

Take Five

Alan Hollinghurst selects five books on themes also explored in his own work.

1) **Henry James** – *What Maisie Knew* (1897): perhaps the most dazzling and technically original of all James's novels, a child's-eye view of the 1890s social world in which her divorcing parents set her adrift. Brilliant comedy deepens into a luminous study of innocence.

2) **Ronald Firbank** – *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923): this coruscating novel of court life in 'some imaginary Vienna' combines the formal economy of Firbank's earlier experiments with a new boldness in its description of gay and lesbian desire. Like all his 'late' masterpieces (he died aged forty in 1926), it is both exquisitely funny and hauntingly sad.

3) **Evelyn Waugh** – *A Handful of Dust* (1934): Waugh's tragi-comic masterpiece, enthralling and unsparing in its portrait of upper-class life at the mercy of modernity and money. The bold finale set in the Brazilian jungle is unforgettable, but it is worth seeking out Waugh's brief alternative ending, in its way even more devastating.

4) **Henry Green** – *Nothing* (1950): a lesser-known favourite among Green's wonderfully original novels, set in a post-war London of reduced circumstances and the awkward accommodations of a suddenly older generation to that of their now adult children. The narrative is sustained almost entirely by Green's miraculous ear for the nonsense of conversation and the anxieties lurking beneath it.

5) **Edmund White** – *My Lives* (2005): perhaps the masterpiece of a great gay writer who has explored his own life in a sequence of fictions, this autobiography, arranged not by chronology but by subject, outdoes even his novels in the candour of its analysis of sexual desire and in the acuteness and generosity of its portraits of family, lovers and friends.