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are so many connections and personalities to cover, over so many years – not to speak of wars, revolutions and political upheavals – the reader is often adrift in a maze of names, genealogies and news bulletins. Because quite a substantial amount of material is drawn from published memoirs rather than manuscript correspondence or journals, there is a certain distance between the reader and subject – and, alas, a distinct lack of scandal (Janet herself seems devoid of the sensuality you might expect from someone revelling in *la vita toscana*.) Expecting a whole lot of knockabout rumpy-pumpy (think of Norman Douglas, or Walter Savage Landor from an earlier period), it was surprisingly dry.

Nina Stibbe: *Love, Nina. Despatches from Family Life*: Penguin-Viking, 2013: 322 pp., hardback, £12.99.
This has possibly been many people's Christmas present, or Christmas reading at the least. It consists of letters written to a sister at home during the early 1980s by a 20-year-old from Leicester who had been taken on as nanny to the two young sons of Mary-Kay Wilmers, already working at the *London Review of Books*, which she now edits. The spare prose, the frequent and economical dialogues, the personalities in this star-studded corner of north London, the humour, affection and wry realism all contribute to a highly enjoyable experience, refreshingly unsullied by poor taste or ill will. A book that makes you feel good, and feel a little guilty as a reader when you interrogate the text for signs of beastliness, class status or self-awareness. Because, of course, that's what really interests us. An apparently semi-literate girl (and, at first you think, relatively poverty-stricken) surrounded by giants of English letters (Alan Bennett is the hero figure, Jonathan Miller the ogre). But this girl's aunty usually stays at the Meridien in Piccadilly, she owned a horse when younger, and had been sent to France for her improvement at some stage too. All these questions (and guilt about asking them)… Then, there's the matter of food. The historian anxious to trace the tides of fashion will have a field-day here. (Why, for instance, did she think that we were only coming to grips with the BLT sandwich in 1982?) When we trace the graph of Britain's rising appreciation of good food, documents like this will serve as an important corrective. If you have a long train journey, and have not read it yet, go bag a copy.

Ben Highmore: *The Great Indoors. At Home in the Modern British House*: Profile, 2013: 292 pp., hardback, £15.99.
The author is Professor of Cultural Studies at Sussex. He has written a book about interiors with almost no illustrations, the gist therefore is literary and cultural studyish. And it is entertaining enough. The emphasis is postwar but when material is lacking, he goes further back, even to the Victorians, to make

his point. He has watched a fair bit of TV and deploys his memories to good effect – although there are moments when he should have watched *more*. He uses the Mass Observation archive as well (and the material is always helpful – and I should thank him for his reference to W.J. Turner's *Exmoor Village* (Harrap, 1947), an account of the village of Luccombe for Mass Observation, which is full of thrills and great photographs). His big point is how relatively banal innovations in plumbing, bedding, heating and painting provoked wider and deeper social change, although it may sometimes be ticklish to unravel whether the technical innovation was responding to or initiating that change. He is good on duvets, for example, and what they tell us of our bedroom habits: but did we adopt duvets with such enthusiasm because Terence Conran told us our sex lives (and bed-making) would be more thrilling, or because we needed a better bed-covering for sex lives that were already getting sexier? Anyway, it is a pleasing walk down memory lane and the notes are full of things you might not have read (although, I would say, not quite full enough – but that is a counsel of perfection). So thanks to him I turned to *Of Human Bondage* (Somerset Maugham) and was struck by the power of some of its facts, if not by its literary style. Maugham is very good about the food eaten by those on the margins of London society at the end of the nineteenth century; very good too on why we should be grateful for the welfare state, even in its postmodern version, and its provision of a safety net, however badly strung.

SOPHIE COE PRIZE 2014

Information about this year's prize was ignored by me until the last moment in the preparation of this issue, hence the singular location of this notice. The deadline for entries for the prize is Friday 9 May 2014. Candidates ashould submit an essay on food history of up to 10,000 words. It may have been published in the past twelve months, or it should be ready for publication. Terms and conditions are set out on the website: http://sophiecoeprize.wordpress.com/ A single prize of £1,500 will be awarded this year. Last year's deserving winner was Barak Kushner for his work on Japanese noodles, an extract from which graced the pages of *PPC* 98.