



LGBT+ History Month at Catz Library

February marks LGBT+ History Month in the UK, and in recognition of the contribution LGBT+ students and staff make to the College, Catz Library has purchased new titles to add to its existing collection of work by LGBT authors and/or addressing LGBT issues and themes.

Both the College and Oxford at large boast a rich LGBT+ history, including Catz alumna Jeanette Winterson CBE/FRSL, whose *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* won the Whitbread Prize for a First Novel in 1985. In terms of the wider University, LGBT+ alumni of Oxford include names such as Oscar Wilde, W. H. Auden, Iris Murdoch, Alan Bennett, Ian Kramer, Harold Nicholson, Ruth Hunt, Justice Edwin Cameron, and many more. Deborah Warner CBE is the current Cameron Mackintosh Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at St Catz.

One name upon which we should pause is Michael Dillon, who read Classics at St Anne's (the then Society for Home Students) between 1934 and 1938. Dillon was the first person in the UK to undergo hormone treatment and surgery for a female-to-male transition, and was President of the Oxford University Women's Boat Club. Dillon spoke with some friends and tutors whilst at Oxford about his anxieties concerning the expectation he live as a woman. The Michael Dillon LGBT+ Lectures series were launched by St Anne's in his memory in 2020.

The titles Catz Library has ordered are recommendations made by students, collated by the JCR/MCR LGBT+ Welfare Officers, and ranging from classics of queer fiction including Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, to recent LGBT+ poetry, including Richard Scott's debut collection, *Soho*, as well as *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing* (ed. Hugh Stevens). Further suggestions are welcome and we hope you enjoy this display celebrating LGBT+ History Month here at Catz.

Chris Jones, Gaia Clark Nevola and Barbara Costa

The Swimming-Pool Library by Alan Hollinghurst

The Swimming-Pool Library is the first novel by English novelist (and Magdalen alumnus) Alan Hollinghurst, which won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1988 and the American Academy of Arts and Letters E. M. Forster Award in 1989. The novel recounts the story of 25 year old William Beckwith, a privileged and promiscuous gay man in London, who saves the life of elderly aristocrat Lord Nantwich, who suffers a heart-attack in a public bathroom. This chance meeting results in a new acquaintanceship between the two, as Nantwich, an elderly man in search of someone young to write his biography, sees in Will the ideal person for the job. A novel deeply invested in the meanings and significance of the historical record, the lives hidden amongst the queer archive, this is a haunting novel which has justifiably taken up its canonical position as a classic of gay fiction since its publication.

The novel is set in London and exudes images of a sweaty urban landscape in a kind of “last summer”, a period which the protagonist describes as a “*belle époque*” era before everything went wrong. Published in 1988, but set in 1983 - just before the HIV/AIDS crisis took off in the UK - the novel omits reference to this contemporary event, which is nonetheless deeply palpable throughout the novel, felt as an absent presence in every chapter. Will repeatedly smells a new deodorant wafting through men’s locker-rooms, tellingly-named “Trouble for Men”, which acts as an ominous intimation of collective trauma that was to come.

Hollinghurst’s novel is a self-reflexive meditation on writing history - especially a queer history erased from the record - as Will’s role as the biographer of Nantwich makes him come to understand the vexed legacy of homosexuality in Britain and its empire, and his own family’s striking involvement in the construction of homophobic and colonial institutional apparatus. It is one of the most striking depictions of gay London, and has left its mark on every depiction of queer life in the city since its initial publication.

Chris Jones

The Well of Loneliness by Radclyffe Hall

The Well of Loneliness is one of the most important landmarks in queer fiction. Published in 1928, the novel depicts the life of a masculine lesbian, Steven Gordon, a thinly-veiled version of the author herself. Hall offers a sympathetic portrayal of lesbian love, as Gordon begins a romantic affair with an ambulance driver during WWI, although their relationship is marked by significant hostility from wider society. Gordon, like Hall, defines as an “invert” - a term with a particular currency at the beginning of the twentieth century to describe same-sex attraction - and the novel presents such “inversion” not as a perversion but an inherently natural state, concluding with the unapologetic statement of defiance: “Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!”

Like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Hall’s novel was the subject of one of the most extensive obscenity trials in the history of literature. The novel does not depict any sexual acts except a single kiss between two women, but this was enough for the editor of the *Sunday Express*, James Douglas, to write in his paper “I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body but moral poison kills the soul.” Following this article, the then Home Secretary, Sir William Joyson-Hicks, withdrew the book from circulation, describing it as “gravely detrimental to the public interest”. That the book was censored in this manner prior to a formal trial evoked outrage from many contemporary literary figures, including T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, and the Woolfs. The novel was ultimately judged obscene by Chief Magistrate Sir Chartres Biron who ordered its destruction.

Whilst discussions about the literary and aesthetic merit of the work have been the topic of some debate since its initial appearance, the legal battles surrounding its publication are credited with helping to increase the visibility of lesbians in society, both in the UK and in the US. The novel ultimately went on to sell in large numbers internationally over many decades.

Chris Jones

Oranges are Not the Only Fruit by Jeanette Winterson

Few things scream lesbian-adolescent-fairy-tale like Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*. The novel, toeing the line of the biography that Jeanette would later write into her subsequent book *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?*, is a queer woman's experience of adolescence, the reconciliation of gender identity and the rejection of family ties and ideologies. At points, *Orange* veers off in the direction of magic-realism, utilising the language of the gothic to articulate queer temporalities tethered to the trauma of family rejection and also the horror of ridding oneself of internalised homophobia. Through twists and turns, exorcisms, young love and dreams of orange trees and orange demons, Jeanette finally grows up in the pages of the novel, ultimately ending up exactly here, in St Catherine's College, Oxford. For me personally, this book was the first novel I read which I knew to be written by an LGBTQ+ identifying author, and necessarily became important for my own queer identity. Much as it's a little embarrassing to say so, Jeanette's book was really what made me pick this college!

Gaia Clark Nevola