



## What we've been reading



### Nicola Bell

I recently finished an epic 72-hour audiobook collection of Sherlock Holmes stories. It was really enjoyable, even though – if I'm honest – I do prefer the storytelling, characterisation and Cumberbatch-ness of the contemporary televised *Sherlock* BBC series. As usual, Stephen Fry was an excellent narrator, and his introductory forewords to each of the six (!) book parts added something very special and personal to the stories that followed.

In the last few months, I also listened to Annabelle Crabbe's *Quarterly Essay 75: Men at Work* and would highly recommend it. It's a thoroughly researched and insightful essay on the gender bias associated with parental leave – a topic with which I previously had very little understanding. Currently, I'm in the middle of reading both *The Trauma Cleaner* by Sarah Krasnostein, and *Quichotte* by Salman Rushdie. Both are incredibly well-written, although I sometimes lose patience with the rambling prose style in parts of *Quichotte*.



### Anna Desjardins

With my Christmas book pile teetering on my bedside table, I've been treated to a range of different stories this summer. *The Silence of the Girls*, by Pat Barker, is a colloquial retelling of *The Iliad* from the perspective of a Trojan princess hauled off as a prisoner after her city is defeated and gifted to Achilles as bed-slave. Everyday details of the war and the brutality of what must have actually gone on mingle with more mythical aspects of the story. An interesting premise (which made me want to go away and actually read *The Iliad!*), but, unfortunately, I found that the writing style jarred with the subject matter and failed to capture me entirely.

*Shell*, by Kristina Olsson, was a book I bought on a whim on a late-night visit to the Newtown bookshop, Better Read than Dead, seduced by its display of new Australian fiction. This is a story of Sydney, at the time when the Opera House was being built, interwoven with the lives of two main characters – a Sydney journalist and a Swedish glassmaker. The writing style was fresh and often beautiful, although I became frustrated with the overuse of fragmented sentences and a choice to only mark direct speech with italics. Made reading a 'distant' exercise, rather than a 'plunge in and live the story' experience. Overall, the story moved slowly, too, and many of the main ideas were explored repeatedly. That said, on finishing, you did feel like you had read something of great sensibility, as carefully crafted as the shells of the Opera House themselves.

Most recently, I have finished *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, by Elif Shafak. This was my kind of writing. Wonderfully drawn characters, whole lives suggested with a few deft memories of taste and smell. Set in Turkey of the 1950s through to the 1990s, it was also a window into the changing Turkish cultural landscape of those decades. The subject matter was quite upsetting at times, but the writing skirted masterfully around topics of deep distress to focus, ultimately, on the indomitability of the human spirit. I will definitely be looking for more by this author.

I am currently highly enjoying *A Gentleman in Moscow*, by Amor Towles, the story of a Russian aristocrat sentenced to house-arrest during the Russian Revolution. So far, the entire story has taken place within the walls of the hotel he is confined to – not much scope to maintain a storyline, one would think – but this is exactly what makes it so delightful. It is quite Jane Austen-like in its style, bringing us down to the dramas being played out in quiet and confined spaces, and I am often finding myself smile as I read. The writing is deliciously elegant, and the reader can relax entirely, knowing that they are in competent hands. I'll leave you with a quote that captures the wry style of the author: "Here, indeed, was a formidable sentence – one that was on intimate terms with the comma, and that held the period in healthy disregard."

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### Alison Madelaine

My favourite read of the last few months was unexpected as I didn't choose the book – it was a book club read. *The Last Runaway* by Tracy Chevalier is about a Quaker who moves to Ohio from England in 1850. She encounters various hardships in her new life and gets drawn into helping runaway slaves. It was interesting to read about the Underground Railroad and how dangerous it could be from the point of view of those helping the runaways. Some other reads have included *Unsolved Australia* by Justine Ford, *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman, *Fleishman is in Trouble* by Taffy Brodesser-Akner, *The Ruin* by Dervla McTiernan and *Too Much Lip* by Melissa Lucashenko.

I don't often read young adult fiction, but I've read two good novels recently (both set in Australia), *Between Us* by Clare Atkins (involving a cross cultural romance in and around a detention centre), and *The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling* by Wai Chim (another young romance exploring mental illness, and in particular, how this is dealt with in a Chinese Australian family). I've also recently discovered Helen Garner. I'm not sure how I have avoided her books for all this time, but I have enjoyed *Everywhere I Look* and am currently listening to *Monkey Grip*, read by the author of course. I'll definitely be reading more of her writing in the future.



### Sarah Arakelian

A little while ago I picked up a copy of *The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* which is a collection of Douglas Adams' first five books in the Hitchhiker's series. Having seen the movie a long time ago, I enjoyed the original story so much that I continued on to read the next two books, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* and *Life, the Universe and Everything*. Though I thoroughly enjoyed Adams' clever and offbeat humour as he takes the reader through an absurd adventure through the galaxy, I found I needed a break back to reality but intend to finish the series at some point.

*Where the Wild Mums Are*, by Katie Blackburn and Sholto Walker, was given to me by my own mother. It was a great take-off of the well worn *Where the Wild Things Are*, instead depicting an escape for a tired mum. I especially love the cup of tea waiting for her at the end.

