Candidates for the 2025 Literary Prize

Josephine baker's secret war: the African American star who fought for France and freedom, by Hanna Diamond. Yale UP. £25. xvii, 326 pp.

When France fell to the Germans in 1940 Josephine Baker, unlike many Americans in France, chose not to return to the USA but to stay in France and, as a citizen of a neutral country, do what she could to aid the nascent Resistance to Nazi occupation. She refused to perform in the German-occupied sector and retreated to her chateau in the Free Zone of France governed by the Vichy government. In liaison with British Intelligence she was able through her neutral status and showbiz activities to travel freely as a courier, even often tucking secret information in her clothing.
In early 1941, after a couple of liaison missions to Madrid, Baker returned to a Marseille which was becoming more dangerous for her work, with a wide fear of German occupation; it was decided that she should move to Vichy North Africa and a spurious medical certificate was supplied which enabled her to take ship to Algiers. In Algiers and later in Morocco she continued her intelligence gathering and transmission, including visits to Spain and Portugal under cover of theatre engagements.
Things changed in late 1942 when US forces landed in Morocco and Algeria and soon occupied both countries, pushing on to Tunisia to meet the British 8th Army coming from the east. Baker helped the US authorities navigate the complex politics of the Moroccan regime but eventually turned more to entertaining the forces – American, British and especially the Free French, performing on fit-up stages in military encampments and visiting the wounded in hospital, both in Africa and later stages of the war in the Levant, in liberated Europe and on a couple of visits to England. In 1944 she was officially enlisted as an officer in the French equivalent of the WAAF until she was demobilised in late 1945, and after the war received several military honours.
The final chapter of the book covers her post-war activities, including visits to the USA where she forced theatrical managers to desegregate audiences for her shows but was appalled by the continuing strength of racism – she had hoped better after the efforts of black American soldiers in the war – and the idealistic setting up in her chateau of a 'rainbow family' of orphans from around the world.

Emile Zola: a determined life, by Robert Lethbridge. Reaktion Books. £25. 304pp.

A full personal and literary biography of Emile Zola, covering his childhood and education, literary apprenticeship, his master work – the Rougon-Macquart series of novels - and his other, lesser, literary works. The final chapter 'Public and private lives' covers his two families – his wife and his mistress, by whom he had two children – and his political engagement, most famously manifested in his defence of the wrongly convicted Alfred Dreyfus, where his manifesto 'J'accuse' led to his self-exile for a year in London and to the eventual retrial of Dreyfus.
An epilogue deals briefly with the personal and literary legacy of his writings and finishes with the intriguing and now unresolvable question of whether Zola's death by carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a blocked stove chimney was, as the hasty inquest decided, an accident or whether it is was the act of a known anti-Dreyfusard workman who was working on the neighbouring house's roof and allegedly made a deathbed confession of the act.

Ninette's war: a Jewish story of survival in 1940's France, by John Jay. Profile Books. £20. xiii, 338 pp.

Ninette Dreyfus was 16 when World War II broke out and a member of the *haute Juiverie* of Paris. When Paris fell to the Germans in 1940 her immediate family managed to relocate to Cannes in the unoccupied, Vichy-controlled, Free Zone, where Ninette resumed her life of tennis and parties. Friends and relatives who stayed in Paris were not so lucky; they began to be rounded up and interned at Drancy prior to deportation to the concentration camps in the East.
In November 1942 Allied forces invaded and occupied French North Africa; the former Vichy zone was immediately occupied by Axis forces – most of it by the Germans but the Cote d'Azur and Savoie (once part of Italy) by the Italians, whose yoke was at first more easy-going. But restrictions grew and German forces started to impose the anti-Jewish measures which the Italians couldn't be bothered with; after the surrender of the Italian government to the Allies in September1943 they took over the Italian-occupied zone and conditions became much worse for Jews. For Ninette and her family life became a story of safe houses, false papers and eventually a perilous and exhausting escape over the Pyrenees to Spain. They made it to Madrid, where Ninette resumed a semblance of her Parisian social life with other exiles until it was safe to return to Paris

after the liberation, where they found their houses looted and many of their relatives and old friends deported, never to return.

Eleanor of Acquitaine: woman, queen and legend, by Lindy Grant. Reaktion Books. £16.95. 224pp.

