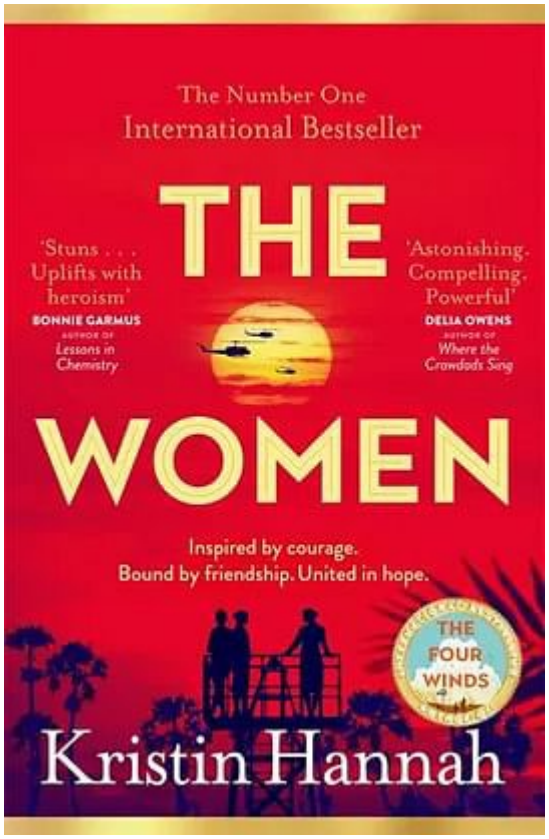


December 2024
The Women by Kristin Hannah

'There were no women in Vietnam' is the oft repeated response American nurses received when they returned home after deployment in the Vietnam War.

This book by Kristin Hannah is about those women who not only went to Vietnam and saved lives but showed 'women can be heroes too'.

More that 50 years after the Vietnam war, this book is an important part of the story.

It's a book that has changed me.

I finished it just before I went to the final AGM of the local peace group, Remembering and Healing where I was a Patron. On the way to that final meeting, I heard of more casualties in another conflict—in the Middle East. When will we ever learn that war is not the answer?

When will peace prevail?

I was in high school when the Vietnam war started in 1962 but it wasn't until I was at teachers college in 1968 that I really started to understand what it meant for the young men with whom I studied, and who were then being called up when their birth date was drawn from a barrel.

Between 1965 and December 1972 in Australia more than 800,000 men registered for National Service. This was a time of conscription by ballot twice a year. While there were some well-publicised conscientious objectors 63,000 young Australian men were conscripted and more than 19,000 were sent to Vietnam. My teachers college colleagues were among them.

In addition to those men, many Australian and US women served in Vietnam, mostly as nurses.

This is a story with a focus on the women who served. It is also the story of the combat personnel who returned to USA and Australia where the public mood had shifted. The war that ended with the withdrawal of allied troops in 1975, had begun with general support, but ended with general opposition. Sadly, that meant that returning service men and women not only returned with physical and mental scars from their experiences, but were met with at best antipathy, and at worst physical and verbal attacks.

There was no heroes' welcome and even our RSL shunned Vietnam Veterans.

This novel is a fictionalised version of 21-year-old American nurse, Frankie McGrath, who signs up to go to Vietnam after her general nurse training, and shortly before her brother was killed in Vietnam. Hannah wastes no time in getting her story underway.

Frankie signs up in Chapter 2 and is in Vietnam by Chapter 4 (there are 35 chapters).

The brutal reality of the look, feel, and sound of her arrival is conveyed with brilliant word pictures. It's horrific, but young Frankie writes to her parents, "I have found my calling". She is saving lives by performing critical procedures and learning that she is skilled at her job. In short, she feels alive and develops a strong sense of self, despite the horrors she experiences.

She forms great friendships outside her prim white privileged debutant upbringing with Beth and Ethel and inevitably, she falls in love with a soldier.

The pain, exhaustion, loss, and trauma that are everyday occurrences build up, and although she and her colleagues 'in country' share those experiences, she cannot tell her parents this reality in her weekly letters home. They were proud of her brother for signing up to fight but opposed to and ashamed of Frankie for doing so.

The American public were being told that the war was being won and were not told of the building casualty toll. There was no recognition that women nurses were often the reason why the casualty toll wasn't even larger.

Returning to her home two years later, Frankie finds it difficult to return to a life where no one talks about Vietnam. 'How could she go from red alerts and saving lives to butter knives and champagne glasses?'

She cannot embrace her parents expectation of marriage, children, and country club lunches, particularly when her father has told friends that she's been in Florence.

The inability to talk to anyone about her experience or even receive acknowledgement among the veteran health system that 10,000 American women were stationed in Vietnam, leads to a dissociated life that spirals out of control.

The book spans 40 years, and while often tragic, does end with recognition and a new sort of peace for Frankie and most of her veteran colleagues.

Many of the readers of this book will be younger than I. Perhaps you might have heard vaguely of the Vietnam war, or have a father, uncle, or grandfather who was there or rarer but significantly, a female family member with veteran experience. Whatever your connection or curiosity, I encourage you to read this book. It will engage and enlighten you.

Oh, and as an aside, the musical references will resonate with anyone who was a teen or young adult in the late 1960s.

This book is one of the most significant I have read in years. Hannah herself acknowledges it is a labour of love, conceived in 1997 and finally completed and published earlier this year. She writes in her authors note that in 1997, "I didn't feel I had the skill or the maturity to achieve my vision."

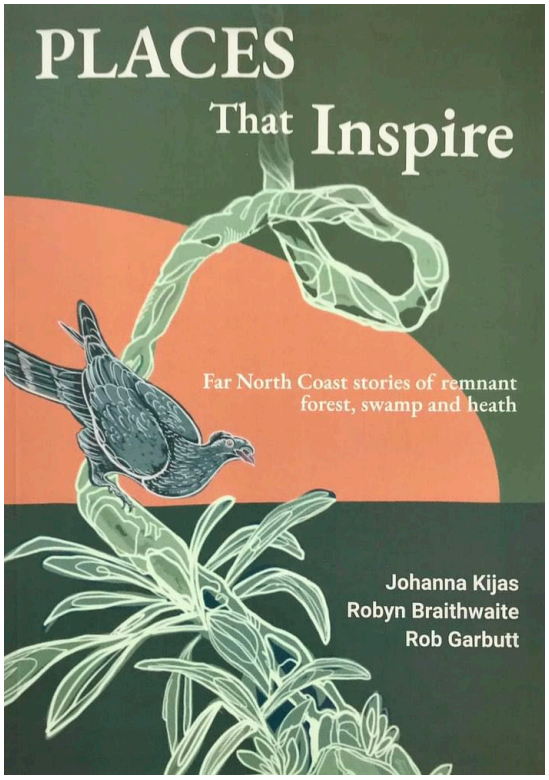
Without doubt, she has achieved her vision now.

