



December 2018

The Trauma Cleaner by Sarah Krasnostein

This biography about Sandra Pankhurst is a riveting read. Not only because it describes the little known work of a trauma cleaner but because Sandra's personal life is so multi-faceted and complex.

The author Sarah Krasnostein met Sandra at a crime and law conference where Sandra was displaying her business in the Trade exhibition area. The before and after photos of rooms that Sandra and her cleaners had cleared and sanitised sparked a conversation that resulted in the book.

The story that unfolded is a weaving together chapter by chapter of the cleaning and decluttering jobs and of Sandra's life story.

The clean-up chapters vividly describe the mammoth and often stomach churning

task of cleaning up after a murder or suicide or for a chronic hoarder but they do more than that. In accompanying Sandra on her jobs, Sarah portrays the living and sometimes unwilling beneficiaries of Sandra's efforts as real people with real anxieties.

During my years in local government, the problem of hoarding arose on several occasions either through a complaint from a neighbour or concerns over lack of communication with a property owner living a reclusive life with many years of unpaid rates.

Environmental health and rates officers were at a loss in attempts to engage with the residents and sought help from a local specialist in hoarding behaviour.

As I read *The Trauma Cleaner*, a greater understanding of the psychology of hoarding grew along with a deeper empathy for the hoarders themselves and a greater appreciation of the skills of those who work to help them.

In one chapter, Sandra helps hoarder Janice set a small achievable goal of 'you and your kids and a cup of tea on the couch' that gives some purpose and resolve to the massive task of clearing tonnes of putrefying rubbish from her home.

When asked what her work requires, Sandra responds 'Great Compassion, great dignity and a good sense of humour 'cause you're gonna need it- and a really good sense of not being able to take the smell in.'

But as I've said, the clean-up jobs are only half the story. The rest is about Sandra herself. Born a boy in Melbourne, a young husband, a father, a drag queen, transitioning to a woman, a sex worker, a drug addict, a wife, a funeral director and hardware shop owner and finally a trauma cleaner is, in a gross understatement, an amazingly complex life. Whether it's the complexity, her personal life's traumas or the effects of her drug taking, there are some gaps in Sandra's story that Sarah was unable to fill. But rather than those gaps causing discomfort, they add to the sensation that one is reading about

a life that is not neatly tied up with a bow. This book is raw, often ugly and sometimes disturbing.

Whether you read *The Trauma Cleaner* as a biography of a life or as an insight into the world of a professional cleaner of the messiest places, I'm certain you'll learn a great deal.

Very highly recommended.



Cheers

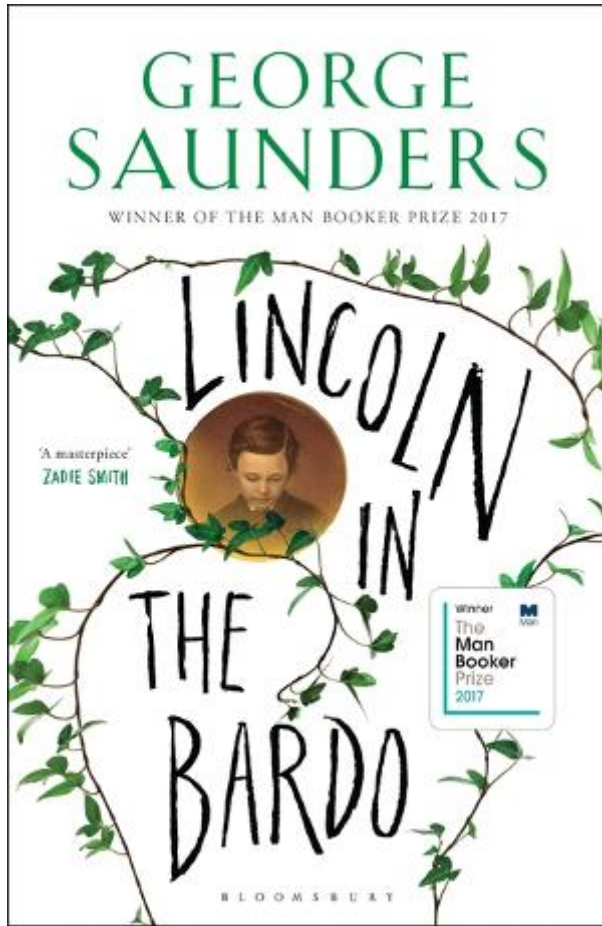
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

Reserve it here!

Thank you Jenny once again, for another one of her very well written and descriptive reviews.





October 2018

Lincoln in the Bardo by George Saunders

It's rare to read a book that breaks the mould but *Lincoln in the Bardo* is unlike any book I've ever read and I am yet to hear of another reader who doesn't feel the same about this unusual book.

