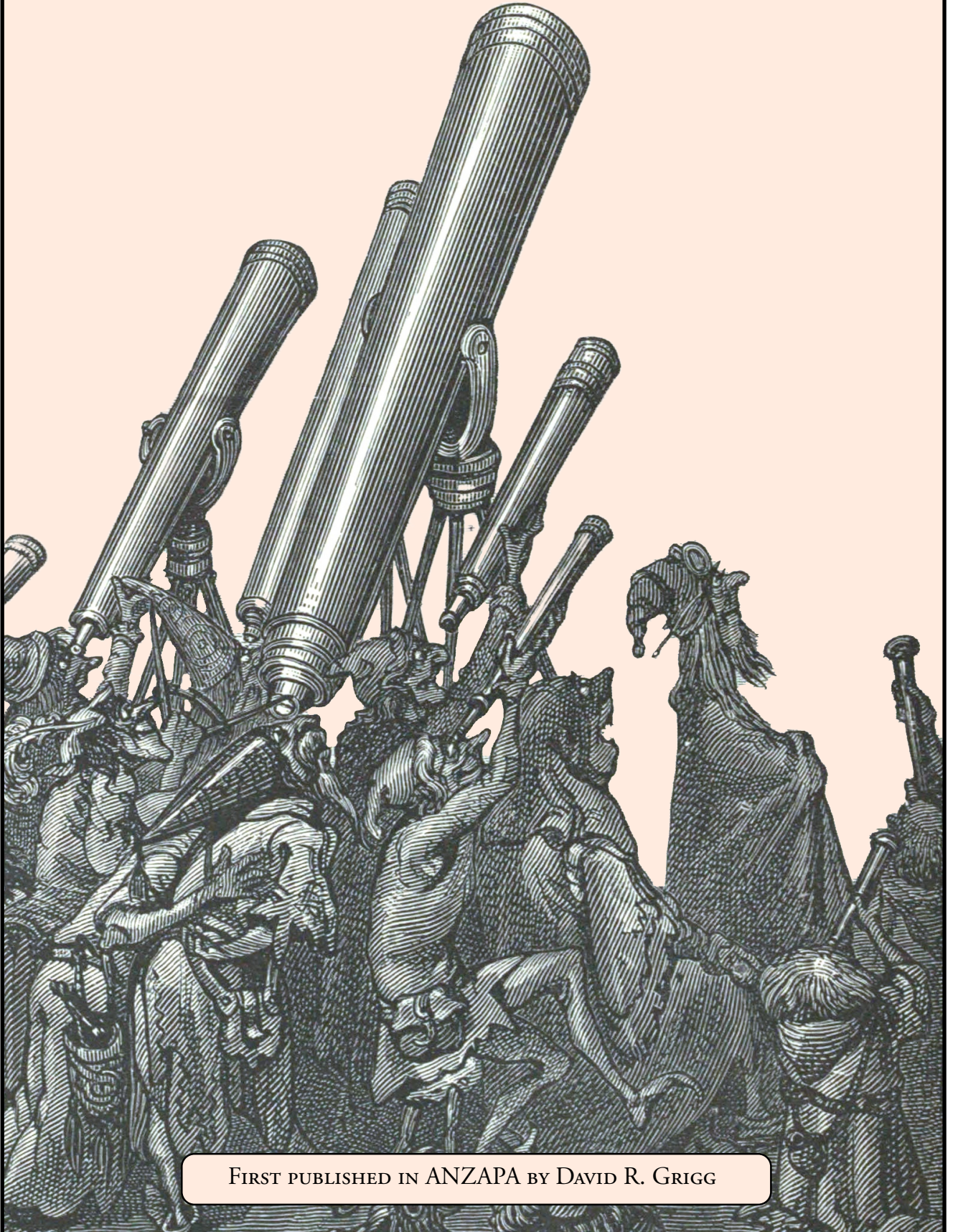


THE MEGALOSCOPE

#1: JUNE 2022



FIRST PUBLISHED IN ANZAPA BY DAVID R. GRIGG

So what's this, then?

Yet another new fanzine title from David R. Grigg? You bet.

The Megaloscope will come out every two months and is primarily intended for contributions to ANZAPA, the Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association, but will also be available to a wider audience.

And what's it about? All about my reading. It is intended to collect and republish longer book reviews taken from my fortnightly newsletter *Through the Biblioscope*. Hence the name of this fanzine, *The Megaloscope* (it's bigger than the biblioscope, get it?)

Let's start with a summary of the last two month's worth of books:

Summary for TL;DR folks:

I've been doing a *lot* of reading this year. By my count, I've read 16 books since the start of April. If I were to keep this up, I'd have a shot of reading 100 books this year. However, to be fair, a number of recent books have been short works, novellas. But if they are published in book form, that counts, doesn't it?

You'll find longer reviews of most but not all of these later in this publication, the following are just quick summaries for impatient readers. I'm not sure I'll keep providing this summary, though, depending on your feedback.

OK, here we go. Since the start of April, I've read:

***Tiamat's Wrath* by James S. A. Corey**

The eighth book in the *Expanse* series of SF novels. You may recall I was re-reading all of these to get back up to speed to read the final book, which I've now done. I like these a lot. The characters are interesting and show considerable development, the SF scenario is well-depicted, and the authors really know how to build up tension so the books become page-turners. I never have any trouble finishing these thick volumes within a few days.