I am currently reading another book given to me as a present, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, by Davin Wroblewski. It follows the main character as his peaceful life with his parents is torn apart when his uncle returns and his father dies. Though it is a long book, it is easy to read and get lost in descriptions of the setting.



### Jennifer Buckingham

As an enthusiastic user of my local library, when it comes time to recall all the books I have been reading, more often than not I can't. So many books fall out of my mind as quickly as they fall into the return chute. One I do remember is Margaret Atwood's *The Stone Mattress*, which is a collection of strange and intimate short stories. I've also recently found the series of Nicci French novels with Freida Klein, a crime-stopping psychotherapist, as the protagonist. The story has enough intrigue to be entertaining, and I especially enjoy the history of London's boroughs woven through them.

Looking at my bookshelf for recent additions, I can see Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach*. I am an unashamed devotee of Helen Garner. I love the way she writes and the way she thinks about human imperfection, both the physical and metaphysical. This is an older novel and not my favourite of hers, I have to say, but that's a high bar to reach. Sitting next to Helen on the shelf is Stanislas Dehaene's new book, *How We Learn*. It's great, of course, and if you are a reader of *Nomanis*, you've almost certainly already read it!



### Kevin Wheldall

I have long been a fan of (the late) Peter Temple's fiction and was delighted to come across *The Red Hand*, recently published posthumously and including a new, but sadly unfinished, Jack Irish novel. So far so good but in this unfinished novel, and certainly in the book reviews and essays also included, Temple comes across as rather snide, mean-spirited even, such that literary luminaries such as Hemmingway and Le Carré are casually trashed en route.

As luck would have it, John Le Carré's latest novel, *Agent Running in the Field*, was next up on my bedside table. At the age of 88, he is back on form in his latest outing, putting younger writers to shame. He grabs you with his opening sentence ("Our meeting was not contrived") and never lets go. He has earned his place alongside his hero, Graham Greene, as a fine novelist.

The death of Australian literary lion, Clive James, prompted me to re-read his breakthrough (semi-autobiographical novel), *Unreliable Memoirs*. What a hoot! As others have cautioned, do read this book but not in a public setting if you do not wish to be embarrassed by your (guaranteed) snorts of laughter. Here's a small sample: "They had a cattle dog called Bluey. A known psychopath, Bluey would attack himself if nothing else was available. He used to chase himself in circles trying to bite his own balls off."

The many admirers of the (rightly) celebrated American author, Elizabeth Strout, will be delighted to spend more time with Olive Kitteridge in *Olive Again*. What an insightful writer Strout is, as well as being a supreme stylist. Widely misunderstood, Olive has a huge heart alongside her undeniable foibles. In reality, more a collection of short stories, this book will serve only to enhance her growing reputation.



### **Robyn Wheldall**

Currently I am reading *Abide with Me* by Elizabeth Strout, author of the fabulous Olive Kitteridge books referred to by Kevin in his *Nomanis* offering in this issue. Strout is such a fine writer; her descriptions conjuring up settings and characters with consummate ease and unconscious detail. *Abide with Me* explores the widowed life of an American pastor in northern New England in the late 1950s, dealing with his grief, his congregation and the fractured life of one of his young children in particular. It's sad but thoroughly engaging and I shall miss it when I have finished. I have never been to New England in real life but this book has taken me there.

*Hares' Fur* by Trevor Shearston, published in 2019, is a gentle and compelling read set in the familiar and beautiful Blue Mountains. When reading this, I could almost smell and hear the bush that is the backdrop to this story of loss, hope and purpose. A recently widowed potter provides haven and then love for three destitute children. A wonderful tale of the healing power of purpose. And I now know a lot more about how pottery is made!

Perusing the list of books that I have read over recent months, there is an emerging theme that I was unaware of until writing this piece. Nearly all of the books I have read since the last *Nomanis* have been concerned with the death or mourning of a loved one. This has been an unconscious choice, in the main, but mirrors my own grief on the death of my mother in November. Another example of the power of reading to meet us at our point of need. A couple of conscious choices were *With the End in Mind* by Dr Kathryn Mannix, a book about the dying process. It addresses the propensity we have in our modern, medicalised world to turn away from the dying process and, hence, not having an understanding of it when we are confronted by it. This is a book everyone should read. I found it extraordinarily helpful in a personally difficult time. Sarah Ferguson's *On Mother* was another timely read, the raw emotion of loss captured in a personal story that spoke to others. *The Weekend* by Charlotte Wood, set in the familiar surroundings of the Central Coast region of New South Wales, was a wonderful and at times brutally honest story of friendship and loss. How those left behind made sense of their friendship when one of them had died was the gist of this story. I can imagine this as a television drama as the characters are vivid and the pathos real. *The Erratics* by Vicki Laveau-Harvie is a gripping memoir of a Canadian-born Australian author that deals with the increasing frailty of a toxic mother and the complex family dynamics that play out in these defining stages of life. This book won the Stella Prize in 2019 and it is easy to see why.

Changing the theme completely, my summer reading also included *Reason, Faith and the Struggle for Western Civilisation* by Samuel Gregg. A scholarly work spanning time and ideas, it is an intellectually stimulating book about, as the title suggests, faith and reason and the Western tradition. This is one I have to read again to fully plumb its depths and appreciate the thesis being presented. I thoroughly enjoyed it even though at times I found it challenging to hold the ideas in my head long enough to absorb them properly.