

John Burnside

Writer - Fiction and Non-fiction

John Burnside was born in 1955 and died on the 29th May 2024. He was among the most acclaimed writers of his generation. His novels, short stories, poetry and memoirs won numerous awards, including the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the Whitbread Poetry Award, the Petrarca Prize, the Saltire Scottish Book of the Year and, in 2024, he received the David Cohen Prize for a lifetime's achievement in literature. In 2011 *Black Cat Bone* won both the Forward and the T.S. Eliot Prizes for poetry.



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Publications

Fiction

Publication Details	Notes
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Something Like Happy 2013
Winner of the 2014 Edge Hill Short Story Prize.
In these remarkable stories, John Burnside takes us into the lives of men and women trapped in marriage, ensnared by drink, diminished by disappointment; all kinds of women, all kinds of men – lonely, unfaithful, dying – driving empty roads at night. These are people for whom the idea of ‘home’ has become increasingly intangible, hard to believe – and happiness, or grace, or freedom, all now seem to belong in some kind of dream, or a fable they might have read in a children's picture book. As he says in one story, ‘All a man has is his work and his sense of himself, all the secret life he holds inside that nobody else can know.’ But in each of these normal, damaged lives, we are shown something extraordinary: a dogged belief in some kind of hope or beauty that flies in the face of all reason and is, as a result, both transfiguring and heart-rending.
These exquisitely written pieces, each weighted so perfectly, opens up the whole wound of a life in one moment – and each of these twelve short stories carries the freight and density of a great novel.

A Summer of Drowning 2011
Jonathan Cape
Shortlisted for the Costa Novel of the Year Award.
A young girl, Liv, lives with her mother on a remote island in the Arctic Circle. Her only friend is an old man who beguiles her with tales of trolls, mermaids, and the huldra, a wild spirit who appears as an irresistibly beautiful girl, to tempt young men to danger and death. Then two boys drown within weeks of each other under mysterious circumstances, in the still, moonlit waters off the shores of Liv's home. Were the deaths accidental or were the boys lured to their doom by a malevolent spirit?

Glister 2008
Jonathan Cape
The children of Innertown exist in a state of suspended terror. Every year or so, a boy from their school disappears, vanishing into the wasteland of the old chemical plant. Nobody knows where these boys go, or whether they are alive or dead, and without evidence the authorities claim they are simply runaways.
The town policeman, Morrison, knows otherwise. He was involved in the cover-up of one boy's murder, and he believes all the boys have been killed. Though he is seriously compromised, he would still like to find out the killer's identity.
The local children also want to know and, in their fear and frustration, they turn on Rivers, a sad fantasist and suspected paedophile living alone at the edge of the wasteland. Trapped and frightened, one of the boys, Leonard, tries to escape, taking refuge in the poisoned ruins of the old plant; there he finds another boy, who might be the missing Liam and might be a figment of his imagination. With his help, Leonard comes to understand the policeman's involvement, and exacts the necessary revenge - before following Liam into the Glister: possibly a disused chemical weapons facility, possibly a passage to the outer world.
A terrifying exploration of loss and the violence that pools under the surface of the everyday, Glister is an exquisitely written, darkly imagined novel.

The Devil's Footprints 2007
Jonathan Cape
Once, on a winter's night many years ago, after a heavy snow, the devil passed through the Scottish fishing town of Coldhaven, leaving a trail of dark hoofprints across the streets and roofs of the sleeping town.
Michael Gardiner has lived in Coldhaven all his life, but still feels like an outsider, a blow-in. When Moira Birnie decides that her abusive husband is the devil and then kills herself and her two young sons, a terrible chain of events begins. Michael's infatuation with Moira's teenage daughter takes him on a journey towards a defined fate, where he is forced to face his present and then, finally, his past...

Living Nowhere
2003
Jonathan Cape

Corby, the industrial new town built around a vast steel works, draws many to the fires of its furnaces - in the hope of steady work, a better house, a fresh start. Amongst them are Francis Cameron, from Scotland, and his friend Jan Ruckert, the son of Latvian refugees. Alienated, intelligent and curious, they form a strong and lasting bond: two teenage boys finding their feet in a foreign place. But violence hangs in the Corby air like the ash and the stench from the steel works, and when it comes down it is sudden and lethal - with repercussions that will last a lifetime. Living Nowhere is a story of friendship and loss - a resonant, thrilling book that carries at its core a beautiful and terrible secret.

