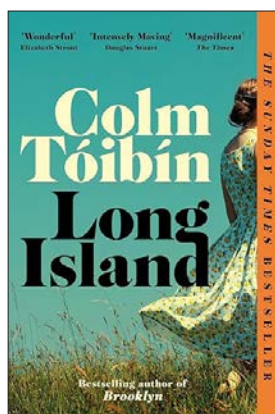


LONG ISLAND by COLM TÓIBÍN

Review by **Bruce Harris**



Long Island by Colm Tóibín

TÓIBÍN has been short-listed for the Booker Prize three times, which perhaps suggests that it is only a matter of time before he finally wins. He could also fairly be described as a writer

who is gay rather than a gay writer, and this book has no gay characters in it at all.

This novel is a sequel to Tóibín's highly successful *Brooklyn*, in which Irish girl Eilis Lacey emigrates to New York and meets an American/Italian man called Tony Fiorello. While the spoiler alert approach again stops me from telling the whole story line to whoever hasn't read the book, Eilis's life in America, perhaps unsurprisingly, does not turn out to be happy ever after. Her husband has managed to get another girl pregnant, and Eilis, a remarkably vivid and well-defined character, is not prepared to accept the compromise arrangements. Her mother's 80th birthday is impending, and she decides to buy herself time by returning to Ireland, with her children, daughter Rosella and son Larry, joining her later.


An old flame of hers in Ireland, Jim Farrell, is

thrown into mental chaos by her return, as he has established a relationship with a local shop-owner, Nancy Sheridan, and they have plans to marry.

How this situation develops is the meat of the story, and it has with it many of the characteristics of Greek tragedy, with the various strands of impending disaster increasingly deteriorating in an atmosphere of ultimate inevitability. In a sense, it is about the clash between the two heavily family-oriented cultures of the Italian-Americans and the Irish. For the former, it is about metaphorically circling the wagons round to keep the situation hidden within the family, regardless of whether the methods used are actually within the law; for the latter, it is more a matter of avoiding scandals which will condemn them in the public eye.

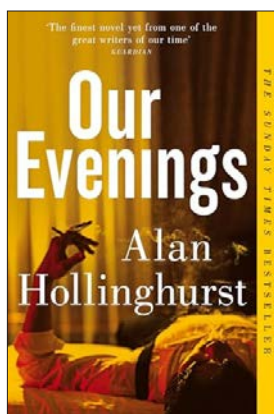
The contrast between the garrulous, extroverted Italian Americans and the guarded, protective Irish could not be more marked, though in both cases, they also be deceptive and contradictory. It is, after all, the more introvert Irish male hero of the book whose passion for a woman's love threatens to cause more calamity than Eilis' Italian American in-laws.

Eilis herself, and her redoubtable mother, emerge as very much the most powerful and defined characters. Tóibín's prose style is all the more impactful because of its simplicity. We can look forward to more of his realistic, detached yet incisive prose in future novels.



OUR EVENINGS by ALAN HOLLINGHURST

Review by **Bruce Harris**



Our Evenings by Alan Hollinghurst

Our Evenings is the story of a life, and while Hollinghurst's main character in this book is clearly gay, as they have been in his earlier books, it would remain more true and accurate to call him a writer who is gay

rather than a gay writer. Perhaps this has a lot to do with why Hollinghurst has too formidable an 'honours' list for him to be ghettoised with a gay label on him, having won the 2004 Man Booker prize with his novel *The Line of Beauty*, set in the hedonistic, profit-obsessed 1980s.

After a present-day introduction, we first meet David Win in 1962 at the age of thirteen at a private boys' school in southern England. With his English mother and now-dead Burmese father, Dave is vulnerable in his school setting, but he has some obvious abilities, particularly relating to mimicry and acting, which allow him some defence and a number of friends. Nevertheless, he is still sometimes bullied by an older and larger boy called Giles, from an affluent background, the implication being that the bullying is sometimes of a sexual nature.