***Night Watch* by Terry Pratchett**

A re-read (as a bedtime read-aloud for Sue and me) of this Pratchett classic. One of the best in the Discworld series, as Commander Sam Vimes finds himself transported into his own past and has to struggle to set his younger self on the right path as well as contributing to a people's revolution.

The Megaloscope #1, June 2022, is published by David R. Grigg primarily for members of ANZAPA.

Cover is a detail from "The Mountain in Labour" by Ernest Griset, illustrating a story in *Aesop's Fables*. From oldbookillustrations.com.

***All's Well* by Mona Awad**

This centres around a main character who is an actress who has suffered severe injury in a fall from the stage. She's now reduced to teaching drama at a college. She wants to put on a Shakespeare play, the lesser-known *All's Well That Ends Well*, but the students, backed by wealthy families, want to perform *Macbeth*. At this point a fantasy element comes which takes the story in an unexpected direction. Some good handling of the themes of chronic pain and how hard women find it to be listened to and believed. The fantasy element didn't quite work for me, though.

[Review here.](#)

***The City & The City* by China Miéville**

One of the best books I've read this year, a brilliant fusion of the crime and SF genres, and a fascinating scenario of two intermingled cities, the inhabitants of each city conditioned never to pay conscious attention to those of the other city.

[Review here.](#)

***Those Who Perish* by Emma Viskic**

A disappointing conclusion to the Caleb Zelic series about a deaf private investigator. Too many things didn't add up for me.

[Review here.](#)

***Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster* by Adam Higginbotham**

This was an excellent and very detailed account of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. The author gained access to a huge number of documents and first-person accounts. A gripping and disturbing read.

[Review here.](#)

***Lady into Fox* by David Garnett**

A production for Standard Ebooks. A curious little book, originally published in 1922. A newly-married couple are taking a leisurely walk through the woods in England when, without warning, the woman suddenly transforms into a fox.

[Review here](#)

***Framley Parsonage; The Small House at Allington; The Last Chronicle of Barset* by Anthony Trollope**

The three concluding books of the *Chronicles of Barsetshire* by Trollope, all done as productions for Standard Ebooks. Pretty good stuff, I thought, and it's clever the way he brings all of the characters of the series together in the last volume.

[Reviews here.](#)

***The Dead Secret* by Wilkie Collins**

Yet another Standard Ebooks production. While it's not as good as Collins' best novels, it contains some of the same elements of mystery and suspense as *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, and much of his characteristic wry humor.

***The Murder Rule* by Dervla McTiernan**

A new, stand-alone, novel from McTiernan, this one set in the United States. Sadly, not as good as her Cormac Reilly series based in Galway in Ireland. It culminates in a courtroom drama which to me was hard to take seriously.

[Review here.](#)

***Leviathan Falls* by James S.A. Corey**

The final book in the *Expanses* series. A pretty satisfying conclusion to the whole 9-book series, I thought. Plenty of drama (the whole of mankind is at serious risk of extinction) and interesting character dynamics.

***Across the Green Grass Fields* by Seanan McGuire**

A stand-alone novel in the *Wayward Children* series which are based on the idea of children who wander through portals into magical worlds, and who when forced to leave those worlds are desperate to get back.

This one made me quite cross, because I think it was a missed opportunity to follow a really interesting start, but it peters out into a ho-hum fantasy. It has been nominated in the Best Novella category at this year's Hugo Awards, but I don't think it deserved it.

[Review here.](#)

***My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante**

The first in Ferrante's *Neapolitan Quartet* series. What I assume is a semi-autobiographical story told from the first person point of view of Elena, a girl growing up in a rough quarter of Naples in the late 1950s, and her complex and shifting relationship with her 'brilliant friend' Lila. I enjoyed this a lot.

I bought all four books in ebook format as a 'boxed set' and I'm keen to roll onto the next in the series, *The Story of a New Name*.

[Review here](#)

***Milk Teeth* by Helene Bukowski**

Excellent, beautifully written novel set in a near-future world where the climate is steadily getting hotter. The first-person POV character Skalde lives in "the territory" which seems to be an island cut off from the mainland. The people there blew up the bridge crossing the wide river and are full of fears about outsiders. So when Skalde finds a young

girl wandering in the woods, a girl who she knows is a stranger to the territory, things rapidly become tense.

[Review here](#)

***A Spindle Splintered* by Alix E. Harrow**

Quite a fun spin on the *Sleeping Beauty* story, with a modern-day teenager finding herself drawn into another world with a princess about to prick her finger on a spindle. To my surprise, not expecting to, I liked it a lot. This is another work on the Best Novella ballot at this year's Hugos.

***Elder Race* by Adrian Tchaikovsky**

Yet another nominee for Best Novella at this year's Hugos. I'm reading them to talk about on the podcast.

For my money, this is the one I would vote for, an interesting mix of what at first seems to be fantasy and then is clearly SF, told in interleaved chapters from two different first-person points of view. I thought it was clever and entertaining. I'd probably vote this as Best Novella.

***80 Days Around the World* by David and Sue Grigg**

Long-time Anzapans may recall that in the year 2000 Sue and I went on a long overseas trip to Europe when our daughter was in England doing a gap year. This is our very long (book-length!) account of that holiday. We've been reading our way through it as a bedtime read-aloud book, and enjoying remembering parts of the trip we'd forgotten about (it is 22 years ago, after all!).

