

THE MEGALOSCOPE

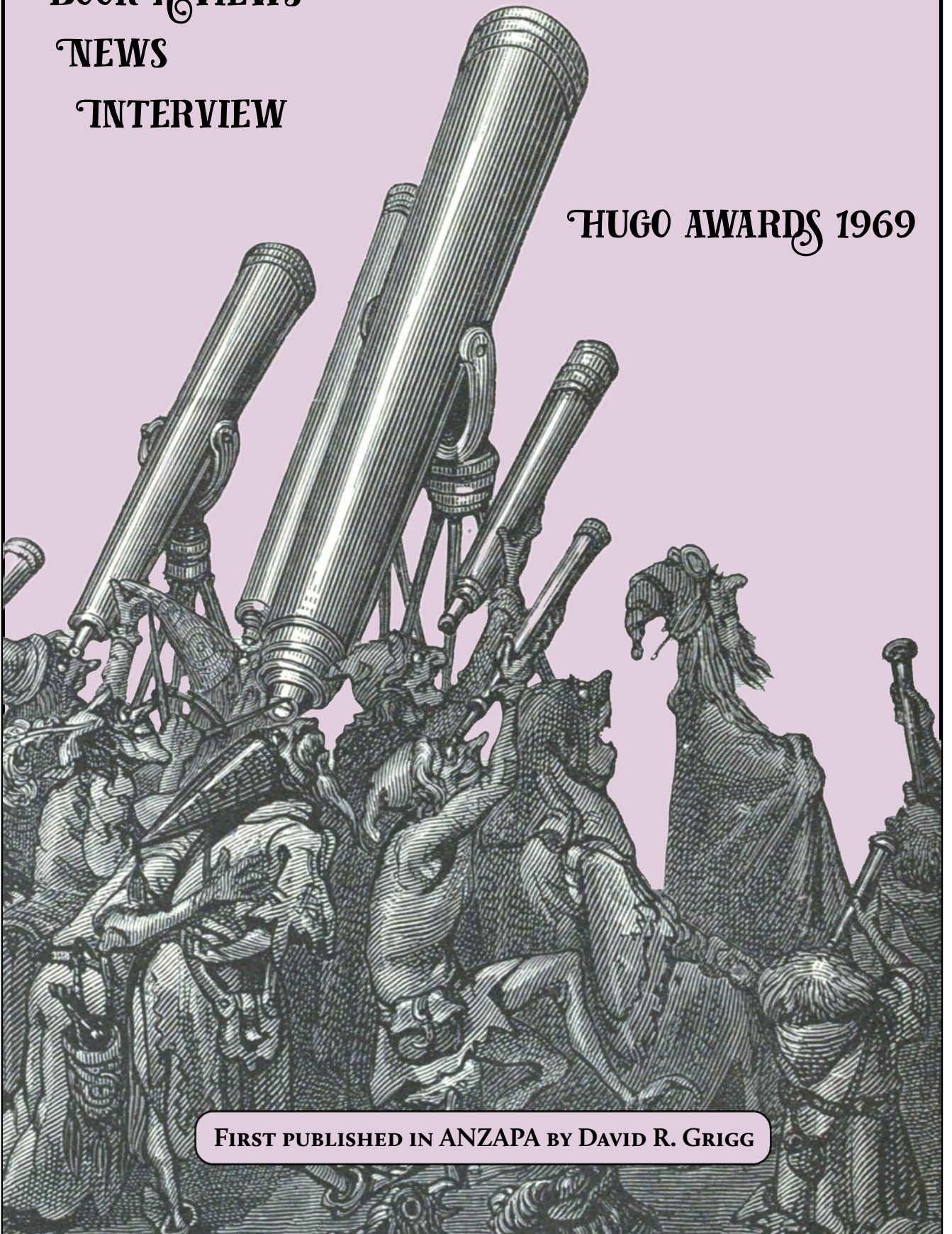
#3: OCTOBER 2022

BOOK REVIEWS

NEWS

INTERVIEW

HUGO AWARDS 1969



FIRST PUBLISHED IN ANZAPA BY DAVID R. GRIGG

THE MEGALOSCOPE

ISSUE #3

OCTOBER 2022

The Megaloscope is a fanzine from David R. Grigg, published first in ANZAPA and then available to anyone who is interested.

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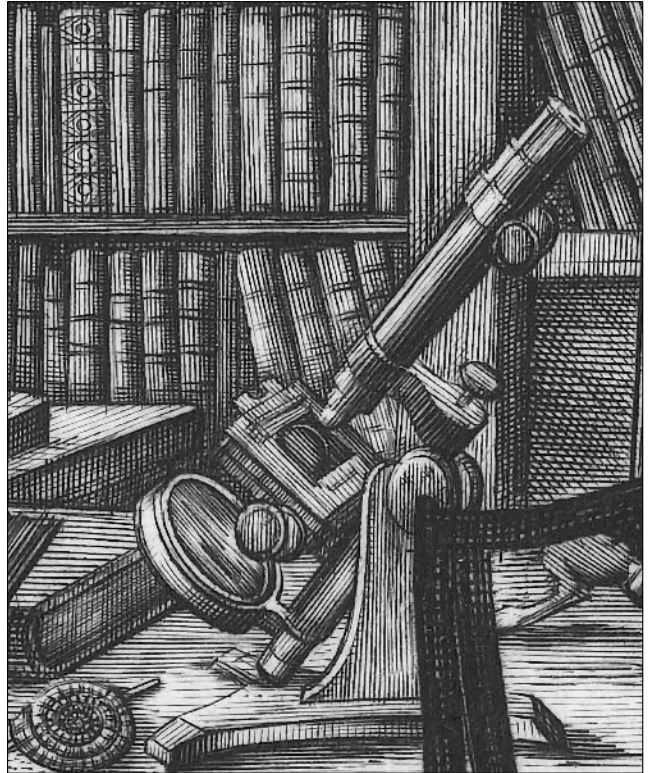
Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the members of the Wurunderi Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park, Victoria, and I pay my respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

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

BOOKISH NEWS



I've decided to start including this Bookish News section in each bi-monthly issue of *The Megaloscope*, based on the material I've been including in my fortnightly Substack newsletter, *Through the Biblioscope*, provided the information is still timely.

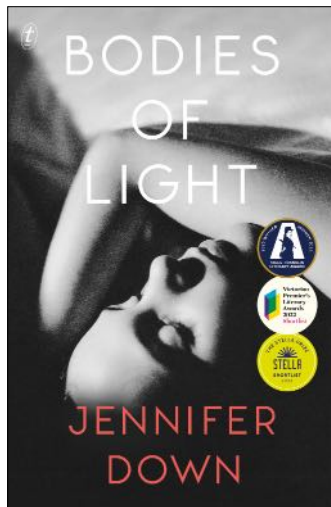
General News

It was sad to read of the death of Hilary Mantel, the author of the brilliant historical series about Thomas Cromwell, comprising with *Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies* and *The Mirror and the Light*, among several other notable works. She was only 70 years old.

Another recent death was that of Alexei Panshin at 82. His novel *Rite of Passage* won the Nebula Award in 1969 and with his wife Corey he was a prominent critic of the SF genre. I review *Rite of Passage* later in this issue [here](#).

RECENT AWARDS

Miles Franklin Award Winner



Announced 20 July 2022, the winner of this year's award was *Bodies of Light* by Jennifer Down.

Maggie (later Josie, then Holly) is raised in foster care by families who are sometimes safe, often not. Her young life is punctuated by abuse, trauma and abandonment, with brief periods of connection offering some respite. This deep loneliness follows her in (and out of) all of her relationships, even in adulthood, as Maggie learns that to keep herself safe means keeping secrets. After enduring trauma that is so much – too much at times – for one person, Maggie runs away from her life, stepping wholly into a new identity in a new country, and burying her painful past. But her trauma and abandonment follow her.... (Readings review).

Another win for Text Publishing, certainly one of Australia's best publishing houses.

Booker Prize Long-list Announced

Thirteen books on the 2022 long-list, as announced 26 July 2022.

- *The Colony* by Audrey Magee
- *After Sappho* by Selby Wynn Schwartz
- *Glory* by NoViolet Bulawayo
- *Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan
- *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley
- *Maps of Our Spectacular Bodies* by Maddie Mortimer
- *Case Study* by Graeme Macrae Burnet
- *Treacle Walker* by Alan Garner
- *The Trees* by Percival Everett
- *Trust* by Hernan Diaz
- *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka
- *Oh William!* by Elizabeth Strout
- *Booth* by Karen Joy Fowler

I haven't yet read any of these. But it's worth noting in particular that Alan Garner, at the age of 87, has been nominated for his new novel *Treacle Walker*. I bought a copy of this a few months ago but haven't yet read it. Now I must. Alan Garner wrote several highly acclaimed novels for young people in the 1960s. You might recall his books *The Owl Service*, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, and *Red Shift*, all of which are excellent. So the fact that he's still writing, 60-some years later, and being nominated for a prestigious award like the Booker, is remarkable.

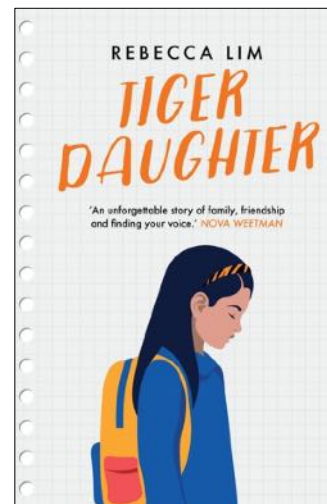
Winners of the CBCA Book of the Year Awards

Announced 19 August 2022

The Children's Book Council of Australia give annual awards for what they call the "Book of the Year". I'll only list the two main fiction categories here.

Book of the Year: Older Readers

Winner was *Tiger Daughter* by Rebecca Lim



Wen Zhou is the daughter and only child of Chinese immigrants whose move to the lucky country has proven to be not so lucky. Wen and her friend, Henry Xiao - whose mum and dad are also struggling immigrants - both dream of escape from their unhappy circumstances, and form a plan to sit an entrance exam to a selective high school far from home. But when tragedy strikes, it will take all of Wen's resilience and resourcefulness to get herself and Henry through the storm that follows.

Honourable mentions went to *Girls in Boys' Cars* by Felicity Castagna and *How to Repaint a Life* by Steven Herrick.

Book of the Year: Younger Readers

Winner was *A Glasshouse of Stars* by Shirley Marr.

Meixing Lim and her family have arrived at the New House in the New Land, inherited from First Uncle who died tragically and unexpectedly while picking oranges in the backyard. Everything is vast and unknown to Meixing and not in a good way, including the house she has dubbed Big Scary. She is embarrassed by the second-hand shoes given to

her by the kind neighbours, has trouble understanding the language at school, and with fitting in and making new friends. Her solace is a glasshouse in the garden that inexplicably holds the sun and the moon and all the secrets of her memory and imagination.

I really enjoy reading books for younger people (well, a lot younger than me, as I'm now 71!) and these two award winners look well worth trying.

Ned Kelly Awards

Announced 24 August 2022.

There were 135 entries in total for the four categories of the awards, indicating another strong year of Australian and international crime writing.

Winner of the Ned Kelly Award for **Best Crime Fiction** was *The Chase* by Candice Fox. I read this last year. A worthy winner, I would say.

The **Best True Crime** award went to *Banquet: The Untold Story of Adelaide's Family Murders* by Debi Marshall. I don't know anything about this, or the crimes it describes.

Best Debut Crime Novel went to *Banjawarn* by Josh Kemp. [Review here](#).

Best International Crime Fiction went to *The Maid* by Nita Prose. [Review here](#).

Davitt Award Winners

The Davitt Award goes to Australian women authors of crime fiction. The winners this year were as follows:

Adult Crime Novel

Once There Were Wolves by Charlotte McConaghy

Young Adult Crime Novels

The Gaps by Leanne Hall

Best Debut Book (+ Readers Choice Award)

Before You Knew My Name by Jacqueline Bublitz

I haven't read any of the above, I'm afraid. Interesting that there's no overlap with the Ned Kellys, and that the Miles Franklin Award winner, *Bodies of Light* was on the long-list. I'm not sure what makes that a crime novel, must read it.

Hugo Awards 2022

Announced 4 September 2022.



HUGO AWARD™

I'll just list the fiction categories here.

Best Novel

1. *A Desolation Called Peace*, Arkady Martine
2. *Light From Uncommon Stars*, Ryka Aoki
3. *The Galaxy, and the Ground Within*, Becky Chambers
4. *A Master of Djinn*, P. Djèlí Clark
5. *She Who Became the Sun*, Shelley Parker-Chan
6. *Project Hail Mary*, Andy Weir

Best Novella

1. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Becky Chambers
2. *Fireheart Tiger*, Aliette de Bodard
3. *A Spindle Splintered*, Alix E. Harrow
4. *Across the Green Grass Fields*, Seanan McGuire
5. *Elder Race*, Adrian Tchaikovsky
6. *The Past Is Red*, Catherynne M. Valente

Best Novelette

1. "Bots of the Lost Ark", Suzanne Palmer
2. "O2 Arena", Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki
3. "L'Esprit de L'Escalier", Catherynne M. Valente
4. "Unseelie Brothers, Ltd.", Fran Wilde
5. "That Story Isn't the Story", John Wiswell
6. "Colors of the Immortal Palette", Caroline M. Yoachim

Best Short Story

1. "Where Oaken Hearts Do Gather", Sarah Pinsker
2. "Mr. Death", Alix E. Harrow

RECENT READING

3. "Proof by Induction", José Pablo Iriarte
4. "Tangles", Seanan McGuire
5. "Unknown Number", Blue Neustifter
6. "The Sin of America", Catherynne M. Valente

Best Series

1. Wayward Children, Seanan McGuire
2. The World of the White Rat, Kingfisher
3. The Green Bone Saga, Fonda Lee
4. Terra Ignota, Ada Palmer
5. The Kingston Cycle, C.L. Polk
6. Merchant Princes, Charles Stross

My comments on the above

I disagree almost *entirely* with the rankings of the Hugo voters, except for the winner of the Best Short Story category, because it was the only half-way decent story there! To be fair, I haven't read the Arkady Martine which won Best Novel. Still, ranking *She Who Became the Sun* below the tedious *A Master of Djinn* and the anodyne *The Galaxy and the Ground Within*? No way!!

In other categories, my pick for best work ended up near or at the bottom of the voting. In the cases of Best Novella and Best Novelette you would need to completely invert the actual rankings of the voters to get close to my own list. No way IMHO that the ho-hum *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* should be ranked above the excellent *The Past is Red*, in my opinion.

All this indicates to me that the Hugo nominators and voters and myself have definitely parted company. I don't think I'll bother trying to read all the Hugo nominated fiction next year. Waste of time.