We follow Dave all the way from school to old age, though a spoiler alert forbids me from trying to enumerate his huge variety of experiences, professionally, sexually and artistically, along the way. The story is told by Dave himself, and Hollinghurst handles superbly the difficult task of making the first person voice move from boyhood to young adulthood and eventually old age. The subtle and not-so-subtle nuances of English prejudice relating to both race and sexuality are described through the eyes and feelings of the boy and then man directly experiencing them.

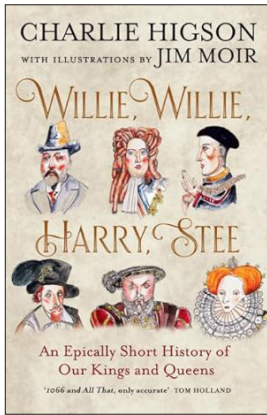
But it is not a 'hatchet job', holding the feet of English society to the fire. The people Dave meets are vastly diverse, beginning with his mother, who drifts a little awkwardly into a sexual relationship with a formidable local woman, being estranged by her own family as she does so and implying the genetic connection with her gay son.

I declare an interest as a gay man myself, and a believer that true gay liberation does not mean exchanging one ghetto of isolation and suppression for another much louder ghetto of extravagant narcissistic life styles and attitudes. Gay people are people like everyone else, and that isn't a mundane or prosaic fact, it is a bedrock of the ultimate state of release, an acceptance that gay people want what everyone else wants, a life of fulfilment, personal success and belonging.



WILLIE, WILLIE, HENRY, STEE by CHARLIE HIGSON

Review by **John Davis**



Willie, Willie, Henry, Stee: An Especially Short History of Our Kings and Queens by Charlie Higson

ACCORDING to author, actor and comedian Higson the title is the opening line of a rhyme he learned as a schoolboy in the 1960s as a way of

remembering all of Britain's monarchs from William the Conqueror through to Charles III.

Publicity blurbs have described this book as '1066 and All That—without the mistakes' and, certainly judging by the amount of detailed information found in the sections on each monarch, Higson has been doing his homework.

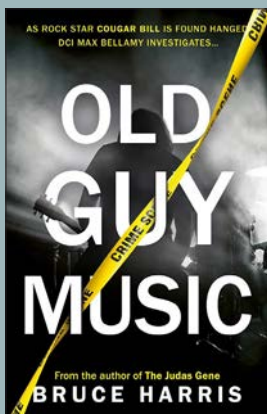
The book is packed with a plethora of colourful details about the ups and downs of being a royal, their duplicitous personal lives, in and out of wedlock,

and the never-ending strain of trying to raise enough capital to keep themselves in luxury, settle scores with neighbouring European countries and try to expand British influence further afield. It is a thorough, 'warts and all' compendium. (Yes, I know the phrase usually refers to Oliver Cromwell, who strictly speaking was not a monarch, but he did rule Britain as Lord Protector following the execution of Charles I in the period known as The Interregnum between 1653 and 1658.)

Perhaps not a book to be read from cover to cover but a very useful turn-to guide when seeking further information about a former ruler.

The family tree diagrams are an added bonus especially as many sovereigns and their families end up having the same Christian names, like four or five Henrys, for example. Line drawings and coloured plates are also included courtesy of Jim Moir, an accomplished artist, but perhaps better known by his comedic alter ego, Vic Reeves.

Published by Mudlark.



Old Guy Music by Bruce Harris

COMPARED with literary giants like Alan Hollinghurst and Colm Tóibín, I have a more modest trumpet to blow, but I will be true to my cause and blow it anyway. I haven't labelled this short piece a book review,

because it's not for me to review my own books. The publisher informs me that the book is doing reasonably well. As with my previous books, the proceeds from this one will go to Huntington's Disease charities, because of the death of my partner in 2023. The story itself has no direct connections to HD, and people who are writing to try and make a living out of it will probably disapprove of using whatever you earn to support charities, but my partner and I were together for 37 years and, as I'm in the fortunate

position in retirement of not having to earn a living from writing, I can think of no better way of using what I do earn.

