

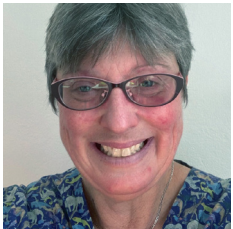
What we've been reading



Jennifer Buckingham

In my WWBR list this time is a book that has immediately become one of my favourite books ever. Frank Moorhouse's *Martini* is a very funny, poetically licensed memoir recounted via vignettes of drinking martinis and talking about martinis, in interesting places with interesting people. The martini minutiae are exquisite. The sort of book that made me want to read bits aloud to whoever was nearby. Another title in the "isn't that fascinating!" genre was *The Bookseller's Tale* by Martin Latham which chronicles the emergence of the book as a major cultural force and, for some, a life-long obsession. Did you know that some of the first local libraries were in chemist shops in Britain? Boots the Chemist's, to be precise.

Apparently reading really is therapeutic. I also continued the MRU Round Robin of Reading with novels that my colleagues have mentioned in the past by Jane Harper and Chris Hammer. For the education policy wonks, I recommend *New Zealand's Education Delusion* by Briar Lipson, in which she sets out a compelling explanation for New Zealand's lamentable and utterly foreseeable educational malaise, and describes the path out of it.



Anne-Marie Van Duinen

The enforced solitude of quarantine gave me time to focus on Brian Deer's, *The Doctor Who Fooled the World*. The major outtakes: that fraud provided the impetus for Andrew Wakefield's 'science' and that a combination of celebrity, desperation and nescience have fuelled an urban myth that continues to burn unabated, affecting many more children than the small group who had the misfortune to come to Wakefield for diagnosis and treatment.

Continuing with the theme of false science, *Making Sense of Interventions for Children with Developmental Disorders* by Caroline Bowen and Pamela Snow is an excellent tome I discovered in the recesses of the MultiLit office and unofficially (sorry!) borrowed. I promise it will be returned (eventually). One of the major challenges faced by parents and teachers is navigating the proliferation of quick-fix solutions for learning difficulties. Quite apart from the false hope and indubitable expense, pursuing non-evidence-based intervention takes time away from quality teaching and intervention. A great starting point for sceptical educators and parents.

From one rabbit hole to another... In *At Night's End*, Israeli author Nir Baram's protagonist, Yonatan, wakes up in a hotel room in Mexico City and can't recall the last five days. Enough said.

