Historical Fiction From Sir Walter Scott to Georgette Heyer and Hilary Mantel

John Mullan

GRESHAM COLLEGE

I

Wreckage (I)

London, May 1536

Once the queen's head is severed, he walks away. A sharp pang of appetite reminds him that it is time for a second breakfast, or perhaps an early dinner. The morning's circumstances are new and there are no rules to guide us. The witnesses, who have knelt for the passing of the soul, stand up and put on their hats. Under the hats, their faces are stunned.

See Huissier Maillard, the shifty man! On his plank, swinging over the abyss of that stone-Ditch; plank resting on parapet, balanced by weight of Patriots,—he hovers perilous: such a Dove towards such an Ark! Deftly, thou shifty Usher: one man already fell; and lies smashed, far down there, against the masonry! Usher Maillard falls not: deftly, unerring he walks, with outspread palm. The Swiss holds a paper through his porthole; the shifty Usher snatches it, and returns. Terms of surrender: Pardon, immunity to all! Are they accepted?—'*Foi d'officier*, On the word of an officer,' answers half-pay Hulin,—or half-pay Elie, for men do not agree on it, 'they are!' Sinks the drawbridge,—Usher Maillard bolting it when down; rushes-in the living deluge: the Bastille is fallen! *Victoire*! *La Bastille est prise*!

Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, I V 6

The cardinal's scarlet clothes now lie folded and empty. They cannot be wasted. They will be cut up and become other garments. Who knows where they will get to over the years? Your eye will be taken by a crimson cushion or a patch of red on a banner or ensign. You will see a glimpse of them in a man's inner sleeve or in the flash of a whore's petticoat.

Another man would go to Leicester to see where he died and talk to the abbot. Another man would have trouble imagining it, but he has no trouble.

Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, Part Three, II (2009)


The Man Booker Prize 2009
A.S. BYATT
The Children's BOOK
J.M. COETZEE
Summertime
ADAM FOULDS
HILARY MANTEL
WOLF HALL
Sarah Waters

Tale of Tudor intrigue is hot favourite as judges rewrite Booker Prize history

Shortlist dominated by a form once taboo

Ben Hoyle Arts Correspondent

When the Booker Prize was set up 40 years ago to reward fine literary fiction, historical novels — like crime stories, thrillers and romances — were considered unworthy of consideration.

Yesterday the judges for this year's prize announced a shortlist anchored more firmly in the past than any before, final proof that the snobbery that used to confront writers of historical fiction is now dead.

Some of the most enduring Booker contenders, such as *Atonement*, *The Remains of the Day* and *Schindler's Ark*, have been historical novels but usually they were joined on their shortlists by something more contemporary or futuristic. This year all six of the contending novels for the Man Booker Prize play out largely against historical backdrops ranging from Tudor London to South Africa in the 1970s.

Only twice before has there been a comparable emphasis on the past: in 1975 — when only two novels were shortlisted, of which one, *Heat and Dust*, was set partly in the present and partly in colonial India, and the other was a First World War novel; and again in 2000 when five books set in the mid to late 20th century jostled with one set in the 19th.

Yesterday *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel's novel about the machinations of Thomas Cromwell at the court of Henry VIII was immediately installed as the hottest favourite in the history of the prize. Mantel, 57, has never been a serious contender for the Booker before (although she has been longlisted previously) but within 48 hours of this year's longlist being announced, five weeks ago, she jumped from being an outsider to the 5-4 on favourite.

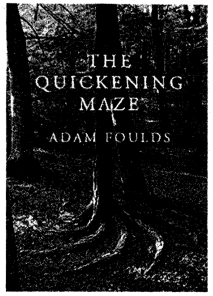
The other five novels in contention are *The Children's Book* by A. S. Byatt, *Summertime* by J. M. Coetzee, *The Quickening Maze* by Adam Foulds, *The Glass Room* by Simon Mawer and *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters. James Naughtie, the chairman of the judges, described the shortlist as "one of the best in the last couple of decades".

All bar Coetzee, who is South African, are British writers vying for a prize that has been dominated by overseas authors over the past decade. Coetzee is chasing the first hat-trick after wins for *Disgrace* (1999) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983).

