

What we've been reading



Anna Desjardins

In recent months, I have veered from letting Favel Parrett's lyrical prose wash over me, to laughing out loud at the satirical wit of Maria Semple and dipping into the poetry of Mary Oliver.

Parrett's *When the Night Comes* follows the life of two siblings in Tasmania at a time when the Danish supply ship, the Nella Dan, was sailing regularly between Hobart and the Antarctic. Their lives are interwoven with the life of one of the sailors on board, and both the joys and the aching difficulty of day-to-day human experience are explored in a pared-back poetic style in which Parrett suspends us in moments of time with her characters – an interesting window into Australian Antarctic activity in the

1980s, coupled with a voice to be savoured.

Semple's book *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* has recently been adapted into a film starring Cate Blanchett. I missed the cinematic experience, but the book did not disappoint – set in Seattle, we are given a front-row seat to Bernadette's internal monologue as she navigates a mid-life crisis in original style – reminiscent of Liane Moriarty's take on Sydney society types, but without the disturbing dark edge, Semple's text is littered with pithy observations about our modern lives that will resonate. Although it is funny (very funny), it is not frothy. Semple uses the humour to tap into what happens when life threatens to overwhelm us and how we manage to carry on carrying on.

And for a moment of time stolen in a playground after school, I have been keeping Mary Oliver's slim volume of Pulitzer Prize winning poems, *A Thousand Mornings*, in my bag. Best read outdoors, her resonant language speaks to a great love and deep understanding of the world and our place in it, inspiring us all to be 'full of earth-praise'.



Alison Madelaine

Sorry guys, but I finally read *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout, and I didn't love it, so won't be rushing to read the sequel or any more of her books. Another big fail for me this time was *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. I really wanted to love it, but decided to give up fairly early on as life is too short to read books that you are not enjoying (both the subject matter and the writing style are difficult). However, I did read lots of other great books in recent months. Some examples are *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, *The Weekend* by Charlotte Wood, *The Dutch House* by Anne Patchett, *Becoming* by Michelle Obama, *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng (also enjoyed the TV series) and *The Lost Man* by Jane Harper.

Like many others this year, I read *Phosphorescence* by Julia Baird, and really enjoyed that one too (although some parts more than others). I read too many books to list this time. I must have done more reading than usual ... I wonder why? I recently donated a box of books to a charity shop, and of course I had to go in and have a look at what they were selling. I picked up a copy of *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins. There has been quite a bit of controversy surrounding this book, and I want to see what all the fuss is about. More about this next time.



Nicola Bell

As anyone who has been within a 10-metre radius of me in the last few months will attest, I recently watched (and re-watched and re-watched) the filmed theatre production of *Hamilton*. This inspired me to take a deep dive into all things Hamilton-related, including the full biography of Alexander Hamilton by Ron Chernow. (Seriously, quiz me.) I also listened to two audiobooks for the sole reason that they were narrated by Hamilton's creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda. These were *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. Both movingly portrayed the experiences of Hispanic boys and men finding themselves; these are characters I probably wouldn't have otherwise read about, and I'm glad I stumbled across them.

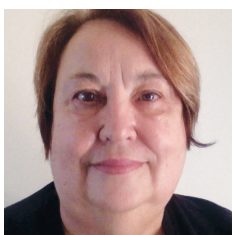
Other books I've enjoyed over the last few months are *Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe, *Becoming* by Michelle Obama, and *The Dictionary of Lost Words* by Pip Williams. I've also been dipping in and out of *Yours*, *Plum: The Letters of PG Wodehouse*, which was edited and compiled by Wodehouse's friend Frances Donaldson. This book is a treasure; the letters Wodehouse (or 'Plum') writes to his friends and family are just as good-humoured, clever and essentially British as his fiction works. I'll never not think he's a genius.



