

TREASURE PALACES

GREAT WRITERS VISIT GREAT MUSEUMS

FOREWORD BY NICHOLAS SEROTA

EDITED BY MAGGIE FERGUSON

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Books

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Preface

Some people have good ideas in the bath; Tim de Lisle had one of his best in the British Museum. It was the spring of 2008, and he was soon to take over as editor of *The Economist's* sister magazine, *Intelligent Life*, when he went with his ten-year-old daughter to the BM's Chinese New Year day. The Terracotta Army was sold out, but they amused themselves instead following a trail of lanterns, watching a performance by a Chinese theatre troupe and browsing the stalls in the Great Court, which had been transformed into a giant wok.

That day was to go down in British Museum history as the single best attended they had ever had. Thirty-five thousand visitors passed through the turnstiles, and the main doors had to be shut for the first time since the Chartist riots of 1848.

It struck Tim that a phenomenon like this simply couldn't have happened in his childhood. Back then, in the 1970s, museums were, he remembered, "mostly dreary places: dusty, fusty, impenetrable". He remembered being dragged out by his parents on wet Sunday afternoons to visit the V&A ("frumpy old frocks on headless mannequins"), the Imperial War Museum ("noisy, confusing and tedious") and the Natural History Museum ("one damned skeleton after another").

But in the 30-odd years between his childhood and his children's, the winds of change had blown through museums. They had woken up, become light and welcoming rather than gloomily introverted. The Louvre had sprouted glass pyramids, and the Great Court at the British Museum turned into a glass doughnut.

Inspired by all this, Tim dreamed up a new series. Called "Authors on Museums", its formula was simple, but strong. With

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each issue of *Intelligent Life* a distinguished writer – not an art critic – would return to a museum that had played some part in their life, and write about what they liked (or didn't) about it, weaving in a thread of memoir.

A couple of years later, I took over the commissioning of the series. I had some interesting misses. Rose Tremain explained that she disliked museums in the same way that she disliked New Year parties – “I feel imprisoned by the demand to come up with a suitable emotional and intellectual response in a very narrow piece of time”; Richard Ford confessed that he gives himself “about 45 minutes before the floors turn to concrete and my eyes don't focus”; David Sedaris admitted that he wasn't a museums kind of person, but “a gift shop and café kind of person”.

But more often than not authors were raring to go, and by the time the series drew to a close earlier this year, 38 authors had written about museums that inspired them – even, in some cases, changed their lives. Their choices ranged from the august (John Lanchester on the Prado) to the domestic (Roddy Doyle on the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York) and the frankly weird (Aminatta Forna on the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb). What distinguished and unified them all, however, was the quality of writing.

We spent a long time mulling over which pieces to include in this volume, and we think we've chosen 24 of the very best. We hope you enjoy them as much as we have.

Maggie Fergusson

There's Life in These Walls

THE LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM, NEW YORK

Roddy Doyle

It is hard to accept that this is a museum. It is hard not to expect a member of the Gumpertz family, probably Mrs Gumpertz, to walk in and demand to know what I'm doing here, in their home.

"Looking at your wallpaper" is the answer.

Mrs Gumpertz – Nathalie, née Rheinsberg – lived here, at 97 Orchard Street, on New York's Lower East Side, a few doors south of Delancey Street. I'm standing in the apartment she occupied with her four children and her husband, Julius, until he left for work one morning in October 1874. He was a shoemaker, a heel cutter, and he never returned.

I live in Dublin, a city of plaques. Renowned writers, revered nation-builders – the city seems to have been full of them. I often wonder what would happen to the architectural glory that is Georgian Dublin if someone unscrewed a plaque. It might collapse. There is a plaque on the front wall of a house across the street from my suburban home: Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Féin, lived there. A ten-minute walk away, there's another – Erwin Schrödinger, physicist and Nobellaureate, lived here between 1939 and 1956. Bram Stoker grew up ten minutes away in the opposite direction, although there's no plaque on the side of that house. Presumably the current occupiers don't want to see their front garden packed, railings to letterbox, with young Japanese vampires. There is a Stoker plaque on the side of a different house, on Kildare Street.

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I like the plaques. I like knowing that James Joyce lived here, and here, and here and here and here, and that Lord Edward Carson was born over there. I like the surprises – Sheridan Le Fanu lived here, Ernest Shackleton lived here, Ludwig Wittgenstein liked to sit and write at these steps in the winter months of 1948 and 1949. The plaques seem to add depth to the city, to make it at once more Irish and less insular. It is right to celebrate and point out the hard work, the ingenuity, the good luck and bad luck that made these names so famous. But there is the limitation: fame. I have never seen a plaque saying “Mary Collins lived here, 1897–1932; she loved her family”, or “Derek Murphy, 1923–2001, printer, sat on these steps and had a smoke on his way home from work. He liked a laugh and always tried his best.”