Hits and Misses

Best Book Read in the Last Two Months?

The City & The City, no question about it.

Second Best?

A toss-up between *My Brilliant Friend* and *Milk Teeth*.

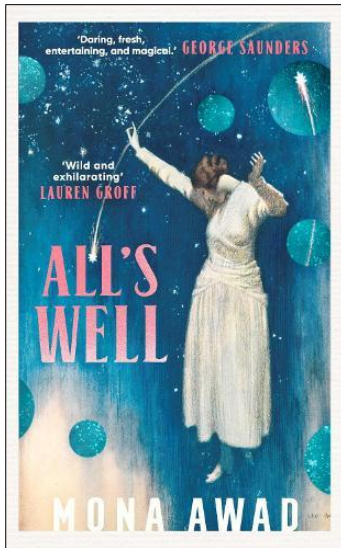
Most Disappointing Book?

Those Who Perish, a disappointing end to a good crime series.

Most Annoying Book?

Across the Green Grass Fields, for reasons spelled out in my full [review](#).

All's Well by Mona Awad



Although this book has been highly praised by some very prominent names, it didn't quite work for me, though it was an entertaining enough read, and it has a dark sort of humour throughout which I quite liked.

It's told from the first person point of view by Miranda Fitch. She's a one-time Shakespearean actor who, after a disastrous accident when she fell off the stage, has been reduced to working as a drama teacher at a small liberal-arts college. Following her accident, which broke several bones, Miranda is in constant pain and has seen a series of doctors and physiotherapists, none of whom seem able to help and several of whom seem to have made things worse. There's a lot of very pointed commentary here about how chronic pain sufferers are disbelieved and misdiagnosed, particularly if the sufferer is a woman.

The college puts on a Shakespeare play each year, and during Miranda's tenure have performed some of the most popular works such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. She's tired, though, of seeing the important female roles performed badly by the troupe's lead actress Briana, whose parents have contributed many dollars to the maintenance of the theatre course. This year Miranda is determined to put on the lesser-known Shakespeare play *All's Well That Ends Well*, a play which itself is about longing, suffering and semi-miraculous healing... But the students, led by Briana, resist this plan strongly and want to put on *Macbeth* instead...

It's at this point that, desperate with pain and with fury at the students' intransigence, Miranda meets three mysterious men in a bar who seem to know her name and who give her advice which speaks directly to her unhappy experiences with the medical profession. This encounter descends into fantasy. There's something very odd about these three. I'm not sure if the author wants us to think of them as the three witches from *Macbeth*, but that's one reading, at least. They foretell success for Miranda. Or will it be her doom?

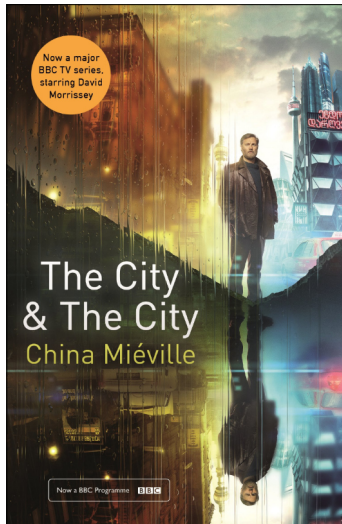
Then we have another, literally magical element introduced, in the form of herbal potions (read "spells") by Ellie, one of the students who has always been on Miranda's side. At one point Miranda has a physical tussle on stage with Briana, who has convinced the students to rebel and brought in her own script of *Macbeth*. This tussle ends in Miranda gripping Briana's wrist tightly, and this seems to magically pass on Miranda's sufferings to Briana. A later, similar, struggle with Miranda's current physiotherapist Mark seems to have the same result. Miranda is suddenly no longer incapacitated and seems full of life. Briana and Mark, however, go into physical declines. Is this transference of pain due to the influence of the three mysterious men, or the result of Ellie's potions?

Things become more and more confusing towards the end of the book, and that's where it started to lose me. It becomes hard to figure out where reality lies and fantasy begins. Does Miranda really "go to sleep in the sea" the evening before the first performance? What do her dreamlike experiences mean?

I would have liked this more, I think, if the author could have lost the three mysterious men and fixed on a single fantasy element (Ellie's potions) driving the plot.

Still, not a bad read.

The City & The City by China Miéville



The City & The City opens as though it were a simple procedural crime novel. It's written from the first-person point of view of police Inspector Tyador Borlú of the Extreme Crime Squad in the city of Beszel. He's at the crime scene in a piece of waste ground where a young woman's body has been discovered, covered up by an old mattress. She's been struck on the head by some heavy object and then stabbed. There's nothing on the body to identify her, and it's clear she was killed somewhere else and brought here to hide.

So far, it seems just the start to a solid crime novel. But we're smoothly, very slowly, introduced to the fact that there's something very strange about the city. In fact, there are two cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma, strangely intersecting or intermingling with each other at many points. These are in fact, the capitals of two independent countries, speaking different languages, and having different cultures and cuisines. Yet they are not merely next to each other, but intertwined. However the inhabitants of each city have been trained from childhood not to pay any conscious attention to those who live in the other city, or to the buildings and streets which lie in that other place, even if those buildings are right next door to each other. This filtered view is not merely a mechanical following of rules, but has become deeply inherent to the subconscious of the inhabitants of both cities. They know intellectually that the other people and buildings are there, but they do not consciously give them any attention. In fact, to notice or interact with the other city's places or its people, is to be in breach, and we eventually learn that there's a mysterious and very powerful entity called Breach which enforces this strange system.

