Best Scottish Books of 2017

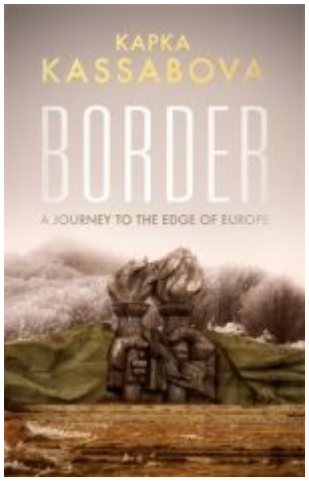
Are you a lover of fiction? Maybe poetry is more your style? Or does your heart only really thrill to a riveting non-fiction story, expertly told? Whatever your heart desires, we have a great selection for you to choose from in this year's Best Scottish Books list.

ASLS has asked authors, reviewers, academics, and members of the literary sector to tell us about their favourite Scottish book from this past year. We're looking for books in English, Scots, or Gaelic, which was published for the first time in 2017 or re-issued this year, and could be a work of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or academic research. And what a wonderful list it is! You'll find new books by those authors you always keep an eye on, and debuts destined to become new favourites — and it all shows the breadth and vibrance of Scotland's writing culture. There is something for everyone, so get comfy, and have a browse through the Best Scottish Books from 2017. The list is organised by title. If your favourite isn't here, let us know about it!

***Autumn* by Ali Smith | Penguin, 2017**
— chosen by Laura Waddell, Publishing Manager and writer of fiction, essays, and criticism

It took me almost a year to face Ali Smith's *Autumn*, billed as the first Brexit novel, but by the time the paperback appeared in suitably rust-coloured splendour in autumn 2017, I was ready. A literary collage of Brexit themes, some as overt as a newly erected fence butting up against a walking route, bureaucratic frustration, or (highly relatable) despair over media complacency and callousness, and others subtle and fleeting, like surreal motifs of a restless sleep. As a format, it's an apt fit to reflect a roiling, shape-shifting, confusing reality, particularly written in the immediate aftermath of the vote. This grid of references is overlaid

across a gleeful inter-generational friendship making a game of storytelling. The small resistance of finding colour, warmth and wit in words is immediately appealing in a bookish way, but stands as a larger metaphor for taking an active role in shaping and questioning narrative, and illustrates the strength that can be drawn from (in idiosyncratic Smith style) compassionate and curious human encounters with our neighbours. Holding such thoughtfulness in my hands, in print, was some solid hope amidst endlessly scrolling, increasingly fragmentary, digital tickertape of news.



Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe **by Kapka Kassabova | Granta, 2017**
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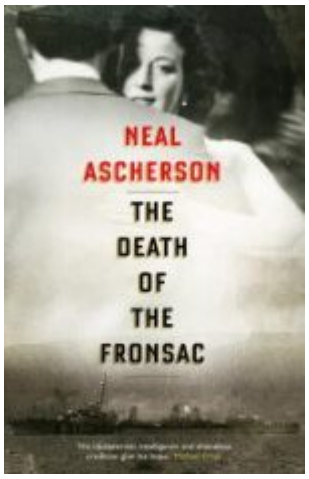
Some books, some stories, are simply right for their times. This remarkable travel memoir from Kapka Kassabova is a case in point. She weaves the personal and intimate stories of the displaced and disposed through a broader narrative of the historical and continuing ramifications of global power plays. My reading of this remarkable book was regularly punctuated with 'who knew?' moments as I was introduced to new places, events and mythologies. Kassabova's poetic sensibilities also had me pausing, reflecting and reading again lines and phrases of power and insight: 'he was light, and took that step for those who were heavy' she says of a young man escaping the Communist block; 'Bulgaria's ethnic purge was the last cretinous crime of twilight totalitarianism', a succinct and damning indictment. Might we be lucky one day and see Kapka take another journey from her Highland home to bring her eye, ear and imagination to the border lands of Trump's America. That I am sure would be another book worthy of note.



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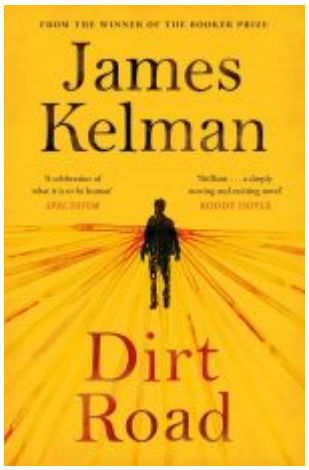

