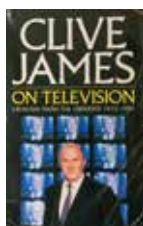


## Book Case

Professor Barry Kelly

### CLIVE JAMES ON TELEVISION

**Clive James. (Picador 1991. ISBN-13: 978-0330319744. Paperback OOP around £3.12)**



Between 1972 and 1982, Clive James was the Observer's Television Critic. This anthology is a compilation of his three earlier books of television criticism: *The Crystal Bucket*; *Visions before Midnight* and *Glued to the Box*. If you are old enough to remember the Three Day Week; Alias Smith and Jones; Nationwide; Dallas; The Liver Birds; Hadleigh; Sasha Distel; Little and Large; Morecambe and Wise and the whole cornucopia of three channel television, the memories will come flooding back. Reviewing one soap opera, he wrote, "I tuned in late as part of my usual preparation for tuning out early." Mr James reports both high and lowbrow culture with the same forensic gimlet eye but always accompanied by a raised amused eyebrow, describing Arnold Schwarzenegger as having a face that looked like "a condom full of walnuts" and Lisa Minelli as someone "who couldn't even walk up a flight of stairs sincerely". As the man himself said, 'I like to turn a phrase until it catches the light.'

### FROM FIRST TO LAST

**Damon Runyon. (Penguin Classics. New Edition 2001. ISBN-13: 978-0141184661. Paperback OOP around £5)**



Runyon's beat was 1920's Broadway and its immediate precincts, in what he himself called 'The Hardened Artery' of New York. These are gloriously comic stories involving among other players, Hot Horse Herbie, Nathan Detroit, Sky Masterson, and Ambrose Hammer the theatre critic, as they try to win a buck, avoid the police and help the

good guy get the girl (and vice versa). The stories are all told by the same anonymous narrator who always speaks in the present tense with a marvellous Runyonese lexicon. Typical gems include 'She has a laugh so hearty it knocks the whipped cream off an order of strawberry shortcake on a table fifty feet away, and 'I came to the conclusion long ago that all life is six to five against.' Men are 'Guys' and ladies, 'Dolls'. One of his best short stories *The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown* became precisely that: *Guys and Dolls*. If Raymond Chandler had been designed by Groucho Marx, the result could well have been Damon Runyon. More than somewhat.

### THE BEST OF MYLES

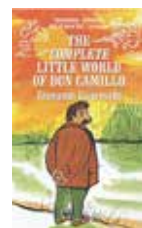
**Flann O'Brien. (Harper Perennial Reissue Edition 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0007247189. Paperback RRP £9.99)**



'The majority of the members of the Irish parliament are professional politicians, in the sense that otherwise they would not be given jobs minding mice at a crossroads.' Brian O'Nolan usually wrote under the pseudonym of Flann O'Brien, but for his Irish Times column, which ran between 1940 and 1966, he adopted the name Myles na gCopaleen, and his column was entitled *Cruiskeen Lawn* (The Little Full Jug). This book is a compilation of his finest work over many years and is quite simply a joy. In it, his virtuosity as a writer, wit, linguist and humorist is on full display. Creations such as The Brother, Keats and Chapman and The Cruiskeen Court of Justice. His column was serendipitously published in harmonious synchrony with J.B. Morton's *Beachcomber* in the Daily Express. Inventive, irreverent and gloriously funny he often insulted and pointed arrows at the adjacent columns, especially the editorials written by the long-suffering R.M. Smyllie. If that fictitious Ambassador ever ran out of Ferrero Rocher bon-bons and served up literary bon-mots instead, this is what he would use to spoil his guests.

