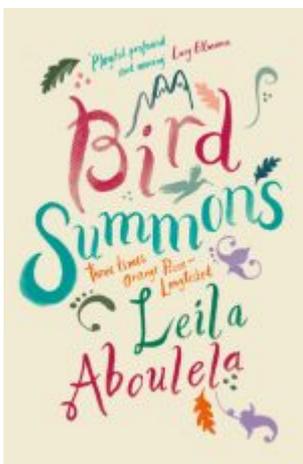


Best Scottish Books 2019

Welcome to the Best Scottish Books of 2019! ASLS has asked poets, writers, critics, academics, and members of the literary sector to tell us about their favourite Scottish book from this past year. The book could be in any language spoken in Scotland; it could be published for the first time in 2019 or re-issued this year; and could be a work of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or academic research ... and there can be more than one. We've got some well-kent faces here and exciting new ones, and they all show the breadth and vibrancy of Scotland's writing culture. There is something for everyone, so get comfy, and have a browse through the Best Scottish Books from 2019. The list is organised by title. If your favourite isn't here, let us know about it!

Want to see what was picked last year? You can also view the Best Scottish Books lists from 2018 and 2017; to see earlier lists, navigate to the 'Back Issues' link in the red bar at the top of this page, and select the November issue of *The Bottle Imp* for each year. The first list was published in 2013.



Bird Summons by **Leila Aboulela** | Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019

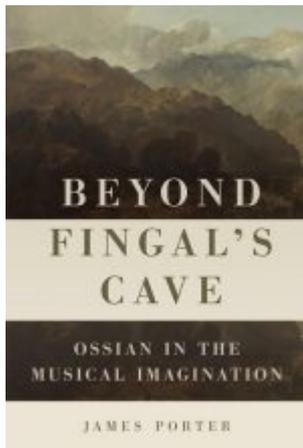
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Beyond Fingal's Cave: Ossian and the Musical Imagination by **James Porter** | University of Rochester Press, 2019

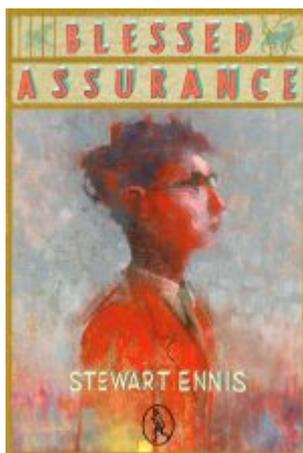
— chosen by Valentina Bold, Vice-Chair of Literature Alliance Scotland

2019 has been a fabulous year, for fiction and non-fiction. Two books stood out for me. Both are beautifully written. Each is imaginative and intellectually satisfying. The folkloric framing of Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* appealed to me. The quality of the narrative kept me reading. Three (very different) Muslim women undertake a pilgrimage into a liminal, rural, Scottish landscape. Through memorable encounters, with themselves and with others, they move towards self-awareness. There is humour and warmth (and mysticism) as familiar female experiences are explored from dislocated perspectives. The gentleness and

skilfulness of the writing, and the memorable characters (human and supernatural) make for a wonderful reading experience.



James Porter's *Beyond Fingal's Cave* is a scholarly tour de force. It takes the ongoing discussion around Macpherson's 'Ossian' into a new realm. Porter explores national and international musical responses to Ossian, from Beethoven to Brahms, Vaughan Williams to James Macmillan. Specialist yet accessible, complex yet easy to follow, Porter's volume adds another, definitive, layer to the study of Macpherson's Ossian. I loved it.

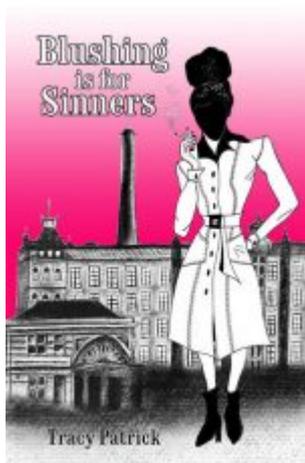


Blessed Assurance by **Stewart Ennis** | Vagabond Voices, 2019

— chosen by Liz Small, Director and co-owner of Gresham Publishing (Waverley Books and Geddes & Grosset)

Blessed Assurance is a new paperback by Stewart Ennis. Set in the late 1960s at a tense moment in the Cold War, and cleverly told over a period of six days, the story explores a small evangelical tight-knit community in a fictional Scottish fog-bound village. At its heart is the soul-searching of an eleven-year-old boy called Joseph Kirkland who is confused about being 'Saved', and his friendship with a wild boy who is far from godly. Entertaining and funny, with tender and tragic strands, and surreal humour, this is an engaging and touching book. I'd love also to mention a new edition of *Robert Burns in Edinburgh*, by Jerry Brannigan, John McShane and David Alexander. It is an exploration of the colourful, vivid times Burns spent in the capital at the height of the Enlightenment, with portraits of the people he met, and notes on the society he kept, plus the poems that these times inspired. And *Star of Hope* by Moira McPartlin — the third book in her Sun Song

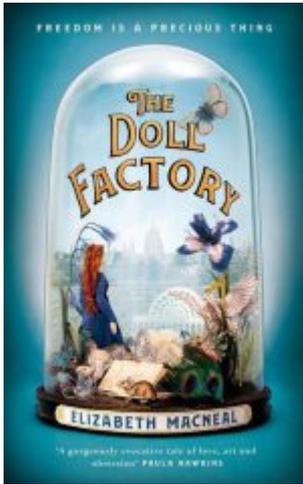
Trilogy. This final story presents the central character Sorlie still alive and grappling with moral dilemmas in this twists and turns story that continues to portray a disturbingly bleak environment in Scotland after huge climatic change.



Blushing is for Sinners by **Tracy Patrick** | Clochoderick Press, 2019

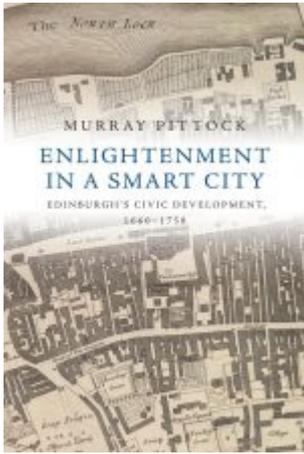
— chosen by Ruby McCann, flâneuse, creative practitioner, and a founding member of the Artist Collective, Cheeky Besom Productions

Blushing is for Sinners by Tracy Patrick was commended by the Saltire First Book of the Year Award judges, 2019. Patrick's debut novel touches on Scottish working-class themes in a tale of womanhood and self-actualisation. She explores how the dynamics of mother-daughter relationships play out, how secrets have a way of resurfacing, and how our choices follow us. Rooted in hardship and struggle, Paisley mill girl Jean McPartland simply wants a better life for her daughter, Ava. She wants to escape her mean-spirited mother who considers her 'selfish', and a gritty marriage to Tommy who denies her autonomy. Spoon-fed on dreams of a new life with jailbird, Billy McBride, Patrick captures the vulnerability and courage of a woman trapped: 'No she wasn't bad. She was in love' (p.126). Mary Queen of Scots becomes a metaphorical connection for Jean, a device for understanding conflict in a series of betrayals as family plot against her. She connects her experiences to, 'Mary, Queen of Scots baring her breasts to the jeering crowds, a woman pushed to the edge, her heart exposed like an open wound for the world to see, to do with it what they would.' (p.142) Patrick's candid prose deepens the cut of family bonds between Paisley and Canada. Her tale separates time and space in a boisterous celebration of community and female empowerment. Patrick feels the pulse of a small Scottish town, chronicling a beat recognised world-wide. Her fictional mill girls nod to Sara Sheridan's *Where Are the Women? A Guide To An Imagined Scotland*. Sheridan maps lists of factual women she imagines commemorated throughout Scotland. In statues, streets, and buildings, in the mountains, glens, forests, and coastlines.