None of this, by the way, is happening on another planet. We're made aware early on that Beszel and Ul Qoma are set somewhere in our own contemporary world. Their citizens visit other countries like Turkey and England, and the Americans and Canadians are involved in trading with the two cities.

But in a way, that's all background. The main thrust of the book is solution of the crime, the unravelling of what has happened to this young woman and why. If not for the fantastic background, you would simply say that this is a top-notch procedural crime novel, with interesting, well-depicted characters and an engaging plot.

Inspector Borlú eventually discovers that while the body was found in his own city of Beszel, the murder actually occurred in Ul Qoma. His superiors send him to Ul Qoma to cooperate with the police there to try to solve the murder. Though the two cities are intermingled with each other, this is like travelling to a foreign country. The local police treat Borlú at first with a degree of hostility and contempt, but he eventually settles into a working relationship with a senior detective in the Ul Qoma police force.

The working out of solution of the crime is done very solidly. We get a good insight into the character and motivations of the victim and why she was killed. What happened to her is by no means incidental to the strange intermingling of Beszel and Ul Quoma, but driven by her obsessive research into the idea that there is a third city secretly existing between the two. When we find out the murderer's identity and their reasons for killing the young woman, they make perfect sense.

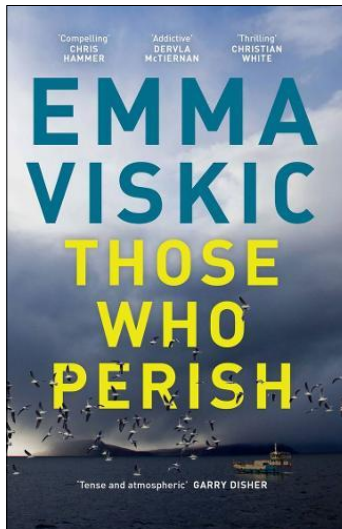
But all along we have this strange scenario of the two cities which is absolutely fascinating. There are several things about it which are never fully explained, such who founded the cities and what technology they might have had (on-site archaeology is revealing some puzzlingly advanced objects beneath the cities), how the cities split up (or were they always split?), who exactly controls the Breach entity and where its advanced technology comes from. But these are pleasant mysteries which I for one was happy for the author to leave unresolved.

This is certainly the best fusion of the crime and science fiction genres that I've ever read. In fact, one of the best books I've read this year.

It's worth noting that *The City & The City* shared the Best Novel award in the Hugos in 2010, presented here in Melbourne at Aussiecon Four. It shared the award with *The Windup Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi, which I haven't read but must, I imagine also be pretty good. I'd also like to watch the TV series of *The City & The City* made by the BBC.

Footnote: The ebook edition I bought through Kobo, from Tor.com, is very badly formatted, and there are some odd things about it: the *z* character in the name of the city Beszel for some reason isn't rendered as an ordinary Unicode character, but as little individual *images* of that character, which some ereaders like Kobo's don't show. I was able to figure this out because ebooks from Tor don't have digital rights management applied so it's easy to go in with an ebook editing tool like the one in Calibre and see what's going on. Needless to say I fixed all of these issues.

Those Who Perish by Emma Viskic



This is the fourth and apparently final book in Viskic's series of crime novels featuring Caleb Zelic, a deaf (or almost deaf) private investigator.

I've enjoyed this series so far, and I have been impressed by how the author deals with her protagonist's deafness and how he struggles to overcome it in carrying out his investigations. She also deals very knowledgeably with the Deaf community and the use of sign language.

However, Caleb is in several ways an annoying character, getting involved in matters which he really ought to leave alone. I really don't much like books where you're all the time saying in your head to the character, "you idiot, don't do that!".

In the past, this characteristic has put those close to him, particularly his Koori wife Kat, in great danger. This impulsiveness and failure to think through consequences on his behalf has led Kat several times to break off with Caleb. As this novel opens, though, the two are reconciled and Kat is in the late stages of pregnancy. Based on his behaviour in the previous books in the series you feel sure, however, that Caleb will find a way to stuff it up, and of course he does.

So that's a pretty good set up for an interesting story. Unfortunately, I found this particular book disappointing. It was unsatisfying and annoying on several counts. There are quite a number of plot threads that just don't seem to hold up when you look back at them and try to make sense of them. As you're reading the book, you kind of accept things as they go past, but later, you think back and say to yourself "Hang on a minute....".

For example, at the start of the novel, we have Caleb racing back to his home town, Resurrection Bay, from Melbourne. He's racing to get there on the basis of an anonymous text message telling him that his brother Anton will be in danger, in a specific place on the foreshore, at a particular time, early in the morning, three and a bit hours after

the message is sent. When Caleb finally gets there, sure enough, there's a sniper taking potshots and Anton is hiding in some bushes. But exactly why this is happening, and who sent this text message, why they sent it, how they could be sure Caleb would notice and read it in the middle of the night (he's deaf, right?) and how they knew about this danger almost four hours before it occurs, is to my mind never satisfactorily explained. Maybe I missed something but it just doesn't add up.

