

GOOD READS

Books that deliciously dip into the past. By *Richard Hopton*



THE SECRETS WE KEPT

LARA PRESCOTT

This engaging novel – Lara Prescott’s first – is set in the 1950s against the backdrop of the Cold War. The action takes place in Washington DC, Soviet Russia and Europe. The gilded icon at the centre of the book is Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, banned in the Soviet Union but first published in Italy – in Italian – in 1957. This is the story of how the novel became a weapon in the struggle between East and West, communism and capitalism, dictatorship and democracy during the Cold War.

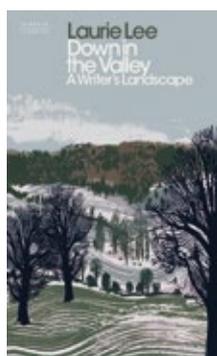
The novel opens with the arrest and interrogation of Olga Vsevolodovna, Pasternak’s mistress and muse, by the KGB. After a show trial, she is sentenced to three years in a labour camp. Prescott vividly conjures up the arbitrariness of the Soviet regime, the brutality of the labour camps and the all-pervading atmosphere of fear and suspicion which dominated Russia in these years.

In Washington, Prescott takes up the story of Irina Drozdova, a young Russian

woman whose mother fled to the United States. She lands a job in the typing pool at the CIA where her usefulness is soon recognised and she begins to be trained as a spy. Prescott deftly recreates life in government service in 1950s Washington: at times it feels rather like *Mad Men* transposed to Pennsylvania Avenue with government-issue pitch pine in place of Madison Avenue glitz. The casual, institutionalised sexism of the time, however, remains, a point Prescott hammers home remorselessly.

The story then moves at pace between Russia, Washington and Europe as Doctor Zhivago joins the infantry divisions and the nuclear warheads as a weapon in the Cold War. Irina is trained in spy craft by a maverick veteran American agent, Sally Forrester; their relationship becomes one of the central strands of the novel.

This is a highly readable novel about the power of literature, the capacity of a single book to alter the balance of a struggle between opposing nations and ideologies. The pen really is mightier than the sword. *Hutchinson, £12.99*

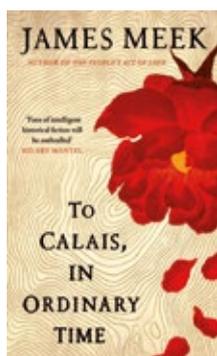


DOWN IN THE VALLEY

Laurie Lee, ed. David Parker

This slim but charming volume captures the authentic voice of Laurie Lee reminiscing in old age about his youth in the Cotswold villages above Stroud. David Parker transcribed the

text from sound interviews he conducted with Lee three years before his death in 1997. Lee’s reminiscences summon up a world, now long disappeared, which will nevertheless be familiar to readers of *Cider with Rosie*. Life was simpler than it is now but harder and more uncertain, too. People in these Cotswold valleys then lived close to the land, close to nature and close to their past. *Penguin Classics, £12.99*



TO CALAIS, IN ORDINARY TIME

James Meek

The Black Death was one of the most destructive outbreaks of pandemic disease in human history, killing half the population of northern Europe in the 1340s. It forms the

background to James Meek’s new novel, a story which immerses the reader in the medieval world. Meek’s world is not simply an older version of our own but a strange and different place. The language of the novel, alternately Latinate, Frenchified and common English, although original and lending authenticity, does not make it the easiest of reads but persevere. It’s worth it. *Canongate, £18.99*



THE MAN WHO SAW EVERYTHING

Deborah Levy

This quirky, elusive novel opens with Saul Adler, a young academic historian, being knocked down on the famous pedestrian crossing outside Abbey Road studios. Much of the action takes place in the former East Berlin in the last year of the

communist regime. It moves sinuously between different parts of Adler’s life, laying bare his many acts of unkindness and self-indulgence, asking questions about memory, perception and human behaviour. Levy’s writing gives Adler something approaching a sixth sense, as if he is preternaturally aware of the connections, real and imagined, in his life, lending the novel an almost surreal, otherworldly atmosphere. *Hamish Hamilton, £14.99*