

Rebecca Markwick:

Welcome everyone to this week's episode of Shelf Healing, UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. This week, I will not be your host, but our lovely Vice Dean of Wellbeing. Professor Samantha Rayner will be talking with Henry Eliot of Penguin, all about his new book. I won't tell you anymore. You'll have to listen to the rest of the episode with Sam and Henry to find out.

Samantha Rayner:

Welcome everybody to this episode of Shelf Healing. My name is Samantha Rayner. I am Vice Dean of Wellbeing for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at UCL. And I'm thrilled to be able to introduce you to Henry Eliot, who is the Creative Editor of Penguin Classics, for today's episode. Welcome Henry

Now, are you alright for me to tell the listeners a bit about you? Or do you want to just tell them a bit about your past and how you got to be Creative Editor of Penguin Classics?

Henry Eliot:

Yeah, I'm very happy to talk about that. So, I've worked at Penguin for about five years now and I, yes, I've got this slightly unusual role title, which is Creative Editor, which to be honest with you, we basically made that up when I started the job. What it means is that I was an author with Penguin before I worked there and they brought me in as a sort of in-house sort of enthusiastic reader and creative to really be a kind of kid in a sweet shop, surrounded by Penguin Classics, and finding ways to help people engage with them.

Because I think one of the, you know, one of the issues we talked about very early on in this role is that there are so many Penguin Classics and Penguin Modern Classics, it can be quite overwhelming. And so, part of my job is to sort of help people navigate that list and find the books they really want to read.

Samantha Rayner:

Sounds like an amazing job role. So, I'm going to ask you a few questions if that's okay. One of the things I want you to start by asking you about, because this podcast is all about shelf healing and the way that, you know, reading can help with our wellbeing. I spotted it on your sort of official bio on your agent's web page that before you did this job, you ran literary tours to places like Canterbury, for example, for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. And one for the National Trust inspired by William Morris and even, and this really sort of made me perk up as a kind of Arthurian, and in my other research interests, you did one on Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

So, could you talk to us a little... yeah... talk to us a little bit about that and why you think people like to travel to places associated with stories?

What does that do for their kind of wellbeing?

Henry Eliot:

Yes. Yeah. This is a question I think about quite a lot. In one way or another, quite a lot of the projects I've worked on over the years have involved situating literature in landscape or in place. In fact, just at the moment I present the Penguin Classics Podcast, which has that very format. In each episode, we travelled to a specific location to talk about a book. Yeah, I think it's some, I think there are several reasons why I find it fascinating and why it really works. I suppose the thing I, what I really love is, it's sort of walking through a landscape while discussing a book or reading from a book.

I think that's partly because there is a kind of comparison you can draw between reading and walking, you know, in similar ways you have to, you have to put in time to make both of those things happen. You know, you have to put in time to get through the space, whether it's on a walk or passing the pages of a book and in a similar way, you know, if you repeat a walk at a different season of the year, or you read a book at a different time of your life, you'll notice different details, or things will strike you differently along the way. I think in another sense, in some walks are pleasant sunny walks in the park. Some walks are quite gruelling and tough. And I think, you know, you know, you go for different styles of walk at different times and you know, you might, I don't know you, if you want a sunny walk in the park, you might settle down to old PG Woodhouse for instance, or, you know, a couple of years ago, I struggled through, *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce, which is honestly the most gruelling reading experience. And I remember at the time comparing it to climbing a mountain because it really felt like it needed sort of endurance and, you know, a lot of willpower to keep going. And it kind of, and it was, and it was really hard. But then afterwards, I thought that was quite a good comparison because I don't feel like I've lived on that mountain. I don't feel like I know it in every type of weather or I don't know every face of the mountain, but I've been up one path and come down and I've got the scope of it now. And I've sort of seen the view from the top. And if ever I do try and tackle it again, I'll, I'll get a different facet of the mountain.

So, I think that, I think, you know, there's a sort of natural comparison to be drawn there. I mean, I also think that some, the pace of, you know, by sort of taking the time to visit a location and, and, and, you know, the pace of walking is a great way to experience a book. You mentioned this recreation of the *Canterbury Tales* that I organised. So, I got a group of about 20 modern day pilgrims together and we walked from Southwark to Canterbury and told all of Chaucer's Tales along the way. And as far as possible, stuck to the medieval pilgrimage route. And actually, it was really, you know, that that could be quite a sprawling, intimidating, text and it made it so accessible and approachable. You know, taking one tale at a time and giving it space and time around it.