The Doll Factory by **Elizabeth Macneal** | Picador, 2019
— chosen by Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir, Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in British Literature at University of Iceland

Set against the backdrop of the 1851 Great Exhibition, Elizabeth Macneal's debut novel *The Doll Factory* is a wonderfully evocative and atmospheric portrayal of Victorian London, in particular its darker aspects. The story focuses on aspiring artist Iris whose opportunity at breaking free from a life of drudgery and no prospects comes when Luis Frost, a (fictional) member of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, asks her to be his model in return for giving her lessons in painting. The street urchin Albie (whose squalid, dirty and desperate circumstances are vividly rendered) provides the link between Iris and Silas, a sinister and reclusive taxidermist and collector of curiosities who becomes obsessed with Iris. These stories come together in an intelligent, engaging and compelling exploration of women and art, as well as of love and obsession. Iris (in certain ways a version of Lizzie Siddal) is a true artist but she is also objectified by the men around her, made subject to and threatened by the male gaze. Her efforts at escaping the limitations placed on women and the violence she is in danger of suffering also reflect issues that are still pertinent today. This is one of many qualities that make this a great historical novel, as is the fact that Macneal writes brilliantly about visual art, immersing the reader in the world of the pre-Raphaelites and their detailed, intense and complex art. *The Doll Factory* is multi-layered and utterly captivating, and once the reader gets to the last quarter of the story it is completely unputdownable.



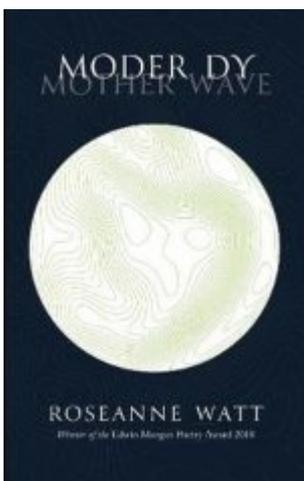
Enlightenment in a Smart City: Edinburgh's Civic Development, 1660-1750 by **Murray Pittock** | Edinburgh University Press, 2019

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Moder Dy by **Roseanne Watt** | Polygon, 2019

— chosen by Ian Brown, a scholar, poet, and playwright

I'm very torn between a remarkable research study and a remarkable first poetry collection. The first is Murray Pittock's *Enlightenment in a Smart City: Edinburgh's Civic Development, 1660-1750*. Professor Pittock, as ever, offer fresh insights into what we thought we knew. Applying Smart City thinking to Edinburgh as it developed into the Enlightenment city, he shows how interconnections and social networks could shape and nurture ideas and thinking across the city through processes of everyday interaction and topographical interrelationship. And the book reads well, making its ideas highly accessible.



Roseanne Watt has won the Edwin Morgan Prize for an unpublished poetry collection. Her first published collection, *Moder Dy: Mother Wave* gives clear evidence of how right the judges were. She writes in Shetlandic Scots and in Scottish Standard English, sometimes in one or other language, sometimes with a Shetlandic poem faced with its expression in English and sometimes working through both languages in one poem. Her poetry has a strength, suppleness and economy that Morgan himself would have welcomed. It has the rich spareness of haiku. I look forward

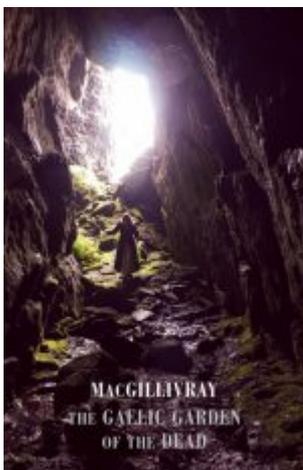
in both cases to their next book.



For The Good Times by **David Keenan** | Faber & Faber, 2019

— chosen by Alistair Braidwood from the Scottish cultural website & podcast *Scots Whay Hae!*

2019 was a year where the most memorable books were those that evinced genuine literary innovation. Alan Trotter's debut *Muscle* did something exciting and new with noir, Ewan Morrison blurred the lines of fact and fiction with *Nina X*, and Karen Campbell gave us *The Sound of the Hours*, a historical novel presented as an unlikely love story, but which proved to be far more about the effects of war on ordinary people's lives. And in non-fiction Jemma Neville's socio-political examination *Constitution Street* struck a chord as few others did. However, my Scottish Book of the Year is David Keenan's *For The Good Times*, his follow up to the acclaimed *This Is Memorial Device*. It can be difficult to follow such a distinctive debut, but *For The Good Times* proved, in case it was in any doubt, that Keenan is the real deal and can rightly be included in any discussion of great Scottish writers, winning this year's Gordon Burn prize for good measure. It's a multi-layered novel of extremes set in the most extreme of times, one which plays with form and structure, yet, for all its style, it is at heart a keen examination of the human psyche.

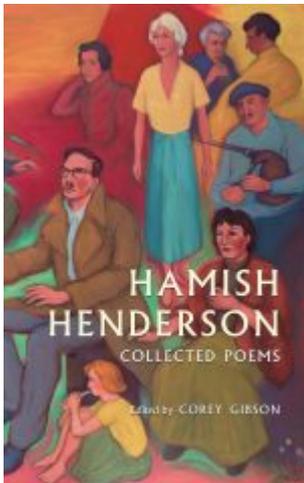


The Gaelic Garden of the Dead by **MacGillivray** | Bloodaxe Books, 2019

— chosen by Richie McCaffery, poet and writer

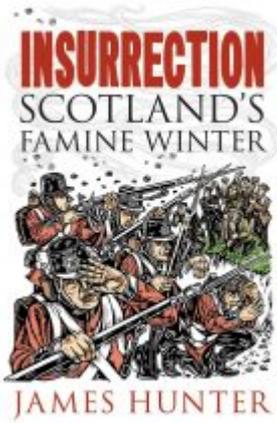
I've already reviewed this book at length for the Poetry School website, but from the embarrassment of riches of poetry collections published in Scotland or by

Scottish-born/-leaning poets in 2019, MacGillivray's third collection seems to me to be a deserving candidate. Why do I think this? Well, perhaps it's because my typical poetry purview is rather limited, I tend to like, and gravitate towards, short, lyrical poems. However, MacGillivray's collection is the equivalent of an ambitious concept album (it's a trilogy of three complementary but different narratives / atmospheres), and the musical comparison isn't out of place here too, because the poetry itself sings, and sings memorably. From sonnets pieced together by the scraps of poems regurgitated by an executed Mary Queen of Scots to a sequence of poems that profoundly engages (in English) with Gaelic poetry and its mythology of trees and its elegiac and panegyric modes. This is the sort of 'big' poetry that demands the reader to surrender to the unique aesthetic of the poet. It's poetry to be immersed in, not sampled and dipped in and out of.



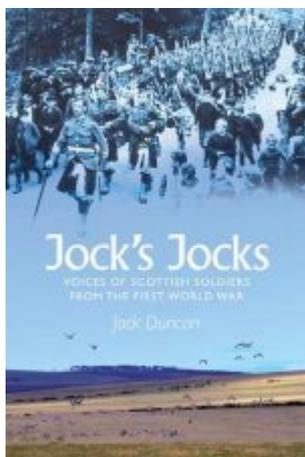
Hamish Henderson: Collected Poems edited by Corey Gibson
| Polygon, 2019
— chosen by Scott Hames, Lecturer in English Studies at the
University of Stirling

My book of the year is Hamish Henderson's *Collected Poems*, edited by Corey Gibson. Both rattle-bag and monument, it celebrates the sheer variety and social zest of Henderson's songs and poems, from highly wrought lyrics to soldiering songs to comic squibs. Even the least polished tunes glow with the convivial pleasure of their making. Building on the work of earlier editors, it's a landmark achievement that fully restores impish intellectualism and bawdy cheek — and yes, highly questionable language — to our slightly sainted image of Henderson.



Insurrection: Scotland's Famine Winter by **James Hunter** |
Birlinn, 2019
— chosen by Calum L Macleòid, a writer, poet, and journalist

In *Insurrection: Scotland's Famine Winter*, James Hunter adds to his remarkable body of work with a new and in-depth exploration of the impact of the potato famine on the north of Scotland. While the first chapter looks at the famine deaths in Barra and the culpability of the island's rightly reviled owner, Gordon of Cluny, most of the book examines the civil unrest sparked by the well-founded fear of starvation on the mainland, especially along the coast from Wick to Fraserburgh. Scene after scene of popular resistance and the state's bungling responses are brought to life through Hunter's clear prose. His loving attention to detail shines through, as he explains some minor detail — that the church Craigstone has moved from the location mentioned in the book, or that a landlord's distillery threatened by rioters in Inverness is now the site of, inevitably, a retail park. Hunter persuasively argues that the riots and blockades he describe was not a knee-jerk reaction, but rather they showed a degree of organisation and political engagement in wider social movements which challenges previous narratives and justifies the book's title.



