

THE MEGALOSCOPE

ISSUE 6: APRIL 2023





ANOTHER SLOW READING PERIOD, only eight books completed in the last two months. This is possibly not unconnected with the fact that I've been spending more time during my leisure hours playing computer games, having recently bought a Windows laptop specifically for that purpose. Still, my reading included a number of excellent titles, so I really can't complain.

Quick Summaries

Science Fiction

***Embassytown* by China Miéville**

This is certainly one of the best pieces of pure science fiction I've read in the last several years, topped only by the same author's *The City & The City*. It has the most unusual and intriguing treatment of an alien species I've yet come across. A fascinating concept, brilliantly carried out.

[Review here.](#)

***Civilisations* by Laurent Binet**

Wonderful piece of alternate history, in which the Incas in South America invade and conquer Western Europe. Improbable? Yes, but so was the real history.

[Review here.](#)

Nonfiction

***Unknown Shore: The Lost History of England's Arctic Colony* by Robert Ruby**

A very interesting piece of non-fiction history writing dealing with a largely forgotten colony in the Arctic during the reign of Elizabeth I.

[Review here.](#)

***Alien Oceans* by Kevin Peter Hand**

This is an excellent piece of non-fiction scientific writing discussing the prospects of finding life in the solar system, concentrating on the new understanding that several moons of the larger planets may have oceans of liquid water beneath crusts of ice.

[Review here.](#)

Crime

***Unforgiven* by Sarah Barrie**

This is a fast-paced thriller by an Australian author I hadn't come across before, and I enjoyed it a lot. Both of the main characters are interesting and are

far from stereotypical.

[Review here.](#)

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

Nikki Crutchley is a New Zealand writer, whose books have twice been shortlisted for the Ngaio Marsh Award, which is New Zealand's premier award for crime fiction. Unfortunately, I found this one, *In Her Blood*, to be both disappointing and annoying.

[Review here.](#)

Literary

***Bodies of Light* by Jennifer Down**

This was the winner of last year's Miles Franklin Award, Australia's premier literary award, and right from the start I can say that I think it was a very deserving winner. There's no doubt that Jennifer Down is an Australian writer to watch, and I'll certainly be keeping an eye open for anything else that she writes.

[Review here.](#)

***Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson**

This was a re-read, for the purpose of talking about it on the podcast. Greatly enjoyed doing so, she's a great writer. A main character who dies again and again, to restart her life each time.

[Review here.](#)

Hits and Misses

Best books read since last issue?

I would have to give top ranking to *Bodies of Light*, but *Embassytown* would be a close second. Two very different genres, that's for sure!

Life After Life was wonderful to re-read after a period of 9 years, enjoyed it greatly. So I'll rank it third for this two-month period.

Fourth would be *Civilisations*.

Most disappointing book

This would have to be *In Her Blood*, which I really didn't enjoy much at all.

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APRIL 2023

The Megaloscope is a fanzine from David R. Grigg, published for ANZAPA members and available to anyone else who is interested.

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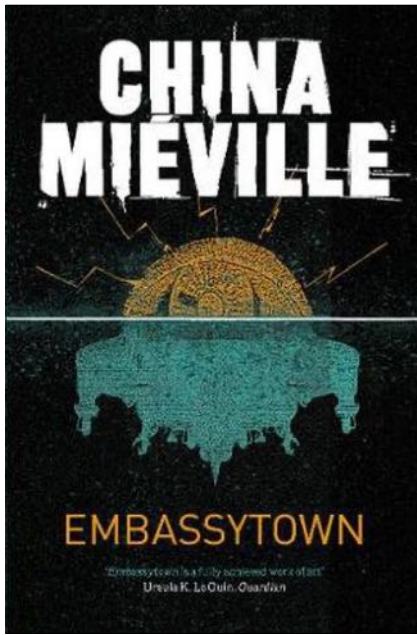
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Science Fiction

Embassytown by China Miéville



My thanks to Murray MacLachlan for recommending this book to me.

This is certainly one of the best pieces of pure science fiction I've read in the last several years, topped only by the same author's *The City & The City*. It has the most unusual and intriguing treatment of an alien species I've yet come across. A fascinating concept, brilliantly carried out.

There's so much to think about in here: about the nature of language; truth and lies; communication and misapprehension; human arrogance, colonialism and exploitation; corporate greed; and drug addiction and dependence.

The story is all told from the first-person viewpoint of Avice Benner Cho, a young woman born in Embassytown, which is a small outpost of humans set on a planet called Ariekeene. Because the humans are living there by the gracious condescension of the Ariekei, the aliens are treated with great respect, and initially we know them only as "the Hosts". Embassytown is an extended embassy compound in the midst of an alien city. It is occupied by ambassadors, their staff and the families of the staff. As the novel opens, the humans have been on the planet for several hundred years. The world-building here is masterly, and the description of the aliens and their strange biologically-based technology (all of their "machines" and even their buildings and factories are living creatures) is fascinating, but it's their *language* which is the key to this book.

After a short prologue, we go back to Avice's childhood. This subtly introduces us to many facts about Embassytown and the aliens. We learn that humans can't breathe the Ariekeene atmosphere: they are kept alive by 'aleoli', plants which emit oxygen,

spread throughout the human enclave. Go much outside that area, as the children dare each other to do, and you begin to strangle on the alien air. It's when one of Avice's friends goes too far, collapses and has to be rescued that Avice meets an adult called Bren, who is to play a significant role in her life. Here also she encounters a Host in person for the first time, and we learn that Bren can understand what it is saying, but that he can't reply and be understood by the Host.

The key to the story is the very, very strange nature of the Ariekei language. They have two different organs involved in communicating, each of which is used to make sounds simultaneously, so that every word has two components. When the humans first arrived, they used their advanced A.I. to quickly learn the Ariekei language, so they could soon interpret what the Hosts were saying. But when the humans tried to reply, using artificial means to make the two sounds simultaneously, the Ariekei didn't understand—indeed, they didn't appear to recognise that *anything at all had been said*. Eventually, more by accident than design, the humans discover that for the Hosts to comprehend speech, there has to be a living, sentient mind behind the sounds being made. But since no single human can produce both sounds at the same moment, this at first seems impossible. The solution the humans come up with is both radical and startling: genetically tailoring and raising human clones to act as Ambassadors. Think of them as identical twins, each of whom is so mentally tuned in to the other that the Ariekei perceive them as a single mind. They are trained to speak simultaneously to generate the two-part Ariekei language.

Since only the Ambassadors are able to speak to the Hosts, there's some doubt whether the Ariekei perceive other humans as even being sentient.

There's more: to the Hosts, to speak and to think are the same thing: they literally cannot speak anything other than the truth because what they speak is pure thought.

All of this, slowly introduced without any indigestible expository lumps, is just background to the critical event, which is what happens when a new Ambassador arrives. This Ambassador, for the first time, has not been born or raised in Embassytown, but has been sent by the corporation which controls the place. I won't give more of the story away, but the arrival of this new Ambassador has profound and completely unexpected consequences, consequences which soon turn out to be utterly disastrous and threaten the survival of everyone in Embassytown.

How Avice, Bren and others deal with these terrible consequences is what fills up the rest of the book. Tension mounts, and the outcome is in doubt for a long while, keeping you turning the pages.

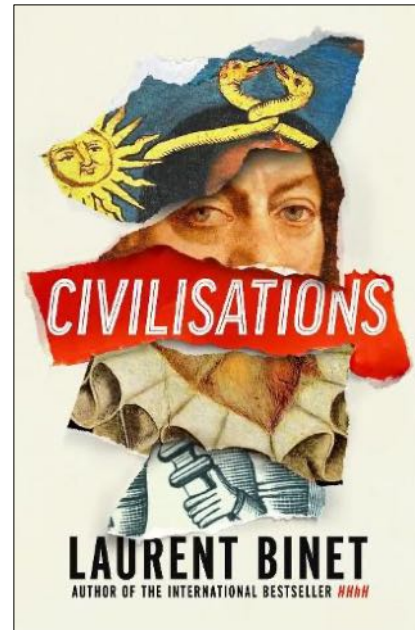
Avice herself has a really interesting and strong character arc: from her childhood, when she's recruited by the Hosts to act as a "simile" (you'll have to read the book to understand this!); through her time away from her home planet working as an "immerser", someone who can navigate through the weird non-space which connects worlds; through her marriage to a man not born in Embassytown, but who is obsessed with the Ariekei language; from being a "floaker", someone idling around not taking life very seriously, to becoming a rebel, a traitor and eventually a saviour.

I just thought this was all great. Highly recommended. In fact I loved it so much, I turned around and read the whole thing again straight away, something I do *very* rarely. And appreciated it just as much the second time through.

Footnote: I see that, although *Embassytown* was nominated for the Best Novel Hugo in 2012, it didn't win, coming second. Also on the list was *Leviathan Wakes* by James S. A. Corey, the first book in *The Expanse* series, which came third. So the actual winner, *Among Others* by Jo Walton, a YA fantasy novel, must either be damn good¹, or else the voters got it completely wrong. Looks like *Among Others* also won the Nebula Award that year.

***Civilisations* by Laurent Binet**

Translated from the French by Sam Taylor.



This is a very clever piece of alternate history, completely and yet plausibly inverting Jared Diamond's classic *Guns, Germs and Steel* about why the European nations so swiftly overcame the long-established civilisations in the Americas.

In this novel, the Inca and then the Aztecs conquer most of Western Europe in the 1500s. Sounds crazy? Perhaps. But then how crazy is it that Francisco Pizarro and his group of only 168 men overcame the long-established and mighty Inca Empire in our timeline? Pretty crazy, that's for sure.

With any alternate history it's always interesting to look for the breaking point, the one incident which shifts the story into a different trouser-leg of time, as Terry Pratchett so memorably called it.

