



What we've been reading



Nicola Bell

What does it mean to actually 'enjoy' a book? Because at no point during my reading of *Yellowface* did it give me any pleasure, and yet I'm still glad that I finished it. In her acknowledgements, the author Rebecca F. Kuang describes the work as "a horror story about loneliness", and this succinctly captures why her writing manoeuvres the reader into experiencing dread from the very first page. How can a book that elicits such unsettling feelings and has such unlikeable characters who make such awful decisions still be so readable? I'm still trying to work that out, but I know some of my colleagues have also read the book, so maybe they have some clues.

Cain's Jawbone is another book I read recently that really toed the line between 'enjoyable' and 'just too hard'. I'd never heard of it before spotting it in my local bookstore, but based on its price, compactness and premise (in that order) I decided to give it a go. The book was first released in 1934 by 'Torquemada', who was a writer of cryptic crosswords and other puzzles. It comprises 100 short pages, which, if deciphered, provide sufficient information to reveal the details of six murders. The main hurdle for readers is that all the pages are intentionally out of order. *Cute*, I probably thought when I stood in that bookstore, smiling smugly at the 'warning' on the back cover that describes *Cain's Jawbone* as "extremely difficult and not for the faint-hearted". Well, that description is no joke. Cut to about a month later and you'll find me pinning colour-coded notes from various bookmarked Reddit threads to a bulletin board and feverishly explaining why page 84 precedes page 13 to my husband who is smiling, nodding and wondering if I'm losing my mind. Anyway, I'm happy to report that I am now living in a post-CJ era and the nightmares about it are definitely getting less frequent. Five stars.



Gabrielle Brawn

As this is the first time I have been asked to contribute to 'What We've Been Reading', I thought I would start off by noting that I enjoy different forms of reading. While I still sometimes read paper books, I also enjoy using technology to access books. I love the convenience of ebooks as they provide immediate access to a book and have the benefits of an inbuilt dictionary and being able to enlarge the font size (useful if you don't have your glasses to hand)! I also 'read' via audiobooks – although maybe some would not count this as reading. In choosing an audiobook, the voice of the narrator is very important to me. I find that autobiographies read by the author are particularly effective. A recent highlight was *Finding Me: A Memoir* by Viola Davis, for which she won the 2023 Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word or Non-Musical Album for her narration of her personal and powerful story. Other reading 'performances' I have enjoyed include Meryl Streep's narration of *Tom Lake* and Tom Hanks' reading of *The Dutch House*, both by Ann Patchett.

I always return to a good mystery/crime series, and I recently finished *The Running Grave* written by J K Rowling under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith. This is the seventh book in the series about private investigator Cormoran Strike and I now must wait until J K Rowling writes the next instalment. I recently discovered a series by Canadian author Louise Penny set in a fictional remote village in Quebec called Three Pines and featuring Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the Sûreté du Québec. I am currently on book three, *The Cruellest Month*, and I am delighted to find there are 18 books in this series with another due later this year, so lots of murder and mystery ahead! As much as I enjoy a good mystery, I don't think I will attempt *Cain's Jawbone* as previewed by Nicola – sounds like too much hard work for me!



Mark Carter

My recent reading has been in the area of natural history, inspired by interactions with our local wildlife. We have an increasing number of birds visiting our house, including the mischievous and sometimes ‘bitey’ rainbow lorikeets, friendly and elegant king parrots, and the strongly discouraged, garbage bin raiding, bonsai decimating, juvenile delinquents of the bird world, the sulphur-crested cockatoos. However, the most interesting encounters are the occasional sightings of an owl on

my pre-dawn walk. With forward facing eyes, human like round face and ability to fly without any apparent sound, they are certainly the most enigmatic of birds. *What an Owl Knows* by Jennifer Ackerman is an absorbing exploration of the remarkable variety of these birds and their extraordinary range of capabilities. For example, their disc-like face can act as a giant third ear and at least some species seem to have cross wiring of the vision and hearing parts of their brains, suggesting they can actually see sounds. Equally remarkable are some of the ingenious strategies used by researchers to investigate the talents of these birds. This book is recommended to anybody who encounters an owl on their early morning walk.

