



What we've been reading



Sarah Arakelian

I recently learned of a new way to get books at my local library through an app which allows you to obtain ebooks and audiobooks via any device. This is another great way to get library books, though I quickly discovered some pitfalls. I borrowed *The Thorn Birds* by Colleen McCollough, which was available at the time and recommended to me. It was perhaps not the best idea to borrow such a lengthy book when my reading time is limited by family and work, but I enjoy

historical fiction and have particularly been liking those set during the world wars. I had to renew the loan several times, sometimes having to wait for others who had requested it, and still only read about 90% before my final loan was up and the book was no longer available at my library. I enjoyed what I was able to read and hope to finish it soon.

I recently read *The Cliffs* by J Courtney Sullivan, more historical fiction with a little fantasy and themes of feminism, relationships and addiction. This book appealed to the ghost story lover in me. The story is mainly told from the perspective of a woman whose whole life has been torn apart by her alcoholism. She returns to her roots and goes on a journey of discovery about a Victorian house in her home town in Maine that she was inexplicably drawn to in her youth. The new owners of the house made considerable renovations and in doing so disturbed the house, bringing to light some of the trauma experienced by the women who lived there. With some chapters told from the perspective of these historical women, the audience discovers links between events that occurred at the house before the protagonist, making it hard to put down in case she never made the connections.

I have finally learned to love a good audiobook on the work commute and now seemingly can't do without them. It took a bit of practice, learning to lose myself in the story while still concentrating on driving, but I find myself no longer rushing, hoping to get a little further through whatever story I'm listening to. I greatly enjoyed *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus, previously reviewed by Anna Desjardins, and *The Hotel Avocado* by Bob Mortimer. The latter is a comical weaving together of the different characters' versions of events in the lead up to a trial in which the protagonist, Gary, will provide evidence against crooked cops. The characters end up on the wrong side of the villains' hired guns and fight, literally and with their morals, to make it to the trial. The audiobook I listened to was read by a different voice actor for each character – including Mortimer as the narrator who kept popping in to give his two cents. One voice actor even skilfully adapted his style to include distinct voices for Gary's friends, the squirrel and the pigeon. I'm sure other commuters thought me crazy as I cackled away in my car.



Gabrielle Brawn

My recent reading activity has been inspired by suggestions in this *Guardian* article: [The experts: librarians on 20 easy, enjoyable ways to read more brilliant books](#), shared by Kevin. The first piece of advice I followed was joining my local library (Recommendation 3: Join a library). In fact, as I live on the boundary of two council areas, I took the opportunity to join two libraries! And it is true, there is so much more than books at local libraries these days. They are true treasure

troves offering everything from audiobooks to ebooks to movies to events like meet the author evenings – accompanied by a glass of wine! I even borrowed a thermal imaging camera. The library app allows me to effortlessly reserve books with a simple tap, and I can then pick them up when notified they are ready. What service!

For my initial borrowings, I selected two nonfiction titles (Recommendation 9: Consider nonfiction): *Life Admin Hacks: The Step-by-Step Guide to Saving Time and Money, Reducing the Mental Load, Streamlining Your Life* by Mia Northrop and Dinah Rowe-Roberts (the best hack for me was to use an app to keep track of birthdays and gifts) and *My Efficient Electric Home Handbook: How to Slash Your Energy Bills, Protect Your Health and Save the Planet* by Tim Forcey (hence, the

thermal camera to assess my home's 'thermal envelope'). Neither book demanded deep reading; instead, they offered practical tips which now populate my growing to-do list!

In preparation for attending the Sydney Writers' Festival where I had tickets to see Sam Neill interview Bryan Brown about his new book *The Drowning*, I downloaded the ebook to my Kindle (Recommendation 16: ebook or print). Unfortunately, I couldn't finish this book (perhaps the bargain price of \$4.99 should have been a clue). While Bryan Brown's unmistakable Aussie 'voice' shone through, I found the repeated use of very short sentences and the storyline to be very uninspiring. Despite this, I enjoyed the Writers' Festival event, and I appreciated the obvious warmth, humour and friendship shared between Sam Neill and Bryan Brown and I reflected on how much I enjoy Sam Neill's voice. This inspired me to listen to his memoir *Did I Ever Tell You This?* (Recommendation 2: Listen to a book rather than 'read') narrated by Sam Neill. While there can be debate about whether listening to audiobooks constitutes reading (the MRU likes the term 'ear reading'), I find that hearing interesting life stories enhances my commute to work. I enjoyed learning more about Sam Neill's life and career and his experience with cancer.