Here, it's what happens to Freydris, the daughter of Eric the Red, who with a large group of Vikings sail west from Greenland to Vinland, where Leif Erikson established a short-lived colony in North America in about the year 1000 CE. For various reasons, Freydris Eriksdottir is expelled from the newly-established settlement there and with a group of followers and supplies including horses and cattle, set off to make their own settlement. Storms drive them south along the North American coast. The Vikings try to settle down and develop good relationships with the local inhabitants, but various things go wrong, including the fact that the Vikings bring with them serious illnesses from the Old World, which devastate the local populations, only sparing a few. So Freydris and her crew are expelled time and time again, moving further and further south before finally finding a resting place in South America, where they are able to establish a permanent colony and interbreed with the locals, to whom they teach the techniques of iron-working

¹ Lucy Sussex, among others, tells me that it is indeed very good. I'll have to get hold of a copy and read it.

and other arts. And of course, the locals who survive have largely become immune to the European diseases the Vikings brought.

The centuries pass until a Spanish-funded adventurer called Christopher Columbus arrives in what we now know as Cuba. We get a long section purporting to be extracts from his journal. In this new timeline, however, the natives are no push-over for the Spaniards. They have iron-tipped arrows and spears and horses, and it's not long before Columbus and his crew are overpowered and captured. Columbus himself dies years later in captivity, nursed in his decline by the Cuban princess Higuénamota, then only a child. She however is adept at learning Columbus' language of Castilian in order to talk to him (he is never able to learn her tongue). Columbus leaves behind his journals, his maps, and the wrecks of his ships. In Europe, no one ever hears from Columbus or his men again, and so no new expeditions are despatched west.

We move forward again in time, but only a few decades. In what is now Peru, a civil war is raging between the brothers Huáscar and Atahualpa. Atahualpa loses this war and is forced north and eventually onto the island of Cuba. Here he meets the beautiful Higuénamota, now the queen. She tells him of the arrival of strange people from the east when she was a child.

You get the idea, I'm sure. Atahualpa and his band are able to rebuild Columbus's ships and (rather improbably) learn how to sail them. He takes a few hundred of his people east and arrive in Lisbon just after it has suffered a major earthquake.

I won't go into much more detail, you should read the book. One thing leads to another and eventually the Inca group take power in Spain, capturing the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and holding him ransom. Ultimately, after Charles's death in a botched rescue attempt, Atahualpa is declared Emperor and for a while peace reigns. And then the Aztecs arrive, having followed the trail the Incas have already blazed...

It's a wonderful concept and very cleverly done.

My criticism is that the book is very uneven. The early parts with Freydris, and particularly Columbus' journal, are well-paced and very interesting. There is some very amusing correspondence between Sir Thomas More and Erasmus about the new religion of the Sun being spread by the Inca (gleefully seized upon by Henry VIII because it permits men to have as many wives as they like). But other parts read rather like a school history textbook and can be rather tedious, particularly if you're not all that familiar with the true history being subverted. And at the end of the book, rather tacked on, is the story of what happens to one Miguel de Cervantes in this new timeline.

Still, all in all a very entertaining read.

Civilisations by Laurent Binet



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*.

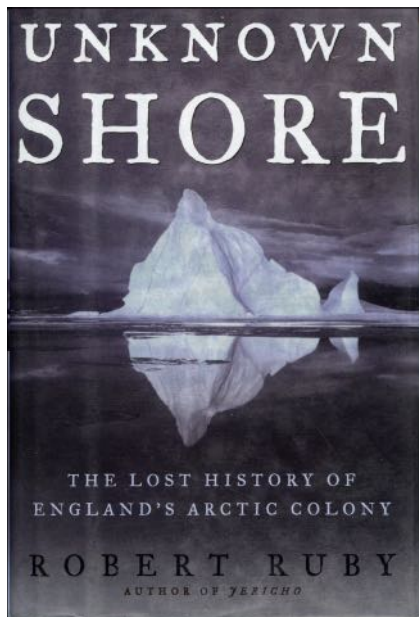
You can get both delivered to your email inbox, or view them in the Substack app.

[Through the Biblioscope](#)

[A Flash in the Pan](#)

Nonfiction

***Unknown Shore: The Lost History of England's Arctic Colony* by Robert Ruby**



A very interesting piece of non-fiction history writing.

There are several levels to the story told here. Furthest back in time is the story of Martin Frobisher in Elizabethan England in the 1570s. He is persuaded that there is a way to reach China (then called Cathay) by sailing over the top of North America. England had been largely excluded from the exploitation of the New World through a series of papal directives which basically carved it up between Spain and Portugal. England was at the time a relatively minor power and at odds with the papacy because of Henry VIII's split with Rome a generation before. Frobisher manages to convince enough investors and gain the blessing of Queen Elizabeth to equip a few ships and set off.

The second level to the story is that of the American Charles Francis Hall in 1859. A journalist and publisher, Hall had long been fascinated by stories of the Arctic. In particular, he became obsessed by trying to find out what had happened to the Franklin Expedition, a much later attempt by Britain to find the mythical Northwest Passage. Franklin and his crew never returned and mystery surrounded what happened to them. Fourteen years later, Charles Hall believed that there was a chance that some at least of Franklin's men might have survived in the north and been taken in by the local natives of the area, then known as "Eskimos" though we now more properly call them Inuit. Hall managed to raise enough money and supplies to set off north, but he couldn't afford his own ship and took passage on a whaler.

The third level of the story is that of the author himself, Robert Ruby, who visited the areas of interest and spent considerable time with the Inuit to research this book.

It's a fascinating story, full of adventure and excitement, and very well written. Here for example is a passage by Ruby describing the environment:

Frobisher Bay and the hills were draped in the moonlight's white silk. The landscape was frozen into white curves and sensual whorls. The bay, in the moonlight in spring, was a plausible setting for a perpetual afterlife cool and spare, economically lit, everything so finely tuned that you heard, or thought you heard, the flapping of a bird's wings as it flew by, and heard the bird's breath.

Martin Frobisher failed (of course) to find a passage to China in the far north, but in his explorations he landed at several places. He treated the Inuit as savages and failed to learn anything from them about survival in the north. He kidnapped an Inuit man, a woman and her child and took them back to England, where they soon died. Still, it's quite remarkable to think of "Eskimos" being in England in the time of "Queen Bess".

However, during their initial voyage, one of Frobisher's men picked up a large black stone on one of the shores they visited. The collection of this stone triggered off a series of further expeditions and disasters because a dubious assay of its material back in England suggested that it was rich in gold. Spoiler, it wasn't! But Frobisher's interest, and that of Queen Elizabeth, turned quickly to the idea of making a fortune by mining this black rock in the Arctic. Further expeditions were mounted, and a short-lived mining colony established on a small island just off what we now know as Canada's Baffin Island.

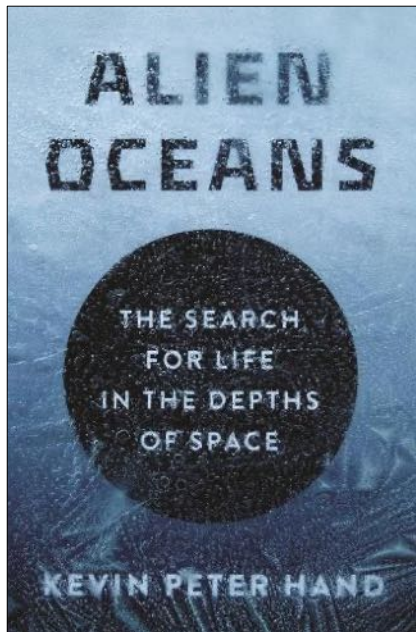
Charles Hall had some success in finding traces of Frobisher's expeditions, but found little of use about Captain Franklin's doomed mission. But he at least was prepared to listen to the Inuit, follow their guidance, and credit what they said, but he treated them as though they were children. I was struck by this passage, referring to the Inuit people who had taken him in and enabled him to survive when otherwise he would certainly have died:

He was Father Hall, as he described himself; they were his children and he wished them to obey him. They had fed, clothed, and housed him, yet he considered them the dependents.

You can only shake your head at such blindness and ignorance, failings certainly not shared by Robert Ruby on his much later expedition to the north.

Each of these interleaved stories is well told and full of interest and unexpected turns. Recommended.

***Alien Oceans* by Kevin Peter Hand**



This is an excellent piece of non-fiction scientific writing discussing the prospects of finding life in the solar system, concentrating on the new understanding that several moons of the larger planets may have oceans of liquid water beneath crusts of ice.

The author writes very clearly for a popular audience and sets out the evidence we have so far which indicates that moons of Jupiter and Saturn like Europa, Ganymede, Titan and Enceladus have deep oceans of salty water below the frozen outer surfaces which we see. He explains why such moons, even far from the sun, can be warm enough inside for liquid water to exist. He raises the prospect that some of these oceans may be in contact with a rocky core, raising the prospect that hydrothermal vents may exist which could provide life with nutrients.

He describes the underwater expeditions on our own planet which discovered such oases of life on Earth: thriving colonies of living creatures far removed from any light coming from the Sun but subsisting on the chemicals and energy coming from hydrothermal vents. He himself has participated in such deep dives, and in fact the book opens with a dramatic passage:

We were stuck on the bottom. Batteries were running low. Our air was running out. We had no way to communicate to the other submersible or to the team on the boat some 10,000 feet above us. We were nestled in the metal sphere of our tiny submersible, perched on some rocks at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

This was my first trip to the ocean floor, and it had the makings to be my last.