***Dirt Road* by James Kelman | Canongate 2017**
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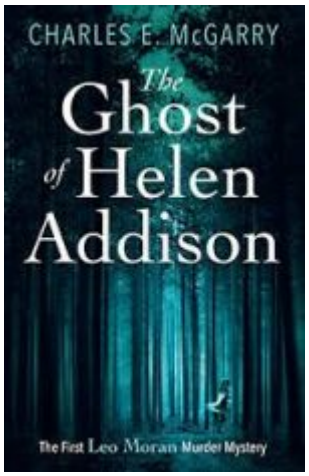
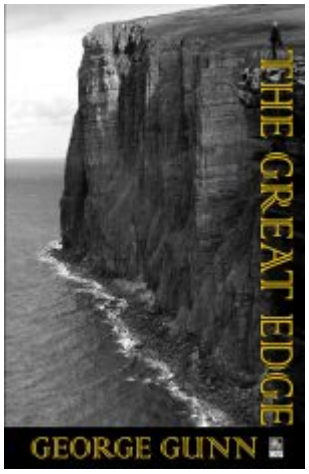


***The Ghost of Helen Addison* by Charles E. McGarry | Polygon, 2017**

— chosen by Donna Heddle, Director of the UHI Institute for Northern Studies

My pick of the year for sheer entertainment value and spectacular leftfieldness is Charles E. McGarry's The Ghost of Helen Addison, as it combines three of my ruling passions – Scotland, the supernatural, and Golden Age crime fiction. His central character, Leo Moran, is a deerstalker-wearing private detective and gourmandising flâneur with a heart and a conscience who also happens to be prone to psychic visions about violent crimes. He receives regular, and suspiciously well-timed, visitations from the unfortunate Helen, who was murdered in a forest one night. Moran is refreshingly different from the usual crop of hardboiled, hardbitten detectives operating in an urban Scottish environment. The writing style of the text is also very distinct, combining an elegiac harking back to the past, both personal and historical, with a strain of otherworldliness which is very Scots, strangely familiar and comforting. McGarry takes the road less travelled both literally and figuratively in this debut novel enticingly subtitled 'The First Leo Moran Mystery'. I'll be there for the next.

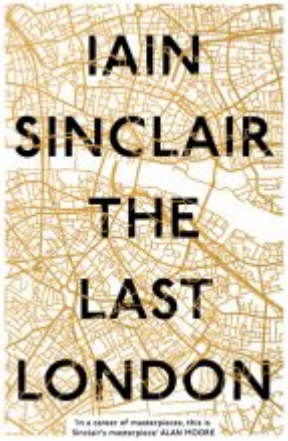


***The Great Edge* by George Gunn | Grace Note Publications, 2017**

– chosen by Laura Morgan, writer and blogger

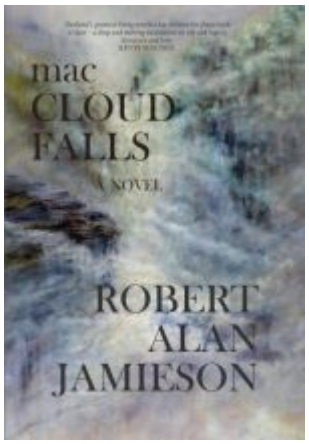
Eight thousand years ago, an underwater landslide at the edge of Norway's continental shelf sent a twenty-metre-high wave washing over Scotland; in George

Gunn's debut novel, *The Great Edge*, shortlisted for the Dundee International Book Prize in 2016, the landslide recurs – this time Dounreay nuclear power plant is in the tsunami's path. A literary environmental thriller, the book is set on Dwarick Head, where in the ninth century, three monks wish to inter a holy clarsach, and in the present day, archaeologist Mags wants to dig the instrument up. Meanwhile, Bragi Boddason, court skald to the gods of Asgard, sets sail in Skidbladnir to observe the giant wave breaking. Bragi's ship unfolds from a white handkerchief and voyages through the sky, but mythology and reality collide when he throws anchor on the roof of Dounreay. Towards the end, one might wonder if the tsunami is really destined for our shores; the last fifty pages are a tense read. But it's worth remembering that as a playwright Gunn won't shy from a final explosive act.



***The Last London* by Iain Sinclair | OneWorld, 2017**
~ AND ~
***Bantam* by Jackie Kay | Picador, 2017**
— chosen by Colin Waters, the Scottish Poetry Library's Communications Manager, Vagabond Voices' poetry editor, and occasional journalist

I'm going to claim Iain Sinclair as a Scot and therefore his latest tome *The Last London* as a Scottish book of the year; with an Aberdonian paternal grandfather, he could've played for the Scottish football team, which is good enough for me. In *The Last London*, Sinclair expresses his disgust at the way in which London has acquiesced in its own destruction, its unruly, mystic history papered over by conglomerate cash. I also spent much of the year reading and re-reading Wilfred Owen as I was involved in staging the centenary celebrations of Owen's transformative stay in the capital in 1917. A highlight of 2017 for me was chairing Jackie Kay's EIBF session, where she premiered a new cycle of poems celebrating Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's meeting at Craiglockhart; I hope she publishes those poems in time for next year's centenary of Owen's death. If not, I can content myself with the National Poet's new collection, *Bantam*, which has some fine poems about WW1, which her grandfather fought in.



