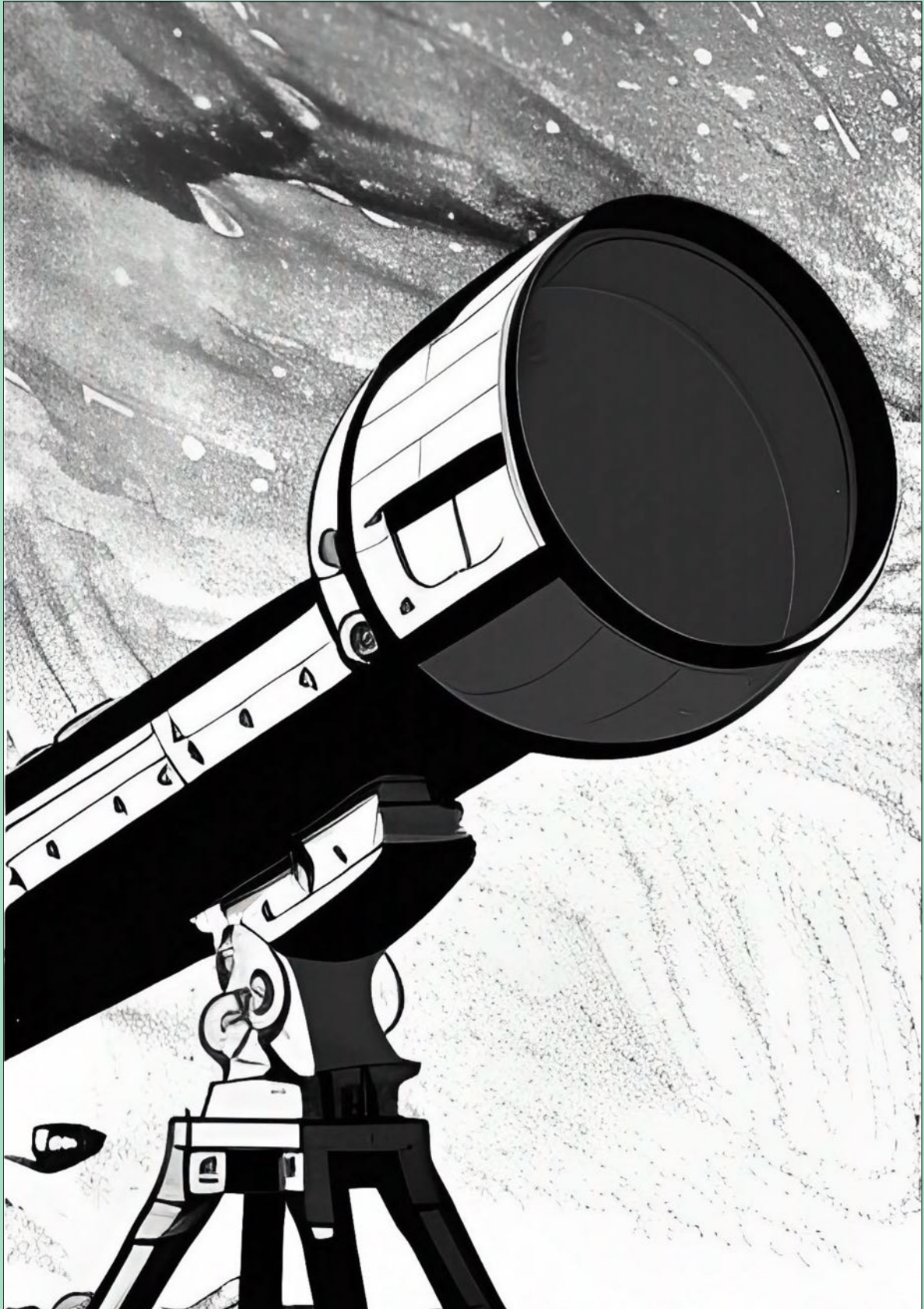


# THE MEGALOSCOPE

#5: FEBRUARY 2023



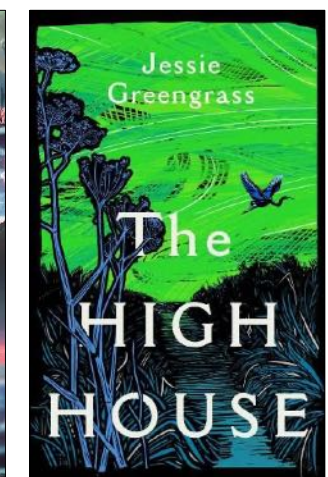
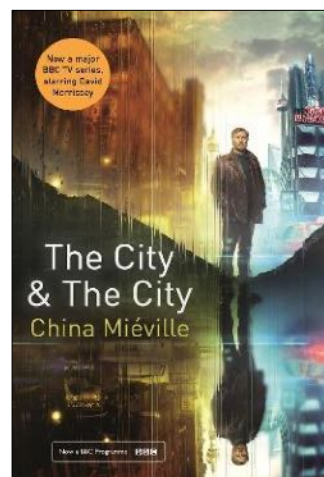
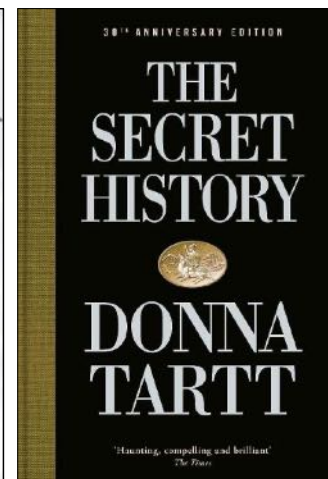
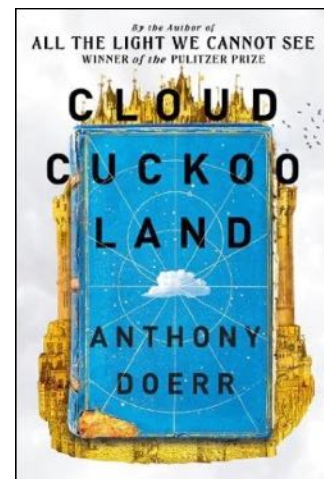
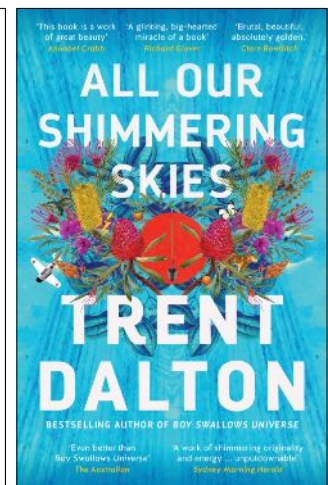
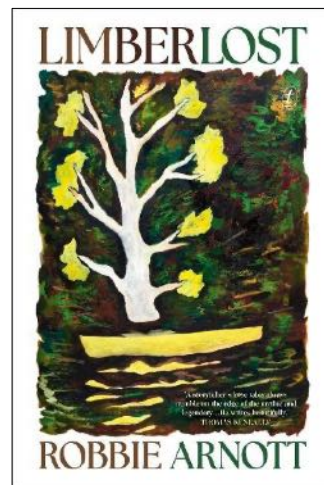
FIRST PUBLISHED IN ANZAPA BY DAVID R. GRIGG

# 2022 A YEAR OF READING

2022 WAS A TERRIFIC YEAR FOR READING. I read some really good books, and it was impossible to pick which I should nominate as the single best of the year. So here are my top six books of the year:

## Best Six Books I Read in 2022

- *Limberlost* by Robbie Arnott
- *All Our Shimmering Skies* by Trent Dalton
- *Cloud Cuckoo Land* by Anthony Doerr
- *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt
- *The City & The City* by China Miéville
- *The High House* by Jessie Greengrass

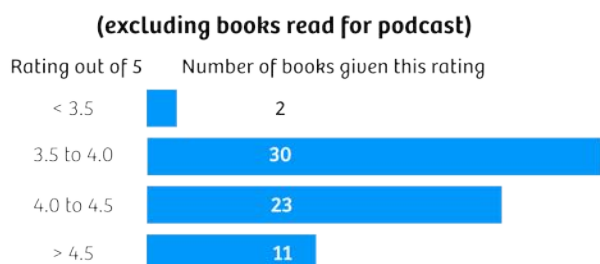
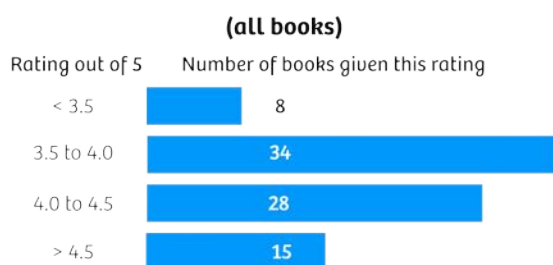


I rated all of these 4.8 or higher out of 5. A bunch of other very good books follow with rankings of 4.6 or 4.7. As I say, it was a great year for reading. It's also pleasing that the first two of my top six were by Australian authors.

However, as in previous years, my reading was heavily distorted by the reading I had to do for the podcast, significantly increasing the proportion of science fiction and fantasy in my reading stream, and alas, a lot of it wasn't very good.

So I've split up the stats given here into "all books read" and "excluding books read for the podcast". I hope that makes sense.

## Reading Quality



## Reading Totals

I read a total of **85** books during 2022, beating my goal of 80 books set on the Goodreads website. I also read some very long books: **19** of the books I read were 500 pages or longer.

It's very hard to be accurate about how many *pages* I read, because many of the books I read were in ebook format. But I estimated those by using the page count of typical print editions on the Goodreads site. On that basis, I calculate that I read the equivalent of roughly **30,000 pages**. Which works out to an average of about 84 pages a day.

The longest book I read was *The Last Chronicle of Barset* by Anthony Trollope (350,000 words) and the shortest was *Lady Into Fox* by David Garnett (25,000 words, really just a novella). Both, as it happens, were productions I did for Standard Ebooks.