The author, George Saunders, takes an historic titbit, the death of President Abraham Lincoln's eleven year old son, Willie, and explores the concept of the Bardo, a Tibetan Limbo-like realm between death and the matterlightblooming or next stage- Heaven or Hell or something else?

The voices throughout this unusual novel are predominantly the characters caught in this strange suspended world as they interact around Willie and observe the grief of his father who visits the crypt to sit

by his son's grave. The Bardo characters, a Reverend, a gay man, a newly wed older man, a foul mouthed couple, and others, speak in distinct voices from the 'sick mounds' (graves) that they've occupied for years but it does take some concentration to follow their narratives. Some readers have observed that an audio version of the novel might lead to better differentiation of the multitude of voices.

In addition to these Bardo characters' commentaries, there are quotations from primary and secondary historic sources throughout the novel adding depth and detail to the Lincoln story and Willie's death from typhoid.

I can't say I really enjoyed this novel, but I'm glad I read it. It's clever, ground breaking and unique- undoubtedly reasons for its selection for the Booker prize last year. Read it and see what you think.



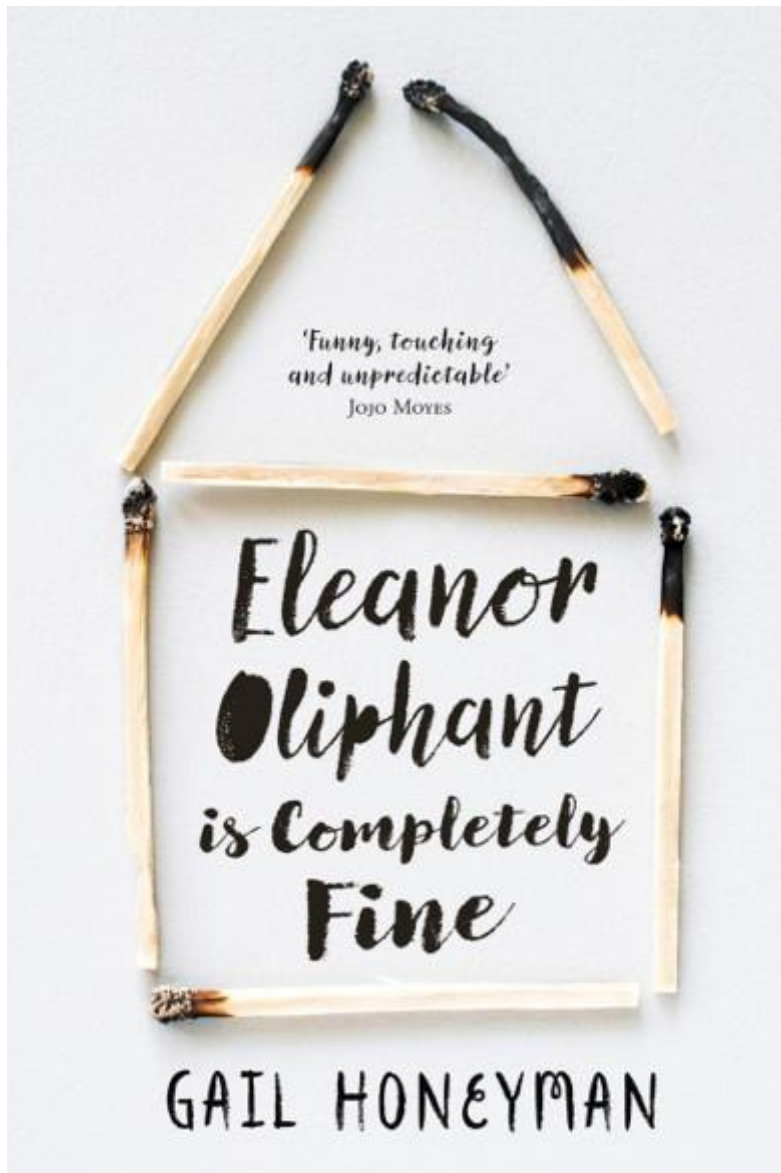
Cheers
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

[Reserve it here!](#)

Thanks Jenny (once again) for another one of your compelling reviews! I have to say that I for one, am intrigued and will be reserving *Lincoln in the Bardo!*





September 2018

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine

by *Gail Honeyman*

A local bookseller recommended this book to me and from the beginning, I loved it. Eleanor is a very unusual character who is socially inept, a creature of habit and with a past that is gradually revealed. The dark, secret explanations for her scars and her relationship with her mother are gently exposed as she deals with her work environment and the chance encounters of her limited life.