Also, that time of walking in between each tale meant that it could really sort of settle with us and we could discuss it and think about it and, and then be ready for the next one when it came along. So, yeah, I feel like there's lots of reasons why I like to take literature into the landscape.

Samantha Rayner:

I do agree. I think there's this connection between outside and whatever's happening internally when we read things, the imaginative side of things, that connection can be extremely powerful. I do remember when I just finished my A-levels, as a group of friends, we got in my little mini and went down to Dorset and we went to Thomas Hardy's cottage, and it was a beautiful summer.

I just remember it being very idyllic, very *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Cause it was, you know, beautiful sunshine and we'd all done *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* for A-level English and we sat in the garden and unfortunately, we already taken our exams. So, it was a bit late to have that kind of, 'oh, wow this is what, you know, this is what he was talking about. This is the landscape'.

Henry Eliot:

Yes. I totally agree. I remember once being a bit sort of feeling a bit sad because Ian Sinclair, who's one of my sorts of heroes and is a great walker and writer. I remember reading a piece by him where he said he was a bit suspicious of literary pilgrimages. Like, I didn't quite understand why. But for me, I think it, it really brings an author's work to life to, to visit particularly like visiting the rooms where a book was actually written. You know, I've, I recently was standing in the study at Shandy Hall, in Yorkshire, where Laurence Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy*. And that book, especially because he keeps breaking out of a narrative to describe like breaking his pen, throwing his wig in the air or whatever, but you could just, you know, to be in that air space to share the same, you know, the same little plot of the planet with, with that author of a book, I love, you know, there was some, there's a real sort of shiver of excitement there and you're right. You know, someone like Hardy, who's such a writer of landscape to sort of see that topography and see how it maps onto the books is, you know. That's so exciting.

Samantha Rayner:

Yeah. And it's something, it's a memory as well. It's something that I don't know stayed with all of us that, you know, went. And it's interesting from your list from I don't know whether you did this, but of course, the standard places, the Lake District, I mean, that's the, that's the place that is kind of synonymous with, you know, the romantic poets and the landscape, but you you've chosen other, other literary influences to do that.

Henry Eliot:

Yes. Yes. I don't know quite how they've always just been things which have struck me as this'll be a fun thing to do. You mentioned the Malory quest for the holy grail.

Samantha Rayner:

Yes. Dare I ask, it's very controversial. Where did you go? You're going upset a group of people no matter where you say you went.

Henry Eliot:

Well, we, I guess I was, you know, it was, there was sort of practicalities to take into account of sort of where we could travel that we had, I can't remember how, I think we only had one full day for that one. So, it was quite as sort of whistle-stop tour, but we started in that we managed to get permission to get into the middle of Stonehenge before it opened Publix. We were standing among the stones for the, for, everyone was sort of more or less assigned a character, which then narrated their bit of a story. So, Merlin appeared from behind one of the stones in the middle of Stonehenge and told the story of the sword in the stone, which is very memorable. Then from Stonehenge, we travelled to Cadbury Castle and just, I forget if it's Dorset or Somerset, but it's just not far from Yeovil. So, this Iron-Age hill fort, which is thought by some to be Camelot. Then from there we walked to, to Glastonbury and climbed the Tor, which some say is Avalon. And then there was perhaps the most memorable moment of the day was sitting around the plot within Glastonbury Abbey that's marked as Arthur's grave. And actually the, the, the friend who had asked to narrate, the, the actual death of, well, rather the sort of disappearance of Arthur, he'd written a song and brought his ukulele along and we sat around this grave and he narrated it as a song, that he'd written which was incredible.. So yeah, that was a beautiful day. And again, that's a real memory for me. It was one of those sorts of golden, late summer days where, you know, sitting among the ruins of the spectacular Glastonbury Abbey with the sunsetting. That was, that was very memorable.

Samantha Rayner:

It seems such a wonderful idea. I'm surprised not more people are doing literary tours, just because as soon as I read that, but, well, that's an amazing idea. So, yeah. Which was the one that you enjoyed most?

I mean, can you pick one?

Henry Eliot:

Yeah, well. So, I did. I, yeah, it's hard to pick them because they will quite be different in a way. I think probably... so the first one was the first walk to Canterbury and that was such, that was a real revelation really just, it was so much fun. There were lots of close friends who came along with that one.