A concise history of the long (80 years) and eventful life of Eleanor of Acquitaine. The first three sections cover the events of her life. The heiress to the rich province of Acquitaine, she first married the relatively poor and feeble Louis VII, with whom she had two daughters; she then dumped him (the marriage was dissolved on the grounds of consanguinity as they were fairly remote cousins) for the better prospect of the younger and richer Henry II of England, bringing under English control for two centuries the rich province of Acquitaine, centred on Bordeaux. They had eight surviving children, among them Richard I ('The Lionheart') and his successor King John. Her life was a roller-coaster of triumphs and disasters, including a disastrous participation in a crusade to Jerusalem, capture by and then release from pirates on her way back, taking the side of her sons in a war against her husband and then being put under house arrest by him for many years. When her son Richard I was imprisoned by the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI on his way back from a crusade she scraped together the huge ransom demanded and went personally to deliver it and bring her son back.
The fourth chapter covers *Family and dynasty*, where the relationships seem to have been as complicated and frequently poisonous as in the TV series *Dynasty*.
The fifth chapter covers a deal of monkish chroniclers' tittle-tattle about sexual misbehaviour by Eleanor and the royals and aristocrats around her, some of which may even be true.
The seventh chapter covers *Riches*: Eleanor seems to have been rather stingy in her patronage of the arts and gifts for the poor and religion.
The eighth chapter *Prayer* continues the pattern: apart from gifts to churches connected with the family or with strategic implications she was not a major donor to religious institutions.
The ninth chapter Power discusses how much power Eleanor had at different stages of her life and how well or badly she exercised it – waywardly and ill-judged at times but well in two supreme crises, when Richard I was absent on crusade and when he was captured by the Holy Roman Emperor.

No more Napoleons: how Britain managed Europe from Waterloo to World War One, by Andrew Lambert. Yale UP. £25. xvi,571pp.

The long-term British policy after the Napoleonic Wars was to ensure that no power in Europe would rise to dominate (or attempt to dominate) the continent as France had done under Napoleon. To this end it cultivated treaties and alliances with and between the states of Europe in order to maintain a balance of power among them. At the same time it used and expanded its naval and industrial power to expand its commercial empire and pay off its vast debts from the over 20 years of almost continuous war with France.
Britain began a wary normalisation of relations with France, which it still regarded for much of the 19th century as the main threat to Britain, and stayed aloof from the various wars between European states provided that no immediate British interests were threatened: for example, it made sure of the international acceptance of the neutrality of Belgium after its revolt against Dutch rule in order to lessen the threat that Antwerp and the Scheldt estuary could pose as a base for naval or military operations against Britain. It maintained a military base there and threatened that if either side in the Franco-Prussian war attempted to attack via Belgium it would join the other side. France was still considered the likely enemy during the reign of Napoleon III despite some warming of relations; it was only after Bismarck's successful aggressive wars against Denmark. Austria and France and the creation of the German empire, together with its massive industrial growth, that Britain began to notice a change in the balance of power in Europe. Germany's part in the Scramble for Africa and the massive expansion of its naval fleet led increasingly to a warmer relation with France (despite the Fashoda incident and French sympathy for the Boers), leading to the Entente Cordiale in 1903. The whole delicate balancing act came crashing down in 1914.

Monsieur Ozenfant's Academy, by Charles Darwent. Art Publishing Inc. £25. 238pp.

Amadee Ozenfant is now completely forgotten but in the 1920s was a major figure in the French avant garde art world as the protagonist of Purism, one of the 'Return to order' neoclassical art movements which emerged after World War One. In this endeavour he was partnered by a young and enthusiastic Swiss architect called Charles-Edmond Jeanneret, for whose artistic endeavours Ozenfant insisted on him using a (meaningless) pseudonym he had invented - Le Corbusier.

In 1936 Ozenfant was sent on a state stipend by France's Popular Front Socialist government as a semi-official ambassador for modern French culture to set up an art school in London as a point for young British artists to connect with modern trends in art – particularly French art. (The actual French Ambassador at the time was a reactionary Fascist sympathiser who loathed Ozenfant and all he stood for; the loathing was mutual). Ozenfant set it up in premises in Kensington and it attracted the interest of forward-thinking British artists. Henry Moore taught sculpture there for a time; Erno Goldfinger and his wife Ursula Blackwell took an interest. The best-known artist to have studied there is the Surrealist Leonora Carrington; in fact, many of the students were Surrealists. Ozenfant didn't mind this contrast with his own style provided that the artist could draw properly and firmly.

In 1938, with the threat of war in the air, Ozenfant closed the London academy and moved his academy to New York, where he stayed until well after the war. When he returned to Paris new art movements held sway: he and Purism were forgotten. His former Purist colleague Jeanneret, on the other hand, went on in the post-war period to become one of the most well-known and celebrated modern architects in the world, using the painterly pseudonym Ozenfant had made up for him – Le Corbusier.

The last third of the book is the author's translation of Ozenfant's London diary entries, an interesting French insight into London and its cultural life in the late 1930s.

The French Revolution: a political history, by John Hardman. Yale UP. £25. xxi,349pp.

