

## What we've been reading



### Sarah Arakelian

While my reading has been rather light lately, I have been reading *Bewilderment*, a novel by Richard Powers about the relationship between a father and his autistic son as he grows from a boy to a teenager. Unlike *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, which has a similar protagonist and which I loved, I have found this story more difficult to read. Though it is not a happy story, I did enjoy the moments shared between father and son as they escape into their own worlds.

On inspiration from a talented colleague's theatrical performance, I read *Little Women*. Having enjoyed the movies since I was little, it was not surprising that I thoroughly enjoyed the book, getting new insights into the characters and lovely little side stories not portrayed in the movies.

I also have to add that my son recently received a gift of Van Gool's *Puss in Boots* which I enjoyed more than I expected, not being a fan of the newer version of the story.



### Jennifer Buckingham

Once again, a range of older and newer books over the past few months. One of the newbies was *Where the Crawdads Sing*, which had been passed around my family members and had received mixed reviews. I found the first half compelling, but my interest had waned by the end. The other airport novel (literally) that I read was Daniel Silva's *The Cellist*. I kept coming across Silva's name and books in one of those odd experiences where something/someone I had never taken any notice of suddenly seemed to be everywhere I looked. *The Cellist* is the 21st book in the series with art restorer and Israeli intelligence officer Gabriel Allon as the protagonist but the first I had read.

Maybe I needed to start earlier in the series because while the plot was OK, the characters were underdone and I couldn't really drum up much enthusiasm for them. Much better were Helen Garner's *Yellow Notebook: Diaries Volume 1 (1978-1987)* and Leonard Cohen's *The Flame*. It's no secret that I am huge fan of Helen Garner, so I enjoyed the self-deprecating musings and reflections in her journal, written when she was a little younger than I am now. Leonard Cohen's poetry is free form and pitches between depression and optimism – "maybe tomorrow will be better / and the banner raised again / for the sisterhood of women / and the brotherhood of men". In a similar vein, I thoroughly recommend Nick Cave's *Red Hand Files*, which you can find online or subscribe to via email. You don't have to be into Cave's music to appreciate his well-crafted and thoughtful responses to questions sent to him about life, suffering, beauty and art, by people from all over the world. Finally, although I am a great admirer of Margaret Atwood's writing, I had never read *The Handmaid's Tale*, so I pulled it from a pile of books my uncle was discarding. Like all of Atwood's books, she creates a vivid and disturbing world with wonderful prose. It's not something I would read again, though, so it went back into the donation pile.



### Alison Madelaine

I have been reading more than usual lately. I'm not sure how – perhaps there has been less phone-scrolling in my downtime? So, I have too many on my list to mention, but some favourites (including some fairly heavy-going stories with difficult subject matter) have been *The Mother* by Jane Caro, *Before You Knew My Name* by Jacqueline Bublitz, *Sorrow and Bliss* by Meg Mason, *Cutters End* by Margaret Hickey, *The Choke* by Sofie Laguna and *Bruny* by Heather Rose.

I also really enjoyed *Dear Mrs. Bird* by A.J. Pearce. It is set in World War II and is about a young, independent woman who wants to become a war correspondent. She takes a job with the *London Evening Chronicle*, but the job is not exactly what she expected. There is a sequel to *Dear Mrs. Bird*, so I will be reading that also.

Like so many others, I read and enjoyed *The Dictionary of Lost Words* by Pip Williams, and for the first time, I finally got to *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin – now to compare it to the 1979 film.

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Finally, an unusual recent read was *Girl in the Walls* by A.J. Gnuse. This book is based on the idea that there could be someone living in your house who you don't know about. Someone who comes out at night or when you are not at home, eats a bit of food here and there and moves things around. They may at this moment be behind a couch, in an attic or basement, or between the walls. Maybe you notice some of these things, hear a sound, or catch a glimpse.