So that was probably the one I had the most fun doing it. And what was, it was quite revelatory, really. You know, we began, we set off and it was, it was a holiday, right? I

mean, it was fun. It was just fun. And we were all, we're all loving doing it. And, and of course, for stories, which come generally, the Canterbury Tales is unfinished and it's fragmentary. And we don't know quite what order things fall in, but there are some tales which you do know where they go. And the first batch of tales are all the most boardy and hilarious and uproarious. And that suited the mood we were in setting out of London and sort of. You know, full of high energy and so on.

But then what was really interesting is that despite the fact that the Canterbury tales is fragmentary and we, you know, there's debate about how it all fits together and did Chaucer finish it. And, you know, to what extent is it finished. The tone of the tales really seem to match the sort of experience of our walk.

So, for instance, there's a moment. I think we did it over four days and there was a moment in the second day where the parson steps forward to tell a tale and the shipman says, 'no, no, we don't want any of your preaching. I'll tell a tale'. And then he tells us this boardy tale it's as if it isn't time yet for the parson to tell his tale.

And as we approached Canterbury, I don't know whether it was you know, it wasn't, it wasn't a particularly a religious or spiritual pilgrimage, but the fact was we had walked from London, we put in every step of the way. And as we approached the city that it did feel rather momentous, it felt sort of, yeah, very, very, you know, it felt like it felt like a bigger thing than we'd been expecting.

And it was at that moment that the parson gets to tell his rather serious final tale, but it was almost as if Chaucer who must, of course, have travelled to it may maybe not on pilgrimage, but he travelled to Canterbury many times because he was a very well travelled man. It was almost as if he knew that sort of, that sort of, psychological arc that you get from a journey and, and he was matching his tales to it.

So, it was things like that, which I just would never have noticed, I suspect, if I hadn't experienced it along with the text.

Samantha Rayner:

That's fascinating. It's part of what you were saying about, so you need the time to do a walk. You need the time to read a book and actually doing the walking it perhaps, especially these days when we're on screens half the time and we read very quickly, we tend to skim things. It's that space to slow down and appreciate the text.

Henry Eliot:

I think it's really important since, and I think you, you know, when you've read a really long book, you get to the end and it does feel like you've been on it on an extraordinary journey, especially because unless you're kind of, well an extraordinary person you'll, you'll have read it over several sittings.

And in my case, quite a slow reader over many sittings. And so, you do feel you've aged with this book. You've, you know, you've sort of lived through it as well. And my wife

and I read *War and Peace* the other year. And we read it over the course of the whole year. We split it up into 12 chunks and read a chunk each month. We had to sort of time it so that we finished at the same time so that we could sort of celebrate together because it felt like such an epic trip that we'd been on together.

Samantha Rayner:

Listening to you saying that I think it, maybe there's something there. I mean, as soon as the clocks go back, and this will link onto what I want to talk about next, which is, um, Penguin Books and Penguin Classics and why we're drawn to them but this time of year for me is all about taking out the classics, particularly Dickens. So, for me, you know, leading up to Christmas, there's a big fat Dickens volume that you have to read, you know, in the dark evenings over a longer period of time. Why? Why is that? What is it do you think that appeals to us so much about (a) the classics this time of year? And then yes Penguin in particular habits sort of genius around the branding of it's an accessibility thing again, of making you feel maybe I can tackle, you know, *War and Peace* or *David Copperfield*. How does that, how did those things come together?

Henry Eliot:

Well, it's, I totally agree with what you're saying. I, I, you know, when the evening's draw in, I think, you know, there's nothing better than hunkering down with a book.

I mean, I think part of that is, is possibly the way that books just do transport. You don't they're, I mean, they're, they're like little handheld portals to other worlds and other points of view. And so. You know, when it's cold and miserable outside, it's rather nice to be whisked off to perhaps a more exotic location.

But I think there is also of course comfort there for those of us who love reading it's, it's a, it's a sort of parallel life that we live in right? But it's sort of, you know, you can experience a book as vividly as you can real-life sometimes. And so to have that, you know, I think we're drawn to that, especially when it's cold and dark. There's probably a bit of a primeval thing going on there sort of, you know, gathering together in the dark and telling stories around the fire and sort of, you know, storytelling works best in the dark. I think that reminds me of this amazing time. I went to hear Susan Hill reading from her latest ghost story.

