unease in Brian Friel's globalized drama since 1990: *Molly Sweeney*, *The Home Place*, and *Hedda Gabler* (after Ibsen)." *Modern Drama* (56:2) 206-31. (2013).



# The Rover: or, The Banish't Cavaliers (1677), Aphra Behn

Recommended by **Professor Paul Baines**, School of English, University of Liverpool.

My students always find this an absorbing, provocative, and occasionally disturbing comedy of sexual intrigue. It has prominent, richly-contrasted female characters, highlighting the position of Behn herself, definitively the first professional female playwright in English.

It is set in Naples at carnival time amongst a group of exiled Royalist Englishmen. Willmore, the 'rover', is an extreme sexual adventurer – 'a mad fellow for a wench' as his more restrained (and sometimes enraged) friend Belville calls him. These two are matched with Hellena, a 'wild cat' according to her brother, determined to escape from life as a nun through wit and boldness, and her sister Florinda, resisting likewise the choices made for her by her father and brother, albeit with less overt feistiness, to pursue Belville. Matters are complicated by the arrival of a courtesan, Angellica Bianca, her name ironically connoting whiteness and purity and her initials intriguingly mirroring those of Behn herself. Ignoring all normal conventions, Angellica hangs up a self-portrait and announces her availability to the highest bidder, divorcing sexual pleasure from any emotional commitment. Irresistibly attracted by Angellica, the normally silver-tongued Willmore incoherently offers Angellica what little he has, despite his antagonism to her ethos. Surprised by her own emotion, she accepts him as her lover. The scenes between Willmore and Angellica shift from the smart prose of comedy into the blank verse of tragedy. But Willmore, pathologically incapable of sexual constancy, ultimately chooses the safer path of marriage to his social equal and 'mad mistress', Hellena, leaving Angellica bereft and, in a sudden lurch towards domestic tragedy, murderous; her appearance on stage with a loaded pistol, gunning for Willmore, is particularly unexpected, if soon defused. Willmore returns alone in a sequel (1681), which derives an interestingly different conclusion from an initially similar set of characters.

## Further Reading

- Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, The Rover and Other Works*, ed. by Janet Todd (Penguin, 1992).
- S. J. Wiseman, *Aphra Behn* (Northcote House, 1997).
- *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, ed. by Derek Hughes and Janet Todd (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- Janet Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (André Deutsch, 1996).



## Lady Audley's Secret, M E Braddon

Recommended by **Esther Menon**,  
Lead Consultant for Edexcel GCE English Literature.

Many of my friends and colleagues in the world of English education admit to a common guilty secret – a passion for crime and detective novels. Most have read 'The Moonstone' and 'The Woman in White', but the majority remain unfamiliar with 'Lady Audley's Secret' which enjoyed equal literary status with Collins's novels in contemporary Victorian England. This is a reflection of M E Braddon's rise and fall, one that is inextricably linked to the politics of women and writing. 'Lady Audley's Secret' is established in many university courses after its return to critical attention in the 1970s, yet has remained absent on A level Literature courses. Here is a novel that is both an excellent read and an iconic Sensation novel – a sub-genre most popular between 1860 and 1880. Some have argued that Sensationalism reflects a mid-Victorian reaction to the stodginess and prudery of middle class values. From the horror of the gothic lying 'outside' society, writers such as Braddon placed horror firmly within the establishment – the middle and upper classes, the domestic, the home, and even women! The novel provides a fascinating exploration of identity, Victorian social and cultural anxieties, and many of the cultural and literary debates of the time.

The guilty secret in Braddon's novel centres on the beautiful, golden-haired woman who places herself as the lady of the manor through marriage. A far cry from the helpless women of the early Gothic novel, Braddon's protagonist captivates the men who surround her, while scheming for her own survival. Braddon establishes the rich ingredients of the sensationalist novel: double dealing, dangerous women, hypocrisy in polite society, bigamy, adultery, mistaken or hidden identities, misdirected letters, plotting, brilliant but eccentric villains, madness, blackmail and arson – how can we resist such a taste sensation!! Detection is carried out by the rather reluctant and lazy upper class lawyer Robert Audley, a likeable idler whose long-term male friend George Talboys disappears as a result of the crimes committed in the novel.

