



# What we've been reading



## Nicola Bell

There are some authors who excel at writing about minutiae. It's so easy to get it wrong and to lose a reader in impenetrably boring prose. But in the right hands? Paragraphs describing an arched eyebrow, or a smile that flickers, or the dancing of thoughts passing through a character's mind – small moments that are strung together to form simple scenes where nothing actually happens – can make the reader feel like they are experiencing life through another's eyes. This is how I felt reading *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. You don't just understand the motives behind a character's action in her stories – you see their whole world. I got the same feeling when reading another book: *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles. This story revolves around Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov, an aristocrat in Stalin's Russia, who is placed under house arrest at his residence in an upmarket Moscow hotel. We readers are introduced to him when he begins his sentence as a 32-year-old man, thereafter following him as he spends his remaining years within the four walls of the Metropol. The plot meanders, but not in a tedious way; it meanders because that's what life does. The minutiae are made meaningful.

Another book I read recently that had more of a tumble-drier style of story structure was *After She Wrote Him* by Sulari Gentill. Gentill seamlessly switches protagonists throughout the book, first writing from the perspective of a crime author, whose half-finished mystery novel features a literary author, and then writing from the perspective of a literary author, whose half-finished introspective work of fiction features a crime author. But who is the 'real' author and who is the character? Reading this one is less like taking a gentle walk in the park and more like bolting towards the edge of a cliff while on fire.



## Jennifer Buckingham

My latest Important Book is *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. Didn't finish it. When I made the call to close it and put it back on the shelf, I was thinking about other books I haven't finished and what they have in common, and I have decided that it's magical realism. Other books I have failed to finish in this genre are *Ulysses* (James Joyce) and *100 Years of Solitude* (Gabriel García Márquez) although I did finish Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Lots of people do like magic realism, but that style is generally not for me. Less celebrated but more enjoyable was a memoir by my friend and former colleague Peter Saunders. His book *Croydon Boy* is about his childhood, adolescence and young adulthood in the South of England. Peter is a rare breed – a conservative sociologist with a sense of fun – and he has cleverly and humorously woven statistics and social commentary about post-war England into his personal story. One of his footnotes led me to track down a book called *Family and Kinship in East London* by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, which was first published in 1957 and was apparently a hugely influential sociological study and became such a successful book it is now a Penguin Classic. While the maternal headship family relationships it describes are set in one place and time, they had been transported across the world to Australia. My parents spent their childhoods in places that were aesthetically very different – one in East London and the other in a tiny NSW country town – but the familial and neighbourhood dynamics were not so far apart. Finally for this round up is *A Little History of the World* written by E. H. Gombrich when he was a bored and out-of-work university graduate in Vienna in the 1930s. It was originally written in German, and he only relatively recently worked with his granddaughter to translate it into English not long before he died. It was written for children, which makes me very impressed with the reading skills of German-speaking children almost 100 years ago; I know several highly educated adults that have enjoyed this book. Gombrich revised it slightly when he translated it, but he never extended it. Events intervened after the original publication, of course, and he went on to spend his

time writing other exemplary books on art and cultural history. *A Little History of the World* is written in a narrative style and traces a line through people and events from pre-history to the time of publication that somehow seems fresh and gives a sense of how we got to where we are.



**Mark Carter**

Many years ago, I read a biography of Joseph Stalin. It was a voluminous tome but a fascinating and detailed insight into a ruthless dictator. Recently, I came across *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* by Sheila Fitzpatrick and thought it might be an interesting big picture follow-up. The book is certainly short, and leaves the reader wanting to delve further into detail, but, surprisingly, was not unsatisfying. The book provides a birds-eye view of Soviet history and fulfilled my

need for nostalgia given, rather depressingly, I lived through a large portion of the history discussed. The book documents many key events, both triumphs and disasters, including the chaotic birth of the Soviet Union, periodic purges, stunning success of the 1930s industrialisation, profound failure of the early pseudoscientific agricultural policy, tragedy and ultimate victory in WWII and of course, the Cold War. The book did remind me how utterly incomprehensible the rapid collapse of the USSR was in 1991. Up to that point, I am sure that many, including myself, assumed that unless they managed to mutually annihilate each other, superpowers would endure forever. Perhaps a timely lesson in there somewhere?