Encounters with other native wildlife are less frequent than for birds who come to us, but we do see the odd echidna, wallaby, snake, native rodent, and the ever-present possums, who party on our tin roof as we attempt to sleep. After a chemical spill in the 1970s resulted in the local extinction of platypus, they have been recently reintroduced in our area. This inspired me to read *Platypus Matters: The Extraordinary Story of Australian Mammals* by Jack Ashby. The book addresses a wide range of Australian mammals, but the platypus gets star billing. This is unsurprising given Ashby states, without a hint of bias, that the platypus is the best animal in the world. They really are quite remarkable, with rubber bodies that would be the envy of a contortionist and electrical sensors in their bills. They also possess Swiss army knife limbs that enable them to walk, dig and swim, and in the case of males, deliver an extraordinarily painful venomous sting.

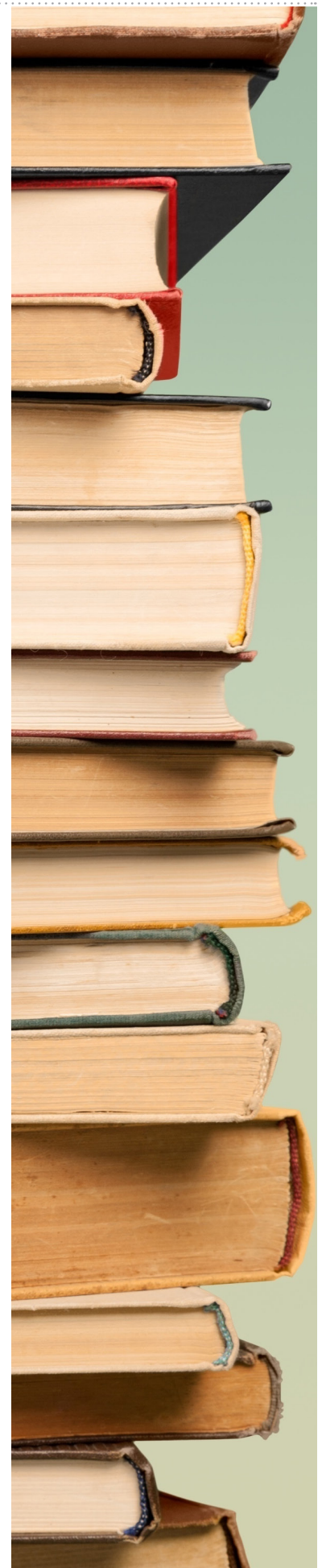
Among the many interesting facts about other native mammals is that wombats can supposedly out sprint Usain Bolt over a short distance. It is acknowledged that this has never actually been tested, probably to spare Bolt the humiliation. One aspect of the book that was completely unexpected was the political dimension. Apparently, when encountered by Europeans, the monotremes broke the existing taxonomic system. After an extended period of denial, a hierarchy of mammals was constructed with the ‘primitive’ egg-laying monotremes at the bottom, marsupials in the middle and the ‘advanced’ placental mammals at the top, with garden variety humans being at the absolute pinnacle, naturally. Ashby clearly points out monotremes are not in any way primitive and simply represent a different branch of mammals that are brilliantly adapted to their environment. Apart from describing many Australian mammals as primitive, there are many additional forms of “othering” (Ashby’s term) of Australian wildlife, including inappropriate comparative naming, suggesting they are inferior copies of better-known animals and the patently absurd claim that “everything in Australia is trying to kill you”. I live near the bush and have not been killed once – yet. Ashby suggests that “othering” of Australian mammals explains, at least to some extent, our world-leading extinction rates and poor environmental regulation. While this may well be a contributing factor, as with most postmodern mutterings, that which can be asserted without evidence, can be dismissed on the same grounds. Nevertheless, Ashby provides a fascinating insight into the life and recent history of Australian mammals.



Anna Desjardins

Like my colleague Maddy, I spent a long time over these last few months with *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. While a book by Kingsolver really requires no review – she captures human experience in such an authentic way and always impresses with her ability to voice a diverse cast of characters – this book certainly deserves one.

