

Christmas All-Stars: A Festival-Themed Gift List

As we build up momentum for the next Surrey New Writers Festival in the coming year, I thought it would be nice to recount some of my favourite texts that I've read over my time working with the festival—especially if you happen to be doing some Christmas shopping for a bookworm (or for yourself... I won't judge).

Each Festival is a lovely amalgamation of writers of all forms from all walks of life. A wide range of topics are always covered in a wide range of ways, and this is something I've tried to capture in my list. Though, I will admit my bias as a prose writer with a strong interest in the fantastical, the creepy, and the historical—and, as will become clear, I particularly enjoyed last year's festival...

But without further ado, and in no particular order, here are six of my favourite works from the festivals over the last three years:

The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel, David Gange (2019)

Perfect for: Poetry Fans, Historians, Traveling Enthusiasts

Starting things off strong with our 2020 headliner, this non-fiction book is one of the most unique and enjoyable experiences I've had reading. David Gange is a nature writer and Senior Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Birmingham, and here recounts his journey around the Atlantic coastlines of Britain in a kayak, where he frequently stopped to investigate the local literature, history, and language.

The result is a lovely blend of raw rural geographical poetry and prose, stunning landscape and nature photography (colour photos are included in the book!), an exploration of the neglected history of Britain's coastal villages, and a gripping retelling of the journey itself— all of which put Britain in a new light for me.

I particularly enjoyed Gange's habit of interweaving his own descriptions of the scenery and villages with excerpts of local literature capturing the same views, sometimes centuries apart. I found it to be a really touching study on the human condition and the constancy of literature.

If you or someone you know is interested in nature, traveling, poetry, or history, consider perhaps gifting them this unique insight into Britain's lesser known literary canons this Christmas. You could even use it as a travel guide to visit some of Britain's hidden gems!

The Last Wave, Gillian Best (2017)

Perfect for: Fans of Family Fiction, Emotional Readers, Swimming Enthusiasts

Gillian gave a wonderful taster session at our last festival on how to write effective dialogue for characters—which I was fortunate enough to chair—and *The Last Wave* certainly shows why Gillian was running this session.

A poignant representation of three generations of a swimmer's family dealing with the marks we leave on those we love, I found Gillian's book to be incredibly touching. It explores dementia, family life as a gay couple, and overall the actions that make us who we are, all through some brilliantly vivid characterisation and dialogue which is as beautiful as it is heart-wrenching.

But overall, I found the book to be an important reminder that people are products of their circumstances, and won't always see things the way you do.

I can't say much more without spoiling the book, but if you or someone in your life has a thing for those rare books that make you cry whilst also making you want to read them over and over, consider buying them a copy of *The Last Wave* to keep them warm this winter.

***salt slow*, Julia Armfield (2019)**

Perfect for: Short Story Enthusiasts, Fans of the Gothic, Seekers of the Strange and Unusual

Making up one third of our incredible Magical Realism panel from our 2021 festival, Julia Armfield's debut short story collection has stuck with me since her partial reading of her story *The Great Awake*, where people's 'Sleeps' take on a corporeal form.

Though our two other brilliant panelists from last year's festival, Inua Ellams and Lucy Hughes-Hallett, could quite easily be on this list, something about Armfield's collection resonated with me. Each story is a similarly uncanny, enigmatic, and gloriously odd experience where something is always just a little *wrong*.

Julia writes in such a way that you are both entirely uncomfortable yet entirely invested the whole way through, as she explores the climate crisis, religion, gay identity, love, and generally being "different" in a heartfelt and haunting way. My favourites from the collection, alongside *The Great Awake*, would be *Cassandra After* and *salt slow*, as I found them particularly vivid.

If a collection of short stories exploring modern society in immersively creepy ways makes someone particular pop into your head, consider fuelling their strange obsession with this book over the holidays. And who knows, maybe it'll come in handy, were you to wake up to your own Sleep staring down at you...

