

Clive Williams Book Reading Log

7th October 2017

TITLE: Conclave
AUTHOR: Robert Harris
DATE: October 2017
PLOT: The novel is set in the Vatican where the Pope has just died. Lomeli is a senior cardinal responsible for the procedure leading to the election of the new Pope, a task which takes the novel through mystery, discovery and a number of unexpected twists.
COMMENT: A slow start but gripping from about half way. An unusual subject expertly crafted by Harris in his very readable way. Worth reading but in this case fiction seemed like fiction.

TITLE: Regeneration
AUTHOR: Pat Barker
DATE: September 2017
PLOT: A novel based at Craiglockhart, a psychiatric hospital where the protagonist Dr William Rivers treated Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen amongst others for mental breakdown from shell shock in WWI. Apart from Robert Graves, most of the other characters are fictitious but their cases and treatment are recorded in factual records made at the time.
COMMENT: A detailed and revealing book both depressing in the relentless despair of the subjects and revealing in the infancy of applied psychiatry and the sub text regarding the administration of the war. Today it is shocking that such treatment was only extended to officers. After this, I now need several light reads.

TITLE: Holy Spy
AUTHOR: Rory Clements
DATE: September 2017
PLOT: John Shakespeare is the Queen Elizabeth I spycatcher who inhabits the Tudor underworld of treason, dark mystery and murder to uncover those who would assassinate the Queen.
COMMENT: Gripping from cover to cover. A terrific adventure well written to hold you until the end. Very good.

TITLE: The Rebel Angels
AUTHOR: Robinson Davies
DATE: August 2017
PLOT: Set in the University of St John etc in Canada, erudite scholars weave a tale of mystery, philosophy, love, fantasy and religion.
COMMENT: The first of a trilogy which I will not continue with. Too cerebral and philosophical for me written in prose I found realistically unconvincing – do people really talk like this – quoting latin and esoteric biblical passages? Weighted overmuch with what the characters were thinking rather than doing.

TITLE: The Ghost
AUTHOR: Robert Harris
DATE: August 2017
PLOT: The body of a writer is washed up on an exclusive US beach. He had been ghost writing the memoirs of a former British Prime Minister. Another ghost writer takes up the challenge to finish the book and uncovers plots and conspiracies which for some proves fatal. Closely mirrors Tony Blair perhaps.
COMMENT: Sorry, but I was disappointed. A number of friends thought it was good, it seemed a weak typical average thriller to me and not a patch on Harris's other work.

TITLE: The Englishman's Boy
AUTHOR: Guy Vanderhaeghe
DATE: July 2017
PLOT: In 1873, two Assiniboine Indians steal 20 horses from a group of sleeping wolf hunters taking pelts to trade. A drifter "The Englishman's Boy" joins their posse tracking North into Canada to run them down. In parallel, the story jumps to 1920 Hollywood where Shorty McAdoo an old time Westerner reveals what really happened
COMMENT: As with The Last Crossing, Vanderhaeghe held me spellbound from cover to cover seamlessly slipping across the decades and between scenes without losing his poetry or sense of believability. Terrific.

TITLE: Stoner
AUTHOR: John Williams
DATE: July 2017
PLOT: William Stoner enters Missouri University at 19, already having achieved very little. He stays there for the rest of his unaccomplished life. Against this academic backdrop he battles against the world outside naively hoping that things will turn out alright in the end. A detailed life study of a nobody.

COMMENT: I will remember this book for the sense of gladness that I am not Stoner, yet there are such people and the novel captures their sad lives superbly. Well written, it has become a classic.

TITLE: Prisoners of Geography
AUTHOR: Tim Marshall
DATE: July 2017
PLOT: Sub titled "Ten Maps that tell you everything you need to know about Global Politics" sums it up. Taking the entire globe, section by section Tim Marshall explains why nations have "progressed or developed" at different times and why they take the political decisions they do, shaped by history, trade, religion, resources etc which are all shaped and controlled by their geography, protecting or exposing them.
COMMENT: A fascinating and clearly written explanation which leaves one more informed on the direction all our futures may take and the problems we may face. Recommended.

TITLE: Butcher's Crossing
AUTHOR: John Williams
DATE: June 2017
PLOT: During the second half of the 1800's Will Andrews leaves Harvard and goes West in search of a new life and discovery. At the frontier town of Butcher's Crossing he meets a hunter who dreams of a vast herd of buffalo he once saw in Colorado. Against all advice, they form a small group of brave and crazy men on what will become an incredible journey.
COMMENT: A riveting story of hardship and survival which is quite different from the Western genre, believable and authentic with fascinating character portrayal. Recommended.

TITLE: Benediction
AUTHOR: Kent Haruf
DATE: June 2017
PLOT: A summer passes in the fictional small town of Holt in Colorado. Simple lives are lived out and life is drawing to an end for Dad Lewis. We meet ordinary people doing ordinary things.
COMMENT: A remarkable book which makes so much of very little with writing that is so evocative and characters whose feelings, actions and emotions are totally absorbing. Such wisdom, humour and understanding of humanity in this book makes it special – I cried at times.

TITLE: As it is in heaven
AUTHOR: Niall Williams
DATE: June 2017
PLOT: A life of colourless tragedy for Stephen Griffin seems marked out with the death of his mother and sister. He is introspective and has little to live for until by chance, he hears an Italian girl playing Vivaldi on her violin. From that moment on his obsession guides and changes his life forever.
COMMENT: Out of the most simple story, Williams spins the most absorbing, emotional and rewarding novel with poetic moments laced with dry observational humour. Superb on many levels and one of the best reads for a long time. This book breathes.

TITLE: The Blue Afternoon
AUTHOR: William Boyd
DATE: May 2017
PLOT: LA 1936. A young architect is shadowed by a man claiming to be her father. She joins him on a journey into his extraordinary past.
COMMENT: Didn't do it for me. I felt the plot was one anyone could dream up and found the writing weak and predictable.

TITLE: The Pigeon Tunnel
AUTHOR: John le Carre
DATE: May 2017
PLOT: Autobiographic collection of vignettes from leCarre's lifetime.
COMMENT: le Carre seems to have met everyone famous and had an adventurous life travelling the world without let or hindrance. This has stood him in good stead to write the novels he has but has little interest in total. A dry book which I was glad to reach the end of.

TITLE: On The Move
AUTHOR: Oliver Sacks
DATE: April 2017
PLOT: Dr. Sacks is one of the rare author/neurologists that can bring warmth and intelligence to the reader with a scientific eye. He tells of his life, lived to the full, from childhood, through swinging 60's and his serious medical quest.
COMMENT: Extraordinary in that it is a biography set in a neurological world with drug taking and his sexuality revealed for all to see. His book "Awakenings" has been made as a film. An amazing man. Recommended.

TITLE: Sicily: A short history, from the Greeks to the Cosa Nostra
AUTHOR: John Julius Norwich

DATE: March 2017
PLOT: A history of several thousand years tells how almost every nation old and new has had a hand in trying to shape and rule Sicily – often without much success. At the crossroads of East and West, and also North and South, its past is rich and often violent,
COMMENT: A very readable book achieving the almost impossible in covering so much in one book. It explains its culture, the poverty, the mafia and so on. Flagged a little in the middle but if you want the history, then this is the book.

TITLE: The Honoured Society
AUTHOR: Norman Lewis
DATE: Feb 2017
PLOT: Describes the reason for the growth of the mafia in Sicily in authoritative detail passing through all the phases as it morphs from one form to another in response to changes in economy, politics, war and technology
COMMENT: Informative, matter-of-fact, and chilling in its forensic detail. Very well written by this great travel author. Recommended highly,

TITLE: Not Forgetting the Whale
AUTHOR: John Ironmonger
DATE: Jan 2017
PLOT: A young man washed up naked on a Cornish beach on the same day as a beached whale turns out to be a banker on the run from a financial disaster who somehow seems to want to save the world.
COMMENT: Others found this a good book – I found it dull with long passages of average writing which had obvious literary devices such as the choice of the whale compared with the downfall of mankind. I gave up after 250 pages- weak.

TITLE: An Officer and a Spy
AUTHOR: Robert Harris
DATE: Dec 2016
PLOT: The complete story of the scandalous affair in 1890 surrounding a French Military Officer charged with spying for the Germans. The affair tore France apart and ended with the demise of many eminent people.
COMMENT: True and unbelievably astonishing. As expected with Harris, the book is educational and un-put-downable. Must be read.

TITLE: The in Between World of Vikram Lall
AUTHOR: MG Vissanji
DATE: Nov 2016
PLOT: lifetime of an Indian lad in Kenya from start of Mau Mau uprising leading to independence.
COMMENT: A full and rich novel revealing the horrors, betrayals, loves and dashed dreams of this period of history. Strangely I failed to connect with this book at my first attempt in 2008 but this time I could not put it down. Outstanding.

TITLE: Half Blood Blues
AUTHOR: Esi Edugyan
DATE: Oct 2016
PLOT: A disparate group of jazz musicians in Berlin through the rise of Nazism and its impact on non whites, jews and avant garde music. The story traces their struggle to exist, escape, the fall of Paris and meeting with fame.
COMMENT: The book which skips back and forth between 1939 / 1940 and 1992 and its use of vernacular speech throughout made it just too much like hard work, consequently I got very little from it.

TITLE: A Possible Life
AUTHOR: Sebastian Foulks
DATE: Sep 2016
PLOT: The lives of a number of disparate characters, all totally different in character, time and place.
COMMENT: Foulks takes the concept that “ a man who couldn't live the lives of others, would not be able to live his own.” A strange basis for a novel and I cannot say I found it illuminating or fulfilling.

TITLE: A Place Called Winter
AUTHOR: Patrick Gale
DATE: Aug 2016
PLOT: Harry Cane is a stammering boy with little promise in Edwardian England. He finds his way forward by leaving his wife, daughter and his own disgrace to discover a new life in Canada – in this way the story develops in twists and turns of fate as Harry finally finds his true self.
COMMENT: Overcome the homosexual content of the first section and you will be rewarded with an excellent tale full of real characters living in the most difficult circumstances. Recommended.

TITLE: Double Cross

AUTHOR: Ben Macintyre
DATE: Aug 2016
PLOT: WWII – Plans for the invasion of Europe depended on successfully fooling the enemy into believing the main attack would be somewhere other than Normandy. The key to this deception was “Fortitude” the use of double agents concertedly feeding a misleading picture over the build up and subsequent to the actual invasion. This is its story which could have gone disastrously wrong.
COMMENT: Macintyre is able to make historic fact into a gripping page turner and leave one astonished that the deception plan worked better than anyone could have imagined. Fascinating.

TITLE: A Hunger Artist
AUTHOR: Frank Kafka
DATE: July 2016
PLOT: The Hunger Artist performs for public entertainment by fasting – a bizarre concept as strange as the story itself. Eventually his popularity declines and by passers fail to notice him in his cage.
COMMENT: Typical Kafka – strange, almost psychological and twisting beyond normal imagination. A bizarre interlude unlike almost any other author. It has to be read for that reason alone.

TITLE: All the Light We Cannot See
AUTHOR: Anthony Doerr
DATE: June 2016
PLOT: The harrowing story of a blind French girl and a young German boy whose lives are thrown together in the tragedy of WWII. Werner becomes a member of the Hitler Youth and Marie-Laure a messenger for the resistance.
COMMENT: A beautiful novel, wonderfully written and deeply moving, it slowly captures the reader until you are left wanting more and more and cannot put the book down. Not a war story in the usual sense. Outstanding, I cannot recommend it highly enough.

TITLE: Knots and Crosses
AUTHOR: Ian Rankin
DATE: June 2016
PLOT: Three girls are murdered and Rebus has to face aspects of his past best left buried in order to chase down the murder who seems intent on leading Rebus a merry dance.
COMMENT: The first of Rankin’s Inspector Rebus novels. Not bad but not entirely believable.

