



# Finding a Good Read

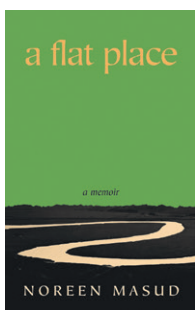
A column to help you find intriguing books

**This month the column comes from Louise Doughty, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, who shares some favourite books with Inside Time readers**



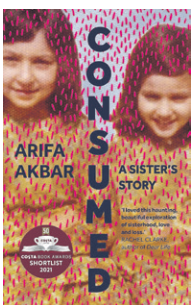
**Louise Doughty**

I love a well-written memoir - the very best have all the power of a good novel with the added intellectual challenge of working out what is 'true', which is not the same thing as what feels true, i.e. what your gut believes to be authentic when you read between the lines. Sometimes you can feel a writer trying to bend something that happened to fit a narrative arc, but the very best ones *feel* real at the same time as providing all the satisfactions of an invented story - and there are so many different ways of writing them.



**A Flat Place by Noreen Masud:** Masud spent her early years in Pakistan but later fled with her mother to Scotland. *A Flat Place* is a brilliant combination of personal anecdotes about her life, combined with beautifully observed accounts of landscapes she can remember or has visited;

the Fens, Morecombe Bay - an empty field near where she grew up in Lahore. 'Flat landscapes, I realised, had always given meaning to a world that made no sense to me.' The sense of fracturing is beautifully understated.



**Consumed by Arifa Akbar:** Akbar's sister died of tuberculosis, undiagnosed in part because of her sister's mental health issues, and like Masud, Akbar has a wonderfully light touch as she combines the personal story of her family with wider observations: in this case

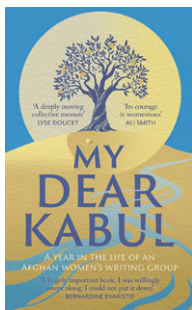
her travels to Rome, where Keats died of 'consumption', visits to her grandparents' house - and a touching account of her family's arrival in London and life in poverty. It's about grief, as so many memoirs are, but it's never grim and the power of her storytelling is acute.



**I'm Black So You Don't Have to Be by Colin Grant:** This is what the author was told by his Uncle Castus - who hoped, along with other relatives, that Colin, born in Britain to Jamaican parents, would become a doctor and be able to transcend racism with class advancement.

This book is constructed differently from the others in that it's about eight different lives, all relatives close to Grant, all sharing the same struggles to overcome and find a place in a society that often discriminated against them. Grant is a well-known writer and historian who has written a biography of Marcus Garvey and an account of the Windrush generation, *Homecoming*. Here he turns an

unflinching eye on his own relatives and their personal histories.



**My Dear Kabul: A Year in the Life of an Afghan Women's Writing Group:** One of the most important books to have been published this year - this is the collective diary of a group of women writers who document their lives in present-day Afghanistan, and the reality that fell

upon them all with the Taliban takeover of 2021. In many ways it's a hard read, as one anecdote follows another about how impossible life is for women now. 'The latest changes in Afghanistan have been like a tornado, wreaking havoc in everyone's lives - there are only ruins left behind.' But while the world's attention is on tragedies elsewhere, the women of Afghanistan must not be forgotten.



**Without Warning & Only Sometimes by Kit de Waal:** Kit de Waal doesn't tell her story in retrospect, like most memoirs - the whole book is told in the present tense, the immediate now, as de Waal relates her upbringing as the daughter of an Irish mother who worked as a

cleaner, nurse and childminder and a Caribbean father who loved a smart car and an expensive suit. De Waal is an award-winning novelist, author of *My Name is Leon* and *The Trick to Time*, and editor of the anthology of working class writing *Common People*. She brings all her story-writing skills to her own childhood and young adulthood where in a crisis her life is saved by reading. 'I start to think I might not die. I might find a way to live through books and other people's lives.' It will remind you, if you need reminding, what solace can be found in books.

*Louise Doughty is the author of ten novels, most recently A Bird in Winter, published by Faber & Faber UK Ltd in August of last year. Her previous books include Platform Seven, filmed for ITVX and broadcast on 7th December 2023; Black Water, a New York Times Notable Book of the Year; the best-seller Apple Tree Yard, adapted for BBC One; and Whatever You Love, nominated for the Costa Novel Award and the Women's Prize for fiction. She has been nominated for many other prizes including the Sunday Times Short Story Prize and the CWA Silver Dagger, along with creating and writing the hit BBC drama Crossfire. Her work has been translated into thirty languages.*

*Prison Reading Groups (PRG) was created in 1999 to set up, support and fund informal reading groups in prisons. We now support more than 100 groups in over 70 prisons nationwide. PRG is part of Give a Book.*