

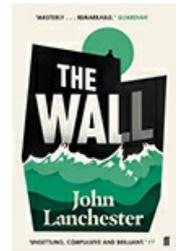
## What We're Reading 31 July 2020

Opinion - Books Friday, 31st July 2020

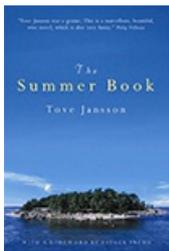
*The BookBrunch team reveals what's on their bedside tables*

### Jo Henry

John Lanchester's first four novels have all been very different in theme and tone, and his fifth, *The Wall* (Faber), is no exception to this pattern. The Defenders - a kind of national service - are on The Wall for two long years. The Change has had a profound impact on climate and geography, so that life defending the 10k of coastline is deeply uncomfortable, with only two temperatures (type 1 cold and type 2 cold), while any Defender who lets in an Other, if they're not killed in the encounter, is expelled to sea. Under such privations the Defenders wrestle with the physical and mental pressure of waiting for the inevitable attack, while a strange kind of camaraderie grows as they learn more about each other. This is compelling, unsettling reading that resonates with the current political climate brilliantly.



### David Roche

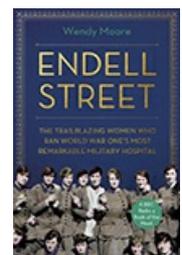


I am in the middle of the forests of Finland on holiday but still indulged my passions by having the cricket on in the background for the final England v The West Indies Test decider earlier this week. In order to counterbalance this irregularity, what better way than simultaneously re-visiting Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* (Sort of Books). Sitting here looking out on the lake where we brought up our children each summer, is there a more perfect book than this? It is clever, funny, moving and has that simplicity that only brilliant writers can achieve. Tove Jansson may be most famous for her success with her Moomin books and characters, but they were a relatively small part of her prodigious

output which included fiction, short stories, anti-Nazi illustrations during WWII in Garm magazine, and also her career as a painter. Any chance to visit exhibitions of her wider work should be taken.

### Lucy Nathan

I rarely read non-fiction, but the subject matter of *Endell Street* by Wendy Moore (Atlantic Books) grabbed me: it's the story of doctors and partners Louisa Garrett Anderson and Flora Murray, who started the first ever military hospital run by women - and entirely staffed by suffragists, the vast majority of whom were also women. Endell Street Military Hospital opened in 1915 and ran until after the war ended, including during the Spanish flu pandemic. It pioneered lifesaving treatments, and both saved and improved countless lives. It is a truly fascinating story that left me astonished I hadn't heard about these remarkable women before, and the way it's written was just as wonderful. It is packed with information and anecdotes and a huge amount of really impressive research, but it's also entirely readable and accessible. A really brilliant piece of medical and social history.





## Nicholas Clee

Prompted by the Times Books newsletter, I have read *Excellent Women* by Barbara Pym (Virago). After I had adjusted to her wavelength, I found her writing irresistible: it is all about the unexpected yet perfectly apt, comic word, like a perfectly placed chromatic note in music. Pym's heroine, Mildred, is dutiful, sensible and single, and in common with Anita Brookner's protagonists finds herself in thrall to people who are vain and careless of others. But this book is cheerier than most of Brookner's - the story of a love that both the reader and the lovers must infer.

## Neill Denny

I wrote about Red Circle's Minis series earlier in the summer, in which the start-up indie commissions short books from leading Japanese writers. The publisher, Richard Nathan, has kindly sent me the latest in the series, *One Love Chigusa* by Soji Shimada, translated by the former British ambassador to Japan, Sir David Warren. It's short - 115 pages - but has plenty of big ideas crammed in a small space. Set seventy years in the future, shades of Blade Runner meets Le Grandes Meaulnes, all wrapped up in a whodunnit written in an elegant and unsettling style. Boy meets girl, or does he... all is not as it seems. Better written and more engaging than a lot of the thrillers cluttering up the charts, this beautiful little book is very much a break from the norm.



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