TITLE: Rabbit, Run
AUTHOR: John Updike
DATE: May 2016
PLOT: Another Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom book. Former US famous sports star in the 1960’s. Eventually walks out on his alcoholic wife and uncontrollable son. What a loser.
COMMENT: Updike does not write about successful celebrities and stars, he writes about everybody else who have to live in second rate mediocrity and suffer a life of nothing turning out for the best. Possibly cynical but searingly accurate depiction of despair and hopelessness. Fascinating observation with black humour in outstanding prose.

TITLE: Saints of the Shadow Bible
AUTHOR: Ian Rankin
DATE: May 2016
PLOT: Glasgow based Detective Sergeant John Rebus doing what he does best – being ironic, off piste and a loose canon so far as the official police establishment is concerned but at the same time unravelling a complicated web of serious crime including delving into historic police corruption.
COMMENT: A good example of Rankin’s mastery of the crime novel.

TITLE: Empress Dowager Cixi
AUTHOR: Jung Chan
DATE: April 2016
PLOT: Sub titled “The concubine who launched modern China.” Factual and astonishing account which describes how Empress Dowager Cixi – the most important woman in Chinese history – brought a medieval empire into the modern age. Under her, the ancient country attained virtually all the attributes of a modern state until her death in 1908.
COMMENT: Readable and revealing – a deep lesson in history which helps to understand China today.

TITLE: Out of Africa
AUTHOR: Karen Blixen
DATE: March 2016
PLOT: Description of life on her coffee farm in Kenya from the hopeful bright beginnings, through the years of the Great War until the tragic end and collapse of her world when she has to leave.
COMMENT: Each chapter is written as though it were a wonderful personal letter to the reader. Her perception of the world around her and ability to capture it in words is outstanding. A magnificent life magnificently told. Highly recommended.

TITLE: The Last Crossing
AUTHOR: Guy Vanderhaeghe

DATE: Feb 2016
PLOT: From Victorian England to 1870 Frontier US and Canada a disgraced military captain and a disillusioned artists search for their lost brother in an unknown land with the help of Jerry Potts a half breed scout resulting in great drama involving truly believable characters.
COMMENT: Based on true events and real people, a beautifully crafted book which is written as a series of first person narratives. It had me on the edge of my seat once I had met all the players. Fascinating, surprising and easily my best book of the year. Outstanding.

TITLE: Not Dead Enough
AUTHOR: Robert James
DATE: Feb 2016
PLOT: Three murdered women, one suspect and no proof. DCI Roy Grace on the track of a brutal killer and facing his own ghosts from the past.
COMMENT: I must admit, I could not read fast enough to find out what happened next. Full of all the ingredients to keep one on the edge of the seat – my only reservation is that this formula is not unique so I felt as if I was being taken on a familiar ride. Very thrilling though.

TITLE: Annie Marble in Germany
AUTHOR: C.S.Forester
DATE: Jan 2015
PLOT: Account of Forester's trip with his wife in an open 15 foot boat 1000 miles along the inland waterways of Germany around 1920. No body would do this now but it was extraordinary at the time.
COMMENT: I cannot recommend this book even to waterway aficionados as so much has changed since his day. He may be a master at the tales of Hornblower but his personal life seemed not particularly exciting or interesting.

TITLE: When The Snow Fell
AUTHOR: Henning Mankell
DATE: Dec 2015
PLOT: Not as you would expect from this author but a story of a teenager discovering himself while battling through school and trying to save his drunkard father.
COMMENT: Set in the south of Sweden, a simple tale possibly tuned for a younger audience.

TITLE: H is For Hawk
AUTHOR: Helen Macdonald
DATE: Dec 2015
PLOT: Having kept falcons for years, McDonald writes of her journey to train the ultimate in falconry, a Goshawk which proves extremely difficult obsession. The experience is told in parallel with passages from a historical falconry manual.
COMMENT: To begin with I found it fascinating but eventually the slow progress in her achievement with the hawk denied the book of its full potential.

TITLE: Roseanne
AUTHOR: Maj Sjowall and others
DATE: Nov 2015
PLOT: Another Swedish crime novel with popular detective Martin Beck, this time solving the murder of a young woman found in the Gota Canal.
COMMENT: Now dated (pre email, mobiles. etc.) but a good story and exciting finish, if you want a straightforward easy read in this genre I recommend it.

TITLE: The Man Who Went up in Smoke
AUTHOR: Maj Sjowall and others
DATE: Nov 2015
PLOT: An early (1966) Swedish crime novel with popular detective Martin Beck who foreruns many others who are now more famous. Searching for a missing journalist in Hungary.
COMMENT: Not the best of the Martin Beck series.

TITLE: How to be Both
AUTHOR: Ali Smith
DATE: Nov 2015
PLOT: I am not entirely sure there is one.
COMMENT: This book is in two discreet halves and some books start with the second story and some with the first, I do not know why. I started in medieval Italy and did not understand a word, I gave up at half time and regretted wasting my time. Avoid it at all costs.

TITLE: Searching for the Secret River
AUTHOR: Kate Grenville
DATE: Nov 2015
PLOT: The story of Grenville's research into the life of ancestor Solomon Wiseman who was sentenced to death for theft when a lighterman on the 19th C Thames then together with his wife, exported to Australia and finally becoming a wealthy business man. The research led to "Secret River" an award winning novel in 2000.

COMMENT: I could not put this book down. Grenville breaths life into every character and incident she stumbles across and reveals the astonishing process she used to create her earlier novel. Superb

TITLE: The Far Pavilions
AUTHOR: M M Kaye
DATE: Oct 2015
PLOT: Set in NW India in the days of the Raj, it tells the story of Ash and Juli from their childhood to her rescue from suttee then develops to include the disaster of the second Afghan war.
COMMENT: A huge masterpiece involving espionage, history, changing cultures and morals. Some of the most heart stopping, page turning, sit on the edge of your seat excitement that I have ever come across albeit slowing down in the last third. An education - must be read. About 1000 pages long.

TITLE: The Calligrapher's Daughter
AUTHOR: Eugenia Kim
DATE: Sep 2015
PLOT: 30 years in the life of a Korean girl during the early part of the 20th C tells the cruelty and hardships of Japanese occupation, the war and liberation. Partly based on the life of the authors mother, the traditions and cultural changes are dramatic and almost unbelievable today.
COMMENT: Interesting and detailed. I felt there were a number of slow passages which could have been edited but glad I read it albeit skipping at times.

TITLE: The Mobile Library
AUTHOR: David Whitehouse
DATE: Aug 2015
PLOT: Four people with lives of sadness for one reason or another come together in a stolen mobile library in order to run away from life.
COMMENT: The most unrewarding book read for a long time. Highly unlikely scenario, depressing and poorly written – why did I bother.

TITLE: The Cat's Table
AUTHOR: Michael Ondaatje
DATE: Jul 2015
PLOT: Three young boys leave Ceylon on board the *Oransay* bound for England. They become involved in imaginary and real mysteries and discover truths and emotions about the adults and other young people around them. With the passage of time, in adulthood, the *Oransay* reappears.
COMMENT: An excellent novel with a fresh viewpoint, exciting, stirring, surprising and emotionally fulfilling. I felt myself willing things to happen. Recommended.

TITLE: Golden Earth
AUTHOR: Norman Lewis
DATE: Jun 2015
PLOT: In 1951 Norman Lewis went to Burma to see and record what was potentially the last remaining days of this ancient country which looked like the next victim of the communist onslaught overtaking that part of the world. He travelled widely and describes the people and their culture.
COMMENT: If I go to Burma one day, I shall read this book while I am there but for today I found it too heavy going. Initially I loved the poetically descriptive pen not unlike the master Colin Thubron but it did not carry me there.

TITLE: Better
AUTHOR: Atul Gawande
DATE: Jun 2015
PLOT: A journalistic approach by Harvard Dr Atul Gawande who examines the nature of progress and failure in medicine, a field defined by what he calls 'the messy intersection of science and human fallibility'.
COMMENT: First heard him give a Reith Lecture and was impressed. Sadly I found the book too gory towards the end and could not finish it but he certainly is influential in his analysis. Stimulating if you can take it.

TITLE: Border Music
AUTHOR: Robert James Waller
DATE: May 2015
PLOT: The tale of Texas Jack Carmine, a man who inspires others to exceed themselves but is himself tortured by a past tragedy, and Linda, a woman supporting a young daughter by any means possible.
COMMENT: A beautiful novel which uses language, scenery, music, situation and characters who truly breath to lift your heart before revealing the tragedy of real life. Wonderful. Also read The Bridges of Madison County – just magic.

TITLE: The Honorary Consul
AUTHOR: Graham Greene
DATE: May 2015

PLOT: Located probably in Argentina, a bungled kidnap attempt to capture the US Ambassador winds incompetently on through farce and tragedy set against a steamy Latin American backdrop.
COMMENT: The atmosphere of the 1950's age drips from Greene's pen in this easily paced, believable semi black tragi / comedy. Recommended for its period character.

TITLE: Codename Tricycle
AUTHOR: Russell Miller
DATE: Apr 2015
PLOT: The true story of Dusko Popov a wealthy Yugoslav businessman and playboy who became one of the most important and successful British double agents who managed to completely fool German Intelligence throughout the entire second world war during which he lived like a King and travelled freely.
COMMENT: An amazing account which were it not true would beggar belief. A fascinating read.

TITLE: Tubes
AUTHOR: Andrew Blum
DATE: Apr 2015
PLOT: What and where is the internet? A travel book with a difference, Blum follows the internet around the world starting from his own house to the farthest reaches of the system.
COMMENT: An explanation of the internet in not too technical detail, given to me by my son by way of letting me understand what he does at work. Some fascinating revelations.

TITLE: The Ice Princess
AUTHOR: Camilla Lackberg
DATE: Mar 2015
PLOT: Swedish crime thriller set in Fjällbacka a small fishing town on the West coast. An apparent suicide starts an author on a mission to find the truth and unravels a web of intrigue and mystery.
COMMENT: Well up to standard in the genre, worth reading - the first in a series.

TITLE: The Woman in White
AUTHOR: Wilkie Collins
DATE: Feb 2015
PLOT: Set in Victorian England, a young woman becomes trapped in a conspiracy which deviously draws her towards the most tragic end. The very people she depends upon to help her are revealed as helpless or treacherous in a spiral of fate.
COMMENT: A classic of the genre. Mystery and surprise abounds until the very end left me unable to put the book down. Excellent.

TITLE: The Road Home
AUTHOR: Rose Tremain
DATE: Jan 2015
PLOT: Lev, an East European immigrant arrives in London already disappointed with his dreams falling apart. Through chance and determination his fortunes ebb and flow while he is constantly haunted by the life he has left at home.
COMMENT: A wonderfully sensitive emotional tour which I could not put down. Writing which never flags or slows in this totally believable exploration of the life of a struggling immigrant.

TITLE: All Points North
AUTHOR: Simon Armitage
DATE: Jan 2015
PLOT: A collection of essays, prose and poems describing the places, quirks and people of Yorkshire centred around Marsden as seen through the young poet's eyes in a typically droll and amusing Northern way and flavoured by his time in Social Services, the Probation Service, broadcasting and film making.
COMMENT: An experience which goes a long way to educating Southerners and according to the reviews greatly entertains Northerners. I discovered Armitage from reading his poem "The Killing of Sophie Lancaster" written in response to a senseless murder in 2007. The poem and the tragic story of young Sophie just knocked me out.

TITLE: The Third Man
AUTHOR: Graham Greene
DATE: Dec 2014
PLOT: Set in bombed Vienna following the end of WWII, a tale of the underworld, intrigue, conflicting loyalties and a search for truth. The protagonist, Harry Lime is an American who's funeral is on page one.
COMMENT: The book was written by Greene for the purpose of making the film which has become one of the classics of all time. Very interesting to read after seeing the film which was artistically ground breaking.