Following this, I listened to Henry Winkler (aka 'the Fonz' from the TV show *Happy Days*) narrate his memoir *Being Henry: The Fonz ... and Beyond*. Many of you reading this are probably too young to remember *Happy Days*, but the Fonzie character was the cool, super confident, motorcycle-riding star of the show. In real life, Henry Winkler appears to have faced lifelong struggles with anxiety, often fearing he would never work again – perhaps an experience common among actors. I was interested to hear his experience of growing up with undiagnosed dyslexia, recounting that he couldn't read, spell or do basic arithmetic. He was eventually diagnosed as severely dyslexic at the age of 34. It was both moving and tragic to hear him recall being called 'dumahun' (dumb dog) by his German parents. His experiences later inspired him to co-author a children's book series about a 4th grade boy, Hank Zipzer, who had similar learning challenges.

Finally, I returned to a favourite: Louise Penny's Inspector Gamache crime fiction series, specifically *A Rule Against Murder* (Recommendation 7: Read what you love). Armand Gamache is a wonderful character: thoughtful, compassionate, decent and kind, with a love of literature, poetry and philosophy. The character was inspired by Penny's late husband, Dr Michael Whitehead. This one ended up being a real page turner as I was racing through at the end to find out 'whodunit'. So I plan to return again to Inspector Gamache and the characters from the fictional village of Three Pines.

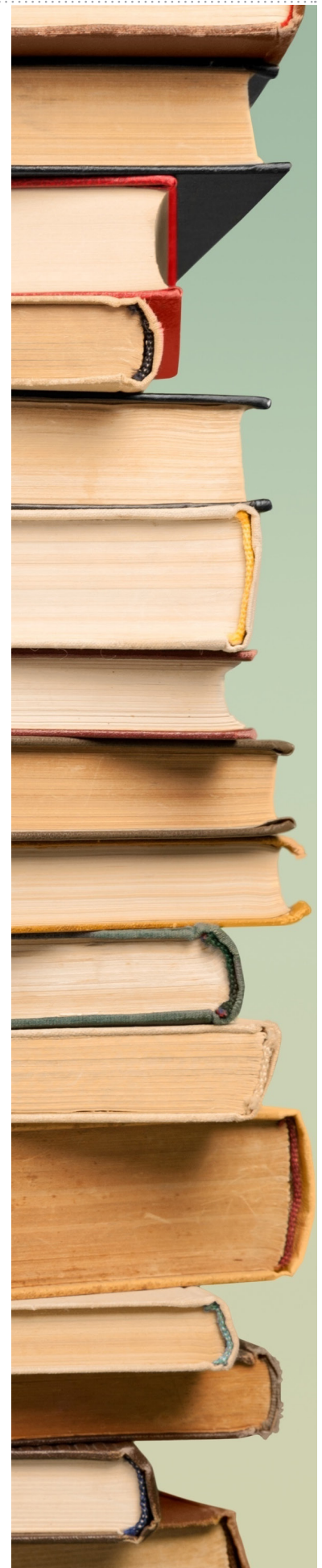


Mark Carter

My recent reading has continued the natural history theme. A recent book was Steve Brusatte's *The Rise and Reign of Mammals*. As expected, Brusatte illustrated the remarkable diversity of mammals, from the tiniest bats to the enigmatic mega-fauna of the last ice age, including the unquestionably uber-cuddly, three-ton wombat, to the most dangerous predator in history, the big-brained *Homo sapiens*. More interesting was illumination of why this diversity exists.

Mammals and their predecessors survived multiple extinction events, and the key issue addressed in the book was what made them so successful and adaptable? Many of the answers turned out to be not what I thought.