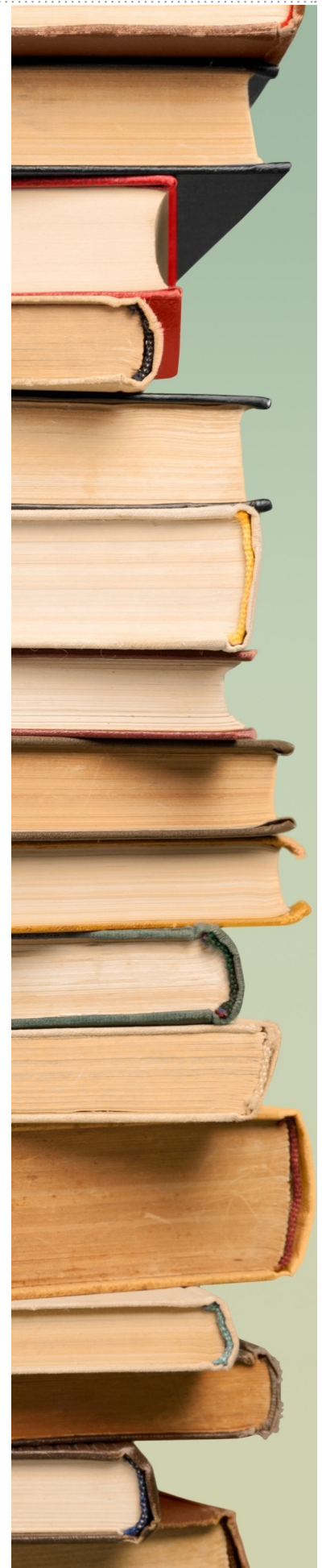
A second read was Sean Carroll's *Something Deeply Hidden*. Most popular books on quantum mechanics focus on how utterly weird the world of the very small is in comparison to our familiar macroscopic world. Quantum mechanics is often treated as a black box that can be used to make accurate and useful predictions, but there is no point trying to explain quantum reality, at least in classic macroscopic terms. Carroll takes a different approach and argues that quantum theory is not just a useful set of tools to make predictions about reality, it actually is reality, and importantly, is not really that weird. To be clear, this is speculation, but interesting speculation, nonetheless. Carroll argues that there is no real division between the quantum and our macroscopic world. The classical world we know is just a momentary slice of quantum reality. How does that happen? Well, it does get a bit weird at this point. Whenever two particles interact, the universe splits into two different realities – existing next to each other – but these realities are never able to interact; the so called Many Worlds hypothesis. This does sound utterly absurd but, at least to a lay reader with exactly zero expertise or knowledge in the area, Carroll makes a convincing case that the Many Worlds hypothesis arises directly from our current understanding of quantum mechanics and represents the most elegant and parsimonious interpretation. The fact that the theory is not widely accepted by physicists, who actually know something about the topic, should probably be considered an indication that my assessment should not be accepted uncritically. Actually, on second thought, I'm probably right. *Something Deeply Hidden* was a rather refreshing popular book on the subject, given it was not focusing on the fundamental weirdness of the quantum world, even if it did turn out to be, well, weird in a different way.