TITLE: Findings
AUTHOR: Kathleen Jamie
DATE: Dec 2014
PLOT: A series of essays as Jamie wanders the length and breadth of Scotland and the Islands observing nature and the world as she sees it.

COMMENT: A little gem of a book out of the same stable as Tove Jansson's "Summer." Gently paced but with the addition of some phrases to die for "...the sort of bird that would want to be excused games if it could."

TITLE: Arthur and George
AUTHOR: Julian Barnes
DATE: Nov 2014
PLOT: Based on a shocking case of mis-justice and imprisonment of a quiet country solicitor, the long fight for justice became Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's life long struggle against all the odds and the worst that the establishment could muster. The unlikely conjunction of these two families runs throughout.
COMMENT: A compelling and gripping read which is superbly written and being based in fact is all the more astonishing. Recommended

TITLE: The Man Who Smiled
AUTHOR: Henning Mankell
DATE: Nov 2014
PLOT: Set in Southern Sweden, Inspector Kut Wallander recovering from 12 months trauma is drawn back to investigating the suicide of lawyer – against his better judgment he cannot let go but becomes involved in the most deadly situations.
COMMENT: As good as it gets with Wallander. An exciting read which builds steadily, descriptively and with high tension at the end. Excellent example of the genre.

TITLE: From the Land of Green Ghosts
AUTHOR: Pascal Khoo Thwe
DATE: Oct 2014
PLOT: The astonishing story of a young man's upbringing in a remote tribal village in Burma and his journey from the horrors of the tyrannical regime destroying his country to the tranquil academe in the quads of Cambridge.
COMMENT: An amazing autobiography giving a first hand account of how repressive, dangerous and backward life was really like in Burma until recent times. A little slow to get going but well worth reading.

TITLE: Harvest
AUTHOR: Jim Crace
DATE: Oct 2014
PLOT: Over seven days the novel is set in an indeterminate rural village in England roughly around 17th-18thC. The villagers celebrate harvest home when the arrival of three strangers heralds the most dramatic change to the lives of everyone; involving witchcraft, murder and the loss of everything they held dear.
COMMENT: A fascinating short tale poetically written. Recommended.

TITLE: The Secrets of Station X
AUTHOR: Michael Smith
DATE: Sept 2014
PLOT: A comprehensive and factual account of the difficulties and successes of Bletchley Park in cracking the secret codes used by the enemy in WWII and undoubtedly shortening the war by years.
COMMENT: A fascinating book which I could not put down even though I had been to BP, seen the film and already knew much of what went on, however it is so well written and authoritative that it comes highly recommended and adds significantly to the previous attempts to tell the story. Very good.

TITLE: The Witches of Eastwick
AUTHOR: John Updike
DATE: August 2014
PLOT: Darryl van Horne is a mystery man who buys up "the Lennox place" a rambling mansion and brings a devil may care attitude, gossip, money (apparently,) music, parties, sex and fertile purpose for three resident women with witchcraft at their fingertips to unleash black tragedy upon their previously perfectly normal small town.
COMMENT: I am an Updike fan, his prose is sometimes poetic, incisive, always very well observed and humorous. This novel started so well, went dark and strange and ended leaving me – and the characters – wishing for something else. Worth reading if only for the pleasure of seeing into Updike's mind.

TITLE: Jude The Obscure
AUTHOR: Thomas Hardy
DATE: August 2014th
PLOT: Set in Hardy's 19th C Wessex landscape, Jude's aspirations to academia or the church drive him relentlessly. However, while his life choices are all made for the best reasons, at every turn he is defeated and the women he loves have the same disastrous effect. If you think you've had it hard, believe me, you haven't.

COMMENT: A grim hard read but rewarding. In this novel, Hardy boldly comments on the established morals and protocols of us all and reveals the hypocrisy and misery such principles can lead to. A challenging stance to take given the age. Well worth the effort.

TITLE: The Girl of His Dreams
AUTHOR: Donna Leon
DATE: July 2014
PLOT: Typical "day in the life of" story of Commisario Brunetti, starts mundanely, gets mysterious and weaves a gripping tale involving the body of a drowned young gipsy girl all confounded by his superiors and family commitments.
COMMENT: An easy and entertaining read, doubly so if you know Venice.

TITLE: Faceless Killers
AUTHOR: Henning Mankell
DATE: July 2014
PLOT: Appalling murders of apparently simple farming folk. Will Kurt Wallander get to the bottom of it before the book ends – read on.
COMMENT: An easy and entertaining read.

TITLE: The Garden of Evening Mists
AUTHOR: Tan Twan Eng
DATE: June 2014
PLOT: Set in Malaysia, a retired woman sets out to create a Japanese garden in memory of her sister who died in the WWII Japanese camp. She fights her prejudice to work with Aritomo a man who was once the Emperor's gardener.
COMMENT: An astonishing book, sensitive and tenderly told in exquisite prose. Deep and multi layered. My best book of 2014, highly recommended, gorgeous writing and surprising that it was written by a man.

TITLE: The Sun Also Rises
AUTHOR: Ernest Hemingway
DATE: June 2014
PLOT: Lost generation of US expats wandering Europe, three men and a girl go to Madrid for the bull fighting – girl falls in and out of love with one after another agitating the drink fuelled relationships of all.
COMMENT: An early Hemingway novel, disappointing in the dialogue but stronger on the descriptive bull fight chapters. Probably more interesting as a milepost in the realism of dialogue creeping in to novels of the period.

TITLE: The Good Soldier
AUTHOR: Ford Maddox Ford
DATE: May 2014
PLOT: The extraordinary interaction of two upper middle class couples in a German spa around 1920 – it reveals naïve and manipulative people who make a mess of their lives.
COMMENT: This deceptively simple story changed the way novels were written. By the clever device of the narrator being one of the characters, he describes everyone else from his perspective in a way so conversational that he frequently doubts his ability to tell his own story and sometimes gets facts wrong or out of place. I enjoyed the experience and can see why the book is an English literary classic.

TITLE: Kennedy's Brain
AUTHOR: Henning Mankell
DATE: Apr 2014
PLOT: The son of Louise Cantor, an archaeologist, is found dead in bed. She refuses to believe it was suicide and goes on a quest for the truth which leads to adventure, deaths and mysteries set around the world.
COMMENT: Not Wallander but an odd stand alone novel which is good in parts but fails to convince or fulfil any opening promises. It does not resolve itself and seems to be a vehicle for Mankell's personal crusades. There are much better books to be read.

TITLE: In Cold Blood
AUTHOR: Truman Capote
DATE: Mar 2014
PLOT: For seemingly no reason, a gentle much loved family are slaughtered in their quite Kansas farm house, the very close community are stunned and theories and suspicions abound. The story follows the two ex cons who committed the atrocity and the stubborn stumbling attempts of the local sheriff to understand what had happened.

COMMENT: My first Capote book and reputedly his finest work. His writing is simply wonderful both descriptively and in his ability to let the reader live, smell and breath the air these people lived and died in. Brilliant and deep, Capote even has you feeling sorry for the poor hand the culprits had been given in life. Could not put it down.

TITLE: The Gift of Rain
AUTHOR: Tan Twan Eng
DATE: Feb 2014
PLOT: Set in Malaya we follow the life of a boy who is the heir to a rubber and tin fortune. He befriends a Japanese neighbour who becomes his mentor and life long friend and so changes for ever the lives and destiny of family and friends through betrayal, love and war. The impact of Japan invading Malaya and Singapore is told with harrowing detail and great understanding.
COMMENT: A wonderful book written with an easy poetic style which draws the reader in to a whirlwind. Highly recommended.

TITLE: Child of the Sea
AUTHOR: Doina Cornell
DATE: Feb 2014
PLOT: Factual account of the seven years the author spent sailing the world from the age of 7 to 14 with her younger brother and parents on a relatively small yacht. Doina visited my sailing group this year and talked about her remarkable experiences.
COMMENT: A fascinating, warm and honest book which charmingly captures this formative and changing stage in doina's life. It will be enjoyed by anyone from 10 years upwards even without an interest in sailing.

TITLE: Saturday Night and Sunday Morning
AUTHOR: Alan Sillitoe
DATE: Jan 2014
PLOT: The passage of anti hero Arthur Seaton from 22 year old rebel to the threshold of marriage is set in post war Nottingham where all the established machinery of authority, society, class, morals, respect and ones "place" are his to fight against and demolish in a binge drinking assault fuelled by piece work in a cycle factory and an unbridled sex drive.
COMMENT: There can be fewer novels which capture the atmosphere of factory work, inner city victorian housing and the change in society which the end of WWII brought to many cities. A nicely wrought ending bring his rebellion to heel in this entertaining trip back into the 1950's. A classic of its time.

TITLE: Anna Karenina
AUTHOR: Leo Tolstoy
DATE: Jan 2014
PLOT: A huge world of tales and events woven around a handful of characters and families in pre-revolutionary Russia. Anna's heartbreaking life, Karenin torn between revenge and absolute forgiveness, Levin desperate to live in two camps at the same time. At every turn, people, social rules, tradition, religion, love and the sins of humanity in the end destine the fate of them all.
COMMENT: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So begins the story, and in a nutshell that is it. I found the socio political setting fascinating and informative, clouds of change beginning to gather. A terrific human story beautifully set out and living before my eyes. The length of the novel was a challenge for me but it was worth it and will endure a lifetime. Before you start, it helps to read and understand the way Russian names are changed depending on gender and familiarity, then note the full names of the main characters - about 15 in all.

TITLE: Rabbit at Rest
AUTHOR: John Updike
DATE: Dec 2013
PLOT: The last of the "Rabbit" books. Rabbit (Harry Angstorm) struggles with retirement and health in his amusingly cynical, unsuccessful and entertaining way to deal with his family and the small town American world which is clearly created to annoy him. While considering Rabbit to be a loser, he mirrors the lives of many people and I can't help having some sympathy for him.
COMMENT: Well written entertaining stuff, albeit Updike overdoses the sex sometimes. Best to read the earlier books first.

TITLE: Jacko The Great Intruder
AUTHOR: Thomas Keneally
DATE: Nov2013

PLOT: Australian TV show celebrity renown in the US for crashing in - literally - unannounced on the lives of ordinary people to show the viewing public their peculiar life stories - he gets drawn in to looking for a missing young woman and so winds the tale.
COMMENT: My wife loved it, I got very little out of the odd collection of even odder associates of Jacko and lost interest half way.

TITLE: Lolita
AUTHOR: Vladimir Nabokov
DATE: Oct 2013
PLOT: Narrator and unrepentant paedophile Humbert Humbert describes the entire story of his uncontrolled desires to pursue "nymphets" and seduce "Lolita" his landlady's daughter.
COMMENT: The most controversial book I have ever read. Probably even more controversial today than when it was written. Darkly humorous it grows more disturbing and uncomfortable page by page. An extraordinary journey into a worryingly obsessive mind. A classic but be warned and prepared to be appalled.

TITLE: Flight Behaviour
AUTHOR: Barbara Kingsolver
DATE: Sept 2013
PLOT: Eastern Tennessee farm wife and mother Delarobia Turnbow encounters a life changing phenomena at a time when she has had enough of her mundane small town family existence. Set in a world of small expectations and all encompassing religious beliefs the story twists and turns unexpectedly within the atmosphere of farm poverty, family struggle, natural and earth sciences and religion.
COMMENT: This is a very fine book - outstandingly well researched, a simple story made into an informative, powerful and memorable novel with characters who truly breath and make one share emotion. As if that was not enough, the dialogue is brilliant, exquisite phrases tumble one after another and leave one laughing or crying. Terrific.