### THE LITTLE WORLD OF DON CAMILLO

**Giovanni Guareschi. (Pilot Productions Ltd 2013. ISBN-13: 978-1900064071. Paperback RRP £11.99)**



In the introduction, Guareschi tells us that this is a special place. "Here, the deep eternal breathing of the river freshens the air for both the living and the dead, and even the dogs have souls." These are the charming stories, set in Italy's post-war Po valley, where the priest, Don Camillo looks after his simple flock whilst waging perpetual war with his communist nemesis, the Mayor Peppone. Christ on the Cross in his little church watches over them all. However, gentle reader, know this: both fought together as partisans during the war and there is a bond between them that can never be broken. In his preface, Guareschi concludes, "And one final word of explanation before I begin my story. If there is a priest anywhere who feels offended by my treatment of Don Camillo, he is welcome to break the biggest candle available over my head. And if there is a Communist who feels offended by Peppone, he is welcome to break a hammer and sickle on my back. But if there is anyone who is offended by the conversations of Christ, I can't help it; for the one who speaks in this story is not Christ, but my Christ - that is, the voice of my conscience." Once you step into this little world, you will never wish to leave it.

### THE COMPLETE SHORT STORIES OF AMBROSE BIERCE

**Ambrose Bierce. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2017. ISBN-13: 978-1975940164. Paperback RRP £9.98)**



Bierce's work is generally divided into three: his Civil War stories; Ghost Stories and *The Devil's Dictionary*. The latter is every bit as irreverent as its name suggests. The Ghost stories are chilling and the Civil War stories harrowing, evocative, and graphic. Perhaps the most



UMJ is an open access publication of the Ulster Medical Society (<http://www.ums.ac.uk>).

The Ulster Medical Society grants to all users on the basis of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence the right to alter or build upon the work non-commercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creation is licensed under identical terms.

famous is *An Occurrence on Owl Creek Bridge*, the story of a soldier who is about to be hanged when a sharpshooter cuts his noose and he dives off the bridge into a river, thus escaping. It's a really short story with a big twist; the sort of device for which Bierce is justifiably famous.

Bierce fought on the Union side and his contemporary Mark Twain, the Confederate. Twain remarked that he was eventually discharged "with exhaustion, brought on by persistent retreating." Both were haunted by the war, but Bierce's proximity to the carnage is graphically recalled in his stories. In *Chickamauga*, a baby crawls off into the woods away from his farm but when he returns, the farm has been burnt down and his parents are dead. The baby's descriptions of their remains, told with a toddler's inarticulate incomprehension, are heart-stoppingly graphic and ultimately heartbreaking. They also reveal that the author has seen these things for himself and can't forget them.

### COSMOS

**Carl Sagan. (Abacus  
New edition 1983.  
ISBN-13: 978-  
0349107035. Paperback  
RRP £12.99)**



*Cosmos* the book was derived from the eponymous TV series that older readers doubtless remember. Sagan takes us on a journey from the origins of time and space through history, discoveries, human thought and folly. In a sense he 'pulls back the curtains' and beckons us to peek out with him into the vastness of the universe.

Carl Sagan was a polymath, but one with a singular gift for explanation. The concepts he presents are tricky to say the least, but he puts so much care into the choice of the perfect word for each occasion that the mists actually do clear. His descriptions of The Milky Way as 'The Backbone of Night' and humanity as 'One Voice in the Cosmic Fugue' are sheer poetry. Later in *Pale Blue Dot*, he describes our tiny earth, photographed by Voyager as it passed Saturn, as "A mote of dust, suspended on a sunbeam."

### THE HITCH-HIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

**Douglas Adams. (Pan  
2016. ISBN-13: 978-  
1509808311. Paperback  
RRP £8.99)**



"I think you ought to know I'm feeling very depressed" moans Marvin the paranoid android. "Here I am, brain the size of a planet, and I'm parking cars." The five parts of this trilogy follow Arthur Dent and his old friend Ford Prefect (not from Guilford, as Arthur had been led to believe, but from a small planet in the vicinity of Betelgeuse) as they look for the ultimate answer to Life, the Universe and Everything. Our heroes leave earth, a small insignificant planet in the *unfashionable* western spiral arm of the galaxy, seconds before it is demolished to make way for a hyperspace bypass. Our heroes visit the legendary planet of Magrathea, meeting the mice, Slartibartfast, Zaphod Beeblebrox the two-headed galactic president and consummate wide-boy, Marvin and Tricia McMillan. As Arthur sighs wearily at one point, "Is there any tea on this spaceship?" If you haven't read this, it won't make sense. If you have, you'll be smiling already. *Don't Panic* and *Mostly Harmless* will never read the same. Just remember to bring your towel.