**Anna Desjardins**

Possibly the best book I've read in the last six months is *Limberlost* by Robbie Arnott, an up-and-coming Australian author. This unassuming little beauty came as a total surprise to me. I'd seen the book featured in a Harry Hartog email pushing 'new reads', but I thought it didn't sound terribly exciting. Then its name popped up again in a book club email I received, but I couldn't attend. Finally, I saw it sitting on the Quick Reads shelf at the library, so I took a punt and borrowed it. Now

I've got another of Arnott's books on request! The story takes us inside the head of a sensitive teenage boy at the tail end of WWII, on an apple orchard in Tasmania, waiting







the interminable months for his two older brothers to return from war. The events of the protagonist's life that summer are interwoven with where his life moves in the ensuing years. This is a book to savour, a hymn to family ties, to the land and our connection to it, and to the language we use to render that on paper. It was quite simply a beautiful read, and I found myself quietly moved by it. It also made me want to go for a long walk through the forest in Tasmania again.

Just last week, I finished the other 'best book' of my last six months, *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus. This is a searingly acerbic and witty tale of an exceptionally intelligent woman, up against all the prejudices of 1950s America as she attempts to forge a life as a chemist. You can imagine that I was not a little surprised when my 14-year-old son was actually the one to bring this into our home, using a precious birthday book voucher! But lucky for me that he did. Elizabeth Zott, the lab-coated and safety-goggled heroine, brooks absolutely no nonsense and although she tends to make a lot of enemies, she also ends up with a charmingly odd assortment of friends, including an insightful and deeply loyal dog, Six-Thirty. Their wonderful repartee (yes, including the dog's) as they all work to just 'make it through life' will have you laughing out loud through your indignant anger. I wanted to look for more by this author too, but amazingly, this is her first novel. It has justifiably become a bestseller.



#### **Maddy Goto**

Having always been a committed reader of books with real pages made of paper, I consider myself a bit of a latecomer to the world of eReaders and even more of a latecomer to audiobooks. In fact, I am currently experiencing my first ever audiobook (*The Bookbinder of Jericho* by Pip Williams), and am still very much an audiobook beginner. I'm told, with practice, I'll get better at them.

I was gifted a Kindle about six months ago and became an instant convert, devouring *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman in record time (for me)! It was the interesting, solitary, and somewhat leftfield women at the centre of these books that drew me in, and by the end I felt I knew these characters really well.

Next, I turned to some non-fiction and made a valiant attempt at *The Cutter Incident: How America's First Polio Vaccine Led to a Growing Vaccine Crisis* by Paul Offitt. Despite it being relatively short, I only managed half of this book. The beginning was fascinating, describing in detail the extreme failings of the first mass vaccinations in the US which resulted in hundreds of children being given live polio vaccines. It was easy to follow the narrative and learn some simple science along the way. I got bogged down, however, when the narrative began to lose its way, themes began to be repeated and individuals were reintroduced at random times. I decided to close this one before the end.

The book that has had the profoundest impact on me recently was *The Red of my Blood* by Clover Stroud. I'm glad I had a paper copy to hold. It deals with death, life, loss, love, and above all, sisterhood. Stroud writes with a brutal honesty and manages to put into words what can't be put into words. She writes of the year following her sister's untimely death, and while it is her own personal story, she manages to forge such a strong connection with the reader that you feel part of her journey. While the beginning of the book is raw and desperate, by the end not only did I feel like Stroud's friend, but I also felt uplifted and in awe of life.



#### **Alison Madelaine**

As usual, I have read some more Australian crime. Firstly, Margaret Hickey's third instalment in the Mark Arity series, *Broken Bay*, is set in a coastal location and involves cave diving in sink holes. If you can get over your claustrophobia, it is a great read. Secondly, I read *Wake* by Shelley Burr. *Wake* is her first novel, and also the first in a series about Private Investigator Lane Holland, and this was definitely one of my favourite reads of 2023. I have the second book in the series (*Ripper*) ready to go and I see Shelley Burr has a third book due to be released in September 2024.