*Continued ....*

Braddon wrote over 40 sensational novels as well as an outpouring of poetry, plays, pennydreadfuls, ghost stories, realist novels, and historical fiction. It's a travesty that we are all familiar with her male contemporaries, yet not Braddon's work. Interest in Victorian crime and detective writing is very much alive in popular culture, thanks perhaps to the BBC and Benedict Cumberbatch. It would perhaps be a crime therefore, not to grasp our students' enthusiasm and also right the wrongs of the past, by ensuring that this gripping novel regains the popular status it originally enjoyed.

### **Further Reading**

- Crime Fiction 1800-2000 by Stephen Knight, Palgrave MacMillan 2004
- <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/sensation.html>
- <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/braddon/index.html>
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/wives/writers/braddon.html>



# The Pitmen Painters, Lee Hall

Recommended by **Gayle Bennet**, Lead practitioner in English Balcarras School, Cheltenham.

I came to Hall's comedy with memories of *Spoonface Steinberg* and *Billy Elliot*, thus with high hopes of an entertaining but thought-provoking play. He doesn't disappoint. And as a teacher, I think this makes an excellent text to bridge the GCSE/AS divide, with its simple plot and comedy it is an accessible and relatively short read for students embarking on an AS course.

The plot centres around the Pittmen Painters of the mid 1930s, increasingly caught up in the self-improvement promised them from painting, and the tutelage of Robert Lyon. It charts the development of their artwork and confidence as well as the political landscape of miners of the period, against a backdrop of an impending World War II. Whereas 'Billy Elliot' reflects those mining communities destroyed under Thatcherism, this play serves as a reminder of what was lost. The miners have real charm, we laugh with them as they develop, but see their ideas about culture pitted against (pun not intended!) those of the middle classes, and thus begin to ask 'is it everyone's entitlement to high culture?' and 'Who decides the meaning of art?' There's an opportunity for students to explore how the language of a community is a source for laughter, but also an alienating force.

There isn't much printed critical material available concerning this play, but I count that as a blessing in some ways; students have to think for themselves, reminding themselves they too are critics, and there is always useful research to be done on Hall's wider collection of work and its common themes, thus providing some breadth of study opportunities. The structure of the play means that students can consider how individuals reflect the political landscape, and vice versa, and students of Theatre Arts can consider the non-naturalistic, Brechtian approaches to staging and their impact.

Bleasdale's and Bennett's work provide further opportunities for studying (Northern) humour. But most of all, I believe this is a play for study and enjoyment; it touches both souls and minds...



# The Little Stranger, Sarah Water

Recommended by **Professor John Mullan**,  
University College London

Sarah Water's novel is set in the late 1940s, in a Britain exhausted by war. The narrator is a Warwickshire GP, Dr Faraday, who has returned in lonely middle age to the area where he was brought up, the clever son of working class parents. One day he is called to treat a servant girl, Betty, who works at the now mouldering country house, Hundreds Hall, where his own mother was once a servant. Thus the former visitor below stairs begins to minister to the Ayres family – a distracted widow and her two adult children – who own the house but can hardly afford to sustain it.

Things are going wrong at Hundreds. Betty thinks she is suffering because there is something 'bad' in the house. Over the months, as Faraday becomes more intimate with the family and they come to rely on him, the Ayres's troubles mount. A series of weird and frightening events begins to persuade them that the house is haunted in some way.

The brilliance of the book is that all this has to be conveyed by Faraday, who thinks himself a man of science. He is convinced that 'nervous' afflictions possess these exhausted members of a landed ruling class that has had its day. The reader's uncertainty – is this a ghost story? – is sustained by the narrator's refusal to believe in the supernatural. With its slowly manipulated episodes of terror it is squarely in a Gothic tradition, yet it is always teasing the reader to work out whether its puzzles are supernatural or a psychological.