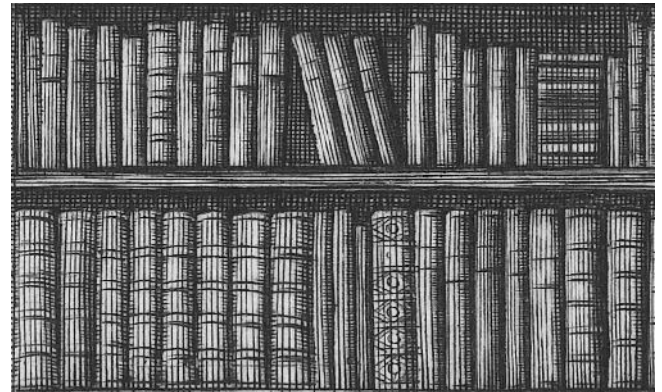
But there was one saving grace:

Astounding Award for Best New Writer (Not a Hugo)

The winner was Shelley Parker-Chan, an Australian writer, whose debut novel *She Who Became the Sun* was on the Best Novel ballot for the Hugo, but only ranked fifth there though it was my pick for first (see my comments above).

Also recently the British Fantasy Association announced its annual awards. *She Who Became the Sun* won the Robert Holdstock Award for Best Fantasy Novel, and Shelley Parker-Chan won the Sydney J. Bounds Award for Best Newcomer.

Great to see this Australian writer getting some well deserved recognition (and shows how wrong the Hugo voters were).



Since the last issue, I've read 14 books, in the crime, fantasy, literary and SF genres.

Quick Summaries

Crime Fiction

***The Island* by Adrian McKinty**

Top-notch thriller set in Australia. A family finds themselves having to flee for their lives on a small island from which it seems there is no escape.

[Review here.](#)

***Daughters of Eve* by Nina D. Campbell**

Pretty good debut crime novel by an Australian author, which takes a sharp look at the violence inflicted on women by men, and how frequently the men get away with it.

[Review here.](#)

***The Millennium Job* by Rob Gerrand**

Another debut novel in the crime genre by an Australian author. A woman wakes up one morning to find herself lying next to a dead body. And then the body goes missing...

[Review here.](#)

***The Maid* by Nita Prose**

This is an easy read, feel-good kind of story. Entertaining and enjoyable, if not very deep or challenging.

[Review here.](#)

***Lying Beside You* by Michael Robotham**

This is the third book in Robotham's series featuring Cyrus Haven, a psychologist working with local police, and a young woman, Evie Cormac, who is the survivor of traumatic childhood sexual abuse. Good page-turning stuff.

[Review here.](#)

***Banjawarn* by Josh Kemp**

This is a confronting, disturbing book. It deals, among many other things, with drug addiction and the way it can drive addicts to live a degraded, desperate life and to carry out actions which are violent, disgusting or just plain morally abhorrent.

[Review here.](#)

Fantasy / Literary Fiction

***Ithaca* by Claire North**

A very interesting, strongly feminist view of Greek myth and legend, focusing on Penelope, the wife of Odysseus but narrated by the goddess Hera.

[Review here](#)

***Bliss Montage* by Ling Ma**

Very interesting collection of short stories, in which various female protagonists encounter the breaking down of reality,

[Review here.](#)

***Limberlost* by Robbie Arnott**

The latest novel by Arnott, whose earlier books *Flames* and *The Rain Heron* were wonderful pieces of what we might call 'magic realism'.

[Review here.](#)

Hugo Time Machine 1969

The following books were read for an upcoming segment on our podcast dealing with Hugo nominated works in the year 1969.

***Past Master* by R. A. Lafferty**

I didn't much like this. An apparently utopian society in the future goes back in time to retrieve Sir Thomas More to try to solve their problems. Confusing and fails to make any real point.

[Review here.](#)

***The Goblin Reservation* by Clifford D. Simak**

Entertaining enough, but Simak jams too many elements into this for my taste. Interstellar travel,

matter transmission, time travel and supernatural beings like goblins and trolls. Too much!

[Review here.](#)

***Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner**

This was the winner of the Best Novel category in the 1969 Hugos. A sprawling, prescient view of the near future when over-population is becoming a major concern. Good stuff, a worthy winner.

[Review here.](#)

***Nova* by Samuel R. Delany**

An engaging tale of an obsession, a quest, and a deadly feud in the far future. I liked it a lot.

[Review here](#)

***Rite of Passage* by Alexei Panshin**

I want to like this more than I do. A well-written coming-of-age story of a female protagonist living on board a vast starship carved out of an asteroid.

[Review here.](#)

Hits and Misses

Favourite book of the last 2 months?

Without question, it was *Limberlost* by Robbie Arnott. Beautifully written and deeply moving.

Second and third favourites?

Second would have to be *Ithaca* by Claire North. No real surprise as I'm such a big fan of her writing. One of these days I'm going to find time to hunt up and read *all* of her books, written under different names (Catherine Webb, her real name, and Kate Griffin). Could take me years, though.

Then probably *Nova* by Samuel R. Delany, a re-read.

Best discovery of a new author?

Ling Ma, with her short story collection *Bliss Montage*. Odd, difficult to understand, but very well written and thought-provoking.

Most disappointing read?

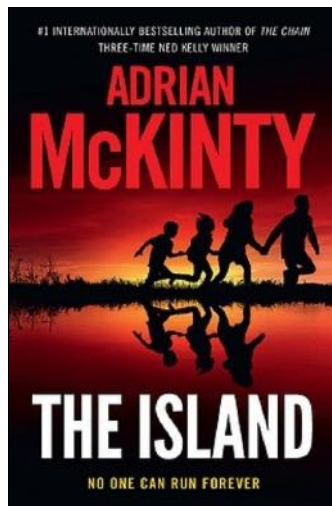
Rite of Passage by Alexei Panshin. It had a lot of promise but took too long to get there, and had some disturbing, Heinlein-esque attitudes towards the end that I didn't like at all.

Most disliked book?

Past Master by R. A. Lafferty. Didn't understand much of what the author was driving at, and I'm not sure that the author did either.

Crime Fiction

The Island by Adrian McKinty



Adrian McKinty is an Irish writer who spent over ten years living in Melbourne, though he's now based in the United States. I've read and enjoyed some of his crime/thriller novels set during *The Troubles* in Northern Ireland, featuring a Catholic policeman called Sean Duffy. He's still writing this series, which is up to nine novels, with two more due to come out soon. And I see that he's written *heaps* of other novels, including some science fiction YA novels which I should certainly follow up. He's won a swag of awards, including three Ned Kelly Awards, the Edgar Award, the International Thriller Writers Award and several others.

I didn't much like his more recent book *The Chain*, however, though it was a best-seller. This one, though, *The Island*, has been getting great reviews so I thought I should take a look, and I'm glad that I did, because it's a very good suspense-filled thriller, set in Australia.

The basic story here is of a family visiting Australia from America. The father, Tom, is a surgeon in his mid-forties who has been invited to speak at a medical conference in Melbourne. He has two teenage children from an earlier marriage, Owen and Olivia. Their mother died a couple of years previously after a fall down a flight of stairs. Possibly in consequence, Owen, the younger sibling, has mentally retreated into his shell and is on several psychiatric medications.

Tom's new wife, Heather, is only in her early 20s. A massage therapist with no college education, she's despised and strongly resented by the two children, who don't accept her as their new "mother".

Cutting quite a bit of story short, the family set off on a short driving trip down the Mornington Peninsula during a break in Tom's conference and end up being taken on a ferry by a couple of rough-looking guys to a privately-owned island just off the Victorian coast where they are told there are heaps of koalas and other Australian animals to see. The family who own the island, the O'Neills, are ruled

by a severe Irish-born matriarch just called "Ma", and she hates visitors coming to their property. But Tom and a couple of Dutch tourists pay the blokes several hundred dollars to ignore Ma's edicts for an afternoon.

All is fine as the family drive around the island in their hired Porche (Tom is seriously rich). They still haven't seen any koalas but are running late to return to the ferry and so Tom speeds up. That's when they hit and kill a young woman riding a bicycle. They're out of range for their mobile phones and can't call for help. After the initial moments of shock, when they find they can't revive the young woman, they panic, thinking of how rough the O'Neill family seem to be. Tom is somewhat concussed from the accident, so Heather is forced to take charge. They get the Porche out of a ditch and hide the body in bushes at the side of the road, hoping to be able to bluff their way back on to the ferry and get back to the mainland.

That doesn't succeed and the family then find themselves at the mercy of the angry O'Neills who are determined to apply rough justice. When the husband of the young woman they've killed turns up, things quickly turn violent and Tom is stabbed.

Heather and the children, and two Dutch tourists, manage to escape from the O'Neills. But where are they going to go? The island is small, and the only way off is the ferry, under the complete control of the O'Neils. There seems to be no hope.

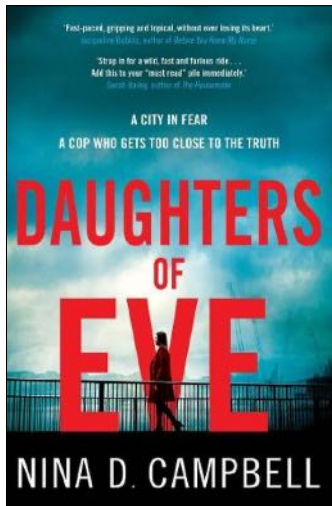
Forced by adversity, Heather takes responsibility for the children and starts to draw on long-forgotten reserves of skill and resourcefulness. Her transformation, and the way the attitudes and behaviour of the two children are forced to change under pressure, make the story compelling.

The author just keeps on ratcheting up the tension step by step as Heather, Olivia and Owen continue to evade the O'Neills, whose increasingly desperate and violent actions make it clear that they'll stop at nothing to prevent Heather from reporting them to the police.

There *are* a couple of too-good-to-be-true things and coincidences which make their evasion of the bad guys just a *little* too easy for my taste, particularly in the closing scenes, but I'll forgive the author those.

In an interesting Afterword, McKinty tells how the story in the novel is based on a real-life incident, what he calls his *Deliverance* moment, when he almost but didn't quite hit a cyclist while driving with his family on a similar remote island in rural Australia. Recounting this incident to his agent, the agent said, "No, you *did* hit her. That's your next book." And here it is. ◀

Daughters of Eve by Nina D. Campbell



I was very nearly turned off this book by its first sentence, which I'll discuss in a moment. But I'm glad I persisted, because it turned out to be an excellent thriller examining some very serious issues in Australian society.

It's worth noting that this is yet another good debut crime novel by an Australian author. We really do have a wealth of choice in local crime fiction.

The book opens with a death. A prominent barrister, Thomas Griffith-Jones, is shot dead in the car park of Sydney's Darlinghurst Courthouse by a sniper. The barrister has just left court after defending a man accused of killing his children by deliberately driving his car into water and leaving them to drown (this is clearly based on a well-known case in real-life).

Detective Emilia Hart, who was also in the courtroom, sees Griffith-Jones fall.

This is how the scene is described in the opening sentence of the book, the sentence which almost made me stop reading: "He folded like a cheap suit after church on Sunday." Really? What does this even mean? How *does* a cheap suit fold after church? Is the author trying to sound like Raymond Chandler?

Anyway, I decided to put that unpromising beginning aside and keep going. There were a couple of other flourishes like that, but not too many.

On to the story itself. Emilia Hart is the first police officer on the scene, being only steps behind Griffith-Jones when he is shot. While trying to staunch the flow of blood from his chest, she looks around for locations where the sniper could still be hiding. Because she's an eyewitness, Emilia feels she is entitled to the lead role in the investigation, but her view isn't shared by her boss, Detective Chief Inspector Willoughby, and she is forced to work in collaboration with a rival in the station, Detective Mark Roberts, known to all as "Robbo". Neither Robbo nor Hart is happy with this arrangement, and it doesn't start out well, but they are slowly

beginning to make it work when Hart is removed from the case because of a complaint from the victim's influential widow after Hart spoke briefly to the victim's daughter.

Booted off to a much less important case, Hart seethes as she investigates the death of a man pulled from the river, presumed drowned after falling in drunk. Until the autopsy reveals that he had been shot by rifle bullets, a compact pattern of three shots to the upper body; a pattern almost identical to that in Griffith-Jones' body. Is there a serial killer involved? If so, what is the connection between the victims? What is the motive? Hart gets together with Robbo again over the similarities of their cases, and Robbo becomes much more of an ally.

Matters escalate rapidly as more men are shot dead by the sniper. Then a very similar case pops up in Melbourne.

Hart, who has served for a while in the Domestic Violence division, is the first to see the connections between the victims. They are all wife beaters, or men who sexually abused children. Griffith-Jones, the first victim, was in court defending a man who almost certainly killed his own children in order to hurt his ex-wife. Then his client, that man himself, is also shot dead by a sniper.

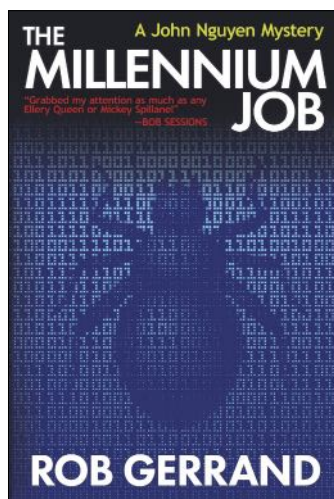
Not long afterwards, a website goes live, carrying the manifesto of an organisation calling itself "The Daughters of Eve", claiming responsibility for the murders and calling on others to do likewise. "No more!" it is headed. "The pages of history fail to record the atrocities visited upon women... It is time for men to learn what it is to walk in fear." Then it lists the victims of the shootings, including one victim's name which has yet to be released to the public, suggesting the manifesto is indeed authentic. The government goes into full panic mode and deploys soldiers to patrol the streets of Australia's capital cities.

As Emilia Hart points out all too accurately: "Fourteen men die and it's terrorism... More than fifty women and children die every year and what do we call that? Domestic violence, that's what we call it. And we're not mobilising the army to stop it!"

I won't give away the twist towards the end of this book, which I pretty much saw coming, but was nevertheless very effective. Suffice it to say that when Hart and Robbo work out who is behind the Daughters of Eve, there are shattering revelations which shock them both. And then there's yet another twist, and another.

Despite its awkward opening, I ended up greatly liking this book, which has a great deal of importance to say about how appallingly badly some men treat women and children in this country, and how easy it is for them to get away with it. The novel treats these issues with an unwavering gaze. ◀

The Millennium Job by Rob Gerrard



This is the first crime novel from this Australian author, in a projected series featuring the same police crew headed by Detective John Nguyen, based in Melbourne, Australia.

Full disclosure: the author is a good friend of mine, who I've known for many years; and I carried out the book design and layout of the interior (though not the cover) and helped Rob publish the book.

The Millennium Job has an intriguing beginning. A young woman called Deidre Makepeace wakes up after a boozy night out to find there's a man lying in bed next to her. She can't remember getting home, and the man is a stranger. Wondering what she got up to the previous evening, she reaches out to rouse him, but to her shock finds that the man's body is stone cold. And now there's blood on her hand.