This time, I read a few quite short novels. As much as I love to get stuck into a really long book, there is something appealing about reading shorter ones. *Small Things Like These* by Clare Keegan had been recommended to me by multiple friends and colleagues and it didn't disappoint. The story takes place in 1980s Ireland in the lead up to Christmas. The central character, Bill Furlong, is married with five daughters. Bill was born to an unwed mother and this very short story highlights the treatment of young unwed mothers by the Catholic Church. The other short novel I read could not be more different. *My Sister, the Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite is not the usual sort of serial killer book. Set in Nigeria, it is about the relationship between two sisters, the older of which feels very protective of her younger sister and goes so far as to help her dispose of bodies and clean up crime scenes after she murders men she has been seeing.

Finally, I have to mention two excellent novels, this time in the historical fiction genre. *The Bookbinder of Jericho* is the second novel from Pip Williams and came right after the very successful *Dictionary of Lost Words*. It certainly didn't suffer for being a second novel and I actually enjoyed it more than 'Dictionary'. *The Lost Apothecary* by Sarah Penner is a dual timeline novel set in London in 1791 and the present day. In the former time period, a hidden apothecary shop caters for women who want to 'dispose of' men who have wronged them in some way. In the present day, an aspiring historian goes mudlarking in the Thames and discovers a link to the unsolved apothecary murders from centuries ago.



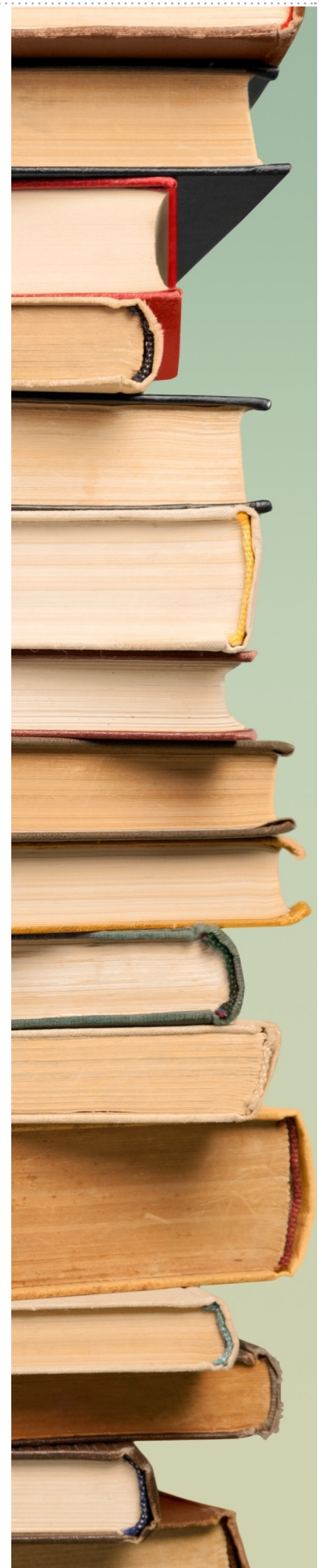
**Siobhan Merlo**

Last year, we hopped in the ute with our roof-top tent and did a lap of Australia. It is certainly a land of many contrasts with no wi-fi for at least half of the journey, and many remote and seemingly inhospitable landscapes. The question which kept arising in my mind was: How did/do people survive here? I was incredibly impressed with the capacity of our First Nations people to survive in these places and manage the land in sustainable ways. Mid-northern Western Australia was particularly inhospitable: red rock, heat, no water in sight, sand and salt bush if you were lucky. It is no wonder the Dutch who arrived in the early 1600s were suitably unimpressed by the 'Great South Land', placed a plaque on a small island off the coastline at Shark Bay and moved right along – which brings me to the book I have been reading. *Batavia* by Peter Fitzimmons chronicles an extremely macabre chapter in Australian history. In 1628, a spice-trading ship travelling from Amsterdam to what is now Jakarta, carrying 340 people and 12 treasure chests, was steered off course in an attempted mutiny and was wrecked on a coral reef off the coast of Western Australia. Survivors of the shipwreck made their way to the small islands nearby, but it was soon very clear that water, food and shelter would prove to be serious challenges. In a bid to obtain help, the captain and approximately 40 others rowed a longboat all the way to Jakarta (then Batavia). In the meantime, the ship's apothecary, a psychopath by the name of Jeronimus Cornelisz, took control of the remaining survivors. He and fellow mutineers decided that there was not enough food or water to go around, and therefore, the only solution would be to systematically 'dispatch' the remaining survivors by whatever means necessary. I found myself turning 'clumps' of pages at a time because of the brutality, and I am not sure I would necessarily recommend this book. I nonetheless find a book about shipwrecks and treasure hard to resist, and particularly intriguing given the *Batavia* ship, treasure, cannons, a 6.2 ft skeleton with a skull lesion, and a pestle and mortar inscribed with *Love Conquers All* which is believed to have belonged to Jeronimus, have been salvaged, many of which can be seen at the Freemantle Shipwreck Museum.