For example, mammals were diminutive creatures for much of history, generally mouse to rat sized. They co-existed with the dinosaurs for 100 million odd years and the largest mammal was little more than a badger-sized snack. Being small turned out to be a superpower, allowing many mammals to ride out the asteroid extinction, which appears to have polished off most of the dinosaurs, and then evolve into the wide variety of critters that are familiar. Another surprising key to the adaptability of mammals turned out to be their variety of teeth and, in particular, the ability to chew. This allowed food to be predigested and offered access to a greater variety of munchies. Have you ever wondered why you seem to have a never-ending series of expensive dental visits – why can't you just grow new teeth, like nails and hair? Turns out, you can blame your ancestors, because chewing requires precisely aligned teeth, which would be impossible if they kept being replaced. So, you only get one set of adult teeth – and my dentist can continue to look forward to his annual European vacation.





The Rise and Reign of Mammals was an interesting read although, on the negative side, the author continually refers to the brilliantly adapted monotremes, such as the platypus and echidna, as “primitive” mammals. Placentalist hegemony aside, a worthwhile read.

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari had possibly the worst opening of any book I have ever read, beginning with a description of the big bang of all things! Talk about taking starting from the beginning to extremes. I almost stopped at that point but, being a cheapskate and having already put my dollar down, decided to persist. I’m glad I did as it turned out to be exactly the sort of book I like, one that challenges my preconceptions, even the ones I did not know I had.

At a recent visit to my GP, I commented that some research I had found on the internet suggested a minor medical ailment was related to vestiges of Neanderthal DNA, perhaps accounting for my brutish charm? Without hesitation and mustering his best bedside manner, my GP added it might also explain the grunting and knuckle dragging! As it turns out, both of our preconceptions of Neanderthals were profoundly incorrect. While they were robust and cold adapted, Neanderthals lived in social groups, made tools, had sophisticated culture, cared for the disabled and infirmed and, in fact, had larger brains than modern day humans. Certainly not mindless brutes and I am proud to retain some of their DNA.

Harari presents many challenging propositions, such as the average quality of life of humans decreased with the agricultural revolution and, in a very real sense, wheat domesticated humans, rather than vice versa. Perhaps the most interesting was the argument that our capacity to cooperate in large groups, essential to our success as a species, is dependent on our cognitive capacity to believe in abstract ‘myths’ such as nations, laws, money, soccer and limited liability companies. For example, I work for MultiLit. MultiLit is not the aggregation of desks, chairs, computers or even people and programs. Rather it is an imaginary, notional entity, which exists because many people elect to accept (believe in) the abstract legal provisions that make it exist. This entity certainly does assist a group of individuals to cooperate and work towards a worthy common goal, but, in some sense, it is no more than a consensually shared delusion. Perhaps this is not a line of argument I should press with the company directors?

Harari acknowledges that some of the propositions presented in the book are subject to academic controversy, which may well be an understatement, and I would be inclined to withhold judgement on many without further evidence. Nevertheless, they certainly challenged some of my preconceptions and biases – and that is usually a good thing.



Anna Desjardins

Feeling recovered from reading the heavy-going *Demon Copperhead* (reviewed last time), I blithely launched into *Boy Swallows Universe* by Trent Dalton to kick off the second half of my year. The series of the same name was being recommended to me from all quarters, and I didn’t want to watch it before having read the book. Wow! I can certainly see why it has been a bestseller. Although having now read it, I feel no desire to also see the story on the screen. Experiencing

it on the page was vivid enough – a raw and real picture of Australian suburban life in the 80s for a family on society’s frayed edges. The unlikely young hero, Eli, is a delight and if you like magic realism, which I do, this book performs a masterful highwire balancing act between truth, dream and perhaps a little of something beyond either.

Other great reads over the last six months have been *The Glassmaker* by Tracy Chevalier and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, both authors I’ve enjoyed before. Chevalier plays with time across 400 years of Venice’s glass-making history in her novel, following the fate of a single family who somehow live through it all. If you are willing to make the leap with her, it’s a rich and fascinating look at a mythic city and its heavily controlled artisan guilds, making it a ruling trade centre for centuries. I loved the Italianness of it all, I learned a lot about glasswork and beadmaking, and the central character’s loves and losses provided an effective through-line to the narrative.