I think it was *The Small Hand* and it was an event at Somerset House in London. And to make it atmospheric, they'd turn down the lights and just had a single candle with Susan Hill reading by the light of it was very, very brilliant. Except that whoever was scheduling the events at Somerset House must've forgotten that that night was also the opening of the massive ice rink outside with a huge, big band playing the *Bear Necessities*. So poor Susan Hill was really trying to make this atmospheric and dark and spooky. And it was slightly spoiled by the music. But yeah, no, I think that's so. Yeah, I think, you know, I think we're all drawn to books when it gets dark, but, yeah. And in terms of Penguin, I think, well, I think, I think Penguin is it's partly, you know, I think

we're lucky that over the years Penguin has, has, has built this kind of, approachable reputation where you know, that that little sort of cheery Penguin is, is, is a sign that this is a book, you know, that I can trust and that I want to read.

Yeah, certainly for me before, you know, before I worked there, I used to turn to Penguin Classics and Penguin Modern Classics all the time, because I just, you know, I do sometimes read contemporary novels, but often you sort of, you don't quite know what you're getting. Whereas you feel like with a, with a classic you're kind of as a, there's a bit of a guarantee there that you're reading something fantastic.

Samantha Rayner:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I do agree. And I also think that the branding thing, so the, the different ways that Penguin Classics have re-jacketed things in different lists. I am a total sucker for having, you know, several versions of the same text, but just because I love the cover so much. But the book that I wanted to there were the two books I really want to talk about the you've written Henry. The first is the wonderful Penguin Classics book that came out a couple of years ago now, which is an amazing compendium really, to, to Penguin Classics. And in the preface to that, you talk about this aim to be a reader's companion to the best books ever written. So, you know, in reflecting on the fact that we've just been talking about, you know, how many there are and different times of year and et cetera, you do also mention the Sisyphean task of building a classic list.

How did you, how do you identify your own best books and how did you organize this one so well? I mean, that must have, what's the thought process behind that?

Henry Eliot:

I think there's two answers to your question. And the first is that yes, I think, I think the classics publisher, it is a Sisyphean task in that it's a constant work in progress.

I think there's, I think no classics publisher, would claim to be, claim to have published the Canon that was a fixed list. And that, you know, here we are, this is the final list. I think it's always a work in progress. It's a task of identifying gaps in the list, identifying imbalances and always looking for new titles to join the list.

I remember when I first started working for Penguin Classics, friends were a bit sort of confused by the idea of new classics, but of course, and I have to admit it, but, you know, before I worked at Penguin, if it, if an old title wasn't a Penguin Classic, I was a bit suspicious of it, really. Yes, what's wrong with it?

Now, I can sort of see now, but it's, you know, Penguin Classics has been going for 75 years, Penguin Modern Classics for 60 years. That's still just so such a long way to go and so many titles still to find and to, and to put in there. So, I thought that's what I mean by Sisyphean task. I think it's, you know, it's constantly putting new titles in, and

now I'm really excited about some of the titles, which are just, joining the list at the moment.

There's a wonderful title, just been published called *Crossing the Mangrove* by Maryse Conde the Guadeloupean writer of this murder mystery. And of course, Maryse Conde is always a hot favourite for the Nobel prize. She won the alternative Nobel prize in 2018. And so that's, you know, a wonderful classic to join the list.

So, it is a constant work in progress. And in terms of these two books yeah in a way, working out how to organize them was one of the hardest tasks. I mean, I suppose what they set out to do is, is, present a kind of Atlas of world literature for people, for readers to explore. I mean, I hope, I, I think it would be a slightly unusual reader who read it through, from cover to cover.

I hope people will use it, like in an atlas, sort of explore the different areas, um, of the history and the, and the world of literature. And so, the first book that the Penguin Classics book. It's divided into four chronological sort of epochs I suppose there's the Ancient World, the Middle Ages, Early Modern Europe, and then the Industrial Age, which is the 19th century roughly.

And an interesting observation is that each of those chronological ages, roughly doubled in size within the book, which I suppose is partly a comment on, you know, how few texts survive over the years, you know, from these are very old text, so much has been lost, but I think it's also a demonstration of just how the number of books being written and published is just increasing exponentially. And certainly, at the start of the 19th century with the rise of industrial printing presses, suddenly the number of books circulating exploded. And so, yes, the first book is in these four sections, roughly doubling in size, but the industrial revolution is pretty much half of that first book.

