



What we've been reading



Nicola Bell

Lately, I've been judging lots of books by their covers. It's straightforward enough to pick out the red, chunky-fonted 'cosy crime' ones that I know will fit in my comfort zone. If there's a lamp post or a top hat featured, even better. If there's a bullet or some blood spatter, I've drifted too far into the 'non-cosy crime' section.

Of all the books in this genre that I've read recently, my favourite was *Magpie Murders* by Anthony Horowitz. This one came out a while ago, which means I have a couple of sequels to catch up on now. *Magpie Murders* tells the story of a crime writer who dies mysteriously. The character's final, incomplete manuscript plays a key role in figuring out the identity of his own killer, and I really liked the weaving together of the two storylines. It got just a little too convoluted at the end, but it was still an enjoyable read.

A couple of others that I really enjoyed were *We Solve Murders* by Richard Osman and *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* by Stuart Turton, although the latter was not especially cosy. I'm really annoyed that I wasted time and money on *The Perfect Marriage* by Jeneva Rose. Awful.



Mark Carter

A recent 'ear-read' (audiobook) was Jacinda Ardern's *A Different Kind of Power*. Ardern always impressed me as something of an outlier in the world of politics. Perhaps she was just the product of political branding, the type that will be all too familiar to Australians. I also wondered whether a politician like Ardern could only exist in Aotearoa New Zealand because the country possessed a more civilised political system and less rabid press, both profoundly naive notions that were quickly

dispelled. Ardern provided narration for the audiobook, and when recounting events such as the Christchurch massacre, the patent emotion in her voice added extraordinary dimension. Ardern also writes very well. Even the details of her early formative years, minutiae that would normally drive me to distraction, were rendered in a way that maintained my interest. As the creeping grumpiness of old age descends upon me, I have reached the conclusion that, given our collective shallow thinking and reflexive political tribalism, we ultimately get the politicians we deserve or, at the very least, politicians who behave the way we deserve. This leaves me with one question. What exactly did New Zealanders do to deserve Ardern?

For something quite different, *Why We Sleep* by Matthew Walker provides an encyclopaedic overview of the functions of sleep, the benefits of slumber and the profound damage caused by insufficient and disrupted sleep cycles. Some of the numerous health benefits of sleep reported include consolidating learning, removing accumulated toxins from the brain and stripping away traumatic emotions from memories. The corresponding morbidity associated with inadequate sleep was more than a bit frightening. I must admit, I did wonder whether Walker was overstating the case at some points or perhaps this was just wishful thinking on my part.



Maddy Goto

A couple of easy reads I've enjoyed recently where the narrative has pulled me in at the beginning and spat me out at the other end, having barely come up for breath, are *Outback* by Patricia Wolf and *The Promise of Rain* by Vasundra Tailor.

Slightly slower reads, not because they were less enjoyable, but because they necessitated a bit more pause and contemplation were *In the Margins* by Gail Holmes and another offering from Percival Everett, *Dr. No*.

Holmes was inspired by Frances Wolfreston, a real person and the tenacious wife of a rector, who was credited with collecting and preserving the earliest part of

Shakespeare's legacy. *In the Margins* offers a little window into life in England in 1647. This was a time when women lived 'in the margins', when religious non-compliance was met with severe punishment and when education was seen as pointless for the poor. The unassuming, yet bold, heroine of this book protects and offers solidarity to the downtrodden women and children in her community, through words and literature. A fascinating and, at times, quite disturbing glimpse into this period of history.

Dr. No was quite the contrast, where despite dealing with some serious and important themes, comedy and absurdity abound in true Everett fashion. This novel is about nothing, quite literally. The narrator, a professor of mathematics, is named Wala Kitu, a Tagalog-Swahili name which, when translated, means Nothing Nothing. He has spent his entire career devoted to nothing, to absence, accompanied by his one-legged dog, Trigo. Once you've got your head around nothing, prepare for some real James Bond-esque villainy complete with billionaires, shark-infested pools and submarines, all in the quest to find a chest containing nothing. While *Dr. No* may be about nothing, I thought it was quite something.



Alison Madelaine

I've read so many excellent books lately, it's difficult to know where to start. Some of my 5-star reads have included *The Funny Thing About Norman Foreman* by Julietta Henderson, *Mad Mabel* by Sally Hepworth, *An Ill Wind* by Margaret Hickey, *The Names* by Florence Knapp and *Lyrebird* by Jane Caro.

Another interesting book I read was *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by T J Klune. It is the story of a government employee who goes to inspect an orphanage containing 6 children and some carers. The children are actually magical beings: a garden gnome, a shapeshifter, an amorphous blob, a sprite, a wyvern and the son of Satan. More broadly, the book is about acceptance of those who are different, fighting prejudice and finding family in an unexpected place. A short while later, I read the sequel, *Somewhere Beyond the Sea*. This was equally as good and is about the fight to keep this unusual family together, with the addition of one more young magical being.

Finally, I read one of the most disturbing books I've ever read, and it is very much still in my head. It has been quite some years since I have read any horror, so I thought I would give one a go. The book was *Bloom* by Delilah S. Dawson. This novella starts all cute and cozy, with a farmer's market stall where decadent cupcakes, handmade soap and plants in pretty pots are sold. The market stall vendor starts a relationship with one of her customers. In this relationship, you could definitely say that some red flags are ignored. And then the book takes a turn that firmly plants it in the horror genre (actually a specific sub-genre of horror, which I will keep to myself in case it is a spoiler). Read it if you dare.

