

The Enigma of Innocence

BY RUBY CONWAY



Innocence, especially when thought of in relation to childhood, is a state that lies more in a mythical realm than in reality. Can anyone ever really be truly innocent? And why do we repeatedly assume this in children? Children can be cruel, cutting and crass, and yet we still often conflate innocence with inexperience, but are they really the same thing?

A quick journey through the history of childhood as a social phenomenon shows us that our expectations and notions of this period of life are ever-changing. Children were once perceived to be born evil and seen as young adults rather than as a separate category entirely. With the coming of the Romantic poets, they were then imbued with the ideal of childhood innocence, a sensibility interwoven with nature, creativity and a prelapsarian state. And then into the 20th century, along with the creation of the welfare state, there arose a recognition that children need protection and nurture, a precursor to how we think of children today.

Looking at the changing landscape of childhood and innocence, we see that notions of these ideas are more likely constructed by adults than cemented in any concrete reality of children's inner lives. As well as altering social ideas around children, we continue to be implicated in our rememberings or re-rememberings of our own youth, our memories tinged by experience, socialisation and culture. In our maturity, childhood allows us to make sense of our own state of adulthood. Youth, then, is perhaps not as linear as we may assume. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes in his preface to *Emile* – 'we know nothing of childhood... the wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man.'

And what of adolescence? A state that perhaps gets longer and longer over time, a bridge between two periods, when we are not quite children and not quite adults – confined in a liminal state. *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides and *The Girls* by Emma Cline are both seminal and haunting novels that explore this foggy, incomparable period, both employing versions of adult narrators looking back on their youth.

The Girls, set in Northern California at the end of the 1960s, is a reimagining of the Manson Family, told from

the perspective of 15-year-old Evie, drawn like a moth to a flame by the breezy, carefree life the group offers and, in particular, the chance to be seen, not as a girl, but as someone real. Cline expertly captures the vulnerability and insecurity of adolescence and the need to be noticed, regardless of the stakes and costs: 'I waited to be told what was good about me' says Evie, 'I wondered later if this was why there were so many more women than men at the ranch. All that time I had spent readying myself, the articles that taught me life was really just a waiting room until someone noticed you—the boys had spent that time becoming themselves.'

If anything, though, *The Girls* is a realisation that vulnerability and innocence are not the same thing; Evie is capable of many crimes, narrowly escaping the most fatal and heinous of them all. As an adult, many years later, Evie is able to re-evaluate her languorous summer spent on the ranch, seeing, perhaps more clearly, the lengths she would have gone to occupy the world she was enraptured in and, along with it, the chance to be part of something greater than her humdrum suburban life.

Eugenides is similarly a master at depicting the alluring haze of adolescence remembered. Through a chorus of men, now adults, the story of the Lisbon girls - five sisters fated to suicide - is told. As seen through the eyes of the boys, they are mythic figures, described as spectral beings: 'a patch of glare like a congregation of angels', and as masters of facades: 'We knew, finally, that the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them.' We see glimpses of the real girls and their internal lives, but largely they are seen as if through a looking glass, symbolic perhaps of our inability to see this period of youth as what it is. 'The house receded behind its mists of youth being choked off', writes Eugenides, and the Lisbon girls, like the chorus of men, are unable to ever outlive that youth.

These books both draw attention to the heightened experience of youth, the intensity and fervent emotions, and its immortalisation and obscurity in our memories, as we grow further and further from our own teen hoods – romanticised or otherwise. And as both authors show, it is not only our own gazes that construct adolescence, but equally the dangerous gazes of others, puncturing the experiences of younger generations, and muddying their so-called innocence.

Book List Innocence

THE GIRLS

EMMA CLINE

A sinuous thriller based on the warped appeal of the Manson Family and set under the Californian sun, Cline's disturbing debut is a hypnotic depiction of personality cults, countercultural conformity and psychopathy masquerading as peace and love. Already a worldwide Bestseller, Emma Cline's *The Girls*, is probably one of the most unsettling and quietly disturbing debuts of its kind.

THE VIRGIN SUICIDES

JEFFREY EUGENIDES

A spellbinding, lyrical and emotionally acute novel about the traumas of adolescence and the lingering mysteries surrounding profound tragedy, *The Virgin Suicides* aches with longing and a sumptuous darkness. This lyrical and timeless tale of sex and suicide that transforms and mythologizes suburban middle-American life announced the arrival of one of the greatest American novelists of the last thirty years.