After the shooting incident, Anton disappears yet again. Later Caleb discovers that his brother, who is a drug addict who had gone missing for six months prior to this, is now at a rehabilitation centre on a nearby island. Caleb takes the ferry across to track him down and work out what's going on.

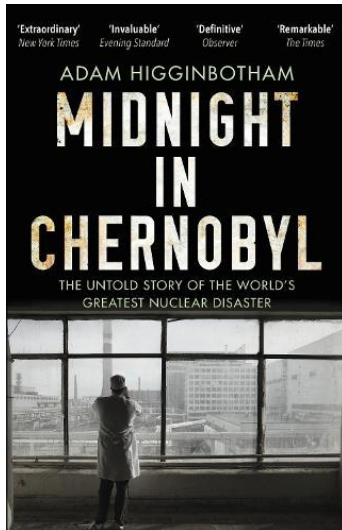
There's a complicated plot in which Caleb seems to be floundering around getting himself into more and more danger, investigating things on the island which seem suspicious to him and making enemies along the way. And soon he's putting his wife Kat in danger again, not to mention his unborn child. She's rightly pissed off by this.

However there are indeed, a number of mysteries to do with the rehabilitation centre, the island and its inhabitants. Something dodgy is definitely going on.

I don't want to give away the resolution of the book, but the biggest disappointment to me was the way what is going on on the island is explained. It's yet another one of the those points where a short while after finishing the book you go "Hang on...". The scheme involves a dodgy, highly secret activity, so secret that people are being blackmailed or killed to keep it secret. But later on you say to yourself: "How exactly are these people making any money from this scheme?". It just doesn't make sense to me.

So yes, I found it very disappointing, which is a pity for the way the series to conclude.

***Midnight in Chernobyl* by Adam Higginbotham**



This was a really excellent book, an almost-incredibly detailed and well-researched account of what happened at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in 1986, and why. Higginbotham was able to get hold of an immense amount of material, including many first person accounts of the disaster and its aftermath, and he brings it all to life so well that it's almost like being on the spot (not that you would have wanted to be on the spot, or anywhere near it!). Much of the blame can be sheeted home to the stultifying Soviet bureaucracy and endemic corruption. Back then the Soviet Union was still in place, of course, and it's clear from Higginbotham's account that the race to modernise the country by rapidly building a large number of nuclear power stations was very much a political rather than technical decision. In fact, the design of the RBMK reactors installed at Chernobyl and many other places across the Soviet Union was fundamentally flawed in several respects. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

It was particularly interesting reading at this time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, because there are many interesting resonances. The pushing ahead at all costs for political purposes, the corruption and over-confidence, the misinformation and severe clampdown on anyone trying to tell the truth to the Russian people; it's all here.

Highly recommended.

***Lady Into Fox* by David Garnett**



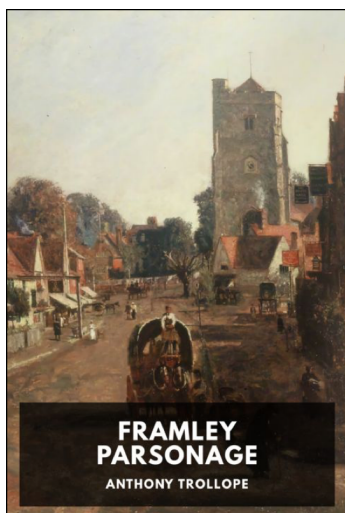
This is a curious little book. Published in 1922, it's quite short (about 25,000 words, more of a novella). The strange premise is this: A newly-married couple are taking a leisurely walk through the woods in England when, without warning, the woman suddenly transforms into a fox. The grief-stricken husband does his best to look after his transformed wife after this astonishing change.

Lady Into Fox quickly attracted critical attention and praise. It won both the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Hawthornden Prize, and was included by the writer Rebecca West in a list of the "best imaginative productions" of the 1920s alongside Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

I did this book as a production for Standard Ebooks because I'd read a kind of sequel to it. As part of one of our podcast episodes, we go back to look at the Hugo Awards in various years. One of the nominees for best novel in 1963 was a book called *Sylva* by an author with the pseudonym "Vercours". Written originally in French and subsequently translated into English, this was directly inspired by Garnett's novel. However, in it, the reverse transformation occurs: a fox on the run from a hunt is transformed into a naked young woman, who is taken in and cared for by the owner of a nearby manor, with all sorts of difficult consequences.

[Available as a free ebook here](#)

Framley Parsonage by Anthony Trollope



I'm quite fond of Trollope's mid-Victorian-era novels, though as of yet I've only read a fraction of his prodigious output. I read *Framley Parsonage* because I was producing it for Standard Ebooks. I'm working my way through producing Trollope's whole "Chronicles of Barchester" series, of which this is the fourth. I quite enjoyed this one, which reintroduces a number of characters from the first two books in the series as well as introducing several new ones.

The book primarily concerns the young Reverend Mark Robarts, who has been appointed as vicar of the parish of Framley through the patronage of Lady Lufton of Framley Court, the mother of his long-time friend Ludovic, now Lord Lufton. Robarts is led into the society of some loose-living aristocrats through his friendship with Ludovic and eventually finds himself weakly consenting to his name being included on a bill for a loan to one of his new connections, Sowerby. By so doing, he becomes liable for debts he cannot possibly satisfy. His guilt and fear of the consequences occupy a large part of the book. An important secondary thread involves Robarts' sister Lucy, who after their father's death comes to live at the parsonage. Living there, she becomes acquainted with Lady Lufton and her son Ludovic, and romantic complications ensue.