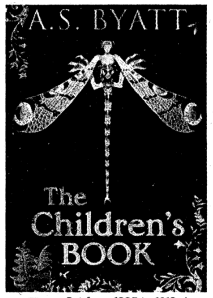
Ion Trewin, the literary director of the prize, said: "The original judges did not include historical fiction because they thought it was genre fiction and genres were considered rather beyond the pale. Gradually, though, the prize has begun to assimilate the fact that good writing can come from anywhere."

He picked out J. G. Farrell, the British novelist, who wrote *The Siege of Krishnapur*, set during the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and who won the Booker in 1973, as one of the authors who made a decisive contribution to dismantling prejudices about historical fiction.

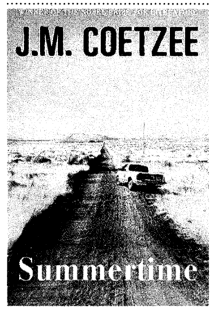
The winner, to be announced on October 6, will receive £50,000 and a vastly improved profile. Last year's winner, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, has gone on to sell more than half a million copies and has been translated into 30 languages.



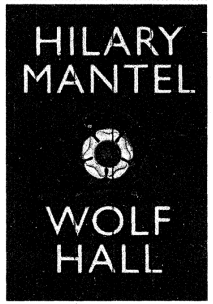
A young Alfred Tennyson moves close to the asylum where the poet John Clare finds himself after years of struggling with alcohol and depression. **Odds: 10-1**



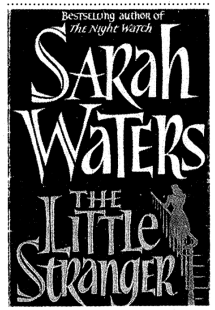
Set from 1895 to 1918. A writer's family plays in a storybook world in their house near Romney Marsh but political upheavals are taking place. **Odds: 6-1**



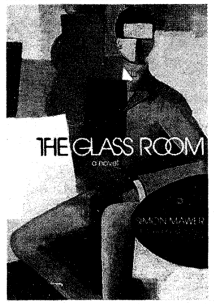
Interviews by a biographer after Coetzee's death reveal an awkward individual who evoked suspicion in 1970s South Africa. **Odds: 6-1**



The ambition of Thomas Cromwell, adviser to Henry VIII, is depicted against the backdrop of his king's tempestuous nature. **Odds: 4-5**



Dr Faraday revisits Hundreds Hall, where his mother once worked as a maid, and soon realises that the grandeur is now in decline. **Odds: 4-1**



An architect's plan to build newlyweds a glass house on a hill in Czechoslovakia is dealt a blow with the outbreak of the Second World War. **Odds: 10-1**

The past is not such a foreign country, after all

Erica Wagner
Commentary

The 2009 shortlist for the Man Booker Prize is laden with historical novels. And yet there are no historical novels on this list. How can such a paradox exist?

For the simple reason that the authors of the books on this list live and breathe and walk among us. Hilary Mantel's astonishing evocation of Tudor England, A. S. Byatt's panoramic portrait of life at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, Sarah Waters's bleak portrait of this country in the postwar period, Simon Mawer's conjuring of prewar Europe, Adam Foulds's evocation of the life of the poet John Clare in the mid-19th century, the stories told of the late "John Coetzee" in J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime*: all these books conjure the past but are products of the present.

To read these books is not to feel smothered by the dust of history but to have the illusion that the past is the present. And so, of course, it would have seemed to those who lived it, would it not? If we look at contemporary documents from Tudor times, the use of English may seem a little foreign or distant to us but it would not have done so to those who spoke or wrote it. Any fictional world is a foreign country: it is the novelist's job to pull the reader into that world, wherever, or whenever, it may be said to exist.

Why are historical novels so popular with readers, judges and non-judges alike? Head to the British Museum, look down at the body of Lindow Man, pulled from his Iron Age grave in a Cheshire bog, and you can't fail to understand. Look at a photograph or drawing of an ancestor of yours. Were they like us? If not, how were they different? What would I have done if I lived then, if I lived there? Stories of the olden days have fascinated human beings since — well, since the olden days.

