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The literary highlights of 2007

Ali Smith

Her latest novel Girl Meets Boy (2007) is published by Canongate.

This year's fiction was characterized for me by a couple of huge books – I mean, the kind of book it's hard to carry if you're going on a train journey, and simultaneously the kind of book you can't bear not to take because you're in the middle of it and it's so good. The first is **Nicola Barker's *Darkmans***, which should have won the Man Booker Prize. *Darkmans* not winning is a bit like a jury being sniffy about Jane Austen. I don't mean that Barker is like Austen – though in many ways they do share a social vision, an ability to turn the mood of a sentence on a hair's breadth and a sense of the novel that no one else has quite mastered. I mean I think Barker is writing with a sharpness, an irony, a sly kind of mercy plus a visionary eye to modernity, the combination of all of which is thin enough on the literary ground just now. But if you add

the velocity at which she conjures, along with the new novelistic shapes she can make out of air, what you get as a reader, I think, is really rare. So I loved both the weight and the lightness of this novel. It's probably wrong to say it's Barker's major work, since most of her writing is excitingly, anarchically major – her last very long novel, *Behindlings* (2003), is a book so ridiculously underrated as to leave me shaking my head in disbelief.

The other weighty pleasure this year for me was **Joyce Carol Oates' *The Gravedigger's Daughter***. I am a steady fan of Oates' writing, which has, on the one hand, a force of voice and persuasion reminiscent of the great Victorians and, on the other, a habit of gifting this force to people who otherwise get lost to history. In her hands the Great American Novel is a democratic declaration in itself. *The Gravedigger's Daughter* does it again, gives what looks like a white trash throwaway story the whole heft of a century's history.

From the macro to the micro. **Grace Paley**, the short story writer, had a great way of describing her reasons for never writing a novel. Art was too long, she said, and life was too short. She died in August; the loss is terrible. Paley, who wrote only four slim collections in 50 years, was clearly one of the major short story writers of the 20th century and probably one of the finest we've ever had, up there with Anton Chekhov and Isaac Babel and Katherine Mansfield and Alice Munro. She was a writer who made the story form her art and for whom art was never shy of or free from politics, for whom life was a form of dialogue in itself. Her discursive, generous art has, just as much as Mansfield's did at the other end of the century, altered the course of the short story's potential, and the force of her was always a force for political and literary goodness.

Since we're talking such goodnesses, it's very good to feel the good substantiality there in your hands of **Jackie Kay's** brand new collection of selected poems, *Darling*, which brings together poems from the 1980s right up to some brand new and previously unpublished work, which is stunning. Kay is a writer without pretension; to read her and then to turn to the knotted workings of so many other poets is a revelation of how a nice hot knife will simply slip through a pat of butter or of how artifice itself loves a kind of honest ease. This collection is already a favourite of my books of this year and next.

Liz Brown

Her writing has appeared in Bookforum, Design Observer, the Los Angeles Times Book Review *and* The New York Times Book Review.

Looking back, I see now that the farewells really added up in 2007. In a year that saw the passing of Grace Paley, Kurt Vonnegut and Norman Mailer – gurus, gadflies and provocateurs – we also said, 'Goodbye, Zuckerman', 'Goodbye, Harry Potter' and, 'Goodbye, book reviews'. At least, that was the panicked sound from critics in the USA, as newspapers 'restructured' their book sections. After the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* decided to eliminate its books editor, an online petition quickly circulated in protest, and no industry conference was complete without a panel devoted to the plight of the book critic. As far as I could tell, though, the books themselves remained fairly robust.

Long-awaited novels from Nathan Englander, Junot Díaz and Denis Johnson arrived. English readers rhapsodized over Natasha Wimmer's excellent translation of **Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*** (1998), the late Chilean writer's polyphonic travelogue and mystery novel. Jerry Seinfeld's wife Jessica, an Oprah-approved cookbook author, even provided a plagiarism scandal, lest the publishing gossip cycle ever slacken.

For this reader the outstanding titles were the hybrids and mutants. Mix prose and graphic arts and you have

Michael Bierut's *Seventy-Nine Short Essays on Design*, a collection of elegant feuillets, with subjects ranging from Ed Ruscha to ITC Garamond to treadmills to Wilson Pickett. **Ander Monson's** non-fiction début, *Neck Deep and Other Predicaments*, crossed personal obsession with schematics, organizing meditations on snow, car washes and mining according to the forms of the Harvard Outline, mathematical proofs and indices. The result was a surprising alloy of caper and elegy.

The publishers of **Diane Williams' It Was Like My Trying to Have a Tender-hearted Nature** called her latest a novella and stories, and that's as good as way as any, I suppose, to categorize these comic, weird, lovely, startling, aphoristic vignettes, the first 36 of which tell the story of Enrique Woytus lusting after his neighbour's wife, a dilemma rife with sexual awkwardness and poignant longing. 'Those were the days,' Enrique muses, 'when the troubles were gradually beginning to suit the occasion.'

Then there was **Wayne Koestenbaum's Hotel Theory**. 'To be in a hotel', the author writes, 'is to float, or to tremble, like just-set custard.' In this brilliant confection the pages are divided literally down the middle, with the left-hand side devoted to 'Hotel Theory', eight 'dossiers' on 'hotel consciousness' that draw on film, philosophy and literature as well as the author's dreams, and include passages titled 'Sebald Hotel', 'Hotel Porn', 'Didion's Pink Hotel' and 'Heidegger and Custard Pie'. Running concurrently down the right-hand side is a dime-store novel, a cocktail of deadpan and hothouse sensibilities, featuring Lana Turner and Liberace, both residents of 'Hotel Women', where celebrities ponder fame, children, parents and desire and where the articles 'a', 'an' and 'the' never appear.

Consider the book as object, and see **McSweeney's** Issue 24, a hardback, double-sided journal with Z-binding, which means you have to flip the book upside down at some point to read the whole thing. A symposium on **Donald Barthelme**, curated by Justin Taylor, includes contributions from Ann Beattie, Clifford Chase, George Saunders, Gary Lutz and the late Paley. But more than intricate production, the journal might be called a premonition.

Next year promises Barthelme's return, with two books from Counterpoint Press: *Not-Knowing: The essays and interviews*, and *The Teachings of Don B.*, previously uncollected works. And with the new year a new controversy must arise. Readers fearing any lag in scandal should note that **James Frey's** third novel, *Bright Shiny Morning*, will be forthcoming. What other fresh outrage awaits? While I wait, the reading list grows: *The Believer* editor **Ed Park's** *Personal Days*, **A.L. Kennedy's** *Day*, **Clancy Martin's** début novel, *How to Sell*, **Leni Zumas'** story collection *Farewell Navigator* and Virago's reissue of **Elizabeth Jenkins' The Tortoise and the Hare** (1984).

Ali Smith and Liz Brown

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by *Ali Smith and Liz Brown*



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