

RELATIVES REMEMBERED IN CROSS-BORDER SWAP

Bereaved son Jason Basset makes an annual 500-mile round trip to lay a holly wreath on his dad's memorial every Christmas. But when pandemic travel restrictions made this year's pilgrimage to Solihull, near Birmingham, impossible, he went on Facebook to look for help.

Jason's post reached 100,000 people and a woman who lives just five minutes away from his dad John's

trip this year to the ashes memorial plot at Robin Hood Cemetery, near Shirley, with wife Lisa, also 30, would have been extra special as their first Christmas with 10-month-old son Arlo.

Funeral director Jason said: "Perhaps this incredible story is the true meaning of Christmas. It has made me think there may be lots of families in a similar situation. Perhaps we can reach out to one another."



MEMORIAL Jason



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IT'S BEEN A BLOCKBUSTER

OF A YEAR FOR SCOTLAND'S WRITERS

One for the record books

Anna Burnside

Scotland's authors have had their best year ever, scooping some of the top prizes across the world.

From novels to crime thrillers, our most talented authors are sweeping the board. Damian Barr, presenter of the BBC's The Big Scottish Book Club, is now calling on the Government to capitalise on this incredible pool of cultural talent.

The author, who wrote critically acclaimed memoir *Maggie And Me* about growing up in Scotland during the Thatcher years, said: "Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* has won the Booker Prize - he's only the second Scot to do so. "And Maggie O'Farrell won the Women's Prize for Fiction with *Hamnet*. We've done the double.

"Now Denise Mina has been shortlisted for the Costa Book Award for *The Less Dead*. We may be about to do the triple. It's a really proud moment and the perfect time to invest in Scottish voices and stories and to expand the idea of what a Scottish voice or story is."

Damian is delighted the First Minister is a bookworm but would like to see the Government doing more.

He would like to see tax breaks for bookshops, support for writers at the start of their careers, and authors in schools.

BIG HEART Nicola Sturgeon sets a brilliant example", he said. "She's very knowledgeable and very well read.

"But no government should preside over the shrinking of the education system or the closure of libraries. Government should do what Dolly Parton does in the US and send a book to every kid. We shouldn't have to rely on heroic individuals. I pay taxes for a reason."

Growing up in Newarthill, near Motherwell, Damian thought that all writers were dead. He said: "As a child, I had never met a living writer.

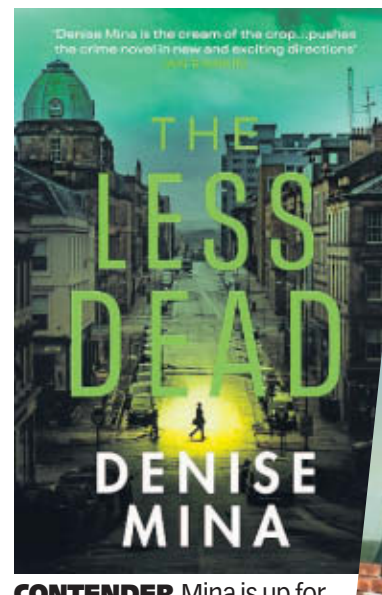
"Some of the first books I owned were given to me by social services. If a kid owns a book, they are much more likely to read and buy books in the future."

Damian, whose first novel *You Will Be Safe Here* came out in paperback in April, said the pandemic has created a golden opportunity to build a nation of readers and writers.

He supports the Scottish Book Trust's scheme to give a book to every child for Christmas. He said: "People have



SCOTS PRIDE Booker winner



CONTENDER Mina is up for Costa. Right, Damian's book



SHARED PASSION But Damian wants Sturgeon to do more

TV host Damian wants success to kickstart a new era of reading

more time to read. They are spending more time online, hearing about other people reading and recommending books to each other.

"As well as The Big Scottish Book Club, there is BBC2's *Between The Covers* and Sky Arts Book Club. That's three shows - books are back on telly.

"After every episode, I get people on Twitter straight away telling me they have bought the book. Libraries are displaying The Big Scottish Book Club books for people who can't afford to buy.

"Authors just want to be read, whether their books are borrowed or bought." It helps that Scotland has a strong infrastructure, with publishers, book

shops and festivals. Damian said: "There are new shops opening all the time. I just heard about one in Blairgowrie. There's a specialist LGBT bookshop, Category Is Books, in Glasgow.

"It's not an accident that our show happened in Scotland and not London; there is such a thriving reading and writing scene in Scotland.

"Now we need to get better at celebrating our cultural heroes. We gave the world Muriel Spark, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, some of the greatest writers in the world. We need to make the shelf for Scottish writers bigger."

The Big Scottish Book Club is on BBC Scotland, Sunday, 10pm

DAMIAN'S BOOKS OF 2020

CRIME: PINE
Francine Toon
This Highland Gothic mystery has been a runaway success story. It has got to be developed for telly at some point.

DEBUT: THE YOUNG TEAM
Graeme Armstrong
The story of Azzy, a ned trying to turn his life around, has echoes of *The Great Gatsby* via Airdrie.

FICTION: SCABBY QUEEN
Kirstin Innes
You only glimpse Clio Campbell through other people but she feels real in this clever, quite Muriel Spark-like novel.

NON-FICTION: ISLAND DREAMS
Gavin Francis
This journey through islands, full of questions about isolation and connection, is an unintentionally very timely book.

MEMOIR: STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES
Richard Holloway
The former Bishop of Edinburgh's tiny book about the big questions and his personal struggle to find meaning.

DAMIAN'S PICKS FOR 2021

LUCKENBOOTH
Jenni Fagin
Five generations in a cursed Edinburgh tenement.

TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM
Yaa Gyasi
Follow-up to her amazing debut, *Homegoing*.

SOME BODY TO LOVE
Alexandra Heminsley
Intimate memoir exploring a rainbow family.

EMPIRELAND
Sathnam Sanghera
A history of the British empire in the age of BLM.

THE OCTOPUS MAN
Jasper Gibson
A law student hears the voice of an octopus god in his head.