In panic, she rings her friend Fran who lives in the same apartment building. Not thinking clearly, the two women bundle the body into one of the building's lifts and send it to another floor. They put the bloodied sheets into the washing machine. Shortly thereafter, they decide they've been stupid and call the police after all. But when the police get there, there is no body in the lift. Either there never was a body, or someone has moved it. What's going on?

The rest of the book lays out the investigations carried out by the initially baffled Detective Nguyen and his staff, who eventually discover the likely identity of the missing body, which in turn leads them to a widening web of intrigue involving a major bank, shady software manipulations during the Y2K era, and the American Mafia.

The novel is fast-paced and definitely keeps you reading, and the conclusion is unexpected.

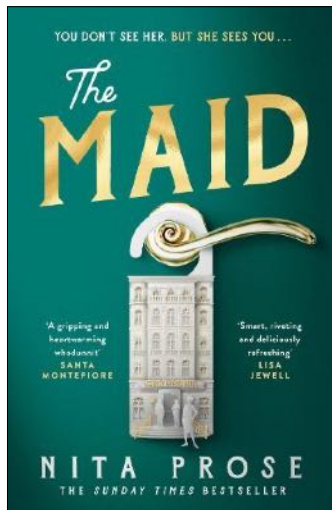
I do have a couple of minor criticisms. The eventual revelation of what happened to the stranger and how he ended up in Deidre's bed is clever and surprising, but I felt it could have had a lot more dramatic impact than it does.

Less importantly, I feel that the author sometimes spends rather too many words in describing trivial matters which don't drive the plot forward strongly. The frequent dialogs about what kind of tea or coffee or alcohol everyone wants to have at the start of a meeting, and the descriptions of the preparation of these could have been cut or at least greatly reduced, I thought. But that's a nit-pick.

Overall, an enjoyable read. I'm looking forward to the next books in the series ◀

See my [interview with Rob here](#), talking about publishing his book and about the re-started Norstrilia Press..

The Maid by Nita Prose



This is an easy read, feel-good kind of story.

It's told from first-person point of view of Molly Gray, who is a maid in the Regency Grand Hotel in a major American city. (I'm not sure that we're ever told exactly what city).

Molly is generally happy and content in her job. She loves cleaning and tidying and does so with a high degree of perfection. But Molly is different, possibly somewhat autistic. It's hard to tell because we only ever see her from her own point of view. But as she says herself: "I often have trouble with social situations; it's as though everyone is playing an elaborate game with complex rules they all know, but I'm always playing for the first time."

This difference means that other staff find her odd and make fun of her, giving her mocking nicknames like "Roomba", after the robotic vacuum cleaner.

Her innocence and naive view of the world means that she's often taken advantage of. An unscrupulous boyfriend steals the nest egg her grandmother had been accumulating for her. Her supervisor at the hotel regularly steals the tips left out for her. All of this means that she struggles to pay the rent on her run-down apartment.

The main plot of the book starts with Molly discovering the dead body of Mr Black, one of the guests in the hotel. It's not long before the police decide that Black was murdered. He was extremely rich, divorced, and on to his second, trophy wife, Gina, whom he had been physically abusing. Prior to Black's death, Molly and Gina had struck up a friendly relationship.

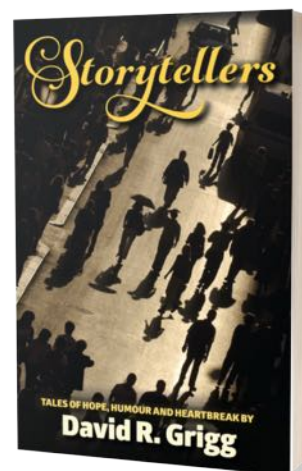
We also discover that Molly's simple nature has also lead to her being involved in a nefarious scheme, leading her to come under suspicion of involvement in Black's death. She is, in fact, being framed for his murder. But she is not entirely without friends to help her out.

The interest in Molly's character carries you along and you are quickly invested in wanting her to

triumph and have a chance at a better life.

Entertaining and enjoyable, if not very deep or challenging.

The Maid won the Best International Crime Award at the recent Ned Kellys. ◀

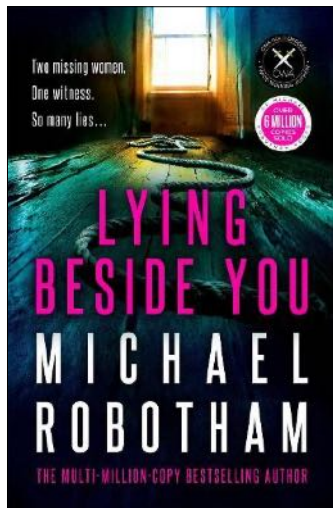


I don't just write reviews of books and stories, I also write them! Here's one of my books.

Storytellers: Twenty-five short stories exploring a variety of situations, characters and themes. Each story is charmingly illustrated by Robert Brunton OAM.

[More details here.](#)

***Lying Beside You* by Michael Robotham**



This is the third book in Robotham's series featuring Cyrus Haven, a psychologist working with local police, and a young woman, Evie Cormac, who is the survivor of traumatic childhood sexual abuse and who has a remarkable ability to detect when someone is lying to her.

Cyrus has his own traumatic background. When he was about 14 years old, his elder brother Elias, suffering from delusions due to schizophrenia, rampaged through their family home with a knife and killed Cyrus's parents and twin sisters. Cyrus himself only escaped because he was still returning home from football practice. Elias was placed in a secure psychiatric facility, where he has remained for 20 years.

As this novel opens, however, Elias is being considered for release into the community, which in practice means to live with Cyrus. Although he has forgiven Elias because of his mental illness, the prospect is still daunting, all the more so because Evie Cormac, now turned 21, has been living as a housemate (but not in a relationship) with Cyrus for the last few years. He's very uncertain how Evie and Elias will get on together, and indeed these two are quickly at odds in the household. Throughout the novel there is uncertainty about whether Elias could revert to his murderous state.

With this in the background, Cyrus is asked to assist in a case in Nottingham in which an elderly man has been found bashed to death in his own home, and his grown-up daughter Maya, with whom he was living, is now missing. Evidence at the scene indicates a sexual motive. When a second young woman is abducted from outside the bar where Evie was working as a casual waitress, Evie too becomes involved in the investigation. But her traumatic childhood means she has trouble thinking through the consequences of her actions in advance, and she blunders badly while trying to investigate an earlier case which seems similar to these recent abductions.

Eventually, of course, Cyrus and Evie find the connections between these three cases, and work

out where the abducted women are being held. There's an unexpected role for Cyrus' brother Elias.

It's all excellent, page-turning writing, though as is quite often the case with crime novels you do start becoming a bit cynical about the coincidences you are expected to swallow. What are the odds that Evie would be a witness to the second woman being abducted? Or that Cyrus would give a casual gardening job to a paroled prisoner who turns out to have been imprisoned for a crime with connections to the later abductions?

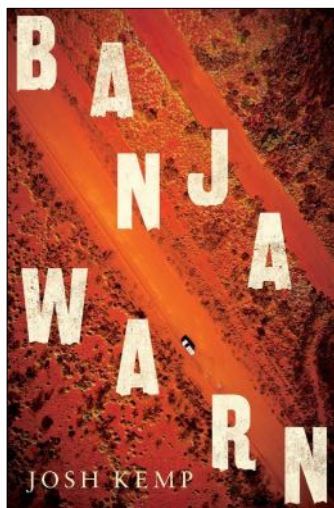
Still, it's all good stuff. Evie's character and view of the world continue to be unusual and carry the story along well. She's really more dominant in this novel than Cyrus, and it's interesting to see her feelings towards him slowly start to develop, while he still holds her at arm's length and describes her to others as his housemate or even as his tenant. This relationship clearly has some distance to go, which we may see in subsequent novels in this series. ◀



If you've enjoyed my reviews here, you might like to listen to Perry Middlemiss and myself discuss books, movies and TV in our podcast, *Two Chairs Talking*. It comes out every three weeks.

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Banjawarn by Josh Kemp



This is a confronting, disturbing book. It deals, among many other things, with drug addiction and the way it can drive addicts to live a degraded, desperate life and to carry out actions which are violent, disgusting or just plain morally abhorrent. More importantly, it looks at the children of addicts and the lives they are forced to live.

There are two main point of view characters. The first is a young man called Garreth Hoyle, who is addicted to the hallucinogenic drug PCP. When we first encounter him he is in the outback in Western Australia, north of Kalgoorlie, slightly crazy and needing to get another fix of his drug, but absorbed by the wonder of the Australian landscape.

Garreth's background and history are revealed through the course of the book. This slow revelation is very smoothly done and integrated well with the ongoing action. We discover that he used to work as a shearer on a sheep station called Banjawarn near Leonora, and that he's written a successful book. This book is a key to most of the novel. It was a non-fiction or true-crime book about his experiences at Banjawarn and in particular about the search for a child who went missing from the station. In the book Garreth changed the names of the people he lived with at Banjawarn, but each person is readily identifiable. The book was a great success and Garreth made a fair bit of money from it. But the other people he lived with are deeply angry about the book for various reasons.

The other main character in the book is a child, a 10-year old girl calling herself Luna (though that's not her real name). When we first meet her, she has locked herself into a toilet in a house somewhere. From time to time men come along and rattle the doorknob and demand to be let in, but she refuses. Someone called Jordy, who looks after Luna, has told her to stay there and not let anyone in until he gets back.

Garreth discovers Luna when he travels to Kalgoorlie and meets up with Kez, or Kerryn, who was one of the people at Banjawarn. She too is an addict, and he wants her to help him score. She's

bitter at him for his depiction of her as a hopeless junkie in his book, but he eventually persuades her to take him to her dealer. It's in this drug house that Garreth, more or less accidentally, breaks into the toilet where Luna is hiding.

Without trying to describe the rest of the book in detail, Garreth finds himself having to look after Luna when it's discovered that Jordy, the man she had been living with, has died from a drug overdose. He refuses to take Luna to the child protection authorities because his own life was one of being shuttled from one foster family to another, and instead promises to take Luna back to her father, who apparently lives in the town of Gwalia near Leonora.

The deeply troubled relationship between these two people, the man and the child, is at the heart of the book. Garreth keeps trying to avoid responsibility and retreat to his drugs and his love of the outback, while she has fixated on him as a guardian, while knowing that he, like many adults she has known, has a bad drug habit and is likely to let her down.

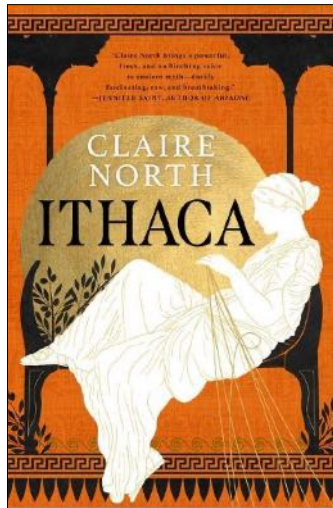
The book comes to a shatteringly violent conclusion at Banjawarn station, which is apparently a real place with an astonishing but true past history which I won't reveal.

I thought this was all excellently done, though the book is often difficult to read because of its subject matter and brutally honest depiction of drug addiction and its consequences.

Banjawarn won the 2022 Ned Kelly Award for Best Debut Crime Fiction. ◀

Fantasy/Literary Fiction

Ithaca by Claire North



When I was growing up in England and raiding my local library as often as I could get there, Greek myths and legends were the first what you might call “grown-up” fantasies which I encountered once I’d moved past the gentle magics of Enid Blyton and E. Nesbit, and I was quickly fascinated by them.

Here were tales of heroes like Theseus, Perseus, Jason and the Argonauts, Achilles, Heracles; and of course excerpts from the wanderings of Odysseus. All of these were tailored for a younger audience—I found them in the children’s library—and the sexual exploits of Zeus were omitted or watered-down. And overwhelmingly these tales were presented from a male point of view, dealing with male heroes and mostly dealing with what happened to the male gods such as Zeus, Ares, Poseidon, Hermes; with Athena, perhaps, being an exception because of her renown with arms.

But as Claire North points out early in *Ithaca*, the poets who wrote of these gods and heroes were overwhelmingly male. Or at least we can say that it’s only the writings of men which have survived. What of the stories of the wives, of the widows, of the mothers and the daughters? Surely theirs is a no less valid point of view? And probably a much more accurate one, as poets are liable to elaborate the truth in aid of telling a good story. Early in the book the narrator says:

The poets will tell you a lot about the heroes of Troy. Some details they have correct, in others, as with all things, they lie. They lie to please their masters. They lie without knowing what they do, for it is the poet’s art to make every ear that hears the ancient songs think they have been sung for them alone, the old made new. Whereas I sing for no creature’s pleasure but my own, and can attest that what you think you know of the last heroes of Greece, you do not know at all.

So the author focuses on those left behind on this small island after Odysseus and his men left for the war with Troy. Eighteen years have passed since the adult men left, and now the inhabitants of Ithaca

are either old men or youths who have grown up without fathers. *And the women, of course.* In particular Penelope, Odysseus’ queen, struggling with keeping Ithaca going while at the same time having to fend off a horde of would-be suitors, each certain that Odysseus is dead and each keen to marry Penelope and become king of this small realm.

This book, the first of a projected trilogy, is narrated by a female voice, the voice of the goddess Hera, Zeus’ wife, the goddess of wives and mothers:

Hera’s attitude towards her fellow gods is a sharp and cynical one, and she often makes amusingly snide comments about them. But her interest in visiting Ithaca (secretly, without Zeus’ knowledge) is to watch Penelope’s struggles and to assist where she can.

The book opens, however, not with Penelope and her unruly crowd of suitors, but with an attack on a small fishing village by three ships of raiders, who pillage, burn and rape. One of the few survivors of the attack is a young woman, Teodora, who has the sense to flee. Her would-be boyfriend, Dares, tries to fight the raiders and is quickly killed.

This isn’t the first such raid; there have been a couple of previous such. It’s clear that there’s likely to be more each time the moon is full. Penelope knows she must take some action, but she is surrounded by male councillors, all of them old and feeble, and as a woman, queen or not, it’s difficult for her to have her voice heard. The old men want to try to put together a militia to fight the raiders, but all they have to work with is other old men and a number of untrained youths, among whom is Telemachus, Odysseus’ own son. Much of the novel relates to Penelope’s ongoing fears for Telemachus, who has grown up in his absent father’s heroic shadow and is desperately trying to live up to what he feels are other’s expectations of him.

The little militia put together by the old men is far too short of numbers, weapons and skill to put up much of a fight against the raiders, even though Telemachus has been getting some additional training at the hands of an Egyptian who has joined the suitors.

Penelope, however, has been secretly putting in place another approach, building an army of her own. I loved this little exchange:

“How do you hide an army?”

“Medon,” Penelope tuts, “what a foolish question. You hide them in precisely the same way you hide your success as a merchant, your skill with agriculture, your wisdom at politics and your innate cutting wit. You hide them as women.”