TITLE: The Fifth Woman
AUTHOR: Henning Mankell
DATE: Aug 2013
PLOT: Swedish crime thriller set around Ystad and Malmo where hero Wallander is faced with trying to find a connection between a series of brutal murders while dealing with his fragmented personal life. What at first seems random occurrences begin to form a pattern and provide explanations.
COMMENT: Absolutely non put downable. With that dour approach and obsession Wallander drives himself relentlessly sometimes at personal cost. The best Wallander novel I have read.

TITLE: A Town Like Alice
AUTHOR: Neville Shute
DATE: Aug 2013
PLOT: During WWII. 32 European women and children captured by the Japanese in Singapore are force marched around Malaya until half had died and the guards depleted to one disgraced Japanese guard who eventually dies himself. A chance meeting with two Australian male prisoners leads to a punishment crucifixion and subsequently an exploration of Australia.
COMMENT: Vintage, gripping Shute story telling based on a true forced march event. Well worth reading and significantly different from the film. My only criticism comes with the ending which I felt was weak.

TITLE: A Small Town in Germany
AUTHOR: John le Carre
DATE: Jul 2013
PLOT: Post WWII West German embassy in Bonn, where a low level diplomat mysteriously does not appear for work - where is he? A strange collection of mundane items have disappeared plus the Embassy's most secret files. Has he defected. Alan Turner is sent from London to investigate and upsets almost everybody with his total lack of diplomatic finesse.
COMMENT: Class war and status is evident in this Cold War setting, who trusts who, what is not being said? A good read and interesting that George Smiley does not appear anywhere!

TITLE: Down and Out in Paris and London
AUTHOR: George Orwell
DATE: Jul 2013
PLOT: Orwell's personal account of living life at the bottom of society in the 1930's - a washer up in cheap Paris hotels and as a tramp sleeping rough in London. Squalor, humour, despair, starvation.

COMMENT: A fascinating first full length work by Orwell explores poverty in both cities and reveals the appalling conditions and circumstances many were trapped in. A source of inspiration for intellectuals like Orwell who perhaps saw the idealism of communism as a solution to improving the lot of mankind.

TITLE: Death in a Strange Country
AUTHOR: Donna Leon
DATE: June 2013
PLOT: A body of a US soldier is found floating in a back water canal. Venetian police Commisario Brunetti opens a can of worms in his investigations which many influential people attempt to hinder. Further deaths and mysteries inevitably follow.
COMMENT: As with many of Leon's books, you are left at the end deeply saddened by the corruption, the illicit use of power and its effect on Brunetti, who, despite all, struggles on trying to stay an honest cop. He is a wonderful character. A good read.

TITLE: Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet
AUTHOR: Jamie Ford
DATE: Jun 2013
PLOT: Set in the USA, Henry Lee a young American Chinese boy loves a Japanese girl much to the horror of everyone else. The US is at war with Japan and thousands were displaced to remote prison camps to prevent "spying." His attempts to continue his association with her eventually fail and contact is lost. Decades later after a happy marriage, he is alone again and rediscovers a connection. The story continues.
COMMENT: Beautifully told, not over sentimental or judgemental of the times. An emotional and recommended read.

TITLE: Smiley's People
AUTHOR: John le Carre
DATE: May 2013
PLOT: Set in Paris, the bleakest Germany you have ever met and a grey beaucroatic London spy catcher George Smiley is unofficially brought back from retirement to fight against his old enemy during the height of the cold war and reveals betrayal of wives, country, friendships and finally of morality.
COMMENT: If you haven't read a Le Carre "George Smiley" novel, this is as good as it gets.

TITLE: To Have and Have Not
AUTHOR: Ernest Hemingway
DATE: May 2013
PLOT: Harry Morgan the courageous and naive hero, struggles to earn an existence between the Florida Keys and pre revolutionary Havana. The story brings together fortune and circumstance and shows how people can be corrupted, debased and finally defeated by bad luck.
COMMENT: Writing as fresh today as ever, this is vintage Hemingway drawing the reader in on page one, showing the raw, hard suffering of the age. As the hero said "No matter how, a man alone ain't got no bloody chance." Tragic and great.

TITLE: State of Wonder
AUTHOR: Ann Patchett
DATE: Apr 2013
PLOT: Pharmaceutical employee sent up the Amazon to discover the circumstances of the death of a key researcher, discovers danger, intrigue and unimagined difficulties. A potentially interesting story line based for the large part on relationships and interaction between the chief players.
COMMENT: Compared with Bel Canto this book was frustrating. Very slow to get going with cardboard characters for whom I had no sympathy. The unexpected end story line verged on the highly unlikely and could have been better developed. Others thought it wonderful but it was a relief when I finished it.

TITLE: Through a Glass Darkly
AUTHOR: Donna Leon
DATE: Mar 2013
PLOT: Murder on the Venetian Island of Murano. Inspector Brunetti once again unthreads the mystery among the detailed description of Venice.
COMMENT: An average Leon novel lacking bite but with enough of Venice to make it stand up – just.

TITLE: Chronicler of the Wind
AUTHOR: Henning Mankell

DATE: Mar 2013
PLOT: Narrated by a baker in Africa, this is the story of Nelio a 10 year old boy who is dying from gunshot wounds and told over ten days after escaping from terrorists who attacked his village. He moves to the city to become a legendary street kid with haunting powers.
COMMENT: Mankell shows life in the gutter in an almost dreamlike world. Oddly draws the reader along in the same way that the baker is trapped in the story and eventually changed for ever..

TITLE: Behind The Wall
AUTHOR: Colin Thubron
DATE: Feb 2013
PLOT: A circular tour of China by Thubron in 1987 not long after it was opened up to the West, meeting the people and acutely observing China itself, its culture and the extremes of its history.
COMMENT: Thubron has an exceptional gift of poetic prose and his style of travel story telling is unique and deep. I was left with a sense of exhaustion as if I had walked every mile with him. The scale of China and the impact of the people is almost overwhelming. Not a light read but most memorable.

TITLE: A Room With A View
AUTHOR: E M Forster
DATE: Feb 2013
PLOT: Set in Florence and England at the turn of the century, a charming love story which amusingly contrasts love, duty, truth and hypocrisy in a comedy of manners.
COMMENT: An engaging book written in Forster's beautiful prose. Excellent, a little jewel.

TITLE: The 100 Year Old Man Who Climbed Out of The Window and Disappeared
AUTHOR: Jonas Jonasson
DATE: Jan 2013
PLOT: Allan Karlsson skips the nursing home on his 100th birthday and unleashes chaos on the present and relives his incredible past in every corner of the world by means of chapter flashbacks.
COMMENT: Insanely funny and stretches credibility to the limit – a light hearted 100 year adventure.

TITLE: A Good Hanging
AUTHOR: Ian Rankin
DATE: Jan 2013
PLOT: My first Ian Rankin and so first Inspector Rebus novel – well a collection of short stories, solving crime in the underworld of Glasgow.
COMMENT: Full of flavour, meaty characters and a fine way to get to know how Inspector Rebus operates which is as a kind of low brow Inspector Morse yet with all his subtle wry wit.

TITLE: The Diary of a U-Boat Commander
AUTHOR: Anonymous
DATE: Jan 2013
PLOT: A personal account of The Great War 1914 – 1918 as experienced by a young German sailor from the time he aspired to join the U-Boat fleet through until the end of the war. His changing beliefs shaped by duty and stress interwoven with his tormented love life and collapsing world at home.
COMMENT: This anonymous but apparently true account comes across as a very well written novel, completely believable in detail and characters. An excellent short read which held my interest until the inevitable end. " Does man exist to serve the country, or the country to serve the man?"

TITLE: Aqua Alta
AUTHOR: Donna Leon
DATE: Dec 2012
PLOT: Commissario Brunetti of the Venice Police wades through the Aqua Alta to solve another crime involving murder, mafia, corruption and the worlds of Opera and Oriental Antiquities all coloured by the social and political society of Italy which makes life either easy or impossible.
COMMENT: If you have not been to Venice, see the Youtube videos of Aqual Alta to understand the setting of this gripping novel. Nicely paced, descriptive and a good end. Could hook you into Donna Leon.

TITLE: The Story of Lucy Gault
AUTHOR: William Trevor
DATE: Dec 2012

PLOT: Beginning in rural Cork, Ireland in 1921. The Gaults, a Protestant family are caught in the troubles and are forced to leave their family home. Their 8yr old only child Lucy attempts to stop them but sets in train tragic unforeseen consequences which run for decades and effect the lives of many.

COMMENT: A beautifully told story which is heartbreaking and sublime in its simplicity yet hooks the reader from the first pages and fills one with hope and desperation until the very end. Excellent - could not put down.

TITLE: Pure
AUTHOR: Andrew Miller
DATE: Dec 2012
PLOT: Paris 1785 The cemeteries are overflowing with corpses poisoning the air, water and the mental stability of the citizens. A provincial engineer finds himself with the seemingly impossible task of removing every corpse to sanitise the City and at the same time learn how to manage the local population and his immigrant workforce.

COMMENT: Based on a true event, this is a most extraordinary and gripping tale, superbly woven with underlying threads and a book which I simply could not put down – bizarre and memorable.

TITLE: To a Mountain in Tibet
AUTHOR: Colin Thubron
DATE: Dec 2012
PLOT: A pilgrimage by Thubron from Nepal into Tibet to Mount Kailas, still unclimbed and the centre of religion for 20% of the world's population. An intense description of a deeply religious and superstitious land in which the tortured earth challenges humanity to cling to life. Through his narrative camera you see the winding river below, the passing travellers and watchful military.
COMMENT: Not having read Thubron before I was beguiled by his poetic writing and can see why he is revered as the master of all travel writers and will search out "Behind the Wall" and "Shadow of The Silk Road" which are the more highly rated of his works. Beautiful and educational.

TITLE: The Summer Book
AUTHOR: Tove Jansson
DATE: Dec 2012
PLOT: A six year old girl discovering life in the wilds of Finland living with her grandmother who nears the end of her life. They spend the whole summer on their island home watching the days and occasional fishing boat pass by and interact with each other in a gentle and rewarding way.
COMMENT: This is a slim, gentle and slowly paced description of discovery in ordinary life which will either delight, entrance or leave you yawning. I enjoyed it, the perfect antidote to my last six books.

TITLE: The Bishop's Man
AUTHOR: Linden MacIntyre
DATE: Dec 2012
PLOT: Catholic priest in Canada used by the Bishop to "sort out" difficult cases, is moved to Nova Scotia to deal with child abuse. He treads a lonely, testing time and is faced with all the weaknesses of humanity.
COMMENT: I felt no empathy with a single character, nor did I enjoy the fly on the wall style of writing. In the end I skipped through the last half and could not have done justice to the book even if it had turned out to be worth the effort.

TITLE: Alamein (War Without Hate)
AUTHOR: John Bierman & Colin Smith
DATE: Nov 2012
PLOT: Historic and journalistic account of the WWII battle for North Africa from Sept 1940 when Italy planned to extend its empire through to the oil rich Middle East together with the German need to destroy the British Army and control the Suez Canal and oil fields, until May 1943 when the Axis forces were eventually driven from Africa.
COMMENT: Clear and detailed writing full of personal letters and accounts by people who were there. It shows the way the war was planned and executed from the highest level and left me feeling overwhelmed at the scale and depth of suffering imposed and experienced by all parties. Personally, the small railway town of El Alamein will never be just another WWII battle location. Tragic, mesmerising and shocking.

TITLE: The Troubled Man
AUTHOR: Henning Mankell
DATE: Nov 2012

PLOT: Wallander struggles with his own ageing process while attempting to unravel a cold war incident which leads to a current day mysterious death and possible involvement with International Secret Services. Walls of silence, misleading information and family relationships abound.
COMMENT: Mankell's last Wallander book if the ending is anything to go by. A slow burn political crime novel mirroring the impact of a changing world on Sweden and the loss of control over its own affairs. There is a sense of real life where things don't work and questions are not always answered. Enjoyable.