That is why the Tenement Museum is so special and why I’m here for the third time in 15 years. No famous people lived here. But people did.

I’m standing in front of a sewing-machine very like the one that Nathalie Gumpertz must have used to keep her family alive after her husband walked out. We will never know why he left, and that is a big part of the museum’s appeal. Each room is assembled – or reassembled – from facts. Birth certificates, census details, court testimonies, pieces of cloth, fragments of wallpaper, corners of linoleum. The rest is left to us. We know he left and we know he never returned. We stand in this room, which has been left – seems to have been left – as it was soon after Nathalie and her children realised that he wasn’t coming home. We look at the sewing-machine. It is tiny compared with a modern model. There was no electric light, no gaslight. Four or five strides would get us from one end of the apartment to the door and the narrow, dark hallway outside. Water had to be collected in buckets from the back of the house, down – and back up

– three flights of stairs. Nathalie might have applied for Outdoor Relief, \$2 a week, usually in goods – bread, coal – not cash. She might have petitioned her landlord, Lucas Glockner, for help with the rent. She might have been given her sewing-machine by the newly formed United Hebrew Charities. We don't know. The word “tenement” means a building that houses three families or more. Standing in this room gives the word its emotional clout.

But the wallpaper is beautiful. It is a sunny, cold, clear morning but the wallpaper would be beautiful in any weather. It is floral, and gorgeous. I'm not someone who notices wallpaper or furniture. I think that is the first time I have written the word “floral”. But this wallpaper is important. It lifts the Gumpertz family – my Gumpertz family – out of misery and sentimentality. It is not the original paper. There are five storeys to this house, and five apartments per floor. In some of the rooms, the people who changed this tenement into a museum found up to 20 layers of wallpaper. They took a fragment of the Gumpertz paper to the company that may have manufactured it in the 1870s, and the company made enough new rolls to cover the parlour walls. But – here is where it's brilliant – the new paper looks as if it's been on the walls for 140 years. The paper looks like an act of defiance: life is dark but the walls are bright and intricate. Nathalie's husband had disappeared and one of their four children, Isaac, died eight months later. The 1870 census lists Nathalie as “keeping house”; by 1880 she's a “dressmaker”. The parlour, the front room, has become Nathalie's “shop”, where her clients come to place orders for alterations to dresses and jackets. They walk into a bright, cheerful room, into success, hope, faith in the future, faith in the power of a well-stitched garment.

There is one photograph of Nathalie in the room, taken around – or “*circa*” – 1880. (“*Circa*” gets used a lot in the Tenement

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Museum literature.) She looks tough and careful. She looks like a woman who can make people laugh when she wants to, or needs to.

The tenement at 97 Orchard Street was built in 1863 by Nathalie's landlord, Glockner, a German immigrant, a tailor. At the time, the area now known as the Lower East Side was known as Kleindeutschland – Little Germany. Between that year and 1935, when it was condemned as a residence, at least 7,000 people, immigrants or the children of immigrants, lived there. They came from more than 20 countries.

The museum is all about layers and waves: layers of paint, waves of people. In 1935, the then landlord decided not to make the expensive renovations that new building laws demanded. His tenants couldn't afford the increased rents, so he evicted them and shut the door. The shops on the two lower floors stayed open but the door to the apartments upstairs remained shut – not literally; some of the apartments were used for storage – until 1988, when two women, Ruth Abram, the museum founder, and Anita Jacobson, opened it. I like to think there was a whoosh, then voices, Prussian, Polish, Irish, Italian, speaking in German, Yiddish, Italian, perhaps Gaelic, maybe even English: "What kept you?"

To the visitor, this visitor, Orchard Street is Robert De Niro in *The Godfather: Part II*, using the rooftops on his way to killing Don Fanucci. Keep our eyes above ground level, and we could be looking back 100 years, and more. Standing on the stoop outside the Tenement Museum – even the word "stoop" is exciting: in Ireland we only have steps – I'm looking at a film, hundreds of films, dozens of my favourite scenes.

Inside, in the dark of the narrow hall, I'm brought further back, out of the age of film. (Mind you, it is very like the hall De Niro stood in, his gun wrapped in a blanket, waiting to shoot

Don Fanucci.) It is like looking at a Jacob A. Riis photograph; I'm almost stepping into it. Riis's photographs of the New York tenements and the appalling living standards of the people who lived in them, and his book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), had forced major housing reforms and improvements. Riis might have stood in this hall. He might have passed through on his way up to photograph and speak to the tenants. It is a bright day outside but the hall is gloomy. (Gas jets were installed in 1905, and electric light in 1924.) It must have been frightening, and dangerous. The wall covering, hung in 1905, perhaps as a response to the installation of the new gaslight, is made of burlap, treated with linseed oil. It is an arresting surface, and attractive, but I can't help seeing a big urchin playing with a box of matches while my babies sleep upstairs.