Jock's Jocks: Voices of Scottish Soldiers from the First World War by **Jock Duncan** | EERC & National Museums of Scotland, 2019

— chosen by James Robertson, a poet, writer of fiction, editor, and co-founder of the Scots language imprint Itchy Coo

A new book from Kathleen Jamie is always a treat, and her latest collection of essays, *Surfacing*, is no exception. The natural world and humankind's place and spaces within it are her themes, with a heavy emphasis on archaeology, the significance of physical objects and the pull of personal memory. Jamie's quiet intellect is impressive, but so is the passion that underlies her writing. Great, too, to welcome a young, confident, adventurous poetic voice in Roseanne Watt's first collection, *Moder Dy*. The title translates as 'Mother Wave', and the poems are rooted and anchored in Watt's native Shetland; yet the constant, generous, inventive exchange between Shetlandic and English makes them anything but insular. In her sheer delight in language, Watt shows that words really know no boundaries. My book of the year, though, has to be *Jock's Jocks: Voices of Scottish Soldiers from the First World War*. This is the outcome of decades of selfless work by Jock Duncan, the renowned traditional singer, now in his nineties. As a loun on the ferm touns of the North-East, he gathered the oral testimonies of dozens of men who had fought in different campaigns between 1914 and 1918, from the Western Front to Gallipoli. For the most part their words are recorded in their native Scots, which is also Jock Duncan's first language. The result is a powerful, unsentimental, at times humorous but always profoundly moving record of ordinary men in extraordinary, terrible circumstances. The soldiers he interviewed are long dead, but thanks to Jock their voices and experiences will survive long after all of us are gone.

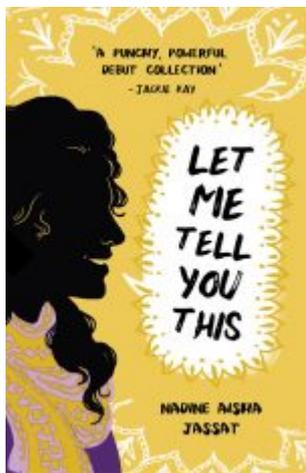


The Lays of Strathearn by Caroline Baroness Nairn **edited by Freeland Barbour** | Bonskeid Music, 2019

— chosen by Gerda Stevenson, actor, writer, director, and singer-songwriter

I'd like to recommend a new edition of *The Lays of Strathearn*, the songs of the great 17th/18th century songwriter Carolina Oliphant, otherwise known as Lady Nairne. First published in 1846, the year after her death, the collection has been out of print for over a hundred years. Now it is republished by Bonskeid Music Ltd, in an exquisitely produced volume, containing words and music, edited by

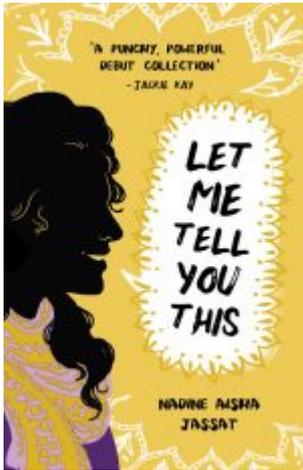
Freeland Barbour, a distant relative of Oliphant. Like most women of her era, Oliphant was a modest individual, and, throughout her lifetime, chose not to reveal her identity as composer of her extraordinary output. Consequently, people assumed her songs were the work of her contemporary, Robert Burns. Many will be familiar with 'Rowan Tree', 'The Land o the Leal', 'Caller Herrin', and the deliciously witty 'Laird o Cockpen', but it's not commonly known who wrote them. Like Burns, Oliphant had the knack of setting her songs to traditional tunes which perfectly reflect the lyrics' meaning. She wrote in Scots and English, entirely comfortable with both. As a welcome complement to this valuable publication, Birlinn has published Freeland Barbour's fine biography of Carolina Oliphant, *The White Rose of Gask*, two books which bring to light a forgotten voice, and, in doing so, perform a lovely double act within Scottish publishing.



Let Me Tell You This by **Nadine Aisha Jassat** | 404Ink, 2019

— chosen by Rachelle Atalla, literary fiction writer, and editor of *New Writing Scotland*

My Best Scottish Book 2019 pick is the debut poetry collection *Let Me Tell You This* by Nadine Aisha Jassat. The collection is carefully divided into three sections: *Hands*, *Words* and *Voice*, navigating the reader through a world full of bold and often brutal observations revolving around race, gender, violence and identity. Nadine has a gift for tackling difficult and somewhat uncomfortable but necessary topics, addressing them with honesty, courage, and fierce articulation. As someone who is also of mixed-race heritage the opening poem 'Third Generation' held particular resonance with me, but the entire collection is so assuredly handled, each word holding its own weight. This is a poignant, thought-provoking and lyrical collection, and Nadine is no doubt a force to be reckoned with. I return to *Let Me Tell You This* time and time again and I urge everyone to read this powerful debut.



Let Me Tell You This by **Nadine Aisha Jassat** | 404Ink, 2019

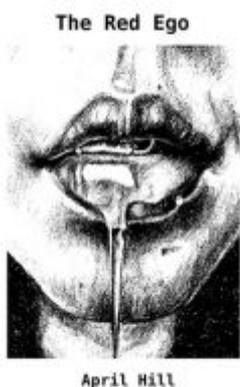
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The Red Ego by **April Hill** | Wild Pressed Books, 2019

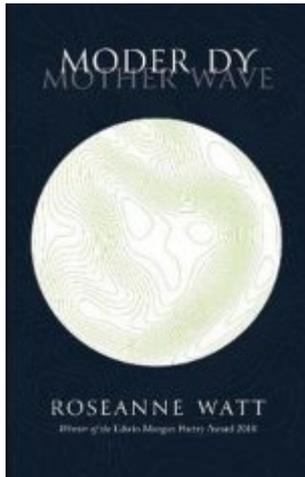
— chosen by Rachel Plummer, a poet living in Edinburgh

“Nadine, you are so lucky. You have the best of both worlds: Muslim skin and English voice” — from ‘Conversations as Girls’

Nadine Aisha Jassat’s debut poetry collection *Let Me Tell You This* is a book full of poems that tell stories. Nadine has a special talent for taking the reader on a journey into the poem’s world, deep enough that we can all see aspects of ourselves reflected there. The book particularly explores race and gender, Nadine’s relationship with her parents and wider family, and her experiences of violence and othering. In this book Nadine tells us what it is to be a ‘dangerous woman’, to be like a prime number, ‘only divisible by itself’. These poems are honest and essential, but they are also beautifully written and a pleasure to read.



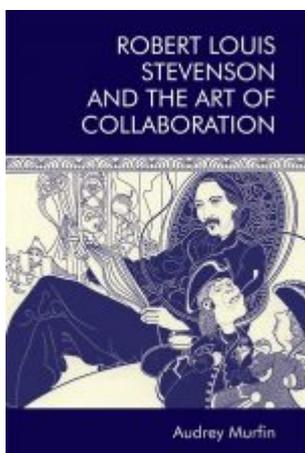
Another unforgettable book this year was poetry pamphlet *The Red Ego* from April Hill. *The Red Ego* also discusses race, gender, trauma and identity, this time via an interracial lesbian relationship. In ‘Precautions’, April asks “How many times will these / white women make us wring out their own dirty laundry?” These are bold poems of lesbian love and desire, complex and unnerving.



Moder Dy by Roseanne Watt | Birlinn, 2019

— chosen by Nuala Watt, a poet from Glasgow with a PhD on the poetics of partial sight. She is a member of the Scottish Poetry Library Board.

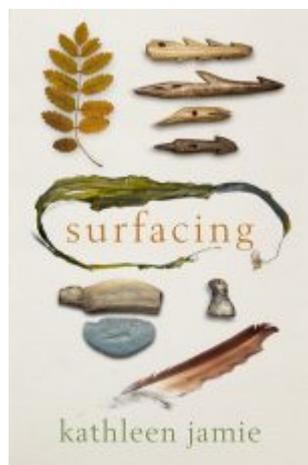
I almost didn't write this review. My daughter is two. Reading and remembering books is a challenge. In this hazy context books that stood out for me are *Moder Dy* by Roseanne Watt, *Split* by Juana Adcock and *The Games* by Harry Josephine Giles. I love Watt's images, such as a woman's body reimagined as a rookery. She creates exquisite sound patterns, both in English and Shetlandic. This is something I aspire to as a poet. I also loved Adcock's sequences especially 'The Serpent Dialogues', a philosophical discourse between a woman and a snake. This sequence expands our understanding both of poetic form and of cultural representations of women. *The Games* takes a playful but also deeply serious approach to poetic form and language - how far can it go? What is a poem? Poetry must be a meaningful political form. How does it achieve this? I once got into an argument with a university tutor when I described poetry as a 'very serious game'. *The Games* proves my point triumphantly.