Eleanor spends her days working in accounts for an advertising company, her nights eating the same meals alone at home and her weekends drinking

vodka - also alone and at home. And yet Eleanor says she's happy, at least until a chance encounter with Raymond, who works in IT, broadens her world and she is confronted with and begins to embrace change.

The novel is funny and sad as we see social interactions through Eleanor's literal, limited and reserved view of the world. Her cutting observations of the inanity of the conversations she observes and her bluntness are very amusing. Late in the book, her interactions ordering a Starbucks coffee are very funny. Her old fashioned verbal formality and dowdy appearance are incongruous with her 29 years of age.

This book is Gail Honeyman's first novel and even as a work-in-progress it was shortlisted for a literary prize. On publication it was chosen as one of the Observer's Debuts of the Year for 2017.

I understand that Reese Witherspoon will play Eleanor in a film of the book and readers will look forward to seeing it translated to the screen.



Cheers

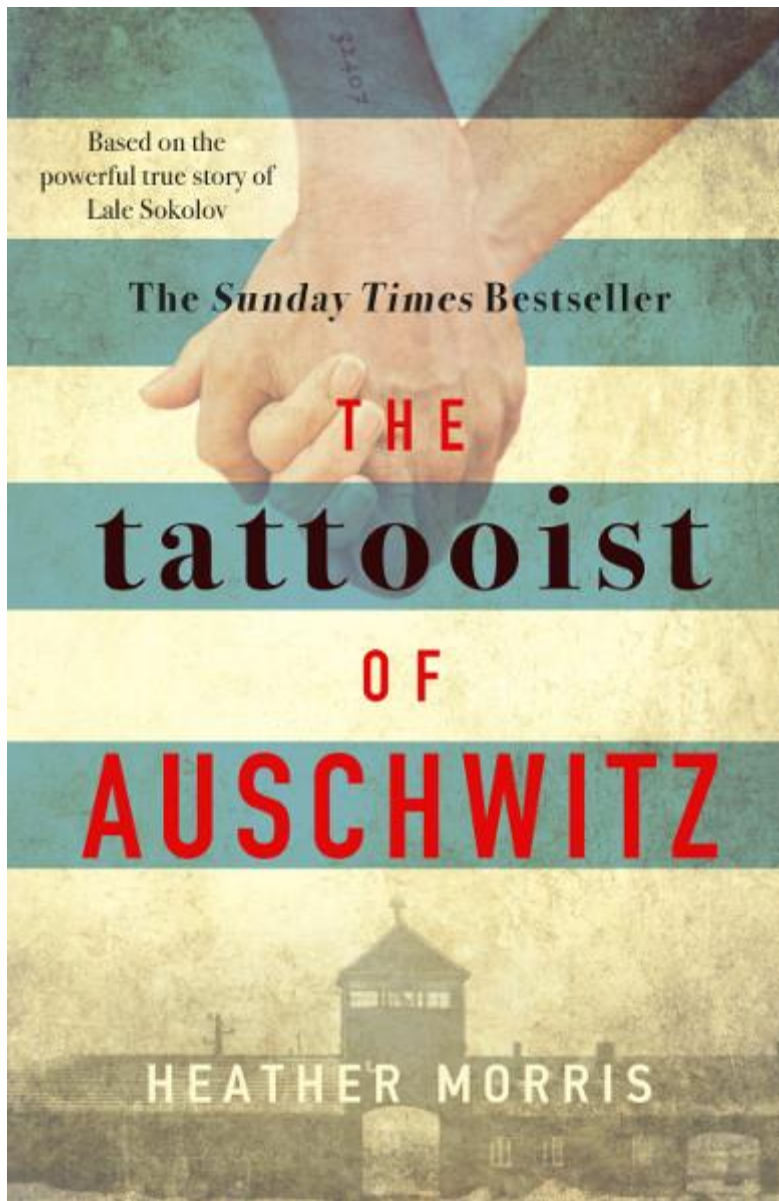
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

Reserve it here!

Thanks Jenny for another very well written and descriptive review.





August 2018

The Tattooist of Auschwitz

by *Heather Morris*

I missed Richard Fidler's Conversation with author Heather Morris on ABC Radio but since reading this book, I've heard several other radio reviews- all glowing. While *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is a novel, it is based on the true story of Holocaust survivor Lale Sokolov who died in Melbourne in 2006. In fact Morris says it is 95% factual with some additions of names where Lale's memory was patchy.

Knowing he was dying, Lale met Heather Morris in 2003 and as they became friends, Lale urged Morris to write his story. Morris originally worked on the hours and hours of tapes with the idea of producing a play before,

after 12 years, reshaping it as this novel.