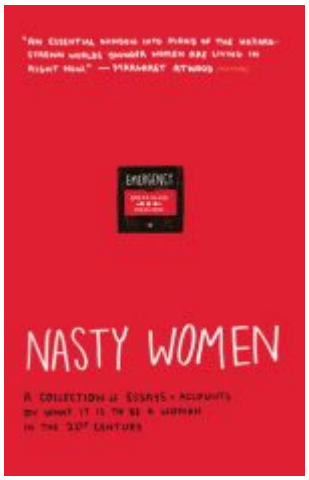
***MacCloud Falls* by Robert Alan Jamieson | Luath Press, 2017**

— chosen by Leith Davis, Professor of English at Simon Fraser University

Kudos to Robert Alan Jamieson, whose *MacCloud Falls* extends the remit of 'Scottish Literature' to include the complex connections (both historic and contemporary) between Scots and indigenous peoples. Jamieson's protagonist, Gilbert Johnson, arrives by Greyhound bus in a small town in British Columbia on the West Coast of Canada on a quest to trace a possible ancestor, James Lyle. Jamieson based the story of Lyle on the actual life of James Alexander Teit, an anthropologist originally from Shetland who learned First nations languages, married a Nlaka'pamux woman named Lucy Susannah Antko, and worked with Franz Boas. Gilbert's travels into the remote regions of British Columbia, framed in the context of his budding relationship with Veronika, a fellow cancer survivor, present the reader with much to contemplate about the fluid nature of identity and the role of language and writing in naming, shaping and contesting identity. In this year during which Canada marks its 150th year as a nation, *MacCloud Falls* is an important book both for Scottish and Canadian readers, calling attention to the often-erased role that First Nations peoples played in the so-called settlement of North America and to the need for ongoing reconciliation between First Nations and settler groups both within Canada and in a global context.

***Muriel Spark Centenary Editions* | Polygon, 2017**
~ AND ~
***Above the Waterfall* by Ron Rash | Canongate 2017**
— chosen by Kevin MacNeil, a novelist, poet, and screenwriter. He lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Stirling.

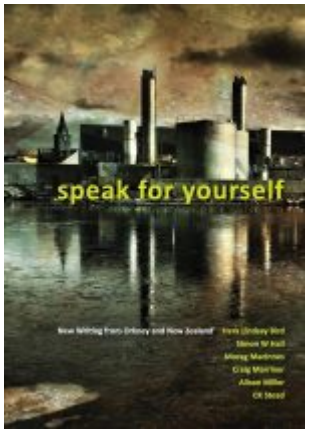
My favourite book of 2017 isn't so much a book as a bookshelf. Muriel Spark is one of modern Scotland's most accomplished authors and Polygon's decision to republish all 22 of her novels in beautifully designed, colourful, hardback centenary editions is much to be applauded. Spark is best known for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Driver's Seat* and *Memento Mori*, but in fact all of her novels are intense, distinctive and original, right up to her final, underrated novel *The Finishing School*. These books will be an intellectually edifying and aesthetically pleasing addition to any library. Meanwhile Scottish publisher Canongate continues to promote the brilliance of Appalachian Ron Rash and his novel *Above the Waterfall* seemed to me an impressive marriage of literary sensibility and cinematic plotting.



***Nasty Women: A Collection of Essays + Accounts on What it is to be a Woman in the 21st Century* edited by Heather McDaid and Laura Jones | 404 Ink, 2017**
— chosen by Peggy Hughes, Chair of Literature Alliance Scotland

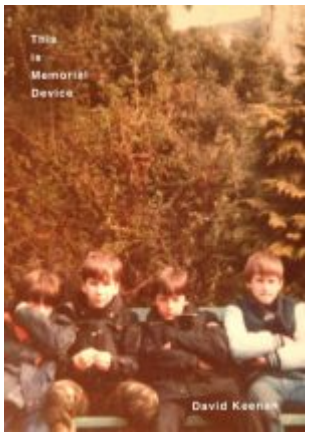
One fan has delivered a copy to Trump Towers; it was the bestselling title at this year's Edinburgh International Book Festival; and publishers 404Ink have just topped *The List*'s Hot 100 list of figures who've contributed most to the cultural landscape during the year: my book of the year has to be *Nasty Women*. Published and edited by Heather McDaid and Laura Jones, it is a timely and powerful collection of essays, interviews and accounts on what it is to be a woman in the 21st century, and it has taken the Scottish (and global) stage by storm. I backed the book on Kickstarter, along with over 1300(!) others, including icon Margaret Atwood and have watched with delight the book become the stuff of living legend.