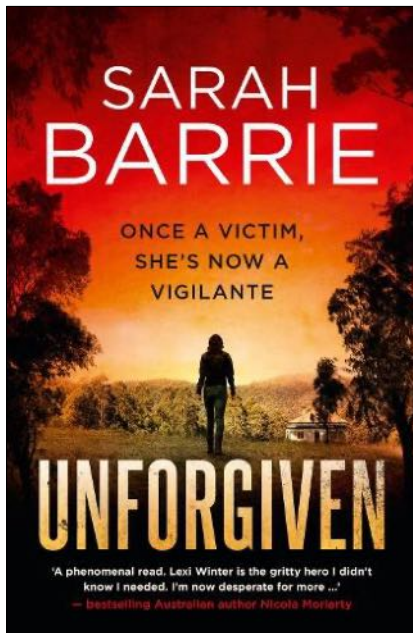
He extends this experience and knowledge to explain why there is every likelihood that such vents exist on icy moons not only in our own Solar

System, but around other stars as well. Perhaps the most common habitat for life in the universe is in such places, and life on the outer surface of a planet the rarity.

I found this to be a really interesting book, and I learned a lot about planetology, biology and our understanding of how life functions and evolves.

Crime

Unforgiven by Sarah Barrie



I hadn't come across this Australian writer before, but my ebook retailer Kobo was promoting a very cheap deal on both this book, and its sequel, *Retribution*, so I thought I would give it a go, and I'm pleased that I did.

Unforgiven is structured in a way I see quite commonly now: two points of view, one told in the first person and one told in the third person.

Here, the first-person narrative is that of Lexi Winter, who it turns out is a sex worker, but a very smart, tough character, hardened by life experiences which we slowly discover. She drinks far too much. She's also very clever with computers. There are obvious similarities with Lisbeth Salander, the main character in Stieg Larsen's Millennium trilogy which begins with *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. But this book is by no means a direct steal of Larsen's work, though it does share the theme of the sexual abuse of children.

As well as her sex work, Lexi uses her knowledge of computers and familiarity with the "Dark Web" to help track down abusers, often by pretending to be an 11 or 12 year old girl, attracting potential groomers on social media. She's doing this to help her younger sister Bailee, who works for a social services department as a caseworker. Bailee wants to get knowledge of abusers who may be targeting young victims who have been referred to her because they are in vulnerable situations.

The other storyline, written in the third person, centres on Detective Inspector Rachael Langley, now in her late 40s. Twenty years previously, she tracked down a pedophile and murderer calling himself "The Spider" and had him imprisoned for life. His name was Thomas Biddle, and he's still in

jail, though now reportedly suffering from terminal cancer. After a retrospective television special about the case, however, Langley is contacted by an anonymous caller who insists that he is in fact The Spider and that she got it wrong twenty years ago. He appears to know many details which give credence to this claim, and then he tells her he's going to commit another abduction and murder of a child, which indeed he does.

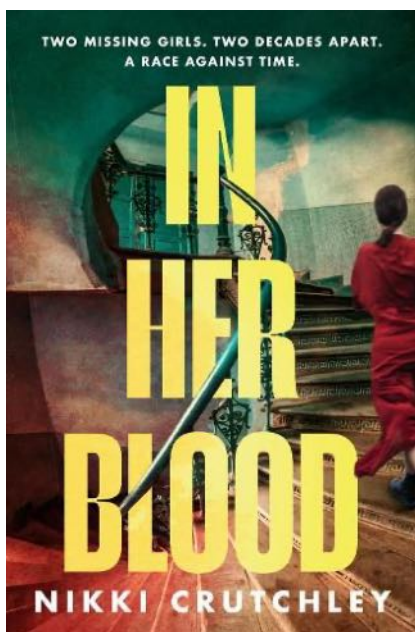
The investigations of these two people, Lexi Winter and Rachel Langley, eventually come together in a satisfying way, and they join forces to track down the man claiming to be The Spider.

This is a fast-paced thriller, and I enjoyed it a lot. Both of the main characters are interesting and are far from stereotypical. Lexi in particular has considerable depth and I liked her cynicism and scepticism of the police procedures.

I do get rather irritated, though, when authors make it appear that a "hacker" can quickly break the passwords on people's computers using some sort of software magic or sheer genius. In reality, it doesn't work that way. The majority of password breaches are done through slow, patient social engineering or phishing.

Setting that aside, however, I'll be rolling on to the sequel, *Retribution* to see how that pans out.

In Her Blood by Nikki Crutchley



Nikki Crutchley is a New Zealand writer, whose books have twice been shortlisted for the Ngaio Marsh Award, which is New Zealand's premier award for crime fiction.

Unfortunately, I found this one, *In Her Blood*, to be both disappointing and annoying, so I won't spend a lot of time on it.

The story is told in three parallel streams, two of them set in the modern day, and the third as a series of flashbacks to events twenty-two years earlier.

As the book opens we're introduced to a teenage girl called Charlie, who wakes to find herself in a dark room. She has no idea where she is and soon finds that she's confined within some kind of cage.

Then we switch to a young woman called Jac Morgan, who is returning to her home town after a seven-year absence. She had left under a cloud, accused of causing a fire in her home which killed her mother, though her father and younger sister Charlie escaped. She's returning now because she's been sent some disturbing texts by her father, telling her that Charlie has gone missing. But when Jac arrives she finds that her father is dead, apparently having fallen into a lake while drunk (his habitual state). No one knows where Charlie and the police aren't very interested.

Eventually, Jac, who is broke, finds her way to an old hotel on the hill above the town. There she encounters Iris Gilmore, the strange old lady who owns it. Iris offers Jac a job and accommodation. This is apparently deeply resented by the old lady's daughter Lisa, who looks after her aging and sometimes bewildered mother.

Throughout the book we get flashbacks from Lisa's point of view about her childhood during which she

was treated with irrational cruelty by her mother, who greatly favoured her eldest daughter Paige. But 22 years ago Paige went missing, never to be heard of again, though her mother insists, even after all this time, that she'll return one day. It's clear she's drifting into senile dementia.

Lisa's story is interleaved with short chapters from Charlie's point of view, still locked up somewhere, brought food and water while she's asleep so she never sees her captor. And also chapters from Jac's point of view as she tries to find out where Charlie has gone, without much progress.

It's pretty obvious from early on that Lisa and Iris, and the old hotel, must have something to do with Charlie's disappearance in the modern narrative, and that she's probably imprisoned in or near the hotel. You're just waiting for the details to be revealed. So I found that the story dragged on quite a bit and I had to push myself to keep on reading. The solution to the mystery of what happened to both Charlie and to Paige really relies on two people being pretty much insane, and not for me in a very believable way. And nothing of this comes about through Jac's actions, she's pretty much just a bystander and observer.

Can't recommend this one.

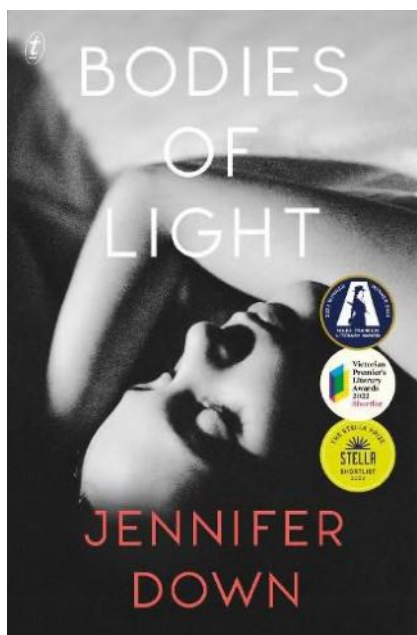


If you've enjoyed my reviews here, you might like to listen to Perry Middlemiss and myself discuss books, movies and TV in our podcast, *Two Chairs Talking*. It comes out every three weeks.

[Visit our website for more information.](#)

Literary

Bodies of Light by Jennifer Down



This was the winner of last year's Miles Franklin Award, Australia's premier literary award, and right from the start I can say that I think it was a very deserving winner.

Interestingly, however, it was also nominated for last year's Davitt Award, given by Sisters in Crime Australia to honour the best *crime* novel by an Australian woman writer. I found this nomination to be surprising, and after reading the book I'm still puzzled by it. It's certainly true that crimes are committed in the novel, mostly with the main character as their victim, and that the main character is *accused* of a terrible crime, but it's hard to see it as a "crime novel".

Anyway, enough blather, let's get to what the book is about. Now I'm going to be giving away spoilers, I don't think that I can avoid doing that, so be warned.

Very quick plot summary: *Bodies of Light* is the life story of an Australian woman, born in the early 1970s in Melbourne, all written from a first person point of view.

It's superbly written. The narrator's story strongly engages our sympathy as we follow her through the traumas of her life. But she's definitely a survivor, determined to overcome the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" as Hamlet has it.

The novel opens with a woman called Holly, who lives in a small community in Burlington, Ohio, in the United States. She has just received a message from someone on Facebook. The man who sent it is a stranger to her, she doesn't recognise his name. He says he's looking for someone called Maggie Sullivan, and that he lived with her for a couple of

years when they were both kids. He's seen a photo online in which Holly appears and he has been struck by how similar she looks to Maggie, who went missing in 1998. Is she a relation?

Holly reacts to this message with a degree of panic, and so we know immediately that Holly is Maggie Sullivan, and that she desperately doesn't want to be found. The question of *why*, and what brought her to this point is answered by the rest of the book.

We get a series of flashbacks of Maggie's life, which as I've already indicated hasn't been an easy one. Her parents are drug addicts, and her mother dies from an overdose when the child is very young. A few years later her father is imprisoned and, she ends up in institutional care and lives in a series of share houses and foster homes. She is sexually abused in these places, and raped at the age of 11. As she moves into her teens, she starts to experiment with drugs, despite knowing the effect they had on her parents. Eventually, though, she finds a safe foster parent who encourages her to study and try for university, at which she succeeds but drops out fairly soon.