And then I see the second book that Penguin Modern Classics book as almost like the fifth and final epoch of this project, it's like, it's doubled again. And this fifth age kind of the modern age fills an entire volume now. So, so that's how I see this sort of all working together. And then within the, within each of these chronological sections, I've organized it roughly geographically. So, for instance, in the modern classics book, which is out in mid-November, it's, it's organized around the world. So, if you read it straight through, you travel from Ireland to Uruguay and Argentina, you'd sort of travel all the way around the world.

But also, within that, I mean, what I also really tried to do in these books is draw myriad connections between titles and authors, you know, titles, which are inspired by other titles where it's like, I guess a title like Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, which is a direct response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but both have appeared in Penguin Modern Classics over the years.

It's fun to put them in the same book and draw that connection. Or you can draw a longer strand through say feminist writing, from Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, sort of

similar to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, to *Women, Race and Class* by Angela Davis, you know drawing these connections is one of the things that's been a real pleasure for me.

And I hope that will help readers to make new discoveries.

Samantha Rayner:

I mean, definitely for me, that was the highlight, the Penguin Classics one, the joy of that was it isn't just a compendium. It has got this, you know, it does point you. So, you, you kind of skip from, from one you think, okay yes, I know about *Heart of Darkness*, but I hadn't heard of that one I'll try that. But just in terms of the organization and to have all those threads in your head, it's an incredible accomplishment Henry, honestly, I don't know how you did it.

Henry Eliot:

Well, uh, yes. Well, looking at it now, I'm not quite sure how I did it either, but it really, the answer is it's taken a number of years.

I mean, it's, I've been working on this two-volume project now since late 2016. So yeah, it's been pretty much five years of working on this and I suppose it was, in a way, it wasn't that tricky because with each, I mean, there's a little piece about each author in each title in that. And when I was reading around each, each piece that I was writing, if ever I saw a little connection to someone who I knew it was somewhere else on the list, I'd make sure to, you know, I privileged that over other connections.

So, I sort of, I'd always be looking for those, those networks and connections. And I've, I've tried to take it a step further actually in the Penguin Modern Classics book. In the Penguin Classics book, the narrative thread, but I roughly trace through it it is a historical one, you know, before each section, I have a little paragraph, which sort of sets the context for what was happening in the Middle Ages and, you know, the middle east or what was happening in 19th century Italy, for instance. In the Modern Classics book that didn't feel quite so appropriate because it's a relatively short time period. So actually, having a sort of, that's sort of historical piece before each section would have been so much overlap. It made less sense. And so, what I've done is instead of the narrative thread in this book is taking all the different movements and groupings and trends of the 20th century. You know, movements Dadaism, or Surrealism, or Post-Modernism, or groups like the Beat Generation and the Bloomsbury Group. And I've got pieces about those dotted throughout the book. So I'm trying to trace a narrative of all these different collectives and manifestos, which have been, which have really been a very sort of distinctive aspect of 20th century literature, I think. And the other thing I've done in here, which I think works particularly well with the Modern Classics book, because it's predominantly fiction, whereas Penguin Classics, it's much more of a blend of non-fiction, poetry, drama and so on. I've got lots of little recommended reading lists on various themes and always trying to go for quite unusual theme. So I've

got a little reading list of novels about dysfunctional families, for instance, or novels, which all set over one day or novels, which involve deals with the devil or novels with monstrous children. And that's one of my favourites, or actually my favourite one is I've got a list of unclassifiable books, which was everything left over after I'd finished all the other lists, which wouldn't. Yeah. So, things like *The Book of Disquiet* by Fernando Pessoa, and *Agua Viva* by Clarice Lispector, which has no plot and no character, but it's still a masterpiece. So, I guess again, I've tried to really sort of foreground those connections and, you know, I've just wanted, it's been such a pleasure for me discover so much about these, these titles and these authors. And I remember that's what I really want is for people to open this book and for it to look kind of like a box of chocolates, really that they just want to go on and, and discovered new books.