There are interesting subplots featuring characters in earlier books: Doctor Thorne and the heiress Miss Dunstable; and the on-going rivalry between the Proudies and the Grantlys in Barchester.

All of these characters, and their situations, are well-described and interesting. Trollope keeps up the tension of the story pretty well, though we're in no real fear of an unhappy outcome for either Mark or Lucy.

You can download the book from Standard Ebooks [for free here](#).

The Small House at Allington by Anthony Trollope



The Small House at Allington was originally serialized in *Cornhill Magazine* between July and December 1862. It is the fifth book in Trollope's "Chronicles of Barchester" series, being largely set in that fictitious county of England. It includes a few of the characters from the earlier books, though largely in very minor roles. It could also be said to be the first of Trollope's "Palliser" series, as it introduces Plantagenet Palliser as the heir to the Duke of Omnium.

The major story, however, relates to the inhabitants of the Small House at the manor of Allington. The Small House was once the Dower House of the estate (a household where the widowed mother of the squire might live, away from the Great House). Now living there, however, is Mary Dale, the widow of the squire's brother, and her two daughters, Isabella (Bell) and Lilian (Lily). The main focus of the novel is on Lily Dale, who is courted by Adolphus Crosbie, a friend of the squire's nephew. In a matter of a few weeks, Lily falls deeply in love with Crosbie, who quickly proposes to her and is accepted. A few weeks later, however, Crosbie is visiting Courcy Castle and decides an alliance with the Earl's daughter Alexandrina would be far preferable from a social and monetary point of view. Without speaking to Lily, he abruptly changes his plans and asks Alexandrina to marry him instead. This act of betrayal is devastating to Lily and her family.

Another young man, John Eames, has long been in love with Lily and after a few months asks for her hand. Eames is devastated to be rejected when Lily tells him she is still in love with Crosbie despite his shameless abandonment of her.

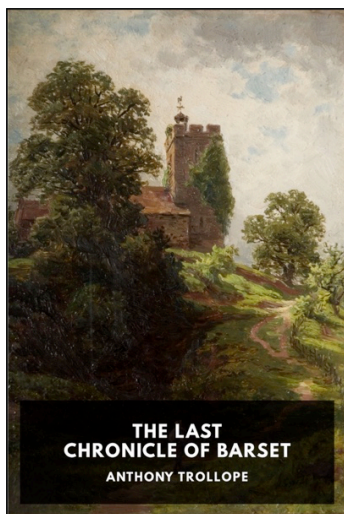
Trollope could easily have gone for a "happily ever after" ending here but he resists that temptation, which is a strength of the book.

I liked this a good deal more than the preceding book in the series, *Framley Parsonage*. The plot was more straightforward and the characters were more interesting and their loves and losses were deeply

engaging. Get it free at [Standard Ebooks](#).

***The Last Chronicle of Basset* by Anthony Trollope**

Another production for Standard Ebooks. It completes the six-book series "Chronicles of



Barssetshire" by Trollope, and is a very satisfying conclusion to it, bringing together the stories of many characters from the earlier books.

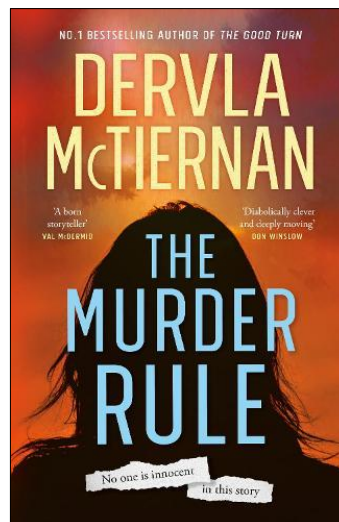
The first two books in the series are *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers*, which were made into a really excellent television series called *Barchester Chronicles* by the BBC in 1982, featuring Donald Pleasance as the Reverend Septimus Harding, Nigel Hawthorne as Archdeacon Grantly, Susan Hampshire as the magnificent Signora Madeline Neroni, and an unmissable early role by Alan Rickman as the oily Rev. Obadiah Slope. If you get a chance to see it on a streaming service somewhere, jump at the chance.

The primary storyline of *The Last Chronicle of Basset* is concerned with the Reverend Josiah Crawley. Although he is a dedicated and sincere clergyman, his ecclesiastical salary is too low to support him and his family in much more than abject poverty, and thus he is continually in debt. As the book opens, Crawley has been accused of passing a cheque for twenty pounds, a cheque not made out to himself and whose possession he cannot account for. The writer of the cheque claims that he lost it while visiting Crawley. The entire neighbourhood of Barchester is shocked and many cannot believe that Crawley would become a thief. The accusation has significant implications for many of the other characters, including Major Grantly, the son of Archdeacon Grantly, who has fallen in love with Crawley's daughter Grace.

Great stuff, trust me!

Get it free at [Standard Ebooks](#).

***The Murder Rule* by Dervla McTiernan**



A complete change of pace, or at least venue, by this Irish writer who is now an Australian resident.

