

*A Lively Midwinter Murder* by Katy Watson

PERHAPS an alternative title to this good old-fashioned, seasonal problem-solver, reminiscent of a traditional Agatha Christie whodunnit, might be three dahlias, a wedding and a funeral.

The dahlias here are three friends, all of them actresses, who as well as their stage exploits, have established a reputation as being rather good at solving murder mysteries.

Their sleuthing style is fortuitously more in the mould of Miss Marple rather than Hercule Poirot who always strikes me as a little too arrogant at times in some of the Christie novels I have read.

Meanwhile the action here takes place in an isolated Scottish castle where the guests are gathered for a society wedding on Christmas Eve. To make matters worse heavy snow arrives cutting the building off from the rest of civilisation.

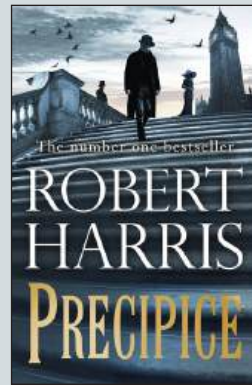
Not really a problem you might think until the body of one of the wedding guests is found outside the family chapel wearing a wedding dress and a stolen necklace.

This is the fourth book in Katy Watson's 'dahlia' collection although it's a stand-alone story and, despite its seasonal appeal, can be read at any time of the year.

Watson has the knack of making even the side characters stand out and the way in which they interact is certainly a tangled web.

Don't be concerned if you do lose your way a little at times in deepest Scotland, there is a wedding invitation, a cast list and a map of the local area provided.

*Published by Constable*



*Precipice* by Robert Harris

I'VE always been an avid fan of Robert Harris and, while I acknowledge that some of his titles are better than others, I'd put him up there with the top popular writers around at the moment.

The thing I've liked best about his stories is the thorough research he carries out into historical events and the investigative, journalistic approach he uses to unfold the layers of a story.

There has to be an exception to any rule but perhaps it's the fact that the subject matter of *Precipice* was not to my liking rather than the way in which the narrative is composed.

In brief, the novel tells the true story of the clandestine affair between Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and socialite Venetia Stanley- all while the government is wrestling with a solution to the Irish Question and coming to terms with the onset of the First World War.

Harris was given access to archives containing Asquith's messages to Venetia but her replies have been lost so we effectively only get one side of the story.

The couple's affair, he aged in his early sixties and she in her mid-twenties, lasted several years and, as there were numerous mail deliveries in London at the time, often involved three or four letter exchanges every day.

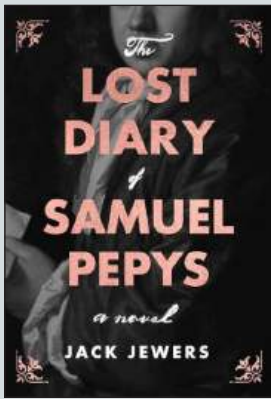
To make matters worse, Asquith, rather like a moon-struck teenager, takes to penning his love-notes during the course of key Cabinet meetings when his attention should have been fully focused on the nation's welfare. Even more serious though, the Liberal politician often includes war related information and other classified information in the missives, some of which are found by the public after being thrown haphazardly out of the window of their chauffeur driven car in public places like Hyde Park.

There is a slight detective element to the story as a security agent is tasked to get to the bottom of where the leaks are coming from but we know most of the answers so there is little mystery to unravel.

*Published by Penguin*

# Book ahead

Book now to beat the after Christmas blues



*The Lost Diary of Samuel Pepys* by Jack Jewers

SAMUEL Pepys is perhaps best known as the author of a diary, written in his own form of shorthand, which he kept for almost ten years from the beginning of 1660.

Less known is the fact that our leading commentator on Restoration England, the Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London that followed, was also a raconteur, womaniser and thorough going man about town who had good reason to use a secret code to describe some of his activities.

For the day job, he worked as the Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board, a kind of logistics officer for the senior service, and in the process had access to many of the country's most important people.

Jewers works on the premise that Pepys did not stop his journal writing after a decade as appears likely but continued to chronicle his further adventures, hence the title of the novel.

It's 1669, three years after the fire, that Pepys and his willing assistant Will Hewer are ordered away from the familiarity of London to the boisterous taverns, congested backstreets and busy shipyards of Portsmouth.

Their mission is to investigate who has murdered the agent who preceded them to the naval base to enquire why the account books of a man-of-war, the Prince Rupert, are far from ship-shape. Add in a band of female outlaws, some traitorous officials, professional assassins and the threat of a Dutch invasion and you have a pacy, pulsating tale that will drag you along with it.

As for Pepys himself though, my credulity did get a little stretched. Here's a man (admittedly only aged 36 at the time, if my maths is correct) but more used to a sedentary and somewhat dissolute lifestyle, seemingly taking so readily and easily to such high energy derring-do.

*Footnote: While other wealthy people buried money, paintings, jewellery, silver etc. in their gardens to save them from the ravages of the Great Fire of London, Pepys was altogether more epicurean. He only stashed away his best vintage wines and the tastiest of his cheeses.*

**Published by Moonflower**



*Sound of the Sirens*, Bridport Arts Centre, February 7.  
Tickets from: [www.bridport-arts.com](http://www.bridport-arts.com).



*Chris Difford*, Marine Theatre, Lyme Regis, February 7.  
Tickets from: [www.marinetheatre.com](http://www.marinetheatre.com).



*Call yourself an Irishman!* Bridport Arts Centre, February 8.  
Tickets from: [www.bridport-arts.com](http://www.bridport-arts.com).



*Coming to England*, The Lighthouse, Poole, February 13-15.  
Tickets from: [www.lighthousepoole.co.uk](http://www.lighthousepoole.co.uk)