Jennifer Buckingham

My reading list over the past months has been typically haphazard: books I have picked up in second-hand shops; books I have been given as gifts; books I have given as gifts to others (and no, I did not read them first!); the manuscript of a friend's first novel; and some re-reads. One of the books I was given as a gift was Tom Kenneally's *The Daughters of Mars*. I have read a couple of Tom Kenneally's novels over the years. I usually quite like them but they rarely leave a lasting impression. This one is about two Australian sisters who enlisted as nurses in WWI. It was entertaining and I learned some things – perhaps a bit too much about the gory details of treating wounded soldiers. So many adjectives. My friend's unpublished

book is also an historical novel and not too far removed from Kenneally's style but I thought it was better. It will feature again here if/when it is published. The characters in *Olive Kitteridge*, which has become a discussion point among the members of MRU, reminded me of the characters in Irish author Colm Toibin's books such as *Nora Webster*. I found the people quite difficult to like but still wanted to know what happened to them. I did grow fond of Olive herself, though, so I'll be reading more. I don't know what to say about another Irish author's new book – *Love* by Roddy Doyle. I had no idea what was going on throughout most of it. Coming back to the historical theme, I re-read *Why Johnny Can't Read* which Rudolph Flesch wrote in 1955. It's much more acerbic than I remembered, describing whole word reading instruction as an "inhuman, mean, stupid way of foisting something on a child's mind". Hard to argue with that even if I might not put it quite the same way.



Meree Reynolds

Recently I have read *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, a story about the lives and experiences of two Irish teenagers from very different backgrounds. I thought the book was really well written and make me reflect on my relationships and experiences at high school and during tertiary education. There certainly wasn't much in common! I have also read *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* by Stuart Turton. While I generally like murder mysteries, I found the complicated plot and the alternating characters difficult to keep track of, probably because I only picked the book up for a brief time each night. I kept wishing that I had taken notes as I was reading so that I could keep track of the intricacies. It's the sort of book that demands full attention and large chunks of reading time, but is worth the effort. Finally, I have just finished reading Jane Harper's new book, *The Survivors*. I really like the way Jane Harper depicts Australian landscapes and characters in her novels. This crime mystery, set in a small coastal community in Tasmania, is a great read, but I felt that it was not quite as enthralling as *The Dry* or *The Lost Man*, two of Jane Harper's previous books.

What we've been reading



Sarah Arakelian

I enjoyed reading Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* so much that I went on to read one of his later books, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Though neither are happy stories, they both struck a chord with me in their descriptions of the culture and lives of those living in (and escaping) Afghanistan prior to and during the fall of the monarchy, the Soviet occupation and the rebellion and eventual oppression by the Taliban. In particular, *The Kite Runner's* description of the relationship between a wealthy widowed businessman and his son were highly reminiscent of some very dear people in my life. At times, I felt that they were the ones telling the story to me. These stories are a very pertinent reminder to be thankful for

all the blessings in our lives, even when difficulties threaten to overwhelm us.

For a change in pace, I read *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and found the storytelling style to be reminiscent of another book that I have previously read (*The Christmas Mystery* by Jostein Gaarder) and loved. Iain Banks' *Wasp Factory*, on the other hand, was less to my taste. I did not get very far into this story before I had to put it down. Strangely, though I could handle very graphic descriptions of war-torn Afghanistan, I could not get past the very vivid descriptions of the actions of the main character and his brother.

Not having watched the movie, I found *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold to be at times confusing, but the perspective interesting and the characters relatable. I couldn't help wondering often where it was all leading, which is perhaps why I found the ending to be a little anticlimactic.



Kevin Wheldall

Looking to expand my horizons and reading pleasure, a few months ago I took out a subscription to an audiobook club. I now have about a dozen or more audiobooks paid for but unread. Why? Because listening to audiobooks only rarely works for me. It works in the car on long journeys but under COVID this does not happen very often. If I sit, or worse, lie down to listen at home, I tend to fall asleep! Same with most podcasts. And if I hear half of the book being read after a car journey, and I am really enjoying it, I buy the hard copy anyway and finish it off.

So it was with *Scrublands* by Chris Hammer, which I strongly recommend. It comes tagged with the label Australian noir, following in the footsteps of Jane Harper's terrific books (*The Dry*, *Force of Nature*, *The Lost Man*, *The Survivors*). He follows up with *Silver*, and *Trust* which I have yet to read. *Silver* is perhaps overly long and does not pack quite the punch of *Scrublands* but he is a fine writer. And we certainly do have some great writers emerging in Australia currently; a new golden age, perhaps.