McTiernan's previous three novels were all set in Galway in Ireland and feature her detective Cormac Reilly. This new novel, however, is set in the United States, and the protagonist is a young woman, Hannah Rokeby.

The very opening of the book is a series of emails between Hannah and a Professor Robert Parekh who runs "The Innocence Project", which is a group of lawyers and volunteer law students who seek out cases where they believe innocent people have been convicted of serious crimes and do what they can to overturn those convictions.

Hannah is clearly desperate to join the Innocence Project. Told it's too late to apply to volunteer, she clumsily attempts to blackmail Parekh, who then agrees to see her, not because the blackmail succeeds, but because he's intrigued by her "out of the box" approach. I thought this was very dubious, to be honest. Competition among students is extremely high, entry has closed, but he lets in someone who has proved herself to act unethically? Nevertheless, he lets her join.

However, we quickly learn that Hannah is joining the Project with an ulterior motive, related to the experiences of her mother Laura, who is now a needy alcoholic. We progressively get to read excerpts from Laura's diary, written before Hannah's birth. Hannah has apparently found this diary by accident and is fired up about what occurred to her mother. The Innocence Project is trying to free a man called Michael Dandrige who has been in jail for 11 years after being convicted of the murder and rape of a young mother. Professor Parkeh and the other volunteers seem convinced of Dandrige's innocence because of the very dubious evidence used against him.

However we quickly begin to understand that Hannah is there to sabotage the efforts of The

Innocence Project to free Dandridge, because of the allegations Laura makes against Dandridge in her diary.

Hannah is quite ruthless in her approach and secretly carries out a series of unethical actions—including in one case, a very cruel action against one of the other volunteers.

So the interest in the novel is in Laura's story as it is gradually revealed through excerpts from her diary, and in the success or failure of Hannah's sabotage. It's quite an engaging read, but in the end there were a number of things which didn't really work for me.

I'm trying not to give away too much about the plot, so I won't reveal how it turns out. But I don't think I'm giving too much away to say that there's eventually a dramatic courtroom scene, which I found simply unbelievable. I'm certainly not an expert on American legal practice, but so far as I can tell the judge hearing the case allows Hannah an absurd amount of latitude and allows evidence to be tabled which I'm pretty sure would be instantly rejected in a real court of law.

And the other thing I found hard to take was that at the end Hannah's unethical and cruel actions have been rather glossed over by the other characters, and she doesn't really suffer any consequences for them, though they have pretty much destroyed the life of one of their fellow workers, who doesn't seem to get any say in this.

***My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante**

Translated by Ann Goldstein.



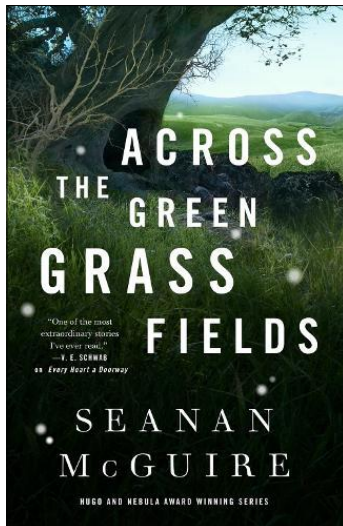
Finally, I managed to get back to this book and complete it, and I'm glad that I did. The first in Ferrante's "Neapolitan Quartet", it is told in the first person by Elena Greco and details her childhood and adolescence growing up in a poor quarter of Naples, where violence, or the threat of violence, always seems to be hanging in the air. In particular, the book focuses, as the title would suggest, on Elena's friend Lila Cerullo, the daughter of a shoemaker. Lila is fiercely independent and intelligent and pushes Elena to match her in school subjects including Latin and then Greek. Yet eventually Lila's family are too poor to allow her to continue at school, while Elena's parents are pressured by her teacher to let her continue.

The confusions of childhood and the fears and emotional turmoil of adolescence are convincingly depicted here, as is the shifting relationship between the two friends, the complex interactions of the people living in the neighbourhood, and the sudden outbursts of violence among people living at the edge of poverty.

"Elena Ferrante" is known to be a pseudonym, and there have been a number of attempts to guess the real name and background of the author, even one suggestion that the author might be male, which I would be astonished to discover. The book seems (to me, at least) to be founded in real, lived experience.

I really enjoyed this, and I'll definitely be going on to the other novels in the quartet.

Across the Green Grass Fields by Seanan McGuire



This is a stand-alone novella in McGuire's series called *Wayward Children*. I've quite liked most of the books I've read in this series, though I continually wish that she would expand them into novels. They always leave me feeling unsatisfied.

This one, though, annoys me greatly, because it's a seriously missed opportunity.

⚡ Warning, spoilers! ⚡

The book starts strongly, with a character called Regan. We first meet her as a seven-year old, who is:

"perfectly normal by every measurement she knew"

She has a number of good friends, but when one of them, Heather, brings a garter snake to school, Regan's other best friend, Laurel, reacts in disgust. This, according to Laurel, isn't "normal". That's not what girls *do*. Laurel is the dominant one in the group and everything has to be the way Laurel sees it. Laurel determines what is "normal". Laurel is a bully.

Heather is quickly pushed out of the circle of friends and literally de-friended, even by Regan. There's a strong message here about how cruel children can be to other children, and how any sign of difference is seized upon to mock and exclude those who don't fit. Regan desperately wants to fit in, so she goes along with Laurel's bullying.