Robert Louis Stevenson and the Art of Collaboration by **Audrey Murfin** | Edinburgh University Press, 2019

— chosen by Marina Dossena, Professor of English Language at the University of Bergamo, Italy

November is an intriguing month: not only is it book-ended by Samhain and St. Andrew's Day, but it celebrates the 'unbirthday' of Robert Louis Stevenson, one of Scotland's famous 'three Robins' (the other two being Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns). It is therefore fitting that this list should include at least one title concerning Stevenson's work, while we look forward to the excellent New Edinburgh Edition making further progress (so far, four volumes have appeared). In the book at hand, the author goes beyond the myth of the artist as a solitary creature, to draw attention to the importance of collaboration in the creative process, while considering collaboration in a broad sense: collaboration with other writers, as one might expect, but also with family members, and even (figuratively) with literary characters in the texts themselves, thus shedding light on the modernity of an author whose letters are equally invaluable sources of insight into his writing. Indeed, collaboration may have been another strategy by means of which Stevenson reconciled his restless mobility with his profound sense of attachment to Scotland: through collaboration he could profit from work with possibly distant figures, while maintaining his own unique voice at all times.

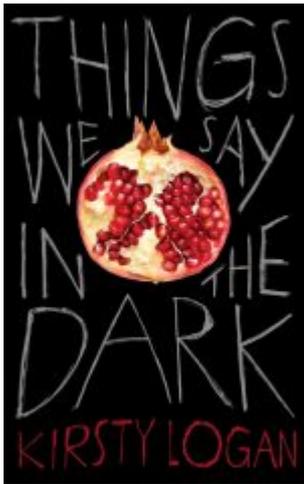


Surfacing by **Kathleen Jamie** | Sort of Books, 2019

— chosen by Rodge Glass, writer, and Reader in Literary Fiction at Edge Hill University

I'm very late to Kathleen Jamie, a writer I've been meaning to read for years, and have been recommended many times. Thanks to the Glaswegian poet David Kinloch, then, for placing her book of essays, *Sightlines*, (2012) into my reading pile, a book which has been my way in to enjoying this masterful writer's non-fiction. Her command of imagery, both human and non-human, and talent for making the natural world seem close-up, essential, made me want to read more. Luckily, I was catching up at a good time; September saw publication of *Surfacing*, so I didn't have to wait, and this new book is a wonderful partner piece

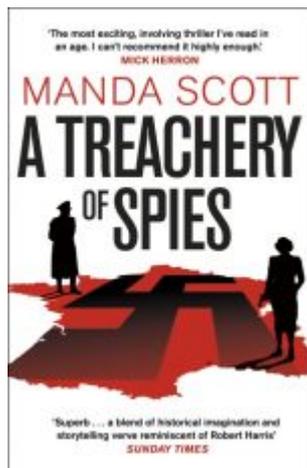
to its predecessor. It's the prose I love. Jamie never reaches for cliché, her exploration of the natural world is precise, exquisite, and she resists the temptation to wrap up her essays neatly or suggest reductive meanings. As suggested by her titles, Jamie prefers looking, noticing, describing, leaving the rest to the reader. Whether on an archaeological dig in Alaska or relating a cancer diagnosis, her work draws past and present together, the big and the small, with a rare and impressive vividness.



Things We Say in the Dark by **Kirsty Logan** | Penguin, 2019
— chosen by Duncan Jones, Director of ASLS

Although a number of her previously published works could be classified as horror, this new collection *Things We Say in the Dark* very definitely places Kirsty Logan among the foremost contemporary writers of the genre. These are exquisitely crafted stories which prey on deep-seated human fears: even if you read them by daylight, they will settle in your brain, and whisper to each other there when next you find yourself alone. These are tales of creeping unease; of the uncanny in the everyday, of the thinness of our illusions. Of how close we are to what we fear, whether we admit to it or not. *Things We Say in the Dark* is not just an anthology, though: running like a red thread through the book is a framing narrative. Logan has done this before, of course; the folkloreish stories in *A Portable Shelter* (2015) are connected by the whispers of that collection's two fictional tale-tellers, Liska and Ruth, as they murmur to their unborn child. Here, though, the narrative appears at first to be just some author's notes, there to give the reader some interesting background on her process. Then gradually the sense of another story starts to swell in these marginal spaces: something larger, weightier, and more true. Okay, we can tell ourselves, we know that this tale, or that one, is just a confection of sharp and sinister ideas and images: beautifully written, carefully constructed, delicately balanced, yes, but still an obvious fantasia. But the author's comments in between begin to mark out a little trail of

their own, winding their way into a deeper darkness – and which we have to follow.



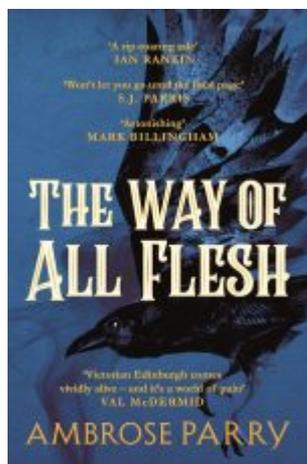
A Treachery of Spies by **Manda Scott** | Corgi, 2019

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The Way of All Flesh by **Ambrose Parry** | Canongate, 2018 (pbk 2019).

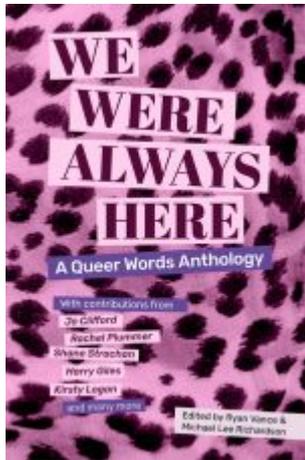
— chosen by Gwen Enstam, Editor, *The Bottle Imp*

I was in the middle of *A Treachery of Spies* when I heard that it won the 2019 McIlvanney Crime Novel of the Year Award, and I was not the least bit surprised. I absolutely loved it. I particularly enjoyed the details of WWII spycraft, but the modern narrative is just as riveting — I think this was the only time, reading a novel with two timelines, that I didn't favour one over the other. The novel opens with the discovery of an elegantly dressed older woman murdered and left in a car — the only clue to her identity being the particular way she was left, and a business card that is sewn into the lining of her coat. Following up with research of her own, Orléans-based Police Capitaine Inès Picaut quickly discovers that no one ever really stops being a spy. As with Scott's other novels, *A Treachery of Spies* is thoroughly researched, and written with such immediacy, it took me all of two pages to be completely hooked. It is the second — the first being the equally brilliant *Into the Fire* — of what I hope will be a long series.



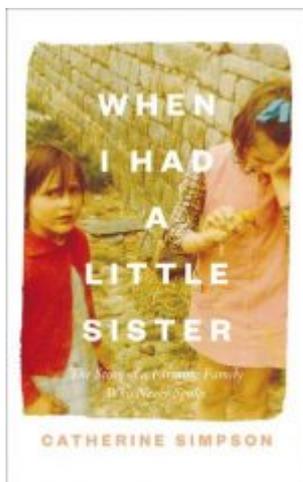
I really want to mention another fantastic historical mystery, *The Way of All Flesh* by Ambrose Parry. The novel is written jointly by Chris Brookmyre and his wife, anesthesiologist Dr Marisa Haetzman: the perfect team to write a medical mystery, artfully set in 19th-century Edinburgh. For a city so effectively divided into Old and New, the characters constantly overlap — and overstep — these boundaries. The exploration of medical practice at the time, in particular midwifery and the pioneering use of ether and chloroform, highlights just how important the doctors and scientists of

Scotland were in the development of medicine and surgery. With its focus on pregnancy and childbirth, this is also very much a novel about women and their position in Victorian society. The descriptions of labour can be fairly graphic, but they do illustrate the limited options available to doctors at the time. The next volume in the series, *The Art of Dying*, was published this year.



We Were Always Here: A Queer Words Anthology **edited by Ryan Vance and Michael Lee Richardson** | 404Ink, 2019
— chosen by Sasha de Buyl, Manager of Scottish Books International

Released in January, *We Were Always Here* showcases the variety and power of LGBTQI+ writing in Scotland today. This collection came about as the culmination of the Queer Words mentoring project, but the book has become much more than this, acting as a yardstick marking just how far queer writing in Scotland has come. With pieces from the best of our queer writers, including well-established writers like Kirsty Logan, Harry Josephine Giles and Rachel Plummer, as well as new voices such as Andrés Ordorica, Alice Tarbuck and Jay G Ying, the collection contains multitudes. Some pieces are touching, some sad, some laugh-out-loud funny, and like all the best queer spaces, the writing comes together in the intersections of all these things.