This novel is primarily a love story but as readers will guess from the title, it's certainly not a light and breezy romance between Lale and Gita the young woman he meets in Birkenau-Auschwitz in 1942. Lale, a Jew from Slovakia, is selected to tattoo the numbers on the left forearm of all adult prisoners brought by the truck load to the infamous concentration camp. From the moment he sets eyes on Gita, also a Slovakian Jew, as he tattoos her identification number, he's determined for them both to survive.

There were times when reading this novel that I felt ill at the distressing descriptions and brutality but there is no glossing over the horrendous acts inflicted on Jews, gypsies and others at the hands of the Nazis.

Running through the book is also the theme of survival and doing what one must to get through alive. For some of the characters, principles and morals by necessity gave way to bribery, buying favours, flattery of the enemy and submitting to degradation in order to simply survive.

While some readers might think this novel would not be to their taste, I encourage all to read it. As disturbing as you will find many parts of it, you will also be uplifted by the will to live and the power of love.



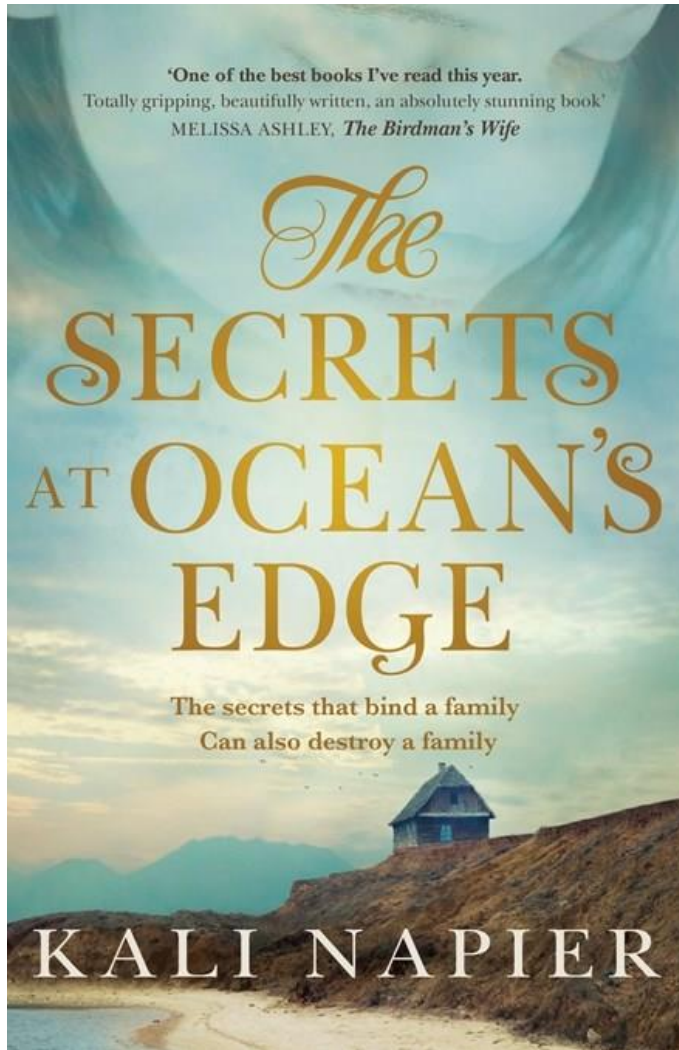
Cheers
Jenny

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Thanks Jenny for another well written and descriptive review. ?





June 2018

The Secrets at Ocean's Edge

by Kali Napier

Although Kali Napier is a Master of Philosophy student at University of Queensland, her first novel is set in Western Australia and tells a story of the people of 'a small town, (who) keep their secrets close'.

Described by the author as being 'a story about family and belonging', the novel is haunting and immensely readable.

Each chapter is written with a focus on one of the four main characters, Lily and Ernie Hass, their 10 year old daughter Girlie and Lily's shell-shocked brother Tommy, a World War 1 returned soldier.

The story is set in 1932 firstly in the Western Australian wheat belt and then for most of the novel, at Dongarra on the coast where the

family tries to fit in and make a new life.

The book so accurately captures the small mindedness of small towns where the face residents show others is not necessarily the truth about their lives and where new comers find it hard to understand the complexity of their townsfolk's relationships. The post war years, the Depression and attitudes to Aboriginal people and 'foreigners' add layers to the complexity of belonging.

Napier is a skilled story teller with a wonderful ability to bring her characters to life with their flaws and strengths making each of them very real. Tommy's personal torment is portrayed with compassion and gut-wrenching pain. Girlie will stay with the reader long after the book is finished. As she tries to make sense of the adult world around her and attempts to make friends among her often unlikeable school mates, she becomes one of the most 'real' young characters in a novel in recent times.

This book is highly recommended as a deeply satisfying read.