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

J.D. SALINGER

The Catcher in the Rye is an all-time classic coming-of-age story: an elegy to teenage alienation, capturing the deeply human need for connection and the bewildering sense of loss as we leave childhood behind. Holden Caulfield's notorious teenage odyssey around New York City constitutes one of the greatest coming-of-age stories in fiction, and Salinger's howl of angst and alienation has lost none of its power to shock and confront.

BEFORE YOU SUFFOCATE YOUR OWN FOOL SELF

DANIELLE EVANS

This powerful and whip smart short fiction collection from the author of *The Office of Historical Corrections* explores class, race, family and privilege in contemporary America with fresh ingenuity and insight. Based in a world where inequality is reality, but where the shifting terrain of adolescence and family are the most complicating forces, Evans' characters are wry, wise and utterly original. Striking in their emotional immediacy, the electrifying, prize-winning stories in *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self* offer a fresh perspective on race and class in contemporary America.

JUNO LOVES LEGS

KARL GEARY

Juno loves Legs. She's loved him since their first encounter at school in Dublin, where she fought the playground bullies for him. He feels brave with her, she feels safe with him, and together they feel invincible, even if the world has other ideas. Set during the political and social unrest of the 1980s, as families struggled to survive and their children struggled to be free, this beautiful, vivid novel of childhood friendship is about being young, being hurt, being seen and, most of all, being loved.

ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT

JEANETTE WINTERSON

Tackling expansive themes with tenderness and acuity, Jeanette Winterson's beautifully nuanced and wickedly

funny autobiographical novel takes a rueful look at dogmatic religion and burgeoning sexuality. Innovative, punchy and tender, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is a few days ride into the bizarre outposts of religious excess and human obsession.

CALL ME BY YOUR NAME

ANDRÉ ACIMAN

It's the mid-1980s in the Italian Riviera. Elio, a 17 year old precocious son of an academic, finds himself falling for the older Oliver, a postdoctoral scholar completing his manuscript at his beautiful family home. Oliver is worldly, handsome, a seductive contrast to Elio's own naivety. Both are bright and questioning; the hook of desire is soon caught fast. Heart-breaking and evocative, *Call Me By Your Name* chronicles the sexual awakening of seventeen-year-old Elio at the hands of Oliver in the warmth of the Italian Riviera.

MIDDLESEX

JEFFREY EUGENIDES

Sprawling, big-hearted and rambunctious, *Middlesex* traces the vagaries of the American Dream through an intersex individual and their quixotic extended family. Bending the traditional bildungsroman to his mercurial will, Eugenides crafts a rich, effusive novel that retains its relevance over fifteen years after its original publication.

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

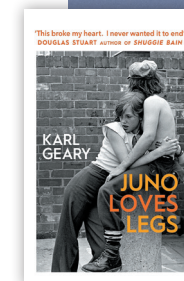
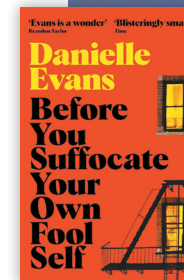
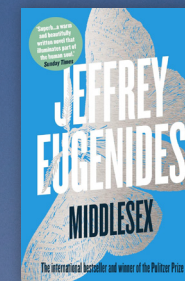
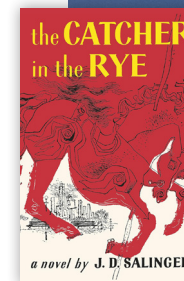
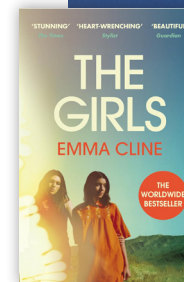
JAMES BALDWIN

Drawing on James Baldwin's own boyhood in a religious community in 1930s Harlem, his first novel tells the story of young Johnny Grimes. Although destined to become a preacher like his father, Gabriel, at the Temple of the Fire Baptized, he feels only scalding hatred for his father, whose fear and fanaticism lead him to abuse his family. Johnny vows that, for him, things will be different. This blazing tale is full of passion and guilt, of secret sinners and prayers singing on the wind.

ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS

OCEAN VUONG

Brilliant, heart-breaking and highly original, Ocean Vuong's debut novel is a shattering portrait of a family, and a testament to the redemptive power of storytelling. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a letter



from a son to a mother, written when the speaker is in his late twenties. The letter tells of Vietnam, the lasting impact of war, and his family's struggle to forge a new future, serving as a doorway into episodes of bewilderment, fear and passion - all the while moving closer to an unforgettable revelation.

PURPLE HIBISCUS

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

This extraordinary debut is about the blurred lines between the old gods and the new, childhood and adulthood, love and hatred – the grey spaces in which truths are revealed and real life is lived. Richly evocative of the heat, both intoxicating and oppressive, of Nigeria, Adichie's profoundly affecting coming-of-age tale brings its protagonist Kambili out from the destructive influence of a fanatical father and into a world of love and laughter with her aunt.

DEMON COPPERHEAD

BARBARA KINGSOLVER

Inspired by the unflinching truth-telling of *David Copperfield*, Kingsolver enlists Dickens' anger and compassion, and above all, his faith in the transformative powers of a good story. Demon is the voice of new generation of lost boys, and all those born into beautiful, cursed places they can't imagine leaving behind. In *Demon Copperhead*, Kingsolver spins an utterly immersive bildungsroman rich in characterisation and grand narrative set pieces.

SING, UNBURIED, SING

JESMYN WARD

An intimate portrait of a family and an epic tale of hope and struggle, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* examines the ugly truths at the heart of the American story and the power – and limitations – of family bonds. Rich with Ward's distinctive, lyrical language, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* brings the archetypal road novel into rural twenty-first century America.

THE INTERESTINGS

MEG WOLITZER

On a warm summer night in 1974, six teenagers play at being cool. They smoke pot, drink vodka, share their dreams and vow always to be interesting. Spanning four decades and brimming with wit, intelligence and

true emotional depth, this luminous novel from the author of *The Female Persuasion* explores friendship, disillusionment and the American Dream through the unfolding lives of six friends who met at a summer camp in 1974.

THE NAMESAKE

JHUMPA LAHIRI

Brought up as an Indian in suburban America, Gogol Ganguli soon finds himself itching to cast off his awkward name, just as he longs to leave behind the inherited values of his Bengali parents. And so, he sets off on his own path through life, a path strewn with conflicting loyalties, love and loss. Spanning three decades and crossing continents, Jhumpa Lahiri's much-anticipated first novel elegant, subtle, and moving – a triumph of humane storytelling.

BEFORE WE WERE INNOCENT

ELLA BERMAN

Ten years ago, after a sun-soaked summer in Greece, best friends Bess and Joni were cleared of any involvement in their friend Evangeline's death. Although they were found innocent, the case made them infamous, and they've not seen each other since. Except now Joni wants a favour, and when she turns up at her old friend's doorstep in need of an alibi, Bess has no choice but to say yes. After all, she still owes her.

THE OUTSIDERS

S. E. HINTON

Teenagers in a small Oklahoma town have split into two gangs, divided by money, tastes and attitude. The Socs' idea of having a good time is beating up Greasers like Ponyboy Curtis. Ponyboy knows what to expect and knows he can count on his brothers and friends - until the night someone takes things too far, and life is changed forever. A pioneering work of young adult fiction, *The Outsiders* is a searing story of loyalty, trust, friendship and betrayal, capturing the hunger, thrill and pain of adolescent life.

BONJOUR TRITESSE

FRANÇOISE SAGAN

Bonjour Tristesse tells the story of Cécile, who leads a carefree life with her widowed father and his young mistresses until, one hot summer, he decides to remarry - with devastating consequences. Stylish, shimmering

and amoral, Sagan's tale of adolescence and betrayal on the French Riviera was her masterpiece, published when she was just eighteen. However, this frank and explicit novella was considered too daring for 1950s Britain, and scenes were removed for the English publication. Now, a fresh translation presents the uncensored text in full for the first time.

IS THIS OK?

HARRIET GIBSONE

An outrageously funny, raw and painfully honest account of trying to find connection in the age of the internet, *Is This OK?* tells the story of Harriet, who spent much of her young life feeding neuroses and insecurities with obsessive internet searching (including compulsive googling of exes, prospective partners, and their exes), and indulging in whirlwind 'parasocial relationships'. Suddenly, with a diagnosis of early menopause, her relationship with the internet takes a darker turn, and her online addictions are thrown into sharp relief.