Then there’s a twist with the arrival on Ithaca of three black-sailed ships, bearing news of the death of Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae who was the leader of the victorious Greek forces at Troy. On board the ships are Agamemnon’s children, Orestes

and Elektra. They are here not only to bear the news, but to try to find Clytemnestra their mother, who murdered Agamemnon. Orestes has felt compelled to swear to kill her in vengeance, but in the novel he is largely a puppet in the hands of his implacable sister Elektra.

This makes life very much harder for Penelope, who is Clytemnestra's cousin, because Penelope knows that Clytemnestra has indeed fled to Ithaca, and eventually discovers where she is hiding.

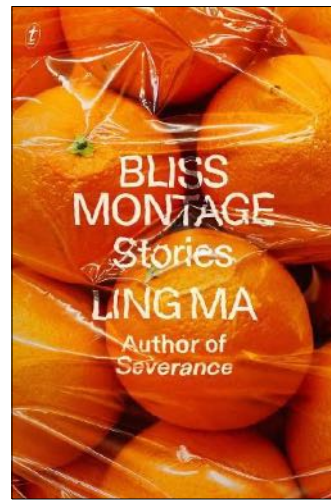
North's feminist treatment of this part of Greek myth is very convincing. All of the most active roles and viewpoints in the novel are those of women, both human women and female gods. This viewpoint seems both fresh and perfectly natural.

If I have to be critical, it's only to say that there were times when the narration by the goddess Hera felt a little too contrived, and I felt at times that it would have been better to have had the story told directly by Penelope. I occasionally had to remind myself that it was Hera, not Penelope, who was narrating.

I won't try to outline any more of the story, which though it starts fairly slowly, quickly gathers pace and becomes gripping.

I liked it a lot, and I'm greatly looking forward to the other books in the trilogy, each of which is apparently narrated by a different goddess. ◀

Bliss Montage by Ling Ma



Many thanks to Text Publishing for providing me with a review copy of this book, and to W. H. Chong for suggesting it to me.

This is a collection of very odd short stories. I confess frankly that I don't fully understand many of them, but they are all very well written, well worth reading, and give you plenty of food for thought. I'll be thinking about some of them for quite a while.

—Warning, spoilers!—

All of the stories are told in the first person by various female narrators. I say "various" but there are many similarities. Each is a young woman who is either an immigrant to the United States from China, or was born in America of Chinese parents. Hardly surprising, because that's the background of the author herself.

In each story, though, the narrator appears to have become, or is in the process of becoming, unmoored from reality.

In that respect, and in several others, Ling Ma's stories remind me a lot of those of Shirley Jackson, many of which feature a young, usually married, woman who suffers a breach with the normal world. I'm thinking particularly of Jackson's stories "The Tooth" and "Pillar of Salt", in both of which women gradually lose touch with reality. I don't mean anything uncomplimentary by this comparison, rather the opposite. Ling Ma's stories are unique and fascinating in their own right.

I won't try to comment on every story here, but just pick out the ones which had a particular impact on me.

The first story in the book, "Los Angeles" is surreal. The narrator tells us that she lives in a large house divided into three wings. She and her husband live in one wing, their children and nannies live in the second, and in the third live her 100 ex-boyfriends. Her husband only speaks in dollar signs (until, later in the story he's reduced to talking in pennies).



Don't forget to check out *Through the Biblioscope*, my fortnightly newsletter about my reading, as well as my monthly newsletter featuring my short fiction, *A Flash in the Pan*.

You can get both delivered to your email inbox, or view them in the Substack app.

[Through the Biblioscope](#)

[A Flash in the Pan](#)

So far, so fantastic, but then reality begins to edge in. One night the police come looking for one of the narrator's ex-boyfriends still living in the third wing. He's called Adam, and he's accused of domestic violence, of which it seems he has a history with the narrator. A surrealistic chase begins, in which the narrator outpaces the police and runs after Adam on her own, never quite catching him.

The second story, "Oranges" also features the abuser Adam, but this time in a much more realistic setting. The narrator sees Adam in the street and follows him secretly until he reaches the apartment where he is living with another woman, Beth. It's her apartment, of course, this is his usual method of operation, moving in with a girlfriend.

The narrator tells Beth about her history with Adam and with other women with whom she's been in contact, his abusive nature, but is not believed. The narrator stares into Adam's face and sees there not fear or anger, but only a bewildered look of entrapment. I don't think we're meant to feel any sympathy with Adam at all, but to understand that in a way he can't escape his own behaviour, though he knows that it's personally destructive to him as well as to his victims.

I do wonder if the name "Adam" is chosen to represent the original man, suggesting that violence towards women is the true original sin. It's a thought, anyway. (And the narrator of the final story in the book is called "Eve").

Of the other stories in the collection, I was particularly taken by the story simply titled "G". In it, Bea, a young woman who is about to leave New York to live in California visits an old childhood friend, Bonnie to say goodbye. We learn that when they were in their teens they experimented frequently with a drug called "G". The drug, we learn, makes the user's body difficult to see, ghostly, perhaps totally invisible to other people, depending on the dose.

Now Bonnie encourages Bea to take one last trip on G and they go out, naked so as to be near-invisible, to explore the places they visited when younger. But eventually Bea realises she isn't coming down from the drug, that its effects are becoming stronger, not weaker, with time. Bonnie has overdosed her, and before Bea fades completely away, her body not only invisible but insubstantial, she sees that Bonnie has started to wear Bea's clothes, has stolen Bea's identity and erased her very existence. "Do you want to know how long I've wanted to do this?" Bonnie asks. She is a different kind of abuser.

The story called "Yeti Lovemaking" is told in the second person, addressed to the narrator's former lover. The narrator hooks up with a man in a bar, but when they go to her apartment he reveals that he's not human, but a yeti, an "abominable snowman". His fur is so sharp that when the narrator strokes him at his invitation, her hand begins to bleed. Having sex with a yeti, it seems,

requires the human lover to harden, to transform. It's a metaphor, I think, of how relationships can damage and harden those involved.

I liked "Office Hours" quite a bit. In it, a young graduate student establishes a friendly (but not sexual) relationship with the head of the university's English Literature Faculty and often takes afternoon naps in his office while he works. Just before her retires, he moves aside some furniture in his office and reveals a portal. The portal takes them into a night-time world in an unknown rural location. Time never passes here: a cup of hot coffee left there days before remains hot.

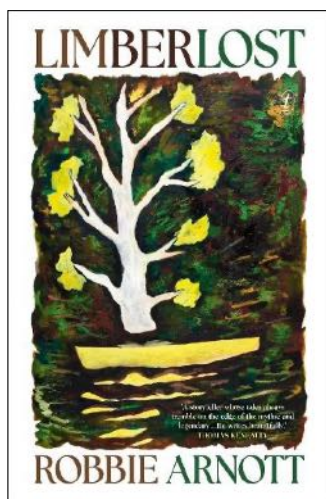
The professor retires and then dies. Eventually, the student graduates and joins the faculty and ultimately the professor's office becomes her own, complete with portal. Entering the portal, she sees a shadowy figure which seems to be the professor, accompanied by his dog, but she is unable to catch up with him to speak. Is the world through the portal the Land of the Dead? Perhaps, but the story ends ambiguously.

"Peking Duck" is a story about memory and the appropriation of other people's memories. It begins with an anecdote of a Chinese man asked to recall his fondest memory, and he tells of his joy of sharing a banquet of Peking Duck with friends. But then the man admits this is not his memory, but that of his wife, whose enthusiasm about the event makes it *his* most treasured memory too.

The narrator tells a story of what she witnessed as a child when her mother was the cleaner at a luxurious mansion in some rural area and a man forced his way in pretending to be selling cleaning products. As a child, she was frightened and confused, but the man eventually leaves. Later in the story, when she has grown up with a child of her own, a close analogy of her mother's experience is played out, with the narrator now a nanny looking after the child of a rich family in an expensive mansion. Now from a first-person point of view, she experiences almost exactly what her mother experienced, but now with a mature understanding of what was going on. But it ends in a different way, reflecting the changes of self-esteem that the change of generations has brought about.

All in all, a very interesting and well-written set of stories. The author wrote a novel called *Severance* a few years ago, which I must look up. ◀

Limberlost by Robbie Arnott



Many thanks to Text Publishing for providing me with a review copy of this book.

This is a beautifully-written and moving novel, and certainly one of the best books I've read all year.

That it is beautifully-written will be no surprise to those who have read Arnott's first two books, *Flames* and *The Rain Heron*. What may surprise readers of those books is that this third novel *Limberlost* has none of the touches of the fantastic which distinguished his earlier works to great effect. No, *Limberlost* is a work of pure realism but loses absolutely nothing because of that.

Robbie Arnott is an Australian author, but more than that, he is a very distinctively *Tasmanian* author. All three of his novels so far are set in Tasmania (well, in the case of *The Rain Heron* it's not named as such, but the setting described is clearly a near-future Tasmania). Arnott's deep love of Tasmania, its history, its landscape, its wildlife and vegetation, its mountains, forests and rivers have never been so obvious as in *Limberlost*.

So what is the book about? One could start by calling *Limberlost* a "coming-of-age" story, and it's certainly that, but it's a coming-of-age story which lasts a lifetime. It's about how deeply-felt experiences, both positive and negative, can resonate through someone's entire life and shape every moment. Traumatic experiences can do that, of course, but the key experiences which shape young Ned in *Limberlost* are not in themselves traumatic as such but nevertheless are profoundly important to him, a boy learning to be a man.

Ned West is the youngest child of an apple farmer in northern Tasmania, whose orchard is called Limberlost¹. Though the novel ranges back and forth over Ned's entire life, the core of the story covers what happens to Ned during a long summer during the last year of the Second World War, when

Ned is in his mid-teens. His two elder brothers have been fighting in different theatres of the war; the oldest, Bill, was in Singapore when it was captured by the Japanese, and nothing has been heard of him since: the family fear that he's dead. The second-eldest, Toby, is in Malaysia and they get occasional letters from him. Ned's eldest sibling, his sister Maggie, has returned home to help their father. His mother died when he was very young.

Young Ned has therefore grown up without the love of a mother, and with his father and two older brothers, whom he idolises, as role models, he is constantly filled with feelings of inadequacy and guilt. His brothers are off being heroes, and his father, who was in the trenches in the First World War, is a hard, remote man who Ned struggles to please.

At the very start of the book, there's a brief passage describing an event when Ned was only five years old. There's been a lot of fearful talk about a mad whale at the mouth of the river, smashing fishing boats and creating havoc. Ned's father, scoffing at these fishermen's tales, takes his sons out in a small boat to show them there is nothing to fear. We don't find out the resolution of this incident until much later in the book, but it has a strong influence on Ned, who as the story proper opens is out trying to shoot and trap rabbits. He wants to earn enough by selling skins to buy a boat of his own. The rabbit pelts are in demand by the Army to make slouch hats.

When he proudly shows his father the pelt of a rabbit he's trapped, and how neatly he's skinned it, his father misunderstands:

Now [Ned] saw it: how his father's oldest boys had been pulled to a distant leviathan of a war, beyond scope or comprehension... And all the while his youngest remained at home, spending his free months selflessly avoiding leisure in order to provide rabbit pelts to the army for the production of slouch hats. Ned saw how it looked, how he had misrepresented his intentions. How he'd drawn a nobler image of himself in his father's eyes than could ever be true.

Ned tries to convince himself that his father's view of him is true, but as he hones his shooting and trapping skills, realises that he can both save for his boat *and* supply the Army's needs. He sells the pelts for a good price and tells his father:

The old man drew on a faint, tired smile. "Well, you're either a hard lad or a thick one. Although you don't seem thick to me."

Ned was strangled hot and mute by the compliment. In this moment life was not brimming with conflict, his skills not linked to guilt or shame.

Such back-handed compliments are the best he can hope for from his father, and his brothers are absent, Bill perhaps dead. His sister Maggie he barely knows, and her approval is rare and criticism frequent, though he longs to please her and to at least partially fill the place of her absent brothers.

¹ The orchard is named for a 1909 American novel *A Girl of the Limberlost*, which was Ned's mother's favourite book. Perhaps significantly, that book also tells the story of a child fighting to gain their parent's approval and love.

Robbie Arnott

But when he fails to recognise that one of the farm's horses has gone lame and do anything about it, her fury lasts for days.

Two main events during this summer shape the rest of Ned's long life. Firstly, Ned eventually gets his boat, a second-hand purchase which turns out to be an unexpected treasure. He's dreamed for years of his brothers returning from the war and being able to show them his boat, of the skills he's acquired in being able to navigate it effortlessly on the river. This, however, is destined never to occur, and through his selfless actions to help his father's struggling business, instead Ned is led to a point of abiding grief.

The second major event is that in trying to trap whatever creature is trying to dig under the fence to get to Maggie's chickens, instead of the suspected fox or Tasmanian devil he finds that he's trapped a native quoll, (a carnivorous marsupial about the size of a large cat, with a white-spotted pelt). Its leg is broken and fastened in the trap, but as Ned moves to kill it, he can't bring himself to do it. Secretly he keeps the quoll in a crate and feeds it scraps of rabbit meat. This goes on for many months. But Ned is very bad at keeping secrets. Many times in his story he lets into the open things he wanted to keep secret, to keep personal, to himself. Eventually the secret of the hidden quoll comes out.

The quoll followed him for years, its jaw gaping through his mind whenever he found terror and fury in the same place.

This is all in the core story of that key summer during the war, but the story roams back and forth over Ned's life: a decade later when he's working for a logging company felling the "White Knights—the name they'd given to the pale, towering mannas"; to his time mustering on a sheep station on the mainland; to his marriage and the birth of his children; to when he's running the orchard himself and is chosen by the local growers association to represent them overseas; to when his daughters are grown and at university; to his old age. This interleaving is done smoothly and without the slightest confusion to the reader. And at each point, we see how the events of the key summer have affected Ned's thinking and actions.

The conclusion of that summer—and of the book—is a deeply moving incident. Not many books bring me to tears, but this one came very close to doing so.

I loved this book. I fully expect to see it on the short list for next year's Miles Franklin Award and unless it has some very good competition, would think it has a good chance of winning. (But what do I know?)

I also really like the book cover by W. H. Chong. ◀



Robbie Arnott's acclaimed debut, *Flames* (2018), won a Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Novelist award and a Tasmanian Premier's Literary Prize, and was shortlisted for a Victorian Premier's Literary Award, a New South Wales Premier's Literary Award, a Queensland Literary Award, the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction and the Not the Booker Prize.

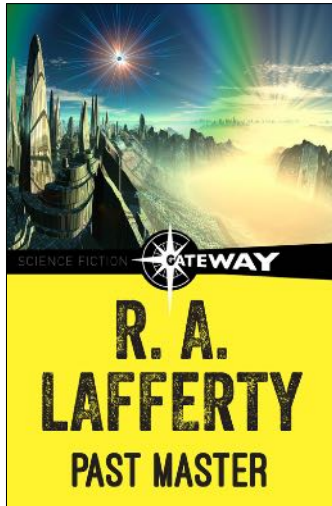
His follow-up, *The Rain Heron* (2020), won the Age Book of the Year award, and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the ALS Gold Medal, the Voss Literary Prize and an Adelaide Festival Award. He lives in Hobart.

