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London has lost all its Ivy

I can't find Ivy Compton Burnett anywhere - and this city is in dire need of her shock treatments

Stuart Jeffries

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"A coil of vipers in a sewing-basket..." Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett (1892- 1969).

The other day I thought I'd go into London to buy, or maybe even just borrow, a novel by Ivy Compton-Burnett. This was, after all, the city where she was born. (The poor love entered the world at Pinner in 1884, and her troubles didn't end there.) It never occurred to me that this might be a challenge. She's such a wonderful novelist that somewhere amid the three- for-two tables - the towers of Jordan's fiction, the biographies of twentysomethings who really should have waited a few decades before letting the ghostwriter come round for tea - there'd be a few inches of shelf space place for the woman Mary McCarthy called "a radical thinker, one of the rare modern heretics". Somewhere in the public libraries of the city, amid the carousels of £1-per-day DVDs and £3.50-an-hour broadband terminals, I was bound to come across a few spine-cracked paperbacks...

Reader, I failed. To be fair, if I had spent an hour in the British Library or had the money to afford the annual subs at the London Library, I would have been luckier. But I didn't. And I haven't.

It's a terrible shame. Compton-Burnett is the most adorably sour of 20th- century English novelists: she wrote 19 mature novels teeming with impassioned, intellectual, elegant dialogue. There are hardly any descriptive passages in her books, so they can often read like transcripts - perhaps supplied in evidence for particularly vile cases of domestic cruelty heard before a Family Division court. "Apart from physical violence and starvation," wrote Edward Sackville-West, "there is no feature of the totalitarian regime which has not its counterpart in the atrocious families depicted in [Compton-Burnett's] books." These books, more often than not, foreground the dramatically compelling - though now nearly forgotten - character of the cruel Victorian paterfamilias. She is as much part of our great 20th-century fictional heritage as Virginia Woolf or Elizabeth Bowen, and could be adapted for Sunday tea-time telly drama more easily than either - if only commissioning editors had ever heard of her.

She writes wonderfully, giving her often ghastly characters mordantly witty lines worthy of Dorothy Parker or Oscar Wilde. Better yet, her characters' hysterical, harrowing repartee makes her a key forebear of Harold Pinter.

Every last footman has - implausibly, yet all the more thrillingly for that - the eviscerating intelligence of an AJ Ayer or a Bernard Williams. Her novels dramatise the painful, often disgusting nature of family life, particularly in late-Victorian moneyed households. The books open, figuratively speaking, to the sound of knives being sharpened; they close to the sound of those knives being resheathed; in between there is certainly a bloodbath, but mostly the wounds are mental rather than physical. They are exquisitely painful, if hilarious, to read about.

Two of our greatest living literary Hilarys (Mantel and Spurling, who wrote a hard-to-find two-volume life of Ivy) are her champions. Mantel wrote: "Ivy Compton-Burnett is one of the most original, artful and elegant writers of our century. To read her for the first time is a singular experience. There is almost no description or scene setting; the writing is pared to the bone, the technique is a gavotte on needles. The story unfolds in page after

page of spiked dialogue. It is not always clear who is speaking; the words themselves are unlike any you have come across before." Mantel wrote these words in the last century (Compton-Burnett died in 1969), but Ivy's originality, artfulness and elegance have hardly been eclipsed in the new millennium.

Spurling wrote: "Ivy's books sold in large numbers in the second war to a general public which responded... without reservations to the severe and startling honesty of a writer whose moral economy had, so to speak, always been organised on a war footing. The effect of stiffness and surface distortion no longer seemed a problem in a world where the comforting half-truths, clichés and conformist platitudes of convention were temporarily in abeyance."

It seemed important to me that Compton-Burnett's novels be written into the fabric of her city. But, in a fit of absentmindedness, Ivy has very nearly disappeared from London. (US secretary of state Dean Acheson said this was how the British let their empire go. Ivy's disappearance is much more serious.) You'd think there'd be still be a few of her novels to be found in London - filed under C, just before the Joseph Conrads. You'd hope that OUP, Penguin Classics, perhaps Virago or another feminist publisher would want a piece of her action. But no: there's a big gap in the bookshelves where Compton-Burnett should be, and the last OUP editions of her works (with introductions by Penelope Lively) were published in the mid-1980s. I defy you to find one on sale in London.

What a mistake I made in bothering London's bookshops with my attention. I visited many that, naively, I thought would be custodians of literature in general and English literature in particular, only to find nothing by a woman who, for what it's worth, became a Dame two years before her death. The Waterstone's on Malet Street (just a stone's throw from the college where Ivy studied classics) has nothing (par for the course: this dreadful branch of an increasingly philistine chain doesn't deserve to occupy its beautiful building in formerly literary Bloomsbury). On and on I went, through Borders, Blackwells, Foyles. Nothing. I hoped that Persephone Books in Lamb's Conduit Street - publishers of books by forgotten women writers, mostly from between the wars - would have saved Ivy from obscurity. But they haven't. (admittedly, only for copyright reasons, but still...)

Finally I unearthed a single copy of *Manservant and Maidservant* in the *London Review Bookshop*. It cost me £11.50 for a 309-page paperback, which is ludicrously expensive. The reason for the high price was that this is an imported edition. Several of Ivy's novels are being reprinted in the *New York Review of Books*' Classics series. At least it was a cunningly assembled edition: the cover image, ingeniously, is an austere detail from an untitled sculpture by Rachel Whiteread, that great artist of domestic spaces Compton-Burnett explored so surgically. The introduction, by American novelist Diane Johnson, is an arrestingly eloquent primer to the book and Compton-Burnett's life.

There's only one problem: Compton-Burnett's spellings have been changed to suit the presumed sensibilities of American readers - "neighbor", "center" etc. This is jarring for readers expecting to be immersed in 1890s England.

But it feels petty to complain about the reverse cultural imperialism whereby English literature is sent overseas to be returned to us refashioned for tastes across the Atlantic: after all, the NYRB is currently proving a better custodian of this novelist than any English publisher.

No, if there's any shame, it is ours. Shame on our English publishers for not printing editions of Ivy's books, shame on our philistine bookshops for not stocking what editions are in print and so making her work available to a reading public that would surely love her. But most of all shame on us for allowing our literary heritage to be so neglected.