I have also read a couple of books on Royal Crown Derby china paperweights, my new obsession, but I won't bore you

with those. Instead, I'll praise Jonathon Coe's *Middle England*, especially if you have a strong affiliation with and knowledge of England. A treasure. I also thoroughly enjoyed Tom Keneally's *The Dickens Boy* about one of Dickens' sons in Australia and Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light*, the third and last book in her trilogy about Thomas Cromwell.

I have also (re)read three of Patricia Highsmith's Ripley books – *The Talented Mr Ripley*, *Ripley Under Ground*, and *Ripley's Game* – but I am not sure that they have truly stood the test of time, fine writer though she was.

For Beatles fans, *4321* is a must read but not if you do not want to have your illusions shattered. Loveable mop-tops? Perhaps not, but all too human. As I have written before, in spite of all of his 'Working Class Hero' protestations, Lennon was the most middle class of the fab four and ... not really a very nice man.

And, finally, please excuse this blatant plug for a first novel written by one of my dear daughters writing under the penname Rhiannon Hartley and published on Amazon. Entitled *Faking it with the Demon*, it is Book 1 in a series of 'paranormal romcoms' called Raising Hell Down Under. So, if you are into feelgood romcoms and/or paranormal stuff (and preferably both) you might want to have a look. But be warned: I have only been allowed to read an expurgated version!



Robyn Wheldall

Some time after everyone else, I got around to reading *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman and discovered just why it was so popular. There is no need to reprise the storyline here except to say that the aftermath of a traumatic past and a gradual unravelling of fantasy as a defence is a skilfully told tale.

Similarly behind the times, I have recently read *Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe. I was aware of his thesis prior to reading the book – that rather than being hunter-gatherers, Australia's First Peoples engaged in sophisticated production techniques and cultivation. Pascoe's account based on his own analysis and drawing on the journal entries by early European visitors and inhabitants is compelling. To me, it makes much more sense of how Indigenous Australians lived on, and with, the land of this vast and often inhospitable continent. As many have said, this book should be essential reading for all Australians.

The Last of the Bonegilla Girls by Victoria Purnam brought me into more contemporary times but also took me back to a time when Australia was much less multicultural and when the waves of European migration after World War II were in full swing. On arrival, some families were housed at Bonegilla Migrant Camp on the Murray River in rural Victoria until work and housing became available to them. This is the story of a friendship that develops among four teenage girls, one of whom was the daughter of the camp's director. The familiar ancient Australian landscape and climate is the canvas for this complex story of new arrivals, new beginnings and hope and the harshness and disappointments that this also brought.

Phosphorescence by Julia Baird was released earlier this year and, for once, I was on the same reading wave with everyone else with this one. The subtitle of the book, 'on awe, wonder and things that sustain you when the world goes dark' is prescient in this time of COVID-19. Baird could not have known that her book would land on our shelves when the world was facing a major challenge in knowing how to live in these uncertain times. A call to pause, to observe beauty, and to be grateful could not have come at a better time. Enormously popular, it is a deeply personal book, part memoir, but in my opinion also an 'everyman' book – a stunning achievement and for me, one that I should reread from time to time.

A little light relief

"OK guys; listen up. It's that time of year again. Yeah, the dreaded Phonics Screening Check.

I know, I know; tell me about it. It's a pain. We all know that. And completely pointless too. Total waste of time.

Look, I agree ...

If they would only tell us the 20 nonsense words they want the kids to learn, it would be so much more straightforward. But no; no chance. It's a secret. And so we have to teach them all the nonsense words. Now is that fair?

No, listen. This year I have a cunning plan to beat them at their own game. Instead of teaching them all the nonwords, we're going to teach them a trick.

What trick? Well if you listen, you might learn something ...

OK, so this is how it works. This is my brilliant trick. We teach the kids the sounds of the letters and letter combinations and then how to put them together to form words. Then the kids will be able to read any nonsense word they throw at us. How good is that?!

I told you it was brilliant. You know, it makes you wonder why they didn't tell us to do that in the first place."

– Kevin Wheldall