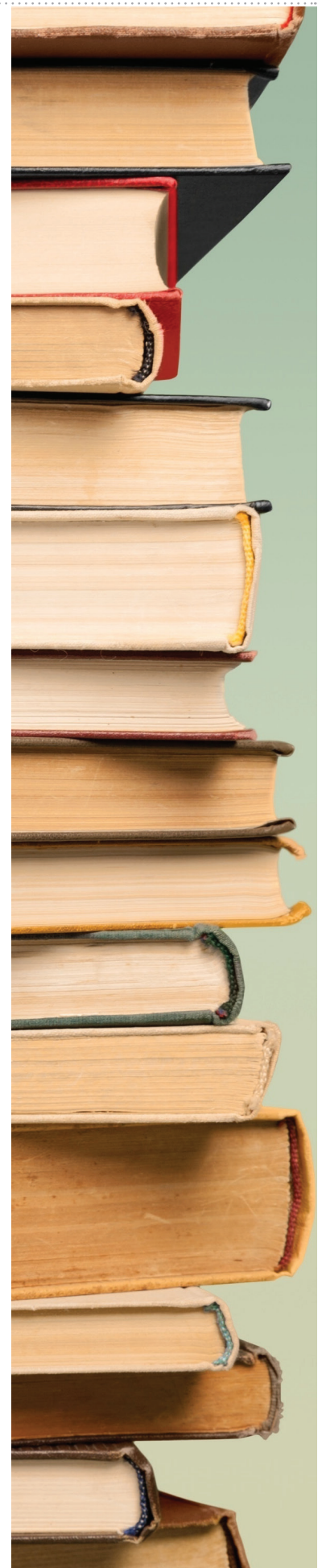


Ying Sng

My relationship with social media is complicated, but sometimes Bookstagram/Booktok delivers stellar recommendations. Here are a few enjoyable titles that I owe entirely to the influencers who inhabit this bookish corner of the internet. The protagonist in *The Correspondent* by Virginia Evans is a prolific letter writer – ideal for an epistolary novel. Sybil Van Antwerp is in her seventies, she lives alone and she is delightfully prickly. Letter by letter, we uncover her story as she confronts painful memories,

the results of a DNA test and juggles the attention of two persistent suitors.

In *The Names*, Florence Knapp asks whether a child's name affects their future. Cora must register her second child's birth. Does she name him Bear (her daughter's choice), Julian (her choice) or Gordon (her husband's choice)? Knapp imagines three different futures for a child born into a family affected by domestic abuse. Ultimately, it isn't the name that determines the baby's fate, it is whether Cora decides to provoke her domineering husband by going against his wishes or submit to the life he has designed for them.



What we've been reading



The River Is Waiting by Wally Lamb was an emotional read. Corby Ledbetter loses his job, turns to medication and alcohol and then something unspeakably tragic happens. Most of the novel is set in prison where he grapples with guilt, faces violence and unexpectedly encounters kindness. In the end, Corby is a man trying his best, though sometimes his best falls short.

It is astonishing that both Virginia Evans and Florence Knapp are debut novelists. I look forward to adding their future projects to my TBR pile where two of Wally Lamb's back catalogue currently reside. All three books were #unputdownable.



Kevin Wheldall

It has been some time since I last wrote about what I've been reading. (My last contribution in the September issue was held over from the previous issue for space reasons.) So, there is a long list to choose from ...

Starting with the book I finished most recently during a bout of insomnia, I enjoyed Jane Harper's *Last One Out*.

But sadly, I was not impressed by Elizabeth George's latest, *A Slowly Dying Cause*. This Lynley series has done its dash and at 650 pages was a chore with some sloppy writing. Two stars only.

On the brighter side, I greatly enjoyed two novellas by Irish writer Claire Keegan, both of which were subsequently made into movies: *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*, both focusing on the darker side of Irish life in the not-so-remote past. Nasty nuns alert.



Robyn Wheldall

Thank goodness for summer holidays! Were it not for a much-welcomed slab of time off over Christmas and the New Year I would not have had anything much to relay here. I really got back into reading for pleasure, although it has to be said that not all of it could be called pleasurable. A couple of titles from over summer were reminders of the important role that reading plays in taking us out of ourselves and into other worlds and other people's experience. I had been reading *Ferryman: The Life and Deathwork of Ephraim Finch* by Katia Ariel when the dreadful events of the Bondi Beach terror attack took place in December. The memoir covers the decades-long community work of a man who converted to Judaism and guided thousands of Jewish people through the end of their lives, preserving the cultural practices around death in the Jewish faith. This memoir was published in May 2025 and references to, and concerns about, rising antisemitism in Australia were included in the book. It was both confronting and shocking, therefore, that those concerns were actualised in the horrific events on the first day of Hanukkah festival.

Memoir is a powerful form for me and another I read over my summer of reading was *What Remains: A Memoir of Fate, Friendship and Love* by Carole Radziwill (2005) which deals with the relationship between the author and her husband, Anthony Radziwill, and his cousin, John Kennedy Jnr and Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, Carole's closest friend. As you may know, the ill-fated Kennedy couple died in a light plane crash off the New England coast. But what was less known (to me) was that this occurred at a time when Anthony was dying from a largely private five-year battle with cancer and these closest of friends were confronting Anthony's impending death at only 40 years old. The unexpected tragedy of the loss of dearest friends at a time of heightened struggle and need was moving and heart-wrenching. The brutal honesty of the emotional turmoil that swirled around this tragic time was powerful.