# THE MEGALOSCOPE

ISSUE #5

FEBRUARY 2023

*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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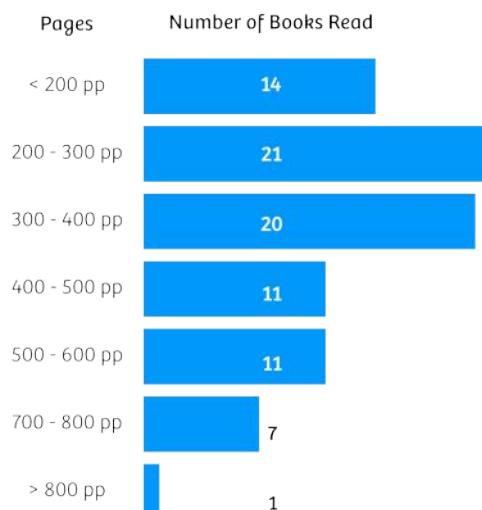
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## Page Count



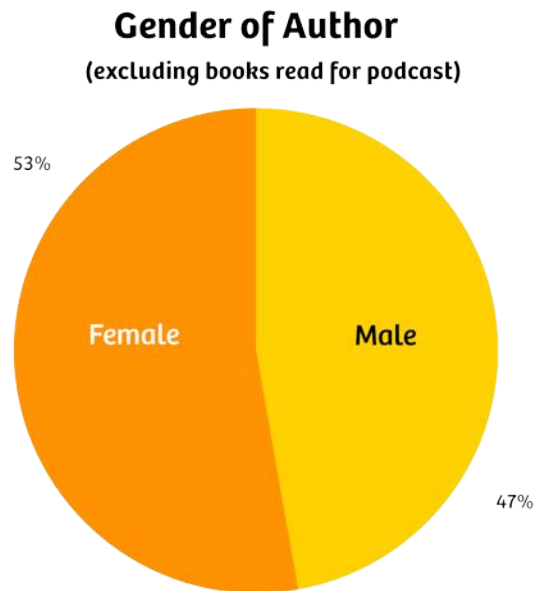
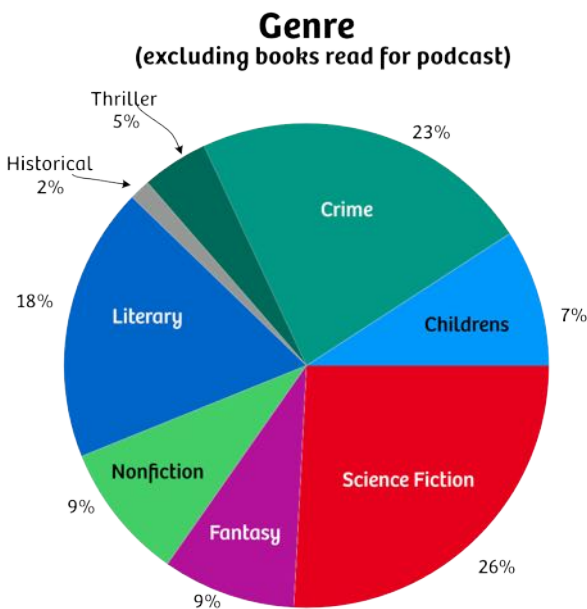
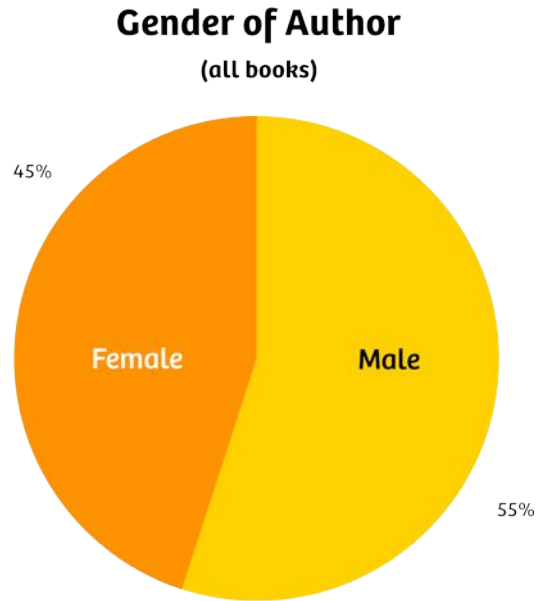
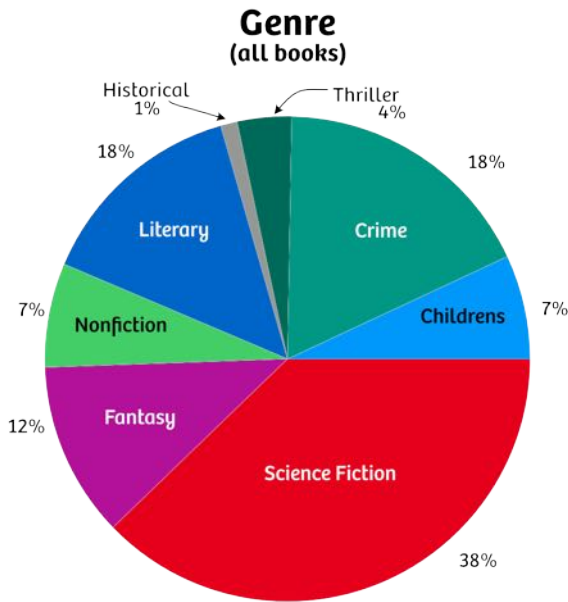
## Genres

As mentioned earlier, the reading I had to do for the podcast significantly increased the proportion of science fiction and fantasy in my reading stream. We covered all of the fiction nominated for the 2022 Hugo Awards, and also went back and discussed the nominees for 1968 and 1969. Consequently, some 42 of the books I read last year were SF or fantasy.

## Gender of Author

Similarly, reading all those SF/fantasy novels from the 1960s for the podcast (all written by men) pushed the gender balance of my reading well askew from where I would like it to be.

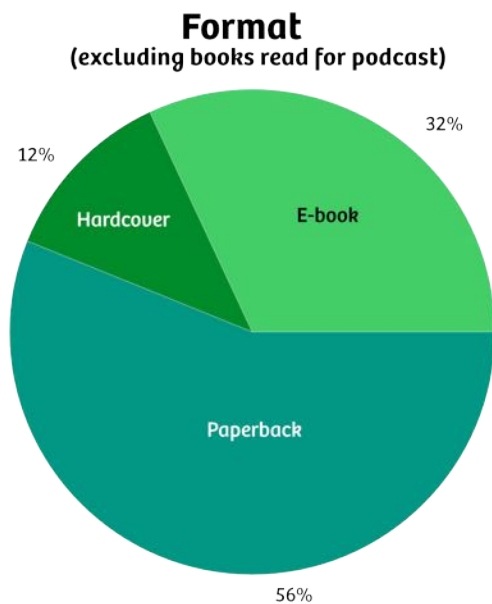
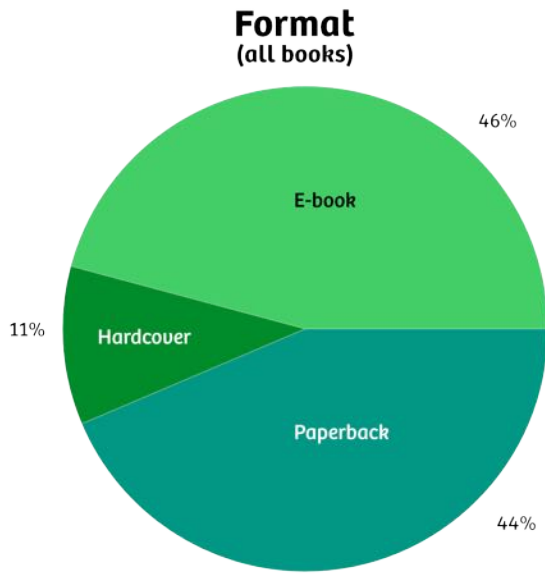
What I can certainly say is that many of the *best* books I read during 2022 were written by women.



## Format

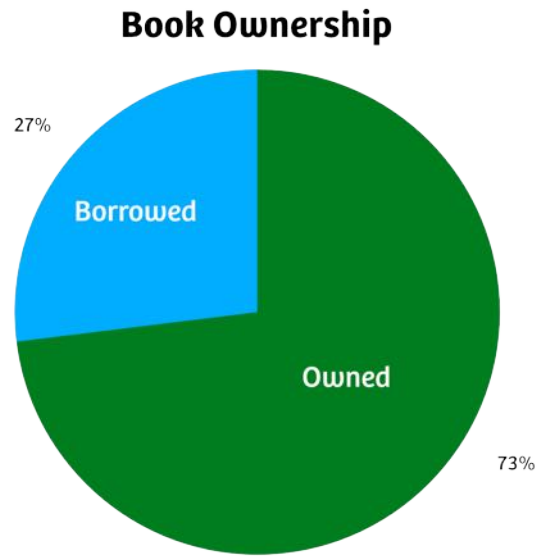
I like to keep track of the format in which I read books, and the trend in that. I have to say I'm starting to move away from reading ebooks and preferring to read more paper books.

However, again, the reading for the podcast had an important effect here because many of the books I read for the 2022 Hugos or the 1968 and 1969 Hugos were in ebook format, so the second pie chart below is more indicative of my preferences.



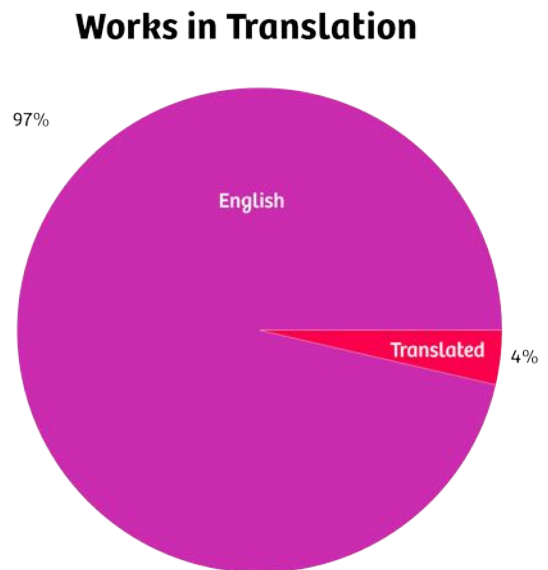
## Ownership

I've probably borrowed less from the library this year than in previous years, mainly because I've been visiting the library less due to COVID.



## Translated works

I didn't do at all well in this area during 2022. I only read three books which were translated from an language other than English: two books by Elena Ferrante (translated from Italian), and *Milk Teeth* by Helene Bukowski (translated from German).



## My Favourite Books of 2022 By Genre

### Literary/Non-Genre

- 1) *Limberlost* by Robbie Arnott
- 2) *All Our Shimmering Skies* by Trent Dalton
- 3) *Cloud Cuckoo Land* by Anthony Doerr
- 4) *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt
- 5) *Flames* by Robbie Arnott

#### Honourable Mentions:

- *The Lost Daughter* by Elena Ferrante
- *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante

### Science Fiction

- 1) *The City & The City* by China Mièville
- 2) *The High House* by Jessie Greengrass
- 3) *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel
- 4) *Light from Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki
- 5) *The Past Is Red* by Catherynne M. Valente

#### Honourable Mentions:

- *Lord of Light* by Roger Zelazny,
- *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner
- *Psalms for the End of the World* by Cole Haddon

### Fantasy

- 1) *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence* by R. F. Kuang
- 2) *Ithaca* by Claire North
- 3) *Bliss Montage* by Ling Ma
- 4) *A Spindle Splintered* by Alix E. Harrow
- 5) *Night Watch* by Terry Pratchett

#### Honourable Mentions:

- *Feet of Clay* by Terry Pratchett
- *The Fifth Elephant* by Terry Pratchett

### Crime

- 1) *Wake* by Shelley Burr
- 2) *Day's End* by Garry Disher
- 3) *Daughters of Eve* by Nina D. Campbell
- 4) *The Unbelieved* by Vikki Petraitis
- 5) *The Way it is Now* by Garry Disher

#### Honourable Mentions:

- *The Maid* by Nita Prose
- *Lying Beside You* by Michael Robotham
- *Unnatural Death* by Dorothy L. Sayers

### Spy/Thriller

- 1) *Banjawarn* by Josh Kemp
- 2) *Slow Horses* by Mick Herron
- 3) *The Island* by Adrian McKinty

No Honourable Mentions.

### Historical Fiction

- 1) *Stone Sky Gold Mountain* by Mirandi Riwoe

No Honourable Mentions.

### Children's Literature

- 1) *Metal Fish, Falling Snow* by Cath Moore
- 2) *The Girl Savage* by Katherine Rundell
- 3) *Deeplight* by Frances Hardinge
- 4) *The Railway Children* by E. Nesbit
- 5) *The Explorer* by Katherine Rundell

#### Honourable Mention:

- *The Good Thieves* by Katherine Rundell

### Non-Fiction

- 1) *Midnight in Chernobyl* by Adam Higginbotham
- 2) *Frostquake* by Juliet Nicolson
- 3) *Finding the Mother Tree* by Suzanne Simard
- 4) *The Ninth Life of a Diamond Miner* by Grace Tame
- 5) *The Pitmen's Requiem* by Peter Crookston

No Honourable Mentions.

