

## What We're Reading - 5 February 2021

Lucy Nathan

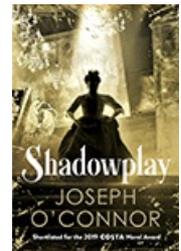
**Opinion - Books** Friday, 5th February 2021

---

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

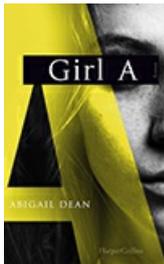
### Jo Henry

Free at last to dig into my Christmas books, I find at the top of the pile Joseph O'Connor's award winning and critically acclaimed *Shadowplay* (Vintage). I'm late to this one, but what a fantastic premise: the troubled relationship between Bram Stoker, theatre manager, and world famous actors Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, with guest appearances from Oscar Wilde and Jack the Ripper. Set in a vividly imagined and suitably Gothic late Victorian London, with the scene set for the gradual emergence of Stoker's legendary vampire. I'm really looking forward to the trip.



### David Roche

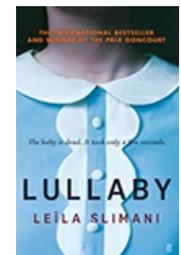
There's been a lot of hoopla around the publication of *Girl A* (HarperCollins), the debut novel by Abigail Dean, which appears to be winning the newcomers chase that traditionally runs in January. Sold by auction in both the UK and US, it's also sold in 29 other countries and the screen rights have been sold to Sony. There's even a big yellow dot on the jacket with a quote from none other than man of the moment Richard Osman, who seems to be vying for Stephen Fry's national treasure (in waiting) slot. *Girl A* is a tabloid 'House of Horror' tale of a family of young children holed up by parents who become capable of depths that seem impossible, and in particular Lex Gracie - 'Girl A' - the one who escaped. Rather than putting us through the grim details of what exactly took



place in relentless fashion, the story interestingly focuses on how Lex and her siblings cope post the event and how their lives unfold in the aftermath. It's a very good debut but for me it doesn't deserve quite the noise it's receiving and it probably should win a publicity award somewhere down the line.

### Julie Vuong

There's a lot to be said for book 'hangovers' which hit me hard after *Middlemarch*. After such an engrossing and weighty tome, I decided to reach for a slimmer novel and a complete change in tone in *Lullaby* (Faber, trans. Sam Taylor). It's in fact my second attempt at reading Leila Slimani's hit thriller; I picked it up last year but found I didn't quite have the stomach at the time to get past the first chapter. Now I'm 50 pages into this short novel (it's just 200 pages) and it's surprisingly brisk; the chapters are short and Slimani seems to be saying a lot about race, class and marriage in her seemingly simple prose.





## Lucy Nathan

Belinda Bauer is one of the best crime novelists out there. Her last book *Snap* was longlisted for the Booker Prize, and her new title *Exit* (Bantam Press) is just as excellent. What I love most about her writing - and that of some of my other favourite crime writers like Susie Steiner and Tana French - is the humour. *Exit* has some very smart lines, and they make Bauer's characters interesting, endearing and well-rounded. It's also a really well-formed mystery with a hook that is nothing like anything else I've read before: it follows 75-year-old Felix, part of a group of people called the Exiteers who keep dying

people company as they take their last breaths as part of an almost-assisted suicide scheme. When he and a new recruit accidentally kill the wrong person, his world is turned upside down. I loved all the characters, the way the story elegantly unfurled - and most of all, I loved the ending, which was satisfying, cathartic and beautiful.

## Nicholas Clee

A review by Lucy Scholes in the *TLS* of various novels in the British Library's Women Writers series alerted me to *Chatterton Square* by EH Young. This 1947 novel, set in 1938, is about the shadow of war - the First World War, and the Second that (almost) everyone knows is to come. The war denier is Mr Blackett, under whose pompous sway the women in his house in Upper Radstowe (based on Clifton, Bristol) languish. Next door is the happier house of the Frasers, whose matriarch, abandoned by her husband, approaches life with cheerful stoicism. Young's generous and ironic imagination grants some measure of sympathy even to the miserable Blackett; but it is the subtle portrayal of women's lives for which *Chatterton Square* is remarkable.



## Neill Denny

The polished stone axe is an icon of neolithic Britain, and Europe, and is used by David Miles as the key to unlocking our shared prehistory in *The Tale of the Axe* (Thames & Hudson). It is a dense and informative work, not a quick read, but his tale of how farming was invented in the Middle East and was then brought to Europe (and Britain) by axe-carrying farmers, who superceded the native hunter gatherers, is fascinating stuff. Fun fact: Cyprus had its own pygmy hippopotamus, until they more all eaten by the first human colonists. More next week.



Source article: <https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-detail/what-we-re-reading--5-february-2021>