TITLE: A Question of Belief
AUTHOR: Donna Leon
DATE: Oct 2012
PLOT: Venice in the heat of Summer. Commissario Brunetti and his less than efficient team investigate a series of everyday crimes until a Judicial Clerk is found battered to death. At last there is a purpose to his police life which is regularly hampered by the Italian political, social and justice system.
COMMENT: A charming walk through the probably unlikely everyday life in the story of a Venetian cop who is regularly given the next breakthrough every time by his impossibly outstanding administrator Elettra. An OK airport read but make a note of who is who from page one, there are dozens to remember.

TITLE: For Whom The Bell Tolls
AUTHOR: Ernest Hemingway
DATE: Sept 2012
PLOT: Set during the Spanish Civil War, a group of partisans plus an American "dynamiter" plan to blow up a bridge. Over four days we live with those men and women in their mountain domain living in fear of the death at every moment, through a tale of love, trust, doubt and betrayal leading to an emotional conclusion.
COMMENT: One of the most powerful and moving stories which will stay with me for ever. Written in a deceptively easy style, this is a brilliant and absorbing journey through the realities of civil war. Several stories and themes cleverly woven together with totally believable characters which my heart bled for. Without doubt a masterpiece.

TITLE: South From Granada
AUTHOR: Gerald Brenan
DATE: Sept 2012
PLOT: The perfect book to follow the Paris Wife, this non fiction account follows Brenan on a search for a life changing experience immediately after the Great War. Disillusioned, in 1919 he leaves to find a simple existence in Spain, often walking 20 to 30 miles a day - roads had yet to be built - he reaches Andalucia where he settles and lives up to the start of the Civil War and is visited by most of the Bloomsbury Set. His observation of a life style unchanged for centuries is fascinating.
COMMENT: I first read this book almost 20 years ago and admired Brenan's wry observations and amusing turn of phrase. Anyone who is going or has been to Andalucia should get hold of this excellent work.

TITLE: The Paris Wife
AUTHOR: Paula McLain
DATE: Aug 2012
PLOT: Written as the memoirs of Ernest Hemingway's first wife when he was unknown and craving fame, a full on powerful driven man who lived a whirlwind life trailing his wife and everyone else in his wake - 1920's Chicago, Paris, Spain and full of intelligencia and the beautiful people who became legends.
COMMENT: Utterly convincing, gripping and brilliant right up to the last tragic page - could not put down. Easily the best book of 2012

TITLE: Our Man in Havana
AUTHOR: Graham Greene
DATE: Aug 2012
PLOT: Ex Pat vacuum cleaner salesman Jim Wormold living in Havana during the Cold War is somewhat unwillingly "acquired" by British Secret Service - and so begins a raucous satire of life in those times
COMMENT: Still as fresh as the day it was written. A very amusing read which portrays the Secret Service and Cuba as it may well have been in pre revolutionary days prior to Castro. Perfectly pitched.

TITLE: As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning
AUTHOR: Laurie Le
DATE: July 2012

PLOT: Autobiography of Lee at 19yrs leaving London to “discover” Spain – a “gap” year before they were ever thought of. Walks most of the way to Andalucia by which time he has seen extreme peasant life, almost died of exhaustion and entertain various ladies on the way, Finally with civil war breaking out around him he manages to escape to safety.

COMMENT: Beautiful poetic writing which paints a picture of Spain on the brink of change. A really good book and one I wish I had read at 19yrs.

TITLE: Wolf Hall

AUTHOR: Hilary Mantel

DATE: July 2012

PLOT: The rise of Thomas Cromwell from blacksmith’s son to one of the most powerful players in the court of Henry VIII, architect of the King’s split from Rome and marriage to Anne Boleyn. An astonishing portrait of this phenomenally intelligent and skillful man set in a world of intrigue, cruelty – the world would never be the same afterwards.

COMMENT: A major novel of 650 pages well worth the effort. It opens the door to reveal so many historical characters living their day to day lives and many whose lives were necessarily cut short.

TITLE: Dark Matter

AUTHOR: Michelle Paver

DATE: June 2012

PLOT: Group of friends set off to explore the Arctic unaware of what horrors await.

COMMENT: Read through the pages of Jack Millers Arctic log dark terror befalls the mission, a ghost story which I found rather thin in literary merit.

TITLE: The Betrayal

AUTHOR: Helen Dunmore

DATE: May 2012

PLOT: Post the battle for Leningrad seen from the viewpoint of a young doctor and family caught in the web of terror woven by Stalin on his own people.

COMMENT: This seemed like two books rolled into one, a novel about domestic feelings and relationships combined with a historical account of the appalling Stalin purges which I found more interesting. Clearly written on the back of “The Siege” which was also not my book choice.

TITLE: A Diamond as big as The Ritz

AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald

DATE: April 2012

PLOT: A short story which start in the relative paradise of a 1920’s privileged American college friendship moves through love and intrigue in a Montana mountain location and with a surprise evolves into Hell on Earth.

COMMENT: Dark shadows lay under the surface from the beginning with a town named Hades. Fitzgerald was interested in the beautiful people who apparently had everything and yet in reality had nothing - this short tale plays on that theme once more and with aplomb.

TITLE: The Mayor of Casterbridge

AUTHOR: Thomas Hardy

DATE: Mar2012

PLOT: The tragic act of a drunken man begins a fascinating journey through his rise and fall, battling with remorse and morality in a lifetime of 19th C rural Dorset.

COMMENT: A masterpiece, totally absorbing, readable and beautifully constructed - read all you will there can be few examples which explore human frailty so well.

TITLE: Pigeon English

AUTHOR: Stephen Kelman

DATE: Feb2012

PLOT: A Nigerian boy living in Peckham with a caring mother and slut of a sister, surrounded by gang culture, ignorance and fear, grows towards manhood, his first girlfriend and promise for a better future.

COMMENT: Will most likely become a classic piece of literature. Funny, sad, depressing, uplifting and certainly entertaining. Written as if clever young Harri is actually standing at your side. Excellent. Based on the murder of Damilola Taylor

TITLE: More Than You Can Say

AUTHOR: Paul Torday
DATE: Jan 2012
PLOT: Present day UK. Back from the Iraq war Richard Gaunt falls into drink and gambling and when a single bet begins a bizarre and life changing experience,
COMMENT: Light reading but highly entertaining, a modern "Thirty Nine Steps."

TITLE: A Tale of Two Cities
AUTHOR: Charles Dickens
DATE: January 2012
PLOT: Set in London and Paris at the time of the French Revolution, describes the appalling life being led by the masses in France and the consequent terrors of the revolution as the scene for captivity, rescue, entrapment and summary justice. Families and friends are tested to the limit.
COMMENT: A powerful warning to any nation not to abuse the masses and equally the masses should be careful what they wish for, written in a poetic style not particularly easy to read today and slightly heavy on wordy description. A notable novel however.

TITLE: The Long Song
AUTHOR: Andrea Levy
DATE: Dec 2011
PLOT: Set in Jamaica in the period when slavery was being abolished, tells the life story of July a slave child and the change to freedom. Told in a narrative style as if she is speaking to her son and so to the reader.
COMMENT: A great disappointment after "Small Island" the book fails to succeed and I felt no sympathy with a single character.

TITLE: The Personal History of Rachel DuPree
AUTHOR: Ann Weisgarber
DATE: Nov 2011
PLOT: Early 1900's America, the badlands of South Dakota, a tale of strife and hardship told by a negro wife and mother struggling to keep alive in bad times, weighed down by a husband who is driven to own more land while others are leaving.
COMMENT: Too depressing and very little story left me feeling what was the point. I did not connect with a single character.

TITLE: Lacuna
AUTHOR: Barbara Kingsolver
DATE: Nov2011
PLOT: Not able to give a review. Something about a servant boy in Mexico coming into contact with Frida Kahlo and others – lost the will to live before the end

TITLE: An Equal Music
AUTHOR: Vikram Seth
DATE: Oct 2011
PLOT: A story of a professional musician, his life and loves The international world of music sets the stage for this drama / tragedy with twists at every turn.
COMMENT: A most beautiful book exquisitely told in first person singular with poetic ease. A tender and wonderful book. Recommended especially if you are musically inclined.

TITLE: D Day - The Normandy Landings
AUTHOR: Antony Beevor
DATE: Aug 2011
PLOT: An authoritative account of the three months from D-1 to the liberation of Paris
COMMENT: Very well written, astonishing first hand records of the preparation, logistics and effects. Excellent historical account for anyone going to Normandy.

TITLE: The Perennial Collection - Beyond Black
AUTHOR: Hilary Mantel
DATE: Aug 2011
PLOT: Spiritual medium living with her ghostly companions who tormented her.
COMMENT: Bizarre and out of character for Mantel. Gave up half way, not going anywhere.

TITLE: Jelly Bean

AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald
DATE: Jul 2011
PLOT: Small town real life boys and girls in youth's struggle to impress each other.
COMMENT: A beautiful example of FSF at his short story best, incisive, observant, amusing, pure essence of youthful life in 1920's Georgia.

TITLE: A Fine Balance
AUTHOR: Rohinton Mistry
DATE: Jul 2011
PLOT: This story of present day India follows the lives of a handful of disparate characters having different social standing, their struggle against seemingly impossible relative odds and shackled by social history.
COMMENT: An outstanding book, superbly crafted, very well written with deep understanding for the characters and their heart rending lives, shocking and enlightening. One of my best books.

TITLE: The End of the Affair
AUTHOR: Graham Greene
DATE: Jun 2011
PLOT: A tale of adultery, devotion, faith and love set in London, probably Clapham. The adulteress makes a promise to God whom she does not believe in and so begins the way the characters are torn apart by feeling we or they do not understand.
COMMENT: A Classic Greene novel, still not dated in style. Disturbing, cerebral and deep. Greene creates some exquisite cameo figures such as the private investigator and spices his profound work with drips of cruel humour. Excellent.

TITLE: Small Wars
AUTHOR: Sadie Jones
DATE: Jun 2011
PLOT: Career soldier and young family move from the safety of Europe to the battle ground of Cyprus in the 50's. They experience a totally different world to that which they had grown up with and face social and moral dilemmas which challenge their lives to the end.
COMMENT: A really good read which draws in the reader at every page. A dramatic exploration of how British supremacy tore Cyprus apart and affected ordinary people in extraordinary ways. Highly recommended.

TITLE: The Seagull
AUTHOR: Anton Chekhov
DATE: May 2011
PLOT: Set in the Russian countryside at the end of 19th C, we are shown a slice of life as it was for some; characters searching for happiness in love, success in career and life in general.
COMMENT: Chekhov is a master at making so much out of nothing, little plot, just meticulous observation of the way we all are, this could be a reflection on our sense of failure like F S Fitzgerald or just mocking the way we behave to each other.

TITLE: So Disdained
AUTHOR: Nevil Shute
DATE: May 2011
PLOT: Post WWI, our hero stumbles on an injured pilot who has crashed after spying on British naval operations for the Russians. He helps him and becomes involved in counter espionage and a chase across Europe while falling in love with the daughter of the local Lord of the Manor.
COMMENT: Boys own stuff but written in that clipped British innocence of yesteryear (he was shocked when she appeared in a dressing gown!) Worth reading for the period style and as this was NS first novel.

TITLE: I'm the King of the Castle
AUTHOR: Susan Hill
DATE: May 2011
PLOT: New boy and housekeeper come to stay. Son is resentful of housekeeper's son and starts hateful campaign, heightened when his father is attracted to her. Swings and roundabouts of childish horror.
COMMENT: Well told exploration of inter child cruelty but the end was predictable.