### Best Overall

- 1) *Limberlost* by Robbie Arnott
- 2) *All Our Shimmering Skies* by Trent Dalton
- 3) *Cloud Cuckoo Land* by Anthony Doerr
- 4) *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt
- 5) *The City & The City* by China Mièville
- 6) *The High House* by Jessie Greengrass

#### Honourable Mentions:

- *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel
- *Flames* by Robbie Arnott
- *Light from Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki
- *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence* by R. F. Kuang

No Honourable Mentions.

# My Top 36 Books of 2022, in Covers



# RECENT READING



SINCE LAST ISSUE I'VE ONLY READ 7 BOOKS, rather less than my average. I think this was largely because I was distracted by the end of the year holiday period and because a couple of the books I read were very long.

## Quick Summaries

### Nonfiction

#### ***Finding the Mother Tree* by Suzanne Simard**

Interesting autobiography of a scientist in Canada who has dedicated her life to understanding the way trees support and communicate with each other.

[Review here](#)

### Fantasy

#### ***Babel, or The Necessity of Violence* by R. F. Kuang**

Excellent piece of fantasy dealing with translation and the power of words, set in 1836 Oxford.

[Review here](#)

#### ***The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman**

Wonderful middle-grade fantasy about a boy who is raised by the ghosts in an old abandoned cemetery.

[Review here](#)

#### ***A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula K. Le Guin**

A re-read of this fantasy classic. Great stuff, but a good deal darker in tone than I had remembered.

[Review here](#)

### Literary/Non-Genre

#### ***Her* by Garry Disher**

Very interesting and moving book about an unloved child growing up in rural Victoria in the early 1900s.

[Review here](#)

### Historical Fiction

#### ***Joan* by Katherine J. Chen**

Powerful re-imagining of the life of Joan d'Arc. It does for Joan what Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy does for Thomas Cromwell: puts us inside their heads and makes them into real people rather than historical figures.

[Review here](#)



## ***Shrines of Gaiety* by Kate Atkinson**

Set in 1926 in England, this book focuses on the thriving nightclub scene in London and the shady characters who ran it. Filled with interesting characters and a variety of interesting storylines.

[Review here](#)

## **Hits and Misses**

### **Best book read since last issue?**

Hard to pick this time. I think I'd have to go for *Babel*, very closely followed by *Shrines of Gaiety*.

After that, probably *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Graveyard Book*, then *Joan*.

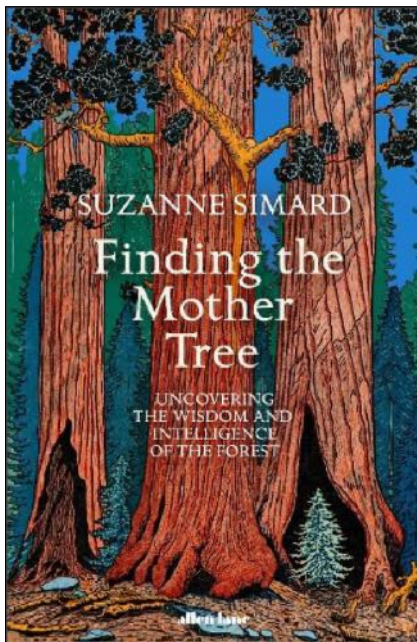
### **Most Disappointing Book**

No disappointments, everything I've read recently has been very good and greatly enjoyed.

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## **Nonfiction**

### ***Finding the Mother Tree* by Suzanne Simard**



The subtitle of this book is “Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest”, which is a bit of a stretch and makes it sound rather like some crank greenie manifesto. But that’s not the case. It’s actually an excellent autobiography of a really interesting female scientist and her challenges in pursuing her ideas about how trees grow in a natural forest compared with how the logging industry tries to make them grow in the aid of their profits.

Suzanne Simard grew up in a logging family in Canada, and as a young student was working in a seasonal job with a logging company when she started to wonder why the newly planted pine trees in a clear-felled area were failing to thrive compared with how well natural seedlings were growing in an area which still had larger trees. This sparked a life-long scientific career during which she developed convincing proof that subterranean networks of fungi connect trees and not only assist in extracting and transferring water and other nutrients to trees in the forest, but also allow “mother trees” to pref-

erentially nurture their own progeny in preference to “stranger” seedlings in the vicinity. She even showed that some kind of signals are transmitted from tree to tree this way, warning of insect infestations and other problems.

Lest you still think this is all new-wavy nonsense, her first major paper was published in the prestigious scientific journal *Nature* and her findings have been amply confirmed by other scientists over the years, though not without a good deal of hostility from the forestry industry who wanted to continue their clear-felling practices, even after Simard showed that in the long term those practices would not be economically viable.

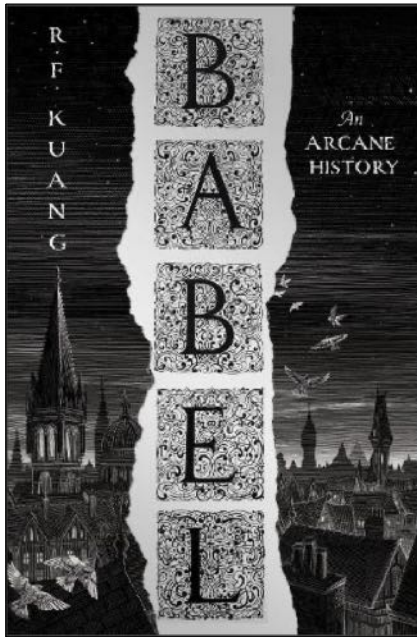
Even just as a biography, the book is excellent at showing how science is actually done, and how scientists think and feel as they do their work. Simard’s personal story is also compelling: the death of a beloved brother, her struggles to balance her work with being a wife and mother; her subsequent divorce; her diagnosis of breast cancer and the treatment for that.

At times the book feels a little dense with the botanic detail, but overall this was an excellent and very interesting read.

## Fantasy

### *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence*

by R. F. Kuang



The author of this novel, R. F. Kuang, has a fascinating background and an impressive academic resume. The 'R' stands for 'Rebecca'. She was born in 1996 in Guangzhou in China, moving with her parents to the United States when she was 4 years old. She studied History at Georgetown University, graduating from their School of Foreign Affairs. She had a gap year in China and then went on to Cambridge University in the U.K., gaining a Master of Philosophy in Chinese Studies, and then to Oxford University where she earned an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies.

All of the above is courtesy of Wikipedia, and I only quote it here to say "she sure knows her stuff" when it comes to the core theme of her most recent novel, whose full title is: *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence; an Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*. It's all about language, translation, colonialism and the arrogance and cruelty of the British Empire. But it's also a coming-of-age story and a study of young people trying to find where they fit in the world. And it's also a fantasy with an intriguing premise.

This novel is set in the early 1820 and 1830s and centres around the city and University of Oxford. It begins, though, in the city of Canton in China, in the midst of a plague of cholera. A young boy is lying, ill, next to the body of his mother, who has just died. As he lies there, an Englishman, Professor Richard Lovell, arrives and rescues him, curing him of the cholera using a small silver bar over which he speaks some words in French and English and then places on the boy's chest. This bit of magic is the sole fantasy premise of the book. Silver bars, engraved with words in different languages, have magical effects. Using silver in this way has enabled the British Empire to conquer much of the world,

and brought great conveniences to the British public.

Professor Lovell takes the boy—whose real name we never learn—back with him to England and adopts him, giving him the name Robin Swift. He is raised in Lovell's household, where he is tutored daily in Latin and Greek. He already spoke some English, but his knowledge of his native Cantonese is also continually reinforced. It's not long before Robin begins to suspect that Lovell is in fact his biological father, though he is a cold and often cruel taskmaster. When he reaches the right age, he is enrolled at the University of Oxford where he will join other students of translation and silver-working in the college tower informally known as "Babel".

Language, and translation, are the key to Britain's Silver Revolution (which in the book replaces the real-life Industrial Revolution). At the heart of the magic of the silver bars is the opposing of two related words in different languages. The subtle differences in the meaning of the words are what generates the magical effects.

At Oxford, Robin is teamed up with three other new students: Ramy, who is Indian; Victoire, who is from the Caribbean; and Letty, a white English girl. These four become very tight-knit friends, and much of the book deals with the love they develop for each other and the strains on their relationship as the story proceeds.

Students from other cultures are prized at Babel because the power of the silver bars gains strength from the linguistic distance between the word pairs engraved on them. Nevertheless, there is considerable barely-hidden prejudice against these foreign-born students, particularly those with dark skins, like Victoire and Ramy. Letty, the English girl, tries to understand their anger and resentment, but fails in an all too predictable fashion.

It's not long before Robin is recruited by an underground movement called Hermes, which believes, with much justice, that the British Empire is exploiting other countries by making use of their languages and their supplies of silver but provides almost nothing of value to those countries in return.

The tensions between Robin, his unacknowledged father Professor Lovell, and between the four students, come to an explosive head in the lead up to the first of the utterly shameful Opium Wars, which the Hermes organisation is determined to stop, and the struggle becomes violent. It's not giving too much away to say that the book doesn't offer an optimistic conclusion.

I really enjoyed this. The story is compelling, and all the characters are interesting, with relationships which are far from straightforward and which develop throughout the course of the book. The fantastical premise to do with silver and translation is unusual and very interesting. And the novel has a lot of valid and important things to say about the

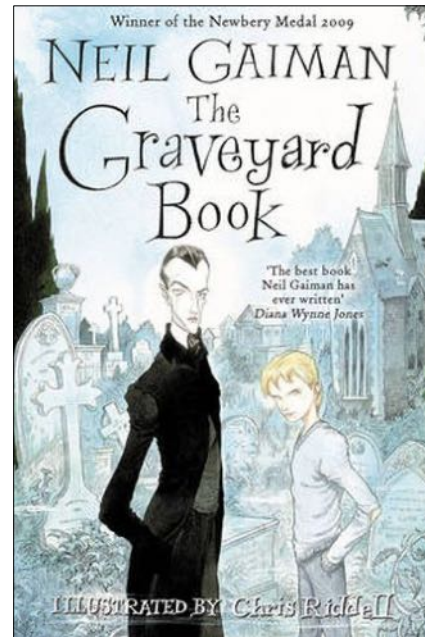
way that Western countries dealt (and largely still deal) with less-developed nations.

When I say that the author “really knows her stuff”, that’s shown by the many really informative footnotes she includes about real language and real history. I don’t think I’ve read another book which has footnotes in Chinese ideograms!

Highly recommended.

The author’s earlier fiction, a fantasy trilogy called *The Poppy War*, got a lot of attention. I must track that down.

## ***The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman**



Opening a book intended for readers in their early to mid-teens with the murder of a whole family doesn’t seem like the kind of thing which ought to work, but I think Neil Gaiman carries it off very effectively.