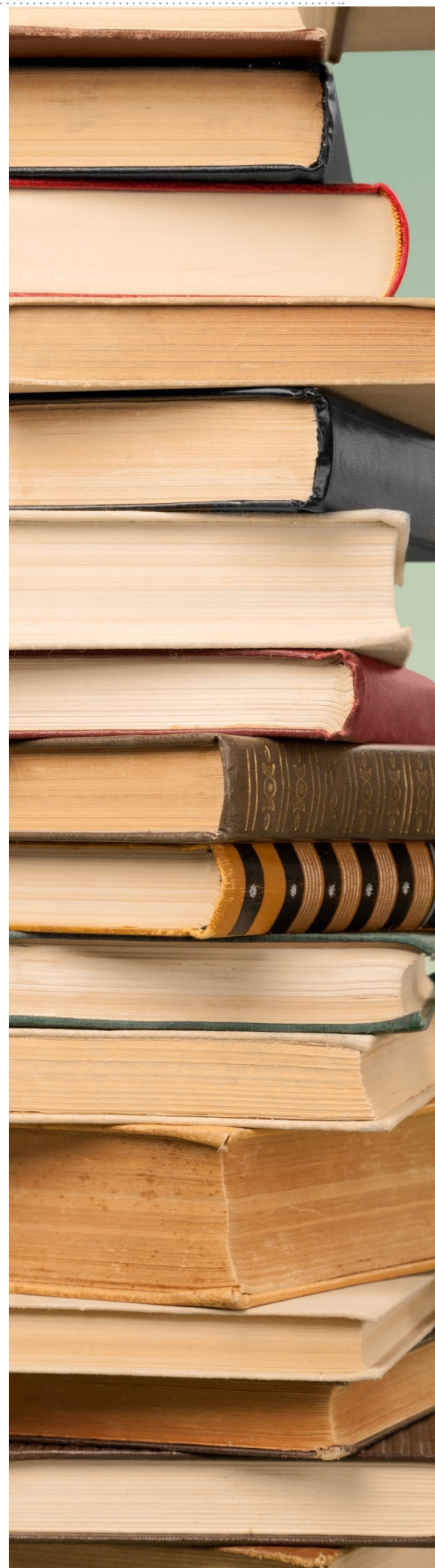
**Mark Carter**

When asked to contribute on my recent reading, I informed my colleagues that, for the most part, I only read nonfiction. I was not quite sure how to interpret their reaction – bewilderment perhaps? In my defence, I find reality far more interesting, and often more bizarre, than anything that could be fabricated. For example, my most recent read was *Merchants of Doubt* by historians of science, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway. The book is a

meticulously researched historical detective story, dealing with unprincipled greed, casual disregard for human life, betrayal, and serial misuse and abuse of power. It deals with conspiracies (real ones) that, in some cases, resulted in the deaths and suffering of millions. The cast of characters includes some of the most brilliant minds of the past century, individuals who were also deeply flawed, ultimately being willing to sacrifice their scientific principles and integrity on the altar of ideology and politics. What else could you want in a page turner? Okay, admittedly, it is devoid of even the faintest whiff of romance, but that works just fine for me.

The story starts in the 1950s when it became clear to scientists, including those in the tobacco industry, that smoking caused serious health problems. How could the industry address this evidence, and the inevitable tsunami of confirmatory science that would follow? The solution was, in equal parts, simple and brilliant. They wouldn't! Rather than addressing the evidence, they would simply 'merchandise doubt', specifically to the lay public and their representatives, the (equally lay) politicians. The industry developed a playbook of strategies to ferment doubt, even though the science was clear and the consensus was overwhelming. The central thrust of these strategies was to claim that the science was 'not settled' and create a gap between public understanding and the consensus of scientific experts. An important plank in the strategy was leveraging the testimony of contrarian scientists and experts holding outlier views, in many cases in the employ of industry.

The playbook created by the tobacco industry was a remarkable success. It effectively delayed by many decades most of the restrictions and legislative changes surrounding smoking that we take for granted today. However, in hindsight, the greatest impact of the tobacco industry on society may not have been the product they sold, but the template for denying science they created. This has been repeatedly employed over the past half century by those with financial or ideological vested interests, with the same cast of characters turning up surprisingly often. The strategies pioneered by the tobacco industry continue to be used with great success today in a range of issues that appear in your daily newsfeed, often amplified by the algorithms of social media platforms. What issues you ask? Well, that's your homework for this week.







### Anna Desjardins (Notley)

I had my first taste of Geraldine Brooks earlier this year, when I read *March*, a historical fiction exploring what Mr March, the absent father in Louise May Alcott's *Little Women*, may have been doing while acting as a chaplain on the front lines of the Civil War. Brooks skilfully captures Alcott's turns of phrase in the letters she imagines Mr March writes home over this time, while spinning a detailed story of her own, based on meticulous research of real events. She doesn't shy away from conveying the brutality of slavery or the full horror of war at a time when medical treatment was limited, so to say I 'enjoyed' this book is difficult, but I was certainly moved by it.

On holiday in New Zealand, I read Ruth Shaw's homegrown memoir *The Bookseller at the End of the World*, spanning a childhood spent in several South Island towns in the 1940s, through many an unpredictable adventure leading Shaw circuitously, 70 years later, to open a colourful 'wee' bookshop in her garden in the remote village of Manapouri. Told in bite-size snippets, and interspersed with anecdotes about visitors to the bookshop, this was a relaxing book to dip into in short bursts, and was interesting for me, because I felt like I could have been reading about my own parents, or their siblings – with their own brand of uniquely Kiwi pluck!

Like many, I'm sure, I also read *Where the Crawdads Sing*, by Delia Owens this year. With an intriguing central character who satisfyingly beats all the odds stacked against her, this was an appealing blend of coming-of-age drama and murder mystery, against a backdrop of evocative and lovingly drawn descriptions of the natural world. A good summer holiday read if you haven't got to it already. (I can't comment on the film, though – on reading a fairly damning review of the adaptation, I decided against seeing it).