Photo and bio courtesy of Text Publishing

Hugo Time Machine 1969

The following reviews of SF/Fantasy books published in 1968 were read for the “Hugo Time Machine” segment of our podcast in which we return to a previous year to discuss the nominees for the Hugo Award in that year..

Past Master by R. A. Lafferty



I found this a very tedious read, which didn't seem to go anywhere interesting.

It's written in a kind of baroque fashion, a little bit like Delany's *Einstein Intersection*, with a mishmash of historical figures and semi-mythical characters, but not done nearly as well as in that book.

We start with a meeting of three individuals on the planet of Astrobe, which has been colonised from Earth several centuries earlier. This meeting is under siege by robotic killers, who are attempting to break in to the building in order to kill one of the people attending the meeting, because they can apparently sense that he's not sufficiently committed to the “Golden Dream of Astrobe”, which essentially says that it's a perfect society not requiring any change.

OK, that's kind of interesting, but the three people blather on about the future of humanity while there's this mechanical carnage in the street and the building starts to be demolished around them.

The problem seems to be that Astrobe, though in many ways it does seem to be a perfect society, seems to have a cancer at its core. Many citizens commit suicide to escape it; others move away from the perfect cities to work in harsh, dirty, dangerous conditions in an unregulated area called Cathead.

So this group of three individuals somehow decide that what they need is to bring in a new leader, someone who can set them right again. And they decide that this person is someone from the past, specifically Sir Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor to Henry VIII.

Now this is where the book lost me. Its depiction of Thomas More as a “Past Master” and a

fundamentally honest man seems to me to be totally misguided on my own reading of history, and the character doesn't feel the least bit authentic as it plays out in the rest of the book.

They go back in time and get him (which he doesn't seem very surprised about) and try to set him up to run the planet. He's bemused that this society seems modelled on his own book, *Utopia*, which he says he only wrote as “a sour joke”.

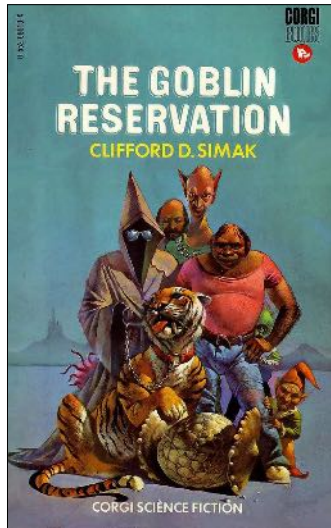
But then he sets off with a motley crew of very odd characters to wander in the wilderness and climb a mountain. All the while being pursued by mechanical assassins determined to do him in. And then... But I'm not going to try to summarise the rest of the book.

At the end, Thomas More makes a decision to stick to his principles by refusing to sign some decree and so it's decided that they'll behead him, which is of course what happened to the real Thomas More. They chop his head off and that's the end of the book. Um, so what?

I'm sure it's all deep and meaningful to some readers, but it's just a farrago of nonsense as far as I'm concerned.

Definitely not my cup of tea. ◀

The Goblin Reservation by Clifford D. Simak



I can't help feeling that Simak piled just too many disparate elements into this book. We have ancient civilisations, evil alien enemies, matter transmission between stars, duplication of human beings, legendary beings such as goblins and trolls now living in the open, time travel, ghosts, neanderthals, Shakespeare, dragons. It's all a bit too much.

Which is not to say that Simak doesn't manage to pull it all together into a fairly entertaining read, but it's a bit of a struggle to make it all make sense as a whole.

The protagonist is Peter Maxwell, a college professor at a Wisconsin university, and as the book opens he's being interrogated by a security official. It seems that he set off from Earth to another star system using a method of interstellar travel which essentially uses matter transmission. Only he didn't end up where he was supposed to go, but on a mysterious crystal planet instead. What's more, he's told, his body was *duplicated* in the process, and one version of him *did* end up where he intended. That copy returned to Earth some weeks ago, but recently died in an accident.

That's an intriguing concept, and there are all sorts of interesting ramifications when this version of Maxwell returns to his university, where all his friends thought him dead, and indeed attended his funeral. His room has been rented out to a young woman (who quickly becomes a romantic interest, of course). Oh, and she has a robotic sabre-tooth tiger as a pet. As you do.

But layered onto all that is the fact that Maxwell teaches on the faculty of the College of Supernatural Phenomena, and that he regularly talks with goblins and fairies, who live on a nearby reservation. There are other legendary creatures there, too, such as grumpy trolls (living under a bridge), and a banshee, which is slowly dying.

Then we add another layer: there's a Time College at the university which operates a functional time machine. They've caused a fuss by going back to talk to Shakespeare, who thinks it's a huge joke that

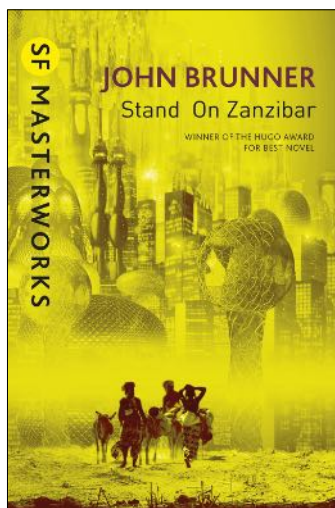
everyone today thinks he wrote all those plays, which were really written by the Earl of Essex. The Time College has invited him to the present day to speak at a conference they are hosting.

Maxwell's best friends, by the way, are Oop, a neanderthal brought into the present day by the Time College, and a Ghost.

There's an interesting plot to do with the intentions of the Wheelers and a strange object called the Artifact which the Time College have brought forward from millions of years in the past. The Wheelers are doing a deal to buy the Artifact but Maxwell and his friends have reason to believe this will be a disaster for humanity. They take extreme measures to stop the deal going through, with an unexpected result.

It's all a bit much. But as I say, Simak spins a fairly entertaining tale from all of this and makes it work. He's always readable even if this isn't his best work. ◀

Stand on Zanzibar by John Brunner



There's no doubt that *Stand on Zanzibar* is an ambitious book. In it, Brunner attempts to create a wide-reaching picture of a near-term future Earth. Well, the near-term future when it was written, as it's set in 2010, now in our past. But apart from a few details here and there, the book really hasn't dated and can be read today with as much interest and pleasure as when it was first published in 1968.

The book is composed of what we might call a collage of many different threads, quotations from fictional books and online news-sites², glimpses of different people's lives, all woven together into a whole.

In Brunner's vision, concerns about over-population are dominant in 2010. His prediction of a world with a human population of 7 billion and still growing is spot on, though our response to that fact has been very different to what Brunner imagined. In his world, America has implemented strict laws about who is permitted to have children, laws which vary in different regions, but are all aimed at prohibiting people with genetic defects to have children in case they pass on their defective genes to their offspring. The list of conditions which exclude people from having children varies from state to state in the U.S. but in each state the list is growing longer and targets more and more minor conditions, now including colour-blindness. Desperate would-be-parents travel to more permissive states, leave the country altogether, or break the law and suffer the consequences. Though all of this probably sounded fantastic in 1968, it's hard to avoid the comparison with the real-life prohibitions of abortion in today's America.

The future world which Brunner conjures up from back in 1968 has many points of contact with the real world of 2022. Marijuana is legal in most states, for example, and sold by companies which once

sold cigarettes. Mass shootings or incidents of domestic terrorism are common and increasing, carried out by individuals Brunner calls "muckers" (short for those who have run amuck). At one point a character visits the city of Detroit and talks about how eerie the place is: "All those abandoned factories..." Not too far from the modern reality of that city.

There are a host of minor characters, but the main thrust of the story follows two men. One is a caucasian, encyclopaedia Donald Hogan, who at the start of the book has been recruited by the CIA as an information analyst and who spends most of his time in libraries reviewing a host of material looking for patterns and connections. Until he is "activated" and forced to take on a much more aggressive role by infiltrating a country which is claiming an unlikely genetic breakthrough which will cure inherited diseases before birth. There's quite a good spy thriller-type plot which develops to do with Hogan's story.

The second man is Norman Niblock House, an African-American (or "afam" as the book has it) who is an executive in a huge conglomerate called General Technics or GT. General Technics owns the world's most powerful supercomputer, cooled by liquid helium, called Shalmaneser. Norman House gets deeply involved in a project to develop an African nation called Beninia which has somehow managed to survive despite the legacies of a period of colonialism, and aggressive neighbours. There's something odd about this success, which is revealed only very later in the book.

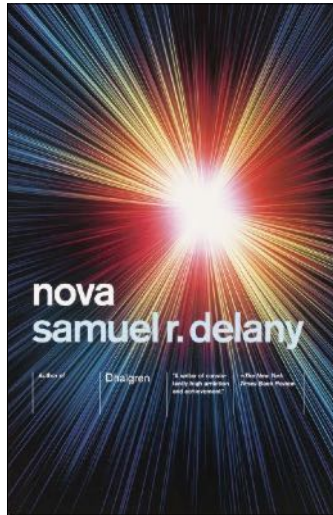
These two men start out as housemates. Their stories diverge widely through the middle part of the book but then unexpectedly come together at the end.

There are definitely some things to criticise: there's a strong misogynist streak in the novel. I can't think of *any* strong female characters. There's only an unpleasant, mindless socialite called Guinevere Steel who specialises in humiliating people at her frequent parties, and Georgette Tallon Buckfast, the cranky, elderly head of General Technics, who dies halfway through the book. And the main two characters continually talk of their girlfriends—usually temporary—with the dismissive term of "shiggies", as do several of the minor male characters.

But overall, Brunner does a magnificent job of creating a believable future world which is full of interest, and unites it with some interesting strands of plot. ◀

² Brunner didn't however predict the development of the Internet. Donald Hogan does his research in a physical library and there are a couple of references to being able to find out information by making a phone call to an 'encyclopaedia'.

Nova by Samuel R. Delany



There are strong hints in this book that Delany wants us to see the story as a Grail Quest, the search for a mystical object which when found will transform the world. Well, there aren't just hints, one of the characters just about says so. But while the main character, Lorq Von Ray, does ultimately find his grail, he is no Parsifal. A deeply flawed Lancelot, perhaps.

However, I'm getting ahead of myself.

The book is set in the 31st Century, in which mankind has spread through the nearby regions of the Galaxy. I say "nearby" but as well as the region nearest to the Solar System, humans have colonised the Pleiades star cluster, which is over 400 light years from Earth. Faster-than-light travel has made this possible.

We start in a bar on Neptune's moon Triton with a character everyone just calls Mouse. He's a gypsy, an orphan, and an itinerant worker. Like everyone in this society, he has neural sockets in his wrists and at the base of his spine which let him control equipment or help fly a starship. He can also play an instrument called a sensory-syrinx, which can not only play music and other sounds, but generate images and smells.

In the bar, Mouse is confronted by an old man called Dan, who seems to be blind. Like the Ancient Mariner with the Wedding Guest, Dan forces Mouse to listen to him while he tells his tale. Dan was on a trip with Lorq Von Ray, approaching a star which went nova, or so he says. And Dan tried to see and hear what was happening using his connections to the ship's sensors. His own senses were totally overwhelmed and are now permanently stimulated. He is all but blind because all he sees is the glare of the exploding star, and all but deaf because he still hears the star's death rattle.

Mouse eventually manages to pull away from Dan, but it's not long before he encounters Captain Von Ray himself, who is recruiting for an expedition. Mouse needs a job, and so despite Dan's warnings, he signs up with a number of other crew. Von Ray is

heading off for another nova, and we find out that he believes that it is possible to plunge into the heart of an exploding star and find a precious material, Illyrion. It's incredibly rare, available only in micrograms, but a pinch of it can fuel a starship or melt the heart of a moon. The Illyrion is, if you like, Von Ray's Holy Grail.

We then get a long flashback to Von Ray's childhood. The Von Rays, based in the Pleiades, are trying to free their region from the control of Earth and implicitly, the Red-Shift Corporation, who have a near-monopoly of building starship drives.

As a child and then as a teenager, Lorq Von Ray has come into contact with Prince and Ruby Red, the children of Aaron Red, who runs Red-Shift. Prince was born with only one arm, and has had it replaced with a powerful robotic arm. Ruby is exceptionally beautiful, and young Lorq falls for her. At which point Prince attacks Lorq with his metal arm and badly mutilates his face, setting up a bitter life-long feud.

If Lorq can obtain enough Illyrion, he can destroy the Red-Shift monopoly and transform the galactic economy. But his motives are wholly personal: Lorq wants to bring Prince down as an act of revenge, and to free Ruby Red from her brother's malign influence so she's free to be with Lorq. In this he badly misunderstands her.

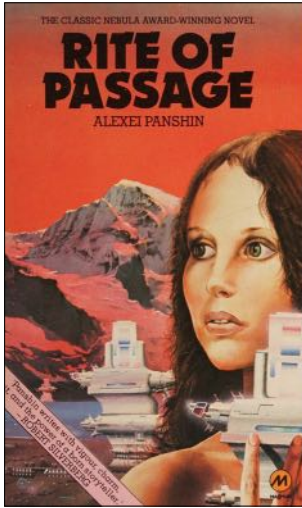
A lot of the story is told from the point of view of Mouse and his friend Katin, a young man who is well-educated, and thinking about writing a novel, at this period an archaic form. We get a fair bit of exposition from Katin explaining things patiently to Mouse.

There are also the other members of the crew, including Tyy, who tells fortunes using Tarot cards. Delany makes out that to think that idea this is phoney is "a romanic notion" and that in the future, what we consider as superstitious nonsense may be taken very seriously. I'm not sure about that.

The rest of the novel details the expedition to a star expected to go nova shortly, while being pursued and harassed by Prince and Ruby Red. There are a number of very violent confrontations between the enemies as the quest goes on, and the result is always in doubt.

I really like this. I remember liking it a lot when I first read it, in my late teens, and I enjoyed it just as much on a second read. Delany has a wonderful style and can also tell an engaging tale. ◀

Rite of Passage by Alexei Panshin



This book won the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 1969, and I honestly find that shocking. In the Nebulas, it beat novels such as *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner (which won in the Hugos), *Black Easter* by James Blish, which is a terrific, dark piece of fantasy, and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K. Dick (on which the movie *Blade Runner* was based). And yet to my mind it's nowhere near as good as those other books. I have no idea what the Nebula panel was thinking.

Rite of Passage is, at heart, the simple coming-of-age story of its first-person protagonist, Mia Havero. She grows up on board a huge interstellar-voyaging Ship which has been carved out of an asteroid.

However there doesn't seem to be a lot of point to this voyaging, as humanity has established many viable colonies in other stellar systems and all that the Ship (and others like it) do is travel between them and trade for resources they need. Earth has apparently been destroyed, but we are never told how or why, though it seems to have been something to do with overpopulation. I'll come back to this issue later.