Samantha Rayner:

I think going back to where we started with talking about literary tours and the landscape, but to have a book like this is literally to dive in and to go, you know, you're, you're, you're mapping out the whole scope you know, could take you a lifetime to work your way through

Henry Eliot:

Probably more than a lifetime. I mean, that's so I'm, so that's a really helpful thing to point out. I think calling it a literary landscape because that's something I've really come to believe over the years of working on these books and working with Penguin Classics is I think for some people, the term classics is still associated in their minds with the idea of a canon, a kind of received, a kind of, almost like sort of imposed cannon from, from school, from, from scholars, from critics. And I really think we need to move beyond that idea because I think it's quite an outdated one really. I, I just don't think it's realistic anymore that there could be a single universally accepted canon of what is essential reading. You know, I think, you know, the world is such a rich and multifaceted place. There is never going to be a single list that works for everyone.

And so, I think we need to move from canon building to a form of cartography. I think. I think, classics publishers and literary academics should be acting not as sort of top-down, cannon builders, but as guides and sort of mapmakers showing it really sort of just showing us this incredible literary landscape and encouraging us, you know, that, you know, saying we might enjoy walking over there. That's an incredibly beautiful spot. Or, or, you know, this is a bit of a challenge, but if you climb this mountain, well, the view is amazing, and you'll see all this other stuff. I'm on a sort of a campaign to sort of shift the way we think about classics away from the canon and towards a sort of, just a wonderful landscape to explore.

Samantha Rayner:

Yeah, I am totally with you there. I think, you know, we talk about decolonizing the curriculum a lot, on sort of English courses, but, but this, I mean, in a way, Penguin are

very, have already been doing that for a number of decades in terms of taking away some of that intellectual, you know, that no certain people read classics. Or normal people don't read classics. That's something that scholars do. And I think thing about you said the friendly little penguin is that, you know, you feel that why? Well, yeah. Why can't I pick up War and Peace or try something from, you know, like you say, Uruguay or Japan, I've noticed some of the new ones, you know, Japanese facets coming through.

So, Henry conscious of the time and that we need to wind this up. I need to ask you of all of the books that you've, you've come across for both of these two books. What would you identify as your own best books and do any of them connect with certain moods that you might be in, or sort of go to ones when you're feeling particularly fed up, or you want a bit of, you know, um, relief from the modern world, or, you know, what are some of your favourites. Recommend some for us.

Henry Eliot:

Yeah, of course, of course. I mean, my sort of, I feel like my personal favourites are always the ones which have sort of stopped with me for longer, but there are certain books that I sort of carry around almost like talismans that I sort of need near me, even if I'm not reading them. And a lot of those are ones from, you know, that were important to me when I was younger, like *Alice in Wonderland*, like *Gulliver's Travels* by Swift.

Another book I need near me is the little Faber edition of T S Eliot's selected poems. A slightly unusual one is it's a Penguin Classic and not a very well-known Penguin Classic, but I highly recommended this book called *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. I love it. I built, I found this. I I've never heard of it before, but, as a teenager or maybe I was at university already, I came across it in a bookshop in Aldeburgh in Suffolk, which is a beautiful bookshop. And I was mainly struck by the cover. Actually. I just was such a weird picture of it, sort of strange people with faces in their chests, strolling around this landscape. It is a totally fascinating book, which appeared in the mid 14th century about a Knight from St. Alban's, an English knight who goes traveling to Jerusalem and then carries on into the east and gets close to the earthly paradise and meets people with dog's heads, and ants collecting gold and the most bizarre adventures. And it was incredibly popular at the time. You know, Christopher Columbus had it on his ship when he was traveling and then has subsequently been demonstrated to be a complete hoax in nearly everything is plagiarized from somewhere else.

But nonetheless, it's just the most sort of thrilling and fascinating read and, and yeah, that's one of the books I have to have near me.

Samantha Rayner:

I mean that is complete escapism that is. It's sort of bonkers in the best kind of way. You could not let you couldn't imagine the things that...

Henry Eliot:

But they're also very wise and humane and, you know, he, he meets some travellers and, you know, through, um, sort of belt of medieval Islam and it's very, very tolerant towards Muslims in a way that, you know. Having just had the crusades, you know, a lot of Europeans weren't. So, it it's, it's a wonderful book, but yeah. In terms of discoveries, I've made, I'm going to recommend two books. In fact, neither of them is published by Penguin anymore, but I've, uh, that's partly why I hadn't heard of them.

So, they used to be published in Modern Classics, but actually quite a lot of titles have once been published in Modern Classics and are no longer. And that's simply because of 20th century copyright law. And when license is expired, you know, publishers, vie for the rights to publish titles, which are still in copyright.