Adichie’s novel, on the other hand, could not have been more firmly grounded in reality. As in all of Adichie’s work, she explores life during Nigeria’s troubled recent history, and in this case, the experience of Nigerian immigrants living in the US and the UK, who find themselves (like immigrants anywhere) in a no-man’s land somewhere between the culture of their birth and the culture of their adopted country.

The book acts as an important commentary from the inside on how race and identity are intertwined in nuanced ways in the different contexts of America and Nigeria. I did find myself sighing a bit towards the middle of the story at the constant critical eye that Adichie had her protagonist turn on every character flitting across her pages – every person observed in a café, or on a street corner, or at a social gathering. It made me wonder what she would make of me if she saw me out somewhere! But the story does eventually redress this imbalance, which was a relief.

Less successful in the ‘books I picked up because I like the author’ category was *Moonlight Market* by Joanne Harris. I feel like this book got published solely because of the name Harris has made for herself with *Chocolat* and her subsequent novels. Even for a self-confessed magic realism fan, this one did not get the balance right. Like its shape-shifting ‘lepidopteran’ heros and heroines, it felt too flutter-flighty, with a lot of repetitive padding.

On a more serious bent, I delved into *The Language Game* by Morten H. Christiansen and Nick Chater. This book is a little like the mirror book to the *The Language Instinct* by Stephen Pinker, and the echo in the titles is not insignificant. In *The Language Instinct*, Pinker examines language acquisition processes that lead us to hypothesise that the grammars of the world’s languages are constrained by our brain architecture, and that children therefore come to the task of acquiring language with innate biases that help them during this monumental learning feat. In *The Language Game*, Christiansen and Chater argue that the evidence we have now points to a different possibility for how language acquisition proceeds; one in which children experiment with imitated chunks, slowly building up a system to achieve communicative goals, from which grammar falls out as a kind of accident. It was thought-provoking to dip into this debate again and update my knowledge on where things sit currently.

Most fascinating for me was the presentation of work that is being done on spontaneous order by complexity theorists (scientists who study complex systems which can range from how molten lava cools to how the global economy functions). These theorists look at how small local interactions can lead to unexpected global patterns across an entire system. Christiansen and Chater argue that the same principles can explain how complex human grammars evolved, and they propose that this system must develop from scratch every time a child learns language.

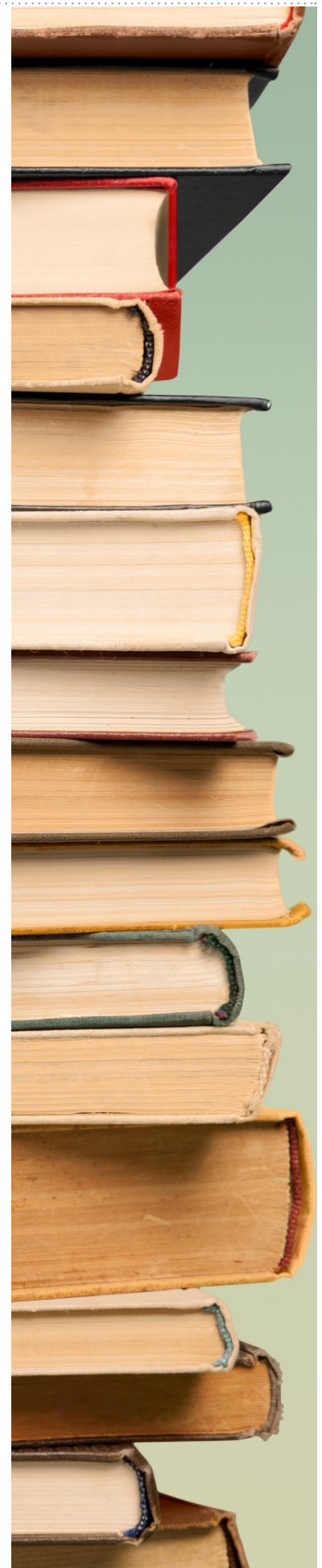
This book inspired me to think more about these issues – but ultimately, I don’t think the two views need to be pitched as at odds with one another. Perhaps they are complementary (a little like the two sides of the speech-to-print and print-to-speech debate). Could it not be that complexity theory will allow us to understand how language evolved and therefore why children do seem to bring certain observed biases to the language acquisition process?