The novel is fairly slow in its development, as we follow Mia's growing-up years and learn through her eyes about the Ship and what life on it is like. She is an interesting and likeable character, and Panshin does a good job of making her development credible. We find out that after children reach the age of 14 they are subjected to a Trial which can sometimes result in the child's death. Only those who survive the Trial are considered to be adults. This Trial, we eventually learn, involves the child being dropped alone on one of the colony worlds with a minimum of gear and left to fend for themselves. If they survive for a month, they send a signal to a scout-ship which then picks them up. If no such signal is sent, it is assumed that the child has died or become incapacitated. No rescue missions are sent.

There's something unpleasantly reminiscent of the books and philosophy of Robert Heinlein in all of this, particularly his books for young adults such as

his 1955 novel *Tunnel in the Sky*.

Mia, though, is a much more sympathetic, credible and interesting character than anyone Heinlein ever wrote (spare yourself and don't even try Heinlein's *Podkayne of Mars*, which similarly has a young female first-person narrator, but is awful). And after her own Trial, she eventually does start to question the Ship's attitude to the colonists, who she starts by calling by the derogatory term "Mudeaters", as do most people on board.

Knowing almost right from the start that Mia's Trial is coming up, though, means that the long prelude to that becomes a little tedious, and you start to fidget and want Panshin to hurry up and get to the action. But that only happens in the last quarter of the book. Everything until then is just Mia's preparation alongside her fellow children in the same age group.

When we finally get to it, Mia's experiences during her Trial on a planet called Tintera are certainly interesting and action-filled enough. She's attacked and her weapon and other gear stolen, and her precious signalling device destroyed. She is, however, treated very kindly by an old man whose own daughter is dead, and her feelings towards the "Mudeaters" start to shift, and she starts to see some of them, at least, as people.

The Epilogue of the book, after Mia and some but not all of the other children experiencing Trial survive and return to the ship, is however troubling.

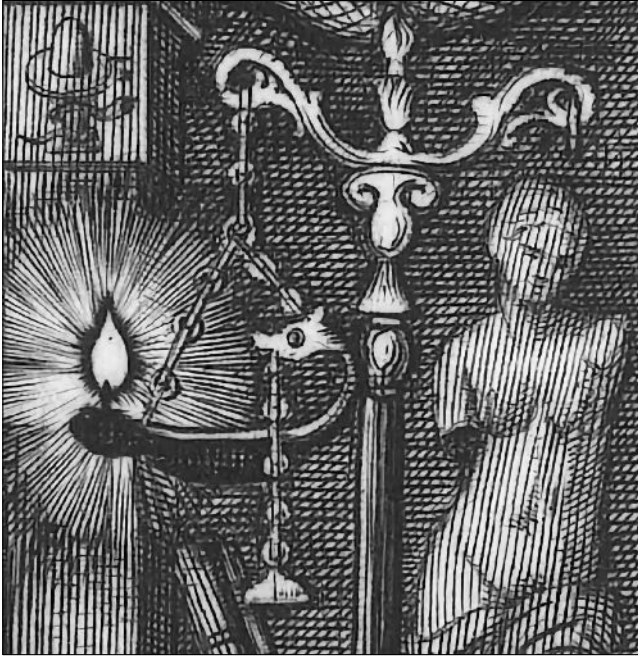
The shipboard people have a horror of "free birthers" who don't control their populations. Obviously, on board the Ship, given the limited space and resources, uncontrolled population growth would be a disaster, but the shipboard people extend this fear to the colony worlds as well. Mia and the other survivors testify that the Tinterans allow free birth and also practice a form of slavery, using the planet's native hominids for forced labour.

The horror of free birth (much more than the slavery) is enough to make an assembly of the shipboard people prepared to utterly destroy the colony world, which only as yet has a few million inhabitants. Mia and many others vote against, but they are outvoted and the destruction goes ahead.

This is where I feel that Mia and her boyfriend Jimmy, who feel the same way, should have made a much stronger stand against this moral outrage. She's learned to see the colonists as people like herself, and yet she allows their mass murder with no real protest, even to her own father, who is the Council Chairman, who argued for Tintera's destruction.

So: interesting, well-written, an engaging female protagonist. I want to like it more, but I still can't recommend this book.

TALKING BOOKS



Interview with Rob Gerrand

This is a transcript of an interview I did with Rob for Episode 80 of our podcast.

DAVID:

I'm joined now by Rob Gerrand who's an old friend who has been involved in the science fiction field for a long time, which is how I came to know him and he's also been involved in publishing and editing over the years. In fact I think he published one short story of mine at one point so there you go.

So Rob you've just published your first novel and it's a bit of a surprise to me that it's a crime novel. How come you decided on the crime genre rather than going for science fiction?

ROB:

Well it's my first crime novel. I did actually publish a science fiction novel called *Fortress* about 25 years ago, that was based on the movie *Fortress* so I was commissioned to write it, so not really my idea but it was a readable book.

DAVID:

It was a novel, it was under your name. I wasn't aware of that. So it's still crime. Why the crime genre?

ROB:

Yes. I'd been writing different things and I'd started this book a long time ago and hit a brick wall because it starts with a young woman after a big night out waking up on a Sunday morning and finding a man in bed with her and she obviously thinks 'oh god what have I done?' She reaches out and touches the man and he's cold and a bit of blood on her hand and he's dead.

DAVID:

Yeah it's a great start to a book.

ROB:

And she's never seen him before in her life and doesn't know what happened and she, her memory of the night before, she had too many vodkas, there's a bit blurred. So I wrote that scene and I thought how do I get myself out of this? You see I thought the crime novelists had it all planned out in great detail as to how everything works out and how it all came to be.

DAVID:

It's one of the reasons I've never tried writing [in the] crime genre.

ROB:

Well some crime novelists certainly do that. Others are called what they termed pantsers by the seat of their pants. Yeah. And because when I was trying to think of a plot I was getting nowhere I'd been decided I'd have faith in my characters and let them take me wherever they did. And after writing that opening scene which is quite gripping as people tell me.

DAVID:

Oh yeah it is, it is.

ROB:

I suddenly thought about the Millennium Bug. I'd been working at ANZ Bank and I was part of their Millennium Bug team in the late 90s and that was of course people worried that come 2000 when all the computer codes would switch over from 1999 to 2000. The problem was most computer codes only had the two last digits of a year. Yes. So people weren't sure whether 99 would become 1900 or 2000 and there were all these teams of IT experts worrying that a plane might drop out of the sky or a bank's finances would freeze or all sorts of things relying on computers would go awry. And huge effort was put into fixing all the computer codes so that when it flipped over it was 2000, not 1900.

And so I [came up] with the idea that a very smart coder working on one of the banks in the middle of doing all that would surreptitiously write a little thing into the code that whenever there's a transaction less than a cent, half a cent, a third of a cent, whatever it was, it'd be creamed off into some other account. And no one would know about this

because no one worries about a quarter of a cent or half a cent. And over a day in all bank transactions, just thousands and thousands of transactions over 20 years, it'd probably be in dollars that's been creamed off. And I thought, if that's the case, the Mafia will be after that.

DAVID:

Yeah.

ROB:

And so then I had the beginning of the novel and the police when they come are trying to work out who the dead man is. But the problem is when they get there, he's disappeared. And I explain the panicking of the woman who rings up their girlfriend and they come and just put the body in the lift and hoping that will, they won't be embarrassed or involved when the police get there. It's not in the lift anymore. So they find some DNA and the story is about how the police track, try and track down who the dead man is. Why he was in her bed, why he was killed if he was and through DNA, Detective John Nguyen and his team of two, Constable Kara McTeesh and Sergeant Graham Brothers, they discovered that there's DNA links to a person in Sydney, a woman in LA and a woman in New York and so he, John Nguyen goes to try and find out what's what. And so it's a bit of an interesting chase and people seem to like the complications of the plot, which I can't say I consciously thought out, but it's obviously subconsciously they came to.

DAVID:

Yes, yes.

ROB:

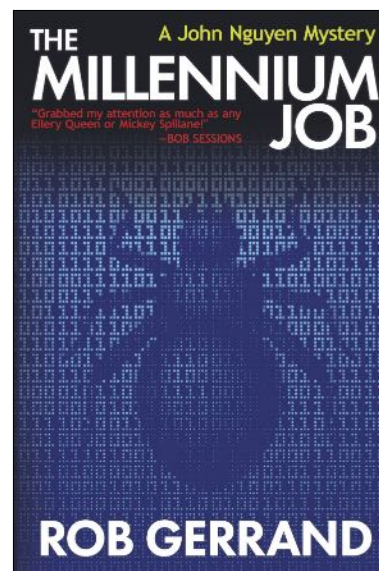
In fact, I had the privilege of having Shane Maloney, the great Australian crime novelist, launched my book at Readings. And he said some nice things about the book for me. But afterwards having a drink, he said, do you use a library cards or how do you do the plotting? And I said, I didn't plot it. It actually comes out a bit like a, a bit of Swiss clockwork. It's all pretty, it all comes together. It all fits together in the end.

DAVID:

Yeah, that's right. Yeah, that works, worked for you. And I know that you've gone on to write a sequel and I think a third book in the series. And so are you following the same sort of pantsner type of approach to that? You know, just letting your characters drive the drive the plot. You must have a seed of some sort of mystery, though.

ROB:

Absolutely. Well, just like I had the seed that I explained about the *Millennium Bug*, missing money and who would be trying to find it, including bank, senior bank people thinking maybe I can get the money myself.



My follow up novel is called *The Green Job*. And I took the advice of my friend Bob Sessions, he used to run Penguin books in Australia, and he said, use the same police crew. And so I'd started it again, another book, again, written the first scene of a scientist found dead in a lab. And I hadn't at that stage thought what sort of lab it was. I said, what sort of situation could lead to a scientist being poisoned? So I thought about what sort of reason could a scientist be poisoned? And I had him working in a lab on what some green activists thought was GM food. And so there'd be lots of protests outside a lab I called the Baytica Institute, protesting about pranking foods and GM foods and all this sort of stuff. And so when this distinguished scientist researcher is found dead in the morning, the police go there and they interview, they interview his family and friends.

And out of that, I'm relying on them, the people that they talk to to take me where the book's going to end. So for a while, I was switching another blockade in that I so clearly signalled one particular person as the maybe killer. And I remembered in all good crime novels, there's usually several suspects and the reader has to work out, is that one the one or is this one or that one? And so now I'm writing other characters who have a plausible reason and if they go over the top to do this poor bastard in. So that's going well.

And the third book will be *The Law Job*. And again, it'll be the same police crew. And I had a vivid dream where this whole book complete with all the complexities is in my head. And I thought, fantastic, I woke up. And all I can remember was the name, *The Law Job*, the title. Everything else had gone.

DAVID:

Yeah, that kind of thing happens, I think.

ROB:

I'd started a story, actually a screenplay, where someone gets killed early on. And the person who kills that person realises he can get away with

murder because of an accidental death. And he's very much angry at the huge fees QC charged to [do] all that. So he starts taking out a range of high profile people, but there's no connection between them. So the police have a huge problem trying to find out what happened. So that's the third cab off the rank once I finished the green job. I've got a third of the way through that now.

DAVID:

All right. You're still writing the third one.

ROB:

Second one.

DAVID:

Oh, you're still writing the second one. So, you've got it all planned out ahead of you.

ROB:

So I'm hoping to finish [that] up this year and then start on the third one next year.

DAVID:

Very good. And in terms of publishing it, did you start with the idea that you would self-publish it? Or did you try to get it published through? This is your first book, *The Millennium Job*. Did you try to get it published through traditional means initially?

ROB:

I did. In fact, I had a U.S. agent, Cherry Weiner, and she worked with me on the book and helped strengthen it. And then she sent it out to a range of U.S. publishers, that was during COVID. I think publishing was all under a bit of a turmoil and she got a lot of no's. I sent it to some Australian publishers and also got either no response whatsoever or "no".

And then a friend of mine, Tony Wilderman, had published a couple of novels, very superior historical novels, one about a young Shakespeare aged between 2021-22. We're not much as known about what he did. And he invented Shakespeare having been forced to leave Stratford on Avon because he'd written a scurrilous verse about the local lord and the lord said, if we catch him, we'll hang him. So he fed to London, bumped into Christopher Marlowe, who was working for Queen Elizabeth's Spymaster, Walshingham. And Walshingham gives Shakespeare a job to escort an illegitimate 18-year-old son of a peer and an Italian countess back to Italy. And so he travels on a boat through the Mediterranean and then up the coast of Italy. And he has experiences which you see in the later Shakespeare plays. So Tony was very clever in sowing seeds in this voyage, which later showed up. And I thought this was a really clever book, very well written, well researched, very credible. And Tony said he couldn't get a publisher.

So he self-published it. And then he wrote a biography of a part of Machiavelli's life called *The*

Diplomat of Florence. And again, to me, it's at the level of historical fiction of... what's the Booker Prize winner, the English novelist who wrote *Bring up the Bodies*?

DAVID:

Oh, Hillary Mantel.

ROB:

I think he's writing at her sort of level of sophistication.

DAVID:

That's certainly high praise.

ROB:

Yeah. And again, he self-published that.

So I said, how did you do this? Because I thought self-publishing was very expensive. And also it was an admission that no one wanted your work. But I discovered that these days, large numbers of good writers are self-publishing because it's now incredibly cheap through digital technology. And it's a small investment, but you can get your book distributed globally. And I decided to revive Norstrilia Press, which I've been part of with Bruce Gillespie and Carey Handfield from the 70s through the late 80s.

And so in Norstrilia Press, so it means that anybody hearing about *The Millennium Job* can buy it in New York. It's printed on demand and they'll get it the next day or two. They can buy it in London. They can buy it in Melbourne. They can buy it in Sydney. They can buy it globally. Or they can buy the e-version, the e-book and get that. And so that's what I did with Norstrilia Press.

I got a very good colleague, namely you, to do the design of the book. Because I discovered you'd helped a few people who'd been self-publishing too.

DAVID:

Yes, I have. Yeah. It's something I enjoy doing.

ROB:

Yeah. So I suddenly discovered there's a whole community of people into this. And there's another version of self-publishing called hybrid publishing. So at the one hand, you had the commercial publisher who contracts the writer, gives them advance, hopefully, and then pays the royalty on sales. At the other end, you have the vanity publishing where a writer pays a small fortune to someone to have 50 books delivered in hard case, hard back or whatever. There's the self-publishing, which is distinct from vanity publishing, where you commission an artist yourself to do the cover. You get someone like you to do the design inside. And then you use someone like Ingram Spark, which is the global company that distributes the book. And they then make it available with an ISP and that you purchase. So any bookshop can order it or any



individual can order it.