It is the flaking paint that is strangely moving. This isn't a re-creation. This is the hall as it was; this is the paint. I'm standing where Nathalie Gumpertz passed on her way to fetch water, where, later, Josephine Baldizzi, one of the last tenants, stepped on her way out to school. Their shoulders rubbed these walls; Baldizzi family shoulders brushed against this paint. Prams were parked; buckets of coal and bolts of cloth were carried through. People just off Ellis Island huddled here and wondered what to do.

The life of the house is in the walls, behind the flaking paint, in the flaking paint. It's tempting to rub a hand across a slice of wall, to eliminate the neglect and age, to watch the flakes lift and fall – to cough and laugh. But this hall belongs to the dead and it is actually beautiful, as Havana is beautiful. The question "Why don't they mend it?" is quickly forgotten. The ceiling is pressed metal; the plaster arch, the wooden wainscotting date back to 1863. It is grand and it is also squalid. It is a bit like America must have seemed to the new arrivals.

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In Ireland the word “landlord” often brings the word “slum” with it, or “absentee”. Irish history is all about slum landlords and absentee landlords. I remember, when I was a little boy, holding my father’s hand, and looking up at the gaping dark entrance to a Georgian house in Dublin. The glass above the door was broken; the hall behind the open door was dark and huge. Wild kids my own age were running in and out, fighting on the steps. “Why are they there?” I asked my father. “They live there,” he told me. The answer frightened me. “Are they bold boys?” I asked. He laughed. “Oh, no,” he said. “But they will be.”

I know I’m standing in a slum now but there is a painting – a roundel, a medallion – in front of me. There is another one behind me but it is a black smudge. This one has been restored. It is a wooden house, blue sky, bright grass, like the work of a talented child. It is hard to figure out why it is on that particular wall. But it is there and it is bright and, somehow, hopeful. The improvements that Glockner made over the years were demanded by legislation but he must have been proud of this house. It was new once.

Upstairs are rooms that have been left as they were found in 1988. Layers of wallpaper and paint; layers of linoleum. Layers of life. I have often walked through old, neglected houses and imagined making them mine, doing them up and living in them. But there is something precise about the neglect here, even something magical. It is not neglect at all; it is respect. People lived here – people live here.

It is the same further up, in the re-created households, the Gumpertzes’ home, and the Rogarshevskys’, the Levines’, the Moores’, the Baldizzis’. The details – a doll, a baby’s undershirt, a pair of scissors, a tin of Colman’s mustard powder – clutch at us and bring us right up to these people. Strangely, the repeated

words “*circa*” and “*might*” do the same. They calm us down and allow us to move about and feel ourselves at home. The past seems to disappear – the Colman’s mustard looks exactly as it does in my local supermarket. There is very little space but it is used ingeniously. The interior windows – big windows in the inside walls – seem odd, even a bit unsettling. But they work. Daylight gets into the deepest corners. These lives were hard but they were lived in the place where home and cleverness met.

The Baldizzi apartment has something extra, the voice of Josephine, born here in 1926. She left when she was nine, in 1935, when her family was evicted. Her recorded voice fills the rooms. It is a big voice, and very American. Her life here wasn’t miserable. “My father could make anything. He had hands of gold.” So did the people who decided that this house was to be a museum.

In 1883, nine years after Julius Gumpertz walked out of 97 Orchard Street, Nathalie received notice that her husband had inherited \$600, following the death of his father, in Prausnitz, Germany. Julius had to be declared legally dead. Lucas Glockner, her daughter, Rosa, and Nathalie herself signed written testimonies, verifying Julius’s disappearance, and Nathalie became the official administrator of his estate. Six hundred dollars was the equivalent of more than four years’ rent. She moved, with her three daughters, uptown – further into America – to Yorkville, on the Upper East Side. She could afford to, and the Lower East Side was changing. Many of her new neighbours, like Nathalie, were Jewish. But they were eastern European; they spoke Yiddish. Yorkville was where the Germans were moving to. In 1886, she was living in 237 East 73th Street, and her occupation was “widow”. She died eight years later, aged 58, and left her daughters \$1,000. They all married within a year of their mother’s death.

In 2009, Julius was finally tracked down. He had died in a

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Jewish Home for the Aged and Infirm in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1924. His occupation was “huckster”.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

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www.tenement.org