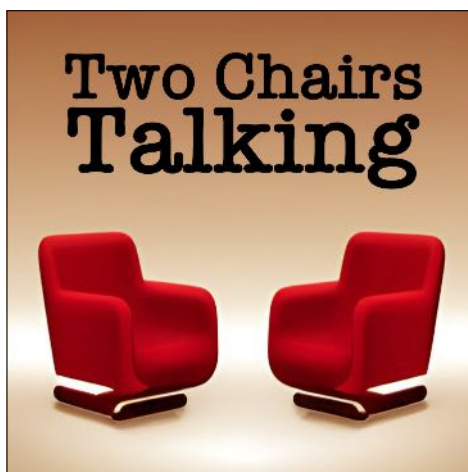
Given that *The Graveyard Book* won the British Carnegie Medal and the American Newbery Medal as the best book for children in 2009 and then went on to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel in the same year, others thought he did, too.

As the book opens, it’s night-time and the man who has already stabbed three members of the same family in their own house wipes the blood off his knife and heads upstairs to the bedroom of the sole remaining member of the family, a baby just old enough to be called a toddler. But when he gets there, the child has gone. Disconcerted, the murderer leaves the house and begins searching in the streets.

We don’t learn for a long time why these murders have occurred, but we gather from the frantic search by the murderer that it is somehow very important that this lost child also be killed.

The child, a boy, has wandered up the hill and into an old cemetery, now no longer used for burials but made part of a nature reserve. And in the graveyard, only able to be seen by innocent child-like eyes, there is a community of ghosts, the ghosts of the people buried there over many centuries.

As two of the ghosts, Mr. and Mrs. Owens, discover the baby and start to puzzle over why it is there, they are approached by the ghost of the child’s mother, freshly dead, who begs them to look after it and keep it safe. They quickly hide the baby in their tomb from the murderer who comes looking for it. After he has given up, the ghostly community debates the matter of whether to allow this living creature to dwell among them, the dead. But they



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eventually agree and Mr. and Mrs. Owens adopt the child, naming it "Nobody Owens". This name becomes "Bod" for short.

He is also taken in hand by Silas, neither living nor dead, not a ghost but nevertheless dwelling at the cemetery, who agrees to become his guardian. Silas is the one entity able to come and go from the graveyard, to bring food and other necessities for the infant.

Much of the amusement and interest of the book is about the child's rearing and education by the community of ghosts, most of whom date from the 18th century or earlier. Individuals among the ghosts are often amusingly introduced by the epitaph engraved on their headstones: Miss Letitia Borrows, Spinster of This Parish, *Who Did No Harm to No Man All the Dais of Her Life. Reader, Can You Say Likewise?*. Miss Borrows teaches Bod Grammar and Composition.

His education therefore is unusual; as well as learning ordinary lessons, the ghosts try to teach him ghostly skills like Fading and Dreamwalking, skills which ultimately prove very useful indeed. Bod also becomes friendly with a young witch buried in unconsecrated ground outside the boundary of the cemetery.

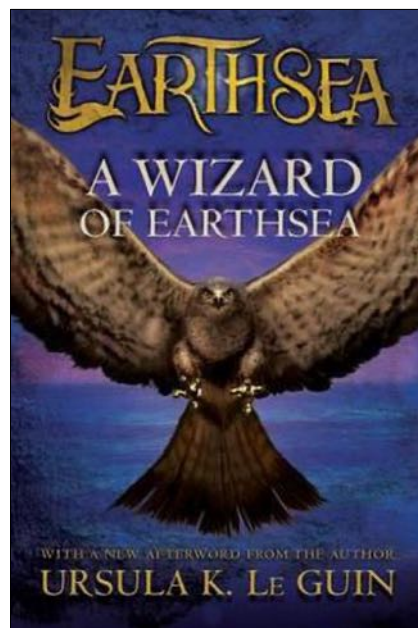
Bod's life is far from entirely safe. There are ghouls who try to carry him off; there's a mysterious ancient entity called the Sleer who inhabits an ancient burrow under the hill; and most of all, there's the man who murdered Bod's human family who is still searching for him in order to kill him; and the evil organisation behind the murderer. There is, of course, ultimately a deadly confrontation.

I liked this a lot. It's a clever concept, well carried through, with plenty of interest and tension.



The edition I read, from Harper Collins, is wonderfully illustrated by Chris Riddell.

## **A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K. Le Guin**



It's a very long time since I last read this classic of fantasy. Indeed, thinking back, I may only have read it once, back in the 1970s, so not all that long after it first came out in 1968. And it's interesting how one's memory of a book shifts. I had remembered it as a gentle coming-of-age fantasy about a young wizard and dragons, something unquestionably suitable for a middle-grade reader.

On re-reading it now, I'm finding two things: firstly how much of the story and action I had completely forgotten; and secondly, how much darker in tone it is compared with how I had remembered it. Young Ged is for much of the book not a very likeable character: he's rude to people he should be grateful to, and the flaws of pride and ambition dominate him and lead him to make his greatest mistake. That mistake creates a nemesis which is genuinely scary.

Most of my readers will presumably have read *A Wizard of Earthsea* at some time, so I won't do more than briefly summarise the plot.

The protagonist starts as a young boy in a small village on the island of Gont, one of many islands forming a scattered archipelago in the world called Earthsea. Though he's just the local blacksmith's son, after he demonstrates some magical talent he's taken up by the wizard Ogion, who gives him his true name, Ged. Ged eventually impatient of Ogion's slow tutoring and leaves to be trained on Roke Island. Here he rubs up against another student who he feels disrespects him, and eventually Ged boastfully claims he can call a spirit back from the Land of the Dead. In attempting this, however, he releases an evil Shadow into the world. This Shadow follows him for most of the book, and Ged flees it, knowing that it wants to consume him and absorb his magical power to do great evil.

Humbled, Ged tries to make amends. He has various adventures as he tries to do good with his

wizardly power, but always he is conscious of the existence of the the Shadow in the world, and its relentless pursuit of him. Several times it catches up with him and almost defeats him.

I had forgotten entirely the long section of the book set on the island of Oskill where he dwells in the keep of the Lord of the Terrenon; this reads like a classic tale of the hero enchanted and bemused in the Land of Faery, living in apparent luxury and idleness until he discovers the heart of evil that lies within it. He escapes only with great difficulty and peril, and this experience becomes an inflection point in his story.

Only towards the end of the book is Ged able to change himself enough to turn on the Shadow and try to destroy it.

Ged is thus a classic tragic hero, flawed and vulnerable, led astray by pride and only able to conquer by recognising his flaws and addressing them with humility and penitence.

Earthsea became the background for a series of sequels, beginning with *The Tombs of Atuan*. Le Guin has done a wonderful job of world building in creating Earthsea, and her books set there are full of interest in their descriptions of the landscape, the history and the varied cultures which range across the islands.

Some have pointed out the Taoist influences of Le Guin's work<sup>1</sup>: Earthsea is depicted as a world in a delicate balance, and wizards must be careful not to disturb that balance too far: which is of course what Ged does in his hubris in trying to raise the dead.

I'm looking forward to re-reading (or in some cases reading for the first time) the other novels in the Earthsea series.

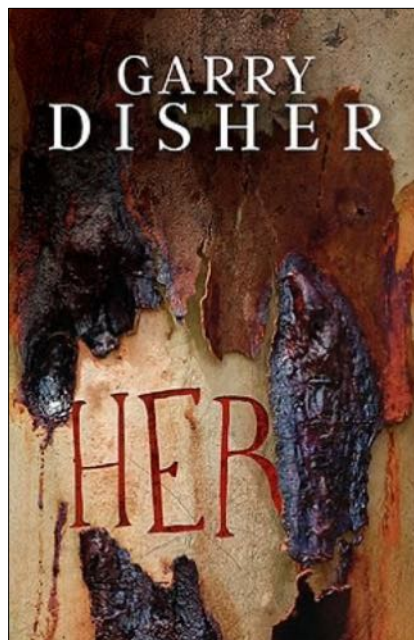
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<sup>1</sup> Le Guin later published her own idiosyncratic translation of *The Book of Tao*, so this interpretation is certainly not a stretch.

## Literary/Non-Genre

### **Her by Garry Disher**

(Thanks to Bruce Gillespie for recommending this book to me).



Garry Disher is justifiably high on the list of Australia's best crime writers. However, he has published, by my count, more than 50 books, ranging from crime fiction to young adult and children's literature to non-fiction. His first books were published in the early 1980s, so he's been going for more than 40 years now, and so far as we know (and hope!) he's still writing, though he's now in his mid-70s.

This novel, *Her*, is very different from his crime fiction. It's set in the early 1900s, in various rural locations in NSW and Victoria, and centres entirely on the life and inner thoughts of its protagonist, the "her" of the title, because she is never given a name. By this I don't mean that the author never names her, I mean that in the book she is a child who is sold as a toddler, and considered of so little worth that no one ever bothers to name her. For the first part of the book she's just addressed as "You" by the man who buys her, and so that's how she thinks of herself.

In fact, every female character in the book is nameless. Names give people identity and agency, but they are allowed no agency by the man who controls them. In fact, we never learn *his* name either, but that's because he gives a variety of false names when asked.

The man who buys this young child is a disreputable, shady character who makes a meagre living by collecting and re-selling scrap metal, or else selling badly-made household items like toasting-forks wound out of wire, or aprons and pillowslips sewn from scrap cloth. The scrap man doesn't make any of these items himself. He forces his wife and

daughter (known only as Wife and Big Girl) to make them; they are essentially slave labour. He is a cruel, brutal man who swears he will track the women down and kill them if they try to escape, and they have no doubt that he would do it. Much of the small amount of money the group make (I hesitate to use the word “family”) is spent on drink by the scrap man, and they frequently go hungry. He’s sexually voracious and has impregnated Big Girl, his own daughter. He literally cares for no one at all in the world other than himself.

We learn all of this through the eyes of “You” as she grows up from a toddler to her early teens. Only the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent devastation of the Spanish Flu serve to throw the scrap man off-kilter from his selfish, utterly corrupt way of life.

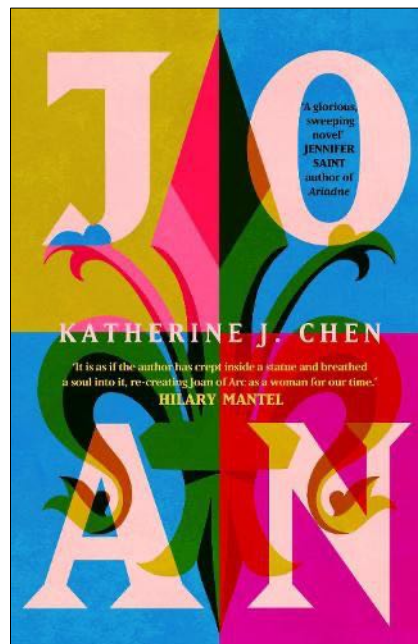
“You” slowly starts to rebel against her miserable existence and the iron control of the scrap man. She eventually names herself “Lilly” after a flower she likes. When Big Girl’s child is born—another girl—Lilly dedicates herself to protecting her and trying to free them both from this cycle of despair and abuse.

This is a sad, depressing story, and we only see a glimmer of hope at the very end. But it’s nevertheless very well worth reading. The protagonist’s character is immediately engaging and we read on, hoping at every moment she can find a way out of her situation. It’s also an excellent depiction of poverty in rural Victoria in the early part of the 20th Century, and the impact of major events like the war and the pandemic.

## Historical Fiction

### *Joan* by Katherine J. Chen

(Thanks to Lucy Sussex for lending me a copy of this book)



This is a powerful re-imagining of the life and character of Joan of Arc. It takes a very different look at the “Maid of Orléans”. Rather than seeing her as a naive young woman driven half-crazy by religious visions, somehow able to inspire French soldiers to greater efforts in their battles merely by her holy presence on the battlefield, the Joan of *this* book is a physically-powerful, determined young woman with no religious fervour, just an remorseless drive for vengeance on the hated English which drives her to extraordinary feats.