As to why historical novels are so popular with authors, the answer is surely the same, though I could venture another, only somewhat facetious, possibility. It is much, much easier to construct a plot if your characters are unable to call each other on their mobile phones. If Cathy had been able to ring Heathcliff and tell him that she never meant to sound that mean would we have had *Wuthering Heights*? I rest my case.

IGM IGM

The Workout No 506

	3			6		
4						
		4				
	6					5
2					8	
			5			
2		4				

© Puzzler Media

Cell Blocks Divide the grid into blocks. Each block must be square or rectangular and must contain the number of cells indicated by the number inside it.

Solutions times2, page 21; for solving tips and more puzzles: timesonline.co.uk/games

Cruddas urges Labour to return to old values

Labour has become "mute", and unable to touch the Tories because it has retreated into a right-wing philosophical framework, the party's leading champion of the Left said (Philip Webster writes).

In an attack on "despair and defeatism", Jon Cruddas, speaking at a conference organised by the Compass pressure group, called on Labour to rediscover radicalism and proposed a high pay commission, fair employment clauses in public contracts and scrapping renewal of Trident and the third runway at Heathrow.

Get ready for spending cuts, page 8

Killer mother jailed

A mother was jailed for six years at the Old Bailey for killing her 20-month-old son in September 2007 by giving him crushed antidepressant pills over several weeks to make him sleep. Laura-Jane Vestuto, 28, of Clapton, East London, pleaded guilty in July to causing or allowing his death.

Interpreter's 'fraud'

A Bengali court interpreter persuaded others to impersonate him in courts around the country on 40 occasions when he was double-booked, Chelmsford Crown Court heard yesterday. Akhtar Zaman, 35, of Woodford Green, Essex, has pleaded not guilty to conspiracy to defraud. The trial continues.

Homes firebombed

The homes of two detectives were firebombed in a revenge attack by a man they had arrested, the Old Bailey heard. It is alleged that Wayne Taylor, 42, recruited two men to throw the bombs in Clacton, Essex. Mr Taylor, of Clacton, denies two offences of arson and a third unconnected arson.

Most read at timesonline.co.uk

1 Islamists guilty of bomb plot
2 British playboy killed tenant
3 Cheney put airline bomb plot case in jeopardy
4 Last orders for troops
5 McEnroe is Djokovic's victim
6 *Time Out*'s top 10 cities
7 Children's views on the Beatles
8 Mobile phone revolution
9 Is baby a Hugo or a Jack?
10 Michelle Obama's workouts

When the Booker Prize was set up 40 years ago to reward fine literary fiction, historical novels — like crime stories, thrillers and romances — were considered unworthy of consideration.

Yesterday the judges for this year's prize announced a shortlist anchored more firmly in the past than any before, final proof that the snobbery that used to confront writers of historical fiction is now dead.

Ben Hoyle, the *Times*, 9 September, 2009

The ‘historical novel’ is, for me, condemned, even in cases of labour as delicate as yours, to a fatal *cheapness* … You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures & documents, relics & prints, as much as you like— the real thing is almost impossible to do, & in its essence the whole effect is as nought. I mean the invention, the representation of the old CONSCIOUSNESS, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world were non-existent. You have to *think* with your modern apparatus a man, a woman, — or rather fifty —whose own thinking was intensely-otherwise conditioned, you have to simplify back by an amazing tour de force —& even then it’s all humbug.

Henry James to Sarah Orne Jewett, 5 October, 1901

WAVERLEY;

OR,

'TIS SIXTY YEARS SINCE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

Under which King, Bezonian? speak, or die!

Henry IV. Part II.

VOL. I.

EDINBURGH:

Printed by James Ballantyne and Co.

FOR ARCHIBALD CONSTABLE AND CO. EDINBURGH; AND LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, AND BROWN, LONDON.

1814.

The dialogue which they maintained between them, was carried on in Anglo-Saxon, which, as we said before, was universally spoken by the inferior classes, excepting the Norman soldiers, and the immediate personal dependants of the great feudal nobles. But to give their conversation in the original would convey but little information to the modern reader, for whose benefit we beg to offer the following translation:-

'The curse of St Withold upon these infernal porkers! … The curse of St Withold upon them and upon me! If the two-legged wolf snap not up some of them ere nightfall, I am no true man'.

Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819), Ch. I

‘Thou seest, Sir Friar, yon herd of Saxon swine, who have dared to environ this castle of Torquilstone. Tell them whatever thou hast a mind of the weakness of this fortalice, or aught else that can detain them before it for twenty-four hours. Meantime bear thou this scroll. But soft – canst read, Sir Priest?’

Ivanhoe, Ch. XXVII

As the cavalcade left the court of the monastery, an incident happened somewhat alarming to the Saxons, who, of all people of Europe, were most addicted to a superstitious observance of omens, and to whose opinions can be traced most of those notions upon such subjects, still to be found among our popular antiquities. For the Normans being a mixed race, and better informed according to the information of the times, had lost most of the superstitious prejudices which their ancestors had brought from Scandinavia, and piqued themselves upon thinking freely on such topics.

In the present instance, the apprehension of impending evil was inspired by no less respectable a prophet than a large lean black dog, which, sitting upright, howled most piteously as the foremost riders left the gate, and presently afterwards, barking wildly, and jumping to and fro, seemed bent upon attaching itself to the party.

Ivanhoe, Ch. XVIII

In point of justice … to the multitudes who will, I trust, devour this book with avidity, I have so far explained our ancient manners in modern language, and so far detailed the characters and sentiments of my persons, that the modern reader will not find himself, I should hope, much trammelled by the repulsive dryness of mere antiquity. In this, I respectfully contend, I have in no respect exceeded the fair license due to the author of a fictitious composition.

Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe,* 'Dedicatory Epistle'

IVANHOE

Costumes d'Ivanhoe

LE CHEVALIER NOIR

(Le Roi Richard cœur de Lion)

XII.

Ivanhoé.

Eugène Delacroix, *Rebecca and the Wounded Ivanhoe* (1823)

Eugène Delacroix, *The Abduction of Rebecca* (1846)

Read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen's very finely written novel of "Pride and Prejudice." That young lady has a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me.

The Journal of Sir Walter Scott, March, 1826

"I fancy there is no room in the small cup of thy understanding for any other liquor than what he pours into it."

"And it were well for thee, Nello," replied Nanni, "if thou couldst empty thyself of thy scoffs and thy jests, and take in that liquor too. The warning is ringing in the ears of all men: and it's no new story; for the Abbot Joachim prophesied of the coming time three hundred years ago, and now Fra Girolamo has got the message afresh. He has seen it in a vision, even as the prophets of old: he has seen the sword hanging from the sky."

"Ay, and thou wilt see it thyself, Nanni, if thou wilt stare upward long enough," said Niccolò; "for that pitiable tailor's work of thine makes thy noddle so overhang thy legs, that thy eyeballs can see nought above the stitching-board but the roof of thy own skull."

George Eliot, *Romola* (1862-3), Ch. I

I was about to depart with my bundle under my arm when the foreman of the house came to me. He seemed to think it a pity that I should go, and wished me to leave my work with him. This, however, I would not do, unless he would undertake to buy it then and there. Perhaps he lacked authority. Perhaps his judgment was against such purchase. But while we debated the matter, he gave me some advice. “I hope it’s not historical, Mr. Trollope?” he said. “Whatever you do, don’t be historical; your historical novel is not worth a damn.”

Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, Ch. VI

Lacking experience, he failed to recognise the signs which would have informed less fortunately circumstanced persons that the house was one of the many hired for the season, and equipped as cheaply as possible.

… He saw that she was quite young: probably some three- or four-and-twenty years of age: her person well-formed; and her countenance distinguished by a pair of candid gray eyes, a somewhat masterful little nose, and a very firm mouth and chin. Her hair, which was of a light brown, was becomingly braided à la Didon; and her gown, which she wore under a striped dress-spencer, was of fine cambric, made high to the throat, and ornamented round the hem with double trimming. Alverstoke, no stranger to the niceties of feminine apparel, saw at a glance that while this toilette was in the established mode it was neither dashing nor expensive. No one would describe it as up to the nines; but, on the other hand, no one would stigmatise the lady as a dowd. She wore her simple dress with an air; and she was as neat as wax.

Georgette Heyer, *Frederica*, Ch. III

‘Do you forget that I am your sister?’