The Locust Room
2001
Jonathan Cape

During the spring and summer of 1975, a rapist stalked the streets of Cambridge, attacking young, single women in their bed-sits and flats and subjecting them to horrifying and increasingly violent assaults. For several months the city endured a climate of fear and suspicion, where the old assumptions about sexual relations and civic decency fell into question, and no male could be taken at face value. These events form the background to The Locust Room, in which a young photographer is forced by circumstances to examine his relations with women, with other men and with his family at home. Over one dramatic summer, he becomes involved in a series of sexual intrigues and acts of subtle violence as he journeys towards tentative self-definition and what he comes to see as honourable isolation. What emerges from this atmosphere of tension and terror is an exquisitely written, beautifully observed fiction - and a moving examination of the possibilities of male tenderness, individual autonomy and personal grace.

Burning Elvis
2000
Jonathan Cape

As he sets out on his first adventure in life, a young man enters the dark realm of adult violence; a married suburbanite longs for the wide, mysterious world that seems to hover just beyond the next turn in the road; a pair of disturbed twins commit a pointless crime; and the boy of the title story, at once appalled and beguiled by the glamour of others, has all his hopes and expectations exposed by a senseless murder.

Burning Elvis is a book about innocence and fear, about boys and men who have no idea who they are, or what they are supposed to do, but are haunted by a vague apprehension of possible grace. In their differing ways they are lost, scared and, at the same time, caught up in a quest, a search for the real Graceland -- 'an idea of home, something in black and white, the smell of cheap lilac soap and a radio playing in the kitchen...and a mouthful of trick blood on the bathroom floor, to keep the night away.'

Already celebrated as a prodigiously gifted novelist and poet, John Burnside here extends his range to the shorter form, in a collection of stories written with the same beautiful control, the same power to ravish and disturb.

The Mercy Boys
1999
Jonathan Cape

Winner of an Encore Award.

The Mercy Boys are four Dundee men who meet every day in their local pub and drink: first to find order, then oblivion. Each has his own ghosts, his dreams of escape. But when death comes to the Mercy Boys it comes suddenly and with staggering violence, and their dreams of leaving bleed into nightmares.

<p>The Dumb House 1997 Jonathan Cape</p>	<p>In Persian myth, it is said that Akbar the Great once built a palace which he filled with newborn children, attended only by mutes, in order to learn whether language is innate or aquired. As the year passed and the children grew into their silent and difficult world, this palace became known as the Gang Mahal, or Dumb House. In his first novel, John Burnside explores the possibilities inherent in a modern-day repetition of Akbar`s investigations. Following the death of his mother, the unnamed narrator creates a twisted variant of the Dumb House, finally using his own children as subjects in a bizarre experiment. When the children develop a musical language of their own, however, their gaoler is the one who is excluded, and he extracts an appalling revenge.</p>
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Non-Fiction

Publication Details	Notes
<p>I Put a Spell on You 2014 Jonathan Cape</p>	<p>In this exquisite, haunting book, John Burnside describes his coming of age from the industrial misery of Cowdenbeath and Corby to the new world of Cambridge. This is a memoir of romance - of lost love and the love of being lost - darkened by threat, illuminated by glamour.</p> <p>The old Scots word 'glamour' means magical charm, and the first time he was played I Put a Spell on You, John Burnside thought he had never heard a more beautiful song - it was an enchantment, a fascination that would turn to obsession. Implicit in the song were all the ambiguities that intrigued him - love, possession and danger - and this book is an exploration of the darker side of glamour and attraction. Beginning with memories of a brutal murder, the book follows the author through a series of uncanny encounters with 'lost girls', with brilliant digressions on murder ballads, voodoo, acid and insomnia, and a cast that includes Kafka and Narcissus, Diane Arbus and Mel Lyman, The Four Tops and Screamin' Jay Hawkins, and time spent lost in the Arctic Circle, black-and-white films and a mental institution. Ending with the tender summoning of the ghost of his dying mother as she sings along to the radio in her empty kitchen, I Put a Spell on You is a book about memory, about the other side of love: a book of secrets and wonders.</p>

Publication Details	Notes
A Lie About My Father 2006 Jonathan Cape	<p>Winner of the Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year Award, Scottish Arts Council Non-Fiction Book of the Year, the Corine Literature Prize (Germany) and the Madeleine Zepter Prize (France).</p> <p>He had his final heart attack in the Silver Band Club in Corby, somewhere between the bar and the cigarette machine. A foundling a fantasist a morose, threatening drinker who was quick with his hands, he hadn't seen his son for years. And for all those years the two estranged men had been falling - each at their own pace - towards their own vanishing points. John Burnside's extraordinary story of this failed relationship is an exquisitely written evocation of a lost and damaged world of childhood: from the condemned prefabs, overgrown gardens and haunted woods of Cowdenbeath to the simmering gang violence and industrial squalor of Corby. And through all this, the constants of his father's world: men defined by the drink they could take and the pain they could stand, men shaped by their guilt and machismo. This was a life of secrets - drunken rampages, adolescent fumbings, domestic violence, illicit affairs, angels in deserted houses - which was to set a pattern of falling: binge-drinking, drug abuse and emotional exile: trying to eradicate the past, trying to disappear. "A Lie About My Father" is about forgiving but not forgetting, about examining the way men are made and how they fall apart, about understanding that in order to have a good son you must have a good father. John Burnside's unflinching honesty, profound thinking and heart-stopping images of beauty and fracture combine to create a moving, unforgettable memoir of two lost men: a father and his child.</p>