And having done that, I then thought, oh, well, I'll publish *The Green Job* in Norstrilia Press as well when I finish writing that. And then a colleague of mine, Stephen Deadman, who you probably know as a science fiction writer, I saw on Facebook that he said he was thinking of self-publishing his new collection of short stories. And I said to him, do you want Norstrilia Press to do it? And he said, yes. That's great. So by [the first of September], Stephen's new book, *Charm, Strangeness, Mass and Spin*, is being published by Norstrilia Press. It's being launched in Perth at Stefan's Bookshop on the 8th of October. And this is the book. [Holds up book]

The stories that Stephen writes are some are science fiction, some are fantasy, some are horror. Quite a few are alternative history. I think the first story in the book, you realise that the main character in it didn't assassinate John F. Kennedy, but stayed as a naval intelligence officer. And I won't tell you the story, but Lee Harvey Oswald, I think was a fall guy by the mafia and the CIA. He did actually work in naval intelligence, which is what he does in this story. And so in this version, Kennedy hasn't been assassinated, but other people are down the track. Another of his stories starts with Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday at the OK Corral back in the 19th century, and finishes with the death of Wyatt Earp at the age in his 80s, with, who's that great US gangster of the 20s who got caught on tax evasion?

DAVID:

Al Capone.

ROB:

Al Capone. So Al Capone's attending his funeral. So that's a nice little short story novelette about that.

DAVID:

Alternate history can be fun, can't it? You're playing with these different mixes of events and different

people. But if they're credible like that, it's clever. And it's interesting too with a story like that where you don't often think about the overlap of people's timelines that these people would have been still alive. Because all that sort of wild west stuff really happens well after the Civil War, isn't it? So it's like 1880s, which is pretty late. It's actually later than we tend to think. Well, I think anyway.

ROB:

Yeah. And I happened to read a biography of Doc Holliday and read a bit about that situation in the West in the O.K. Corral time. So I knew a little bit about it from somebody else that researched it. And Stephen's story has actually rang absolutely true with what I knew about what had actually happened then.

DAVID:

There's also, there's actually a good novel about Doc Holliday by Mary Doria Russell. It's just called *Doc*. I read that.

ROB:

Yeah, in fact, that was what prompted me to read the biography of him because she wrote *The Sparrow*, I think as well.

DAVID:

She did. Yes, she did. Wonderful science fiction novel. Terrific first contact story.

ROB:

Yeah. But I mean, another of Stephen's stories, it's set in a future world where gender doesn't exist. Every child at nine or eight or something takes some sort of medical treatment and becomes completely androgynous. And he uses the adjectives Ur and E, I think, for the pronouns. And the story is set on this world where there's no gender. In a visiting Muslim ship on its way to Hajj back on Earth. And this planet is a stepping stone. And a young Muslim girl comes out of the rocket ship to the school where there's one where the main character is and they fall in love. And he's really puzzled by the fact that she's a girl because none of the, even though they can temporarily assume different genders, I presume, he's written this genderless world. Or the prejudice about Islam are rehearsed it. And I discovered he wrote it in 1997 before 9-11. It reads the sort of story that could have been written yesterday as a result of 9-11. So he's very prescient as a writer.

DAVID:

It looks like a very interesting collection. Certainly, there's a lot of stories in there and they're very varied. I can tell people that because actually, I haven't read the whole thing yet, but I've certainly seen all the stories and read a little bits of them. It's a kind of a funny process when you're laying out a book because you sort of just get little glimpses. It's the same with your novel, which I have now

completely read, of course, but you get these little glimpses chapter by chapter and you feel you sort of kind of, you sort of know the story. But then you should actually sit down and read the whole thing, of course.

ROB:

But almost all Stephen's stories in this were published in other magazines, including *Asimov's*, and so that some people may have read them in different settings, but most people won't have read all of them. And he's a very good writer, very entertaining. More entertaining, he's also got something interesting to say.

DAVID:

So where do you see the future then with Norstrilia Press? Are you sort of planning to expand it at all or are you not throwing it open for people to submit manuscripts to you as yet, I imagine?

ROB:

No, people are willing, happy to submit manuscripts. In fact, I'm publishing a book with a distinguished person, writer in London, which I can't talk about until the whole thing is sort of settled down, but it looks like it'll probably all come out in the next year. It'll be a non-fiction book. And that'll be sold under the Norstrilia Press imprint. And he was delighted to be published by the Norstrilia Press.

DAVID:

No, terrific. That sounds very interesting. I'd be interested to hear more about that.

ROB:

So I'm certainly open to other people sending me their manuscripts, but I'll only publish work that I think is worth publishing. And having been a publisher with Bruce and Carey some time ago, I know the process and you do get a lot of things which are not publishable, some which are worth working on and some which are gems when you're first to get them.

DAVID:

Yes. So things have changed a lot since those days though, haven't they? I mean, I happen to know that you, because in those days when people were publishing, you had to have a minimum quantity of books that were printed by a printer. And I don't know what it was, it must have been 500 or 1000 or something. And at one point, I was helping store the back catalog of Norstrilia Press underneath my house out at Eltham for quite a while. But nowadays with print on demand, you don't need to do that. You can get one copy printed if you want and leave it at that.

ROB:

Exactly. That was the financial barrier back then to doing it yourself, because you had to print, if you

want to distribute them to bookshops, which is the only way people bought them in those days, you couldn't buy them online, of course. There was mail order, but you had to know the book existed. And I'll get to that in a moment. One of the problems of any publisher, with itself or commercial, but back in the day, the two biggest problems a publisher faced, apart from getting a good manuscript, was you had to need the financials to print 1,000 or 2,000 copies or whatever you're going to print.

The second problem was how do you distribute it? And there used to be various distributors that were used as an Australia press and one went out of business and we lost them stock. And another one went out of business and that was when we decided to close the publishing house, because we just, there's no other one that we could use. But today, as you say, you only need to print one or two copies. Anybody can buy it globally. So the distribution problem is fixed. If you want to get into bookshops, it's a bit more complicated. So you normally organise that the bookshop gets its traditional 40% discount off the retail price. But the biggest problem, having done all that, whether you're doing it commercially and then print it up on a stock or whether you're doing it on demand, is how do people know the book exists? And if you can employ a publicist, then you might get coverage in one of the major newspapers or magazines. You might get a review here and there. And if you missed out on that, the only way that's feasible these days is social media. Yes. And so you've got to learn, which I'm trying to teach myself a bit, how do you best use Twitter or TikTok or Instagram or Facebook to get people to be following you as a writer for a start so that when you send a message out, they'll pick it up and being aware that your book actually exists. So getting people to review it, post reviews online. That's the hard part. That applies whether you're doing it yourself, whether you're Penguin Books or Harper Collins.

DAVID:

So does this mean you think that small independent publishers have a role or are all authors going to publish their own books? I mean, it seems to me that there's definite benefit of coming to an organisation like Norstrilia Press, which has got an imprint that you can say that they've published the book rather than Joe Blow has published his own book. So I think there's a benefit there of having an imprint. I'm not sure where I'm going with that question, but there you go.

ROB:

Well, what I take from that is that certainly it's a future for small publishers and for big ones, but the business models change for both. So that I remember with *The Millennium Job*, I write to the book editor at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and saying, where should I physically send a book? And they said, we don't review self-published novels. So I didn't have to send it to them, but then I discovered a month later, they did review a self-

published novel. They had a claim. So I think having Norstrilia Press or some other established imprint makes it easier for a writer not to be seen as being self-published, which still has a bit of stigma to it, but it's changing.

DAVID:

Yeah. Well, I can say some very significant names are doing some self-publishing these days. Absolutely. And there are some people who literally lifted themselves up by their bootstraps by self-publishing. I'm thinking of people like Andy Weir who self-published *The Martian*, which then became a huge success and it was turned into a film. And Hugh Howey with his *Silo* series, which are terrific books.

ROB:

Yeah, very good books.

DAVID:

I don't know what he's doing recently, actually, but those were a terrific a terrific set of books, which he started off by self-publishing and then were picked up by a traditional publisher. I don't know how that happens. If you've self-published your book, what are the odds that a major publisher is actually then going to pick you up from there?

ROB:

I suspect the odds are still pretty low. I mean, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the same thing happened to it. It was first done online somewhere as a fan fiction. The Australian thriller writer, his name escapes me for the moment, but he's done about twenty novels now. He started his first self-publishing. He went around to bookshops, putting in hard copies and selling them. And then he got taken up by a big publisher and he's been a big international seller ever since. So if you're lucky, you get picked up.

One of the problems is that because there are so many manuscripts, so many books being published, the cut through is very hard. But it means if you're the poor editor working for one of the big publishing houses and you get my manuscript or your manuscript or someone else's, and it goes through the first sieve, if you like, of saying it's not rubbish, we have to look at it, who we get in the office to have a look at it. If you strike someone who is looking for feminist YA and your stuff isn't feminist YA, you're not in luck. If your book is feminist YA, you may be in luck. So the sensibilities of the editor is pretty important.

I think a lot of editors these days are probably in their 20s and 30s. So the things that interest them may not be quite the same as interest all readers. It's how you could explain a book like *The Martian* or the *Silo* books didn't get picked up by the publishers because maybe the publishers thought, I don't particularly like it, so is there a market? Well, in fact, there's a big market. And similar to my *Millennium Job*, even though no commercial publisher picked it

up, everybody who has got in touch with me with a review or a comment has said it's a page turner. They really like it. And so clearly, I've done something right, but the publishing world is still not able to reflect that yet.

DAVID:

Yeah. Well, the best of luck to you then with the book and with the other books you're publishing. And we'll look forward to seeing the next books in the series.

ROB:

Thank you. And by the way, if you're still writing...

DAVID:

I do occasionally, very occasionally, I'll see if I can find something to put together for you.

ROB:

Yeah, because you did a brilliant collection of very short flash fiction in a way a few years ago, based on each day of a month of [November], I think someone had different images.

DAVID:

Yeah, that's right.

ROB:

And they were brilliant, short stories of yours. I really liked them.

DAVID:

Thank you. Well, you see, I'm now publishing in a different way, which is using Substack, which is an email newsletter kind of arrangement. And quite a lot of people are publishing things on that. So I publish with that, without trying to blow my own trumpet too much, I publish a fortnightly review, book review newsletter. And every month, I republish, I have to say, not new things, but I republish one of my old stories on Substack. So I'll send you the links.

ROB:

Good. Well done. Thank you.

DAVID:

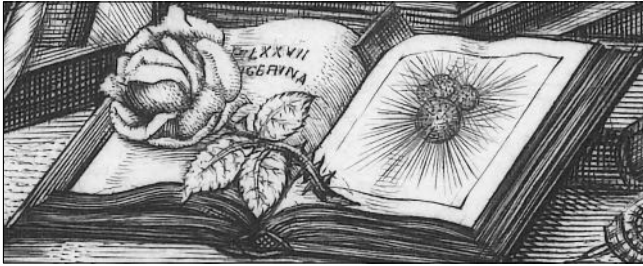
And thanks for talking with me.

ROB:

A pleasure.

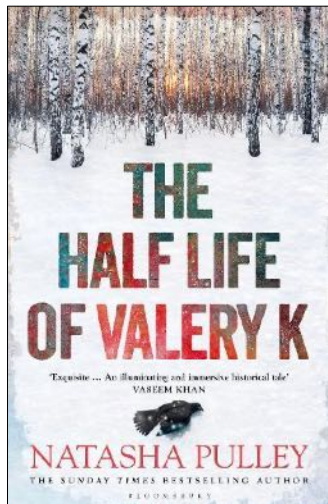
This transcript was generated by [Whisper](#) from Open AI (the same organisation which developed DALL-E). Manually edited thereafter, but really only to identify who is speaking and fix a few sound-alike errors. Amazing stuff, this machine learning!

I WANT TO READ



There are a vast number of new books published each month! These are just the few books out of that flood which I think I'd really like to get hold of, so it represents just what has appealed to my taste.

***The Half Life of Valery K* by Natasha Pulley**



Published 5 July 2022

Based on real events in a surreal Soviet city, and told with bestselling author Natasha Pulley's inimitable style, *The Half Life of Valery K* is a sweeping historical adventure.

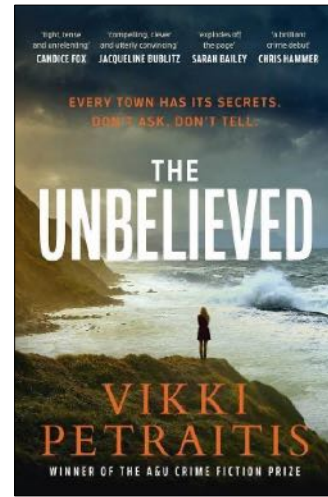
I really liked this author's novel *The Kingdoms*, and this sounds intriguing so it will be a 'must read'.

***The Unbelieved* by Vikki Petraitis**

Published 2 August 2022

'So you believed the alleged rapists over the alleged victim?' Jane's voice took on an indignant pitch. 'Girls lie sometimes.' I nodded. 'And rapists lie all the time.'

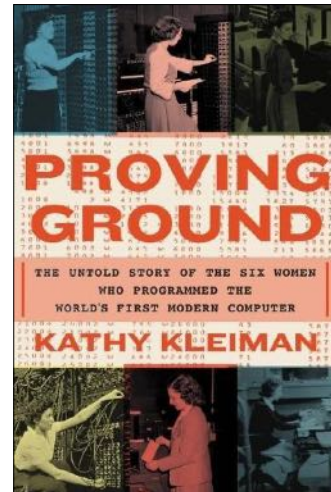
Chilling, timely and gripping, *The Unbelieved* takes us behind the headlines to a small-town world that is all too real - and introduces us to a brilliant new voice in crime fiction.



Yet another debut crime novel by an Australian author. Hard to keep up! But this one looks particularly good.

***Proving Ground* by Kathy Kleiman**

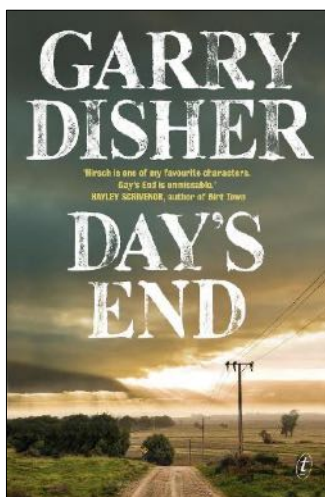
Published 26 July 2022



After the end of World War II, the race for technological supremacy sped on. Top-secret research into ballistics and computing, begun during the war to aid those on the front lines, continued across the United States as engineers and programmers rushed to complete their confidential assignments. Among them were six pioneering women, tasked with figuring out how to program the world's first general-purpose, programmable, all-electronic computer--better known as the ENIAC-- even though there were no instruction codes or programming languages in existence.

This looks really interesting, though at present it's only available in hardback. I might wait for the paperback, or get it from the library.