However, few years later, Regan starts to question her parents about why she isn't starting to develop breasts or start menstruating like her other friends. Her parents tell her, while admitting they should have told her much earlier, that she is trans-gender. She has XY chromosomes, which would normally make her male, but she also has androgen insensitivity, which gives her female genitalia (as you may know, the female form is the standard human form, we males are the deviants). Her parents tell her that when she's 16 she can start to

have hormone treatments which will allow her to more fully develop female characteristics. By this stage, the reader has built up considerable empathy with Regan and her plight.

Unwisely, she tells her secret to Laurel, who of course (as you'd expect from her previous behaviour) rejects Regan with shock and horror and runs to tell everyone else that Regan is a boy pretending to be a girl. All this is very solid, interesting stuff, which I think could have been the basis for a strong novel developing Regan's character as she deals with her situation, and exploring the themes of bullying, identity and transphobia.

Unfortunately that's not what happens in the book.

Instead, after her disastrous conversation with Laurel, Regan runs away from the school grounds. While wandering through a wood, she stumbles through a magic portal into another world, the Hooflands. Regan has always been fond of horses, and the Hooflands is a world full of centaurs, unicorns and other mythical creatures. The story then degenerates into a lack-lustre girls-love-horses fantasy. Even the adventure she has in this world ends very limply, with no real tension built up at the crucial points.

At the very end of the book, several years after she passed through the portal, with Regan now having reached the age of 16, she finds herself pushed out of the Hooflands and back into her own world. In trepidation, she approaches the door of her parent's house... And that's where the book ends!

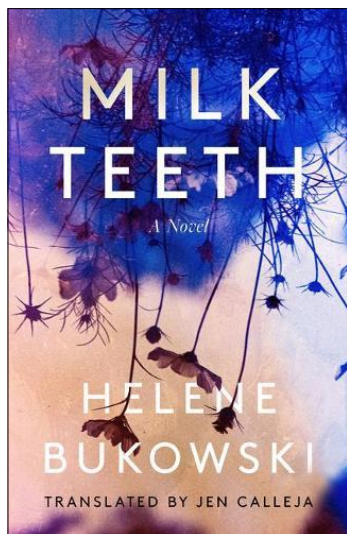
So there's no attempt here to deal with what Regan's life might be like now she is back in the real world, how she might deal with her ambiguous gender, what life might hold in store for her, what difficult decisions she might have to make. Or even anything about how her parents have managed to cope for more than five years, all the time presumably thinking their only child is dead, and what their reactions are when she returns. Nothing of that.

I can't help thinking that Regan's passage into the magical world of the Hooflands is a complete dodge by both the character *and the author* to avoid dealing with the difficult and important issues which are raised by the promising start to the book. It's a badly missed opportunity, and it made me cross. Don't raise these sensitive issues unless you're going to deal with them honestly. Real transgender children don't have the opportunity to escape into a fantasy world.

This has been nominated for Best Novella at this year's Hugo Awards. I won't be voting for it.

***Milk Teeth* by Helene Bukowski**

Translated by Jennifer Calleja



This is an interestingly-different post-apocalyptic novel, where the apocalypse is not a sudden disaster, just life steadily getting worse for people over a matter of years. It's told from the first person point of view of Skalde, a young woman living in "the territory" which seems to be a large island. At some time in the recent past, the inhabitants blew up the bridge across the river which gave access to the rest of the world and are determined to keep others out. The climate is slowly getting hotter, year after year, and crops are beginning to fail.

Skalde lives with an older woman Edith, who seems half-crazy or bogged down by depression, and who doesn't so much bring up Skalde as live in the same house while Skalde raises herself. It takes a while before it's clear that Edith is actually Skalde's mother.

While Skalde's life is not easy—supplies are becoming hard to get—there's a settled nature to it, which is completely disrupted when one day, she discovers a young girl wandering in the nearby forest. At first the girl barely speaks, but it's clear that she's a stranger: Skalde knows everyone who lives in the territory. And the girl has startlingly red hair. Not knowing what else to do, Skalde takes the girl back to the house. This sets off a series of ugly confrontations with the other people of the territory, who hate and fear outsiders. Skalde is forced to defend the child and her own action in taking her in. Ultimately everything is changed.

The themes of climate change and xenophobia are well explored here, and the prose, beautifully clear in this translation, has a powerful effect.

On my waiting list:

- *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel : the latest novel by the author of *Station Eleven* and *The Glass Hotel*.
- *The Lifters* by Dave Eggers: a middle-school level adventure story which looks interesting, and I'm keen to get to Eggers' latest adult novel, *The Every*, which isn't yet in the library so I thought I'd give this a spin.
- *Wake* by Shelley Burr : a debut crime novel by an Australian author.
- *The Daughters of Eve* by Nina D. Campbell : yet another debut crime novel by an Australian writer.
- *Frostquake* by Juliet Nicolson: a non-fiction book about the devastating winter in the UK in 1963, which was a trigger for my parents to emigrate to Australia.
- *Underland* by Robert MacFarlane: my wife is listening to this non-fiction book as an audiobook and keeps singing its praises. It's been sitting on one of my bookshelves at home for about three years!

How many of these I'll get through is an open question!