

CONCIERGE

What's hot around the region

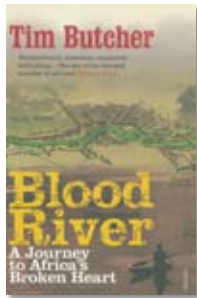
TOP SHELF

A round-up of what is rocking the world of literature

TIM BUTCHER: BLOOD RIVER

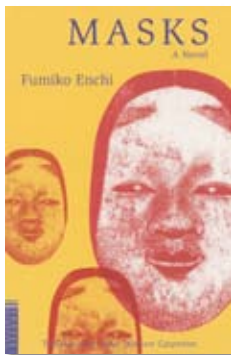
Few journalists stumble into travel literature successfully. Many try, but the immensity of the book looms large and the attempt becomes a shapeless ramble. Tim Butcher, former Africa correspondent of Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, is a master of the form. Soon after he was sent to

Africa in 2000, he became obsessed with the legendary Congo River and the idea of recreating H M Stanley's famous 1874 expedition up it. Stanley's sensational reports encouraged the Belgian monarch, Leopold II, to stamp colonial rule upon the continent's interior, signalling the start of European suppression. With Africa now unfettered, Butcher's journey takes the reader through a Democratic Republic of Congo which like much of Africa is corrupt, war-ridden, decrepit and dangerous. Summing up his journey, Butcher writes, "I touched the heart of Africa and found it broken". Despite the bleak outlook, this is an enthralling eulogy of one of the most misunderstood countries in the world.



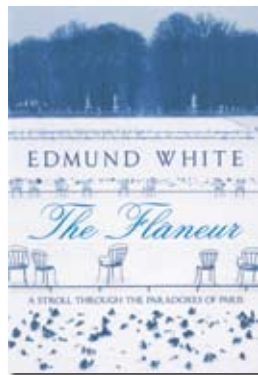
FUMIKO ENCHI: MASKS

Traditional Japanese literature, to a native of English Literature at least, can seem stilted, as though characters waded through an ocean of silent water, distancing the reader and making the pleasure purely aesthetic. Fumiko Enchi, the foremost female Japanese writer of the last century, is perhaps best known for her 10-volume translation of the Japanese classic *The Tale of Genji*. However, Enchi's literary style has been distilled from global influences, making her writing much more open to readers abroad. *Masks* is her masterpiece. The protagonist, Mieko Togano, is a woman in her fifties who, bitter from her own failures in love, manipulates the lives of the two men who vie for the hand of her widowed daughter-in-law. Infused with feminine jealousy and deeply analytical of the serene camouflage behind which Japanese emotions are hidden, the novel is an intense and powerful investigation of the bitterness of human failure.



EDMUND WHITE: THE FLÂNEUR

A flâneur is someone who strolls the streets with apparent intent, but who is louchely surveying the landscape around him looking for excitement and intrigue and something erotic. Edmund White, better known for his trilogy of autobiographical novels *A Boy's Own Story*,



The Beautiful Room is Empty and *The Farewell Symphony*, spent years in Paris and is the perfect flâneur. Walking the historic streets of Paris, White encounters the city's streets as old friends, peeling away the façade of the city and unearthing its trembling heart. Infused with personal recollection, *The Flâneur* is an ideal travelling companion, widening your vision as it stretches your mind.

ALBERT LOW: ZEN MEDITATION

The infuriating thing about meditation is knowing whether or not you have actually done it correctly. Being entirely internal, only you can judge its success or failure, and when such judgement is based upon complete ignorance of how it is supposed to feel, one is rather left at sea. This question had been nagging me for well-near a year when a copy of Albert Low's *Zen Meditation* fell into my lap. Scored with Buddhist teachings, this book goes into great detail telling you what every feeling and mental action is called and is illustrated with a number of photos of showing the pose one must take if nirvana is to be found, which I frankly found a bit patronising since I'm hardly going to meditate with my legs wrapped around my head. So I followed the steps, called unto one of my five *skandhas*, leapt into the lotus, flopped my hands one upon the other and tried to think of nothing. Three minutes and thirty four seconds later, my head was pounding. Having read that doubt is a natural though unwanted emotion, I banished the thought that this was



a headache and convinced myself instead it was the onset of something momentous. I gave it another minute but my third eye was causing me to hallucinate and my heart was racing. The following morning I was left to wonder: had I mistaken pain for bliss? The secret, I was convinced, must lie in the book's final chapter. I read on and came upon something ominous: "All true ways insist upon the need for a teacher. There are many blind alleys where the path peters out completely." So you can't do it on your own after all, but rather have to suffer some silent, alcohol-free, non-smoking three-week retreat to be coerced by some nutty American in a saffron robe. My conclusion: a large gin can have the same effect for half the effort.

CLASSIC TRAVEL LITERATURE

Robert Byron: *The Road to Oxiana*

Widely acknowledged as the greatest travel book prior to the Second World War, Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* is an account of the author's journey to Persia and Afghanistan during 1933 and 1934. Although it was far outsold upon its initial publication by the travelogues of Evelyn Waugh and Peter Fleming, it has been far more enduring than other works of its time and almost every travel writer of any repute has been a devotee, from Patrick Leigh Fermor and Eric Newby to Colin Thubron and Bruce Chatwin, who once wrote that the book was, "a sacred text, beyond criticism". In 1981 it was bought back into print and since then the number of Byron disciples has been swelling. Starting in Beirut, Byron travels through the Middle East via Jerusalem, Baghdad and Teheran to Oxiana on the border of the Soviet Union. Although he, unwittingly, travelled through and wrote about countries and cities that have since become the epicentre of world unrest, Byron's ruminations are not merely informed and intelligent, but gratifyingly humorous. When Robert Byron's ship was torpedoed in 1941 the world lost one of its greatest literary stylists at the height of his powers. However, this single masterpiece depicting a world forever lost remains emblematic of his unnerving genius. – MG