At the end of the book there is a photo of the Vietnam Women's Memorial that was unveiled in Washington DC in 1993, to honour the 265,000 military and civilian women

who served around the world during the Vietnam War.

5/5

Reserve it here!



November 2024
Places That Inspire—Far North Coast Stories of Remnant Forest, Swamp, and Heath by Jo Kijas, Robyn Braithwaite, and Rob Garbutt

This beautiful book published by Richmond River Historical Society (RRHS), consists of four stories of significant but sometimes overlooked places in our region and the people who have been instrumental in their protection and conservation.

Whether it's a local author or a local story, I gravitate to books that reflect something of our beautiful environment and our rich creative community. When a book arrives that combines local writers and local stories that is locally published too, I get excited. *Places that Inspire* ticks all those boxes and more. An introduction by Dr Kristen Den Exter, two poems by local Bundjalung woman Kylie Caldwell, and cover art by local contemporary artist Beki Davies ensure this is a book with which I connect.

The book was originally planned as something different. Dr Jo Kijas submitted an individual grant application to Create NSW in 2021 and received word of its success in January 2022. Jo devised the book so that each chapter would highlight an object from the Richmond River Historical Society's Museum collection that related to the person and place that was the subject of each chapter.

But as Jo wrote "things came off the rails in late February!"
The objects that were to be paired to the stories are still in storage post-flood so the book and its form changed. As we in Lismore know all too well, adaptation is essential.

One of the objects in the Museum's collection is Richard Frith's cabinet of 17 stuffed birds, a favourite piece of Robyn Braithwaite's, pictured in the book on page 6. Dr Harry Frith who donated his father's cabinet to the museum, was born, raised, and died here, and held a major position in the CSIRO. Robyn's opening chapter on Harry Frith tells his story.

Jo Kijas has written of Marj Henderson, who in the 1960s was instrumental in working with local Aboriginal people in protecting heath lands in Evans Head in the face of coastal development. As Jo worked on her chapter she realised there was a connection to Rosemary Joseph's work in Rotary Park, Lismore, and knew that Dr Rob Garbutt had a long interest in the Park's history. Rob's resulting chapter on Rotary Park focuses on the important work of Rosemary Joseph and Keith King in looking at new ways to regenerate this remnant of The Big Scrub, right in the heart of our regional city.

Jo Kijas also tells the story of Tuckean Swampsouth of Lismore and its importance as a wetlands. Like many similar low-lying areas throughout the nation, there was pressure in the 1990s to drain such areas with barrages and channels for agriculture. The legacy of

acid sulphate soils remains.

I feel an emotional connection to this book, too. In addition to knowing all the people who wrote and illustrated this book, the places are dear to me. Rotary Park is a gem in the heart of our beloved Lismore. When my family moved here in 1991, it was the taste of the Big Scrub, served to visitors spending just a brief few hours with us. Sadly it was neglected for many years until restoration work and a new boardwalk was undertaken recently. It's a magical place.

I met Rosemary Joseph during the campaign against CSG at Bentley where she and husband Ross were living. I didn't know until reading this chapter how pivotal Rosemary was in the restoration of Rotary Park. Bravo and thank you Rosemary!

As a part of NR Bushwalkers Club, I recently walked in and around Dirawong reserve, Evans Head. I had just read this book and gave silent thanks to Marj Henderson.

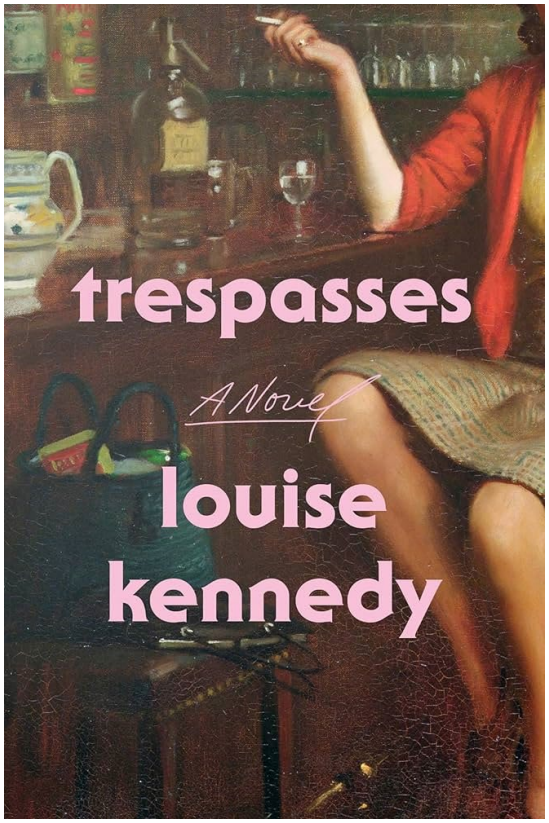
Every part of this book is perfect. The poems by Kylie Caldwell topping and tailing the book, A Survivor and Nanna, You Remember, remind us of the ancient connection to place that the Bundjalung people have always had, and from whom we have much to learn. The author biographies, photos, drawings, endnotes, and index are as detailed as you would expect from the high calibre of other RRHS publications.

This is a book that connects people and places that we know and love in this place that we call home. So although the book project did not end where it started, the result is simply superb. It would be an ideal Christmas gift for anyone with a connection to our area.
Places that Inspire—Far North Coast Stories of Remnant Forest, Swamp and Heath by Jo Kijas, Robyn Braithwaite, and Rob Garbutt is available in our library and also for purchase through Richmond River Historical Society's pop-up shop at 106 Molesworth Street Lismore.

PS Make a note that when the RRHS Museum reopens, the objects related to each chapter will be on display.

5/5

Reserve it here!



October 2024
Trespasses: A Novel by Louise Kennedy

I was prompted to read this book after hearing a recent replay of the author's conversation with Sarah Kanowski on ABC radio.

Primary teacher, Cushla Laverty, teaches in a school on the outskirts of Belfast. Her young Catholic students can't wear school uniform when they go on an excursion but the fact that they are in 'civvies' clearly indicates which side they are on in this time of The Troubles.