Kingsolver shines a light on the recent history of an impoverished pocket of the state of Virginia in the 1990s and early 2000s, as she explores the tussle between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ for her protagonist, Demon, who spends a





large part of his childhood in foster care. She gives us a heartbreaking sense of how the environment children are bequeathed when they come into this world carries the force to twist and crush them entirely, while concurrently imbuing the story with a deep appreciation of place and its importance for identity. Her similes alone always had me sitting up in recognition of a master wordsmith. Just to give one example, when Demon spends time away from his home in the city, he says, “I made my peace with his place, but never went a day without feeling around for things that weren’t there, the way your tongue pushes into the holes where you’ve lost teeth.” Nothing short of brilliant.

Demon Copperhead required a lot of processing time, and I definitely needed something lighter to follow it up. *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt was doing the rounds of our Product Development team and fit the bill. With an octopus as one of the main characters, it was a refreshing and quirky read – it felt a little too light-on at times, but the human characters grew on me and the feel-good ending was satisfying, stopping just short of being too twee. I also dipped into the first of *The Thursday Murder Club* series by Richard Osman. This was a book with another fun choice of characters, as senior citizens turn sleuths in the classic murder mystery genre – *The Thursday Murder Club* members are full of verve, and as an airport purchase for non-demanding reading during a flight, it entertained while offering some touching observations of life in different age brackets.

Feeling ready for something meatier again, I turned to an unusual non-fiction choice for me (I like to think Mark Carter would be proud!) and waded into *Courting: An intimate history of love and the law* by Alecia Simmonds. Alecia is the searingly intelligent friend of a friend, and I had attended her book launch at the State Library of NSW some months prior. I bought the book on the back of her entertaining presentation (and witty title), but then failed to open it for some time. Having now dived in, I have been enjoying a rollicking ride through our courtrooms.

The book reviews a rather niche area of the law, ‘breach of promise of marriage’ actions in Australia between the time of the early colony up to when the action was abolished in the 1970s (yes, one could sue a partner for breaking an engagement not so long ago, receiving monetary compensation for ‘lacerated feelings’). Simmonds selects a number of key cases that allow her to trace parallels between the action, the settlement of the colony (and corresponding desettlement of the original inhabitants) and our societal norms and changing attitudes towards gender and love. She clearly enjoys bringing the cases to vivid life, so that we feel like those crowding into the courtrooms for the salacious entertainment that they provided, and she lends her litigants depth by detailing their lives both before and after their actions. The book has made me think about how much the law overlaps with and illuminates our history.

Finally, from time to time, I consult *365 Poems for Life* compiled by Allie Esiri, one for each day of the year if one so desires, with poems chosen from the greats of yesteryear and into the modern day. It so happens that on writing this, just yesterday, the chosen poem was from *Pippa Passes* by Robert Browning – it was the exact excerpt that my grandmother, Pippa, once voiced on radio and whose scratchy recording I had been trying to decipher for some time.



Maddy Goto

For my first taste of Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead* was a good one. I didn’t know much about it when I added it to my Kindle library but was intrigued by the title and its prize-winning stickers. At the time of adding it, I hadn’t seen it in print and so didn’t realise quite how hefty it was. It took me a long time to get through, not only because of its length. There were parts where I slowed down to savour the language, parts that made me laugh, parts that made me wince and parts that took some time to process and remained with me for a long time afterwards. Kingsolver’s fictional creation is brutally real, and Demon’s narration sucks the reader right into it. I’m glad I discovered this one as a book to read rather than listen to. It gave me the time to ‘go slow’, reread and ponder things like the seemingly simple but oh-so-clever naming of characters, and how much they add to the narrative.

I balanced the bleak world and written text of *Demon Copperhead* with a couple of audiobooks for the car. I’ve decided I’m not good at listening to fiction – I get distracted too often and miss bits and after a while seem to find myself getting irritated by the

narrator. So, it's non-fiction for my car journeys. For quite a long time I've thought about how I've changed as a reader, not only my reading habits but how I engage with (all sorts of) texts. I know that having a phone in my pocket has had a frighteningly big impact. In *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, Maryanne Wolf examines how the digital world has affected our ability to read deeply and the implications this has for our kids. I found it quite hard-hitting and depressing at times, not least because it confirmed my theories on why I'm a different reader now to the reader I was 25 years ago. It's not all doom and gloom though, and Wolf wraps it up with some hopeful ways we can try and mitigate it. Recommended reading (or listening).