Day's End by Garry Disher

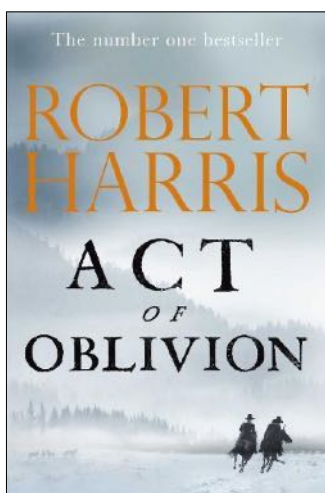


From Text Publishing. Out 1 November 2022.

Garry Disher is back with a cracking new thriller that finds old favourite Hirsch smack-bang in the middle of a missing-person case. Navigating the personal and societal perils of the pandemic doesn't make this investigation easy, and with twist after nail-biting twist thwarting his best efforts, Hirsch is pushed to the limit. This is an ending you'll never see coming.

The first three books in this series were excellent, so I'm really looking forward to getting my hands on this one.

Act of Oblivion by Robert Harris

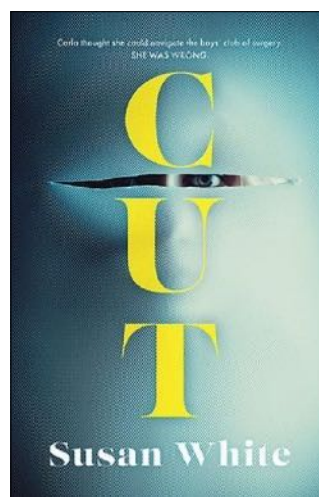


Out 20 September 2022.

1660, General Edward Whalley and Colonel William Goffe, father- and son-in-law, cross the Atlantic. They are on the run and wanted for the murder of Charles I. Under the provisions of the Act of Oblivion, they have been found guilty in absentia of high treason.

Robert Harris has written some terrific historical fiction and thrillers over the years, and this one, about the hunt for two men accused of the murder of a king, looks very interesting.

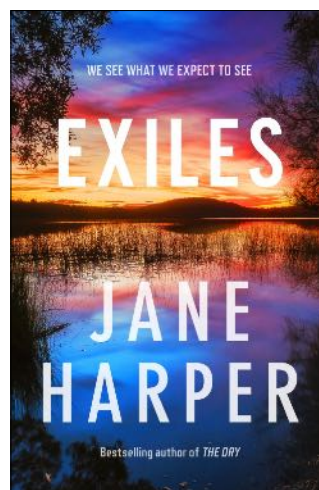
Cut by Susan White



Carla is a young doctor striving to become the first female surgeon at a prestigious Melbourne hospital. When a consultant post opens up, she competes with her lover for the job and thinks she can be judged on merit. But an assault after a boozy workplace dinner leaves her traumatised and struggling to cope with the misogyny coming from every corner of her workplace. Recovering her fragmented memories from that night, Carla begins a fight for justice that will shake the foundations of the hospital she loves.

This looks timely and interesting, and it's set in Melbourne, so it definitely deserves a look.

Exiles by Jane Harper



At a busy festival site on a warm spring night, a baby lies alone in her pram, her mother vanishing into the crowds. A year on, Kim Gillespie's absence casts a long shadow as her friends and loved ones gather deep in the heart of South Australian wine country to welcome a new addition to the family. Joining the celebrations is federal investigator Aaron Falk. But as he soaks up life in the lush valley, he begins to suspect this tight-knit group may be more fractured than it seems.

All of Jane Harper's books so far have been well worth reading, so it's exciting to see another title out from this Australian author.

RECENT VIEWING



Darkest Hour (Amazon Prime)



It was interesting to watch this 2017 movie after so recently having watched the *Slow Horses* television series, given that both feature the same actor, Gary Oldman, in two entirely different roles and with two very, very different appearances.

In this, Gary Oldman is utterly convincing, both due to the brilliance of his acting (which won him the Oscar for Best Actor) and due to some amazing prosthetic work by Kazu Hiro and his team (who also won an Oscar for it).

A lot of the film is seen from the viewpoint of Elizabeth Layton, Churchill's private secretary, here played by Lily James.

There are also very good performances by Ben Mendelsohn as King George VI, and Kristin Scott Thomas as Churchill's exasperated wife, Clementine.

According to Wikipedia there are quite a lot of inaccuracies in the film when compared with the historical facts, such as a completely fictional episode where Churchill travels on the London Underground and talks to other passengers about their feelings; but that scene works well from a dramatic perspective. And the shouting matches in the War Cabinet about whether to seek negotiations with Hitler apparently didn't happen that way. Lots of stiff upper lips instead, I imagine.

Nevertheless, though one has to make allowances for this loose handling of the facts, I hadn't realised until I watched this film just how close Britain came to giving in and accepting a negotiated peace with Hitler (to be mediated by Mussolini). That seems to be quite factual. Nor did I know about the sacrifice of the Calais brigade to help hold off the Germans to allow the evacuation of British troops at Dunkirk.

My wife and I enjoyed this a lot.

The Outlaws (Amazon Prime)



I talked last issue about his series, but we've now completed watching the second season, and I thought I should at least record that we enjoyed it right through and felt the conclusion was very satisfying. Recommended. I can't imagine that there'll be a third season, though.

Lots of Spider-Man (Amazon Prime)

I had a bit of a binge-watch recently, having discovered that Amazon Prime had almost all of the movies made about the iconic Marvel super-hero Spider-Man. Amazon Prime is the only streaming service to which I currently subscribe.

Now the rights to Spider-Man were acquired quite a while ago by Sony, and so he is the only Marvel character for which Marvel/Disney don't have total control and so he can appear outside the Disney+



channel. And, since my early teenage years, Spider-Man has been my favourite super-hero.

Anyway, over a period of a couple of weeks, I watched, one after another, the following:

- *Spider-Man: Homecoming*
- *Spider-Man: Far From Home*
- *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.

I particularly liked the last, *No Way Home* and its final battle which brings together the Spider-Men from alternate universes (read, movies made by other directors), Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield, plus some of their villains such as Doc Ock and the Green Goblin. Great that they could get the original actors to reprise these roles.

And having done that (and since they were also available on Amazon Prime) I decided to watch the Andrew Garfield Spider-Man movies, directed by Marc Webb, which I'd never seen before.

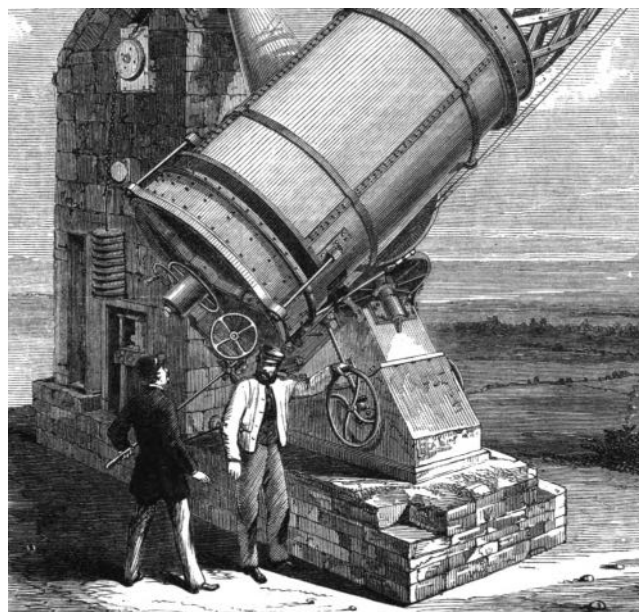
- *The Amazing Spider-Man*
- *Amazing Spider-Man 2*

I thought these were OK, if not great, and it was an interesting twist to concentrate on Peter Parker's parents and why they had died.

I did, however, balk at re-watching the Tobey Maguire versions (directed by Sam Rami), though the first two were pretty good, particularly the second one with Doc Ock (played by Alfred Molina). But the third one is just awful: Tobey Maguire trying to look evil is just embarrassing.

I think I can officially say that I'm now "Spider-Manned Out"!

THROUGH THE EYEPIECE



Conversations With Readers

This is always going to be a very strange sort of letter column, because it combines responses made to my Substack newsletter *Through the Biblioscope*, together with comments directly on *The Megaloscope*, both by email and in ANZAPA.

Claire Brialey (ANZAPA August 2022)

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #1]

I really like the way that you've spun off and set out *The Megaloscope*, although it's all the more obvious that my approach to writing about books wouldn't sustain a similarly separated approach. I also find, as a separate publication, that it feels harder to comment on specifics here – perhaps because I've already read and enjoyed the relevant issues of *Through the Biblioscope* by the time I come to write mailing comments. I particularly like your 'Hits and Misses' summary; a similar approach for me in June and July would see *Genre Fiction* by Peter Nicholls as a clear winner, with Ryka Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars* as my second-best pick. Despite some stern looks over the top of my glasses—and not just because I need a different varifocal prescription—at some of the other Hugo finalists, I think *Put a Wet Paper Towel On It* takes the prize for most annoying as well as most disappointing book this time.

Mark Plummer (ANZAPA August 2022)

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #1]

... good overview of Seanan McGuire's *Across the Green Grass Fields*. I felt the story generally became

less interesting once Regan arrived in the Hooflands and I liked that first 'real world' part more than I expected given its obviously YA aspect. A point of terminology, though. You describe Regan as 'transgender' but isn't she more accurately intersex? I'm slightly hesitant here but my understanding is that transgender means having a gender identity or expression that differs from the sex assigned at birth, and Regan—I think—identifies as female and is externally physically female while having some male sex characteristics such that she doesn't fit the gender binary. There's a case for saying that somebody cannot 'tell' somebody else that they're trans, except to give them a term they hadn't previously known to describe how they feel. In narrative terms I suspect it doesn't matter in that the novella would work – or, as I think you contend, not work – equally well if Regan were trans. Or would it? Would Regan have confided in Lauren that while she was birth-assigned female she identifies as male, or vice versa,, given Lauren's demonstrated abhorrence of perceived male behaviour by girls?

David:

Yes, you are quite right that it would be more accurate to describe Regan as being intersex rather than trans. Would the novella have been different if she was instead trans-male? Definitely. But I think Seanan McGuire would still have ruined it by allowing Regan to escape all his/her difficulties by entering the Hooflands and then not examining what happened when they came back to the real world.

John Newman (ANZAPA August 2022)

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #1]

I was reading your review of *The City and The City* and was surprised that you had troubles with character rendering in the epub.

Then I discovered that I have never had the epub, I read it in paperback. Gad, how time has passed! A great novel though.

It reminded me of the parallel cities we inhabit ourselves, where some of the folk see a different reality than others do. The only difference from China's scenario is that we see and interact with all the people, they just don't all live on the same planet!

Milk Teeth sounds interesting. Perhaps when I've finished the Hugo reads...

Roman Orzanski (ANZAPA August 2022)

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #1]

I'm a big fan of *The City & The City*, and can recommend the TV series made from the novel. Beautifully filmed, it uses different colour schemes for the two cities (the show was filmed in Manchester and Liverpool, without CGI).

"One part of the street would be used for one city and the other would be used for the other city and then we would slowly reveal that they are next to each other."

Glad you fixed up the *z* character in the ebook — did you send a copy of the fixed version to Tor?

David:

No, I haven't sent the fixed version to Tor, though I probably should. But then I'm not sure whether the problem is in their original or whether the Kobo version introduced it for some reason.

Gerald Smith (ANZAPA August 2022)

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #1]

A book review zine! Wonderful, more books to add to my never ending list of books I want to read, sometime, if I ever have the time.

Just kidding. I really enjoy the reviews by [ANZAPA] members such as yourself, and Perry, and Claire, and Diane and whomever else I have forgotten/ don't have the time to list. Since I will most likely never get the chance to read more than a few of the books reviewed, at least I can get some idea of what they are about and whether I would have enjoyed them if I had been able to read them.

And then you go and include a couple that I have actually read. I agree that *Night Watch* is one of the best of the Discworld series. I always enjoyed the books about the City Watch, and especially when they centred around Commander Vimes.

The City & The City I read about three years ago I think. It is one of those rarities these days, a truly novel SF story novel in the sense of being new and imaginative in its concept, not in the length of the story. It is brilliantly written and a captivating tale. I would love to have the time available to read more by Miéville.

I must find the time - somehow - to actually read the "Chronicles of Barsetshire". I loved the *Barchester Chronicles* when it was on the ABC all those years ago, and your review confirms that the books would be equally loved.

Jenny Bryce (Email 21 August 2022)

[Responding to *Through the Biblioscope* 28]

Just wanted to say, it will be interesting to compare notes on the current Bookers, which I'm gradually reading. At present I'm reading *Oh William!* — enjoying it, but a little surprised it's nominated for this prestigious award. *Small Things Like These* is beautiful and one can't help but be sympathetic to the horrendous actions of the Catholic church that are revealed. *Case Study* is extraordinary and, I found, gripping... More anon.

David:

I haven't yet read any of the Booker nominees, though I have Garner's *Treacle Walker* to hand. I'll try to get to some of the others, but it probably won't be until after the winner is announced.

Bruce Gillespie (Email 6 September 2022):

Your remarks about the most recent Hugo Awards [see here] only echo what I've thought of them for many years. Not that there are many years when I've read more than one or two in any category, but from the 1980s onward I've usually found that the dull stories win the award, and the interesting stories come last or usually don't make the ballot at all.

There must be a complete list of Hugo winners and runners-up, perhaps in the online SF Encyclopedia. I must find and go through such a list some time and count up the Hugo winners I did agree with. The only one of the last 20 years I can think of is *Among Friends* by Jo Walton, which is fantasy not science fiction, but is a very enjoyable novel. The novel I expected to win last year was *Piranesi*, but perhaps the novel, by a British author, was not well enough distributed in US.

I suddenly realise that the main reason why SF and fantasy novels I like don't win the Hugo, but are much more likely to win the World Fantasy Award, are because they are by British authors—and are published first in Britain and so seem to be automatically ineligible for the US-based Hugos. I might get the time eventually to count up my favourite SF novels published during the last 40 years. I suspect most of them are by British authors and were not even considered for the Hugo, although probably did well on the Locus Awards, World Fantasy Awards, etc.

David:

There's something to what you say about works published first in Britain, but it doesn't explain why really excellent SF/Fantasy works by American authors also don't even get nominated for the Hugo. I'm thinking of *Cloud Cuckoo Land* and *Bewilderment* for example. Both indubitably science fiction, both excellent. Didn't get a mention.

Bruce:

Thanks ... for your [review](#) of Rob Gerrand's new novel. You say much better than I could things I didn't say in my own very short review in *SFC* 110. I'll point toward your review if the opportunity comes up in a very crowded *SFC* 111.

Thanks for the news that a new Claire North novel is expected. I saw on the latest Readings catalogue that the new Kate Atkinson is now officially released in Australia. I'll order them both from there.

David:

My copy of Claire North's *Ithaca* arrived last week, you can [read my review here](#). And Atkinson's *Shrines of Gaiety* is on order [I mentioned this was coming out in *Through the Biblioscope* 24] and should be here soon. So much new stuff to read!!

And that's all for this issue. See you next time!

—David