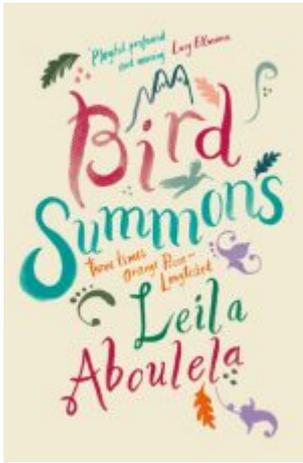


When I Had a Little Sister by **Catherine Simpson** | 4th Estate

— chosen by Hannah Lavery, writer, performer, Learning & Engagement Coordinator for the Scottish Poetry Library, and Director of CoastWord Festival

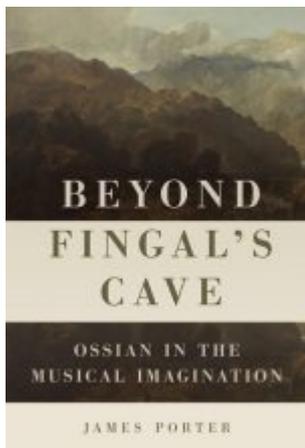
What a difficult choice to make, I have loved so many books this year. I will mention first, two wonderful poetry collections. Janette Ayachi's *Hand over Mouth Music* and Jenny Lindsay's *This Script*, which I think are brilliant and beautiful and have been steadfast companions to me since I got my hands on them, returning again and again to them for their moving and accomplished poetry. But the book that has stayed with me most this year is Catherine Simpson's heartbreaking and funny memoir, *When I Had a Little Sister*. The warmth of Simpson's writing has always impressed and engaged me but the searing honesty of this book really shook me. It is quite an extraordinary memoir of grief and of the way a family copes with mental illness and suicide, not shying away from the pain and raw grief but with such an eye for the absurd, and delivered with powerful generosity and forgiveness. Welcome to the Best Scottish Books of 2019! ASLS has asked poets, writers, critics, academics, and members of the literary sector to tell us about their favourite Scottish book from this past year. The book could be in any language spoken in Scotland; it could be published for the first time in 2019 or re-issued this year; and could be a work of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or academic research ... and there can be more than one. We've got some well-kent faces here and exciting new ones, and they all show the breadth and vibrancy of Scotland's writing culture. There is something for everyone, so get comfy, and have a browse through the Best Scottish Books from 2019. The list is organised by title. If your favourite isn't here, let us know about it!

Want to see what was picked last year? You can also view the Best Scottish Books lists from 2018 and 2017; to see earlier lists, navigate to the 'Back Issues' link in the red bar at the top of this page, and select the November issue of *The Bottle Imp* for each year. The first list was published in 2013.

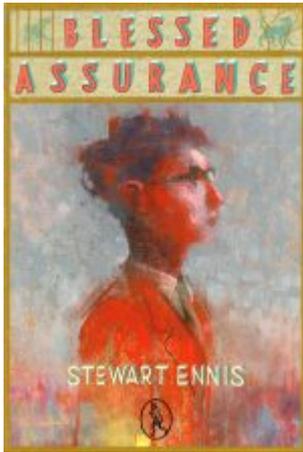


Bird Summons by **Leila Aboulela** | Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019
&
Beyond Fingal's Cave: Ossian and the Musical Imagination
by **James Porter** | University of Rochester Press, 2019
— chosen by Valentina Bold, Vice-Chair of Literature Alliance Scotland

2019 has been a fabulous year, for fiction and non-fiction. Two books stood out for me. Both are beautifully written. Each is imaginative and intellectually satisfying. The folkloric framing of Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* appealed to me. The quality of the narrative kept me reading. Three (very different) Muslim women undertake a pilgrimage into a liminal, rural, Scottish landscape. Through memorable encounters, with themselves and with others, they move towards self-awareness. There is humour and warmth (and mysticism) as familiar female experiences are explored from dislocated perspectives. The gentleness and skilfulness of the writing, and the memorable characters (human and supernatural) make for a wonderful reading experience.



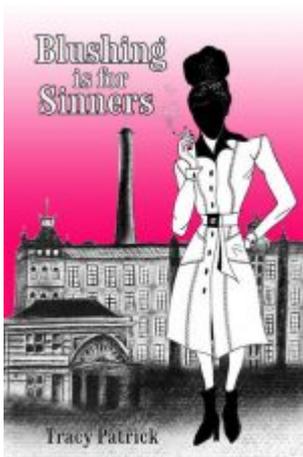
James Porter's *Beyond Fingal's Cave* is a scholarly tour de force. It takes the ongoing discussion around Macpherson's 'Ossian' into a new realm. Porter explores national and international musical responses to Ossian, from Beethoven to Brahms, Vaughan Williams to James Macmillan. Specialist yet accessible, complex yet easy to follow, Porter's volume adds another, definitive, layer to the study of Macpherson's Ossian. I loved it.



Blessed Assurance by **Stewart Ennis** | Vagabond Voices, 2019

— chosen by Liz Small, Director and co-owner of Gresham Publishing (Waverley Books and Geddes & Grosset)

Blessed Assurance is a new paperback by Stewart Ennis. Set in the late 1960s at a tense moment in the Cold War, and cleverly told over a period of six days, the story explores a small evangelical tight-knit community in a fictional Scottish fog-bound village. At its heart is the soul-searching of an eleven-year-old boy called Joseph Kirkland who is confused about being 'Saved', and his friendship with a wild boy who is far from godly. Entertaining and funny, with tender and tragic strands, and surreal humour, this is an engaging and touching book. I'd love also to mention a new edition of *Robert Burns in Edinburgh*, by Jerry Brannigan, John McShane and David Alexander. It is an exploration of the colourful, vivid times Burns spent in the capital at the height of the Enlightenment, with portraits of the people he met, and notes on the society he kept, plus the poems that these times inspired. And *Star of Hope* by Moira McPartlin — the third book in her Sun Song Trilogy. This final story presents the central character Sorlie still alive and grappling with moral dilemmas in this twists and turns story that continues to portray a disturbingly bleak environment in Scotland after huge climatic change.

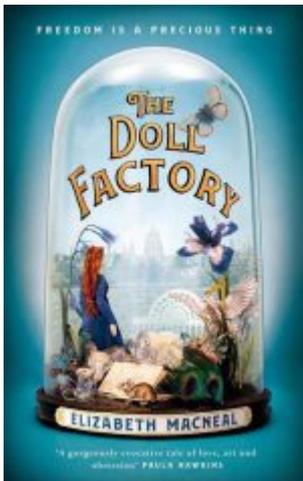


Blushing is for Sinners by **Tracy Patrick** | Clochoderick Press, 2019

— chosen by Ruby McCann, flâneuse, creative practitioner, and a founding member of the Artist Collective, Cheeky Besom Productions

Blushing is for Sinners by Tracy Patrick was commended by the Saltire First Book of the Year Award judges, 2019. Patrick's debut novel touches on Scottish

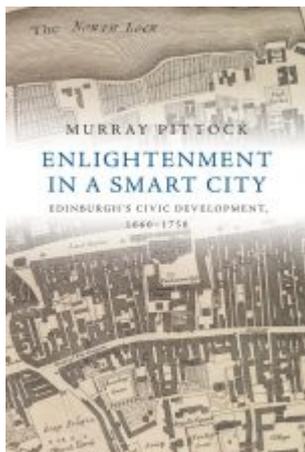
working-class themes in a tale of womanhood and self-actualisation. She explores how the dynamics of mother-daughter relationships play out, how secrets have a way of resurfacing, and how our choices follow us. Rooted in hardship and struggle, Paisley mill girl Jean McPartland simply wants a better life for her daughter, Ava. She wants to escape her mean-spirited mother who considers her 'selfish', and a gritty marriage to Tommy who denies her autonomy. Spoon-fed on dreams of a new life with jailbird, Billy McBride, Patrick captures the vulnerability and courage of a woman trapped: 'No she wasn't bad. She was in love' (p.126). Mary Queen of Scots becomes a metaphorical connection for Jean, a device for understanding conflict in a series of betrayals as family plot against her. She connects her experiences to, 'Mary, Queen of Scots baring her breasts to the jeering crowds, a woman pushed to the edge, her heart exposed like an open wound for the world to see, to do with it what they would.' (p.142) Patrick's candid prose deepens the cut of family bonds between Paisley and Canada. Her tale separates time and space in a boisterous celebration of community and female empowerment. Patrick feels the pulse of a small Scottish town, chronicling a beat recognised world-wide. Her fictional mill girls nod to Sara Sheridan's *Where Are the Women? A Guide To An Imagined Scotland*. Sheridan maps lists of factual women she imagines commemorated throughout Scotland. In statues, streets, and buildings, in the mountains, glens, forests, and coastlines.