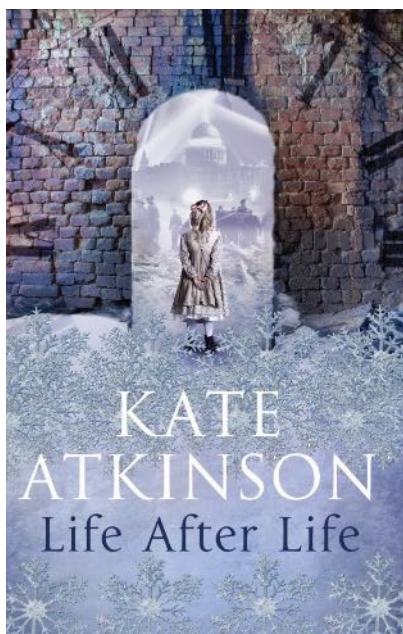
The key turning point of her life (spoiler here!) is that after she is married she has a series of babies,² all of whom die in infancy or early childhood, presumably from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It's hard to read this section of the book as we follow how Maggie deals with these increasingly shattering tragedies for her and her husband, who is driven to despair. After the final death, she is interviewed by the police and eventually charged with infanticide, purely on the basis that "once is a tragedy, twice is a coincidence, three times is a crime". This section of the book relates to several similar real-life cases such as those of Kathleen Folbigg in Australia and Sally Clark in England. Here, I suppose, is the major crime component of the novel, though we have no doubt that Maggie is innocent. Looking back at her life history, however, she knows it will count against her, and that she's very likely to be convicted. So she finds a way to escape. As I say, she's a survivor.

The author really engages us with Maggie's story, and it's both a fascinating character study and an indictment of institutional responses to children who are in bad circumstances, sometimes taking them into much *worse* circumstances which will affect the rest of their lives.

Top notch, I was really impressed by it, and as I say I think it's a very worthy winner of the Miles Franklin Award. There's no doubt that Jennifer Down is an Australian writer to watch, and I'll certainly be keeping an eye open for anything else that she writes.

² Is it *three* or is it *four* babies who die? This is the problem with borrowing books from the library, it's been returned and I can't check!

Life After Life by Kate Atkinson



I first read this book when it came out in 2014. I just finished re-reading it because Perry Middlemiss and I are going to be talking on our [podcast](#) about both this novel, and the excellent BBC television series based on it. That episode will be out in mid April. I may then publish a transcript of our discussion here in *The Megaloscope*. So I'm not going to do a long review here, though the book certainly deserves it.

For now, let me just say that this is a really excellent read—I rated it five stars on Goodreads, a rare accolade from me.

The book has a fascinating premise: the protagonist, Ursula Todd, lives her life over and over again. Each time she dies, she is reborn as a baby at the exact same date and time, in 1910. Ursula dies many times, for many different reasons. When she is reborn, she doesn't remember her previous life, but she does have vague premonitions and feelings which allow her sometimes to avoid whatever went wrong in her previous life.

We follow Ursula, episodically, through the first half of the twentieth century with a major focus on the Second World War. This is the best depiction I've yet read of what the London Blitz must really have been like to live through—devastatingly awful. And we also get a deep insight into the lives of a middle-class family between the two World Wars. All of the characters are really interesting, and the writing is superb. Highly recommended.

Life After Life won the 2013 Costa Award for best novel and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize and a bunch of other awards.

I'm a very keen fan of Kate Atkinson's work. I've read every novel she's published, and there's a collection of her shorter fiction, *Not the End of the World* which I must get hold of. Last issue of *The*

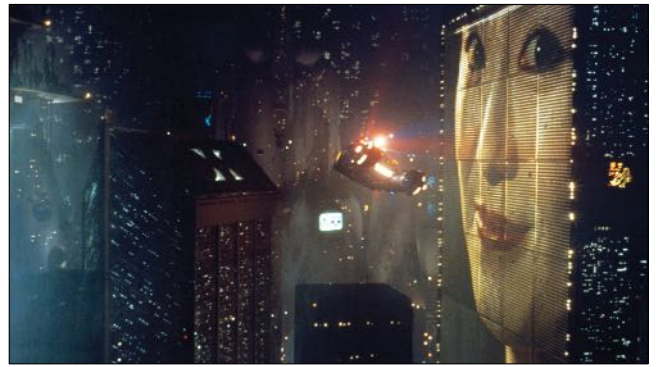
Megaloscope I reviewed her most recent release, *Shrines of Gaiety*, also very good, though not quite as good at this, which is her masterpiece.

Atkinson is almost exactly my own age—so she's now 71 years old—but I really hope she keeps on writing. The good news is that, looking at her Wikipedia entry it looks as though there is another novel in the works, titled *The Line of Sight*. That will be another “must buy” for me.

LinkTree

I'm not a big fan of QR codes, but this helps fill up a blank. Scan this with your phone to go to my Linktree profile with links to all my online stuff. (Or just click [this link](#) which is much easier, really!)





Blade Runners

THIS IS THE TRANSCRIPT OF A DISCUSSION I had with Perry Middlemiss on our podcast a few years ago. I thought it might follow on nicely from my article last issue about Ridley Scott's *Alien* movies.

DAVID:

So we mentioned last time that we just passed November 2019, which is a memorable date because it's the date in the future in which the movie *Blade Runner* is meant to be set.

It's quite interesting, really, isn't it, that in a lot of these movies, I'm thinking about *2001 A Space Odyssey*, and this one, the people who write these movies sort of think that the future is going to happen a hell of a sight quicker than it actually has been doing. I mean, here we are in 2019, and the future is nothing like the one in *Blade Runner* as yet. You actually can perhaps imagine, possibly in other 50 years, we might see something similar to this on our own.

The same with *2001*, which came out, of course, pretty much the same year as the men landed on the moon, or it might be the year before, that that future of people having a lunar base and so on, and satellites and Pan-Am flying you up into orbit and so on, that never happened by 2001, that's the same. So yeah, it's interesting that we tend to be over-optimistic when we think about the speed of change in the future.

But anyway, so we're going to talk about both *Blade Runner* and its sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*. So Perry, do you want to talk about *Blade Runner*? I have a few things I'd like to say about that, but you can start off if you like.

PERRY:

Blade Runner, the original film got a pretty poor reception when it first came out. I think more than anything because the producers, this was a film that basically was very, very different. We hadn't seen this future before in film, this was very, very strange. And I think that the movie studios basically got a bit scared of it. They didn't know what sort of reception it was going to get. The initial response

from people that they showed it to wasn't good.

And yet, in hindsight, if you go back and have a look at it, you strip away all the artifice, all the stuff around the outside. And it's basically pretty much a classic noir plot. And basically it's a private detective, if you like, looking for somebody, trying to take somebody down.

But it's just the world in which it's set, which is just so absolutely peculiar. Hadn't seen that at all.

It reminded me after a while of Gibson's *The Sprawl* that came out in 1984. Now, I don't know whether Gibson was influenced by *Blade Runner*, but I can tell you that just about every other movie that came out post-*Blade Runner* in the science fiction world, was influenced by him. It's a really major, major film.

And you think of that and you think of *Alien* and the work that was being done at that time has such a ripple effect all the way right through.

DAVID:

Of course, this is Ridley Scott again, isn't it?

PERRY:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Now, the interesting thing about it, of course, is it's based on the book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick. You can totally understand

the fact that a movie studio is not going to call a film *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. People—the general Joe Bloggs out in the street are going to go, “What the hell is this?” So they call it *Blade Runner*.

But if you actually go and have a look at the novel, the word “Blade” never appears. And “Run” is only what somebody would just... Anyway, it might appear once. The term “Blade” isn't there at all.

Now, I was having a think about this, but I cannot find it anywhere. But I seem to recall reading at the time that the movie studio actually had purchased the rights to two SF novels at the same time. One of them was the film that came out of the book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*.

And the other was *The Blade Runner* by Alan E. Norse.

Now, the Alan E. Norse novel is a novel set in the year 2014, which deals with the illegal supply of medical equipment for a rogue surgeon who's helping out people that are deemed not eligible for medical help. And I think what happened was that they decided for whatever reason that the term “Blade Runner” was a good one that they could use on top of the film. But it seems to have no connection to it at all. And it's just a peculiar...

DAVID:

Yeah, so, I mean, the basic plot is pretty simple. The basic plot is pretty simple to understand. There have been not quite a race of men, but a group of androids created by the Tyrell Corporation, who are creating these simulated humans, if you like, who work as slaves or as soldiers.

They're very like humans, but because they need to keep them under control, the Tyrell Corporation has given them a limited lifespan of four years, because they're scared of what they might do if they live longer than that.

And there's a group of these replicants, as they're called, who've come to Earth, slaughtered some people on a spaceship, come to Earth, and they're really there to try and get in touch with the guy who's running the Tyrell Corporation and convince him to extend their lives. They don't want to die after four years, like no one would, of course.

But they're kind of gone rogue and they're quite dangerous. The film opens with a scene of one of these replicants killing someone who's trying to investigate him and determine whether he's a human or a replicant, and the replicant kills him.

Then we meet Dekker, who's supposedly retired, but who is supposed to hunt down these rogue replicants and kill them, gets rid of them. And so he's tasked with finding these four replicants who've been, who've landed on Earth.



But the twist in the plot is that Dekker is also introduced to a young woman called Rachel, and it fairly quickly becomes clear that Rachel also is a replicant and who doesn't know it. At the first, as the movie opens, she doesn't know that she's a replicant, but she actually does discover that, and of course is devastated by this knowledge.

And then the film plays out as to Dekker hunting down these characters, at the same time falling in love with this character, Rachel, and what's he going to do about that? He really should be killing her too. So there's some interesting emotional tensions involved in the movie.