To finish with something lighter I’ll leave you with some ‘ear-reading’ news, as I am at long last getting on this podcast bandwagon thing! I have been enjoying exploring *The New Yorker Fiction* podcast (thanks to an Annabel Crabb recommendation). In each episode, the magazine’s fiction editor, Deborah Treisman, has an insightful conversation with an author, who she has invited to read and discuss another author’s short story with her. I’ve discovered some interesting new names and stories (such as *Haunting Olivia* by Karen Russel, *Love Letter* by George Saunders and *Every Night for a Thousand Years* by Chris Adrian). I’ve also found hearing US creatives’ thoughts and feelings in the current political context to be a refreshing way to tap into world news. And I just love Deborah – she is wry, measured and thoughtful, and she’s great at keeping her interviewee on track. The principle of the podcast can lead to some less successful episodes, as not every author is also a great reader, but I’ve found it generally to be more hit than miss.



Maddy Goto

My book consumption over the past few months has taken me on quite a journey – from the unruly classrooms of English secondary schools to the rolling hills of the Oxfordshire countryside, to colonial India, over to New Zealand and then back to Europe. Tom Bennett’s *Running the Room* aside, where strategies to regain control of unruly classrooms are the same wherever you are, the concept of place and all that it represents featured prominently in each of the other books I read.





While it is often the characters that tell the stories, places tell stories too. I don't think the authors probably intended for the settings of their novels to have such an impact on their reader, but after reading Clover Stroud's *The Giant on the Skyline* I've thought about 'place' in a slightly different way.

The Giant on the Skyline was the second memoir I've read by Stroud. In this one, she writes of home, of belonging, of community, of family, all of which are deeply rooted in her physical surroundings. There is a narrative of sorts, but it is the way in which she notices, captures and describes the detail of things that are so easy to overlook (like the intricacies of a hedgerow or the movement of a waterway) that makes you slow down, ponder and marvel. *The Giant on the Skyline* taught me a lot about the history of the enduring landscape of this particular part of Oxfordshire and how it shaped the people who have lived there over millennia. I love Stroud's writing style – she writes from her soul, in a visceral yet colourful prose.

From Oxfordshire, I journeyed to India and the sweeping saga of *The Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese. Spanning three generations, I found this one too long and struggled to get to the end. I think I was more interested in what it could teach me about this part of India's history that I found the narrative distracting. Perhaps it just didn't grab me and therefore took me too long to read, resulting in me simply 'losing the plot', so to speak!

I had read some great reviews of *Auē* by Becky Manawatu, and having read very little by authors from New Zealand, decided to give it a go. I bought this one on my Kindle. It chops and changes between different viewpoints and characters, placed differently in time, which sometimes made the narrative a bit difficult to follow. Manawatu writes with an urgency, however, that doesn't give you time to dwell but pushes you on. *Auē* tackles some confronting themes – domestic violence, gang violence, drug abuse, orphaned children – and is achingly sad at times. Māori words are used frequently throughout the text, and while the meaning of some could be inferred, others simply left me guessing (and a bit frustrated). It wasn't until I reached the end of the book that I realised there was a glossary – something I would have known about from the beginning (and referred to often) if I'd had the paper version in my hands!

I needed something light after the relative heaviness of *Auē* and opted for *The Lost Bookshop* by Evie Woods. Magical realism isn't my usual go-to, but I enjoyed the speed with which I turned the pages of this one, getting lost in the streets of Dublin and carried along by the story. I didn't particularly like the writing style but for an easy read, it served the purpose!



Alison Madelaine

This year, I have reviewed two more ARCs (Advanced Reader Copies). *All the Colours of the Dark* by Chris Whitaker is an absolutely epic story beginning in the 1970s and spanning decades. Set in small town USA, we are following friends Joseph (Patch) and Saint. Something happens that puts strain on their friendship, and the rest of the story follows their lives, both individually and together. It is hard to categorise this book. It is a coming-of-age story, a mystery, a serial killer thriller, and a story of friendship, love and determination all rolled into one. The other ARC was by the author of the popular *Harry Bosch* and *Lincoln Lawyer* book series (the TV adaptations are also excellent, and I have recently binged *The Lincoln Lawyer* Season 3 on Netflix). *The Waiting* is about a lesser-known character in the *Harry Bosch* Universe, Renee Ballard. One of the most interesting things about this story was the use of genealogy in solving crimes, for example, identifying genetic relatives and building family trees in order to help narrow down suspects in a case.