The Doll Factory by **Elizabeth Macneal** | Picador, 2019
— chosen by Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir, Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in British Literature at University of Iceland

Set against the backdrop of the 1851 Great Exhibition, Elizabeth Macneal's debut novel *The Doll Factory* is a wonderfully evocative and atmospheric portrayal of Victorian London, in particular its darker aspects. The story focuses on aspiring artist Iris whose opportunity at breaking free from a life of drudgery and no prospects comes when Luis Frost, a (fictional) member of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, asks her to be his model in return for giving her lessons in painting.

The street urchin Albie (whose squalid, dirty and desperate circumstances are vividly rendered) provides the link between Iris and Silas, a sinister and reclusive taxidermist and collector of curiosities who becomes obsessed with Iris. These stories come together in an intelligent, engaging and compelling exploration of women and art, as well as of love and obsession. Iris (in certain ways a version of Lizzie Siddal) is a true artist but she is also objectified by the men around her, made subject to and threatened by the male gaze. Her efforts at escaping the limitations placed on women and the violence she is in danger of suffering also reflect issues that are still pertinent today. This is one of many qualities that make this a great historical novel, as is the fact that Macneal writes brilliantly about visual art, immersing the reader in the world of the pre-Raphaelites and their detailed, intense and complex art. *The Doll Factory* is multi-layered and utterly captivating, and once the reader gets to the last quarter of the story it is completely unputdownable.



Enlightenment in a Smart City: Edinburgh's Civic Development, 1660-1750 by **Murray Pittock** | Edinburgh University Press, 2019

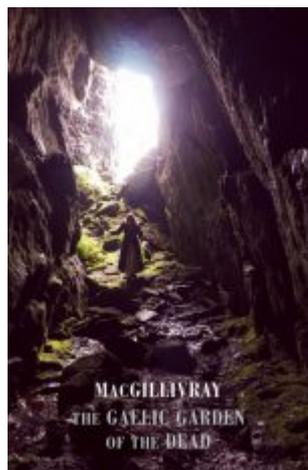
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Moder Dy by **Roseanne Watt** | Polygon, 2019

— chosen by Ian Brown, a scholar, poet, and playwright

I'm very torn between a remarkable research study and a remarkable first poetry collection. The first is Murray Pittock's *Enlightenment in a Smart City: Edinburgh's Civic Development, 1660-1750*. Professor Pittock, as ever, offer fresh insights into what we thought we knew. Applying Smart City thinking to Edinburgh as it developed into the Enlightenment city, he shows how interconnections and social networks could shape and nurture ideas and thinking across the city through processes of everyday interaction and topographical

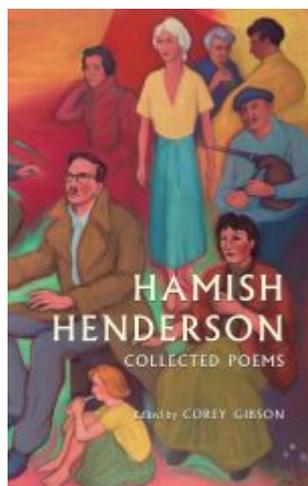
one which plays with form and structure, yet, for all its style, it is at heart a keen examination of the human psyche.



The Gaelic Garden of the Dead by **MacGillivray** | Bloodaxe Books, 2019

— chosen by Richie McCaffery, poet and writer

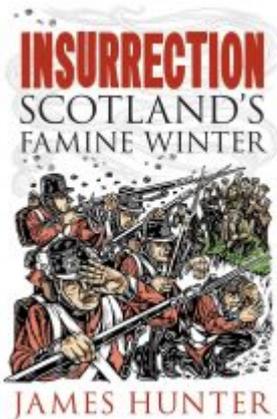
I've already reviewed this book at length for the Poetry School website, but from the embarrassment of riches of poetry collections published in Scotland or by Scottish-born/-leaning poets in 2019, MacGillivray's third collection seems to me to be a deserving candidate. Why do I think this? Well, perhaps it's because my typical poetry purview is rather limited, I tend to like, and gravitate towards, short, lyrical poems. However, MacGillivray's collection is the equivalent of an ambitious concept album (it's a trilogy of three complementary but different narratives / atmospheres), and the musical comparison isn't out of place here too, because the poetry itself sings, and sings memorably. From sonnets pieced together by the scraps of poems regurgitated by an executed Mary Queen of Scots to a sequence of poems that profoundly engages (in English) with Gaelic poetry and its mythology of trees and its elegiac and panegyric modes. This is the sort of 'big' poetry that demands the reader to surrender to the unique aesthetic of the poet. It's poetry to be immersed in, not sampled and dipped in and out of.



Hamish Henderson: Collected Poems edited by Corey Gibson | Polygon, 2019

— chosen by Scott Hames, Lecturer in English Studies at the University of Stirling

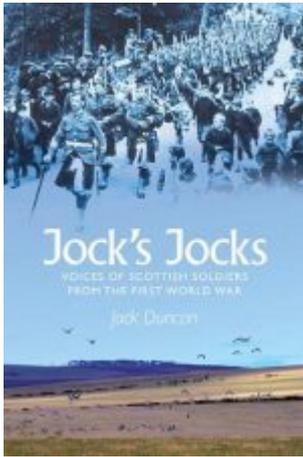
My book of the year is Hamish Henderson's *Collected Poems*, edited by Corey Gibson. Both rattle-bag and monument, it celebrates the sheer variety and social zest of Henderson's songs and poems, from highly wrought lyrics to soldiering songs to comic squibs. Even the least polished tunes glow with the convivial pleasure of their making. Building on the work of earlier editors, it's a landmark achievement that fully restores impish intellectualism and bawdy cheek — and yes, highly questionable language — to our slightly sainted image of Henderson.



Insurrection: Scotland's Famine Winter **by James Hunter** |
Birlinn, 2019

— chosen by Calum L Macleòid, a writer, poet, and journalist

In *Insurrection: Scotland's Famine Winter*, James Hunter adds to his remarkable body of work with a new and in-depth exploration of the impact of the potato famine on the north of Scotland. While the first chapter looks at the famine deaths in Barra and the culpability of the island's rightly reviled owner, Gordon of Cluny, most of the book examines the civil unrest sparked by the well-founded fear of starvation on the mainland, especially along the coast from Wick to Fraserburgh. Scene after scene of popular resistance and the state's bungling responses are brought to life through Hunter's clear prose. His loving attention to detail shines through, as he explains some minor detail — that the church Craigstone has moved from the location mentioned in the book, or that a landlord's distillery threatened by rioters in Inverness is now the site of, inevitably, a retail park. Hunter persuasively argues that the riots and blockades he describe was not a knee-jerk reaction, but rather they showed a degree of organisation and political engagement in wider social movements which challenges previous narratives and justifies the book's title.



Jock's Jocks: Voices of Scottish Soldiers from the First World War by **Jock Duncan** | EERC & National Museums of Scotland, 2019

— chosen by James Robertson, a poet, writer of fiction, editor, and co-founder of the Scots language imprint Itchy Coo

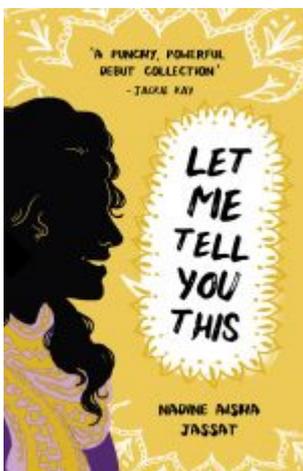
A new book from Kathleen Jamie is always a treat, and her latest collection of essays, *Surfacing*, is no exception. The natural world and humankind's place and spaces within it are her themes, with a heavy emphasis on archaeology, the significance of physical objects and the pull of personal memory. Jamie's quiet intellect is impressive, but so is the passion that underlies her writing. Great, too, to welcome a young, confident, adventurous poetic voice in Roseanne Watt's first collection, *Moder Dy*. The title translates as 'Mother Wave', and the poems are rooted and anchored in Watt's native Shetland; yet the constant, generous, inventive exchange between Shetlandic and English makes them anything but insular. In her sheer delight in language, Watt shows that words really know no boundaries. My book of the year, though, has to be *Jock's Jocks: Voices of Scottish Soldiers from the First World War*. This is the outcome of decades of selfless work by Jock Duncan, the renowned traditional singer, now in his nineties. As a loun on the ferm touns of the North-East, he gathered the oral testimonies of dozens of men who had fought in different campaigns between 1914 and 1918, from the Western Front to Gallipoli. For the most part their words are recorded in their native Scots, which is also Jock Duncan's first language. The result is a powerful, unsentimental, at times humorous but always profoundly moving record of ordinary men in extraordinary, terrible circumstances. The soldiers he interviewed are long dead, but thanks to Jock their voices and experiences will survive long after all of us are gone.



