

# The power of the flower

Flower power is back. Following her much-lauded magnum opus, *The Rose*, Jennifer Potter is back in full bloom with new research, entitled *Seven Flowers And How They Shaped Our World*.

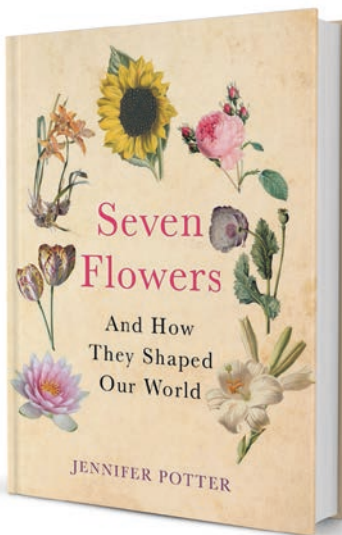
This, her fifth study of what orders our gardens and what lies behind the universal pleasure of gardening, concentrates on seven flowers that have, in one way or another, affected cultures and attitudes including, as one would expect, matters concerning the heart. The Suburb's botanical historian has extended her scope across the globe and deep into the ancient world to bring to the reader this intensely meticulous account of the origins of these seven flowers and how they have influenced the behaviour of mankind.

Her previous book, *The Rose*, was its inspiration. "For five long years I tracked the rose's evolution, struck by how central it had been to so many cultures," she writes. "Who you are dictates how you see the rose. Each age has reinvented the rose in its own image." She then asked herself: "If the rose can do this what about other flowers?"

The seven chosen flowers, including the rose and her least-favoured bloom, the orchid ("nasty, spidery things"), are all scrutinised for the ways they have shaped lives, whether in the fields of politics or commerce, medicine or aestheticism, or in mythology.

The lotus, for example, traditionally regarded as the flower of Buddhist contemplation, played a pivotal role, many millenniums ago, in the mystery of creation and the mythology of ancient Egyptians, Indians and Chinese. We learn that the burial chambers of the elite in Egyptian society, including that of the boy king Tutankhamun, contained dried lotus blooms and images of the flower on various artefacts which were placed in the tomb to sweeten the deceased's journey into the afterlife.

The lotus's powers and sacred associations are shared by the lily, the origins of which go back 3,500 years in Europe. Its



application as a medicine and a healing ointment were matched by its use as a perfume (for men). In more recent times the lily has been a floral accessory of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, a symbol of intimate imaginings of poets and the object of adoration from those of the Aesthetic Movement, Oscar Wilde having once said: "The reason we love the lily and the sunflower is that they are the two perfect models of design... the gaudy leonine beauty of the one and the precious loveliness of the other... entire and perfect joy."

Well, whatever the great aesthetes thought of the sunflower, another of Jennifer Potter's seven choices, she has her own view. "The sunflower is a brute," she writes before adding how it had an uncanny ability to lock you into its stare. Argument over the sunflower's heliotropic properties, the plant turning its head from eastwards to westwards as the day progresses, are given with the author scorning the myths and religious symbolism attached to this daily movement.

Another flower that could also be described as a "brute" is the opium poppy, not because of its appearance of course but because of its use as an illegal drug. One of the ironies surrounding this feared and medically-acclaimed plant is that it began botanical life as a food in the western Mediterranean and then moved eastwards where now,

principally in Afghanistan, it is grown, as the author puts it, "to haunt those who first recognised its potency." The political impact of flowers is perhaps no better exemplified than by the two Opium Wars of the nineteenth century in which Britain, in pursuit of commerce, sought to force opium produced in India on a Chinese government afraid of the drug's addictive effects on the nation's populace.

The genesis of Jennifer Potter's inspiration can probably be traced to a sojourn in San Francisco during the Flower Power era where she immersed herself among the Beautiful People and their ways. However, she says she was not one to wear a flower in her hair. Well, of course not... the flowers were already in her head.