Cushla also works the occasional shift in her family's pub where English soldiers leer at her. She quickly wipes off the telltale mark on her forehead for Ash Wednesday when she arrives for her shift. Handsome, worldly barrister Michael Agnew catches her eye and he invites Cushla to assist his Irish language class by authenticating their learning.

Of course predictably, Michael is older, married, and Protestant. He defends young Catholic men arrested for participating in civil unrest. The inevitable happens and an affair develops between Michael and Cushla.

The title of this novel is perfect. The book is clearly about sin and forbidden love but it is also about land, who belongs where, and who can go where.

Much of the book fulfils preconceived ideas of Northern Ireland including the religious, class and societal values of the mid 70s, but it is also much more.

Louise Kennedy who was in hospitality, describes herself as a 'chef with notions' (imagine that phrase spoken in an Irish accent). She moved into writing short stories and then this novel. It is rich in ingredients—particularly detail, phrasing, and most importantly, character.

As an ex primary school teacher, I was drawn to Cushla's young student Davy McGeown and his poor family. His incapacitated dad Seamus, his older brothers Davy and Tommy, and his mum Betty are the epitome of a struggling family in a divided Belfast.

There are many other well-portrayed characters in this book including teaching colleague Gerry Devlin, who is the alibi for Cushla as well as her mother's hope as a potential future son-in-law.

While the novel uses the convention of third person and past tense, the dialogue markers are absent, so occasionally I found myself re-reading parts to see who was speaking. There is a shocking but casual reality in the language too. These young school children use the lexicon of bomb and gun types in their daily morning news presentations. I had to look up a few phrases such as 'gravy rings'* and often re-read a

sentence to grasp its meaning but throughout, it all felt totally authentic. The fashions, music, and the contrast of home life with sophisticated city life was very real to me and my experiences in the 1970s too.

The novel begins with a brief section set in 2015 where a young tour guide is describing a sculpture of a broken man. The book's closing chapter explains those early characters and what had happened in the intervening 40 years.

It is a beautiful novel that was the winner of the Irish Book Awards Novel of the Year in 2022.
A very worthy winner in my view.

If you're interested, here is the link to the conversations episode with Louise Kennedy https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/conversations/louise-kennedy-belfast-bombs-pavlova-repeat/104027920.

*Gravy rings are donuts

5/5

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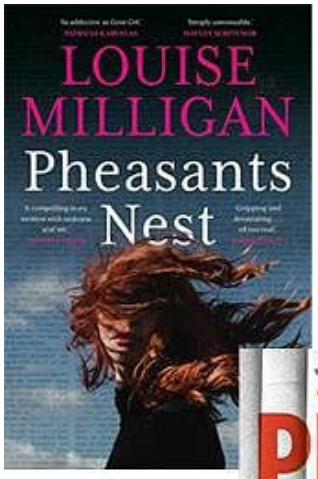
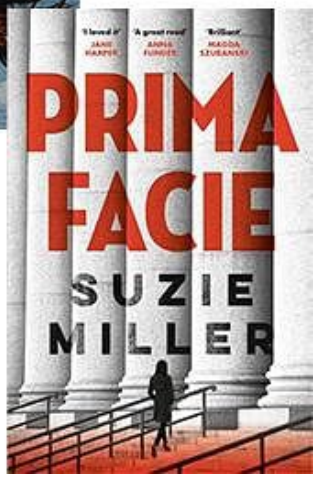




September 2024
Pheasants Nest by Louise Milligan and ***Prima Facie*** by Suzie Miller

By chance I borrowed these books at the same time, not realising their subject matter was similar, nor that the authors were not primarily fiction writers. You may recognise Louise Milligan's work—like ABC's 4 Corners investigative journalism into accusations of sexual assault against George Pell, into behaviour at Cranbrook private school, and at Channel 7. Milligan has also written about the court treatment of sexual assault cases in general.

This, her first novel is in the crime thriller genre. After the rape and murder of ABC journalist Jill Meagher in Melbourne in 2012, Louise Milligan interviewed Jill's husband who was initially a suspect in the murder.
In *Pheasant Nest*, Kate, a Melbourne journalist who writes about violence against women and knows only too well about the statistics, is in a new relationship with Liam, a medical negligence lawyer. He of course is the prime suspect when Kate disappears. He is not convinced that the Victorian or NSW police are doing their jobs so he and Kate's friend Sylvia try to find her.

As a reader, we know from page one that Kate has been sexually assaulted and abducted. She is bound and gagged in the back of a car, fearing for her life. Her destination is Pheasants Nest on the M1, crossing the Nepean River in NSW.

Also from page one, it is obvious that this book is written by someone who knows how to write. There is nothing superfluous, repetitive, or heavy-handed about this novel. It is witty, engrossing, and simply excellent. We hear from Kate herself as she recounts the trauma of her attack and abduction, and her fear of not being found. Parallel to Kate's story, we hear from Liam and Peter D'Ambrosio—a NSW police officer with his own demons.

Prima Facie is also written by someone not primarily known as a writer of fiction. Readers might recognise the title of the book under its original form, a one-woman play that premiered in Sydney in 2019, and later in both London and New York where Jodie Cromer won a Laurence Olivier Award and a Tony Award for her performances.

The playwright Suzie Miller who is British born and lives in both UK and Sydney, rewrote her dramatic play of the same name in 2017, and as a novel published in 2023. It is expected that there will be a film version forthcoming. Miller also wrote the one-woman show RBG that toured Australia recently.

The novel, set in London, expands Prima Facie—the one-person play—with the additional characters needed to make this a page-turning dramatic thriller. Tessa, a 'scholarship student' Cambridge graduate and criminal defence barrister from humble

beginnings, is known as a defender of men accused of sexual assault. She prides herself in finding inconsistencies in witness testimonies and her success rate in having cases dismissed.

Her view of the legal system in which she works changes after she is sexually assaulted.

Prima Facie is written in the present tense as two parts—Before and After—as an unfolding narrative interspersed with chapters of 'Then' in the first part, that commence when 18-year-old Tessa first arrives as a student at her Cambridge accommodation, and her mother and brother Jimmy depart. Through those 'Then' chapters, we see firstly the obvious privilege of generations of 'legal aristocracy' among Tessa's classmates and the challenges of her family. In the After section, the 'Then' chapters cover the immediate aftermath of the assault, and the other chapters disclose the unfolding court case more than two years later.