The Lays of Strathearn by Caroline Baroness Nairn **edited by Freeland Barbour** | Bonskeid Music, 2019

— chosen by Gerda Stevenson, actor, writer, director, and singer-songwriter

I'd like to recommend a new edition of *The Lays of Strathearn*, the songs of the great 17th/18th century songwriter Carolina Oliphant, otherwise known as Lady Nairne. First published in 1846, the year after her death, the collection has been out of print for over a hundred years. Now it is republished by Bonskeid Music Ltd, in an exquisitely produced volume, containing words and music, edited by Freeland Barbour, a distant relative of Oliphant. Like most women of her era, Oliphant was a modest individual, and, throughout her lifetime, chose not to reveal her identity as composer of her extraordinary output. Consequently, people assumed her songs were the work of her contemporary, Robert Burns. Many will be familiar with 'Rowan Tree', 'The Land o the Leal', 'Caller Herrin', and the deliciously witty 'Laird o Cockpen', but it's not commonly known who wrote them. Like Burns, Oliphant had the knack of setting her songs to traditional tunes which perfectly reflect the lyrics' meaning. She wrote in Scots and English, entirely comfortable with both. As a welcome complement to this valuable publication, Birlinn has published Freeland Barbour's fine biography of Carolina Oliphant, *The White Rose of Gask*, two books which bring to light a forgotten voice, and, in doing so, perform a lovely double act within Scottish publishing.

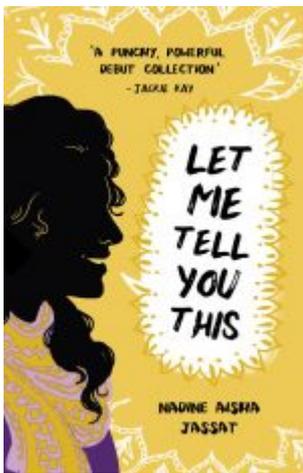


Let Me Tell You This by **Nadine Aisha Jassat** | 404Ink, 2019

— chosen by Rachelle Atalla, literary fiction writer, and editor of *New Writing Scotland*

My Best Scottish Book 2019 pick is the debut poetry collection *Let Me Tell You This* by Nadine Aisha Jassat. The collection is carefully divided into three sections:

Hands, Words and Voice, navigating the reader through a world full of bold and often brutal observations revolving around race, gender, violence and identity. Nadine has a gift for tackling difficult and somewhat uncomfortable but necessary topics, addressing them with honesty, courage, and fierce articulation. As someone who is also of mixed-race heritage the opening poem ‘Third Generation’ held particular resonance with me, but the entire collection is so assuredly handled, each word holding its own weight. This is a poignant, thought-provoking and lyrical collection, and Nadine is no doubt a force to be reckoned with. I return to *Let Me Tell You This* time and time again and I urge everyone to read this powerful debut.



Let Me Tell You This by **Nadine Aisha Jassat** | 404Ink, 2019

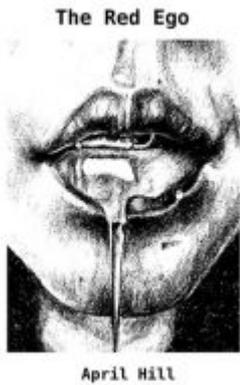
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The Red Ego by **April Hill** | Wild Pressed Books, 2019

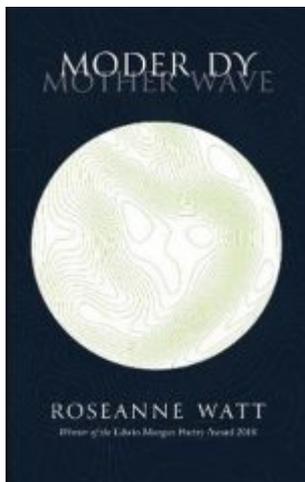
— chosen by Rachel Plummer, a poet living in Edinburgh

“Nadine, you are so lucky. You have the best of both worlds: Muslim skin and English voice” — from ‘Conversations as Girls’

Nadine Aisha Jassat’s debut poetry collection *Let Me Tell You This* is a book full of poems that tell stories. Nadine has a special talent for taking the reader on a journey into the poem’s world, deep enough that we can all see aspects of ourselves reflected there. The book particularly explores race and gender, Nadine’s relationship with her parents and wider family, and her experiences of violence and othering. In this book Nadine tells us what it is to be a ‘dangerous woman’, to be like a prime number, ‘only divisible by itself’. These poems are honest and essential, but they are also beautifully written and a pleasure to read.



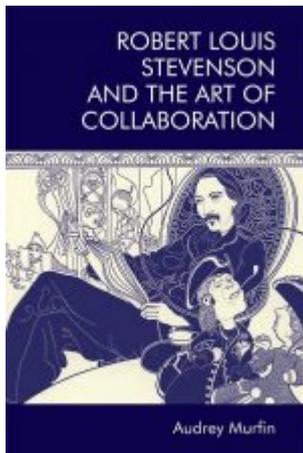
Another unforgettable book this year was poetry pamphlet *The Red Ego* from April Hill. *The Red Ego* also discusses race, gender, trauma and identity, this time via an interracial lesbian relationship. In 'Precautions', April asks "How many times will these / white women make us wring out their own dirty laundry?" These are bold poems of lesbian love and desire, complex and unnerving.



Moder Dy by Roseanne Watt | Birlinn, 2019

— chosen by Nuala Watt, a poet from Glasgow with a PhD on the poetics of partial sight. She is a member of the Scottish Poetry Library Board.

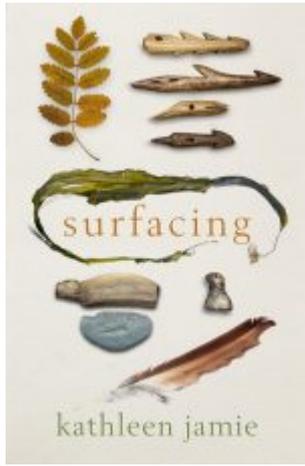
I almost didn't write this review. My daughter is two. Reading and remembering books is a challenge. In this hazy context books that stood out for me are *Moder Dy* by Roseanne Watt, *Split* by Juana Adcock and *The Games* by Harry Josephine Giles. I love Watt's images, such as a woman's body reimaged as a rookery. She creates exquisite sound patterns, both in English and Shetlandic. This is something I aspire to as a poet. I also loved Adcock's sequences especially 'The Serpent Dialogues', a philosophical discourse between a woman and a snake. This sequence expands our understanding both of poetic form and of cultural representations of women. *The Games* takes a playful but also deeply serious approach to poetic form and language - how far can it go? What is a poem? Poetry must be a meaningful political form. How does it achieve this? I once got into an argument with a university tutor when I described poetry as a 'very serious game'. *The Games* proves my point triumphantly.



Robert Louis Stevenson and the Art of Collaboration by **Audrey Murfin** |
Edinburgh University Press, 2019

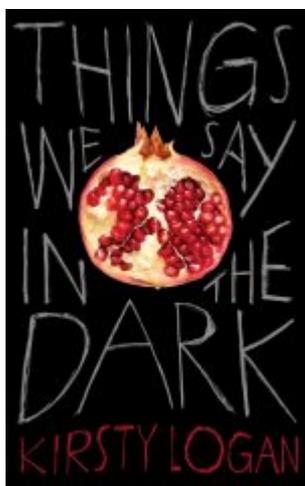
— chosen by Marina Dossena, Professor of English Language at the University of Bergamo, Italy

November is an intriguing month: not only is it book-ended by Samhain and St. Andrew's Day, but it celebrates the 'unbirthday' of Robert Louis Stevenson, one of Scotland's famous 'three Robins' (the other two being Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns). It is therefore fitting that this list should include at least one title concerning Stevenson's work, while we look forward to the excellent New Edinburgh Edition making further progress (so far, four volumes have appeared). In the book at hand, the author goes beyond the myth of the artist as a solitary creature, to draw attention to the importance of collaboration in the creative process, while considering collaboration in a broad sense: collaboration with other writers, as one might expect, but also with family members, and even (figuratively) with literary characters in the texts themselves, thus shedding light on the modernity of an author whose letters are equally invaluable sources of insight into his writing. Indeed, collaboration may have been another strategy by means of which Stevenson reconciled his restless mobility with his profound sense of attachment to Scotland: through collaboration he could profit from work with possibly distant figures, while maintaining his own unique voice at all times.