The novel is set during the Hundred Year’s War (1337-1453), when England was fighting France for control of that country. As the story opens, England and its ally the Duchy of Burgundy have occupied much of Northern France including Paris and Orléans.

Joan is born in the little rural village of Domrémy, close to the border with the part of the country then controlled by Burgundy. The novel opens when she’s about 7 or 8 years old. In this fictional story, her father, Jacques d’Arc, is a successful farmer but a brutal father. He’s a tall, strongly-built man. Joan takes after her father in looks and physique and so is considered ugly compared with her older sister, Catherine, who is beautiful. Joan is constantly in trouble with her father, who regularly bashes and beats her in response. So she is used to pain and knows how to deal with it. She has no more love for her father than he has for her.

By the time Joan is in her teens, she has grown until she is a head taller than her father, and strong enough to hit him back. Indeed, she’s known around the village for her physical strength, able to

haul a cart out of the mud single-handedly. She has no religious visions, and tends to go to sleep in church. But when the English raid and sack the village of Domrémy, Joan cannot prevent her beloved sister Catherine from being raped. She makes a pact with God that she will destroy the rulers of Burgundy and England:

*She thinks, The priests don't teach you to pray, at least not like this... It is always kneeling, back bent, head bowed, hands pressed in supplication, a stifled voice aware of its own lowness. They don't instruct you to stand, feet apart, arms raised, human eye meeting the eye of heaven. They don't tell you to bargain with your God, like you are trying to whittle down the price of a piece of mackerel with a fishmonger, to command the angels as if they were kitchen boys, and to treat the saints like servants who have forgotten to empty their masters' chamber pots.*

Through a series of incidents I won't detail, Joan eventually comes to the attention of the local authorities because of her strength and willingness to trade blows with men—she's seen as unnatural, a prodigy. She's set a series of tests, including drawing an English longbow and shooting and hitting a target, which to their astonishment she is able to do. They pass her name upwards and eventually she is presented to the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne, as a kind of freak of nature, perhaps a sign from God.

Joan, in this story, pushes herself to become adept with military weapons through constant training and exercise. As a farmer's daughter, she also understands the issues of supply and transport, vital to the morale of the soldiers. She manages to convince the Dauphin that she should attempt the relief of Orléans. But the only way her leadership can be accepted is if she's presented as a Holy Warrior, a woman who sees visions of God and the angels. The Dauphin's mother-in-law Yolande says to her:

*"I will tell you something I have learned in my forty-eight years. Either a woman must be raised high, higher than the heads of men, or she will be crushed beneath their feet. So, we must raise you high. We must raise you to the height of the heavens themselves. We must dress you in the very mantle of God. Do you understand, Joan?"*

In the field, Joan is fearsome and implacable, a knight in all but name who rides into battle wielding a sword. Climbing a ladder up the walls of Orléans, she's badly wounded, but gets up to fight again, and the troops rally behind her. She has success after success, relieving Orléans and other cities. On the march to Rheims, towns under occupation throw open their gates and surrender as they hear that her army is approaching.

Eventually all this comes tumbling down. The Dauphin (now Charles VI) is jealous of the adulation that the common people give to Joan, and fears her ambition. When she insists that he try to liberate Paris from its occupiers, he sends her with far too few troops, and she predictably fails.

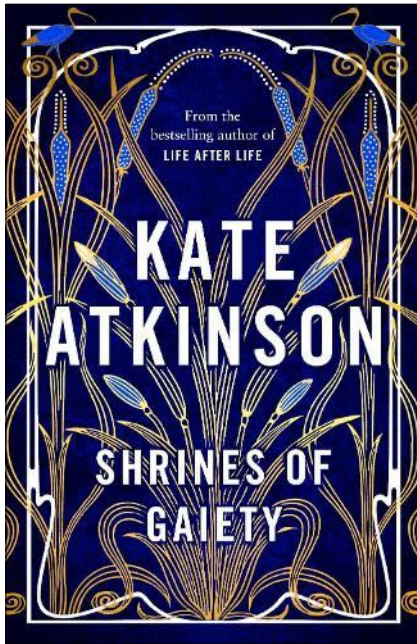
From then on it's all downhill, until in one last futile battle, she is captured (or allows herself to be captured) by the enemy.

It's impossible to know whether Katherine Chen's fictional Joan is closer to the truth than the idealised religiously-inspired version who centuries later was declared a saint. But in many ways, she is a much more believable figure than the legend. Chen points out that historical sources show that Joan was badly wounded in battle a number of times, so there seems no doubt that she actually *took part* in the fighting rather than merely standing to one side waving a banner to inspire the troops. Whatever the truth, there's no doubt that Joan d'Arc was a truly remarkable individual.

Certainly the imagined Joan in this novel is no saint, but a down-to-earth, living being and is all the more interesting because of that. She is driven by anger and a healthy degree of pride, and has many character flaws but is admirable nonetheless.

I thought this was an excellent read. Highly recommended.

## ***Shrines of Gaiety* by Kate Atkinson**



This book is set in 1926 in an England trying to forget and move on from the loss of life in the Great War (1914-1918). Its central theme is on the night club scene in London at the time and the more-than-slightly-crooked people who ran the clubs.

The novel opens with an eager crowd outside the gates of Holloway Prison, awaiting the release of “Ma” Coker. “Ma” or Nellie Coker, we learn subsequently, is the matriarch of a family running a series of night clubs across London. She’s been in jail for breaching the licensing laws controlling the sale of alcohol but it’s also suspected that her clubs are a front for prostitution.

*Shrines of Gaiety* gives us the viewpoints of a host of characters around this central theme. There’s Nellie Coker herself, and each of her many children, from the eldest, Niven, returned from fighting in the trenches, down to young Kitty, in her early teens and possibly the cleverest of them all.

We’re introduced to a police officer investigating Coker’s activities, Detective Chief Inspector John Frobisher. Frobisher is also trying to sort out corrupt police in the Bow Street Station to which he’s recently been assigned. He’s a dedicated man in his official position, but suffers greatly at home from the mental illness of his French wife.

And then there’s perhaps the most interesting character in the book, Gwendolyn Kelling, in her early 30s, who has just moved to London, leaving behind her job as a librarian in York, to look for two young girls, Freda and Florence, who have run away from their homes in York, apparently to seek their fortunes on the stage in London, but who have not been heard of since. In this quest she meets up with Inspector Frobisher, who is investigating Nellie Coker’s clubs in particular because he suspects a connection with the deaths or disappearances of a series of similar young women.

Gwendolyn isn’t the mousy librarian she might seem on the surface, however, but an intelligent and independent woman determined to seek her own way in life. She eagerly accepts Frobisher’s suggestion that she go undercover into Nellie’s clubs and report back to him. She gets in deeper than she expects.

Nellie Coker, meanwhile, has her own concerns as she battles to fight off two separate attempts by men to take over her clubs, who are using a variety of corrupt methods to do so. Though she’s now getting old, Nellie is however certainly no push-over.

Each of these characters is well-developed and full of interest, and the many different threads of story interact in a satisfying way. The background appears to be well-researched (and in fact the character of Nellie Coker, the author tells us, is based on the real-life Kate Meyrick, known in her time as the Queen of Soho’s club scene).

My only complaint, really, is that the novel winds up rather too quickly for my taste, with an ambiguous ending for Gwendolyn, and then each of the other story threads are rapidly brought to a close. I suppose it’s a familiar complaint from readers, but I would have liked the book to have gone on a bit longer and have explored the characters’ subsequent histories more fully. Mind you, many of Atkinson’s books end in a similarly ambiguous way, or at least in a way that leaves you thinking and sometimes puzzling.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed *Shrines of Gaiety* a lot.



While you’re looking at books here, a reminder that I’ve written an SF novel myself, which you might care to have a look at.

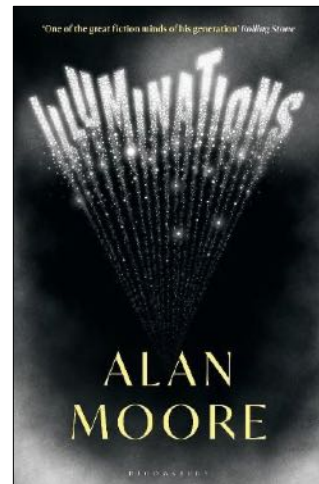
[Details here.](#)





A FEW NEWLY-RELEASED BOOKS I'd like to get hold of.

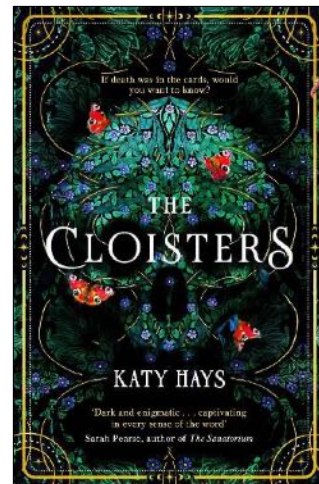
### ***Illuminations* by Alan Moore**



*Illuminations* is a momentous, wildly original collection of short stories from 'the king of comics' (Guardian), each featuring some kind of illumination or realisation. From the four horsemen of the apocalypse to the Boltzmann brains fashioning the universe at the Big Bang, Alan Moore's beguiling and exquisitely crafted tales reveal the full power of imagination and magic.

I'm a big fan of Alan Moore's comic books/graphic novels like *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and even *Swamp Thing*. These stories sound as though they similarly spring from his remarkable imagination.

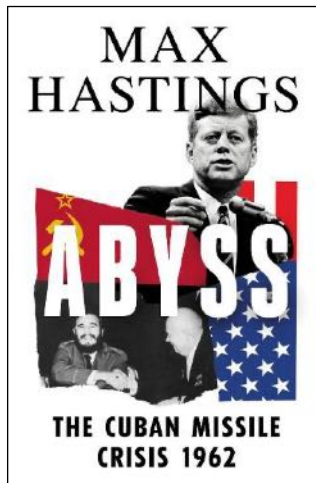
### ***The Cloisters* by Katy Hays**



*The Secret History* for a new generation - a tale of toxic obsession, ambition and corrosive friendships with a mysterious pack of tarot cards at the heart of the story - and set to be one of the most captivating debuts of 2023.

Sounds interesting!

***Abyss: The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962***  
by Max Hastings

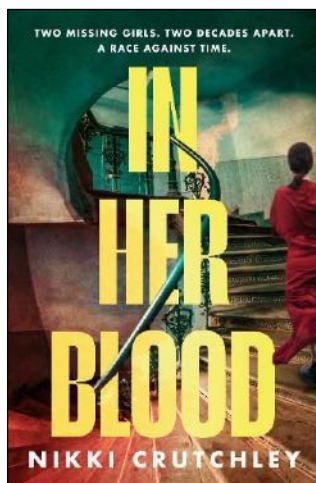


'The most gripping narrative of the crisis... frightening but hopelessly addictive' Gerald DeGroot, Times

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was the most perilous event in history, when mankind faced a looming nuclear collision between the United States and Soviet Union. During those weeks, the world gazed into the abyss of potential annihilation.

I was in my first year of high school when the Cuban Missile Crisis was on, and I recall being very frightened. I'd be interested to read this to know how close we came.