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

BETTY SMITH

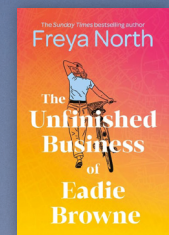
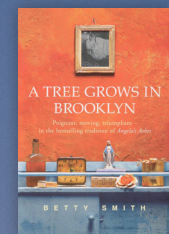
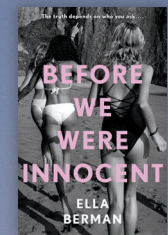
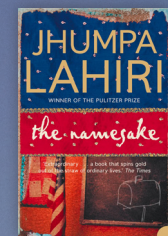
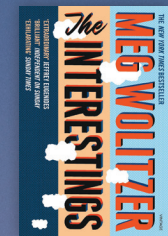
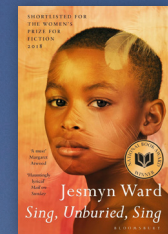
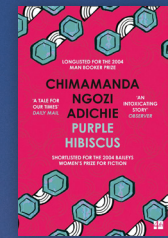
Universally regarded as a modern classic, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is a tale of an immigrant family in early 20th-century Brooklyn that has become one of the great distinctively American novels. The Nolan family are first-generation immigrants originating in Ireland and Austria. Their life in the Williamsburg slums of Brooklyn is poor and deprived, but their sacrifices make it possible for their children to grow up in a land of boundless opportunity, and amid the poverty and suffering among the poor of Brooklyn, there is hope, and the prospect of a brighter future.

THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF

EADIE BROWNE

FREYA NORTH

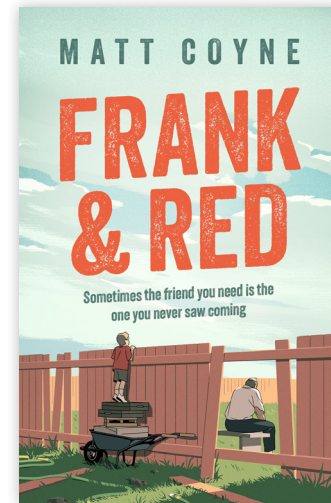
When Eadie Browne arrives in Manchester as a student in the late 1980s, she tastes freedom for the first time. In the vibrant and gritty city, with her newfound independence, Eadie is swept along. Until one night, her past comes hurting at her and she fears nothing will ever be the same again. A decade later, Eadie is stuck in a job rut while her marriage is quietly crumbling. Travelling back from North to South for a funeral, Eadie contemplates all that is now and all that was then in this moving love-letter to youth.



Finding Innocence

One of literature's great powers is its ability to carry its readers through time, whether through its plot or through the memory of reading itself. I'm almost certain we could all recall exact moments when life-changing sentences were read for the very first time; where we were and who we were with when an idea or story formed its roots in our minds. And even if those memories have become hazy over time, re-reading certain stories will inevitably conjure up all the emotions we connect to certain points in our lives – particularly the innocence of childhood.

In celebration of the Proustian effect of our most treasured stories, we spoke to a group of authors about the books that never fail to transport them to a simpler, more innocent time.



Matt Coyne

The Body by Stephen King (the novella upon which the film 'Stand by Me' is based) is really about the *loss* of innocence. But, for me, it captures a moment in time. An age, around eleven or twelve, of endless summers, freedom and adventure, and a feeling that you were unstoppable as long as you had your friends, cheese sandwiches and a bike. This sense of immortality, this innocence, comes to an abrupt end with the discovery of the titular body. But in the pages before that discovery, it doesn't half make me miss my friends: Rich, Deano, Super Keith, John... and my second-hand Raleigh Chopper.

Frank & Red was published 1 February by Wildfire.