‘No: I’ve never been granted the opportunity to forget it. Oh, don’t fly off the hooks again – you can have no notion how bracket-faced you look when you get into one of your pelters! Console yourself with my assurance that if Buxted had left you purse-pinched I should have felt myself obliged to let you hang on my sleeve.’ He looked mockingly down at her. ‘Yes, I know you’re about to tell me that you haven’t sixpence to scratch with, but the plain truth is that you are very well to do in the world, my dear Louisa, but the most unconscionable pinch-penny of my acquaintance! Now, don’t nauseate me by prating of affection! You’ve no more for me than I have for you.’

Frederica, Ch. I

If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word.

John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Ch. 13

“My dear Miss Woodruff, it is a pleasure to see you.” And she went and pressed Sarah's hand, and gave her a genuinely solicitous look, and said in a lower voice, “Will you come to see me-when dear Tina has gone?” For a second then, a rare look crossed Sarah's face. That computer in her heart had long before assessed Mrs. Tranter and stored the resultant tape. That reserve, that independence so perilously close to defiance which had become her mask in Mrs. Poulteney’s presence, momentarily dropped. She smiled even, though sadly, and made an infinitesimal nod: if she could, she would.

The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Ch. 14

‘I will not have French books in my house.’

‘I possess none. Nor English, ma’am.’

She possessed none, I may add, because they were all sold; not because she was an early forerunner of the egregious McLuhan.

The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Ch. 6

Her mother made discreet inquiries; and consulted her husband, who made more; for no young male ever set foot in the drawing-room of the house overlooking Hyde Park who had not been as well vetted as any modern security department vets its atomic scientists.

The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Ch. 11

see i had cnawan yfel was cuman when i seen this fugol glidan ofer

a great blaec fugol it was not of these lands it flown slow ofer the ham one daeg at the time of first ploughan. its necc was long its eages afyr and on the end of its fethra was a mans fingors all this i seen clere this was a fugol of deofuls. in stillness it cum and slow so none may miss it or what it had for us. this was eosturmonth in the year when all was broc