If there are any fans of Australian author Craig Silvey out there, I recently got to meet him and he signed my son's copy of *Runt*, which I have also recently read. If anyone is looking for a great children's book that appeals to adults too, *Runt* is it. Craig also revealed that he is currently writing a second instalment!

My list of fiction translated from Japanese is growing, and this time I read *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata (translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori). This is a very short, quirky book and I devoured it in one sitting. Another very good read was from the queen of short books, Clare Keegan. *So Late in the Day* is about the

relationship between a man and a woman and what might have been. As always, Clare Keegan manages to pack a lot into a novella.

Recently I did two long road trips and listened to a few good audiobooks. One was *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles. While I did not love this as much as many others have, I did enjoy it once I got into it. The other was Liane Moriarty's latest book, *Here One Moment*. This was a very interesting read. A woman on a plane stands up and points to each of the passengers 'predicting' their age and manner of death. Most of the passengers are convinced she is some sort of fortune teller, and some of them set about trying to thwart her prediction. This book explores the question of whether you live your life differently if you know how and when you are going to die. I will not spoil the book by telling you whether these predictions came true or not – you will have to read it to find out!



Ying Sng

When *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver was published last century, I started reading it but didn't finish for one reason or another. It must have made an impression on me because every time I heard the book title or saw the author's name, an image of a girl in a small plane would appear in my mind. No context. It would just show up. Well, I can tell you where it was from now! As big books go, this one is a cracker.

I really enjoyed the characters, loathsome and lovable as some of them were. After I turned the last page and closed the book, I sent a text to a friend to rave about it – "I've just finished this book. Let me tell you about it!" Of course, she had read it years ago – you know, way back when I should have.

Another book I enjoyed was *The Women* by Kristin Hannah. The central character is Frankie, a young woman from a well-to-do conservative family in California. Her parents revered military service but when she joins the Army Nursing Corp during the Vietnam War, they are aghast. The expectation is for her to have a suitable marriage; war is something best left to men. The twenty-year-old Frankie is frightfully unprepared for life in a warzone but eventually she finds support from her colleagues and purpose in her work. When she returns home, Frankie struggles with forming relationships, substance addiction and what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder. There was no support for women because they were not on the front line. I guess the horrors of dealing with mass casualties from grenades and napalm wasn't front line enough. The 1960s was a period of change and Frankie's experience brought a sense of the political and cultural zeitgeist. There were also light-hearted moments and some romance, after all Frankie was a young woman in a male-dominated setting. However, my favourite part was the thread of friendship that ran throughout the book. Bonds that are forged through joint turmoil are unbreakable and in Frankie's case, lifesaving.

The House of Doors by Tan Twan Eng is set in colonial Malaya and weaves real historical events with fictional characters. A quote on the cover calls it "richly atmospheric" and it is difficult to find two better words to describe it. The protagonist, Lesley Hamlyn, lives in Penang with her husband who went to school with Somerset Maugham. The renown writer and his secretary/companion, Gerald, come to stay with them and during this visit Lesley recounts many stories from her past. These included how they were acquainted with the would be revolutionary, Dr Sun Yat Sen, when he lived in Penang and devised plans to overthrow the Qing dynasty and the murder trial of Lesley's best friend, Ethel Proudlock (the first white woman charged with murder in Malaya). Ethel's story was included in Maugham's *The Casuarina Tree* and later turned into a successful play. Tan Twan Eng has written three books and considering all three have been on the Booker longlist, he isn't too shabby a writer. His other two books are now on my precariously tall to-be-read pile.

By chance, I seem to have read a few books of historical fiction. Next time, I may endeavour to read some nonfiction and perhaps some books with titles that don't begin with 'The'.

Note: For reasons of space, we have had to hold over contributions from the editors until the next issue.