But, hype aside, what of the work? Alice Tarbuck's beautiful essay on small, radical gestures in a frightening world. Laura Waddell powerfully challenging lazy working class stereotypes. Chitra Ramaswamy on pregnancy and Christina Neuwirth on grief, essays on race and rape, contraception and choice. Every piece in this book has something vital to say, a story to tell, a voice worth hearing: it is the most exciting and necessary book of the year.



***Speak for Yourself: New Writing from Orkney and New Zealand* | Abersee Press, 2017**
— chosen by Harry Giles, a performer, poet, and general doer of things

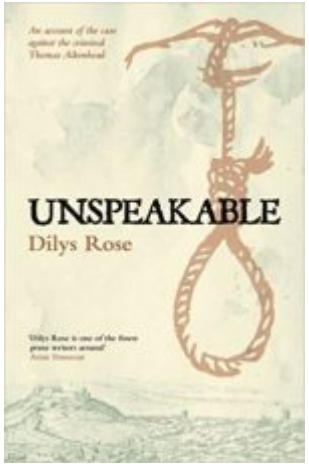
My pick is a very little book that's part of something much larger: Abersee Press's *Speak for Yourself*, a chapbook of stories and essays published in May. Linking Orkney and New Zealand writers, it marks a new period of Orkney literature, with local authors writing confidently about contemporary life and cultural conflicts in the islands, with an assured use of Orkney language. It was preceded by *Orkney Stoor* and followed up this month with *Swiet Haar*, so a new press and literature has certainly arrived. Edited by Duncan Maclean, Abersee Press' work is thus in a grassroots publishing tradition that stretches back to Rebel Inc. and more, making local Scots literatures with international visions a new centre of quietly subversive writing. The stories in *Speak for Yourself* leave island clichés behind, describing an Orkney that thrives and struggles now, that speaks in its own voice. Duncan Maclean's opening essay surveys what a new and more local Scots literature could become, while Alison Miller's addresses, with heart and honesty, the tricky divides between English and Scots-speaking incomers and Orcadian-speaking establised islanders that are at (rarely publicly spoken) core of many island conflicts. These are the conversations Scots and Scottish writers should be having, and the voices we should listen to and speak with.



***This is Memorial Device* by David Keenan | Faber & Faber, 2017**

— chosen by Alistair Braidwood who runs the Scottish cultural website *Scots Whay Hae!*

In most other years *That Was A Shiver*, the new collection of short stories from James Kelman, would be a shoo-in for my Scottish Book of The Year. Kelman is a master of the form and this publication was a timely reminder of that. Another contender, and arguably the most important and influential book of the year, was 404 Ink's collection of essays *Nasty Women* which didn't just capture the zeitgeist in 2017, it helped create it. However, my Scottish Book of The Year is David Keenan's *This Is Memorial Device*. When I first read it back in March I doubted I would read a better book this year, and, despite stiff competition, that has proved prescient. It is smart, stylish and daring, and will no doubt alienate as many as it attracts. The attention to detail and sheer-bloody mindedness Keenan displays reminds me of the best of Alasdair Gray, reflecting the will of the writer rather than a desire to please readers. The result is one of the most original novels in years.



***Unspeakable* by Dilys Rose | Freight Books, 2017**

— chosen by Juliet Shields, Professor of English at the University of Washington, Seattle

It's surely significant that this year saw the publication of not one but two novels about Thomas Aikenside, the last person to be executed for blasphemy in Scotland: Heather Richardson's *Doubting Thomas* and my favourite book of the year — Dilys Rose's *Unspeakable*. *Unspeakable* is a novel that begins at its end,

with Thomas Aikenhead's walk to the gallows in Edinburgh's Grassmarket, where he is to be hanged. While this could make for an overly sentimental or darkly disturbing story, the narrator's dispassionate tone in relating Aikenhead's most vivid memories and formative experiences up to this point give *Unspeakable* the quality of a documentary film. From a boy who dreams of concocting a recipe for happiness from his apothecary father's medicinal stores Thomas Aikenhead grows into a thoughtful young man with 'a loose tongue and precious little else' other than a resilience that survives deprivation and loneliness. Late seventeenth-century Edinburgh, as Rose depicts it, is uncanny in its familiarity. Representing a world in which art, music, and humanistic learning are viewed with suspicion, in which bigotry and cruelty reign, and in which free thought can be criminalised, this engrossing novel made me wonder what difference the Enlightenment made, not just to Scotland, but to the world. Have we really made any progress?

***Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks* by Magi Gibson | Luath, 2017**
— chosen by Gwen Enstam, Project Developer for ASLS

I admit it. When I first saw *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks*, I didn't know what the title referred to. And there is the poem of the same name, waiting patiently at the end of the book to explain itself. But this is such a beautiful — and beautifully constructed — book of poetry, the only way to really do it justice is to start from the beginning: and that title poem means so much more, once you know where you're coming from. In her latest collection, Magi Gibson looks at family, language, grief, growing up ('Onceuponadream: a multiple choice poem for little girls' is a very honest fairy tale indeed), and a Scottish countryside so vibrant it comes to life: 'Scots pines turn their Presbyterian backs / on a stream that pishes like a drunk' is one of my favourite stanzas, from 'Early Morning Train

to Inverness'. But the poems that draw me back are the ones that rescue and re-interpret the feminine – the crates of scarlet lipstick delivered to a concentration camp in 'Liberation of Belsen': 'No one knew what fool / had ordered them, or why. // But when the women heard / they came. Limping.'; the 'new dress, a fresh dress, a still-yes dress' worn with brand new shoes in '19/9/2014'; the 'checkpoint of my female tongue' that transforms the no-man's land of 'My Neighbour'. The title poem, 'Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks', is also one of these – at once reclaiming an act of housewifely drudgery, and of love.Are you a lover of fiction? Maybe poetry is more your style? Or does your heart only really thrill to a riveting non-fiction story, expertly told? Whatever your heart desires, we have a great selection for you to choose from in this year's Best Scottish Books list.

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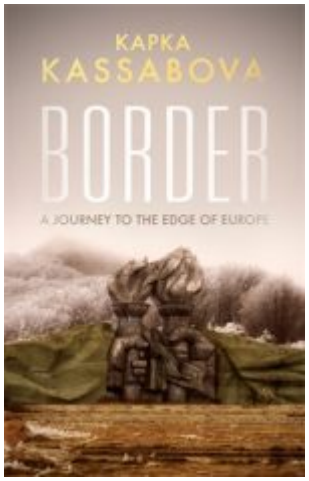

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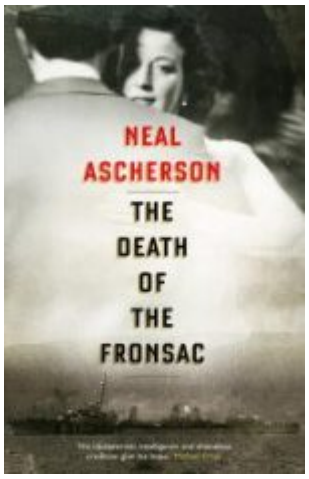

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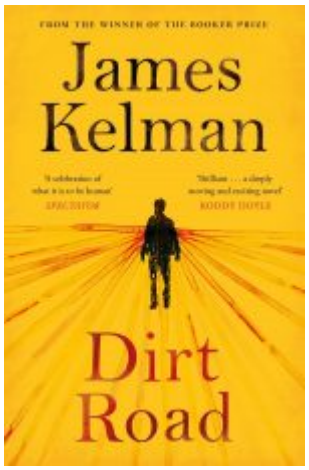

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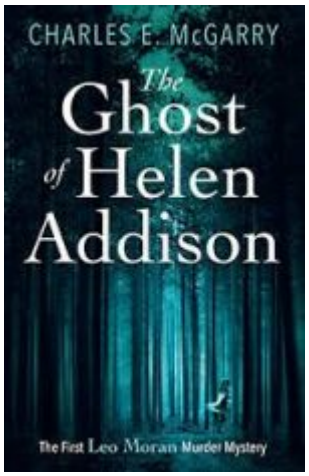
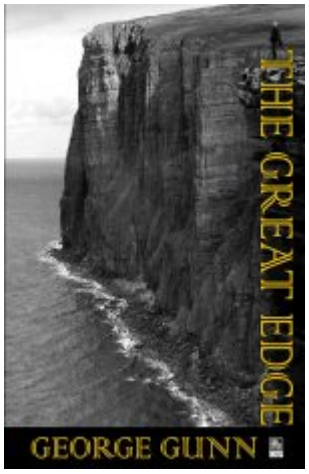


***The Ghost of Helen Addison* by Charles E. McGarry | Polygon, 2017**

— chosen by Donna Heddle, Director of the UHI Institute for Northern Studies

My pick of the year for sheer entertainment value and spectacular leftfieldness is Charles E. McGarry's The Ghost of Helen Addison, as it combines three of my ruling passions – Scotland, the supernatural, and Golden Age crime fiction. His central character, Leo Moran, is a deerstalker-wearing private detective and gourmandising flâneur with a heart and a conscience who also happens to be prone to psychic visions about violent crimes. He receives regular, and suspiciously well-timed, visitations from the unfortunate Helen, who was murdered in a forest one night. Moran is refreshingly different from the usual crop of hardboiled, hardbitten detectives operating in an urban Scottish environment. The writing style of the text is also very distinct, combining an elegiac harking back to the past, both personal and historical, with a strain of otherworldliness which is very Scots, strangely familiar and comforting. McGarry takes the road less travelled both literally and figuratively in this debut novel enticingly subtitled 'The First Leo Moran Mystery'. I'll be there for the next.

