What we've been reading

Anne-marie Van Duinen

This issue, I've traded hotel quarantine for lockdown and, with no access to the MultiLit library (for covert borrowing purposes), I've been thrown back on my own devices. Here are the results.

Twenty Letters to a Friend by Svetlana Alliluyeva was first published in 1967 and it is both profound and profoundly disturbing – perhaps not surprising given that the author was the daughter of Joseph Stalin. Smuggled out of Russia in 1966 and published after her defection to the United States in 1967, the book is a memoir of Svetlana's early life and her struggle to come to terms with the atrocities committed by her father, even on members of her own family. As a companion piece, Rosemary Sullivan's 2015 multi award-winning biography, *Stalin's Daughter* is also highly recommended. It follows the latter half of Svetlana's life until she died in penury and obscurity in 2011.

The School by Brendan James Murray is a much more contemporary tome. A semi-fictionalised account of one year of the author's teaching career, this book is a candid and thoughtful reflection on all aspects of school life both personal and political. As a teacher, I found the portrayals of the students deeply affecting. I have met a version of every one of them.

And to finish, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* by Tom Shakespeare provides a nuanced discussion of disability practice and policy focusing on the social model of disability. Tom, who is a professor of disability research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, also has some compelling videos available on YouTube for those who would like to explore his work further.

Anna Desjardins (Notley)

Over the last few months of lockdown, being reduced to what I could find on my bookshelves at home meant I finally picked up the last two unread books I received as Christmas gifts. The first of these was *Out of Africa* by Karen Blixen, a classic that had passed me by until now. Although it took me some time to settle into the rhythm of her account of her life in Kenya from 1914–31, once I had, I ate up her words. Blixen has a particularly rich descriptive tone, taking the reader into landscapes and moments in time in an exceptionally immediate way – all the more impressive given that she wrote the book some time after her return to Denmark. One feels that her years in Africa marked her so deeply that she could plunge herself back into a day there as if she had never left. Now to watch the film!

Accompanying this book, I was given a historical fiction, *Circling the Sun* by Paula McLain, based on the life of one of Karen Blixen's contemporaries, Beryl Markham. Beryl's life overlapped with Karen's in Kenya, so it was interesting to read about some of the same places and people from a different perspective. Beryl was a fascinating person in her own right, being the first woman to make a successful solo flight across the Atlantic in 1936. Although I wouldn't rave about this particular fictional account of her life, it did make me curious to read her autobiography, *West With the Night*.

I then turned to a book passed on to me by my mother in a lockdown book-swap-drop: *China Room* by Sunjeev Sahota. This was a sparely written, powerful look at the life of a Sikh woman, Mehar, in the early 1900s, in an arranged marriage at the age of 15. The title refers to the narrow windowless room of her new home, where the china is kept and where the three young girls married to the family's three sons spend most of their time, unless called for service. Beneath the veil that reduces her view of the world to her own feet, Mehar is irrepressibly full of life. As she deals with the trials born of locking a teenage girl on the cusp of womanhood into a world of repression, we also meet her great-great-grandson at a time when he has lost himself and journeys from England to the now-abandoned house of the china room. Their two stories are beautifully interwoven, and I will look for more by this author whose work has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. I enjoyed his style, in which the reader must pay just as much attention to what is not said, as to what is.

I've most recently (and to my pleasant surprise) really enjoyed *The Map that Changed the World* by Simon Winchester, which I picked up from the MultiLit book exchange shelf some time ago. A non-fiction account of the life of the 'father of modern geology' doesn't sound like it has much going for it, but in the

hands of Winchester, it most certainly does! William Smith was the first man to really pay attention to the layers of rocks and fossils being laid bare in coal mines in Britain during the Industrial Revolution (and who then undertook to map these layers across the country in a single-handed feat unmatched by anyone since). In bringing Smith to life, Winchester manages to make geology cut-throat and exciting, with a delightfully British turn of phrase, and imparts a due sense of majesty to this discipline, which has contributed so much to our understanding of the world in which we live.