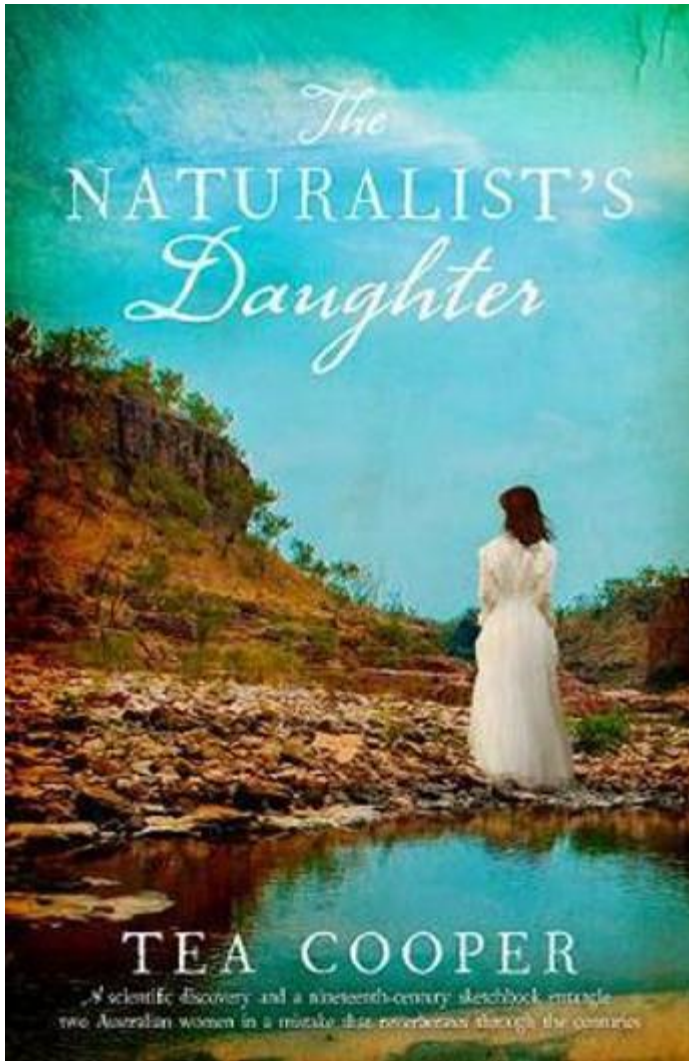
Cheers
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

Reserve it here!

Jenny, you keep us informed and entertained! This one sounds incredible!





May 2018

The Naturalist's Daughter by Tea Cooper

I hadn't read anything of Tea Cooper's before this novel but I can see why she has a strong following. Cooper has written three other novels of historical or contemporary Australia and has an additional three in electronic form.

The Naturalist's Daughter follows two women whose stories although 100 years apart, are linked by that strangest of Australian of animals, the platypus. Many of us will recall from school studies that the platypus was regarded as a hoax when stuffed examples of the animal arrived back in England in the early 1800s. This novel follows the life of Rose Winton who works closely with her father, Charles Winton, a naturalist commissioned to collect information for Sir Joseph Banks. In doing so, the Wintons

also draw on the knowledge of local Aboriginal informants and Cooper includes this indigenous knowledge seamlessly.

When her father is too ill to travel to present to the Royal Society, Rose makes the trip. Not only is the platypus greeted with derision, but so is Rose who, as a woman, is unable to present her father's drawings and observations.

One hundred years later, another young woman, Tamsin Alleyn, travels from her work at the Mitchell Library to authenticate a sketchbook book.

Cooper is skilled in describing landscapes and I found the writing of Rose's story and particularly satisfying for the most part. To my mind, both women's stories became a little more like romantic fiction than I would have liked but that might say more about my tastes than those of most readers.

Sometimes information about Sydney in the early 1900s as described by the characters in dialogue with Tamsin seemed to be unnecessary educative additions and there is an overly dramatic inclusion in Rose's history too. Overall however, the characters in the novel including the minor subjects and their relationships are well portrayed.

In the Historical Note at the end of the book, Cooper makes it clear that Charles Winton is a fictional character but there is some conjecture that Sir Joseph Banks may have

received a platypus pelt many years before Governor John Hunter first described the unusual animal.

If you like a good novel of historical fiction that explores women in 19th and 20th century non-traditional roles and the fascination of ornithorhynchus paradoxus, then this will provide an interesting read.