what is this fugol i saes to my wifman

i cnaw naht of fugols she saes why does thu asc me of these things

wifman i saes lysten this is sum scucca glidan ofer us what does thu mac of this

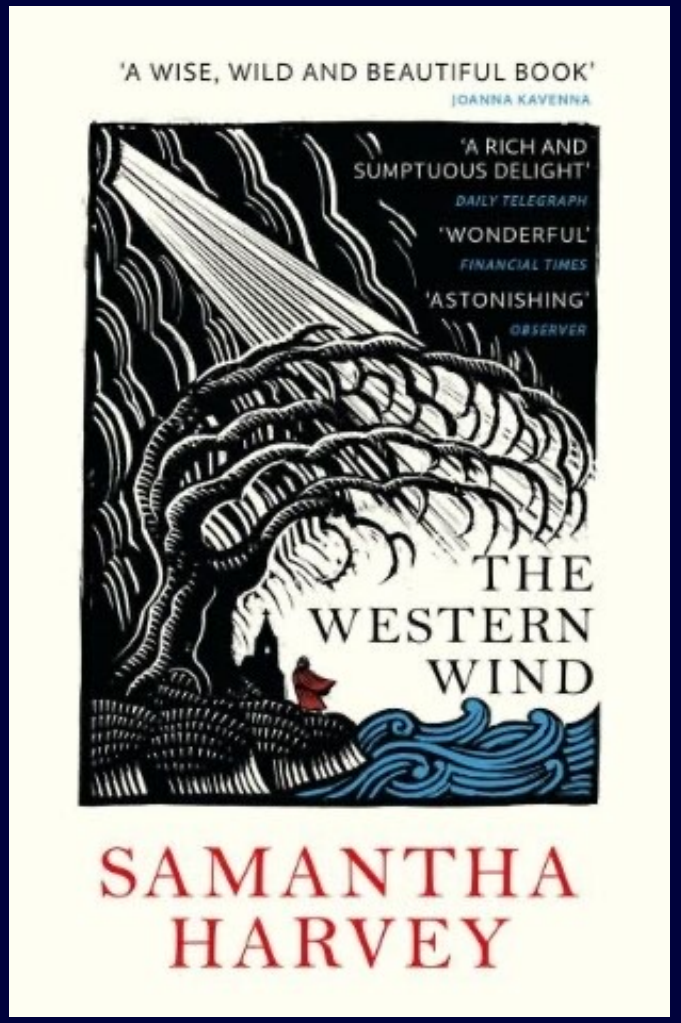
naht she nefer saes naht

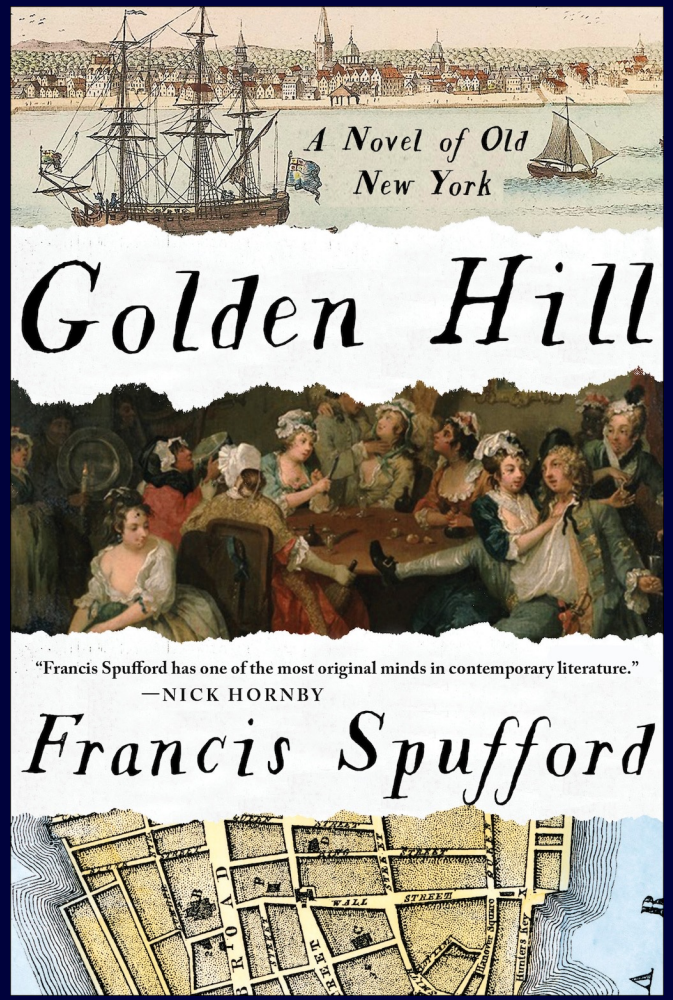
i tell thu sum thing is cuman

Paul Kingsnorth, *The Wake* (2014)

On the leavings of housewives' stockpots the children laid owl pans and rotten crow, rib of vole and otter, a deal of brock rigbone, some small-fowl carrion and the shells of things that crawl in mould. All it ne gladdened us the pans of nightingales webbed with rat leg and snake rib in one mound of bone, Nack the hayward said a bonefire cleansed the air like no other, and held the saints their noses, their ears were open yet to beads, their gold eyes open to our candles' light.

James Meek, *To Calais, in Ordinary Time* (2019), 'Outen Green'


'A WISE, WILD AND BEAUTIFUL BOOK'
JOANNA KAVENNA
'A RICH AND SUMPTUOUS DELIGHT'
DAILY TELEGRAPH
'WONDERFUL'
FINANCIAL TIMES
'ASTONISHING'
OBSERVER
THE WESTERN WIND
SAMANTHA HARVEY


A Novel of Old New York
Golden Hill
"Francis Spufford has one of the most original minds in contemporary literature."
—NICK HORNBY
Francis Spufford

Beneath him the ground upheaves. The river tugs him; he looks for the quick-moving pattern, for the flitting, liquid scarlet. Between a pulse-beat and the next he shifts, going out on crimson with the tide of his inner sea. He is far from England now, far from these islands, from the waters salt and fresh. He has vanished; he is the slippery stones underfoot, he is the last faint ripple in the wake of himself. He feels for an opening, blinded, looking for a door: tracking the light along the wall.

Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light* (2020), Part Six, II