The author has published major biographies of Louis XVI (which won the Society's prize in 2016), Marie Antoinette and Antoine Barnave; by contrast this book is a narrative political history of the revolution, starting with the financial crisis of the earlier 1780s (caused, ironically by the cost of French support for the American revolution against the British crown). The crisis led to the summoning of the dormant Estates-General which rapidly mutated into the National Assembly, which then rapidly passed an increasingly radical series of reform measures, including the abolition of the privileges of the nobility and the clergy.
The author describes the steady radicalisation of the revolution amid continuous political turmoil and the threat (soon realised) of attack by foreign powers; the

deposition and eventual execution of the king and queen; the institution and intensification of the Terror – all accompanied by endless confusion, debate and shifting political alliances – culminating in the final fall and execution of the ultras such as Robespierre and St Just and the Thermidorian reaction, paving the way for the 5-man Directory.

The Maginot Line: a new history, by Kevin Passmore. Yale UP. £30. xvi,486pp.

The Maginot Line has become proverbial as an example of how the military's strategic thinking can be based on thinking how to win the previous war rather than the next one. It was conceived in the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Great War, but actual construction did not begin until the 1930s, when France's economic difficulties led to some skimping in sections of the fortifications; these weaknesses were exploited by the German army when their blitzkrieg began on 10th May 1940, when defences built to withstand the weapons of the mid-1930s failed to stand up to the more powerful ones developed by 1940. There was also continuing conflict in French tactical and strategic thinking between proponents of a static, defensive strategy and those in favour of a more mobile one: this played out disastrously when the German invasion came. Service in the deeply buried fortifications was not positive for the morale of many of the French soldiers, some of whom were from wider regions of France and some were local. The fortified line sat a little uneasily in territory which had been part of the German Reich only 20 years or so previously; some of the French soldiers of local origin had been members of the German Imperial army in WWI, and the number of local Alsatians serving in the French defences was therefor capped. Relations with the local German-speaking population could also be a little equivocal.

Fractured France: a journey through a divided nation, by Andrew Hussey. Granta. £25. 318pp.

A report by a British journalist living in Paris on the current problems and discontents dividing France. In this part travelogue and part memoir the author travels from the decaying post-industrial towns of the north through the small towns of *la France profonde* to Marseille in the south, recording his own impressions and interviewing locals, from the person in the street to well-known writers and politicians. He brings out the contrast between some thriving and lively large cities such as Paris, Lyon or Bordeaux and smaller, dull, left-behind

provincial towns such as Amiens or rural market towns, and discusses the differences between ethnic groups such as ghettoised Moslem communities in the banlieues and the native French. Despite everything he ends on a hope of sorts, referring to the history of France endlessly renewing itself.

Francis I: the knight-king, by Glenn Richardson. Reaktion Books. £17.95. 223pp.

A concise history of the life of Francis I of France, who started life as a distant kinsman of the French king but through the death or lack of male heirs of those between him and the throne became king in 1515. He was tall and strong and became known as *Le roi chevalier*, but was also highly educated and a patron of the arts: among other building projects he turned the medieval Louvre into a Renaissance palace and built the magnificent and still standing Chateau de Chambord. He invited Italian artists and sculptors to his court, most prominent among them Leonardo da Vinci, who brought with him the painting of the Mona Lisa which Francis had bought in Italy and was given a house close to the Chateau de Chambord, another of Francis' Renaissance palaces. Francis attended Leonardo's deathbed.
He pursued the Renaissance ideal of 'magnificence' as a virtue in princes, perhaps mostly vividly displayed when he met Henry VIII of England, at that stage an (unreliable) ally, at the Field of the Cloth of Gold.
Francis was a stalwart warrior and had been in Italy several times in pursuit of his claim to the Duchy of Milan: he achieved this temporarily but eventually lost all at the Battle of Pavia, where he was taken prisoner and became the subject of a hefty ransom. This was the occasion when he wrote to his mother the phrase that is usually quoted as 'All is lost save honour'.
He also improved and modernised the administration and taxation of his realm and left it in good shape for his successor, though his persecutions of Protestants later in his reign were a foretaste of the religious wars that would tear France apart for much of the rest of the 16th century.

Hidden portraits: the untold stories of six women who loved Picasso, by Sue Roe. Faber. £25. 298pp.

In this book Sue Roe brings to the foreground six women who often appear as secondary characters in biographies of Picasso. The book covers the whole of Picasso's artistic life, during which Picasso repeatedly traded in his current

muse for a new model (not to mention a lot on the side), leaving most of them emotionally or psychologically damaged. The change of model often coincided with a change of artistic style. Model number five, Francoise Gilot, was an artist in her own right and an exception to the rule: she left Picasso on her own initiative to pursue her own career independently – a vindictive Picasso then took back (without warning her) all the paintings and drawings he had given her. Her artistic career flourished; she moved to the USA, married Jonas Salk (inventor of the Salk Polio vaccine) and died in New York in 2023 at the age of 101, exemplifying the saying that living well is the best revenge.