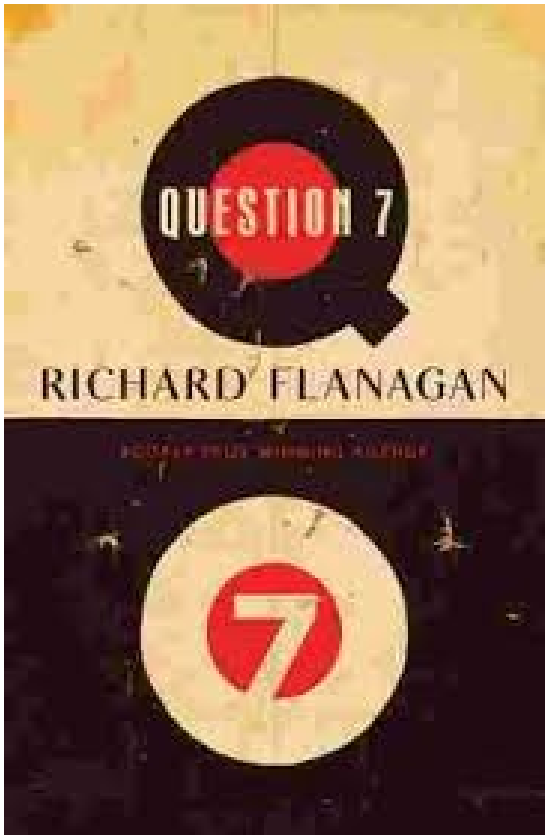
Another feature of this book is that there are no quotation marks or 'he saids'. Instead, dialogue is indented in the narrative and it is surprisingly easy to become accustomed to this style.

These two books are riveting reading. Read one, read both. If you enjoy crime thrillers, these are fine examples of the genre.

PS If you attended the Byron Writers Festival, you may have heard both authors speaking about these books.

5/5

Reserve them here!



August 2024
Question 7
by Richard Flanagan

This is a difficult book to review and one that I was hesitant to write about but because the author is a feature guest at the upcoming Byron Writers Festival, I decided to tackle it.

Question 7 is an enigmatic book. Its title comes from Anton Chekhov's parody of a school test problem—

> *Wednesday, June 17, 1881,*
> *a train had to leave station A at 3 am*
> *in order to reach station B at 11 pm;*
> *just as the train was about to depart, however,*
> *an order came that the train had to reach*
> *station B by 7pm.*

Flanagan adds 'Who loves longer, a man or a woman?' and 'why do we do what we do to each other? That's Question 7'.

The book is part memoir, part family history, part historical fiction and part philosophical treatise. It is also a thought provoking read that links the relationship between Rebecca West and H.G. Wells and the author's father's internment in Japanese mines as a POW (prisoner of war).

Richard Flanagan describes his own father as distant, damaged and 'lost in another dance'. This book helps explain the events that shaped his father. Writing and reading was an important part of the family's Rosebery, Tasmania home in the 1950s. His father recited poetry and loved and revered the written word. Although the household had few books, his mother read to Martin and five siblings every night.

Question 7 ranges from those childhood reflections to the development of the atomic bomb. From the writings of Wells and the imaginings of Leo Szilard—the Hungarian physicist who was key to the creation of the atomic bomb—through the science of an amoral framework and the horror of Hiroshima, the book examines what humans do to each other. The attempts to exterminate Tasmania's First Nations People are explored later in the book and Flanagan's musings also cover the non-human costs in the destruction of Tasmania's west coast rainforest.

These meandering, poignant stories are worth savouring. The imagery is often deeply sad, but beautiful nonetheless. The Franklin River nearly took Richard Flanagan's life (as we read in Death of a River Guide), and in this book, the river is a key feature and part of his destiny.

We learn in *Question 7* that at the age of four, Flanagan decided to be a writer. It seems that books and words define him. There is a self-exposing, sad sense of loss in this book. 'The words of the book are never the book, the soul of it is everything' Flanagan writes.

But *Question 7* is not just about words. It's also about science and the intersection of the two. Fermi, Einstein, Szilard, Vonnegut, Wells, Sakharov, and Oppenheimer are explored as mad scientists, imaginative novelists, or enlightened visionaries. Yes there is judgement, but there is also an acceptance that 'That's life' in all its complexity. In fact those words, 'That's life', end many chapters.

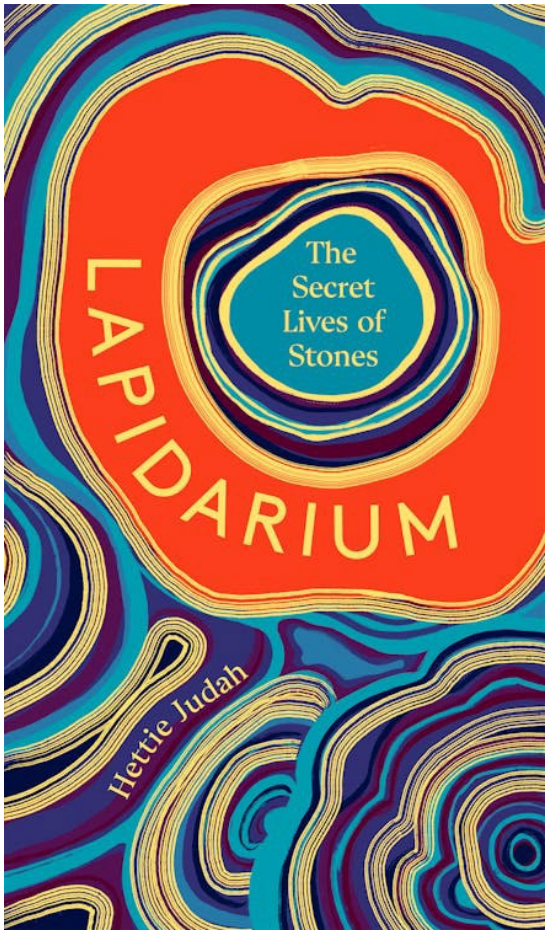
At the end of the book Wells' link to Tasmania through *War of the Worlds* is explained. The idea of people dropping out of the sky to exterminate the original Tasmanians mentioned in the first chapter as a 'war of extermination', is illustrated by the 'loss of that sacred world' suffered by subsequent generations. Also near the end of the book, the link between Wells and the author is described in a chain of events that brings this remarkable book to its conclusion.