TITLE: When the Lion Feeds

AUTHOR: Wilbur Smith
DATE: May 2011
PLOT: 19th C South African adventure following the trail of a couple of characters hunting, gold digging, fighting their way from rags to riches and back again.
COMMENT: A poor book by current standards. Smith's first novel and probably would not get published today, non stop action but no literary work.

TITLE: Tender is the Night
AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald
DATE: Apr 2011
PLOT: Lavish lifestyle between the wars with fabulous wealth and beautiful people all perpetuating the illusion of paradise in the South of France. Self destruction, despair, every depth and façade of humanity is revealed.
COMMENT: A longer, slower exploration than Gatsby, I struggled at times but one day I will read it properly, there seems to be so much there I was overwhelmed and too impatient.

TITLE: Riptide
AUTHOR: John Lawton
DATE: Apr 2011
PLOT: Espionage set in WWII London, with a German double agent on the loose, US Captain, Special Branch and Scotland Yard etc muck in to dodge the blitz and pursue the enemy in spite of each other.
COMMENT: What started out as a very promising plot within an authentic setting of blitzed London during 1941 became over populated with stereotype characters, toffs, gawd luv yer Cockneys and brass nosed Northerners in the middle section. That apart the final third rescued the yarn enough although the factual elements built in were actually more gripping than the fictional.

TITLE: The Redbreast
AUTHOR: Jo Nesbo
DATE: April 2011
PLOT: Another Harry Hole detective exploit involving Norway's hidden Nazi right wing die hards.
COMMENT: Bought on the back of Laarson's success and Nesbo's Snowman, not in the same league. Contrived and unrealistic.

TITLE: Babylon Revisited
AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald
DATE: Mar 2011
PLOT: The struggle of an alcoholic father in an attempt to regain custody of his daughter from his sister in law and husband. One of three short stories in this tiny book of gems.
COMMENT: FSG is one of America's finest writers with phrases to die for, plots, description and characters which are deep and totally absorbing. Wonderful.

TITLE: We are all made of Glue
AUTHOR: Marina Lewycka
DATE: Mar 2011
PLOT: Georgie, a separated struggling author attempts to save the world and the house of an old insane lady from the clutches of double dealing estate agents and the social services. Bizarre characters flood the plot through sex scenes, domestic disasters and social mayhem.
COMMENT: A boring book at 420 pages is far too long and which did not succeed in meeting the expectations having read Lewycka's superb "Tractors" novel.

TITLE: Tess of the D'Urbervilles
AUTHOR: Thomas Hardy
DATE: Mar 2011
PLOT: Tess is a 19th C country innocent bestowed with the magic and beauty which shapes her love and life in the most tragic way imaginable. Her life swings from ecstasy to torment on a journey beset with secrets, social barriers and morality.
COMMENT: Hardy's story and portrayal of Tess just tore me apart and swept me along in this superbly passionate masterpiece. For me it had everything – Outstanding.

TITLE: Splinter
AUTHOR: Sebastian Fitzek
DATE: Mar 2011

PLOT: Berlin present day. The protagonist seems to have lost his mind and is embroiled in a bizarre world in which nothing seems to make sense until the last chapter. A psychological thriller apparently.

COMMENT: The worst book I have read for years. The author has concentrated on misleading the reader with a completely unrealistic plot which dies a deserved death in the last chapter. I need a Thomas Hardy immediately.

TITLE: Lady Chatterley's Lover

AUTHOR: D H Lawrence

DATE: Feb 2011

PLOT: Set in 1920 Yorkshire, The young and insensitive Clifford Chatterley's world is collapsing around him as established values crumble. Paralysed by the war after one month of married life he is unable to produce an heir. The weight of his ancestry is on his shoulders. Lady Chatterley discovers herself in a passionate liaison with the gamekeeper and in the process illuminates the dilemmas facing a post war society.

COMMENT: Written today, this book would be less sensational than it was in the 30's. but is still a finely crafted exploration of how we hide the truth behind a shield of propriety, class and social rules. Good.

TITLE: The Great Gatsby

AUTHOR: F Scott Fitzgerald

DATE: Feb 2011

PLOT: Jazz age America. Gatsby is one of the beautiful people, he has everything, yet nothing. He exists in an aura of mystery. People are drawn to him like moths to a lamp. A brilliant and concise study of humanity, love and truth.

COMMENT: A masterpiece. Fitzgerald's writing is lyrical, poetic and incisive to a degree which made me gasp at a single phrase. One of the finest examples of the writer's art.

TITLE: Sea of Poppies

AUTHOR: Amitav Ghosh

DATE: Feb 2011

PLOT: Historical novel set in 1830 India with the East Indian Co. trading opium to China. Many characters coming together on a boat called the IBIS. The lives, flavours and images of adventure at that time – the first of a trilogy.

COMMENT: Clearly I did not have the patience to get past the first 150 pages which I found heavy going, unrewarding and frustratingly full of unfamiliar language – possibly in an attempt to make the period authentic but to me was meaningless. I suspect that eventually there is a great adventure ahead but not for me.

TITLE: The Hanging Shed

AUTHOR: Gordon Ferris

DATE: Jan 2011

PLOT: Post war Glasgow, Brodie a journalist is contacted by a condemned man to prove his innocence four weeks before the hanging. A race against time uncovers plot upon plot with good description of Scotland at that time.

COMMENT: Could not put this book down, a fast read with interesting twists and turns.

TITLE: 1222

AUTHOR: Anne Holt

DATE: Jan 2011

PLOT: Norway present day, catastrophic rail crash in extreme snow storm isolates hundreds of passengers in a developing murder mystery with wheelchair bound, lesbian ex cop bent on cracking the case before help arrives.

COMMENT: Weak writing does not help this somewhat contrived yarn.

TITLE: Operation Mincemeat

AUTHOR: Ben Macintyre

DATE: Jan 2010

PLOT: The true story of a successful but very risky deception carried out by British Intelligence on the Germans during WWII. To convince the enemy that the Mediterranean invasion target was Greece and not Sicily, an extremely detailed and intricate plot amazingly worked to perfection.

COMMENT: Based on documented records, this is a more studious revisit of the story told in the film "The Man who Never Was." It's story line and appeal is slightly diminished by the in depth studies of many of the characters involved. However, a good second half.

TITLE: Ordinary Thunderstorms
AUTHOR: Williams Boyd
DATE: Dec 2010
PLOT: Set in present day London, Adam Kindred stumbles into a deeply dangerous conspiracy which drives him underground in his efforts to clear his name and save his life.
COMMENT: I feel that Boyd is a different author each time he writes. Gripping adventure from page one. Interesting characters and a carefully woven plot provides enough twists to make it "unputdownable". Not high literature but very readable and recommended.

TITLE: Three Ways to Capsize a Boat
AUTHOR: Chris Stewart
DATE: Dec 2010
PLOT: Adventures of a novice sailing in Greece then with Tom Cunliffe in Hirta en route to Newfoundland via Norway and Greenland.
COMMENT: A disappointment after "Driving over lemons" which was absorbing. The format was too much like a logbook and despite the appearance of Tom who is always entertaining this book failed to entertain.

TITLE: A Voyage in the "Sunbeam"
AUTHOR: Annie Allnut Brassey
DATE: Nov 2010
PLOT: Autobiographic account of a one year voyage around the world on the "Sunbeam" her husband's 157ft private steam / sailing yacht in 1876 with a crew of about 40. The people she met, sights seen, dangers encountered – slaves, cannibals, shipwreck etc. and going where few white people had been seen before.
COMMENT: A fascinating description of an almost unknown and developing world and its people. My only slight irritation is a distaste for the superiority and arrogance of the British at that time.

TITLE: The Snowman
AUTHOR: Jo Nesbo
DATE: Oct 2010
PLOT: One of a series of Harry Hole detective crime novels set in Norway. A serial killer on the loose always one jump ahead of detection and a catalogue of horrific techniques to set your hair on end.
COMMENT: Unfair to compare Nesbo with Larsson except both are based on Scandinavia, detection, suspense and full of surprises. This one has a complex plot and helps if you keep a note of who is who. A good example of the genre.

TITLE: The Girl who Kicked a Hornets Nest
AUTHOR: Stieg Larsson
DATE: Sep 2010
PLOT: Third book in the trilogy involving the ultra disturbed young woman with The Dragon Tattoo in the continuing violent and mysterious thriller in an evocative Swedish setting.
COMMENT: Carries on immediately from the end of the second book and continues to grip and surprise with violent passages. Could not put it down, possibly the best of the trilogy.

TITLE: The Widow and Her Hero
AUTHOR: Thomas Kenealy
DATE: Aug 2010
PLOT: At the start, the hero's death at the hands of the Japanese is described. His widow tells the whole story of Australian wartime exploits from the hero's diary entries and her own experiences up to the current time when the final curtain is drawn back, ghosts and unpleasant truths revealed.
COMMENT: I have a feeling there is more to this book than I made of it. I did not enjoy the counter change between diary and widow but a fascinating story from Shindlers Ark author. Worth reading.

TITLE: In the Heart of the Canyon
AUTHOR: Elisabeth Hyde
DATE: Aug 2010
PLOT: Twelve people on a trip of a lifetime down the rapids of the Grand Canyon with three guides. Tensions, interaction and crises build steadily to keep you reading.

COMMENT: An easy, gentle book highly recommend. Interesting character portraits and superb description of the Canyon. (Author of Abortionist's Daughter)

TITLE: Mudbound
AUTHOR: Hillary Jordan
DATE: Aug 2010
PLOT: Mississippi delta in 1946. Laura, new to cotton farming, struggles to bring up family in isolated shack under hateful eye of racist father in law. Ingrained racism ignites momentous tragedies when war heroes return.
COMMENT: A compelling novel which captures the moment and winds the reader in to the devastating and inevitable end. Very moving and worth reading.

TITLE: Home Before Night
AUTHOR: Hugh Leonard
DATE: Jul 2010
PLOT: The childhood reminiscences of Hugh Leonard as a growing lad in Dublin through the 30's and 40's. His rise out of poverty to what seemed to be an unattainable level of education and fulfilment.
COMMENT: Leonard superbly captures the era, lifestyle, the religious and class ridden constraints of the time in this hilarious journey to manhood. A little gem.

TITLE: Lustrum
AUTHOR: Robert Harris
DATE: Jul 2010
PLOT: Set in post Caesarean Rome as seen through the eyes of Cato, the enslaved secretary to Cicero. The story relates the corruption, intrigues and power struggles as moral decline is first sensed in the great Empire.
COMMENT: As expected, eminently readable and intriguing. Not quite the grip of Pompeii but a good read nonetheless.

TITLE: The Girl who Played with Fire
AUTHOR: Stieg Larsson
DATE: Jun 2010
PLOT: Second book in the trilogy involving the ultra disturbed young woman with The Dragon Tattoo in the continuing violent and mysterious thriller in an evocative Swedish setting.
COMMENT: Took a little while to get going but having read the first book you know what to expect. Gripping, violent, bizarre and many surprises.

TITLE: Little Boy Lost
AUTHOR: Marghanita Laski
DATE: Jun 2010
PLOT: France immediately in the aftermath of WWII, an English man in search of his son, lost after his French wife was murdered by the Gestapo.
COMMENT: Stilted writing dated and characters without an ounce of merit. The story was very predictable and introduced players who appeared to have almost no relevance. Feeble.

TITLE: Agent Zigzag
AUTHOR: Ben Macintyre
DATE: May 2010
PLOT: The true story of Edward Chapman, chancer, crook and British double agent during WWII who completely fooled the German secret service into believing he was their foremost agent. Incredible exploits put Chapman's life on a knife edge day after day.
COMMENT: Based on documented records, this is one of the most exciting and extraordinary stories about a real life James Bond character. A really gripping read.