Only slowly do you recognize that the slightly pedantic doctor, with his faith in natural explanation, is the most unreliable of narrators. This is the fascination of the novel: the person who tells the story is in fact its most troubling subject, and the more carefully we read the more clues to this we discover. As well as being a thrilling story, and a subtle exploration of social history, it is a book about how narrative works.

## Other reviews of 'The Little Stranger':

- Thomas Jones in the *London Review of Books*, Vol. 31, No. 13 (9 July 2009).
- John Mullan in *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/31/book-club-little-stranger-waters>



## The Lonely Londoners (1956), Sam Selvon

Recommended by **Dr Rachael Gilmour, Senior Lecturer in English, Queen Mary University of London.**

One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if it is not London at all but some strange place on another planet, Moses Aloetta hops on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellar who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train.

(Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*)

Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* is the classic novel of postwar migrant experience, its distinctive dialect narration chronicling the lives of West Indians struggling to make a home in 1950s London. Focused upon the world-weary Trinidadian Moses Aloetta – ten years in the city, reluctant guide for new arrivals, a distant and ironic echo of his Biblical namesake – the novel is constructed as a series of interlocking stories featuring a cast of West Indian characters, from the wide-eyed idealistic Galahad to the resourceful Tanty. *The Lonely Londoners* offers a vision of city life for the 'Windrush generation' that is by turns lyrical, funny, tender, and troubling. Wryly and acutely observant of the politics of race, class, and gender in postwar Britain, the novel also speaks thereby to concerns of the present moment. Yet, though what carries the reader along is Selvon's storytelling, the novel is as interesting stylistically and formally as it is thematically: restlessly experimental, it combines European modernist strategies such as stream-of-consciousness with Caribbean aesthetics. Students can explore influences on the novel ranging from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, to Trinidadian calypso.

Of all the novels I teach to undergraduates at Queen Mary University of London, *The Lonely Londoners* remains one of the richest, and one of the most consistently popular. Students enjoy their exploration of Selvon's structure, language, and narrative technique, uncovering the literary complexities of this apparently so straightforward, readable novel. They are attracted to the vibrancy of his characters, each drawn with economy and style – but also interested to explore the limitations of the novel's often distinctively masculine narrative perspective. Discussing the limitations of the novel's view of women helps students to learn how to read even a great work of fiction critically. At the same time, *The Lonely Londoners* offers a fascinating perspective on this period of British history, prompting students to learn about postwar immigration, histories of empire, and the relationship between Britain and the Caribbean. *The Lonely Londoners* thus offers students the opportunity to explore how the novel, and the nation, have been transformed through migration, while developing their skills of literary analysis in exploring Selvon's wonderful prose.

## Further Reading

- Susheila Nasta, 'Introduction', in Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin, 2006).  
Nasta's excellent Introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition offers important historical and critical contexts to the novel for teachers and students.
- Bill Schwarz, 'Sam Selvon *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)', in Andrew Whitehead (ed) *London Fictions* (Five Leaves Publications, 2013).  
A brief, clear, astute summary of the novel's distinctive features, and its significance as the classic novel of the migrant experience.
- Susheila Nasta (ed.) *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1988).  
This classic collection of academic essays offers a wealth of critical approaches to Selvon's writing, while also helping to give an overview of his work.
- Martin Zehnder (ed) *Something Rich and Strange: Selected Essays on Sam Selvon* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003).  
Another collection of academic essays on Selvon's writing.
- John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).  
The first chapter offers a highly readable overview of the representation of the city in *The Lonely Londoners*.
- James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester University Press, 2003).  
Procter's discussion of Selvon in this book combines insightful analysis of *The Lonely Londoners* itself with valuable socio-historical and literary contexts.

There are also numerous excellent academic articles on Selvon's work, particularly in the journal *Ariel: A Review of International Literature in English*, which are accessible free of charge via JSTOR through many library portals.

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