In parting, I shall just say that I did dutifully scour the street libraries on my neighbourhood lockdown walks, often coming home with something, with all the best intentions. However, I invariably found that a general sense of fatigue would overtake me after the first few pages, and I would inevitably deliver these books back to another street library somewhere. My son dubbed this helpful activity 'book pollination', and I quite like to think that I have, short of reading much myself, served the general hive of book lovers in some way during this period of strange stagnation!

Nicola Bell

In my ongoing pursuit of all things narrated by Stephen Fry, I recently came across a series of short detective stories called *The Tales of Max Carrados* by Ernest Bramah. These stories were written at roughly the same time as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was writing Sherlock Holmes stories, and the two series are similar to one another in tone, length and cultural references. That said, Max is a much friendlier hero than Sherlock, and that seemed to make it a comparatively more inviting read.

Another audiobook I read recently was *I, Partridge* by Steve Coogan, writing as his alter ego, Alan Partridge. I'm a latecomer to the world of Alan Partridge, so a lot of references flew over my head, but I still really enjoyed it. (And if you're a fan of that kind of thing, I highly rate the Alan Partridge podcast series, *From the Oasthouse*.)

On a completely different note, another book I read recently – and yes, I'm years late to this one – was *The Dry* by Jane Harper. It will surprise no one to learn that it was excellent. The film adaptation is also worth watching – full of grit and suspense and a morose Eric Bana.

Lastly, I read *Temporary* by Hilary Leichter, wherein the fictional protagonist details her experiences living as a permanent temp. She moves from job to job, working briefly as a CEO, a mother, a pirate, a bank robber, and, at one point, a barnacle. One of the front-cover quotes describes the book as '*Alice in Wonderland* set in the gig economy', and I think this sums it up pretty well. Completely surreal, but fun.

Jennifer Buckingham

Thomas Sowell became an intellectual beacon for me when read his book *The Vision of the Anointed* twenty or so years ago, and I have since read many of his writings on social policy race and economics. Only recently have I dared to read his memoir, *A Personal Odyssey*, because I didn't want to test the adage that you should never meet your heroes. The adage was partially right – Sowell seems to have been a prickly character even in his pre-grumpy old

man years, but one can argue that intolerance of the intolerable is a virtue and Sowell definitely takes that approach to life.

Speaking of the intolerable, I also re-read *Stasiland* by Anna Funder. It's a terrifying exposition of what can happen when the policies and ideologies against which Sowell has been railing for decades are enforced in their extreme. Funder tells the true stories of people in post-war East Berlin – how they were surveilled, controlled and subdued, not just by the government and its police, but by their own neighbours and friends.

Still in the non-fiction pile, I am part way through *Farmers or Hunter-gatherers? The* Dark Emu *Debate* by Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe and have so far found it to have more common ground with *Dark Emu* (by Bruce Pascoe) than I expected from the commentary around it.

Two novels I read recently were by authors I have spent much time with over the years – one old-ish book and one new book. The former was a novel by Sebastian Faulks called *Human Traces*, a fictional account of an English and a German doctor who are trying to understand the human mind and mental illness from two different perspectives, in the time when psychology was trying desperately to become a science.

For something lighter, I gave myself some gentle escapism in the form of the new book in the 44 Scotland Street series, *A Promise of Ankles* by Alexander McCall Smith.

Alison Madelaine

Listurbia by Carly Cappielli has been described as experimental fiction and is a novella written in lists (I love lists so this really appealed to me). It won the Australian-based Viva la Novella prize in 2019. This was certainly a bit different to what I usually read, but I think I'll be checking out some more winners of this prize. Other novels I've read and enjoyed are *Force of Nature* by Jane Harper, *The Paper Palace* by Miranda Cowley Heller, *Falling* by TJ Newman, *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood and *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. Two that I did not enjoy as much as other readers were *All Our Shimmering Skies* by Trent Dalton and *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery.