TITLE: The Siege
AUTHOR: Helen Dunmore
DATE: May 2010
PLOT: The battle for Leningrad seen from the viewpoint of a family slowly following half the population to death from hunger and cold.
COMMENT: The story would have been more fulfilling if the relentless grind to inevitable death was seen from both the Russian and the German participants. Not my book choice.

TITLE: No Country for Old Men
AUTHOR: Cormac McCarthy
DATE: April 2010
PLOT: 1980 Texas. A drugs deal ends in a massacre, the payoff is discovered by an opportunist who is embroiled with hit men in a violent manhunt with changing fortunes as body after body piles up.
COMMENT: I cannot believe this is the same Cormac McCarthy as The Road. An exciting essay in depravity, greed and the breakdown of society. Could not put it down.

TITLE: The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo
AUTHOR: Stieg Larsson
DATE: April 2010
PLOT: Fallen Swedish journalist involved in a quest to discover the truth behind an apparent murder. Joins forces with ultra disturbed young woman in an evocative Swedish setting.
COMMENT: First class film came from this first class thriller. Gripping, violent and bizarre – imaginative characters in a deep story which kept me guessing - loved it.

TITLE: Patron Saint of Liars
AUTHOR: Ann Patchett
DATE: Apr 2010
PLOT: Three separate narrators take you into the lives of the inhabitants of a Catholic home for unwed mothers in the US. First Rose, then her second husband 'Son', and finally her daughter Cecilia. Secrets weave them together as characters slip out of your grasp.
COMMENT: Beautifully written, real human characters you care about and desperately want to see resolved in your hopeful, ideal world. A superb novel which held me the entire journey and moved me greatly. My best book of 2010 so far.

TITLE: The Road
AUTHOR: Cormac McCarthy
DATE: Mar 2010
PLOT: Post apocalyptic America, a bleak, grinding meditation on humanity and death. A man and a boy wandering a road through total desolation. You are not told who they are, why or where they are going, only surrounded by the feeling you are at the end of the world.
COMMENT: The absolute opposite of a suitable boy. An oddly written and unsatisfying read thankfully very short.

TITLE: A Suitable Boy
AUTHOR: Vikram Seth
DATE: Mar 2010
PLOT: An Indian family finding a suitable boy to marry their daughter Lata – however the story details the lives of four families in the period after Independence. It involves politics, business, culture, love, intrigue and every aspect of Indian life in Cities and villages.
COMMENT: A vast novel confirming Seth as an outstanding literary figure, his writing is poetic flowing and extremely descriptive sometimes in minute detail. As I am not a quick reader the novel at 1500 pages was too long. An education and literary milestone if you dare.

TITLE: Run
AUTHOR: Ann Patchett
DATE: Feb 2010
PLOT: It is Winter. Boston family ex Mayor with adopted black sons involved in car accident. Black woman saves life of a son, ends in hospital leaving athletic young daughter stranded.
COMMENT: Yet another unique and searching novel from this author who finds a different angle every time. However, my high expectations were not fulfilled. The story was not strong enough and slightly implausible – where was the grip of Bel Canto?

TITLE: Fludd
AUTHOR: Hilary Mantle
DATE: Feb 2010
PLOT: Set in strongly catholic North Country village of Featherhoughton, a new curate arrives to assist the incumbent priest but acts as a catalyst.. Intrigue, scandal, relationships change to embroil the village in mystery – is he a saint or the devil?
COMMENT: A quaint little novel, well worth reading.

TITLE: Havan Bay
AUTHOR: Martin Cruz Smith
DATE: Jan 2010
PLOT: Fourth in the series about Moscow detective Arkady Renko this time in Cuba, sinister menace with lashings of blood and seedy locations.
COMMENT: Sort of thing to read on a plane when you've got nothing else to do. Not memorable but boys own stuff.

TITLE: Animal Dreams
AUTHOR: Barbara Kingsolver
DATE: Jan 2010
PLOT: Young woman returns home to south west US and traditional Spanish and Indian influences effecting the modern world. She searches for her roots and future via tragedy, love and frustration. There is a dream like quality which draws comparisons between human emotions and animal instincts.
COMMENT: Barbara Kingsolver weaves words with the ease and artistry, a moving and evocative read. Recommended

TITLE: An Experiment in Love
AUTHOR: Hilary Mantel
DATE: Dec 2009
PLOT: Lancashire girl rises out of elementary education through grammar to university. We are taken through the development from child to woman and adventures away from home.
COMMENT: Held by the story telling, a nice easy style with many observations which brought back childhood memories. Very much a description of the exploration of life we all go through, I liked this book even though it is very female orientated and was sorry it came to an end leaving the rest of Carmel's life yet to come.

TITLE: Cold Comfort Farm
AUTHOR: Stella Gibbons
DATE: Nov 2009
PLOT: A 1930's parody on many classic novels – society girl with little inheritance descends on remote farming kin in Sussex to find the most bizarre and hilarious characters living out a life of primitive hell which she sets about changing.
COMMENT: Should be compulsory reading for everyone who begins to take novels too seriously – a classic of its genre.

TITLE: Countdown to War
AUTHOR: Richard Overy
DATE: Nov 2009
PLOT: Factual account of the few weeks leading up to the invasion of Poland and outbreak of WWII
COMMENT: Clearly written, informative and interesting to read the major influences acting on all the major players and how close it might have come to being totally different in outcome.

TITLE: Remembering Babylon
AUTHOR: David Malouf
DATE: Nov 2009
PLOT: Australia mid 19th C, extreme limit of settlement in Queensland. A ragged figure appears out of the wilderness – the story is the reaction of the settlement to this arrival.
COMMENT: I quote – "It is like finding a spirit painting in a 19th C locket – full of wisdom and magic – the most delicate tracing of a profound and elliptical history." - "The poetry of Malouf's vision is needle sharp." A wonderful and moving book.

TITLE: Notes from an Exhibition
AUTHOR: Patrick Gale
DATE: Nov 2009
PLOT: Description of present day family and characters around Rachel Kelly a disturbed artist who lived in Cornwall and has died.
COMMENT: This book failed to do anything but annoy. Unexpected leaps in time do not help to gel the too numerous and unengaging characters who appear. After page 100 I was still waiting for something to grab me sadly it had not happened by the end. Maybe I like books to be a little more than simply about relationships – I could not see why this book was written.

TITLE: Guernica
AUTHOR: Dave Boling
DATE: Oct 2009
PLOT: Leading up to bombing of Guernica, destruction of families, establishment of anti Franco movement and Basque nationalism. Network for escaping airmen during WWII
COMMENT: The prose was plodding, the characters were two dimensional and the plot predictable. A good understanding of why so much hatred caused by the treatment of the Basques by their own people. Not my favourite book.

TITLE: A Passage to India
AUTHOR: EM Forster
DATE: Oct 2009
PLOT: Set in pre war India, the arrival of a young English woman not prepared for the rarefied way of life in the colony leads to a disastrous breakdown of decades of the establishment culminating in a trial for rape.
COMMENT: An excellent story carefully built and beautifully written. The British Imperial might in all its arrogance completely cross grained with Indian culture. Undertones of the inevitability of independence. Superb.

TITLE: The Cellist of Sarajevo
AUTHOR: Steven Galloway
DATE: Sept 2009
PLOT: Sniper sets out to protect the cellist who has become an icon.
COMMENT: Gave up half way. Too much death and fear without any sympathy with the characters also predictably out of Day of Jackall mould but not so original or spell binding.

TITLE: Brideshead Revisited
AUTHOR: Auberon Waugh
DATE: Sept 2009
PLOT: Life and torment with wealthy Sebastian Flytte and his eccentric family between the wars. Characters torn by the power of Catholicism and family ties.
COMMENT: Beautifully set in end of era opulence but found hard going when read slowly.

TITLE: The White Tiger
AUTHOR: Aravind Adiga
DATE: Aug 2009
PLOT: The tongue in cheek journey of an Indian "boy" from poverty to owning his own business as an "entrepreneur" by way of rebelling against tradition and murdering his boss.
COMMENT: Entertaining read written as if he is writing letters of explanation to the President of China who is to visit India. Amusing and well worth reading.

TITLE: The Magician's Assistant
AUTHOR: Ann Patchett
DATE: Aug 2009
PLOT: A Magician has died (present day.) His wife who was his assistant discovers he had kept secret a family living in Nebraska – for good reason. She meets them and a whole can of worms is opened in a touching discovery of each others lives and history.
COMMENT: Quirky, spellbinding, different and absorbing. An excellent novel written with dream like sequences. Recommended.

TITLE: The Luminous Life of Lilly Aphrodite
AUTHOR: Beatrice Colin
DATE: July 2009
PLOT: Adventurous life of Lilly from childhood in a German catholic orphanage to fame in Hollywood spanning two world wars. A very colourful and exciting journey.
COMMENT: A gripping yarn easily readable gives a shocking sense of Germany as the Great War progressed and the situation leading to the IIWW. I could not put the book down. Recommended.

TITLE: A Pale View of The Hills
AUTHOR: Kishuo Ishiguro
DATE: July 2009

PLOT: Japanese woman living in England with her daughter and memories of first daughter who committed suicide. She is haunted by her life in post bomb Nagasaki and an acquaintance who had fallen into poverty and seemed to not care for her own daughter.

COMMENT: For me nothing happened. An air of mystery hangs over the novel which uses the mundane of everyday life as a canvas for something which I must have missed.

TITLE: On The Other Hand

AUTHOR: Chris Cleave

DATE: July 2009

PLOT: An incident in Nigeria involving two locals and a "normal" UK couple lead to soul searching depths, illegal immigration, conflicts of interest and give glimpses of horror.

COMMENT: A lively writing style. Tragic, blackly comic, thought provoking and a really good read.

TITLE: My Cousin Rachel

AUTHOR: Daphne du Maurier

DATE: June 2009

PLOT: Who is the mysterious cousin from Italy, is she an enchantress, a scheming murderer or the victim of suspicion and fate?

COMMENT: A very finely crafted novel, keeps the reader guessing from the first sentence to the last. Outstanding.

TITLE: Fire in The Blood

AUTHOR: Irene Nemirovsky

DATE: June 2009

PLOT: Tale of village people in central France, their true feelings hidden for years are revealed to expose violence, adultery and secrets in a pastoral setting.

COMMENT: A tiny book, much acclaimed by many but did nothing for me.

TITLE: The 19th Wife

AUTHOR: David Ebberhoff

DATE: May 2009

PLOT: Story woven around present day murder and history of Church of Later Day Saints in USA and it's belief in polygamy.

COMMENT: A fascinating read and extraordinary history of the Mormon offshoot. Has an "academic" structure to the writing which is intriguing. Recommended.

TITLE: Night of the Iguana

AUTHOR: Tennessee Williams

DATE: April 2009

PLOT: The Play. Set in West coast Mexico 1940, a tour bus arrives at a jungle fringed hotel, the action revolves around the patron Maxine and her guests, Shannon the driver who is a hopeless drunken case, a pitiful couple clinging to past glories and the unseen forgotten tourists.

COMMENT: TW's surgical insight into the character of people and convincing observations, the play however does not have the power of Streetcar or Tin Roof.

TITLE: Revolutionary Road

AUTHOR: Richard Yates

DATE: Mar 2009

PLOT: "Nice" young family couple living in a "nice" NY suburb have their aspirations and dreams slowly torn apart by everyday life.

COMMENT: This is a masterpiece. An outstanding novel on every level, astonishing observation of people and their environment. Phrase and description to die for. Yates story hooks the reader from page one and stirs every emotion in this brilliant tragedy. Exceptional.

TITLE: The Reader

AUTHOR: Bernhard Schlink

DATE: Feb 2009

PLOT: Young man seduced by older woman, she disappears, he grows up, re-encounters her in dramatic situation, he is haunted by her and circumstances until the last page.