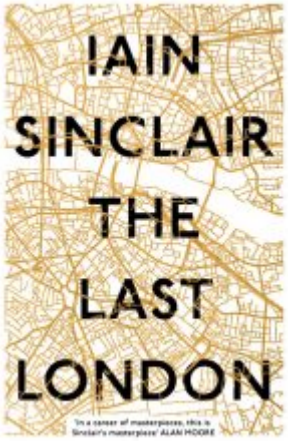


***The Great Edge* by George Gunn | Grace Note Publications, 2017**

– chosen by Laura Morgan, writer and blogger

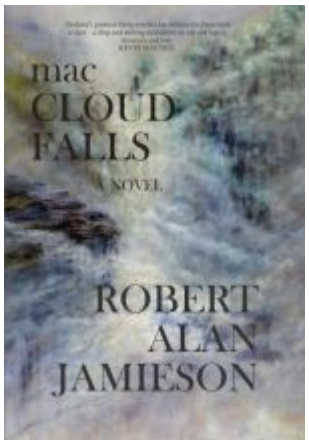
Eight thousand years ago, an underwater landslide at the edge of Norway's continental shelf sent a twenty-metre-high wave washing over Scotland; in George

Gunn's debut novel, *The Great Edge*, shortlisted for the Dundee International Book Prize in 2016, the landslide recurs – this time Dounreay nuclear power plant is in the tsunami's path. A literary environmental thriller, the book is set on Dwarick Head, where in the ninth century, three monks wish to inter a holy clarsach, and in the present day, archaeologist Mags wants to dig the instrument up. Meanwhile, Bragi Boddason, court skald to the gods of Asgard, sets sail in Skidbladnir to observe the giant wave breaking. Bragi's ship unfolds from a white handkerchief and voyages through the sky, but mythology and reality collide when he throws anchor on the roof of Dounreay. Towards the end, one might wonder if the tsunami is really destined for our shores; the last fifty pages are a tense read. But it's worth remembering that as a playwright Gunn won't shy from a final explosive act.



***The Last London* by Iain Sinclair | OneWorld, 2017**
~ AND ~
***Bantam* by Jackie Kay | Picador, 2017**
— chosen by Colin Waters, the Scottish Poetry Library's Communications Manager, Vagabond Voices' poetry editor, and occasional journalist

I'm going to claim Iain Sinclair as a Scot and therefore his latest tome *The Last London* as a Scottish book of the year; with an Aberdonian paternal grandfather, he could've played for the Scottish football team, which is good enough for me. In *The Last London*, Sinclair expresses his disgust at the way in which London has acquiesced in its own destruction, its unruly, mystic history papered over by conglomerate cash. I also spent much of the year reading and re-reading Wilfred Owen as I was involved in staging the centenary celebrations of Owen's transformative stay in the capital in 1917. A highlight of 2017 for me was chairing Jackie Kay's EIBF session, where she premiered a new cycle of poems celebrating Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's meeting at Craiglockhart; I hope she publishes those poems in time for next year's centenary of Owen's death. If not, I can content myself with the National Poet's new collection, *Bantam*, which has some fine poems about WW1, which her grandfather fought in.



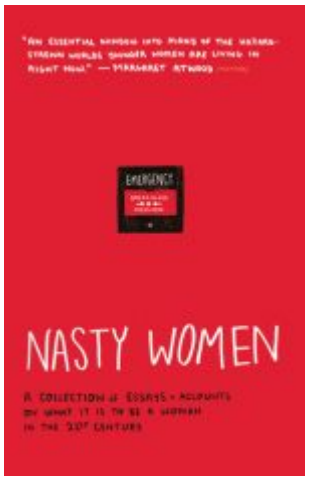
***MacCloud Falls* by Robert Alan Jamieson | Luath Press, 2017**