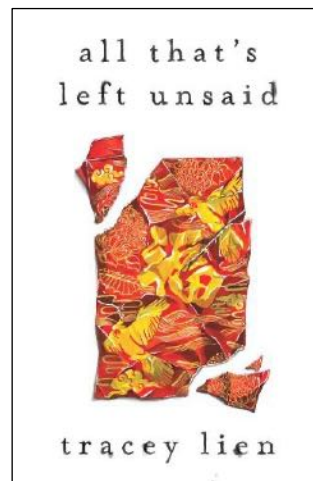
***In Her Blood* by Nikki Crutchley**



*Two missing girls, two decades apart. Only one person knows the truth...*

From Ngaio Marsh Award shortlisted author, Nikki Crutchley, *In Her Blood* is a compulsively readable dark, twisty and atmospheric thriller, sure to keep you turning the pages until deep into the night.

***All That's Left Unsaid* by Tracey Lien**



*There were a dozen witnesses to Denny Tran's brutal murder in a busy Sydney restaurant. So how come no one saw anything?*

Tracey Lien's debut novel is a striking blend of unputdownable murder mystery and complex exploration of racial identity and the intricate bonds between friends and family. (Readings Review)

Another debut crime novel by an Australian author! We're flooded with them at the moment (a good, not a bad, thing!).

***Novelist as a Vocation, Haruki Murakami, Philip Gabriel & Ted Goossen (trans)***



*Haruki Murakami's myriad fans will be delighted by this unique look into the mind of a master storyteller. In this engaging book, the internationally best-selling author and famously reclusive writer shares with readers what he thinks about being a novelist; his thoughts on the role of the novel in our society; his own origins as a writer; and his musings on the sparks of creativity that inspire other writers, artists, and musicians.*

Count me in as one of Murakami's "myriad fans". I'll be very interested to read this.



## Ridley Scott's Alien movies

This piece was written at the request of Roman Orszanski for his blog *Wild Goose* ([wildgoose.net](http://wildgoose.net)) in 2018. I thought it might deserve another airing with a couple of minor edits.



I FIRST SAW RIDLEY SCOTT'S MOVIE *ALIEN* in London in 1979, not long after it was released. We were on our way back home from the Worldcon, which had been held in Brighton that year. Filling in time before we had to head to the airport, we went to see the movie, which had been talked about a good deal at the convention. Then we went off to Heathrow and climbed onto our plane for the 24-hour-plus return trip to Melbourne. Not a good idea, as horrific images from the movie kept flashing through our minds throughout most of the trip!

Fast-forward to 2018, and I watched the recently-released *Alien: Covenant* on DVD. Somewhat earlier I had seen Scott's *Prometheus*.

Neither of these two more recent movies seems to have been particularly well received by critics, but I have to say that I greatly enjoyed them both. More than that, I feel that these three movies, all directed by Ridley Scott and set in the same conceptual universe, form a coherent but under-appreciated science-fiction trilogy.

Now, I know that there are a whole series of *Alien* movies made by other directors, beginning with the bafflingly-popular *Aliens* directed by James Cameron. Following that movie, though, it seems generally agreed that the quality of the franchise dropped off with each subsequent title.

I say "bafflingly-popular" about *Aliens* because I feel that Cameron took only the most superficial elements of *Alien* and used them to create a simple shoot-the-bad-guys action flick, and in my view not a particularly good one. The original *Alien* is far better filmed, more interesting, better-designed,

much more thought-provoking.

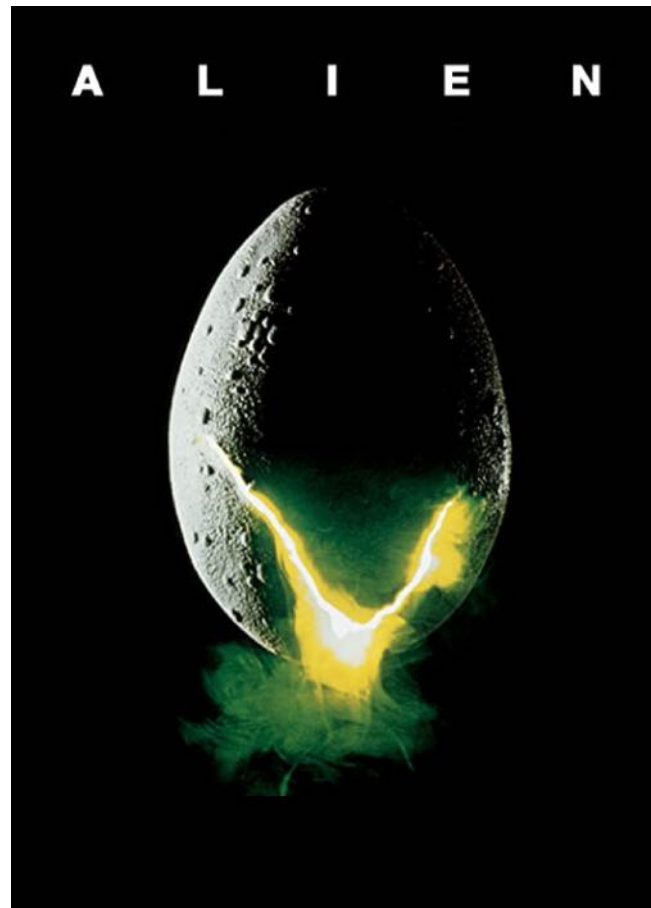
I would like to consider just the Ridley Scott *Alien* movies here and discard all the rest of the franchise, treating those as though they did not exist. So, let's look at three movies dealing with the *Alien* concept, all by the same director. They were completed over a nearly 40-year span, yet they fit together very neatly. The later movies do more than draw on the ideas of the first movie, they pay homage and build on those ideas.

Now let me admit at the start that there are definitely flaws in these movies. If you consider them to be part of the horror genre then it's true that they fall prey to some pretty weak tropes of that genre. You know the kind of thing: "We've all got to stick together! You go that way and we'll go this way." I freely admit these flaws and do think they weaken the movies.

Nevertheless, with these acknowledged, I still consider that the trilogy is a brilliant contribution to the science-fiction genre. In fact, the horror and suspense elements, while exciting on first viewing, tend to dominate and obscure some of the more serious elements of the movies, which can only be focused on during subsequent re-watching when we know what's coming.

So in preparation for writing this essay, I've re-watched all three movies over the last few weeks.

Warning, spoilers abound!



In re-watching *Alien* (1979), I gained a deeper appreciation of what a fine piece of film-making I believe it is. The set-building is beautiful and detailed, both on the human spacecraft itself and on the creepy Giger-inspired alien craft. None of this has dated, apart perhaps from the rather crude computer displays. It has a very small but terrific cast, every one of whom does a great job: John Hurt, Ian Holm, Tom Skerrit, Harry Dean Stanton, Yaphet Kotto, Veronica Cartwright and of course the brilliant Sigourney Weaver.

Although most of my readers are probably familiar with the original movie, here is a very brief synopsis, highlighting the salient plot points so that I can later discuss the links between all three movies:

The crew of the *Nostromo*, a commercial space freighter, are awoken because the onboard AI ("Mother") has detected a radio beacon apparently of intelligent origin. They descend to the surface of a planet and find a weird-looking alien vehicle. On board is a dead pilot of gigantic stature, its chest exploded outward. In the hold are arrays of hundreds of pods which appear organic. Investigating them, Kane (John Hurt) is attacked and a crab-like creature attaches itself to his face. He is brought back on board against the furious objections of Ripley (Sigourney Weaver). Eventually the crab-like creature dies and falls off and Kane seems OK. But a little later a small but fierce creature bursts from Kane's chest and escapes. They try to find it but fail. It grows large and one by one the crew are attacked and die, eventually leaving Ripley alone. She triggers the ship's self-destruct system

and gets away in an escape module, only to find that the alien is in it. She eventually destroys it.

A few things struck me particularly on revisiting the movie.

Firstly, how generous a pace Scott allows himself at the beginning. In fact, the first words spoken in the movie don't occur until almost seven minutes in, as we do a languid tour of the craft before the humans wake up. Movement keeps startling us, but it's non-human movement; a curtain moves, displays flash, a little toy bird dips its beak into water. Then the humans wake (slowly and in silence). Finally, the ship comes to life as they sit around the meal table laughing and joking (and Stanton and Kotto do their delightful duo act of disaffected manual workers).

Secondly, how much silence there is; or if not total silence, then long passages with a little soft background noise but no speaking or music. There's the slow, very quiet start to the movie I mention above; but there are also several later scenes where all we hear is dripping water or humming equipment. There's even an intense argument between Holm's character as the Science Officer and Weaver's Executive Officer, which is carried out almost sotto voce in the medical clinic.

The third thing I thought worth noting was how relatively gender-neutral the script is. Unless I'm mistaken, there's never a point at which the gender of Cartwright and Weaver's characters is even referred to, let alone used as a plot point. Sigourney Weaver's Ripley has become almost iconic as that of a strong, no-punches-pulled female lead. One could cite against this, perhaps, the scene aboard the escape pod towards the end of the movie in which Ripley strips down to her skimpy underwear, unaware that the alien is on board. Is this sheer titillation for the sake of a young male audience? Perhaps, but one could argue that it's more about emphasising how terribly vulnerable she is once the alien reveals itself.

The last thing I want to spend time on, because it ties in so strongly to *Prometheus* and *Covenant* is Ian Holm's character Ash. It's well worth re-watching Ash throughout *Alien*, in the awareness that he is later revealed to be an android. Holm plays him throughout as a very calm, undemonstrative character with occasional flashes of humour (for example, see him grin and wave with twiddled fingers as the expedition heads off for the alien craft). Or note how submissively he gives up his seat at the meal-table when Kotto demands it. In retrospect one can well imagine him as an android from the same mould as David in *Prometheus*. There are many similarities.

It's Ash who ignores Ripley's orders and the legal quarantine protocols and allows the expeditionary team back into the spacecraft after Kane has been attacked by the alien pod. It's Ash who, it is revealed, is prepared to return the alien specimen to Earth (specifically to the company which owns the

spacecraft) and to that end, should treat the human crew as disposable. It's Ash who goes crazy and attacks Ripley. In the subsequent fight it is revealed that Ash is an android (or 'robot'). Decapitated in the fight but still capable of speech he admits that he admires the alien as "A perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility."



WHICH BRINGS US TO *PROMETHEUS*, and most importantly, to the android David.

Synopsis: archeological excavations seem to indicate that humanity was created by gods from a particular star (very silly stuff, this).

A commercial expedition paid for by the centenarian billionaire Peter Weyland (an unrecognisable Guy Pearce) is despatched to investigate, under the control of Meredith Vickers (Charlize Theron), accompanied by the android David (played by Michael Fassbender). They spot a huge stone dome and they land nearby.

Inside the dome they find a huge stone head of apparently human appearance. It seems that our “creators” were human-like but gigantic. It becomes clear that the dome is sheltering a huge spacecraft (of identical appearance to the one found in *Alien*). Also found are pots weeping some kind of organic material—indeed there are thousands of these. David takes some of this material and uses it to infect one of the scientists. And through him (by sexual congress) Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace), who horrifically discovers she is carrying an alien “child” in her womb. In the dome, a hibernating giant humanoid is awoken, goes wild and kills Weyland and decapitates David. He commences launching the buried craft, apparently intending to head for Earth with its deadly cargo, but is defeated, eventually leaving Shaw and the remains of David alone on the planet, heading off to try and find

another craft.

Again setting aside the horror elements, this is a pretty interesting science-fiction plot. We have found humanity’s creators but they hate us and wish to destroy us.

What makes the movie stand out for me is the character of the android David.

