

NEWNHAM COLLEGE
CAMBRIDGE CB3 9DF

The Newnham Modern and Medieval Languages Essay Prize
2020-21

The Newnham Modern and Medieval Languages Essay Prize is open to all **girls currently in Year 12** (Lower Sixth) at a UK school. This prize may be of particular interest to those currently studying, or considering studying, languages, but we welcome entries from interested students studying any combination of subjects.

Entrants are invited to submit a response to the question overleaf, which should be between 1,500 and 2,000 words (including footnotes and captions). Essays should be written primarily in English. All sources must be appropriately acknowledged and cited, and a bibliography – including websites consulted – should be attached (though excluded from the word count). Up to **five** entries may be submitted per school.

Each of the Newnham Essay Prizes has a first prize of £400, a second prize of £200, and third prize of £100.

Good essays will present a clear argument using specific examples, but beyond this many different approaches are welcome.

Entrants should upload their submissions to the webform, found here: https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d0jlQUfoNT1f7g1

The **cover sheet** should also be uploaded to this webform. Please ensure that a school/college representative has completed the appropriate section. Entries will not be valid without this information.

The deadline for receipt is **12pm on Wednesday 10th March 2021**. For any queries not answered here, please contact Lucy Rogers (Schools Liaison & Outreach Officer) by email at slo@newn.cam.ac.uk or by telephone on 01223 330471.

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21: Question

Please write a response (no longer than 2000 words) to the following extract from the beginning of Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1981), translated by William Weaver (2007). You might like to analyse the way in which the author and/or the translator presents reading and the roles of the reader and writer. You should also draw on your own encounters with books.

So, then, you noticed in a newspaper that *If on a winter's night a traveller* had appeared, the new book by Italo Calvino, who hadn't published for several years. You went to the bookshop and bought the volume. Good for you.

In the shop window you have promptly identified the cover with the title you were looking for. Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop past the thick barricade of Books You Haven't Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among them there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid manoeuvre you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean To Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You'll Wait Till They're Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out In Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody's Read So It's As If You Had Read Them, Too. Eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out:

the Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages,
the Books You've Been Hunting For Years Without Success,
the Books Dealing With Something You're Working On At The Moment,
the Books You Want To Own So They'll Be Handy Just In Case,
the Books You Could Put Aside Maybe To Read This Summer,

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the Books You Need To Go With Other Books On Your Shelves,
the Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily
Justified.

Now you have been able to reduce the countless embattled troops to an array that is, to be sure, very large but still calculable in a finite number; but this relative relief is then undermined by the ambush of the Books Read Long Ago Which It's Now Time To Reread and the Books You've Always Pretended To Have Read And Now It's Time To Sit Down And Really Read Them.

[...] All this simply means that, having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of *If on a winter's night a traveller* fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier so that your right to own it can be established.

You cast another bewildered look at the books around you (or, rather: it was the books that looked at you, with the bewildered gaze of dogs who, from their cages in the city pound, see a former companion go off on the leash of his master, come to rescue him), and out you went.