Alison Madelaine

Late last year, I received my first two ARCs (Advanced Reader Copies): *A Shadow at the Door* by Jo Dixon and *The Dinner Party* by Rebecca Heath. Both were domestic thrillers that I really enjoyed over the Christmas/New Year break. *The Dinner Party* was my favourite of the two. During a neighbourhood dinner party in the late 1970s, the couples left their children at home asleep in their beds, checking them every so often as people did back then. But one night, a young baby went missing.

Forty years later, the case has still not been solved and her older sister gets a visit from a woman claiming to be the missing baby. The story is told mostly in the present day, with flashbacks to the night of the dinner party and transcripts from episodes of a podcast series on the disappearance of the baby. It is somewhat of a slow burn as the reader gradually finds out that all is not as it seems and many of the characters have secrets they are trying to keep hidden. I could not put this book down as I had to find out the truth of what really happened the night of the dinner party. Rebecca Heath now has my attention, and I am looking forward to reading her previous thriller.

In the past few months, I seem to have read my share of heavy fiction containing difficult and disturbing events: *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* by Christy Lefteri, *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* by Shankari Chandran, *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver, *Yellowface*, by Rebecca F. Kuang, and *Prophet Song* by Paul Lynch. After reading about the difficult journey of Syrian and Sri Lankan refugees, racism in Australia, a boy growing up in less-than-ideal circumstances, plagiarism, cultural appropriation, internet trolls, and family struggles amidst the rise of totalitarianism in contemporary Ireland, I really needed something a bit lighter. It may seem like a strange choice, but for me, that is crime fiction. *Resurrection Walk* by Michael Connelly and *What Happened to Nina?* by Dervla McTiernan were both great page-turners. *The Seven* by Chris Hammer was also an excellent read, incorporating three timelines.

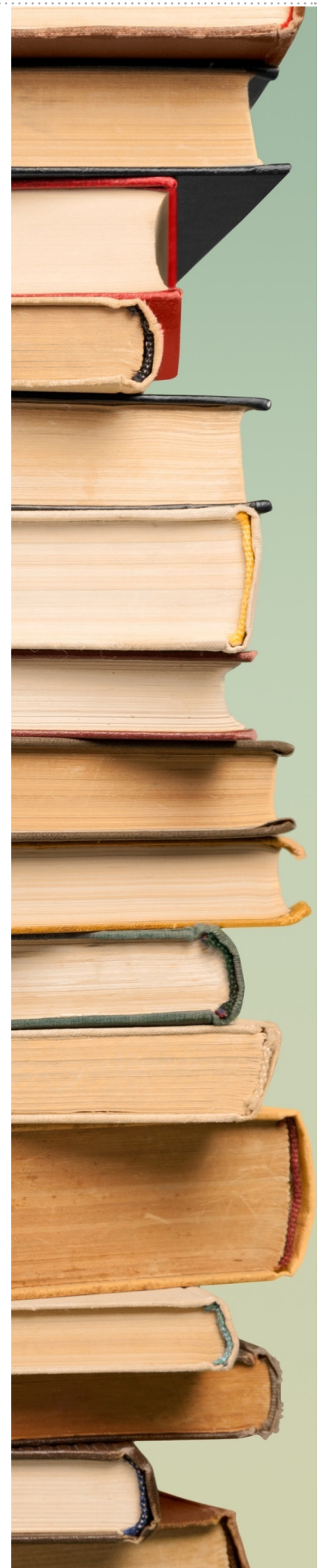


Ying Sng

According to their website, a Street Library is "... a tiny vestibule of literary happiness". They give me an inordinate amount of joy and I cannot resist checking them out. On a jaunt around the neighbourhood, I saw a copy of *The Cuckoo's Calling* by Robert Galbraith. Crime fiction is not one I naturally gravitate towards but I knew the Cormorant Strike series were immensely popular, so I liberated the book to find out what the fuss was about. Once I'd finished reading it, I looked up how

many more were in the series and quickly realised the best thing about stumbling upon a new-to-me series is the back catalogue (or is it the front catalogue in this case?). The other books were devoured in quick succession but please don't ask me about the plot. All I remember is they generally start with a character dying under suspicious circumstances which leads to someone close to the victim securing the services of Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott, his extremely competent assistant. Needless to say, the duo gets into some strife during the investigation, engage in some romantic shenanigans (not with each other ...yet) and the book culminates with a clever resolution. Perfect reading for pleasure fodder!