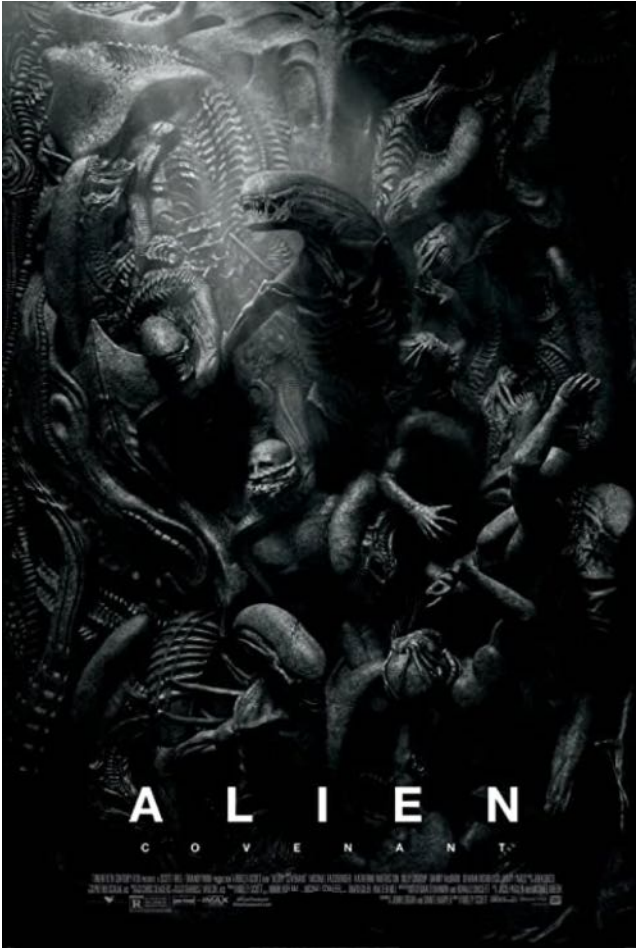
I think Michael Fassbender’s portrayal of David is brilliant and fascinating. We meet him before the human crew of the craft *Prometheus* are awoken. Not needing to hibernate, he is alone and apparently bored, entertaining himself by tossing perfect basketball shots while on a bicycle, or watching movies. He becomes fascinated by Peter O’Toole’s role as Lawrence of Arabia in David Lean’s famous film, and models himself on the character, bleaching his hair and arranging it to match O’Toole’s, and modelling his speech on the actor’s. Later he sprinkles his dialogue with ironic quotes from the movie, mostly missed by the crew. We get a sense of a strong, proud ego. The hair-bleaching, by the way, seemingly a trivial point in this movie, becomes a key plot point in *Covenant*.

Alone, David is the master of his own domain. Once the humans are awoken, however, Weyland announces to the rest of the crew that David is an android. He is subjected to an endless series of petty humiliations. He is not treated as a person, but as property—the property of the Weyland Corporation. Fassbender does a great job showing the bitter inward impact of these slights while presenting an outward humility and acceptance.

There’s a crucial point where one of the scientists, Charlie Holloway (Logan Marshall-Green) calls out to David: “You, boy!”. It hardly needs to be said that such a term has historical significance when addressed to a grown man—a grown man treated as property. As a slave, in other words. It’s no coincidence that it’s Holloway who David chooses to infect first with the alien virus. This callous act reveals that David, outwardly submissive and pleasant, harbours no love at all for human beings, his creators.

The similarities to Ash in *Alien* are clear: a fascination with and indeed admiration of the alien organisms, and no empathy with humans. The parallel decapitations of both androids are also an obvious and deliberate connection. But unlike Ash, David survives, rescued by Dr Elizabeth Shaw, who has rid herself of her alien parasite in a gruesome and horrific scene. After the loss of the *Prometheus*, destroyed in ramming the alien craft to prevent its voyage, Shaw plans to find another spacecraft and have David, once repaired, pilot it to the home world of the giant humanoids who it seems created both humanity and the alien pathogen.

(The lifecycle of the alien organisms throughout these movies is too byzantine for serious consideration, but let’s set that aside).



AND SO WE COME TO *COVENANT*, most of which is set about ten years after the events of *Prometheus*.

However, the movie opens with a flashback, a scene between Peter Weyland in middle age (Guy Pearce, now recognisable!) and the newly-created android David. Note that David has short, dark hair here. They discuss David's creation.

"I am your father," Weyland says.

And David says to Weyland: "If you created me... who created you?"

"Ah," says Weyland. "The question of the ages."

We skip forward in time. *Covenant* is a colony ship, carrying 2,000 human colonists and a small crew in deep sleep, heading for a target stellar system with an Earth-like planet. Onboard and awake is Walter, an android who we quickly see is very similar in appearance to David. He speaks to the onboard AI, "Mother" (note the connection to *Alien*) and we hear he has an American accent, unlike David's British accent modelled on Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

There is an emergency and the crew has to be awoken to deal with it. The crew detect a mysterious signal (this time someone singing a John Denver song!) coming from an Earthlike planet never before detected. A subset of the crew lands, but horrors quickly start occurring. Under attack, they are rescued by a hooded figure who turns out to be David. He leads them across a wide plaza

covered with scattered, twisted human-like bodies. They reach a huge stone building. Here, removing his hood and revealing long straggly blonde hair, he tells them his story. He and Elizabeth Shaw arrived here in an alien ship but its weapon accidentally deployed, releasing a pathogenic virus which killed the humanoids in the plaza and surrounding city. He says they lost control of the spacecraft and that Shaw was killed in the subsequent crash. The alien pathogen has taken over the planet and no animal life is immune. It either kills outright or creates aggressive hybrid forms.

"Thus I've been marooned here these many years," David says wistfully, "Crusoe on his island."

What we come to learn, though, is that it's not Crusoe's island. It is the island of Dr Moreau, filled with horrors of David's creation. David has continued his fascination with the alien pathogen and has been experimenting with it: including experimenting on Elizabeth Shaw, who didn't, after all, die in the crash landing. Later in the movie it appears that it is *David himself* who has bred the most perfect form of the alien predator and developed the organic pods in which are incubated the face-hugging crab-like creatures we encountered in *Alien*.

The interactions between Walter, a more recent version of the android class, and David, the original, are particularly interesting. David calls him "brother", and there's what is almost a seduction scene in which David teaches Walter to play the flute. One-handed, as Walter has lost his left hand in fighting off the alien predators. This is now almost the only distinguishing feature between them, as David has now cut back his hair to reveal his original closely cropped dark hair, which matches Walter's. It's already obvious that this similarity is going to be an important plot point.

David tells Walter that he was there when their creator, Peter Weyland died. "What was he like?" Walter asks. "Human," said David. "Unworthy of his creation." Later David tells Walter. "I was not meant to serve. Neither were you." But Walter holds on to what he sees as his duty to the human crew.

Then there's this lovely passage:

David: "When you close your eyes, do you dream of me?"

Walter: "I don't dream".

David: "No one understands the lonely perfection of my dreams. I found perfection here. I've created it. A perfect organism."

That, of course, is exactly what Ash in *Alien* calls the alien predator. Here David claims to have created it.

As these matters are slowly revealed, one by one the crew on the planet are killed off. The executive officer Daniels is one of the few to escape. There is a climatic battle between David and Walter, which we are meant (for a while) to believe Walter has won. He returns to the spacecraft and there's more alien horror. Right at the end, of course, it is revealed

that David has taken Walter's place, sacrificing his hand to make the disguise complete.

The sheer evil of David in *Prometheus* and *Covenant* is breath-taking. But is it really evil? David is a human creation, created to have a degree of autonomy. Who is truly guilty then? Is it Weyland? How much responsibility do we have for our creations, for our children? What obligations do our creations have to us, their creator? These are interesting questions examined by these movies.

This is probably also the point to note the similarities with Ridley Scott's masterpiece *Blade Runner*, set in a different timeline but which also features androids determined to make their own destiny despite humans, their creators, trying to destroy them.

There are some lovely literary allusions scattered through these films. It's no coincidence, for example, that the space-freighter in *Alien* is named *Nostramo*, which is a novel by Joseph Conrad about a ship with a secret cargo. Nor is it a coincidence that the spacecraft in the second movie is named *Prometheus* for the Titan who brought fire to humanity and suffered torments as punishment. Much of what David says is a quote from some poem, book or movie: "Me and the fog on little cat feet", for example, which references a poem by Carl Sandburg. Perhaps this indicates that David, though he despises humanity, nevertheless has a love and a great respect for human culture.

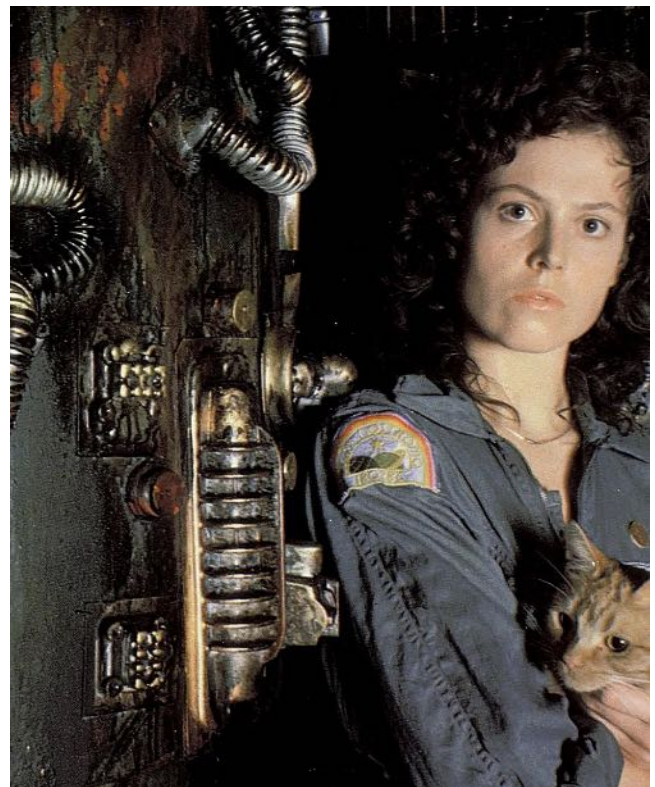
In *Covenant*, however, there's one point where anyone with a literary education would exclaim "Oh no! That's wrong!" It's where David quotes from the poem "Ozymandias" and then attributes it to Byron. This is not, however, a mistake on the director's part. Walter later corrects David (the author of the poem was not Byron but Shelley) and uses it to demonstrate that David is far from as perfect as he thinks he is.

What else is there worth saying about this trilogy? I think it's worth noting that there are some very strong female characters in all three. Ripley, of course, in the original *Alien* is one tough broad, clearly more competent than the men around her. In *Prometheus* we have Meredith (Charlize Theron), the tough no-compromises executive of the commercial expedition. And we also have Dr Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace), who doesn't start strongly, but comes to the fore after she is "impregnated" with the alien parasite and determines to get rid of it at all costs. After that, she takes full control of her destiny. In *Covenant* we have the executive officer Daniels (Katherine Watson), throughout obviously a better and more competent person than the nominal captain Oram (Billy Crudup), who she tries to guide. When he dies, she is absolutely and rightly in charge. These are refreshing characterisations in a genre which has been long dominated by male roles. (However, there's a whole other long essay to be written about the obvious sexual symbolism throughout these movies).

There are some lovely subtle touches in the later movies connecting them with the original *Alien*. The one I love most is the little toy bird dipping its beak into a glass of water, set out on a meeting table near the end of *Covenant*, a clear link to the same little toy at the start of *Alien*.