PERRY:

It's a very good film about what it is to be human.

DAVID:

Yes, yes.

PERRY:

And it's stunning to watch, to look at first off, and basically the cinematography is just a sort of astounding.

There's a couple of little twee pieces in it, which I really found a bit meh, when they were in the Bradbury building with some of those little sort of, almost, automatons that are sort of wandering around.

I thought some of that was a little bit meh.

DAVID:

Oh, yeah.

PERRY:

But other than that, I mean, that's sort of a very minor criticism of the whole overall thing.

It's a, as I said, a classic noir plot. Harrison Ford is the perfect person for it, because he's got that sort of face, and he's got that sort of chiselled, worn down, noir-ish detective look about him. He fits it brilliantly, and he was on a high as well, and he'd be doing some fairly big stuff at that time.

You think about all those things that he was doing with, after he appeared in *American Graffiti*, and then he was in *Star Wars*, and then he was in *Indiana Jones*, and how these, those last three films, have rippled down through public culture all the way down through this period for the last 45 years.

DAVID:

He's been in been some very significant films.

PERRY:

He has indeed, and it's really quite astounding. And so it's interesting that we're getting him coming back to all of these films as well.

I mean, I don't know, *Indiana Jones* ones were a series going all the way right through, but he's come back into the latest run of the *Star Wars* stuff, and he then comes back into *Blade Runner 2049*.

DAVID:

That's right.

Before we get onto that, though, there's just, there are some really interesting things in the first movie. I mean, there's some great acting that you talk about, Harrison Ford, and the young woman who plays Rachel: Sean Young is the actress, I think is brilliant in the movie.

But most of all is one of the replicants, Rutger Hauer. And he's great, and of course there's the famous, classic death scene where he gives this speech which is dubbed "Tears in the Rain", and that really has become a classic piece of cinematography. It's brilliantly acted, the the pacing of that is just very, very well done.

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe.
Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion.
I watched sea beings glitter in the dark near the
Tannhouser Gate.
All those moments will be lost in time.
Like tears in rain.

Time to die.

There are some interesting things in it that having rewatched it recently which I found really quite interesting.

Firstly, I think we have to acknowledge that there's a fair bit of misogyny in the movie. For a start, Dekker actually only successfully kills the *female* replicants before.

PERRY:

That's an interesting point.

DAVID:

He kills Zora and he kills Prist. In fact, it's Rachel who kills Leon. And of course Dekker never manages to kill Roy Batty, who nearly kills Dekker himself.

So that's interesting. There's a few disturbing things like that.

There's a scene with Rachel where Dekker forces her to stay. She's going to run away from his apartment. He forces her back into his apartment and then proceeds to start kissing her and [forcing his] attentions on her. Which I think is a bit strong, certainly by today's standards, anyway.

There are some other interesting things in it. You remember the bit where Leon and Roy Batty get hold of the guy who's making the eyes. It's in this really cold environment. They take off his cold suit.

And just absolutely out of nowhere. Batty quotes this bit of poetry.

Fiery the angels fell.
Deep thunder rolled around their shores,
Burning with the fires of orc.

Which is lovely bit of stuff. But what's it got to do with anything?

PERRY:

What's it from?

DAVID:

It's actually from William Blake. It's actually a butchered quote because in the original William Blake it's "Fiery the angels rose". But in Roy Batty's thing he goes "Fiery the angels fell". Don't know whether that's a deliberate mistake or just a mistake.

But it's out of a William Blake poem called "America, a Prophecy". Which is full of very strange... I mean some of the William Blake stuff is very strange. But what is Batty doing saying that and then [inaudible]?

PERRY:

Well, there's connections there. American philosophy. Prophecy. When you think about it We're dealing with A.I. and the future.

DAVID:

It's interesting.

And then there's that silly bit where Dekker zooms into the photograph. He finds this photograph and zooms into it. And zooms into it. And zooms into it. And zooms into it. Perfect. Absolutely infinite resolution in this thing. And then there's a particular part where he keeps zooming in and actually manages to look behind a piece of foreground footage or something.

What? That's so...

And the other thing which I find really odd. Which is kind of like a theme which runs through this movie and the next movie. Is that Dekker talks to people in English and they respond in a foreign language. Different foreign languages. Which he understands. But then they're supposed to understand his English. But they're responding in their own language. That happens in both movies. It's really quite interesting. I don't get that.

PERRY:

The original film, it's hard to know which version to watch. Because there was the original cinema release and then there was a director's cut that came out later on.

DAVID:

I've seen that one too. That was the one I just watched.

PERRY:

And then a final cut that came out later on. I believe the final cut is the one that people say is the one that's closest to what Scott really wanted to deliver.

But because he had a butcher for the studio in the first instance, he had to put a voice over. Voice over narration over the top. Which I think is terrible. It really ruins the film because it basically sort of assumes that nobody can figure out what's going on.

They were obviously just scared that they had a lemon on their hands. And while it didn't do very well originally, it has become a cult classic. It's become a major classic film.

And if you would look at it now in terms of science fiction films of the 20th century, it's right up there. Because it's got so many little bits and pieces in it that are just rippled down through the rest of the culture.

It's fantastic.

DAVID:

It's certainly a classic.

And then we move on to the sequel. Which is *Blade Runner 2049*, which features Ryan Gosling as essen-



tially as a replicant. But a new model replicant who is no longer quite so dangerous. They have means of keeping them under control.

And we start with him liberating... What's the term they use?

PERRY:

Retiring.

DAVID:

Retiring this old replicant who is living by himself as a farmer in some remote locality.

But then there's some interesting things happen about an old dead tree that's being propped up in this guy's backyard. And beneath the roots of the tree is a box very deep. And inside the box are bones.

And it gradually becomes clear that there's been a child born. The bones are of a woman who died in childbirth. But it turns out that that person, that mother who gave birth to the child was in fact a replicant herself.

And so the idea that replicants can give birth is kind of... is shocking to everyone. It's either a miracle or there's something very odd going on.

So that's where the movie starts.

And then K [the Ryan Gosling character] goes on and investigates and investigates and investigates.



And things come to light.

So it's interesting. I don't like it anywhere near as much as the first movie. And the reason really is that it's quite a good action movie. But it tries... to me, it tries way too hard to be atmospheric. There's a whole lot of stuff in there which is just there purely for atmosphere. The whole business in the city where he's trying to locate Dekker, the Harrison Ford character.

And he visits the city which is apparently being hit by a neutron bomb or something, and it's been deserted. There's only Harrison Ford essentially living in the city. But the atmosphere is a bit like Sydney at the moment I think. It's all orange skies and deep, deep, deep atmosphere. But there's kind of all this weird stuff in there. Like he's flying his little flying car. And there's all these huge gigantic statues of naked women, some which are broken apart and some which are whole.

Then he lands and there's a, he finds a bee landing on him. There's this whole set of hives of bees. And again, what this got to do with anything?

And then he finally finds Dekker and goes on from there.

So it's interesting and it connects interestingly with the first movie. But to me it just tries too hard to be atmospheric.

And then right at the end, I know I'm hogging the conversation here Perry, but I'll give you a chance at a moment. But right in the end I think it just descends into schmaltz. The Americans love schmaltz. And the end of this movie to me is just schmaltz.

But what the hell?

PERRY:

Didn't you think the ending of the first one was?

DAVID:

No!

PERRY:

Well, he flies off into the sunset with her.

DAVID:

Well, in the... In the director's cut version I saw, he doesn't fly off into the sunset with her. They leave together, they leave his apartment together. But you don't know what the result's going to be.

In their minds is ringing the thing that the character Gaff says, which is,

"It's a pity she has to die, but then don't all of us?"

That's kind of nicely ambiguous, I think, in that particular version. But in the cinematic release, they

all fly off and they're all going to live happily ever after.

PERRY:

Well, I actually like it a lot more than you do. I can see this.

There's some interesting connections between the two, because Ridley Scott acts as an executive producer. So he probably had overall control over the whole thing.

And it's got the same script writer.

DAVID:

Ah, that's interesting.

PERRY:

A person by the name of Hampton Fancher, which actually sounds like a pseudonym, but I don't believe that it is. And he wrote the original screenplay based on the original novel for *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

And then it got changed and changed and it came back to him. But he's now credited as the major script writer of the first one, and also for the second one. So there's a solid connection there.

We've got the characters running through, so Ford is back.

And this whole thing...

I think we can talk about this. This whole thing about from the first one was Harrison Ford a replicant or not. I've watched that film a couple of times and I've gone there looking for clues. I can't find any. I think people just made it up.

DAVID:

No, Rachel, at one stage says, "Have you done this test?" The test that determines whether you're a replicant or not. "Have you done the test yourself?" And he actually doesn't answer that. So it's kind of deliberately ambiguous.

PERRY:

Oh yes, I think it's just a furphy.

DAVID:

But I think by the time we get to the second movie, I don't think there's any doubt.

I mean, in fact, it kind of doesn't work if he's not a real human. Because the whole premise of the second movie is a real human has had a child with a real replicant, someone who's definitely a replicant.

And the child exists in the world. So what is this going to mean for the whole race of replicants, as it were?

PERRY:

I liked the pacing of the second film. A lot of films that you see these days, especially if they are action or detective stuff, it's like, bang, bang, bang, bang, there's one cut, there's another cut, there's another cut.

In this one, they hold the scene. Some of the ones you thought...

DAVID:

It's very slow.

PERRY:

It's slow placed, it's slow editing. But I didn't mind that.

I went to see it in the cinema and it was really bloody loud when it was on there. And just watching it recently on the Blu-Ray, it's pretty loud on the Blu-Ray as well. But the score has basically... sort of gives echoes of the score in the first film.