Non-fiction reads have included *Kidnapped: The Crime that Shocked the Nation* by Mark Tedeschi and *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* by Barbara Demick. Both were excellent but disturbing in different ways. *Kidnapped* is about the 1960 kidnapping of eight-year-old Graeme Thorne after his parents won the lottery. This one fed my obsession with true crime. Prior to reading *Nothing to Envy*, I did not really have a good understanding of what went on in South Korea in the 1990s. The famine that struck the country was so widespread, that it didn't matter how much money a person had, there was very little food to buy. This one did not exactly have the most uplifting content, but it is well written and definitely worth a read.

Kevin Wheldall

Rather than reading more books during COVID lockdowns, I seem to have been reading fewer. Asking around, I find that I am not alone in this among bibliophiles. However I have certainly bought a lot of books (mainly The Folio Society editions) and I have certainly read a great deal online. But actually reading books…? Not so much.

However, I have read several books on my hero, William Morris, polymath extraordinaire, and the Arts and Crafts Movement in general. These have included: *William Morris and Red House* by Jan Marsh, *William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Home* by Pamela Todd and *Morris and Co* by Christopher Menz. A recent article by Serena Trowbridge in *The Conversation* sums up his legacy aptly thus: 'William Morris – how a great thinker and poet was overlooked for his wallpaper'.

Some books are revered for their provenance rather than their quality per se. I regret to say that I found this to be the case for the much admired and highly praised *The Passenger* by Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz. Written originally in four weeks by a young German Jew (23 years old) in the aftermath of Kristallnacht, it was recently rediscovered, edited and republished, and hailed as a literary masterpiece.

It is a remarkable achievement for one so young for sure and it conjures up the horrors of the pogroms remarkably well. But so have many other books that were perhaps (dare I say it) a little less tedious. Nevertheless, this story needs to be told and retold. *The Passenger's* title refers to the seemingly endless series of train journeys his protagonist is forced to take to escape Nazi persecution. So what's the PR hook? Having escaped persecution by travelling across Europe, the author was interned as an 'enemy alien' on the Isle of Man (UK), subsequently deported to New South Wales, interned again, and finally allowed to travel back to England as a 'friendly alien' in 1942. Sadly, the troop ship on which he was a passenger was torpedoed, killing well over 300 people including the still-young Boschwitz. As I said, the provenance is as compelling as the story of the book.

I have also re-read *The IPCRESS File*, the breakthrough novel written by the underrated literary spy novelist, Len Deighton, and *Misery* by Stephen King. If the movie of this latter book, starring the incomparable Kathy Bates, freaked you out, then for goodness sake don't read the book! You have been warned.

Robyn Wheldall

What have I been reading? Well to tell you the truth, not much in the fiction area at all. You would think with the recent extended lockdown in Sydney due to COVID-19 that I would have been able to attack both my reading pile and my overcrowded cupboards. Neither has happened! (I think Kevin has reported a similar thing in his WWBR.) I have, however, read a couple of books that I recall (that's also been a problem), on reflection, actually have some commonality. *Dinner with Edward: A Story of an Unexpected Friendship* by Isabel Vincent, first published in 2016, was a delightful memoir passed to me by a friend. With themes of personal struggles following loss of loved ones, by death and by divorce, notwithstanding the sombre setting, this book is uplifting in its exploration of finding meaning and connection in apparently unlikely places. The addition of the gastronomic details of the meals that Edward, a widowed nonagenarian, thoughtfully prepared for the ragged investigative journalist from the *New York Post*, provided that extra detail that stimulated the senses. The restorative power of the shared table was an element I really enjoyed. A lovely tale.

The Truth About Her, a first novel by Sydney journalist Jacqueline Maley published in 2021, also had the death, divorce, single motherhood and unlikely friendship elements as central setting and plot events. Maley's writing is beautiful, as we might expect from this experienced wordsmith and the plot doesn't disappoint. It's a page-turner and I even turned the very last page wanting and expecting there to be a bit more. Being a parochial Sydney-sider, I also liked the fact that this story is set in my home town. I know it's not a good reason to particularly like a book, but it always gets me in.