Lesley McDowell

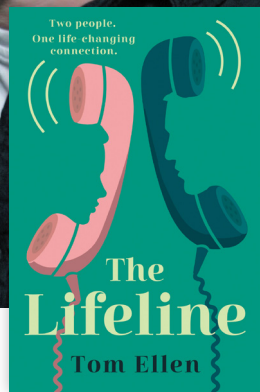


There's something about adventure stories that always feels innocent – it's probably why we still like them as adults. There's a clear line from A to Z, and the complications of the world are gathered up into a battle between good and evil, where good always wins. But Allan Campbell Mclean's novel *The Hill of the Red Fox* about Alasdair, an orphaned boy going to live in the Highlands with his suspicious uncle Murdo, and who is passed a secret message on the train on the way there – *Hunt at the Hill of the Red Fox* – was always more than that. It was about a boy who fell in love, and a boy who found a father figure, only to lose him again. The final image of the novel has always stayed with me – the ghost of his father's best friend, Duncan, waving goodbye to the boy, after the truth has been exposed and the mystery solved. I think it might be the first time a book made me cry.

Clairmont is published 29 February by Wildfire.



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Tom Ellen

When I think of innocence, I think of a sense of wide-eyed wonder — which is exactly what I felt when I was 12 or 13 and opened *Puckoon* by Spike Milligan. The book opens fairly traditionally, in third-person narration, describing a field and a man lying in it. Then, within a few paragraphs, the man starts talking back to the narrator, correcting them and criticising them. It was mind-blowing to me at the time; I didn't know you were even *allowed* to do that. It seemed so playful and subversive and weird — it opened me up to a whole other way of thinking about writing. I suddenly realised: 'You can do *anything* when you're writing a book, absolutely *anything*. There are no rules at all.'

The Lifeline is published 29 February by HarperCollins

Neil Lancaster



Years ago, my Mum persuaded me to put down *The Beano* and read a proper book for the first time. Reluctantly, I agreed, and she handed me a copy of *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell about his family's five-year sojourn to the Island of Corfu. I was immediately astounded when I realised what the written word could achieve. It was warm, funny, intriguing and bathed in the glow of 1930s Corfu. When I think of that book, it reminds me of the simpler times of my childhood. It makes me happy, because it makes me remember my mum, without whom, I'd never have become a writer.

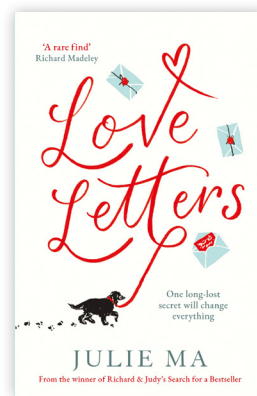
The Devil You Know is published 28 March by HQ.

Kathleen McGurl



I always enjoy books set in the late 1930s, just before war breaks out. There's an innocence about them — the reader knows what's coming but the characters don't, especially if they're young and uninformed, perhaps shielded from what's happening by their lifestyle: 'Oh you sweet summer child,' I find myself saying, to quote *The Game of Thrones*. One book that evokes this wonderfully is Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. The early scenes at the family home, the long hot summer, drinks on the terrace and calls of 'Anyone for tennis?' depict a period of innocence that readers, with foreknowledge, find enjoyably discomfiting.

The Lost Child was published 1 February by HarperCollins.



Julie Ma

I pinched the name for the main character of my latest novel from *Asta's Book* by Barbara Vine. Asta is famous for her published diaries, and after a family funeral, a solicitor tells the narrator something the public don't realise — that fame doesn't insulate you from the grief of losing a loved one. Some of us still think that celebrity sets you apart, that the famous can't be sad or lonely, so we can troll and abuse them. There is a childish innocence about not realising your actions can be hurtful. It is growing up that develops your empathy muscle.

Love Letters was published 1 February by Welbeck.

Gareth Brown



The theme of innocence makes me think of one of my all-time favourite novels: *Boy's Life* by Robert McCammon. The book is set in a wonderfully atmospheric Alabama in the 1960s, where life changes for a young boy when he and his father discover a naked, beaten corpse in a submerged car. The novel depicts that time in our lives when the darkness of adulthood drags you away from the innocence of childhood. It is a fabulous read, laced with the bitter-sweet nostalgia of someone looking back on their own childhood and remembering long-lost friends and old adventures. I love it.

The Book of Doors was published 15 February by Bantam.

Shubnum Khan



Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. I was 23 when I read it, and it was time when I was really beginning to form my own understanding of the world. When I stepped into that lush, deep and disturbing novel I knew I would be changed forever — I learnt a sentence could be a whole world and that an author could create their own language. It was such an exciting time for me, to realise I could be my own person, and that writing could help me on that path and offer me a freedom I never knew existed.

The Djinn Waits A Hundred Years was published 1 February by Magpie.



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