Flanagan has published parts of this book as articles, essays, and speeches. Many sections can stand alone and the final five pages of the epilogue do just that. This is not an easy book to read but it has been widely acclaimed as Flanagan's finest work. Writer Peter Carey says, '*Question 7* may be the most significant work of Australian art in the last 100 years', while Tim Winton says it is 'the strangest and most beautiful memoir I've ever read.' I encourage you to read it and give it your own assessment.

I can't say I loved this book. While not difficult to read, I found it difficult to understand. For once, I'm not going to give it a score.

Read it and determine its rating for yourself.

Reserve it here!



July 2024

Lapidarium-The Secret Lives of Stones
by Hetti Judah
What do Imelda Marcos, Sony PlayStation®, Dolly Parton, and the Rude Man of Wiltshire have in common?

They are all part of a fascinating book, *Lapidarium—the Secret Lives of Stones* by Hettie Judah. These disparate people and objects are parts of a collection that 'explore(s) how human culture has formed stone, and the roles stone has played in forming human culture.' 'Something unchangeable is set in stone. Stone is imagined as eternal. This is a matter of perspective, or more accurately, time.'

I admit that this book is a significant departure from my usual reading.

For urging me to read it and write about it, I thank Jack, a young library assistant at RTRL. One day Jack, observing that I borrowed lots of books asked why I didn't review non-fiction. I responded that I do but only about one per year so he recommended this book.

Lapidarium's author, Hettie Judah is an art historian with a pithy, ascerbic, and often humorous style.

Quoting the Introduction, lapidariums of Babylonian times are described as 'a chamber of stones—a jumbled collection of lithic curiosities' but rather than an imagined museum, 'this lapidarium takes the form of a storybook'.

Lapidarium—The Secret Lives of Stones, describes how humans have discovered, commodified and placed value upon various stones and minerals.

The book is beautifully presented in hardcover with colour tinted edging in a soft colour palette that reflects the stones and the stories they tell. There are simple colour drawings of each stone in chapter groupings including Power, Sacred, Technology, and Living. This way of grouping makes *Lapidarium* much more interesting reading than simply an alphabetical list of 60 stones.

For serious lapidary enthusiasts, there is an index, extensive end notes, and references plus a 'Lexicon of Lithic Lingo'.

I encourage readers to explore this unusual book and its bite-size gems. Read it as I did from beginning to end or dip in as the mood takes you. Read chapters in any order or about a particular stone.

I found myself googling many of the items referenced to learn more about things of which I had limited or no knowledge—the Giant Man, the Koh-I-Noor diamond, long barrows, and Goddard Drops.

At the time I was reading this book, I took a bushwalk with friends around the Goonengerry waterfalls when a member of the group found a piece of pumice. I knew pumice was volcanic but the reading about this stone had given me so much more information about its origins from our own extinct volcano, Wollumbin.

I'm sure all readers will have their favourite stone stories. I found the sections on pearls, obsidian, sapphire, opal (Australia's famous gemstone), and even calculi, the accidental 'stones' that develop in the human body, fascinating.

The book ends with newly-discovered minerals and mineral-like species developing in our human epoch. In short, it looks into the past and towards the future.

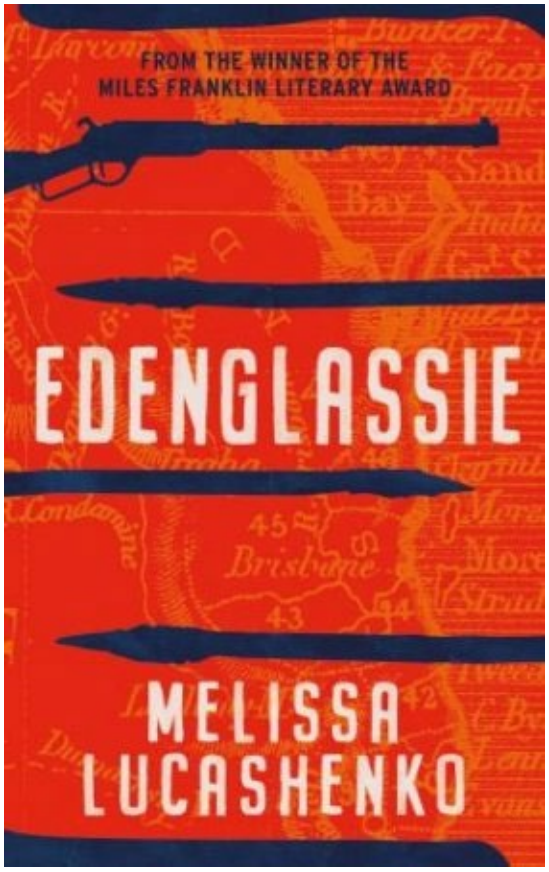
Lapidarium—The Secret Lives of Stones is in the science genre but it will appeal to readers of history, politics, religion, and mythology.

If you are looking for a gift for anyone interested in geology and our human attraction to sparkling or fascinating things we find at our feet, this book might just hit the mark.

Thank you Jack for broadening my reading by introducing me to this fascinating book.

5/5

Reserve it here!



June 2024

Edenglassie
by Melissa Lucashenko
This latest book by Bundjalung author Melissa Lucashenko, is a novel based on historical events in and around Edenglassie or as we now know it, Brisbane. But it is also much more. It is also about undoing myths and questioning assumptions of our colonial past.

Set in the mid 1800s and 2024, this novel stretches from a time when more Europeans were arriving by ship from Sydney each week, to the current day when the establishment of the penal settlement by John Oxley is approaching its bicentenary.

Many of the European names in this book are familiar—Petrie (Terrace and the suburb), Bribie (Island), Wickham (Terrace), and others. Sadly the Goorie names are not, including the important historic figure of Dundalli whom I only learned about through this book. Dundalli was an Aboriginal lawman and leader of the resistance against the invasive colonists for a decade. He was hanged in Brisbane in 1855 aged just 35.

In Lucashenko's novel in 1855, young Yugambeh man Mulanyin (from Nerang) now living on Kurilpa land (South Brisbane) and Nita, a young woman of the northern Kabi Kabi people (Sunshine Coast area) are working unpaid for Andrew and Mary Petrie's family in Magandjin (Brisbane).

No pun intended, but this is both a black and white story *and* a nuanced one. The Petrie family—especially son Tom, who speaks the local language—have a respectful relationship with the local Goorie people. Others do not.

If you've read David Marr's recent book ***Killing for Country***, *Edenglassie* further illustrates the brutality of the Native Police and the hatred of many pastoralists who were contemporaries of the Petries, towards the first peoples. Frontier wars were real and the death toll was enormous.