COMMENT: Superb story, beautifully written, gripping, haunting and provokingly questions the difference between right and wrong. Outstanding.

TITLE: A Mad World, My Masters
AUTHOR: John Simpson
DATE: Jan 2009
PLOT: His adventures around most of the danger spots in the world along with a BBC news crew. Told in lots of small bite sized yarns.
COMMENT: He writes well and entertains easily, comes across as an interesting grumpy old man, the bites sized yarns mean there is no overall thread – like life really.

TITLE: The Age of Wonder
AUTHOR: Richard Holmes
DATE: Dec 2008
PLOT: Life History of Banks, Herschel and Davy leading through their discoveries and enlightenment of science in 18/19th C
COMMENT: Heavy going, too much mundane family detail padding out the discoveries.

TITLE: The Book Thief
AUTHOR: Markus Zusak
DATE: Dec 2008
PLOT: Story told of a child and her family in German city from 1936 to 1944. Narrated by Death.
COMMENT: An interesting angle with the narrator and the Jewish situation, could have been less pages but good for quick readers.

TITLE: The Secret River
AUTHOR: Kate Grenville
DATE: Oct 2008
PLOT: Life of earliest settlers in Sydney from condemned London convict. Hardships and struggle with blackfellas.
COMMENT: If you didn't know the history it might appeal but been there done that many times before – nothing new.

TITLE: The Wave
AUTHOR: Morton Rhue
DATE: Sep 2008
PLOT: US teacher uses strict regime to demonstrate the power of Hitler's Nazi Party but it all goes wrong and runs out of control.
COMMENT: Weak writing and not believable although oddly it actually did happen.

TITLE: A Thousand Splendid Suns
AUTHOR: Khaled Hosseini
DATE: Sep 2008
PLOT: More a life story than a plot. How life was and is for a female in 21st C Afghanistan
COMMENT: Well written, well worth reading, shocking and thought provoking.

TITLE: Sweet Bird of Youth
AUTHOR: Tennessee Williams
DATE: Aug 2008
PLOT: The Play. Philanderer Chance Wayne and faded film star Del Lago cling to past success but time relentlessly brings them down.
COMMENT: Not as deep as his other plays, less stimulating.

TITLE: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof
AUTHOR: Tennessee Williams
DATE: Aug 2008
PLOT: The Play. Set in 1950's Mississippi. Very rich cotton planter diagnosed ill, family circle around each other for the kill, almost every human virtue and sin, hope, greed, jealousy..
COMMENT: A master of the spoken word. Totally believable characters speaking as people speak in a superbly crafted family setting. The words are wonderful. Play runs in real time. Excellent and gripping.

TITLE: Long Journey Into Night
AUTHOR: Eugene O'Neil
DATE: Aug 2008
PLOT: The Play. Set in 1912 Upper East Coast US. Harrowing autobiographic description of addiction, illness and human failings between the protagonists.

COMMENT: – Hope hangs temptingly throughout but the inevitability of it all is tragic. Deep and well written

TITLE: The Crucible
AUTHOR: Arthur Miller
DATE: July 2008
PLOT: The Play. 17th C US Pilgrim settlers in witch hunt amongst themselves.
COMMENT: Brilliant description of early settlers life, horrifying story of belief in the Devil and its use to further political positions and settle old scores dependant on the word of children. A masterpiece.

TITLE: Not Quite the World's End
AUTHOR: John Simpson
DATE: May 2008
PLOT: Autobiography
COMMENT: Well worth reading, gives a good understanding of the “truth” behind Afghanistan and Iraq, well written.

TITLE: Crimes of the Heart
AUTHOR: Beth Henley
DATE: May 2008
PLOT: The Play. Three Mississippi sisters, , one shoots her husband. Mother had hung herself and the cat. Black humour.
COMMENT: Story seemed to end abruptly without resolution. Extremely detailed stage / props directions.

TITLE: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf
AUTHOR: Edward Albee
DATE: May 2008
PLOT: The Play. US University couple have new Biology teacher and wife back for drinks after a late night party. Family row builds to outright hatred and devastation.
COMMENT: Nothing to do with VW! Development of matrimonial row outstanding and use of “the son” secret strings you along all the way. Chilling study of mental cruelty.

TITLE: Any Human Heart
AUTHOR: William Boyd
DATE: May 2008
PLOT: The widely varied whole lifetime of 20th C Brit Logan Mountstuart, writer, spy, socialite, failure. Sent on fallguy mission to Switzerland in the war.
COMMENT: I struggled with the diary / journal format. At times boring, then really good. Glad I read it but hard work.

TITLE: Mr Pip
AUTHOR: Lloyd Jones
DATE: Apr 2008
PLOT: The only white man in land of black locals on Island in Pacific, story told by young girl of discovery and tragedy.
COMMENT: Excellent, highly recommended. Dickens Great Expectations cleverly woven through story, observant and very readable.

TITLE: Great Expectations
AUTHOR: Charles Dickens
DATE: Apr 2008
PLOT: A mysterious benefactor raises Pip from poverty and changes his life
COMMENT: A masterpiece without question. Get in tune with the language and it is easily readable. Touches every human emotion, unparalleled observation of the human character.

TITLE: Johnno
AUTHOR: David Malouf
DATE: Mar 2008
PLOT: Reminiscences of an Australian childhood to early adulthood
COMMENT: Absorbing, skilful observation of ones inner self, no unlikely drama - just life really but I wanted to read on and on. Even better if you've been to Brisbane.

TITLE: May Contain Nuts
AUTHOR: John O'Farrel
DATE: Feb 2008
PLOT: Neurotic mother takes 11plus exam in place of daughter.
COMMENT: Light reading, entertaining but story oddly moves from farce to moralising

TITLE: Imperium
AUTHOR: Robert Harris
DATE: Feb 2008
PLOT: Rise of Cicero in Roman Empire seen through eyes of slave.
COMMENT: Readable, interesting, informative, not as good as Pompeii, worth reading.

TITLE: The in Between World of Vikram Lall
AUTHOR: MG Vissanji
DATE: Jan 2008
PLOT: lifetime of lad in Kenya from start of Mau Mau uprising
COMMENT: Gave up on p 127, found it disjointed and impossible to get into, no story too many oddly named characters.

TITLE: Tenderness of Wolves
AUTHOR: Stef Penney
DATE: Dec 2007
PLOT: Murder in 1870 Canada
COMMENT: Lovely writing and feel for the time. My best book of 2007

TITLE: Half a Yellow Moon
AUTHOR: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
DATE: Nov 2007
PLOT: Biafran War viewed through the eyes of servant to an academic family
COMMENT: Excellent, harrowing decline of the country into civil war.

TITLE: The Wyrd Sisters
AUTHOR: Stephen Briggs
DATE: Oct 2007
PLOT: The Play from Terry Pratchett's novel. Parody on Macbeth.
COMMENT: Hilarious alternative to Shakespear based loosely in Discworld. An easy read.

TITLE: Purple Hibiscus
AUTHOR: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
DATE: Oct 2007
PLOT: Wealthy Nigerian family with ambitious and vicious father.
COMMENT: Excellent, beautiful writing

TITLE: Bel Canto
AUTHOR: Ann Patchett
DATE: Aug 2007
PLOT: Tropical America hostage situation. Hostages and terrorists thrown together to create surprising situations.
COMMENT: Excellent. Quite different.

TITLE: A Spot of Bother
AUTHOR: Mark Haddon
DATE: 2007
PLOT: Disfunctional family drives father to the edge of insanity helped by himself.
COMMENT: Quirky humour. Amusing light hearted read.

TITLE: Old Filth
AUTHOR: Jane Gardam
DATE: 2007
PLOT: Failed in London Try Hong Kong. Life of lad who rises to cult in the law
COMMENT: Did not enjoy the writing. Did not do it for me.

TITLE: A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian

AUTHOR: Marina Lewycka
DATE: 2007
PLOT: Two years after my mother died, my father fell in love with a glamorous blond Ukrainian divorcee. He was eighty-four and she was thirty-six. Read on !
COMMENT: Excellent and highly amusing tragedy, a fast and engrossing read.

TITLE: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time
AUTHOR: Mark Haddon
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The world as seen by an autistic child.
COMMENT: Excellent and amazing. A very entertaining insight into the mind of an autistic child

TITLE: Human Traces
AUTHOR: Sebastian Faulks
DATE: 2006
PLOT: Doctors working in 19th C mad house, psychology mixed with life story
COMMENT: Long winded, there are plenty of better books.

TITLE: That Old Ace in the Hole
AUTHOR: Annie Proulx
DATE: 2006
PLOT: Wheeler dealing by a born loser in the Texas panhandle
COMMENT: Great description of the country and naïve stumbling of the protagonist. I loved it.

TITLE: Night Mother
AUTHOR: Marsh Norman
DATE: Jan 2006
PLOT: The Play. One act, one scene mother and daughter in the 1950's mid west US. Gripping family scene cleverly set in actual clock time experienced by the audience.
COMMENT: Breathtaking writing. Amazing use of situation and subject. Left me stunned.

TITLE: Death of a Salesman
AUTHOR: Arthur Miller
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The Play. Dead beat sales rep at the end of his working life struggling with work and family which have never reached his expectations but he keeps running uphill.
COMMENT: Harrowing grasp of characters inner fears. Brilliant character observation.

TITLE: Hedda Gabler
AUTHOR: Henrik Ibsen
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The Play. Social commentary of 1880 life. A heroine fighting society and circumstances.
COMMENT: A classic read.

TITLE: The Cherry Orchard
AUTHOR: Anton Chekhov
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The Play. Futility of the declining aristocracy to maintain status and futility of the bourgeoisie to find meaning in its newfound materialism in pre revolutionary Russia.
COMMENT: Delicate and classic writing. An education.

TITLE: The First Casualty
AUTHOR: Benn Elton
DATE: 2006
PLOT: WW11 Police consc. Objector sent on secret mission.
COMMENT: Easy read, an enjoyable yarn.

TITLE: The Peoples Act of Love
AUTHOR: James Meek
DATE: 2006
PLOT: Russian escapee from labour camp involved in revolution and mystery
COMMENT: Excellent story well written.

TITLE: One Good Turn
AUTHOR: Kate Atkinson
DATE: 2006
PLOT: Scottish sleuth. A farce of coincidences. Everyone mentioned is somehow linked to everyone else.
COMMENT: Average to good.

TITLE: Little Foxes
AUTHOR: Lillian Hellman
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The Play. Post Civil War southern US family where plots and schemes between innocent and ruthless characters aim to gain wealth and power
COMMENT: Clever observation of human character. Good.

TITLE: The Front Page
AUTHOR: Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The Play. Hard nosed newspaper reporters at a prison to see the execution of a villain. Confirms everything you thought about the gutter press. Brilliant insight into their world.
COMMENT: Hilarious, thoroughly enjoyed it, would love to see the play but probably too politically incorrect these days.

TITLE: Glengarry Glen Ross
AUTHOR: David Mamet
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The Play. Dirty business life in 1969 Arizona fly by night real estate operation. The dirt is done to the clients and the businessmen to each other.
COMMENT: Good play with a twist. Nice observation of character.

TITLE: The Glass Menagerie
AUTHOR: Tennessee Williams
DATE: 2006
PLOT: The Play. Missouri during The Depression. Troubled relationship between an aging mother, Amanda and shy daughter Laura as told by the son and brother Tom who relates events from memory.
COMMENT: Very clever use of theatre. Harrowing, moving and wonderful. Excellent.

TITLE: The Kite Runner
AUTHOR: Khaled Hosseini
DATE: 2005
PLOT: Story of Afghan boy, his parents, friends and country
COMMENT: Excellent. An eloquent story.