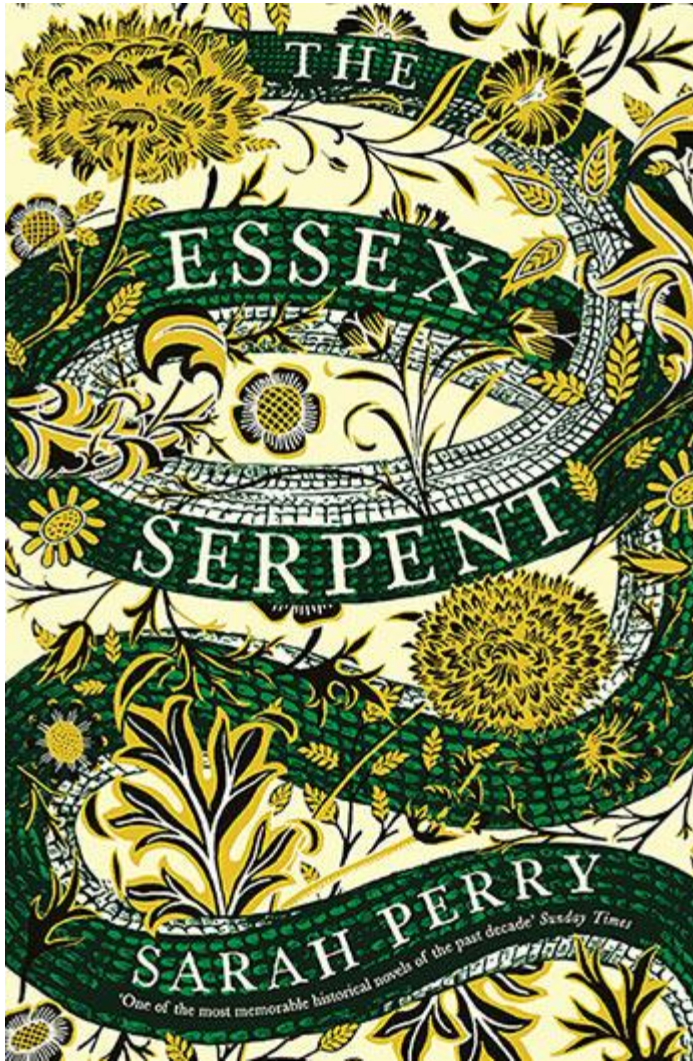
Cheers
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

Reserve it here!

Thanks again Jenny, for another great review.





April 2018

The Essex Serpent by Sarah Perry

The Essex Serpent is a book that I did not want to end. It is such a beautifully written novel that I wanted to savour it by frequently re-reading passages and marvelling at the imagery.

Based on a legend of a mythical beast that brought misfortune and illness to residents of Essex, the novel explores the conflicts of science and religion and matters of the heart and class. Emerging issues such as social attitudes to housing, nature versus nurture and evolution are also explored.

The story is set in 1893 with monthly chapters of rich narrative interspersed with surprisingly frank and emotion-filled letters between the main characters.

Newly widowed Cora Seaborne casts off the shackles of her

marriage and with her son, whom we would today regard as being on the autism spectrum, finds a new freedom in the small coastal community of Aldwinter. There she forms a relationship with the local vicar William Ransome, his wife and children. As well as exploring the conflicting ideas of Cora and William, the novel also encompasses the nature of love and the role of women in an age of emerging feminism.

The Essex Serpent is a riveting novel but it's more than just a good story. The writing is exquisite with beautifully evocative passages describing the landscape, the characters and the feelings between them.

Sarah Perry is a skilled author who holds her own alongside original Victorian era writers such as Dickens, Hardy, Stoker and the Brontes.



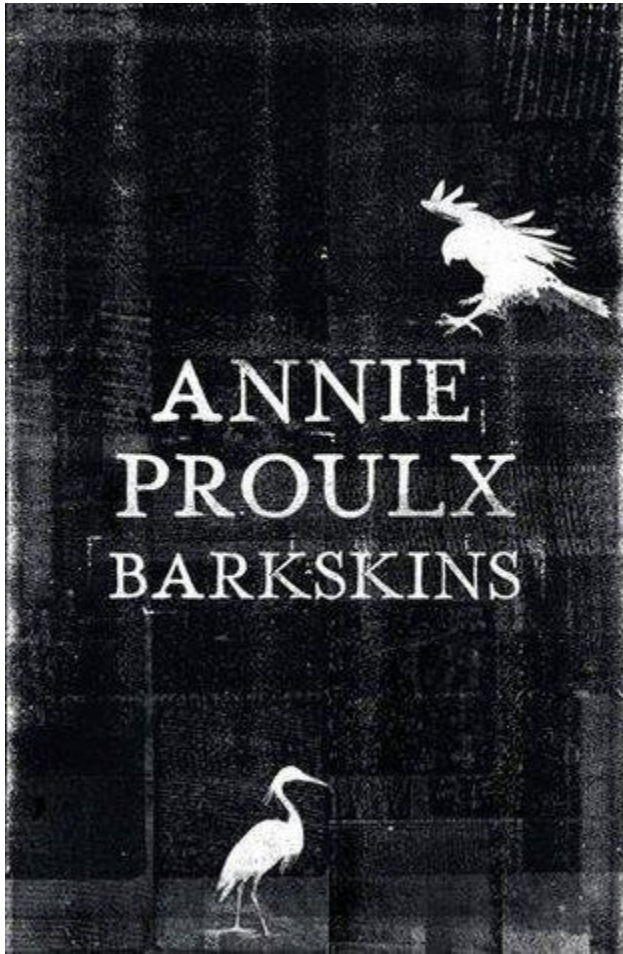
Cheers
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