DAVID:

It's by Vangelis.

PERRY:

It's by Vangelis. This second one wasn't, of course. But there's just a lot of things that hark back to the original. The opening scene.

DAVID:

I actually like most of the start of the second movie, but then, to me, it descends.

PERRY:

Oh, OK. I just think there's a lot of things that are there. There's a character that's a replicant, or maybe a replicant, or at least she plays a prostitute who is very... I looked at her today and I thought, oh, very similar to the character played by... was it Daryl Hanna that played [the character] Pris in the first one.

So, very, very similar to that. So there's a lot of pieces that go back from the 2049 back to the original. And seeing the two of them together, certainly, I think that the flow of it just goes all the way through.

I think that there's the cinematography is truly excellent. You don't like some of it, but I do.

DAVID:

Oh no, I think it's... I thought it was really, really good film to look at.

PERRY:

Yes, absolutely. And it follows the approach that was held in that first one, so it carries on with the same sort of thing. We've moved further down into our



eco-catastrophe. And Los Angeles is now completely surrounded by walls on the sea side, because the seas are risen up too much. It's a shocking place to live in, and it's just disgusting, and the sprawl is still there, and it's actually gone a little bit further. That city sprawl that goes all the way through California seems to have evolved a little bit, but not too much. It's still recognisable as what it was from the original.

So, I thought that... I thought it was a good... I thought it was a good sequel. It's very difficult to get to the point where you're going to do a really good [sequel] of an original. I mean, basically, the only one that I can really think of, and my kids will be all over me because of this because I keep on talking about it, is that *Godfather Part II* is probably as good as *Godfather Part I*. But I don't know of any other sequels that are really quite up to it. When you've got the first one, which is iconic, what do you do with the second one?

Yes, it may be down a little bit, but I don't have a problem with this film at all. I don't feel that it is... I don't think that's a poor film by any stretch of the imagination.

DAVID:

Oh yeah, it's not boring. I think I enjoyed the start of it, but the ending I really thought was disappointing. The ending... we might as well give away a spoiler. The ending is essentially Harrison Ford finally being introduced to his child.

And poor old K, he's kind of lying in the snow, dying outside while he does this. And that's the end of the film. Harrison Ford meets with his child, end of story.

And it just seemed to me to be very schmaltzy. A tear-jerker. Here's the father who's been separated from his child ever since she was born.

PERRY:

I think you've been a bit too cynical about this. Sometimes I think that... I think a little bit of... I think endings like that are fine. I don't have a major problem with it. I hope they don't do anything else. They really do need to leave it there. It's done. Done and dusted.

The interesting thing, director of this, Villeneuve, also directed *Arrival*.

DAVID:

Oh yes, I thought [that] was very good.

PERRY:

And I thought that actually was a better version of the material than the original story. That's just my view. Because a lot of people like the original story. I read the original. You haven't read it?

DAVID:

No.

PERRY:

I've read the original. Now that I've seen the film I can probably go back and understand what the heck was going on.

But anyway. He's a very good director. He also directed *Sicario*.

DAVID:

I'm not sure I know that one.

PERRY:

This is basically Emily Blunt. It's sort of an action film set on the US-Mexican border. Where basically the authorities in the US do a raid into Mexico to basically arrest a drug king and to bring him back for trial. And basically start a war.

It's quite a good action film. Really quite excellent.

I thought Gosling was great in *2049* I thought that he was a perfect foil for Harrison Ford. And to the extent that you could basically put them as father and son. Or at least couldn't you? There's a bit of a subplot in there that is he or isn't he. But Gosling is great in this.

I think that I've seen him in a few things. And I've actually quite liked him a lot.

DAVID:

Have you seen *First Man*?

PERRY:

No, I still haven't watched that. I've watched *Drive*, which I thought was quite good. But I haven't seen *First Man* yet.

DAVID:

It was interesting because I saw *First Man* quite recently. *First Man* is a biopic of Neil Armstrong. Ryan Gosling plays Neil Armstrong as this very buttoned-up, emotionally buttoned-up character. And I thought there were a lot of similarities really because throughout *2049*, he really is quite buttoned up. It's partly because he's supposed to be a replicant or an android. And his response is really buttoned down because he can't afford to let his emotions out that he may have. And he keeps them right under control. So there's actually a lot of similarities in the emotional delivery of that character between those two films.

So that was interesting.

PERRY:

Well, I think basically I enjoyed *2049*. I can understand where people might think, "Well, maybe not...It's not up to the standard of the first one".

I'm happy to admit that it isn't up to the standard of the first one. But as I said, hard to get up to that level of an iconic film. But it did a pretty damn good job of that.

DAVID:

Fair enough. I enjoyed watching it. But I was just disappointed at the end of it because I thought it left a heck of a lot of questions unanswered. And it's just this kind of, to me, overly emotional ending

which I didn't much like.

I could list all the questions that are left unanswered, but there's no point because no one's ever going to answer them.

[laughter]

No, but it wasn't a bad movie.

PERRY:

That's good.

DAVID:

Well, we might end up there.

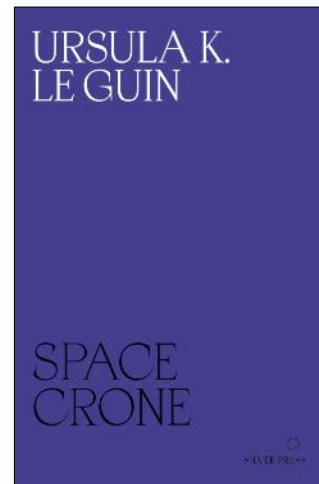
The first draft of this transcript was generated by Whisper.cpp, a version of Open AI's Whisper software ported to C++ and optimised for running on Apple Silicon.

WANT TO READ



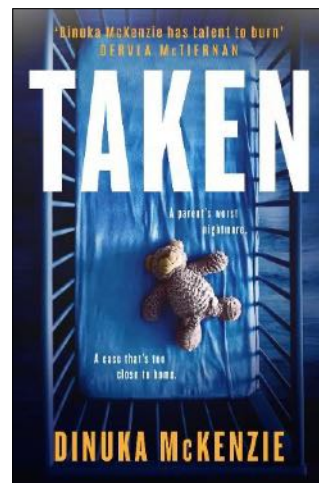
These are some new-ish releases which have caught my eye, and many of them have ended up on my “want to read” list or worse (from my point of view) on my “want to buy” list!

***Space Crone* by Ursula K. Le Guin**



Celebrated author Ursula K. Le Guin witnessed the rebellions and upheavals of the twentieth century, including women’s liberation, the civil rights movement and anti-war and environmental activism. Spanning fifty years of her life and work fighting for social and environmental justice, *Space Crone* brings together Le Guin’s writings on feminism and gender for the first time. Gathering speeches, essays and stories, *Space Crone* offers new insights into her imaginative, multi-species feminist consciousness: from its roots in her ecological and anti-war concerns, to her self-education about racism and her writing on motherhood and ageing.

Ursula Le Guin was a wonderful writer, teacher and thinker. Just about everything she ever wrote is well worth reading and contemplating.

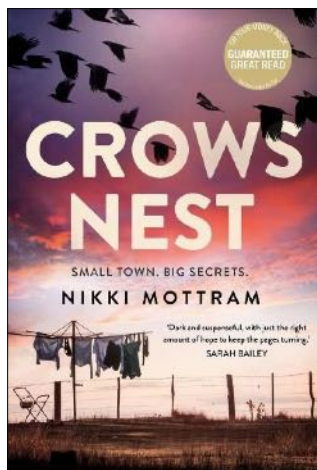


***Taken* by Dinuka McKenzie**

Detective Sergeant Kate Miles is back from maternity leave and struggling on multiple fronts - the pressures of a second child, financial strain from her husband losing his job, and a corruption scandal that may involve her father.

When an infant goes missing, Kate finds herself fronting a high-profile and emotionally fraught case. Was baby Sienna removed from her bassinet by an unknown abductor or is the answer much closer to home?

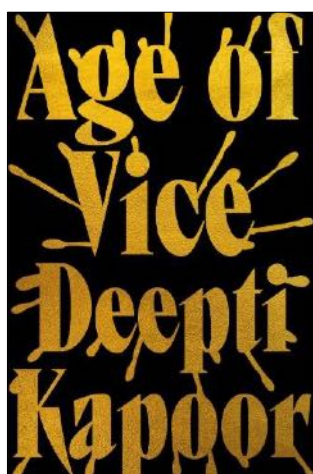
Dinuka McKenzie's debut novel, *The Torrent*, was pretty good, so I'll certainly be checking this one out.



Crows Nest by Nikki Mottram

Fleeing problems in her own marriage, child protection worker Dana Gibson leaves Sydney for a job in the Queensland town of Toowoomba. Her first house call is to nearby Crows Nest to assess the children of Sandra Kirby, which results in her getting both her new boss and a local detective offside. Dana soon learns that, in the country, city rules do not apply.

More interesting-looking crime fiction from an Australian author.

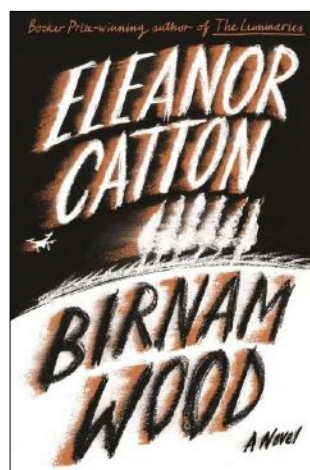


Age of Vice by Deepti Kapoor

Equal parts crime thriller and family saga, transporting readers from the dusty villages of Uttar Pradesh to the urban energy of New Delhi, *Age of Vice* is an intoxicating novel of gangsters and lovers, false friendships, forbidden romance, and the consequences of corruption. It is binge-worthy entertainment at its literary best.