Yes, this work of fiction is strongly based on fact. Not only are the dagai (white settlers) names real, so are many of the Goorie names. Many events are also real although some have an altered timeline. Some of Nita's story reflects the experiences of Lucashenko's great grandmother.

Parallel to Mulanyin and Nita's story, is the 2024 story of Winona, a corn-rowed activist from Logan who meets Dr Johnny Newman as they both care for 100-year-old Yagara woman, Granny Eddie Blanket. Grannie Eddie has ended up in hospital after falling in the street and laying there unassisted until some Malaysian students help her up.

Granny Eddie's charisma attracts the attention of media and the state's Premier who makes her the poster-woman for the celebration of the bicentenary. Granny Eddie who is a little unsure of her age, soaks up the attention with humour, spinning yarns to the media, particularly to young reporter, Dartmouth, and others who flock to her.

Despite her swagger, young Winona is plagued by inner voices of self-loathing and scathing self-criticism. Granny Eddie's voices come from Grandad Charlie, a ghost in her hospital room.

The narrative also explores a current-day point of discussion. What makes a blackfella? Who claims or confers Aboriginality? Is having a black ancestor enough? What is the difference between understanding a culture and belonging to one?
The dialogue between Granny and Winona, and Winona and Johnny, is a vehicle to explore these questions without didacticism. Granny is ready to welcome Dr Johnny as a Goorie while Winona is critical of the 'pop up blakfella' who has recently discovered he has an Aboriginal ancestor. As a non-Aboriginal reader, I find that debate educational and interesting.

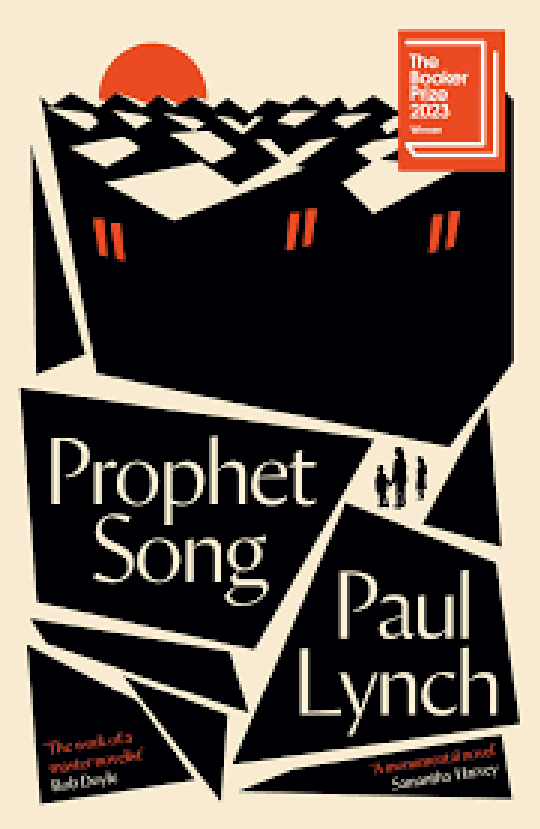
It is also worth mentioning that throughout the book, local-language names are given for various objects, animals, and birds. Their meanings are clear from the context without the clunkiness of footnotes. In so many ways, this book is not only very entertaining—often funny—but richly educative too.

In her essay in the *Griffith Review 76: Acts of Reckoning, April 2022*, Lucashenko writes about her research and reasoning for this novel. In her efforts to undo racist myth-making about a simplistic nomadic people, she wanted to 'subvert the trope of a dying race' that was popular in early-colonial literature. Instead, she paints a picture of 'governance, stability and sophistication of sovereign Aboriginal nations … viewed from the point of early colonisation'

Melissa Lucashenko lives in Kyogle and is well known in our region. She is a leader in Australian literature by any measure and is a worthy dual recipient of our preeminent literature prize, the Miles Franklin. This book won the prize in 2023 as her novel ***Too Much Lip*** won in 2019. For me, this is her finest work. It's an epic and I hope you enjoy it too.

5/5

Reserve it here!



May 2024

Prophet Song
by Paul Lynch
Before I write about *Prophet Song*, I would like to explain something.
Although I make an effort to read books shortlisted for major literary prizes, in recent years I've been less than impressed by many winners. It seems that sometimes 'clever' writing attracts the judges' attention rather than a well-written story.

Readers of my regular reviews will note that invariably I give the books I write about, a full five stars. My son says they are therefore recommendations rather than reviews. He's right. I read up to 12 books a month and I'm not going to write about a book I don't enjoy and can't recommend. I don't want to waste your time by telling you, readers, 'I didn't like this book but you might'. Therefore these 'reviews' are always focused on the books I have enjoyed or appreciated the most.

Prophet Song is one such book, and it's an award winner too.

This novel is set in Dublin in a dystopian world where the National Alliance Party has control and is increasingly limiting personal freedom. Civil war ensues as militant opposition forces mobilise. Chemist Eilish is married to teachers' unionist Larry. They have four children Mark, Molly, Bailey, and baby Ben.

One evening the gardai come for Larry and shortly afterwards, he disappears. Eilish's world is disintegrating and she must protect her children and care for her father Simon, whose dementia is increasingly apparent.

This is not a beautiful story. It is bleak and sometimes horrendous. Amid growing restrictions, Eilish struggles to get food and medical aid for her children. Under sniper fire and the rubble of a combat zone, Eilish has to muster incredible inner strength to survive. The story is disturbing, especially as we contemplate the areas of conflict around the world at this time—as more people are displaced from their homes. Watching the evening TV news from Gaza, I couldn't help but imagine it was mirroring the Dublin of this book

But despite the harsh grittiness of the environment, the writing is beautiful. Lynch writes in an unusual style defying the rules of grammar and form. There are no paragraphs, even in sections of dialogue which also lack quotation marks and most 'he said' indicators. The lack of conventional markers in sections of dialogue, surprisingly, do not make those sections difficult to read or understand who is speaking. There is enough use of names and conventional turn-taking that there is no confusion. Occasionally a sentence runs for a whole page. Rather than making it difficult to read, this technique conveys the complexity of, for example, Eilish's stream of consciousness and her

anxiety at the shifting sands around her. Those sentences also reflect the reality of much of our own daily dialogue.