Reserve it here!

Thanks Jenny once again, for another stellar review!





March 2018

Barkskins by Annie Proulx

A new novel by Canadian author Annie Proulx is always bound to be highly anticipated and *Barkskins* does not disappoint. At more than 700 pages, it's a huge book but it's the epic story that truly makes it a huge and important book.

The story begins in 1693 when two penniless young Frenchmen are indentured as *Barkskins* (wood cutters) in New France. The stories of René Sel and Charles Duquet and their descendants diverge and develop through the next 300 years with trees and the timber industry being the constant throughout. While mostly based in Canada, other locations in Europe, China, New Zealand and even Australia feature in the constant search for forests and timber.

The characters in *Barkskins* are beautifully drawn, flaws and all. The hardships they face, the harshness of the land and conflicting cultural identity are all expertly described. The family trees in the back of the novel help readers to keep track of the characters in the Sel and Duquet-Duke clans but even if, like I, you don't discover these pages until well into the book, you'll find the multitude of characters do not lead to as much confusion as you might think.

While the people come and go, and often violently, the reader is left in little doubt that the loss of thousand year old forests is more significant. The more recent issues of vegetation monocultures, soil degradation, land destabilisation and climate change are emerging themes in the novel but it's not really until the final chapters that Proulx pushes these as pressing matters. Some might say that these chapters are a little heavy handed but it's hard to sustain a critique of preachiness in just a few pages in such an enormous novel.

Barkskins ends in 2013 with a question of whether the damage done can be fixed and whether forests can repair themselves. Once again Annie Proulx has delivered an important book that further cements her place as one of the greatest authors of our time.



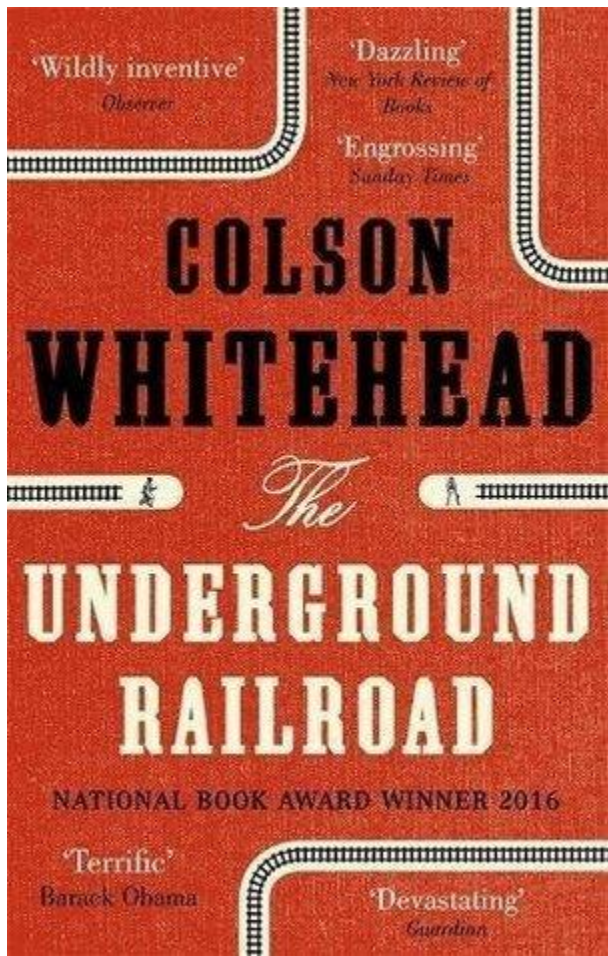
Cheers
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

Reserve it here!

Thank you Jenny! Another amazing review!





February 2018

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

I feel slightly embarrassed to admit that I hadn't heard of *The Underground Railroad* as the network of transport routes and safe houses that helped African- American slaves escape from their often horrific lives in the South of the United States to the relative safety in the abolitionist North.

This novel isn't an easy read and I struggled with the bleakness of many parts of it but I'm pleased I persisted.