— chosen by Leith Davis, Professor of English at Simon Fraser University

Kudos to Robert Alan Jamieson, whose *MacCloud Falls* extends the remit of 'Scottish Literature' to include the complex connections (both historic and contemporary) between Scots and indigenous peoples. Jamieson's protagonist, Gilbert Johnson, arrives by Greyhound bus in a small town in British Columbia on the West Coast of Canada on a quest to trace a possible ancestor, James Lyle. Jamieson based the story of Lyle on the actual life of James Alexander Teit, an anthropologist originally from Shetland who learned First nations languages, married a Nlaka'pamux woman named Lucy Susannah Antko, and worked with Franz Boas. Gilbert's travels into the remote regions of British Columbia, framed in the context of his budding relationship with Veronika, a fellow cancer survivor, present the reader with much to contemplate about the fluid nature of identity and the role of language and writing in naming, shaping and contesting identity. In this year during which Canada marks its 150th year as a nation, *MacCloud Falls* is an important book both for Scottish and Canadian readers, calling attention to the often-erased role that First Nations peoples played in the so-called settlement of North America and to the need for ongoing reconciliation between First Nations and settler groups both within Canada and in a global context.

***Muriel Spark Centenary Editions* | Polygon, 2017**
~ AND ~
***Above the Waterfall* by Ron Rash | Canongate 2017**
— chosen by Kevin MacNeil, a novelist, poet, and screenwriter. He lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Stirling.

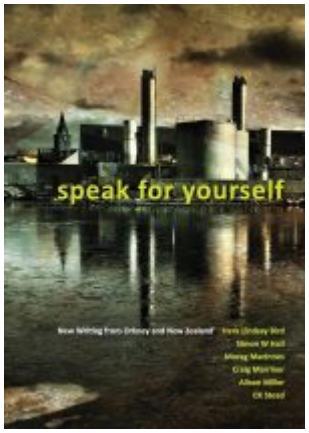
My favourite book of 2017 isn't so much a book as a bookshelf. Muriel Spark is one of modern Scotland's most accomplished authors and Polygon's decision to republish all 22 of her novels in beautifully designed, colourful, hardback centenary editions is much to be applauded. Spark is best known for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Driver's Seat* and *Memento Mori*, but in fact all of her novels are intense, distinctive and original, right up to her final, underrated novel *The Finishing School*. These books will be an intellectually edifying and aesthetically pleasing addition to any library. Meanwhile Scottish publisher Canongate continues to promote the brilliance of Appalachian Ron Rash and his novel *Above the Waterfall* seemed to me an impressive marriage of literary sensibility and cinematic plotting.



***Nasty Women: A Collection of Essays + Accounts on What it is to be a Woman in the 21st Century* edited by Heather McDaid and Laura Jones | 404 Ink, 2017**
— chosen by Peggy Hughes, Chair of Literature Alliance Scotland

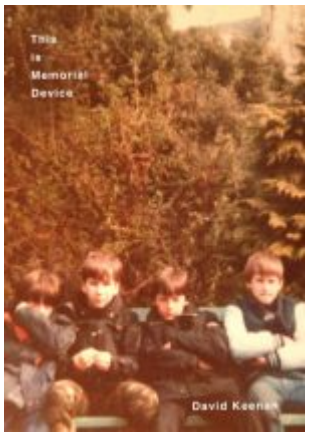
One fan has delivered a copy to Trump Towers; it was the bestselling title at this year's Edinburgh International Book Festival; and publishers 404Ink have just topped *The List*'s Hot 100 list of figures who've contributed most to the cultural landscape during the year: my book of the year has to be *Nasty Women*. Published and edited by Heather McDaid and Laura Jones, it is a timely and powerful collection of essays, interviews and accounts on what it is to be a woman in the 21st century, and it has taken the Scottish (and global) stage by storm. I backed the book on Kickstarter, along with over 1300(!) others, including icon Margaret Atwood and have watched with delight the book become the stuff of living legend.

But, hype aside, what of the work? Alice Tarbuck's beautiful essay on small, radical gestures in a frightening world. Laura Waddell powerfully challenging lazy working class stereotypes. Chitra Ramaswamy on pregnancy and Christina Neuwirth on grief, essays on race and rape, contraception and choice. Every piece in this book has something vital to say, a story to tell, a voice worth hearing: it is the most exciting and necessary book of the year.



***Speak for Yourself: New Writing from Orkney and New Zealand* | Abersee Press, 2017**
— chosen by Harry Giles, a performer, poet, and general doer of things