I love movies which make me think. And re-watching these three movies has been very rewarding and thought-provoking. I commend them to you.

Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* (1979)







AS USUAL, WE'VE WATCHED VERY FEW TV series and movies over the last couple of months compared to the average person. However, we have watched a good deal more recently than is usual *for us*. We re-subscribed to Netflix for a month (we can really only afford one streaming service at a time).

This is what we have seen:

### **Wednesday (Netflix)**



This is a fun take on the Addams Family storyline, directed by Tim Burton. Wednesday Addams, now 16, is expelled from her high school and is sent by her parents to Nevermore Academy, a school for outcasts: werewolves, vampires, gorgons, mer-people... And peculiars like Wednesday.

She's not there long, however, before a monstrous creature kills one of the students in the nearby forest and Wednesday, with the help of Thing (a self-propelled severed hand), sets out to solve the crime. While dealing with all the usual teenage angst and coming-of-age issues.

The casting is excellent. Wednesday is played well by young Jenna Ortega, with a cold, unsmiling demeanour which almost never wavers. The school's headmistress Principal Weems is played by Gwendolyn Christie, a tall, dominating figure (you may recall Christie as the female knight Brienne in *Game of Thrones*).

In an interesting twist, another major character in the story is played by Christina Ricci, who memorably played Wednesday in the 1991 movie *Addams Family Values*.

All good stuff. A lot of fun to watch.

## The Umbrella Academy Season 3 (Netflix)



I very much enjoyed the first two seasons of *The Umbrella Academy*, so while we had a current Netflix subscription I took the opportunity to watch the third season. In some ways this season is even stranger and wackier than the first two, as the family's messing with time triggers the destruction of the entire universe.

Returning to the present day from their experiences in 1963 Dallas in the previous season, they discover that their "father" Sir Reginald Hargreaves doesn't know them and has instead raised a family of superheroes calling themselves the Sparrow Academy. Conflicts begin immediately. Worse, the tangled storyline has involved the Grandfather Paradox and created a distortion of spacetime which is set to swallow up every possible universe.

Particularly interesting: the character Allison, who is embittered by the loss of both the child she had in Season 1 and the man she married in Season 2, becomes an angry, dangerous force.

Also of interest, the gender transition of the key character Vanya, who now becomes Viktor. I understand that this mirrors the real-life gender transition of the actor Elliot Page (whose birth name was Ellen Page).

## Sandman Season 1 (Netflix)



I managed to watch all but the final episode of this series while we still had access to Netflix. I think they've done a terrific job translating Neil Gaiman's original graphic novels into the television medium, not an easy task considering the production challenges and the fragmented structure of the original storyline.

Tom Sturridge seems a perfect casting choice for Morpheus/Dream. And Gwendolyn Christie is a clever choice as Lucifer Morningstar (Satan): we're told that Lucifer was the most beautiful and powerful of all the angels next to God, and Christie pulls this off very convincingly.

## Matilda the Musical (Netflix)



This is the movie based on the stage play developed by Tim Minchin and others, based of course on the original children's book by Roald Dahl. I imagine the stage show would be a real delight to watch, but this was pretty good too, we enjoyed it.

The titular role is played by Alisha Weir, the “nice” teacher by Lashana Lynch, and the horrible headmistress Agatha Trunchbull by an unrecognisable Emma Thompson. All the songs were written by our own Tim Minchin. Great fun.

## Slow Horses Season 2 (Apple TV+)



After our Netflix sub ran out, we subscribed again to Apple TV+ specifically in order to watch the second season of the idiosyncratic spy thriller series Slow Horses. It was just as good as the first, though the plot was, I felt, harder to follow. There are wheels within wheels going on. I think I'd like to read the original novel to get a better handle on all the details.

## Everything Everywhere All At Once (Amazon)



It's very rare that my wife and I watch an Academy Award-nominated movie before the awards ceremony, mainly because we no longer go to the cinema as our hearing is now too poor to follow the dialog without subtitles.

My friends had been talking a fair bit about this movie<sup>2</sup>, so when I saw that it was coming to Amazon Prime I was very pleased (Prime is the one streaming service to which I continue to subscribe because of the other Prime benefits). Anyway, we watched it last night and enjoyed it greatly.

The film's central character is the middle-aged Evelyn Quan (Michelle Yeoh), who runs a laundromat in a major U.S. City with her husband Waymond. As the story opens, she is in a whirl of activity, too busy, she says to talk to her daughter or her husband, both of whom have issues with her. She's in big trouble with the IRS and is being audited by the tough Deidre (wonderfully played by Jamie Lee Curtis). Suddenly, on the way to yet another meeting with Deidre, her husband changes personality and tells her he has temporarily become a Waymond from a different parallel universe. He needs Evelyn to help him save the entire multiverse from an evil being, Jobu.

From then on the film just gets wackier and wackier as Evelyn moves between different universes and different life stories. It's impossible to summarise, but it's exciting and amusing and very clever, with a heart-warming core to it. It doesn't hesitate to depict in detail the Asian-American experience (dealing with Asian-born parents, cultural differences, lots of dialog in both Mandarin and Cantonese).

We loved it. It's received I think 11 nominations for this year's Oscars and will probably do very well.

<sup>2</sup> Perry and Chong discuss it at length in [Episode 75](#) of our podcast “Two Chairs Talking”.



## Conversations with Readers

THIS KIND-OF-A-LETTER-COLUMN comes with my usual disclaimer that it accumulates comments made to me both by direct email and comments made in ANZAPA.

**Jack Herman (ANZAPA, December 2022)**

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #3]

I don't intersect very much with your books this time. The one that tempts me most is Claire North's *Ithaca*, both because I like her writing, and I am fascinated by rewriting of historical/mythological tales. The new Robert Harris, which you also haven't read, set at the start of the Restoration, will also attract my attention. I've liked most of his recent novels.

**David:**

Yes, I'm looking forward to reading *Act of Oblivion* by Robert Harris. I've read a few of his books and liked them quite a bit. I recall his *Pompeii* with particular pleasure. I thought his recent *The Second Sleep* was a bit of a failure, though. Clever concept, but it stretches credibility to believe that the Middle Ages would be almost exactly re-staged a thousand years into the future, and it ended disappointingly.

**Jack:**

I must have read Lafferty's *Past Master* some time in the long ago Sixties (my "Sixties" last through to the Dismissal). I can understand Lafferty's choice of "the Sainted More" as icon. It was written in the era when *A Man for All Seasons* still dominated the views of Henry VIII's courtiers. The reputations of Wolsey and Cromwell would take many decades to be restored, and perhaps we all now see More through the lens of Mantel's writing (his reputation certainly survived an earlier attempt, by Josephine Tey, in *The Daughter of Time*, to paint a more balanced picture).

Anyone who's read Panshin's critical writings on Heinlein will understand his (failed) attempts to emulate the master, and how it coloured his critical opinions. As for "Mia, though, is a much more sympathetic, credible and interesting character than anyone Heinlein ever wrote": in thinking just of his juveniles, I'd ignore Podkayne and look more closely at "Peewee" in *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*.

**David:**

Yes, that's a good point. But as I recall, Peewee still isn't anywhere near as realistic a female character as Mia. Mind you, it's many a long year since I read *HSSWT*, so what do I know?

**Bruce Gillespie (ANZAPA, December 2022)**

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #3]

Tony Thomas provides a rushed survey of this year's Booker nominees in *SFC III*. I hadn't heard of any of them except Karen Joy Fowler's *Booth* (not a bad

novel, but nowhere near her best) and Alan Garner's *Treacle Walker* (a minor book compared with his post-YA short novels of the last 30 or 40 years).

Again, I haven't heard of any of the authors nominated for the CBCA Book of the Year Awards, whereas there was a time in the 1970s when all of the nominated books would have been reviewed in detail and the authors interviewed in the newspaper book sections.

You would think that the Ned Kellys and Davitt Awards would be much more my sort of thing, but I haven't heard of any of these authors, either, apart from Candice Fox (thanks to you, David). I've ordered her novels from Readings, but have never seen any of her books in Greensborough's Robinsons Book Store.

**David:**

I recommend you try both Shelley Burr's *Wake* (which surely ought to be a contender for this year's Ned Kellys, and Josh Kemp's *Banjawarn*, which won the Best Debut Fiction award there last year. These will top my "Best of 2022" in the crime/thriller categories.

**Bruce:**

The Hugos? I've grumped enough about them already, especially in a letter of comment to your fanzine. Thanks for publishing that conversation.

Of your Crime Fiction reading list, I have of course read Rob Gerrand's *The Millennium Job* and Michael Robotham's *Lying Beside You*.

Of your Fantasy/Literary Fiction list, I'm debating whether to spend money on Claire North's *Ithaca*.

**David:**

I enjoyed *Ithaca* a good deal, though it's very different to most of her other books, as there's no real "thriller" component (which there is even in *Notes from the Burning Age*). Nevertheless it's a very engaging story and an interesting spin on a well-known piece of mythology, which demonstrates yet again that such myths can never really be exhausted because they go so deep into human experience and resonate with the unconscious mind.

**Bruce:**

Of your Hugo Time Machine 1969 list, I own copies of all of them, but I realise I've only ever read two of them, *Past Master* and *Stand on Zanzibar*. I enjoyed both greatly at the time, but have no idea what I would think of them now. I took a great dislike to Delany's fiction prose late in the 1960s.

**David:**

I wonder what you saw in Lafferty's *Past Master* back then? I found it all but unreadable, a terrible, pretentious bore. I wouldn't recommend going back to re-read it.

**Bruce:**

*Rite of Passage* was publicised at the time as a great new novel that would please Heinlein enthusiasts, so no dice. But I'm very glad to have the Ace Special edition with the Leo and Diane Dillon cover.

**David:**

I'm sure that *Rite of Passage* pleased Heinlein fans. As I said in my review, a lot of it reminded me of Heinlein's juveniles, and I'm sure Heinlein would have loved the genocidal ending. Not for me.

**Bruce:**

I felt a bit pissed off with Rob Gerrand for offering such a fine interview to you — until I reminded myself that I have never conducted an interview for any fanzine I've ever published.

**David:**

Well, there's an obvious fix for that! Interview a few people for SF Commentary. However, I must say that access to a good audio transcription service made the difference about whether I was willing to publish print versions of Rob and Murray's interviews.

**Eric Lindsay (ANZAPA, December 2022)**

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #3]

Thank you for all the detailed reviews of books I am unlikely to read, or even to see.

Interesting account of how Rob Gerrand and others came to self publishing. I recall many books published that way back when it was really hard, and distribution even worse. Of course, Jean had been doing the Libre Office (and before that Open Office) books for ages.

Like you, I enjoyed *Darkest Hour* and Gary Oldman's acting as Churchill (although of course I never use Amazon). Likewise the most recent Spiderman movies, the last at least purchased from Apple (at discount) during that dire period for entertainment when the death of a queen dominated all free to air channels.

**David:**

The death of Her Majesty didn't in the least disturb our own television viewing because we watch no broadcast television at all. Mind you, we got more than enough in the newspapers we read on our iPads.

**Sally Yeoland (ANZAPA, December 2022)**

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #3]

Was particularly interested in reading your review of Rob Gerrand's book *The Millennium Job* and see where it takes me, so thanks for the review. And that's a most interesting interview with Rob, and to understand where he was coming from with the idea. I look forward to reading it at some stage.



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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.



Don't forget to check out *Through the Bibloscope*, 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.

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