Poetry

Publication Details	Notes
Black Cat Bone 2011 Jonathan Cape	<p>Winner of the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for best collection.</p> <p>John Burnside's remarkable book is full of strange, unnerving poems that hang in the memory like a myth or a song. These are poems of thwarted love and disappointment, of raw desire, of the stalking beast, 'eye-teeth/and muzzle/coated with blood'; poems that recognise 'we have too much to gain from the gods, and this is why/they fail to love us'; poems that tell of an obsessive lover coming to grief in a sequence that echoes the old murder ballads, or of a hunter losing himself in the woods while pursuing an unknown and possibly unknowable quarry.</p> <p>Drawing on sources as various as the paintings of Pieter Brueghel and the lyrics of Delta blues, Black Cat Bone examines varieties of love, faith, hope and illusion, to suggest an unusual possibility: that when the search for what we expected to find - in the forest or in our own hearts - ends in failure, we can now begin the hard and disciplined quest for what is actually there.</p> <p>Full of risk and wonder, Black Cat Bone shows the range of Burnside's abilities, but also strikes out for new territories. He remains consistently, though, one of our finest living lyric poets and each of these astonishing poems is as clear and memorable as 'a silver bracelet//falling for days/through an inch and a half/of ice'.</p>

Publication Details	Notes
The Hunt in the Forest 2009 Jonathan Cape	<p>Taking its title from Uccello's famous painting of a band of men - on foot and on horseback - massing for the chase, John Burnside's new poems take us on a journey out of the light and into the darkness, where we may just as easily lose ourselves as find what we are looking for.</p> <p>In these poems of hunting and predation, Burnside explores our most deep-rooted and primeval pursuits: romantic love, memory, selfhood, grief, the recollection of the dead. Yet just as we seek, so are we sought out: at any moment we may slide into loss or be gathered in by some otherworldly light; at any moment, the angel of the annunciation may seek us out and demand some astonishing transformation. Even in the pursuit of love, or in the exercise of memory, we fall into snares and become entangled in veils; just as we are always on the point of discovery, so we are always a hair's-breadth away from being lost. Concerned with love and mourning, with what we discover and what remains hidden - with learning how to follow the trail through the forest and find the way home - above all, these poems are about the quest: knowing that whatever we bring back from the hunt, it is always hard-won and never fully our own.</p> <p>With this extraordinary collection of fleet and deftly beautiful poems, John Burnside confirms his place at the forefront of writing, as one of a handful of truly important British poets working today.</p>
Gift Songs 2007 Jonathan Cape	<p>To the Shakers, a good song was a gift; indeed the test of a song's goodness was how much of a gift it was. In their call to 'labour to make the way of God your own', Shaker artists expressed an aesthetic that had much in common with the old Japanese notion, attributed to Hokusai, that to paint bamboo, one had first to become bamboo.</p> <p>In his tenth collection, John Burnside begins with an interrogation of the gift song, treating matters of faith and connection, the community of living creatures and the idea of a free church - where faith is placed, not in dogma or a possible credo, but in the indefinable - and moves on through explorations of time and place, towards a tentative and idiosyncratic re-ligere, the beginnings of a renewal of the connection to, and faith in, an ordered world.</p> <p>The book closes with a series of meditations on place, entitled 'Four Quartets', intended both as a spiritual response to the string quartets of Bartók and Britten (as Eliot's were to Beethoven's late quartets), and as an experiment in the poetic form that the finest of poets, the true miglior fabbro, chose as a medium for his own declaration of faith. The poems in this collection are true gifts: thrillingly beautiful, charged with power and mystery, each imbued with the generous skills of a master of his craft.</p>