PETER HODGSON

*Seven Flowers and How They Shaped Our World by Jennifer Potter. Published by Atlantic Books at £25*

Theatres of War is about a theatre – an opera house in Naples – and a war – the Italian campaign in 1943. But it is really about love: the love of two men for one woman, and the love of opera.

Frank and Edmund are two British officers fighting in Italy in 1943. While on a brief period of leave in Naples, Frank stumbles upon an abandoned theatre and determines to put on first a play, and then an opera. Vermillion, Edmund's girlfriend, follows Edmund to Naples from Cairo and then helps Frank stage his operas. The inevitable love triangle develops.

The novel has an old-fashioned feel, and this is, I think, one of its strengths. It is authentic. A presumption grew up in the 1960s and 70s that the old black-and-white films of wartime romances portraying as they did bravery, a stiff upper lip, romantic infatuation, naivety and innocence, were lying to us. But if you read diaries and

autobiographies of the time, and the works of historians such as James Holland, it seems clear that this was the way many British behaved in the war, and that it got them through it. Richard Hall understands this, and adds some examples of narrow mindedness which are breathtaking by modern standards, but once again were to be expected at the time. Edmund's courage is both remarkable and believable, as is his chauvinism.

Hall has clearly researched his subjects carefully: the Italian campaign, Naples, wartime behaviour. The battle scenes, the freezing horror that was Monte Cassino in that winter, are well crafted, especially in the opening, where we see Frank bellowing out Schubert's songs in an attempt to shore up his own courage under bombardment. But it is the opera, and in particular the effect it has on the various characters in the book, that grabs the reader. I know little about opera, I don't understand it, and before I read this book I didn't understand the people who love it. But here we see its effect on Frank, on Vermillion, on the Italian singers

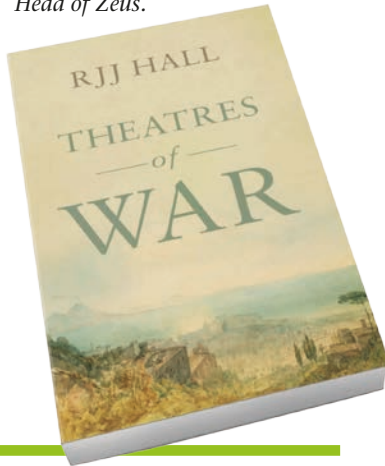
and musicians, and on the ordinary soldiers who come to watch.

The Second World War was a tragedy, inhuman in its scale and depravity. But there were countless tiny incidents of love and of beauty where humanity prevailed. *Theatres of War* tells the story of one of these.

MICHAEL RIDPATH

*Theatres of War by RJJ Hall, Matador: paperback 347 pages, £9.99; e-book £4.99.*

*Theatres of War is shortlisted for the winter 2013 collection of The People's Book Prize. Vote for RJJ Hall's book at [www.peoplesbookprize.com](http://www.peoplesbookprize.com). Michael Ridpath's latest book, *Traitor's Gate*, is published by Head of Zeus.*



## SNOWDROPS

*I know we look sad: unfortunately it's instinct.*

*If your ancestors had seen what we endured maybe you'd understand. We were always attracted to sacred places, the never ending peace of holy ground, only the sound of bell ringing, the chantings and sheep.*

*They were on horseback, thundered through the fields and forests where we lay, some dormant others in bloom. The noise...their hooves ripped the earth, then came the cries. It happened all over, but in the east, Walsingham, Framlingham, great swathes of us were*

*wiped out, others so shocked they didn't see daylight for years. We don't like being thought of as sad. I know they hadn't come for us but it was a bloodbath. We were part of it. No, talking about it doesn't help.*

*From Saying it with Flowers by Peter Phillips*



At the Free Church Christmas Fair Diana Darrer, Christine Barrow, Anne Lowe and Isobel Darrer sell crafts, Christmas gifts and decorations.

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