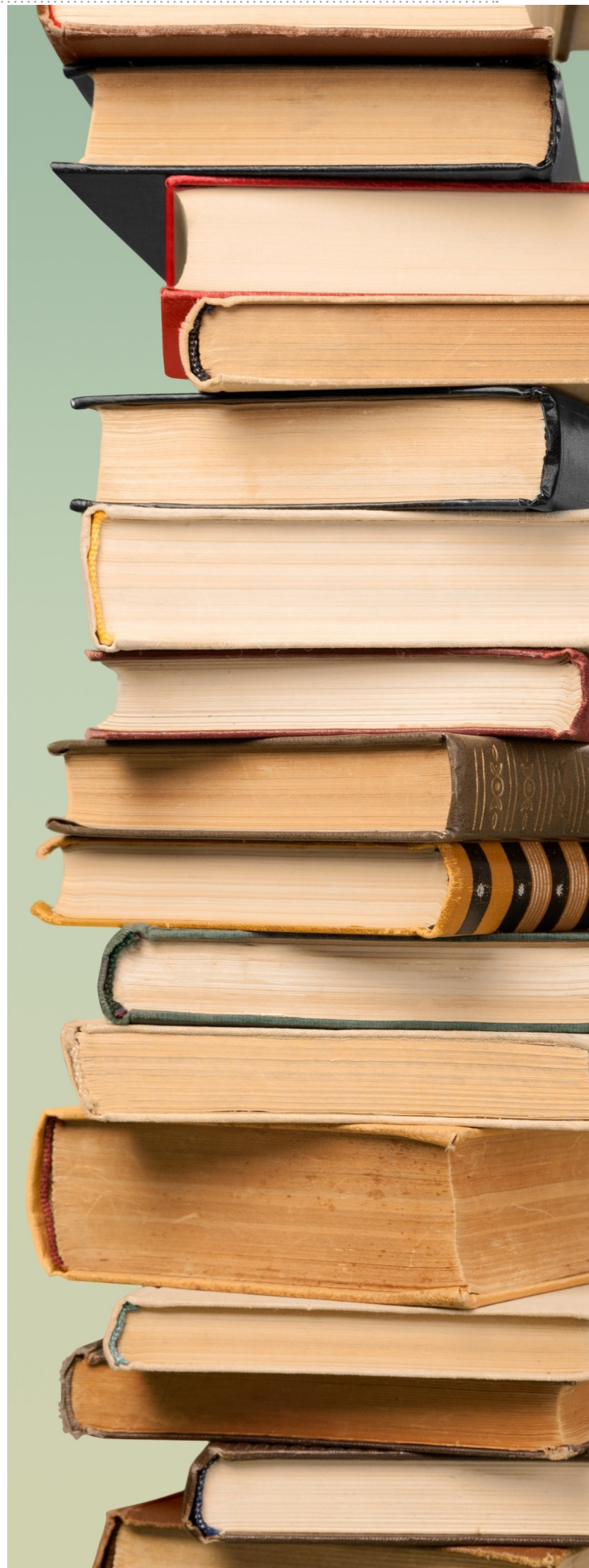


Alison Madelaine

I've read a bit of non-fiction recently, which is not normal for me. Although all have difficult content, I did enjoy *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance, *Talking to My Country* by Stan Grant, and *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* by Behrouz Boochani. Boochani, a Kurdish-Iranian journalist, wrote his memoir in Persian on a mobile phone. It was subsequently translated into English and won the Victorian Premier's Literary Prize for Literature and for Non-fiction on 2019. It was a shocking read of course, but what really struck me was how much of it was about food and drink, and going to the toilet – things that really come to the fore when basic rights are taken away. Apparently, it is being turned into a film this year.

My fiction reads have included *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins, *The Survivors* by Jane Harper, *The Course of Love* by Alain de Botton, *Here is the Beehive* by Sarah Crossan, *The Thursday Murder Club* by Richard Osman, and *Honeybee* by Craig Silvey. *Honeybee* was my favourite of all these, and it also just won the 2021 Indie Book Award for fiction!

Finally, on a recent road trip with my son, I listened to *Storm Boy* by Colin Thiele on audiobook. He loved it and of course we then had to watch the original movie from the 1970s, which brought back lots of memories for me.



Nicola Bell

My reading list from the last couple of months has taken a bit of an unnerving turn. Instead of the usual light-hearted stories, most of the books I've read recently have centred around murder. I think this must have been prompted by *Scrublands* by Chris Hammer, which was absolutely absorbing. The other two books in his trilogy – *Silver* and *Trust* – were well-written, though not as good as the first. I also read *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, which documents the hunt for the real-life "Golden State Killer". This was a fascinating read, partly because the author (Michelle McNamara) weaves in her own experiences of how the investigation affected her life. These snippets are all the more poignant given that the book was finished and published after McNamara's death in 2016.

I also really enjoyed reading *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* by Jon Ronson, which is a deep dive into the phenomenon of internet-based pile-ons. Ronson is a brilliant journalist, and he has a kind of sarcastic/neurotic writing style that I love.

One book I didn't quite get on board with was *A Lonely Girl is a Dangerous Thing* by Jessie Tu. It was captivating enough, but the protagonist's terrible life choices frequently made me want to kick her.



Meree Reynolds

A recent favourite was *The Nowhere Child*, a debut novel by Christian White that was a Christmas gift from my granddaughters. They chose well! It is a quick, thoroughly enjoyable read that has everything: suspense, intrigue, twists and turns and lots of action.

In contrast, *Defending Jacob* made me squirm as I went into empathy overload for a family in crisis when the teenage son was accused of murder. There's plenty of suspense in William Landay's courtroom drama and it kept me engrossed right up to its quite unexpected ending.

Reading Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight* was a special experience for me. It is a story of memories of childhood, set in the years after World War II that I thought was beautifully written with fascinating characters and a mystery that captivated me as it was slowly peeled back, layer by layer.

What we've been reading

Currently I am reading *Corruption in High Places* by Clarrie Briese who was a key witness in the trials of Justice Murphy in the 1980s. At the time, the Lionel Murphy scandal perplexed me, particularly because many of my friends and acquaintances were fierce defenders of the High Court judge. Yet I was not at all convinced of his innocence in the matter. This newly released book provides Clarrie Briese's side of the story. I found it very interesting and I am full of admiration for the author who put a great deal on the line when he testified against a very senior and highly influential public figure.



Anna Desjardins

The books on my latest round-up sound like they belong in a poem together, with *The Hidden Life of Trees* and *The Secret Life of Bees* both captivating me, for different reasons. *The Hidden Life of Trees*, by Peter Wohlleben, recounts how trees interact together in larger forest groups in surprising ways that resemble social networks. In a style that is both scientifically sound and emotionally aware, Wohlleben leaves us with a sense of just how much we underestimate these living beings that we share the earth with.