Publication Details	Notes
Selected Poems 2006 Jonathan Cape	<p>Over seventeen years and nine collections, John Burnside has built - in the words of Bernard O'Donoghue - 'a poetic corpus of the first significance', a poetry of luminous, limpid grace. His territory is the no-man's-land of threshold and margin, the charmed half-light of the liminal, a domestic world threaded through with mystery, myth and longing.</p> <p>In this Selected Poems we can see themes emerge and develop within the growing confidence of Burnside's sinuous lyric poise: the place of the individual in the world, the idea of dwelling, of home, within that community, and the lure of absence and escape set against the possibilities of renewal and continuity.</p> <p>This is consummate, immaculate work born out of a lean and agile craftsmanship, profound philosophical thought and a haunted, haunting imagination; the result is a poetry that makes intimate, resonant, exquisite music.</p>
The Good Neighbour 2005 Jonathan Cape	<p>Shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize for best collection.</p> <p>The question of how we live together sits at the heart of this, John Burnside's ninth collection of poetry. Tensions between the need for love and the desire to be alone, between the idea that 'good fences makes good neighbours' and the fact that we must live with one another in order to survive and, most of all, the shifting space between 'self' and 'other' - between solitary experience and the 'real world' - inform The Good Neighbour from start to finish. From intimate and sometimes painful explorations of married life to meditations on isolated communities and individuals such as the Mennonites, or the last man to speak a now-extinct Caucasian language, this is a book about intimacy and distance, about love and freedom, that touches upon the basic question of what it is to be individual in a world where there is no such thing as an individual destiny. Crafted with Burnside's customary artistry and confidence, the poems in The Good Neighbour are rich in intellectual nourishment and originality, full of light and grace and passionate care.</p>
The Light Trap 2002 Jonathan Cape	<p>Shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year Award.</p> <p>In this, his eighth collection of poetry, John Burnside looks deeply into the ways we see our world: addressing the organic relationship between the environment and the unconscious, between ideas and the creatures, in poems whose protagonists - from the deer who pass through a suburban garden to the poet's six-month-old son - are infinitely mysterious, difficult and 'out there'. These are poems that move beyond the traditional idea of 'nature poetry', investigating the very basis of our knowledge, not only of living things, but of the play of gravity and light that makes our world and theirs possible. Resonant and luminous, this is work of intimacy and wonder.</p>

Publication Details	Notes
The Asylum Dance 2000 Jonathan Cape	<p>Winner of the Whitbread Poetry Award and shortlisted for both the T. S. Eliot prize and the Forward Prize for best collection.</p> <p>Lucid, tender, and strangely troubling, the poems in <i>The Asylum Dance</i> - which won the Whitbread Prize for Poetry - are hymns to the tension between the sanctuary of home and the lure of escape. This is territory that Burnside has made his own: a domestic world threaded through with myth and longing, beyond which lies a no man's land - the 'somewhere in between' - of dusk or dawn, of mists or sudden light, where the epiphanies are.</p> <p>Using the framework of four long poems, 'Ports', 'Settlements', 'Fields' and 'Roads', the poet balances presence with absence; we are shown the homing instinct - felt in the blood and marrow - as a pull to refuge, simplicity, and a safe haven, while at the same time hearing the siren call from the world beyond: the thrilling expectancy of fairground or dancehall, the possibilities of the open road. With a confident open line and complete command of the language, John Burnside writes with grace, agility and profound philosophical purpose, confirming his position in the front rank of contemporary poetry.</p>
A Normal Skin 1997 Jonathan Cape	<p>From memories of childhood and personal loss to the quiet celebration of a lover's navigational skills, from meditations on nature and sexuality to the fantasy world of aquarium fish, the poems in <i>A Normal Skin</i> cover a wide range: lyrical in tone, and highly visual, they express once again the poet's sense of wonder at the world, while exploring some new preoccupations, including love and identity the tension between masking and self-revelation, and the writer's pleasure at returning to Scotland after a long absence. Most significant, however, is the continuing exploration of the relationship between self and other, and of the constant shifting of territory and boundaries, seen through the prism of love and home.</p>
Swimming in the Flood 1995 Jonathan Cape	<p>A breakthrough book of poetry by one of the most exciting young poets in Britain. Dealing with issues of childhood, betrayal and domestic and sexual violence, <i>Swimming In The Flood</i> is a dark and powerful collection.</p>
The Myth of the Twin 1994 Jonathan Cape	<p>This collection of poetry is concerned with the place of the individual in the world and the necessary coexistence of the self and the other - with the twin or double. The poems look at the dialogue between the two, and the move from solipsism to a growing sense of community.</p>
Feast Days 1992 Secker and Warburg	<p>Winner of the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize.</p> <p>The poems in this collection focus on memories of a Scottish childhood, the felt absence of a religious faith, and the loss of Burnside's mother and grandmother.</p>
Common Knowledge 1991 Secker and Warburg	<p>Winner of a Scottish Arts Council Book Award.</p> <p>A collection of poems concerned with the common and the familiar - household items which are examined so hard that they begin to glow, taking on the aspect of icons.</p>

Publication Details	Notes
The Hoop 1988 Carcenet	Winner of a Scottish Arts Council Book Award. In 'The Hoop', John Burnside's first book of poems, he takes his bearings from Celtic mythology and from landscape, especially that of Gloucestershire. 'The things that contribute to how I work are botanical texts and drawings, fairy stories, Celtic and Romance literature.' The originality of his work lies in its themes - stewardship of the land, a sense that landscape by being described is valued and preserved - and in his disciplined eye and ear.