The novel is divided into chapters based mostly on Cora, a young slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia, but also on other characters including Cora's mother. The timeline moves in a non-linear fashion from the ancestors through to childhood of some of the characters and back again.

This is a book that also makes us in Australia think as some of the attitudes relate to the racist past of our own treatment of Aboriginal people.

But don't think this is a bleak and hectoring novel. There is hope, evidence of good people and a riveting storyline.

Cora and Caesar, slaves from Virginia, take the risky step of trying to escape to the north. The route to freedom is not easy however and the novel exposes the terrible violence inflicted on both those who attempt to escape and those who remain as slaves.

In reading this novel, I think we can all more fully understand the USA today. As an example, the current Black Lives Matter campaign focussing on the violence perpetrated by police on black Americans is a modern day expression of that dark history of racial abuse.

Highly recommended as an educative and interesting read.



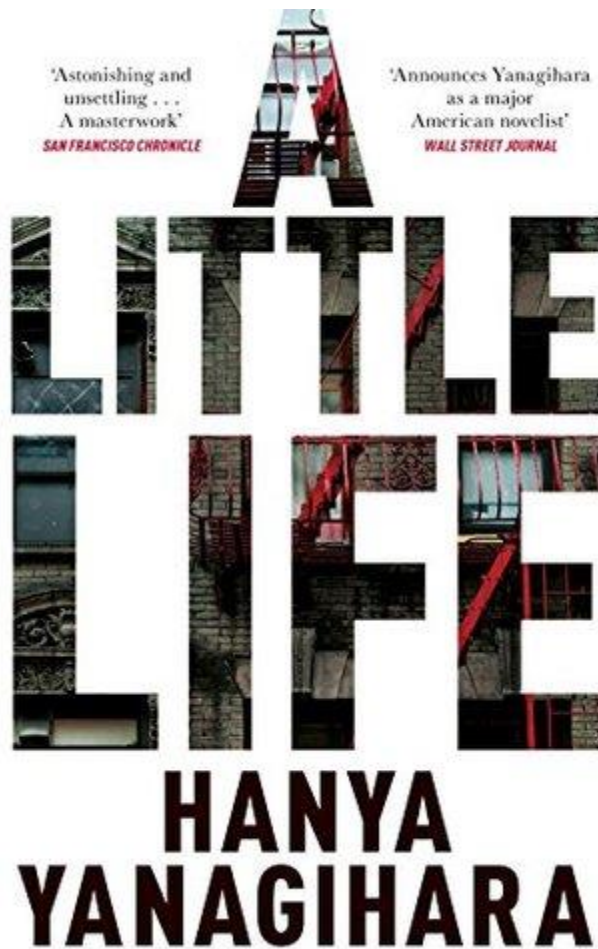
Cheers
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

Reserve it here!

Thanks Jenny, another great review!





January 2018

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara is the sort of book that stays with you for a long time after you've read it. Even now, weeks after finishing it, I am overcome by a deep melancholy when I reflect on it.

This huge novel of over 700 pages tells the story of four male college friends who find themselves in New York at the start of their careers. BJ, Malcolm, Willem, and Jude have vastly different backgrounds but are held together as a close group of friends over many years. As the novel unfolds, we learn about each of these young men but the novel focuses largely on Jude, the most enigmatic and complex character I've encountered in a novel for many years.

Jude has suffered terribly at the hands of those who raised him from a very young age and while the abuse they inflicted on him is slowly revealed throughout the book, it's clear from the start that Jude is a deeply damaged man who does not believe he's worthy of love or happiness. Indeed, it's difficult at times to love Jude and like Willem, we will probably consider giving up on him too.

The descriptions of the abuse Jude experiences at the hands of others and self-inflicted are harrowing and I know some who could not read passages in the book without taking a few deep breaths. If you usually read before going to sleep, you may have some difficulty too but do not be dissuaded from reading it. There are many parts of the book that are heart-warming, beautifully positive and will restore your faith in the power of love. It's just that for some damaged souls, love isn't enough.

Hanya Yanagihara said at the 2016 Sydney Writers Festival that 'Fiction should march into anything that involves the human condition' and march into it, she does. You may feel you've been marched all over after you've read it, but I think you'll also feel that you understand the effects of long term early childhood abuse much more as a result. The author has said that the novel is not about institutionally sanctioned predation on children but with the final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Assault due in December, it's a timely and relevant read.

A Little Life was among the 6 novels shortlisted in 2015 for the Man Booker Prize.

Without doubt, this is one of the best novels I've read in many, many years. I thank a friend for recommending it to me. I'm very, very pleased she did.



Cheers
Jenny

Look for another book review next month!

[Reserve it here!](#)

Jenny, what would we do without you? Now I know what to read next week! ♥