A run of reading in this genre must have done something to my search algorithm because other crime fiction titles kept coming across my feed, including *Central Park West* by James Comey. If you think that name sounds familiar, you'd be right – it is that very tall man from the FBI. The book was OK. If you see it in a 'tiny vestibule', pick it up but don't expect too much in the way of 'literary happiness'.





I have also gone down a rabbit hole of Japanese fiction. It began with *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi and was quickly followed by *Sweet Bean Paste* by Durian Sukegawa, *Days at the Morisaki Bookshop* by Satoshi Yagisawa, *What You Are Looking for is in the Library* by Michiko Aoyama and *The Kamogawa Food Detectives* by Hisashi Kashiwai. I got a real feeling of contentment from reading them. I wonder if this sense comes from the absence of a major story arc and the undercurrent of morality. Whatever it was, they were all very satisfying and relaxing reads. However, I do lament my inability to read in another language – it would be nice to compare the original composition to the translation. If this has piqued an interest, I'd recommend *What You Are Looking for is in the Library*. This book was my favourite! It is a collection of stories where people go into a library and the quirky librarian helps them find something that they didn't know they were looking for. Seriously, how can you resist a book with that title?

I have been doing a bit of academic reading on the topic of reading comprehension and had a comprehension epiphany of my own while reading *The Bee Sting* by Paul Murray. I alternated between reading and listening to the book – *Whispersync for Voice* makes it so easy to switch between audiobook and ebook. Each chapter is told from the point of view of the (mostly irritating) characters and I was getting increasingly frustrated with them as I read or listened. About halfway through the book, I realised that Paul Murray had written all the chapters for Imelda, the wife and mother character, with limited punctuation. I had somehow managed to only listen to her chapters where the lack of punctuation was not evident because the narrator inserted pauses and used appropriate intonation. Once I saw the text laid out in Imelda's chapters, it gave me a completely different mental picture. The meagre use of punctuation provided a richness to her background and almost added a sense of desperation that the audiobook couldn't. I suppose I knew this implicitly but that "Aha!" moment confirmed the edge printed text has over audiobooks.

Although *The Bee Sting* provided me with a moment of self-development, I'm not sure it is a book I'd recommend. It was on the Booker shortlist and has won some other awards. Maybe it is a book that should be read twice. Maybe I'll re-read it one day. Maybe I won't.



Kevin Wheldall

Like some of my other colleagues, I have read and been intrigued by *Yellowface* (by Rebecca F. Kuang); intrigued and discomforted in equal part. I find it hard to actually like books where the principal protagonist, and in this case the narrator, is profoundly unlikeable. It does not help that there is no other character to love either. Doubtless this is rather shallow of me, but I appreciate the author's skill, intelligence, and ingenuity, nonetheless.

I enjoyed Willian Boyd's *The Romantic*, and also *Trio*, but perhaps not as much as usual for this confirmed Boyd fan; but he is a fine writer. *A Heart Full of Headstones* by Ian Rankin and *Treasure and Dirt* by Chris Hammer were both enjoyable enough.

Anne Patchett, however, has delivered for me in spades of late. *These Precious Days* is a delightful collection of essays and her latest novel, *Tom Lake*, was a joy to read. I have written before about my difficulties with *Heart of Darkness* but an earlier book by Patchett, *State of Wonder*, loosely based on Conrad's novella, was a revelation. Pursuing similar colonial themes, her evocation of life on the far reaches of the Amazon is breathtaking. An encounter with an anaconda is particularly riveting.

The Running Grave by Robert Galbraith (aka J K Rowling) signalled a return to form following, for me, her disappointing previous novel, *The Ink Black Heart*. Her latest is a very satisfying account of a deeply sinister cult. Having said that, 960 pages is asking a lot of the reader: author in need of a firm editor. But there is a lot to love about J K not least her brave public stand for women's rights on 'the socials'. She has made a lot of enemies in the process and has been subject to outrageous abuse.

