

What we've been reading



Nicola Bell

My favourite book from the last few months was one I found at an Airbnb during my stay there over the summer holidays. It was *A Man Called Ove*, by Fredrik Backman. I'd heard good things about it and had already enjoyed *Anxious People* by the same author, so I had high hopes. Well, I'm happy to report that those hopes were met and surpassed. I don't think the writing style would be to everyone's taste, but it had exactly the right combination of depth and corniness for me.

Another book I really loved was *The Thursday Murder Club*, by Richard Osman. It had an excellent plot, snappy dialogue, and characters that quickly felt like old friends. I'm currently

reading its sequel, *The Man who Died Twice*, and it's so far just as fun.

In the way of non-fiction (sort of), I read the audiobook of *Troy*, which was written and narrated by Stephen Fry, and it was such a great listen that I enthusiastically downloaded the original story of *Troy* as told in Homer's *Iliad*. Unfortunately, this latter selection is still sitting in my Audible library with about 18 hours left to go. My main note of feedback for Homer: lose some auxiliary characters.



Anna Desjardins (Notley)

Back in December, I really enjoyed *The Paris Library* by Janet Skeslien Charles, picked up off the 'quick reads' shelf at the library. I think the cover undersells this book as a light chick-lit offering, when it is much more. It charts the story of two young women, one coming of age at the time the Germans occupy Paris in World War II (and working in the American Library in Paris, which organised book parcels for soldiers and more dangerously, for Jews sequestered in their homes), the other a teenager in the American Midwest during the 1980s. The two women's stories are beautifully interleaved, and although there are books aplenty out there set during the war, having

just come through our own lockdowns, I found that the evocation of curfews, curtailed freedoms and uncertain futures spoke to me on a deeper level this time.

Tracy Chevalier's *At The Edge of the Orchard* was another great one, taking me into the American Midwest again, charting the fortunes of a young man who escapes his family farm near Ohio as an illiterate child, eventually ending up in California where he turns to plant collecting at the height of the European craze for American redwoods. A fascinating look into a time when the advent of tourism spelled a threat to priceless wilderness, as well as a human story of family – in which cruelty bred of hardship is the status quo, but in which love between a brother and a sister still manages to hold on by a thread.

I gave myself an objective a while ago to read a classic every now and then, and this time around have enjoyed soaking in the beautiful turns of phrase of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Gorgeous though it was, it required concentration, and I needed something light and modern after that – Jaclyn Moriarty's *Gravity Is the Thing* hit the spot. It was fun to read a book set in Sydney among suburbs I know well, and Moriarty's sense of humour had me laughing out loud. Her writing is as true to human feeling as her sister's without the dark edge. Finally, I've just finished *City of Girls*, in which Elizabeth Gilbert dishes up something completely different to her previous novels. Vivian, the ninety-year-old protagonist, is a strong-minded woman who dares to break with expectations as she is growing up. She recounts with acerbity her achievements, her downfalls, her loves and her mistakes, plunging us into the showbusiness world of New York in the 1930s and taking us through the decades to the present day, while endearing us to the motley cast of characters we meet along the way. If you like Gilbert, give it a crack!



Jennifer Buckingham

I got a Kindle for Christmas and used it to download a couple of mainstream novels while in false alarm COVID isolation from Christmas to New Year. One was the latest Inspector Lynley novel, *Something to Hide* by Elizabeth George. I have read a lot of the Lynley novels but this one took formulaic to the next level. I would easily believe it was written by a bot that had been programmed using all the previous books in the series.

Thanks also to the Kindle I read some classics, or at least attempted to: Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Conan-Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and Joyce's *Ulysses* which had been getting a lot of attention because 2022 is its 100th anniversary of publication. I can't say that *The Prince* was enjoyable

but I am glad I took the time to read it. It was different from my expectations based on my general knowledge of its key themes, with fascinating ideas about the nature of power and politics. The *Sherlock Holmes* stories were a delight – such great writing and good fun – unlike *Ulysses*, which I failed to finish yet again. Every time I opened it on my Kindle, the estimated reading time got longer (16 hours and 32 minutes at last count) and I gave up. I did belatedly recognise, however, the similarities in style with another celebrated Irish writer, Roddy Doyle, whose books I also find tough going at times.

The last book I will mention is *Boomers* by Helen Andrews, which I read in good old-fashioned hard cover. Helen is a wonderfully talented writer; there are few like her. *Boomers* is tenaciously researched and viciously funny. Speaking of which, I'd like to acknowledge and mourn the passing of PJ O'Rourke with whom I was lucky enough to have a scotch and cigar a few years ago. RIP PJ.



Kevin Wheldall

*I'm a pout-pout fish
With a pout-pout face
So I spread the dreary-wearies
All over the place.*

Curiously, one of the rediscovered books I've read repeatedly of late is *The Pout-Pout Fish*, prompted by my newest crop of grandies. What a rollicking read it is! Deservedly, in my view, it was a *New York Times* bestseller in 2013 when published. Written by Debra Diesen with pictures by Dan Hanna, it is highly recommended for reading aloud to 'littlies'.

Speaking of books for grandies, I bought all of them the splendid new 100th anniversary edition of Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* which is delightful. I am not so impressed by the other book I bought for them, JK Rowling's *The Christmas Pig*, which I am still struggling to finish. I find it dull and a bit of a potboiler. I say this as a big fan of both JK's adult and children's fiction.

Of my more adult novel reading, I have greatly enjoyed (of course) Elizabeth Strout's latest *Oh William!*, John Le Carre's final (and posthumously published) *Silverview*, and Sebastian Faulks's *Snow Country*. On the biography front, I have read *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* by Fiona MacCarthy and one on *The Young H.G. Wells* by Claire Tomalin. (I am currently fascinated by this period of history.) As for *Inside Story* by Martin Amis, was it autobiography or not? Regardless, although patchy, Amis is always a delight to read.

Like many of my female Twitter and other friends, I have just read Bonnie Garmus's much admired *Lessons in Chemistry* and I liked it too, but perhaps not quite as much. While reading this book, I was also watching the TV series *Julia* about Julia Child (the first celebrity chef, or should I say, cook) of whose books I have been a fan from way back. (I still have a dog-eared and falling to pieces copy of the Penguin edition of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* from the seventies but have since acquired both paperback and hardback editions of the two volume sets.) I was struck by the fact that both these oeuvres, the Garmus book and the TV show about Julia, were very similar in some respects. Both are about two very different celebrity cooks and both are set in the early sixties. Moreover, they both tackle the rampant misogyny of those white-bread times head on.