To mix things up, I've been enjoying some poetry over breakfast lately, with a couple of 'how to' guides: *How to Fly in 10,000 Easy Lessons* by Barbara Kingsolver and *How to Make a Basket* by Jazz Money – two completely different voices, the first showcasing a depth of understanding and feeling that can only come with life experience, the second a young, fresh insight into a First Nations viewpoint – but both accessible, and both often achingly beautiful.

Finally, for my dip into the classics, I turned to Shakespeare. I took to reading quite a bit of the Bard during lockdown (finally, that *Complete Works* volume coming in handy for more than flower-pressing and doorstep functions!) and I have to admit that it gives me a startled thrill when, wading through the words, I come across a piece of dialogue that speaks with surprisingly modern tendencies clean across the centuries. Discovering Emilia's observations of men and women in *Othello* on a cold Sydney winter night a few months ago, gave me one of those moments: "Let husbands know their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell and have their palates both for sweet and sour, as husbands have ... And have not we affections, desires for sport, and frailty, as men have? Then let them use us well ..." Indeed, William, indeed.



### Ying Sng

When I was much younger, I persevered with a book even though I wasn't enjoying it. I owed the author that much and maybe it would improve. About 10 years ago I decided there were too many books and not enough time, so I strategised. I would give a book a quarter of the total pages to hook me. If it didn't happen, I'd put it down and move on. No hard feelings. I'd bought the book and my obligation to the author was fulfilled. I was going to judge the book not by its cover but by the



first 25 per cent. This strategy did not serve me well when I picked up *Sorrow and Bliss* by Meg Mason. I adored the first third. Oh boy, this was going to be GREAT! All the reviews told me I'd love it. Then, I would read a sentence or a paragraph and I'd realise I was unconsciously rolling my eyes or I'd say "for Pete's sake" out loud. I was beyond my self-imposed cut-off so I couldn't abandon it and it was a book club discussion book. Sigh! The main protagonist was so wilfully unkind to the people who loved her the most and there was so much dysfunction, neglect and mistreatment that reading it became quite unpleasant for me. Although she was so mean to her family, she managed to charm other people. How do you activate your charisma enough for someone to let you stay in their Parisian apartment rent free for years? I was very irritated by the whole thing! Underpinning the entire plot was a misdiagnosed mental illness but I didn't think it gave someone reason to be cruel. I wasn't convinced by the ending either, it was just too tidy. A friend told me she vacillated between wanting to hurl the book against a wall and fist-pumping. Yes, I agreed ... That reminds me, I must get that dent in the wall fixed.

Next up is a book that stayed firmly in my hands. No airborne adventures for *Loop Tracks* by Sue Orr! The book begins in the late seventies with the main character recalling her first plane ride, from Auckland to Sydney. Charlie is taking the journey alone because what she needs is no longer available in New Zealand. It was a bad time to be unwed and pregnant. Even worse when you are 16 and your parents have had to borrow the money for the trip. The decision to get off that plane defines this young woman's life. She gives birth to her baby, and he is adopted. Charlie cannot reveal the name of the baby's father and the reason for this becomes clearer later in the book. The baby does not grow up to be a nice bloke and he manages to track Charlie down years later and she ends up raising her grandson, Tommy. The plot traversed issues of abortion, euthanasia, consent, politics, conspiracy theories and neurodiversity. What anchors the story is family and connection. I thought the characters were developed with empathy and this is the first book I've read that weaved a COVID lockdown into the plot. Somehow it made it more relatable and added to the story. I would recommend this one and all is well in my small literary world.



### Kevin Wheldall

In my last contribution to this feature, I was mildly critical of *The Christmas Pig*, a book for young children by J. K. Rowling. Here I go again ...

But I should stress that I have been a great fan and admirer of J. K. since the first Harry Potter book was published all those years ago now. Moreover, I have great respect for her brave, much criticised, but truly feminist stand in the current gender wars. Consequently, it grieves me to write critically (again) of her latest work in the Cormoran Strike series, published under her nom de plume Robert Galbraith. Coming in at just over 1000 pages, *The Ink Black Heart* is a daunting read. (I could have been reading *War and Peace*!) But apart from the need for it to be edited back to (at least) half the length, the biggest black mark (pun intended) is reserved for J. K.'s ill-advised, extensive, and excessive use of pages of double column, internet chat room conversations among the main suspects. Rather than being a clever plot device, it is a continual source of irritation and distraction from the main game. I gather that I was not alone in feeling this way. I still love the main characters in the series (Cormoran and Robin), and remain engaged in their welfare, but what promised to be a feast was, sadly, largely indigestible.

On a far more positive note, I owe a great debt of gratitude to my dear old (as in longstanding) friend Coral Kemp who introduced me to the work of Peter May, as a present for my birthday. The Lewis trilogy, set on the remote Scottish island of that name, comprises *The Blackhouse*, *The Lewis Man* and *The Chessmen* and is a delight; engrossing, beautifully written and highly recommended.