I'm sure that I ought to be reading more by writers from other countries. This one looks particularly

interesting.

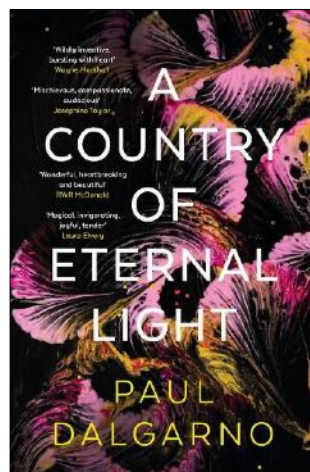


Birnam Wood by Eleanor Catton

A gripping psychological thriller from Eleanor Catton, the Booker Prize-winning author of *The Luminaries*, *Birnam Wood* is Shakespearean in its wit, drama, and immersion in character. A brilliantly constructed consideration of intentions, actions, and consequences, it is an unflinching examination of the human impulse to ensure our own survival.

Birnam Wood is on the move ...

I really enjoyed Catton's *The Luminaries*. This is her first novel since then, and it sounds very interesting. A "must buy", I think.



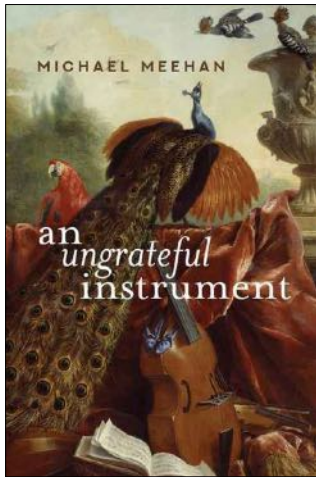
A Country of Eternal Light by Paul Dalgarno

Margaret Bryce, deceased mother of twins, has been having a hard time since dying in 2014. These days she spends time with her daughters – Eva in Madrid, and Rachel and her family in Melbourne – and her estranged husband, Henry, in Aberdeen. Mostly she enjoys the experience of revisiting the past, but she's tiring of the seemingly random events to which she repeatedly bears witness. There must be something more to life, she thinks. And death.

A poignant, utterly original and bitingly funny novel about complicated grief and how we remain wanted by our loved ones, dead or alive.

Sounds intriguing!

I haven't read very much of Rushdie's work, I'm afraid. I think I've only read *Shalimar the Clown*. He's an author I really should spend some more

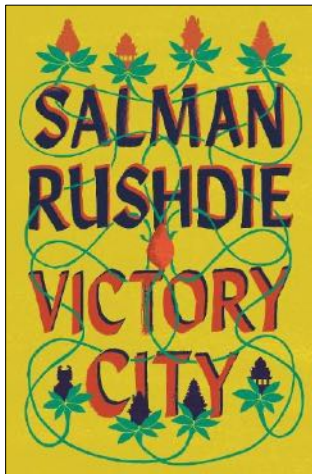


***An Ungrateful Instrument* by Michael Meehan**

At its heart *An Ungrateful Instrument* is a novel that portrays a son's struggle to be more than a mere instrument of the father's ambition. Antoine Forqueray and later his son Jean-Baptiste, were each brought up as child prodigies to the court of Louis XIV. Together, they were said to be the only musicians in France who could play the father's brilliant, eccentric music for the viola da gamba. In an imaginative masterstroke the story is told by Jean-Baptiste's highly attuned deaf-mute sister, Charlotte-Elisabeth.

This is a novel that can almost be heard like music, as it soars in language, theme, and a wisdom that both embodies and transcends its period setting.

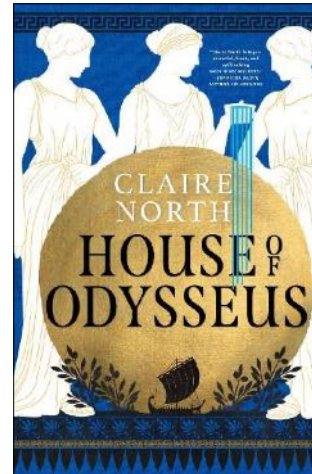
I don't read a lot of historical fiction, but this one sounds worthwhile.



***Victory City* by Salman Rushdie**

The epic tale of a woman who breathes a fantastical empire into existence, only to be consumed by it over the centuries - from the transcendent imagination of Booker Prize-winning, internationally bestselling author Salman Rushdie.

Brilliantly styled as a translation of an ancient epic, this is a saga of love, adventure, and myth that is in itself a testament to the power of storytelling.



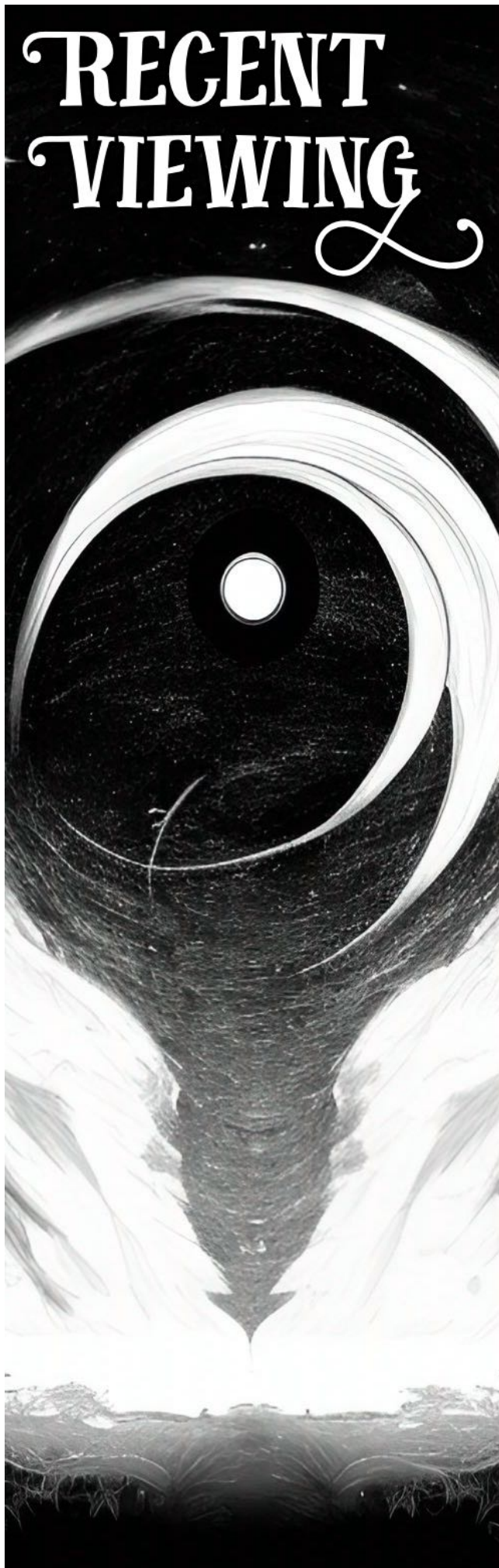
time on. This one certainly looks interesting.

***House of Odysseus* by Claire North**

This is the story of Penelope of Ithaca, famed wife of Odysseus, as it has never been told before. Beyond Ithaca's shores, the whims of gods dictate the wars of men. But on the isle, it is the choices of the abandoned women - and their goddesses - that will change the course of the world.

Due out on 24 August 2023.

This is the sequel to *Ithaca*, which I read earlier this year. I'm a big, big Claire North fan, so this will be a "must buy" even in hardcover. By the way, I really like this cover, and the way the word "of" mimics the symbol for the female gender.



AS USUAL, we haven't watched very much recently. Because we'd resubscribed to Apple TV+ in order to watch the second season of *Slow Horses*, though, we also started watching:

Severance (Apple TV+)



This is a *very* strange show, which just gets weirder and weirder with every episode. It's directed by Ben Stiller and Aoife McArdle.

The concept seems fairly simple: in the near-future, a corporation comes up with a way to implant a chip in the brains of its workers which institutes a complete separation of their memories of work and home life. The declared purpose of this is to enforce workplace security. Why would anyone submit to this procedure? Well, they might have things in their personal life they want to be able to forget for a while; or they may not want to take their work hassles home with them.

That's the case with Mark Scout (played by Adam Scott), whose wife has died tragically in a car accident. As he arrives at work and goes down in the elevator, his face clears. He's now an "innie" known as Mark S, and he has absolutely no memory or knowledge of his life as an "outie". He and the other innies with whom he works don't know if they are married or single, straight or gay, whether or not they have children. Nothing. And the same in the other direction. Mark Scout has absolutely no idea what he does at work each day.

Enter Helly R (Britt Lower), a new recruit to Mark S's department. She's introduced to her work, which involves staring at a computer screen until she identifies "scary" numbers which she has to corral and get rid of. None of the workers have any idea what this is about. Frustrated, Helly R tries to quit. But innies can't do that. And trying to smuggle out a message to your outie is both forbidden and prevented by technological surveillance.

Things, as I say, become weirder and weirder. The company which has invented the severance technology, Lumen, is run by a dynasty, and there's a strong degree of religious worship of the founders.

Mark S's boss Ms. Cobel (Patricia Arquette) is a fierce middle-aged woman who metaphorically cracks the whip over Mark S and his team to ensure they meet their quarterly quotas (of whatever it is they are doing). She is also, we soon discover, Mark Scout's neighbour in his outie life, but there she is known as Mrs. Selvig, a fussy kind woman who runs a gift shop. Mark Scout, of course, has no idea that his neighbour is also his supervisor.

The mysteries multiply, particularly when Mark Scout is contacted by a man called "Petey" who has had an illicit operation to remove the severance chip. He says was Mark's best friend at work. Lumen, he says, is doing something dreadful, but isn't clear on what that is.

