Salzman arranges his 1621 materials in part thematically and in part generically. Beginning with the trendy category of ‘selves’ (which encompasses the emergent form of autobiography, along with a more unexpected selection of sermons), his discussion moves through romance, drama, poetry and news to conclude with some distinctly unfashionable modes of ‘instruction’, namely religious, historical and educational writings. ‘News’ is a talismanic concept for Salzman: in its up-to-date coverage of events it mirrors his own unemphatic and exhaustive method of cataloguing the year’s texts.

Newspapers were a novelty in 1621. The contemporary term was ‘coranto’, which played on both senses of the word ‘current’. Corantos were brief bulletins that listed items of news, each headed with a date and place name. Published originally on the continent, they conveyed to English readers details of crises in European affairs. Topical commentary on political events was also available in letters, diplomatic dispatches, ballads, broadsheets and almanacs. Salzman reveals a newly developed cultural appetite for information about what is happening now. Writings committed to the daily and ephemeral are an important part of the process by which material events infiltrate or transform into literary texts.

In a more personal vein, Salzman writes: ‘1621 has for much of my career been the year of Mary Wroth’s Urania, and I started out, a long time ago, just wanting to know more about the context for the publication and reception of that particular, extraordinary work.’ Reading Wroth’s romance involves a reading, too, of her uncle Philip Sidney’s Arcadia, written a generation earlier in the 1580s and republished in 1621. Like the mythologised figure of Sidney himself, the Arcadia was understood as a lament for the lost chivalric values of Elizabethan England; in imitating its form and title in her Urania, Wroth offers a criticism of contemporary Jacobean politics, as well as infamously depicting some of its scandals. More significantly, Wroth mobilises romance’s engagement with the feminine in order to re-examine the place of women in the state. Salzman’s major act of recanonisation is to place Urania at the centre of Jacobean literary culture.

The other crucial difference between Salzman’s work and more conventional literary histories is its privileging of reading over writing: he aims to cover what was readable in 1621, not simply what was written then. His book begins with a map of the mental horizon of a paradigmatic late-Jacobean reader in his account of John Chamberlain, a gentleman, information-gatherer and letter-writer who immersed himself in the news of his own culture and recirculated its currents. He is interested, promiscuously, in feasting and masquing and gossiping; he interprets what he sees and hears, whether it is trivial and playful or serious and political. For Salzman, Chamberlain stands ‘as the exemplar of a method that will endeavour to allow nothing to pass unnoted’. It is hard for a reviewer to resist this as a characterisation of Salzman’s own book, which is long, learned and enlightening. It adds a great deal to our sense of the detail of this rich period of literary history, even if it leaves the traditional contours of the bigger picture firmly in place.