**Ying Sng**

If you are not put off by the size of *The Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese, you will be rewarded with two stories about love, loss and family set during Crown rule in India. The book begins with the marriage of a 12-year-old girl to a 40-year-old man she has never met – stay with me, it is 1900, so it wasn't unusual. Ammachi has married into a family with a mysterious condition that has plagued them for generations. The parallel story details the life of an impoverished Scottish boy who







becomes a doctor and joins the Indian Medical Service. The writing takes you through three generations across the better part of a century, and I was transfixed for all of it.

There has been a bit of fuss about *Yellowface* by Rebecca Kuang, and I understand why. It feels weird to say I enjoyed it because a feeling of unease permeates the entire book. The characters are unlikeable and they make many questionable decisions. The portrayal of the publishing industry is eye-opening but the most thought-provoking for me were the questions around diversity, cultural appropriation and the militant use of social media. In a case of life imitating art, the real-life praise and criticism of this book (and the author) is revealing and a little bit meta!

Independent bookshops are irresistible. Maybe it's the smell of freshly printed books, but I think it is mostly the bookseller's recommendation. I would never have picked up *The Collected Regrets of Clover* by Mikki Brammer otherwise. Clover is in her mid-thirties, introverted and awkward AND she's a death doula. Yup, I didn't know that was a job either! Despite the grim subject matter, there is nothing morbid about this book. It is an easy read and a tender reminder to celebrate life and take risks. Another bookseller recommended *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin, and I thought he was joking. Seriously? It's a young adult book about gaming for heaven's sake, but these booksellers know their stuff. I really enjoyed it – even the bits about developing and playing games!

If you haven't read *Tom Lake* by Ann Patchett, don't wait – buy it, read it. Better yet, listen to Meryl Streep narrate it on Audible. Lara's three adult daughters return to the family orchard because of the pandemic. As they work, they ask her to tell them the story of her relationship with Peter Duke, a famous movie star. There is a heartbreaking moment near the end, but overall it is a sublime coming-of-age story about finding contentment with the decisions we make.

Prize-winning books don't always hit the mark, but here are two that I really enjoyed. The first was *Trust* by Hernan Diaz (Pulitzer Prize joint winner). A collection of four stories, it begins with a novel about a wealthy financier and his wife during the Great Depression, followed by a ghost-written autobiography of Andrew Bevel who appears to be the inspiration for the first story. The next two stories are told from the perspective of the ghost writer and Andrew Bevel's wife, each revealing a little bit more to the reader until you realise how malleable the truth can be. I thought it was very clever. The other prize winner was *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens* by Shankari Chandran (Miles Franklin Award winner). Who would have thought that a book set in a Sydney nursing home could be so engaging! Don't be fooled by the light-hearted title. It is not about a tea party in a park. Some of the descriptions of what the characters went through in Sri Lanka are so brutal that if it were a movie, I would have covered my eyes. I suppose that is the beauty of reading; you can't avert your gaze from the images that words conjure up.