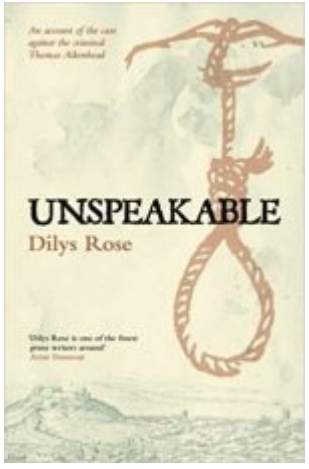
My pick is a very little book that's part of something much larger: Abersee Press's *Speak for Yourself*, a chapbook of stories and essays published in May. Linking Orkney and New Zealand writers, it marks a new period of Orkney literature, with local authors writing confidently about contemporary life and cultural conflicts in the islands, with an assured use of Orkney language. It was preceded by *Orkney Stoor* and followed up this month with *Swiet Haar*, so a new press and literature has certainly arrived. Edited by Duncan Maclean, Abersee Press' work is thus in a grassroots publishing tradition that stretches back to Rebel Inc. and more, making local Scots literatures with international visions a new centre of quietly subversive writing. The stories in *Speak for Yourself* leave island clichés behind, describing an Orkney that thrives and struggles now, that speaks in its own voice. Duncan Maclean's opening essay surveys what a new and more local Scots literature could become, while Alison Miller's addresses, with heart and honesty, the tricky divides between English and Scots-speaking incomers and Orcadian-speaking establised islanders that are at (rarely publicly spoken) core of many island conflicts. These are the conversations Scots and Scottish writers should be having, and the voices we should listen to and speak with.



***This is Memorial Device* by David Keenan | Faber & Faber, 2017**

— chosen by Alistair Braidwood who runs the Scottish cultural website *Scots Whay Hae!*

In most other years *That Was A Shiver*, the new collection of short stories from James Kelman, would be a shoo-in for my Scottish Book of The Year. Kelman is a master of the form and this publication was a timely reminder of that. Another contender, and arguably the most important and influential book of the year, was 404 Ink's collection of essays *Nasty Women* which didn't just capture the zeitgeist in 2017, it helped create it. However, my Scottish Book of The Year is David Keenan's *This Is Memorial Device*. When I first read it back in March I doubted I would read a better book this year, and, despite stiff competition, that has proved prescient. It is smart, stylish and daring, and will no doubt alienate as many as it attracts. The attention to detail and sheer-bloody mindedness Keenan displays reminds me of the best of Alasdair Gray, reflecting the will of the writer rather than a desire to please readers. The result is one of the most original novels in years.



***Unspeakable* by Dilys Rose | Freight Books, 2017**

— chosen by Juliet Shields, Professor of English at the University of Washington, Seattle

It's surely significant that this year saw the publication of not one but two novels about Thomas Aikenside, the last person to be executed for blasphemy in Scotland: Heather Richardson's *Doubting Thomas* and my favourite book of the year — Dilys Rose's *Unspeakable*. *Unspeakable* is a novel that begins at its end,

with Thomas Aikenhead's walk to the gallows in Edinburgh's Grassmarket, where he is to be hanged. While this could make for an overly sentimental or darkly disturbing story, the narrator's dispassionate tone in relating Aikenhead's most vivid memories and formative experiences up to this point give *Unspeakable* the quality of a documentary film. From a boy who dreams of concocting a recipe for happiness from his apothecary father's medicinal stores Thomas Aikenhead grows into a thoughtful young man with 'a loose tongue and precious little else' other than a resilience that survives deprivation and loneliness. Late seventeenth-century Edinburgh, as Rose depicts it, is uncanny in its familiarity. Representing a world in which art, music, and humanistic learning are viewed with suspicion, in which bigotry and cruelty reign, and in which free thought can be criminalised, this engrossing novel made me wonder what difference the Enlightenment made, not just to Scotland, but to the world. Have we really made any progress?

***Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks* by Magi Gibson | Luath, 2017**
— chosen by Gwen Enstam, Project Developer for ASLS

I admit it. When I first saw *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks*, I didn't know what the title referred to. And there is the poem of the same name, waiting patiently at the end of the book to explain itself. But this is such a beautiful — and beautifully constructed — book of poetry, the only way to really do it justice is to start from the beginning: and that title poem means so much more, once you know where you're coming from. In her latest collection, Magi Gibson looks at family, language, grief, growing up ('Onceuponadream: a multiple choice poem for little girls' is a very honest fairy tale indeed), and a Scottish countryside so vibrant it comes to life: 'Scots pines turn their Presbyterian backs / on a stream that pishes like a drunk' is one of my favourite stanzas, from 'Early Morning Train

to Inverness’. But the poems that draw me back are the ones that rescue and re-interpret the feminine – the crates of scarlet lipstick delivered to a concentration camp in ‘Liberation of Belsen’: ‘No one knew what fool / had ordered them, or why. // But when the women heard / they came. Limping.’; the ‘new dress, a fresh dress, a still-yes dress’ worn with brand new shoes in ’19/9/2014′; the ‘checkpoint of my female tongue’ that transforms the no-man’s land of ‘My Neighbour’. The title poem, ‘Washing Hugh MacDiarmid’s Socks’, is also one of these – at once reclaiming an act of housewifely drudgery, and of love.

(c) The Bottle Imp