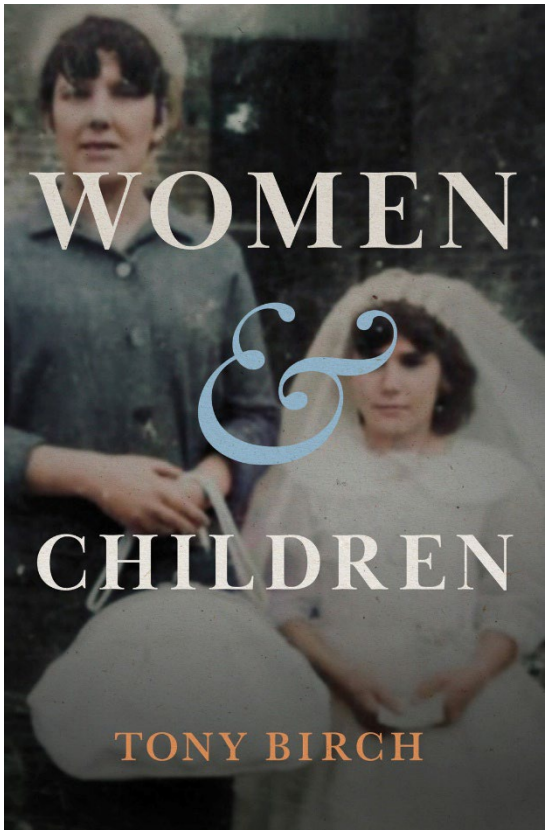
Sometimes the phrasing and sentences are so beautifully poetic that they demand to be re-read. I have re-read the passage that includes ‘how happiness hides in the humdrum’ (p 43) and the beautiful reassurances that Elisha gives her daughter, Molly, about her missing father ‘he will always be here because the love we are given when we are loved as a child is stored forever inside us… it is the law of the human heart’ (p198) several times with tears welling at their beauty. Unusually, I used several bookmarks while I read *Prophet Song*, using one to mark where I was up to, and two more to mark parts I wanted to go back and read again.

Friends who’ve read *Prophet Song* tell me they couldn’t put it down. They read it at night and again first thing in the morning before work or tasks. While I have known that urge, *Prophet Song* had a different affect on me. I wanted to savour the writing and reflect on the emotions it generated so I deliberately set it aside to ensure I was able to give it my full attention, in a quiet place without distraction for the next reading.

This is also one of the most unusual novels I’ve read. Yes it’s ‘clever’ writing but it works. It also won the 2023 Booker Prize so others also think it works too. You will hurt inside from this story. I encourage you to give it a go. Suspend your beliefs on what writing should look and sound like. Broaden your viewpoint and let *Prophet Song* lead you into a new place of modern writing, while telling an all-too-familiar ageless tale of woe.

4/5

Reserve it here!



April 2024

Women and Children
by Tony Birch
Have you ever finished a novel and just sat, running your hand over the cover of the closed book, pondering what you've experienced? *Women and Children* is one of those rare books for me.

This hardback beautiful book has end papers covered in small white women's handbags with a top clasp and two short straps, the style used by women in the 1960s. On its cover is a photo of a young girl in a communion veil and a woman standing beside her holding a handbag of the same shape and style. In the author notes, we read that the photo is of the author's sister and aunt and was taken by his mother.

Women and Children is not autobiographical but the stories that inspired it are embedded in Birch's experiences and explorations of not accepting silence. Tony Birch is an Aboriginal Australian author, academic, and activist. He left school at 15 and went to Melbourne university aged 30 where he won the Chancellor's medal for his Arts PhD. In 2017, he became the first Indigenous writer to win the Patrick White Award. He became the Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne in December 2022. This is his fifth novel, the previous one being the highly acclaimed, *The White Girl*.

Women and Children is set in 1965 in a poor, inner suburb of Melbourne, possibly Fitzroy where Birch grew up. The main character is 11 year old Joe Cluny who lives with his older sister Ruby and their single mum, Marion. Joe has a close relationship with his retired street sweeper grandfather Charlie (Char) who collects and sells unwanted goods with his mate Rhanji. Joe's aunt Oona lives nearby with her partner Ray.

School life is hard for Joe who is regularly compared to his bright sister by the often cruel nuns. Home life is severely shaken when aunt Oona arrives badly beaten. Ray is a con man with close contacts with the police so justice through police channels is not available.

There is a subtle reference to the stolen generations as Char and Rhanji talk about their relationships with their father. Early in the story Joe finds a gun and there is a hint that it may be used to enact a different form of justice.
The closeness of the relationship between Joe and his grandfather, between Char and Rhanji, and between the sisters Marion and Oona plus the bravery of them all, are key themes in this novel.

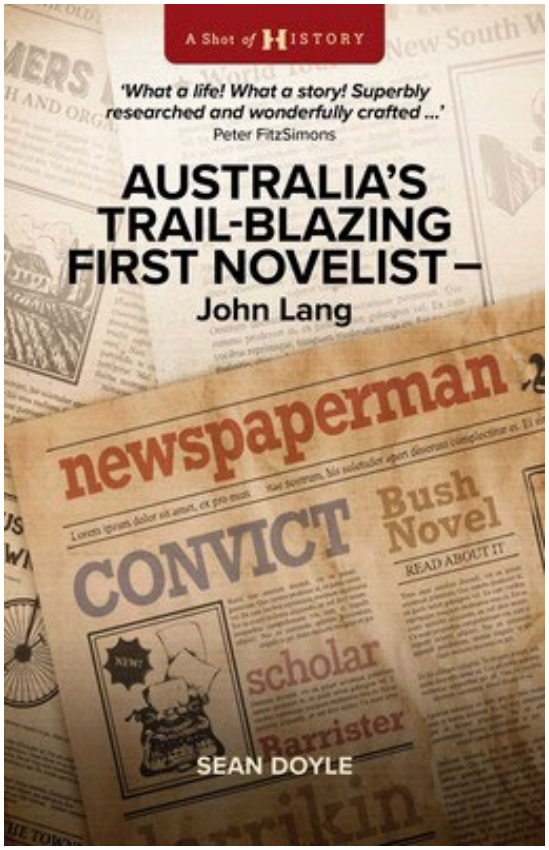
Every character in this beautiful story is well imagined and tangible. Their interactions and dialogue ring true. Birch has been awarded numerous literary prizes for his perceptive stories of family life. This book is on the top of the pile and deserves to be

widely read and acclaimed.

I hope it touches you as much as it touched me.
One of the best books I've read in years.

5/5

Reserve it here!



March 2024

Australia's Trail-blazing First Novelist—John Lang
by Sean Doyle
Have you heard of John Lang, Australia's first novelist? I hadn't and I assume you haven't either.

