


# Love, Sex, Death, and Words: Surprising Tales from a Year in Literature

*John Sutherland , Stephen Fender*

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Love, sex, death, boredom, ecstasy, existential angst, political upheaval - the history of literature offers a rich and varied exploration of the human condition across the centuries. In this absorbing companion to literature's rich past, arranged by days of the year, acclaimed critics and friends Stephen Fender and John Sutherland turn up the most inspiring, enlightening, surprising or curious artefacts that literature has to offer. Find out why 16 June 1904 mattered so much to Joyce, which great literary love affair was brought to a tragic end on 11 February 1963 and why Roy Campbell punched Stephen Spender on the nose on 14 April 1949 in this sumptuous voyage through the highs and lows of literature's bejewelled past.

## Love, Sex, Death, and Words: Surprising Tales from a Year in Literature Details

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# From Reader Review Love, Sex, Death, and Words: Surprising Tales from a Year in Literature for online ebook

## Julia says

Read this over the past year, a day at a time on the relevant date. It was fun to do it this way and the book, being so densely packed with interesting facts, would have swamped me if I had tried to read it all in one go. Fascinating, informative and a must read for bibliophiles.

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## Kinga says

Quite possibly this was nothing more than a potboiler. But since we're talking about John Sutherland here, even a potboiler by him can prove perfectly enjoyable. The idea behind this book is to create a sort of literary calendar, an almanac if you like, with a bit of bookish trivia, a mini essay for each day of the year.

The selection is completely arbitrary and doesn't even pretend to be anything else and as expected it's a mixed bag. Some entries are fascinating, some trivial but funny, some baffling by their obscurity (I learnt more about 17th century English poetry than I ever needed to). The authors did try to make sure it's not all about dead white men, so there is enough gender and ethnic variety to fend off the accusations of racism or sexism, but they hardly ever explore any regions outside of England and America. Although, of course, that's the area of the authors' expertise, so we shouldn't be very surprised.

I learnt a great many things from it, most of which I have already forgotten, but some will stay with me forever, like the fact that Philip Larkin had apparently a big penis, Ezra Pound was a fascist, Cabrera Infante (who died in 2005) requested that his ashes are to be kept unburied until after Castro's regime is gone (they are still unburied), Kenneth Grahame went crazy and wouldn't change his underwear for months, all the royalties from Peter Pan go to Great Ormond Hospital for Children in London (they actually passed a law in the UK to prevent this title entering the public domain), and that gothic romance became a way of talking about the unconscious before Freud gave us the vocabulary for it.

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## Amalia Gavea says

I thought I would really like this book. It combined my love for History and Literature in one little volume, but I was frustrated and deeply saddened to abandon it around the 65% mark. Why? I stumbled upon this paragraph concerning the Pottermania phenomenon:

*"Reading (particularly reading a 600-page book) is the epitome of couch-potatoism.(...) Reading is a good thing (...) but would it not be an even better thing for children to be outside-actually "doing" something, rather than passively "reading" or "watching" something?"*

Well done, sir! Way to spread the love for reading in young minds by telling them not to sit down with a book and, practically, wasting their time on it! I wonder why on earth did you make the effort to write a 600-page book...Perhaps you wanted your readers to appreciate it while playing football...

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### **CuteBadger says**

This is more of a book to dip into than one to sit and read for long stretches, or as there is a chapter for each day of the year, you could read one a day and make it last. Each day has a short article on something related to literature, some subjects well-known, others not. The pleasure for me in this was finding out about areas of which I was previously ignorant and on which I might go on to do further reading. And if you don't like one article, there are plenty more to come.

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### **Val says**

The authors have put together a literary themed 'On this day'. It is fair to say that some days they could not find anything of great significance, so the book is quite patchy.

The pieces are short, although several include links to books or websites if we want more information. John Sutherland can be delightfully pithy.

I enjoyed it on the whole and it is an interesting idea and book, even though the content is not all interesting. I have a few quibbles with the book: Dylan Thomas did not 'fatally' drive into a tennis net, no humans were hurt and the net was either replaced or repaired, and films are not literature, even when spuriously linked to books.

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### **Pat says**

This is such an enjoyable book to read all year long. There is an entry for each day of the year - unspecified year so it can started on any date and then read for the year. I began it last September and finished it a year later reading one entry a day, and I looked forward to it each morning. Each entry is connected to literature in one way or another. I bought 10 copies last Christmas for gifts to my book loving friends. I have been rereading entries and will probably continue to do so. FUN facts!

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### **Don LaFontaine says**

I read this book through the year of 2017. It was alright, but not a book that I would plan on rereading in the future. Some of the entries were enjoyable and intriguing, while a larger amount of the entries were long winded and went off on tangents that had nothing to do with the piece of literature being promoted for that day. Most of the time, the author's words came across as pretentious, as if without a degree in literature the reader will need their help in reading and understanding the topics they were discussing. I felt this took away from the point they were trying to make regarding author/book/poem, and made the book more difficult to

read.

While I won't go so far as to recommend this book to others, I think it is the type of book that one either enjoys and does not enjoy, with almost no middle ground.

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### **Lynne says**

This is a varied and fascinating selection of anecdotes, one for every day of the year. Some are historical, many literary, some biographical, some political. I really enjoyed the articles, and finding out the links between them. I read this book on my Kindle, just dipping into it when I wanted to read for a few minutes (I finished it today in the dentist's waiting room). It is an ideal book for this.