The whole season was deeply intriguing and it was getting more and more interesting, but then after a plot crisis I won't describe, comes to an abrupt halt. This was a bit of a shock to Sue and I because we hadn't realised there was going to be more than one season, made worse by the fact that I thought there were 10 episodes to watch when in fact there are only 9. So not realising that episode 9 was the last, we were expecting major revelations in the next episode... But there wasn't one! The second season isn't out as yet.

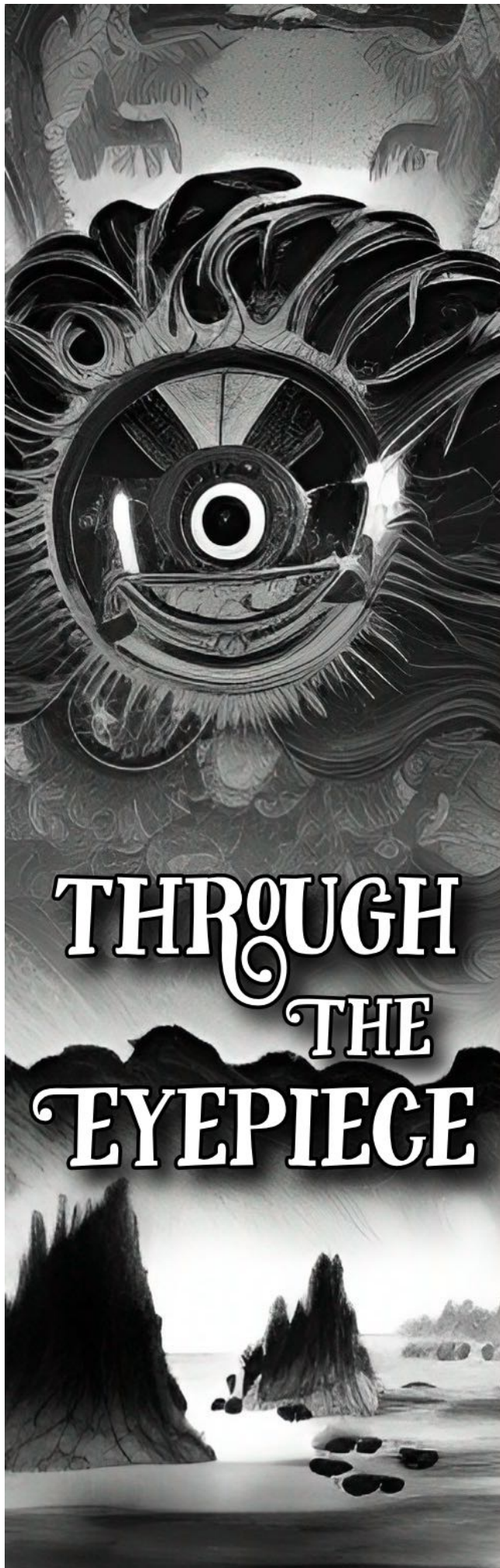
I don't see how this show can be sustained for more than a couple of seasons, and we're a bit up in the air about whether we'll watch the second season. Perhaps if we resubscribe to Apple TV+ to watch the next season of *Slow Horses* and if the second one of *Severance* is out we'll watch it then.

Life After Life (BBC/Britbox)



This 2022 production is based closely on the novel by Kate Atkinson (one of my very favourite authors). I've reviewed the novel earlier in this *Megaloscope*, so I won't spend much time talking about the TV version here, other than to say that it's a really excellent production and very faithful to the source material. The casting of the children and young women to play Ursula at different stages of her life was excellent, so that her growing older felt seamless. And all their acting was excellent, so let's name them: Eliza Riley (Ursula aged 5); Isla Johnston (Ursula aged 10); and Thomasin McKenzie (Ursula as an adult). The other child actors playing Ursula's siblings were also very good.

Perry and I are going to talk about the book and the TV version in the next episode of our [podcast](#), which should be out in mid-April.



Conversations with Readers

A KIND OF A LETTER COLUMN. I'm a bit torn about this now, because at least one person in ANZAPA has said that they don't feel comfortable with my reprinting their mailing comments here, and would prefer that I print only actual letters of comment sent as such. The problem is, very few people *do* send me letters of comment. My own fault, really, for not finding a way to circulate this more widely.

Anyway, a change of policy. I'll only reproduce mailing comments here *if you've explicitly asked me* to treat them as though they were letters of comment, as Bruce Gillespie has done.

So please, whether you're in ANZAPA or not, send me a letter (or email) of comment or two!

Bruce Gillespie (Anzapa February 2023)

[Responding to The Megaloscope #4]

I would find it very hard to name my favourite books these days, because many of my favourites read during the 1960s and 1970s have failed me when I've tried to re-read them recently. I always considered Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* as my favourite novel, but when I tried to re-read it a few years I came to a screaming stop about page 70. Ditto for Elias Canetti's *Auto da Fe*, which was one of my great discoveries of 1971. Some other books I dare not try again, such as William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*, also a favourite read first in 1971. *Alice in Wonderland/Through the Looking Glass* still reigns supreme, with Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* (first read in 1969) promoted to equal top along with Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (read first in 1959 when I was 12, and then just a few years ago), and Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* not far behind.

David:

I think (and hope) that my own favourite books would hold up under a re-read, though I should give them a try, I guess. *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke is still very high on my Best Books of All Time list, but I'm not ready to re-read it yet. So many of the books on that list are books I've read in the last 10 years, so I think they would hold up pretty well.

But when Perry and I do our Hugo Time Machine segment, dealing so far with winners and nominees from the 1950s and 1960s, I am finding that several favourites from that era don't bear re-reading. Some do, though.

Bruce:

I thought *Day's End*, as a story, was a bit disappointing from Garry Disher, but still contained some memorable detail about living in the backblocks of South Australia.

David:

Better than *The Way Things Are Now*, though, his previous novel, which was OK but not great.

Bruce:

I'm not sure why I've never been tempted to buy and read a book by Donna Tartt. I assume her two huge sellers are still at our local Robinsons Bookshop or Dymocks in the city.

David:

In my own case, I kept coming across *The Secret History* mentioned as people's favourite crime novel (though it's much, much more than that) so I deliberately tracked it down. Her *The Goldfinch* is sitting on a bookshelf here and I'd really like to read it soon.

Bruce:

Readings still hasn't tracked down any Candice Fox novels for me. I couldn't find any on the shelf when I was there last, or at Dymocks.

The interview with Murray MacLachlan is superb, especially as he has never revealed any of his background story to Elaine and me. For some reason he's kept it all a closely guarded secret. His entry into fandom in New Zealand sounds very much like the way any of us get involved — find a source of SF books, usually at a friendly library, then accidentally meet with somebody who knows about the local SF club. The books that Murray discovered are rather different from the ones that influenced me, but the direction of reading has been very similar to mine and Elaine's. (There is a decade's difference in age.)

Murray is curiously reticent about his non-SF career path, but it does seem to have given him a wide range of negotiable skills. He neglects to mention that he and Natalie had attended Aussiecon 3 in 1999, although I can't remember meeting him then. The first I became aware of his existence was when he turned up at Nova Mob after we began meeting at the North Carlton Public Library. He then disappeared again, because he was working in Gippsland for some time.

Murray's story, as told here, includes a huge gap. For about ten years, he and Natalie provided much of the energy that went into the Melbourne Science Fiction Club and publishing its magazine *Ethel the Aardvark*. This was their real contribution to Melbourne fandom, especially when suddenly they found themselves having to guide us through the forced abandonment of the St David's Church Hall in West Brunswick and the removal of everything to our new home at the church hall in Northcote. This involved placing into storage in Eltham the MSFC library, which has been the heart of the club since the 1950s. Our new venue did not want us to set up a library, so it remains in storage.

One of the most bizarre evenings of my life was the AGM when Murray proposed the closing down of the MSFC in its fifth decade! I still feel disbelief. The motion failed, and I was delighted to turn up for the Club's 70th anniversary in 2022. (But the Library is still in storage, thanks to generous donations from one of the world's great true fans, who will never allow me to mention his name. And we still do not have a secure, lock-up home, because nobody associated with the MSFC has the income to make that possible.)

Nova Mob had changed over the many years while Lucy and Julian were running it. Some changes were very beneficial, such as the decision to move from meetings in people's homes to meetings in public library facilities. Others just happened, such as the expectation by attendees that they should be entertained, not consider themselves part of the vigorous discussion. John Foyster's original concept was that the Nova Mob should be a kind of tutorial in critical thinking about science fiction, with every member expected to give a paper once a year. That worked for at least twenty years. Unfortunately, most talks were given off the cuff and have never been published. The current situation is that if one is a speaker, one is supposed to provide digital decorative material. No wonder I gave up volunteering to speak after late 2019.

Early in 2020 the Covid pandemic seemed to threaten the continued existence of the Nova Mob, but the change to Zoom meetings did work. I can't stand communicating by Zoom, so I've dropped out, but it's good to know that the Nova Mob is still bubbling along, thanks to Murray's convenorship. Also, we have been allowed back into the Kensington Public Library for face-to-face meetings in 2022.

Nick Farey (Email, 3 February 2023)

[Responding to *The Megaloscope* #5]

Definitely agree on wanting to read the *Slow Horses* novels, though I didn't find [Season 2 of the TV series] to be as hard to follow as you apparently did. Mind you, I'm a bit of a spy story geek to start with...

David:

I haven't yet got around to reading *Dead Lions*, but I think I'm now distant enough from watching the TV version that I'm prepared to do so. I'm torn between wanting to read all the books in the series one after the other but not wanting to spoil surprises dealt with by the excellent TV series, which of course has to come out at a much slower pace.



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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.