Old Guy Music is my seventeenth published book. The total includes six novels, seven short story collections and four poetry collections. There have also been a considerable number of short stories and poems published in online and printed magazines.

Most regions of the country have creative people based locally, including artists, musicians, performers of one kind or another etc. Local support for them varies, though whether it can be fairly said that local writers receive much support is debatable. *Old Guy Music* has many implications for thoughts and opinions on 'little boats' and who runs this country and why. Please consider supporting this local writer, both for a fictional angle on the south west and further support for a dangerous and corrosive illness which remains beyond treatment.

*Edition first published by the Book Guild 2026
Available from www.bruceharrisbooks.com*

LORD OF THE FLIES

Directed by MARC MUNDEN
Review by **John Davis**



Lord of the Flies
BBC IPlayer (four episodes)

ALTHOUGH he wrote a number of novel length stories, this is by far the best known of Golding's output and rightly deserves a place in the top fifty books in English literature.

The author is said to have gained inspiration reading *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne to his own children but, going completely 'left-field', he decided to alter the idyllic lifestyle, mutual co-operation and derring-do depicted in that book by adopting a much more sinister and foreboding tone.

In his version, Golding poses age-old dilemmas. What happens to a society when there are no boundaries to people's actions, the rule of law has broken down and situations begin to degenerate into absolute mayhem?

At the time the novel was written, Golding was teaching in a private boys' school in Salisbury so he would certainly have known how the minds of young men tick. Adding further credibility to this production is the fact the novel has been adapted by Jack Thorne, writer of the recent hit series *Adolescence*, another drama with young people at its core.

Too much plot detail would only act as 'spoilers' but basically it is the 1950s and a large group of schoolboys from different establishments are marooned on an uninhabited tropical island when the aeroplane they are travelling on crashes. It seems likely they are being evacuated from some major catastrophe though no explanation is given. How the boys survive the crash but the adults and crew on board are all killed is also an enigma. What ensues is the how the boys interact and survive in an alien environment untrammelled by the constraints normally imposed by adults.

Thorne has written each of the four episodes around a central character, Piggy, intellectual but vulnerable, (David McKenna), Jack, the chief

antagonist with a lust for power, (Lox Pratt), Ralph, well-intentioned and confident, (Winstone Sawyer) and Simon, full of innate human goodness, (Ike Talbut). All were relative strangers to acting but excel as do other cast members.

The way in which the story evolves raises many issues concerning the human condition. The rise of populism, the fragility of democracy, peer group pressure and the herd mentality, for example. The story was banned from school curriculums at one time because of its graphic violence and the way it illustrates the darker side of human nature. History is full of the kind of scenarios portrayed here, however, and we need to be cognizant of this.

The series was filmed in Malaysia and the scenery is stunning. The drone sequence of the pig hunt, the ribbon-like arrival of the choir along the beach and the tracking shots during the sea cave chase are particularly memorable. There are occasions though when the impetus and tension of key events involving the main characters is lost as the director hives off into aerial views of raptors, close ups of insects crawling up stems or maggots gorging on rotting fruit. If these were intended to be symbolic, I missed the point and wanted a quicker return to the nitty-gritty.

A huge final tick to the cast, their families and all other members of the crew for successfully mastering the massive logistical exercise involved in filming the production over a period of three months. The boys were limited to working set hours because of their ages, they needed to be chaperoned throughout while tutors took care of the schooling and that's not to mention the constant and intense heat.

Footnote: The title *Lord of the Flies* comes from a literal translation of 'Beelzebub' a Biblical name for a devil or a demon with malevolent intent. In the story it refers to a fly covered severed pig's head on a stick which becomes a focal point for the boys' attention.