

Dear Father Christmas,

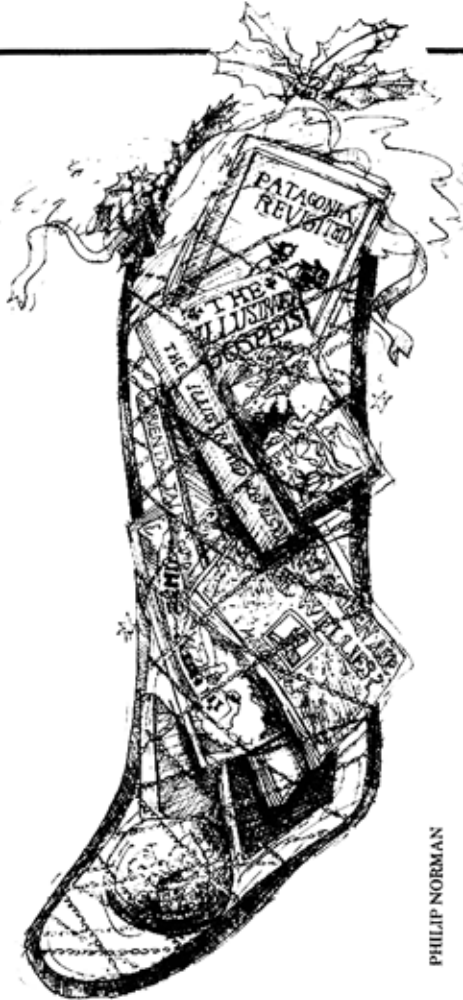
My mummy is typing this because I am too young. People say I am a precocious brat, but I don't care. I want to grow up to be an intellectual, and so all I want this year in my stocking is books, except please for a Jacob Rees-Mogg mask and glasses so that people will think I am 15 and know everything.

The first book on my list is Margeurite Yourcenar's *Oriental Tales* (wonderfully translated by Alberto Manguel; Aidan Ellis, £8.95). This book is certainly a major literary event. Although half a century late getting into English, these tales are welcome relief to those who continually pine at the lack of any more Isak Dinesen stories. Here they are! Yourcenar is an anagram: the question is, was this authoress actually invented by Karen Blixen, as some people say that Bacon wrote Shakespeare?

Next can I please have Godfrey Howard's *A Guide to Good English in the 1980s* (Pelham Books, £8.95)? Howard is full of wise observations, and comes close to the bone with me (as a prodigy) when he says: 'Baby-talk rarely becomes normal usage but this has happened to *twee*.' I couldn't agree more with him when he says: 'Because humankind finds it difficult to reconcile its higher intelligence with its animal functions, the ordinary words for those functions are labelled *dirty words* . . . and we are left hedged in on all sides whenever we want to talk about our fundamental bodily activities.' I find this a problem, as there is no single word for 'scratching one's head', for instance. Howard is both comforting and disturbing, always entertaining, and capable of conveying intense pathos at the decline of 'lovely words' which go astray; bemoaning the loss of *gay*, he takes cheer from observing: ' . . . it may soon be possible again for anyone to feel *queer*, meaning slightly ill.'

Also can I have Annie Tempest's *How Green Are Your Wellies?* (Muller, Blond, & White, £2.50)? Although I hate green wellies and believe they are for women and philistines, this book is rally fawfully funny, it rally is.

If I were religious I would want the breathtakingly beautiful new book *The Illustrated Gospels* (Century, £10.95). Art lovers will wish to gaze at its reproductions from illuminated manuscripts, done to perfection. As Christ said: 'A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.' And if I were literary, I would want



PHILIP NORMAN

Blue stocking

Robert Temple
wants books in
his Christmas stocking

Tony Harrison's *The Mysteries* (Faber, £9.95 paperback £4.95). This text of the traditional mystery plays of the Middle Ages, wrought together by a modern theatre company, has language which is rich and invigorating, and a stimulus to those with ears to hear.

Please may I have the utterly delightful *One for the Pot*, 'A small book about tea brewed up by Penny Dann', aged 21 (Elm Tree Books, £2.95). This one is not only for the pot but for the stocking of anyone who appreciates tea. Written with a delicate, wistful humour, it is packed with marvellous illustrations by the author.

I simply must have Gemma O'Connor's *First Lines* (Wolfhound Press, Dublin, £4.95). This book is a fascinating collection of opening lines of books. My favourite is by Eric Thompson, so expressive is it of my own condition on many an occasion: 'Dougal was in bed thinking about not being in bed.' But there are haunting first lines which once heard can never be forgotten, such as L. P. Hartley's: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' and Daphne du Maurier's first line from *Rebecca* which Hitchcock used so well: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderlay again.'

For whiling away the long winter evenings, what better could I wish than that repository of all that is edifying, bizarre, and curious, Kenneth Gregory's third anthology, *The Third Cuckoo: More Classic Letters to the Times* (Allen & Unwin, £8.95). In 1911 it took 13,000 troops to contain the rioting Poplar strikers, and in 1946 King Zog of Albania was accused of taking liberties with British clothing coupons (an allegation later shown to be spurious). One 85-year-old wrote to assure readers that he could still ride a bicycle, and the Rev. Cecil Holmes wished to communicate the fact that an Australian he had known had eaten 11 feet 6 inches of sausage for breakfast one morning. If we didn't know these things, wouldn't life be poorer?

Surely the most original new book out is *Patagonia Revisited* by Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux (Michael Russell, £4.50). It is a wonderfully evocative ode to the vast wastes of Patagonia, in the manner of a Homeric hymn which gathers together all the mythological and literary testimonies of this archetypal dreamland at the tip of South America. While W. H. Hudson dies his 'unutterably hateful way' in a British boarding-house amid dreams of Patagonia, Darwin and Magellan sail there, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid retreat there, Poe fantasises about it, Caliban issues from thence, Conan Doyle, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Jonathan Swift all derive inspiration. The strangeness of this little book is exceeded by its vividness and its sheer poetry.

That's what I want for my stocking, and if you're too busy I'll come to the Far North (Barnet? Finchley?) to get them.

Yours with sincere admiration,

(Name and address supplied)