

Paperbacks: Borrowed Finery
The Lovely Bones
Dorian
Scanty Particulars**The Blank Slate**

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Borrowed Finery by Paula Fox Flamingo, £6.99, 272pp

Paula Fox is among a clutch of older American writers who've gained a new readership thanks to the advocacy of a younger generation. Her six critically acclaimed, but commercially unsuccessful, adult novels have recently been republished in the States, and have re-entered the bestseller lists.

Borrowed Finery, Fox's memoir, tells of an extraordinarily peripatetic childhood during which she was exposed to more than her fair share of idiosyncratic relatives and make-shift homes. The daughter of a Cuban-born mother and a third-rate screen writer, Paula started life in an orphanage. Rescued by her grandmother, she was passed around like a parcel until finally claimed by "Uncle Elwood", a penurious minister. She found happiness in his benignly beaky presence, but was whisked away for long periods to New York City, Florida, Cuba and Malibu, in the company of parental substitutes, and, on occasion, even her own.

Fox's account of the outrages suffered at the hands of her "disinclined" parents is told with elegant detachment. Recalling her mother's icy put-downs and her father's outbursts (he smashes a dinner-tray down a hotel dumb waiter because she asks for a glass of milk), she reflects on the fateful moment when adult selfishness takes centre stage. Be prepared for the book's shockingly truncated conclusion: it's a surprise ending that leaves you wishing that the author hadn't decided to close up shop on her generational saga quite so soon.

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold Picador, £6.99, 328pp

This US bestseller really is one of those books that you could read in the proverbial one sitting. Contemporary fiction is scattered with gruesome stories of missing girls, but Alice Sebold's version shakes off the usual thrillerish conventions to reveal more sophisticated fare. For a start, the novel is narrated by the murder victim herself. Susie Salmon, a smart 14-year old recently dismembered by a neighbourhood psycho, now views the world from a heavenly cloud. Far from voyeuristic, Susie's thoughtful reflections on her very own suburban tragedy make for a curiously uplifting read.

Dorian by Will Self Penguin, £7.99, 278pp

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* captured fin-de-siecle decadence. Will Self attempts the same for the generation who grew up over the summer of the Royal Wedding. Upper-class druggie Henry Wotton and his acolyte Baz Hallward meet Dorian Gray, an uncorrupted youth "like a ripe grape dusted with yeast", who becomes the subject of Baz's video installation. In this gloriously overblown tale of "tainted love", Self's characters purr around SW3 in their five-litre Jags on their way to the next Wildean excess, dispensing eschatological expletives en route.

Scanty Particulars by Rachel Holmes Penguin, £7.99, 326pp

Ever wondered what drew male medics to gynaecology and obstetrics? Rachel Holmes's sympathetic biography of the military surgeon, James Miranda Barry - the man who performed the world's first recorded successful Caesarean - tells how this unsung medical hero, rumoured to be a woman, had a closer affinity to women's "slippery" parts than most. Holmes's convincing narrative unearths a mysterious childhood Barry tried to erase, and gets as close as possible to uncovering the secret of Barry's sex. A fascinating investigation into what made a gentleman a gentleman.

The Blank Slate by Steven Pinker Penguin, £7.99, 509pp

Popular science books will never stop gnawing at the nature-vs-nurture debate: it touches too deeply on our sense of where we come from, and desire to go. But Steven Pinker's sweeping survey-cum-polemic brings readers up to speed on fresh thinking with a stylish erudition none of his peers can equal. His counter-attack on "the modern denial of human nature" may stop nervous liberals fretting about the return of "innate" qualities in

psychology and biology. Dumping the old "blank slate" model of the mind in no way requires us "to abandon feminism, or to accept current levels of inequality and violence, or to treat morality as a fiction".