#### Kevin Wheldall

I recently rewatched (and appreciated afresh) *Apocalypse Now* (original cut), loosely based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. So, I decided to have another crack at reading this apparently seminal novella. Having discarded it at least once before, only part way through, I tried an audiobook version this time. Reader, I fell asleep. Two of my family members told me that they had thoroughly enjoyed it. I found it unbearably turgid.

According to CliffsNotes, "Conrad intentionally made *Heart of Darkness* hard to read. He wanted the language of his novella to make the reader feel like they were fighting through the jungle, just like Marlow fought through the jungle in search of Kurtz." He succeeded. All I can say is "the horror, the horror". But I did love *Lucie by the Sea* by Elizabeth Strout, as always. What a wonderful, humane, far-from-turgid writer she is.

I am new to the work of Mick Herron and was drawn to read his latest *The Secret Hours* after watching the excellent TV dramatisations of his earlier works. (*Slow Horses* was so seedy you could almost smell it!) His latest shows him to be a worthy challenger in the replacement stakes for John le Carré. Speaking of whom, le Carré devotees should not miss the award-winning doco *The Pigeon Tunnel* (on Apple TV) which is a remarkable piece of work. The pigeon tunnel analogy itself is the stuff of nightmares ...

I have also read *A Winter Grave* and *Extraordinary People* by Peter May but was not as impressed as I was by his *Lewis* series (reviewed in an earlier issue). They both lacked the authenticity of his wonderfully evocative Scottish series of novels. In similar vein, *To Kill a Troubadour* by Martin Walker was, shall we say, average, but this series is wearing a bit thin now (apart from the descriptions of food)! Not so for *Standing in the Shadows* by the late Peter Robinson which was true to form. It is sad to think that this might be the last outing of Detective Superintendent Alan Banks unless the publishers have an, as yet, unpublished manuscript tucked away in the bottom drawer.



**Robyn Wheldall**

In my last entry for 'What We've Been Reading' I committed to reading more fiction (I hear you Dr Madelaine) and I did attempt it. I landed on a novel written by one of my favourite non-fiction writers, Alain de Botton (*Consolations of Philosophy* being well thumbed), that had been sitting on one of our bookcases with the pages yellowing. *Kiss and Tell: A Novel* was published in 1995 so is approaching a 30-year anniversary in the not-so-distant future.

The goal of de Botton's novel was to demonstrate Dr Samuel Johnson's observation that everyone's life is "a subject worthy of the biographer's art". De Botton did this by deciding to write a biography (in the style of a novel) of the next person who walked into his life. If you think that sounds odd (that a biography can be a novel) you are not alone. Frankly, I don't think de Botton pulled it off on this occasion. The fact that I cannot recall a single detail of the life of the person who was the subject of the novel is testament to that. Having said this, I did enjoy it but was sometimes left wondering what type of book I was reading. It really didn't know what it was. I am pleased that de Botton did not devote his life to writing novels. Enough said.

During Covid-19 (and remembering that this is not actually over), Julia Baird published her now international best-selling book, *Phosphorescence: On Awe, Wonder and Things that Sustain You When the World Goes Dark*. I have written about *Phosphorescence* previously and it seemed that this book landed just at the right time (notwithstanding the fact that it was written before the pandemic arrived and changed our lives in dramatic ways) with many (thousands and thousands) finding comfort and inspiration from her invocation to engage in the natural world to help live our lives. Baird has done it again, with her new title *Bright Shining: How Grace Changes Everything* arriving as it has at a time when there are deep divisions in the world, both internationally and in Australia. I am thoroughly enjoying this latest offering but wonder if Baird's call for us to show grace and participate in acts of 'moral beauty' may be harder to achieve than allowing the natural world to speak to us, a main theme of her previous blockbuster. Baird has a committed following as evidenced by the crowds that are gathering over our country on a book tour following the recent launch of the book early in November. No doubt *Bright Shining* will be given and received much this Christmas, and if we can embrace the author's final words in the book we will be the better for it: "To walk alongside each other, despite everything. To sing, even. To feel the sun on our faces, and know we are alive."