So actually, that's something worth saying that this modern classics book includes everything that's ever been a penguin, modern classic, including lots, which no longer is including great authors like Hemingway, Graham Greene, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Colette, JD Salinger. But because they have been, I thought it was worth putting them all in there because it gives much more comprehensive overview of exactly.

And I think. I don't want this to be a sort of marketing catalogue. I want it to be a useful companion to 20th century literature. So, I think this gives it a much more rounded scope, but that's meant that I've come across some extraordinary little things, which I hadn't known about before, which had once been on the list.

And the first I recommend is a book by Dino Buzzatti called *The Tartar Steppe*, which is quite easily accepted. I think Canongate published it now. It's a mid-century Italian novel about a young soldier who gets posted to a remote fortress, overlooking this vast desert waiting for... it's the desert of the Tatars. And they're waiting for this great attack from this sort of Tartar horde. And he slightly neglects his family, and he neglects his friendships, but he thinks it's okay because I'll prove myself here at the pass. I'll be the hero that I always thought I'd be. And the years pass and, and the Tartars never attack, and the years pass more and he gets a bit older. And in the end, he passes his almost his entire life waiting for this great act of heroism, and he's got to perform and, well do they attack in the end? I won't reveal the ending. You'll have to read the book, but it's a, it's a great year. It's been compared to Kafka and Beckett, and it's a great sort of great novel of waiting.

And then the other one, I just think it's brilliant. I really want more people to know about it is a book called *Locos*. I'm not quite sure how you're meant to pronounce it by Felipe Alfau, who was a Spanish writer, but he actually lived most of his life in America. And the book is written in English and it's just brilliant. The first chapter is set in a cafe in Toledo called the Cafe de los Locos, the cafe of mad people. And then there's an author sitting in the cafe, looking at all these characters thinking, oh, they'd make good characters in a book. And then the next chapter begins and he's writing about one of the characters that he spotted in the cafe, and he's telling us about him. And then the

doorbell rings and the author says, oh, the doorbells are out. They have to go and answer that. And as soon as he's gone, the character starts talking to us and saying, oh, thank goodness that author's gone. Now I can tell you my real story, because he's taking me in completely the wrong direction. And then the character tells this story. For the rest of that chapter until the author comes back and realize that's what's happening and cuts it off quickly. And it's like a sort of high wire balancing act with each chapter builds on the previous one and it just gets more and more meta-fictional and, and convoluted. And it's, it's brilliant. So, yeah, I highly recommend *Locos*. I think, I think it's, I think it's in print in America, perhaps with the Dalkey Archive and you can, you it's possible to buy over here. So yeah, there's some. Top recommendations.

Samantha Rayner:

Right. And presumably both of those do feature?

Henry Eliot:

Yes, they both do feature in the Modern Classics book.

Samantha Rayner:

Well, Henry, thank you so much for your time this morning. That was fascinating. I wish we had 10 hours to talk about all the things that I would like to talk to and ask you about and how you, you know, mapped it all out, literally to put them all in the books. Thank you for talking a bit about, um, your connection to the books, not just the Penguin books, but also through the literary tours.

And just a reminder to everybody that the Penguin Modern Classics book is out on the 18th of November. I think, 30 pounds if I'm correct in that as well...

Henry Eliot:

Yes, it's a bit pricey but, oh you got your money's worth. There's lots of pages in there. Yeah.

Samantha Rayner:

I mean, I am not employed by Penguin in any shape or form, but I can say if it's anything like the Penguin Classics book was, for literally, really anybody that loves books that you like, I'm just dropping hints again, out there to my family members this is the perfect Christmas or even non-Christmas. Why wait till Christmas, buy it for people that love books now, Henry, thank you so much. I hope that was enjoyable for you.

Henry Eliot:

Thank you, Sam. It was great. I've really, I've really loved talking to you. Thank you.

Samantha Rayner:

Thank you for coming on Shelf Healing.

Rebecca Markwick:

I hope you enjoyed listening to Henry and Sam as much as I did.

And Henry's new book is out now in all good bookshops we have popped a link to it in the show notes, hint to all of those, struggling to find presents for those book lovers. There are now two Penguin Classics and Penguin Modern Classics books that Henry has written, which are fabulous and highly recommended. As always thanks to Nicolas Patrick for our music. Nat Balch has done our transcript this week and don't forget to check us out on Twitter at shelf underscore healing.