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### **Duncan says**

Didn't find much of this very interesting, I'm afraid. May pick it up again one day and give it another go. Nice idea but perhaps this book stretches the concept a bit further than the quality of the content merits.

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### **M.G. Mason says**

This is an interesting and unique book that works on a simple premise. Bite sized essays, 366 of so one for each day of the year, that discusses a different aspect every day. It works on a "On this day in year..." and discusses an important or not so important yet otherwise interesting event that happened on that day.

From 1st January chronicling the complications of the copyright of Peter Pan, Alexandre Dumas duel on the 5th January, a vignette of why Johannes Gutenberg is the true villain of The Hunchback of Notre Dame on the 6th, we move on swiftly through our "year": Charles I beheading on 31st January and John Milton's (Paradise Lost) defence of the act which would see him given a role as propagandist in Cromwell's government. Who knew that Salman Rushdie went into hiding when the fatwa against him was pronounced on Valentine's Day? Or did you know why Twain's Huckleberry Finn was delayed publication in the US for several months?

It is an interesting collection of facts and in this fast-paced world of information, it works really well. However, I feel that some were too short – it too often left me wanting more from some and less from others... a strange mix of too much filler with some entries and too little information with others. Most are in the region of 200-300 words each and I wished that several were longer, especially of the day of the death of Agatha Christie (12th Jan), the origin of God Save the King (12th March) and the founding of Amazon.com (15th May) for example. I imagine though that the authors were trying to keep it tight. I read the Kindle version and it estimates the paperback copy to have around 500 pages, a good comfortable (and average) length for a popular non-fiction book. Some more astute editing would have served the book well.

Despite the title, the subject matter is not limited to those three things. It covers social issues, politics, literature, personalities, science, technology, history and many other topical subjects you might find in a book like this. If you enjoy the QI books, you should enjoy this too and imagine that's the sort of market it

was aiming at with the topical quiz show still popular.

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### **Fazackerly Toast says**

far too many long long boring entries about utterly insignificant US writers or events, many with only a tangential relevance to literature, repetitious and lazy.

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### **Heather says**

Loved the idea of this book, but so many of the dates you could tell the authors were really reaching to find something of note.

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### **Rebecca says**

This was my bedside book for 2015. It's composed of 366 daily entries compiled by John Sutherland, one of my favorite commentators on books, and Stephen Fender. Each entry zeroes in on an event from literary history corresponding to that calendar date. The events range enormously in terms of time period, setting and theme. Births, deaths, anniversaries, Nobel prizes awarded to authors you've never heard of, publication dates – this has it all.

A few of my favorite random pieces were: “**12 July** – The end of blasphemy” (the last successful blasphemy charge was made against a work of literature in 1977: a poem in *Gay News* that implied Jesus was homosexual and imagines a Roman soldier sodomizing his corpse); “**20 August** – England's finest naturalist–novelist is buried” (introducing me to Richard Jefferies, about whom I knew next to nothing); “**19 November** – After a sound night's sleep at the Willard Hotel, Washington, D.C., Julia Ward Howe wakes early in the dawn with the words of ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’ in her head”; and “**9 December** – *Peanuts* gets its first of many outings on television.”

Bits of what I read here kept tying in with my reading and writing assignments over the course of the year. Several mini-essays about the Nobel Prize inspired me to write a BookBrowse backstory article about literary prizes named after people (such as Alfred Nobel). A piece about Alexander Pope's relationship with his doctor, John Arbuthnot, struck me for its similarity to Jude's friendship with Andy in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* – “Pope was of necessity closer to his physician than any other human being.”

There are also humorous little comments about the writing life dotted through, like “None but a blockhead, [Samuel] Johnson said, writes for anything but money.” I can feel better about my work ethic after reading about Edgar Wallace, creator of *King Kong*, who “hated the labor of actually writing” so much that between dictation sessions he brewed a pot of tea every half hour and smoked 80 cigarettes a day. I chuckled at this analogy: “Harold Bloom ... is to literary criticism what Einstein was to physics” (for learned yet readable literary criticism, I'd take John Sutherland any day). And I even learned a new word: “pathographesis” is writing inspired by illness – one of my favorite autobiographical subgenres.

Like *The Novel Cure*, this would make an ideal gift for any bibliophile. Entries are only a page or a page and a half, so even the busiest literature lover will have time to fit them in. Over the course of a year, you'll take away your own personalized cache of literary nuggets, and still get to keep the book on the shelf for future reference when birthdays and holidays get you thinking "now, what else happened on this day?"

(Originally published on my blog, *Bookish Beck*.)

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### **Gill says**

An enjoyable book to 'dip into' rather than read from cover to cover. Written by two professors from different sides of the Atlantic, it suffered a little, I felt, from a need to give equal space to each, thus dealing with events or figures which were not only unknown to me but didn't feel particularly interesting either. Repeated material on the Mayflower travellers, for example, may well be of considerable interest to Americans, but once was enough for me.

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### **Colin says**

I love almanac type books, with a page or so to read every morning before I head off to work, and this was my choice for 2016. Although enjoyable and occasionally surprising, it didn't quite deliver what I'd hoped it would. Some of the events recorded day by day in its pages were rather dull, some very familiar and others only very tenuously linked with the world of literature. Nevertheless, I discovered some fascinating nuggets along the way, and some new authors to try and books to read.

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