There is a short listing for John Lang in Wikipedia, and a little more detail in ANU's Australian Dictionary of Biography with these words describing Lang as having 'human failings, a wide intellect, remarkable memory, and sparkling wit'. It concludes 'Through narrow social sanction Australia lost one of its most brilliant sons and its first native-born novelist.'

Author (and local) Sean Doyle, having spent many years as an English language teacher, travel journalist, and editor—plus his extensive travels in India—is an ideal biographer of John Lang.

Peter FitzSimons provides this quote on the cover, 'What a life! What a story! Superbly researched and wonderfully crafted'.

The blurb on the back of the book summarises Lang a 'writer, journalist, barrister, larrikin', as TV news might say today, 'a colourful character'.

Lang was born in humble circumstances in Parramatta in 1816 and wrote the first detective novel—a convict romance—in English at the age of 19. For various reasons, the novel was published under his own name, adding to the lack of our knowledge of him. Later he wrote the first Indian travelogue. He was also the first Australian to publish a newspaper overseas (well before Rupert Murdoch) at age 28.

There are some explanations for the lack of knowledge about this enigmatic man, but I won't reveal them here. Suffice to say that he loved the limelight but sometimes that limelight was hot enough to burn him and his reputation.

It is little surprise that from time to time he took to the stage, and like many of the present day celebrity men in the law, he loved oratory, verbal jousting, and taking on powerful entities in the court room.

Doyle explores why we haven't heard of this man. He does so in an engaging style, combining primary sources with historical background material and a flowing style that makes the book highly readable. Clearly Doyle's experience and deep connection with India makes the complexity of Lang's years on the subcontinent during the rise and fall of the East India Company (in which he played a part) and the influence of the British Raj, richer and more satisfying reading.

The book also explores Lang's family life including his 'three fathers', two marriages, and his six years in London. Although he talked of returning to Sydney, he died in India at the age of 47.

The book is chaptered in chronological order with a clear table of contents, concluding with an epilogue, a very helpful 'timeline by age', a list of Lang's writings, endnotes, and sources. This book should be read by anyone interested in early Australian authors, but anyone who enjoys a good biography will find this a fascinating read.

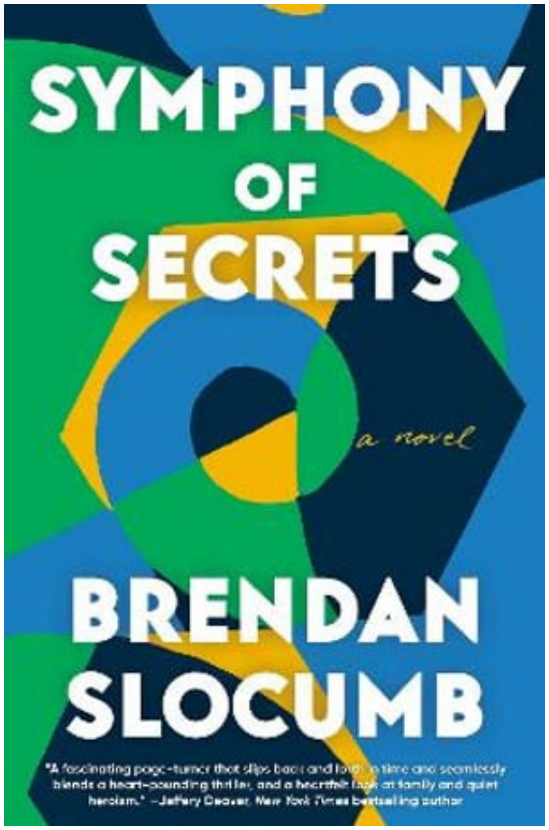
Sean Doyle fills out the short but event-filled life of our first novelist with great skill and detail. I imagine Lang would have proudly embraced this book, despite it not always being flattering to its subject.

I could not agree more with Peter FitzSimons 'What a story!'

Highly recommended.

5/5

Reserve it here!



February 2024

Symphony of Secrets
by Brendan Slocumb
This is a wonderful novel for musicians and those of us who know nothing about music except that we enjoy it. An historical novel set in New York in both the early decades of the 1900s and present day, *Symphony of Secrets* is a musical mystery. Like his main character, Bern Hendricks, author Brendan Slocumb is a current-day music academic.

In this novel, Professor Hendricks is commissioned by the Frederick Delaney Foundation to orchestrate a newly discovered work by Delaney who was a prolific composer 100 years ago. Delaney had written musical pieces related to the colours of the Olympic rings but Red is missing.

Rough sleeper Josephine Reed is neurodivergent, experiencing sounds as notes and transcribing what she hears in doodles. She also remembers every tune she's ever heard and can compose new pieces without having any training in musical notations. It is the early 1900s and Frederick Delaney—once known as the struggling Freddy Delaney—is suddenly the most popular composer in the country. The pair link up and Delaney convinces Reed that as a black woman, she can never be recognised and published, so he passes her work off as his own—he is a lyricist and transcribes the notations into a conventional musical score. She, meanwhile, is happy sleeping on his floor, cooking for him and listening to music.

In those days, music lovers bought sheet music and the pianists, such as Delaney, played in local department stores and made money from those appearances and the sale of their musical scores. A century later, Music Professor Bern Hendricks is hired by the Delaney Foundation to bring the long lost and recently discovered Delaney composition, Red Opera to the stage. Black Cybersecurity IT whiz Eboni Washington is his modern-day collaborator and mystery solver.

This is a novel exploring the issues of the early 1900s in USA, especially segregation and white supremacy. Musicians will more fully understand the musical references, but I can attest that having no musical knowledge is no impediment to being absorbed by this intriguing novel. The story is gripping and starts with Delaney going through his pre-performance routine of filling two champagne glasses and honouring a photo of an unnamed 'kiddo'.

The novel, like an opera, is in acts with alternating movements featuring Bern Hendricks and Freddy Delaney with occasional movements or chapters focusing on Josephine Reed. This story is also a plea to broaden our gaze to the people on the fringe—those who look, act, sound, or think differently. The musical term scherzo is used to represent Josephine as a sideline or interlude. Finally in Act 4, Josephine Reed is given the focus she deserves. She is no longer the scherzo, but this extraordinary woman becomes the

centre of the music where she should always have been.

I found this book to be riveting in its evocative recreation of the era and an insight into the musical world of which I know so little.

I think you will enjoy it too.

5/5

Reserve it here!