I'm not sure how I missed out on *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, 20 years ago, but I am grateful to have been given a copy for Christmas (by a MultiLit colleague, of course!), as it has flown firmly to one of my 'top reads' spots. With a compelling story set at the time of the civil rights movement in the American south, and language you feel like eating at times for its ability to connect you with something hovering just outside our realm of physical experience, this deserves to be the bestseller it is. I have now raided the Sue Monk Kidd shelves at my local library.

I also had my first taste of Isabel Allende recently, when *A Long Petal of the Sea* took me to a moment in history I knew shockingly little about: the desperate Spanish Civil War and the subsequent retreat of Republican refugees as Franco's army comes to power. Leaving Barcelona in the depths of winter, on foot, the protagonists cross the Pyrenees, survive a subsequent internment in a French concentration camp and eventually immigrate to Chile aboard a ship chartered by the poet Pablo Neruda, just as World War II breaks out in Europe. And that's just the beginning! The reader is then swept through another fifty years of history, leading up to and through the turmoil of Chile's own repressive military regime under Pinochet. Against this backdrop, Allende illuminates the human will to survive and the multiple stories of our hearts. Masterful, eye-opening and uplifting in equal measure.

And for something light, *The Strays of Paris* is a sweet story by Jane Smiley (she's got the name to go with the feel of the book!), told from the viewpoint of an unlikely band of animals who take a young boy they meet quite literally under their wing (and paw and hoof). To be read with a cup of tea when nothing too taxing is required, I can see this book being adapted into a charming film for children that, if done well, would be equally enjoyed by parents.



Kevin Wheldall

For a change, I'll start with a book that I am currently reading entitled *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius*. Over the last few years, I have been increasingly drawn to the philosophy of stoicism. As Donald Robertson makes clear in his book, there are many similarities with stoicism and the principles of cognitive behaviour therapy. I heartily recommend both the book and the philosophy.

I am also reading Chris Hammer's latest, *Trust*, the follow-up to his two highly successful previous novels, *Scrublands* and *Silver*. I note that some of my colleagues have been enjoying these books as well.

What good taste we have in MRU!

I am often wary of Booker-prize-winning novels, with the exception of Hilary Mantel's superb works, but I was bowled over by *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart. Pulling no punches, it is a full-on visceral account of growing up gay and dirt-poor in Glasgow. As well as being unsettling, I also found it profoundly moving.

A Spy Among Friends: Philby and the Great Betrayal by Ben Macintyre is a work of non-fiction that reads like a novel. Being as critical as I am of the English establishment, even I was flabbergasted by the way that the upper class, old boys' network continually refused to see what was staring them in the face. They found it unthinkable that a sound chap, one of their own, could

possibly be a spy. You don't have to be an arch Republican (which I unashamedly am) to find this despicable and disgusting.

As a long-time fan of Graham Nash, I found his memoir *Wild Tales* disappointing and self-indulgent. He appears to have learned very little about himself over the years. Rather than reading this misogynistic litany of sexual and drug-fuelled escapades, I know that I'd be better off listening to the Hollies and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young.



Robyn Wheldall

My absolute favourite book of the last calendar year was Pip Williams' *The Dictionary of Lost Words*. A wonderful piece of historical fiction (with more than a little fact) set in the context of the development of the Oxford English Dictionary. The interweaving of the

activities of the suffragettes adds richly to the book and it provides wonderful insights into the lives of women at the time. I love the fact that Pip Williams is an author from the Adelaide Hills and that this book is set in Oxford. This is a book that I shall read again this year – too good to only read once. (I note it's been a favourite of my MRU colleagues, too.) During that languid, balmy period between Christmas and New Year, I delighted in reading Nigella Lawson's *Eating* – a little book from the Vintage Mini series. An entirely appropriate book for the season, *Eating* is full of kitchen, entertaining (with a small 'e') and life wisdom. Nigella's 2020 book *Cook Eat Repeat* also provided some much-needed enthusiasm and fresh ideas when it comes to the gastronomic aspects of life.

The theme of fascinating female characters in my reading continued with Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves* which revolves around the fictional (but highly probable) innermost thoughts of Elizabeth Macarthur – the 'mother' of the wool industry – in early colonial Sydney. Grenville has a strong track record of bringing to life the characters, privations and tragedies of early European habitation in New South Wales and *A Room Made of Leaves* added to this tradition. *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance was a powerful autobiographical read, deeply disturbing but also with hope for the strength and endurance of the human spirit. It gave me important insights into some of the reasons for the entrenched divide in contemporary USA, with origins in deep social disadvantage. I have not yet seen the Ron Howard film of this book – which I believe is also affecting – but am very much looking forward it.