***Where Hope Comes From: Healing poetry for the heart, mind and soul*, Nikita Gill (2021)**

Perfect for: Those Working on Themselves, Mythology Enthusiasts, Fans of Feminist Literature

Though I'm not usually much of a poetry fan (unless it's John Keats), I found Nikita's reading of and discussion around her poetry both on Instagram and in print to be incredibly enjoyable. Nikita has a wonderful way of using mythology and nature to explore both the raw anxieties and joys of womanhood in her poetry, while also powerfully capturing motivational feelings of reinvention and reinvigoration for those going through hard times.

It was really inspiring to hear from someone being so consistently personal with their work at the festival last year. Some of my personal favourites of Nikita's include *Notes on Survival* and *Medusa*, for the way they so brilliantly capture these themes. Nikita has built up 630,000 Instagram followers through rewriting her feelings and past experiences in her poetry, and her account @nikita_gill is worth following not only for some brilliant poetry, but for days where you find you need some encouragement.

If poetry that helps you to reinterpret mythology, nature, and even yourself in a reassuring and tender way sounds like something you or someone you know would like to keep on their bookshelf for a rainy day, consider Nikita's debut collection as a gift this festive period.

***Boy, Everywhere*, A.M. Dassu (2020)**

Perfect for: Fans of Books that Stay With You, Those Feeling Displaced, Children's Literature Enthusiasts

Boy, Everywhere has to be one of the most important books I've come across in my time reading. The Middle Grade book follows the thirteen year old Sami as he is forced to flee his comfortable home in Syria after a terrorist attack, and make a perilous journey to seek refuge in the U.K. Dassu works to

break down harmful stereotypes along the way in a beautiful yet raw story accessible to younger readers, while still able to bring adults (like me) to tears.

Boy, Everywhere is a much-needed window into the lives of refugees, and reminder of why it is so important to extend kindness to everyone and anyone you meet. It still impresses me just how real and tangible Sami feels throughout the book, and how such a powerful story can be written so sensitively yet remain so approachable to the Middle Grade audience it is aimed at.

If you're looking for a poignant book that will tenderly yet unapologetically present the journeys of refugees, and reinforce the importance of empathy, all while staying with you for years to come, please consider picking up *Boy, Everywhere* over the holidays.

***People Like Her*, Ellery Lloyd (2021)**

Perfect for: Social Media Gurus, Fans of Thrillers, Originality Seekers

A name and book well-known to those in the University of Surrey Literature department, *People Like Her* was written by our very own Dr. Paul Vlitos, and Collette Lyons, his wife, under the pen-name *Ellery Lloyd*. Collette and Paul gave a fascinating talk on the ins and outs of writing a novel collaboratively at last year's festival, and it was brilliant to hear about how their processes contrasted with other cooperative creatives.

The book itself explores the recent "Insta-Mum" phenomenon through a sleek thriller, as an ex-fan targets a famous Instagram influencer's family while she struggles with the fame and demands of her job. I found this to be a dimension of influencers which I had hardly considered before, and the book was an interesting yet gripping exploration of the pressures and dangers which can come along with the modern job. This was absolutely one of those books I was not able to put down.

If a fresh, modern thriller sounds exactly like the thing missing from a bedside cabinet you know of, consider letting *People Like Her* fill that space this Christmas.

Of course, these are only a sliver of the authors and books that have featured at Surrey New Writers Festival over the years—this is a topic I could easily write reams and reams about. If you found this article interesting, I would encourage you to head over to the 'About>Past Festivals' page of our website, and explore the other amazing authors we've had over the years.

And, of course, stay tuned to our website and social media as we begin to unveil more and more about our line-up this year! You might just discover your new favourite author...

About the Author – Leon Lynn

After helping out with the festival on a gap year while contracting in video game writing last year, I'm now completing the final year of my Creative Writing Undergraduate degree. I'm also very excited to be one of your Assistant Directors again for SNWF 2022! You can find my writing portfolio [here](#).