

pre-war years that the book's pace relaxes and something of Watkins's indomitable character is revealed.

When her Aunt Alice is arrested (for crimes amounting to nothing more than being Jewish and owning a gold shop), Watkins's true mettle emerges, as she risks her own safety by taking food to her aunt.

'It was an agonising decision; who knew what the risks might be? Disappearances and murders were commonplace, something we dared not reflect on too much, but in the end, my love for Alice overcame my fears,' writes Olga.

It is this inner strength (one is left with the impression that Watkins, now aged 88, is tough as old boots), an unwavering belief in love and the tantalising possibility of a reconciliation with Julius that make this book – which could easily have seemed repetitive, with its details of the heroine's laborious journey through Austria, Hungary and Germany – so compelling.

The story reaches its dramatic climax against the backdrop of the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp. It is simultaneously heart-rending and giddy too.

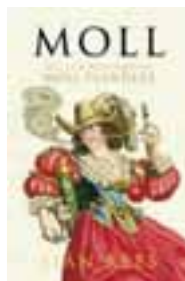
Of course, this being a true story, set during some of the past century's bleakest years, the book was never going to have a fairytale ending. But then, when does the course of true love ever run smoothly?

REGGIE NADELSON is the author of *Londongrad*

The Salt-Stained Book; Julia Jones, (Golden Duck, £7.99), 272pp

Before I ever met Julia Jones or saw the *Peter Duck*, her wonderful sailing yacht, I knew nothing at all about Arthur Ransome. Not that he had owned this yacht, which Jones's parents bought when she was three, or that he had written *Swallows and Amazons*, a series of much-loved children's books of which I had barely heard. Nor am I any kind of sailor, either.

That I came to Jones's novel, *The Salt-Stained Book*, without this knowledge, means I read it without any baggage. It is, in short, terrific; wonderfully written, it is both tough and charming, a rare combination. With the characters, especially Donny, the hero, you really feel that Jones gets children. She also has a take-no-prisoners view of the more crackpot version of the politically correct, especially those who deal with children. When Donny is taken into care, he has plenty to deal with,



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and this gives the book its sinews.

This is the tale of a book that survives a disaster at sea. And of Donny who, 60 years later, finds out that his own history is based on lies. What helps him redeem his life is that he finds he has a talent for sailing. And Julia Jones, who has also written the definitive biography of mystery writer Margery Allingham, really knows her way around a suspenseful narrative and secret history.

People ask if *The Salt-Stained Book* is for children or grown-ups. In a sense it is both. It is one of those singularly English novels that anyone from the age of around 10 to 100 can happily read, even anticipating the next in the series. Books like *I Capture the Castle*, *Ballet Shoes*, *The Secret Garden* and, oh, OK, what's his name? Harry Potter.

STEPHANIE CROSS has written for *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*

Moll: The Life and Times of Moll Flanders; Siân Rees (Chatto & Windus, £18.99), 288pp

The original tart-with-a-heart, the ultimate good-time gal, Moll Flanders may be a 300-year-old fictional heroine but, in the popular imagination, she's a petticoated reality TV star. This Moll is not, however, the one who appears in the novel by Daniel Defoe. While the adventures of Defoe's creation would no doubt inspire a Red Top meltdown – bigamy and incest are just the beginning – Moll's messy life is not quite the amoral romp it's generally taken to be.

Siân Rees's biography of Defoe's heroine comes as a corrective. Her aim is simple: to put back into the

picture the history that Defoe left out. As Rees observes, in concentrating so closely on Moll's eventful personal life, Defoe made it easy for latter-day adaptors to suit her to their purposes, thus allowing audiences to forget the realities of her times. For while Defoe's novel was published in 1722, Moll was born over a century earlier: instead of Gin Lane, we should be thinking of the birth of the American colonies and London's Great Fire. Moreover, in this Puritan age, Moll is no mere saucy wench, but a public enemy.

If this makes Rees herself sound like a tiny bit of a killjoy, fear not: this slim volume is brisk, lucid and packed with colour. As well as filling out the facts of Moll's life, Rees gives us the stories of three real women who might be thought of as Moll's peers. There is Mary Frith or 'Moll Cutpurse'; Mary Moders, aka the 'German Princess' – needless to say she only passed for one, but probably preferred that title to the alternative 'Mary the Vulva' – and Moll King, a pickpocket twice reprieved from death and thrice transported to America.

The stories of these women are used to illuminate Moll's own, which remains as irresistible as the day it was written. Here is a heroine born in Newgate, who notches up five marriages and countless children – her 10th pregnancy at the age of 40-something is 'nothing out of the ordinary for women of her time'. She travels to America twice, spending eight years in Virginia and nine in Maryland before returning to England in her late 60s.

If you haven't read the original, this book will surely prove the necessary spur; to Rees's credit, it's also highly enjoyable in its own right.