Surfacing by **Kathleen Jamie** | Sort of Books, 2019
— chosen by Rodge Glass, writer, and Reader in Literary Fiction at Edge Hill University

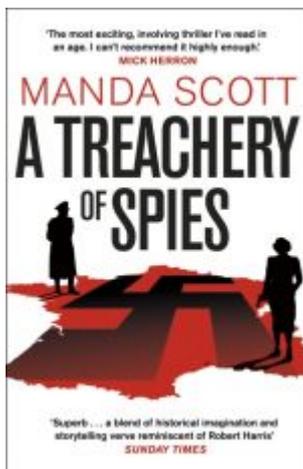
I'm very late to Kathleen Jamie, a writer I've been meaning to read for years, and have been recommended many times. Thanks to the Glaswegian poet David Kinloch, then, for placing her book of essays, *Sightlines*, (2012) into my reading pile, a book which has been my way in to enjoying this masterful writer's non-fiction. Her command of imagery, both human and non-human, and talent for making the natural world seem close-up, essential, made me want to read more. Luckily, I was catching up at a good time; September saw publication of *Surfacing*, so I didn't have to wait, and this new book is a wonderful partner piece to its predecessor. It's the prose I love. Jamie never reaches for cliché, her exploration of the natural world is precise, exquisite, and she resists the temptation to wrap up her essays neatly or suggest reductive meanings. As suggested by her titles, Jamie prefers looking, noticing, describing, leaving the rest to the reader. Whether on an archaeological dig in Alaska or relating a cancer diagnosis, her work draws past and present together, the big and the small, with a rare and impressive vividness.



Things We Say in the Dark by **Kirsty Logan** | Penguin, 2019
— chosen by Duncan Jones, Director of ASLS

Although a number of her previously published works could be classified as

horror, this new collection *Things We Say in the Dark* very definitely places Kirsty Logan among the foremost contemporary writers of the genre. These are exquisitely crafted stories which prey on deep-seated human fears: even if you read them by daylight, they will settle in your brain, and whisper to each other there when next you find yourself alone. These are tales of creeping unease; of the uncanny in the everyday, of the thinness of our illusions. Of how close we are to what we fear, whether we admit to it or not. *Things We Say in the Dark* is not just an anthology, though: running like a red thread through the book is a framing narrative. Logan has done this before, of course; the folkloreish stories in *A Portable Shelter* (2015) are connected by the whispers of that collection's two fictional tale-tellers, Liska and Ruth, as they murmur to their unborn child. Here, though, the narrative appears at first to be just some author's notes, there to give the reader some interesting background on her process. Then gradually the sense of another story starts to swell in these marginal spaces: something larger, weightier, and more true. Okay, we can tell ourselves, we know that this tale, or that one, is just a confection of sharp and sinister ideas and images: beautifully written, carefully constructed, delicately balanced, yes, but still an obvious fantasia. But the author's comments in between begin to mark out a little trail of their own, winding their way into a deeper darkness - and which we have to follow.



A Treachery of Spies by **Manda Scott** | Corgi, 2019

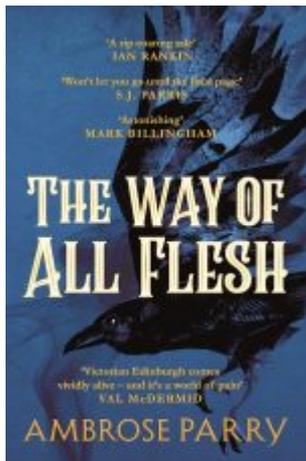
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The Way of All Flesh by **Ambrose Parry** | Canongate, 2018
(pbk 2019).

— chosen by Gwen Enstam, Editor, *The Bottle Imp*

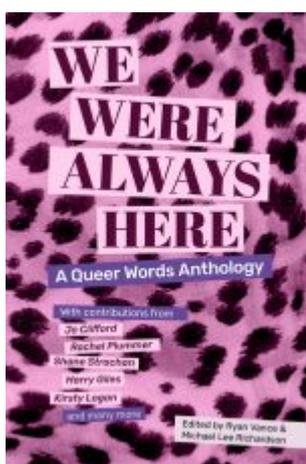
I was in the middle of *A Treachery of Spies* when I heard that it won the 2019 McIlvanney Crime Novel of the Year Award, and I was not the least bit surprised. I absolutely loved it. I particularly enjoyed the details of WWII spycraft, but the modern narrative is just as riveting — I think this was the only time, reading a novel with two timelines, that I didn't favour one over the other. The novel opens with the discovery of an elegantly dressed older woman murdered and left in a

car — the only clue to her identity being the particular way she was left, and a business card that is sewn into the lining of her coat. Following up with research of her own, Orléans-based Police Capitaine Inès Picaut quickly discovers that no one ever really stops being a spy. As with Scott's other novels, *A Treachery of Spies* is thoroughly researched, and written with such immediacy, it took me all of two pages to be completely hooked. It is the second — the first being the equally brilliant *Into the Fire* — of what I hope will be a long series.



I really want to mention another fantastic historical mystery, *The Way of All Flesh* by Ambrose Parry. The novel is written jointly by Chris Brookmyre and his wife, anesthesiologist Dr Marisa Haetzman: the perfect team to write a medical mystery, artfully set in 19th-century Edinburgh. For a city so effectively divided into Old and New, the characters constantly overlap — and overstep — these boundaries. The exploration of medical practice at the time, in particular midwifery and the pioneering use of ether and chloroform, highlights just how important the doctors and scientists of

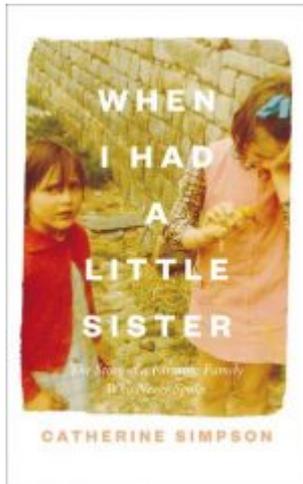
Scotland were in the development of medicine and surgery. With its focus on pregnancy and childbirth, this is also very much a novel about women and their position in Victorian society. The descriptions of labour can be fairly graphic, but they do illustrate the limited options available to doctors at the time. The next volume in the series, *The Art of Dying*, was published this year.



We Were Always Here: A Queer Words Anthology **edited by Ryan Vance and Michael Lee Richardson** | 404Ink, 2019 — chosen by Sasha de Buyl, Manager of Scottish Books International

Released in January, *We Were Always Here* showcases the variety and power of LGBTQI+ writing in Scotland today. This collection came about as the culmination of the Queer Words mentoring project, but the book has become much more than this, acting as a yardstick marking just how far queer writing in Scotland has

come. With pieces from the best of our queer writers, including well-established writers like Kirsty Logan, Harry Josephine Giles and Rachel Plummer, as well as new voices such as Andrés Ordorica, Alice Tarbuck and Jay G Ying, the collection contains multitudes. Some pieces are touching, some sad, some laugh-out-loud funny, and like all the best queer spaces, the writing comes together in the intersections of all these things.



When I Had a Little Sister by **Catherine Simpson** | 4th Estate

— chosen by Hannah Lavery, writer, performer, Learning & Engagement Co-ordinator for the Scottish Poetry Library, and Director of CoastWord Festival

What a difficult choice to make, I have loved so many books this year. I will mention first, two wonderful poetry collections. Janette Ayachi's *Hand over Mouth Music* and Jenny Lindsay's *This Script*, which I think are brilliant and beautiful and have been steadfast companions to me since I got my hands on them, returning again and again to them for their moving and accomplished poetry. But the book that has stayed with me most this year is Catherine Simpson's heartbreaking and funny memoir, *When I Had a Little Sister*. The warmth of Simpson's writing has always impressed and engaged me but the searing honesty of this book really shook me. It is quite an extraordinary memoir of grief and of the way a family copes with mental illness and suicide, not shying away from the pain and raw grief but with such an eye for the absurd, and delivered with powerful generosity and forgiveness.

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