Two standout books for special mention were *Wifedom* by Anna Funder and *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa. The former recounts the role of his first wife, Eileen O' Shaughnessy, in the life and literary works of Eric Blair, better known as George Orwell. Funder makes a strong case for acknowledging Eileen's considerable, and until now relatively little-known influence on Orwell's writings, not to mention

putting up with an insufferable husband! Both *Animal Farm* and *1984* owe a debt to her own brilliance. Abulhawa's novel recounts the travails of growing up as a continually displaced Palestinian girl and woman in post-war Middle East. It is a moving story with a clever, complex plot and, while highlighting the plight of ordinary everyday Palestinians over decades, she manages to treat her Jewish characters sympathetically and with deserved respect. Both of these novels make for rewarding reading and are highly recommended.



Robyn Wheldall

In January this year, I took a month's leave from work. There were plans. And then a nasty virus struck. All plans were unmade. This was disappointing but there was a silver lining. As I was unable to do much on the holiday list, January became my month of reading. You could argue that I would have read books on my holiday anyway. This is true but no other summer has been so productive in terms of digesting books – eight in all. But before 'the bug', I finished the first book. It

was a Christmas gift – *The Exquisite Art of Getting Even* by Alexander McCall Smith. A book of four short stories, it was the perfect way to while away the lazy days between Christmas and New Year. Although the title sounds rather mean, the final message of the book is an invocation to mercy and forgiveness, as revenge is never a worthy thing. The introduction to the final story provides a good summary. "Forgiveness heals; it allows us to unclutter our lives with the business of the past; it makes room for human flourishing" (p. 168).

Other books in my summer haul touched on some similar themes, by chance. I finished reading *Bright Shining* by Julia Baird. Excellent as always, Baird firmly grasps life with both hands and exhorts us to show grace and pursue 'moral beauty'. *Liturgy of the Ordinary* by Tish Harrison Warren is a call to find meaning in the everyday tasks that make up the daily grind, or more positively, our daily life. Quoting Dr Johnson at the beginning of the book set the tone, hooked me in and the book delivered. "It must be remembered that life consists not of a series of illustrious actions, or elegant engagement; the greater part of our time is passed in compliance with necessities, in the performance of daily duties, in the removal of small inconveniences, in the procurement of petty pleasures." This book helped me with the sorting of paperwork over the Christmas break (a task I definitely do not relish) and raised hope that I might practise this approach throughout the year, as close I got to a New Year's resolution.

Bittersweet by Susan Cain (another Christmas gift from a thoughtful colleague) is a great read from the insightful writer who brought us *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* more than 10 years ago. Another non-fiction title, Cain helps us to understand how love, loss and sorrow make us whole; that we should embrace and use the pain in life rather than run from it. Cain dedicates the book to the memory of Leonard Cohen, quoting from his song *Anthem*, "There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Having had my fill of non-fiction, I turned to novels. *Jesustown* by Paul Daley is a skilful, challenging and historically informed piece of fiction about the brutality of the frontier wars and the conflict between Indigenous and European Australia. *No Words* by Maryam Master is a children's book about a mute boy who is traumatised in Iran. It is a story of friendship and finding his voice in his new country. The author, born in Tehran, fled persecution after the Iranian revolution and escaped the country with her family, arriving in Australia at age 9. Master's own experience creates a depth of experience for the reader. Continuing the refugee theme and also set in Australia, I found *Hopeless Kingdom* by Kgshak Akec a compelling story of the lives of Sudanese refugees, told simultaneously from the perspective of a child and her mother.

Leaving the best till last, I was enthralled by Holly Ringland's *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*. This book is an epic tale of the life of a young, orphaned girl born into a family marred by domestic violence, anger and fear. It is a modern Australian masterpiece in my opinion – resonating with Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* to my mind. The thematic use of Australian wildflowers that have their own language is inspired and Ringland captures the vast and varied Australian landscape with mastery. An amazing debut novel. And so my summer of reading concluded, with five of the eight titles being from Australian authors.

