

November 2022

Horse by Geraldine Brooks

Any new book by Geraldine Brooks comes with high expectations and much excitement. This Australian-born writer now lives both here and in Massachusetts. In this book she weaves a story firmly based in American history but with deft Australian touches.

Brooks is known for basing her stories on known facts and connecting them in insightful ways. *Horse* does just that.

A painting discarded in a Washington DC kerbside pick up in 2019 is collected by a Nigerian-American art history PhD student. This first short chapter, Theo, sets the pattern for this novel. Each character brings a perspective to the story from 1850, 1954, and 2019, gradually solving the mystery of the painting while bringing to the fore the history of slavery in America and its residue of racism.

Along with chapters about Theo, the other characters include Jess, an Australian scientist (2019), Martha Jackson, an art dealer (1954), Mary Barr Clay, a young headstrong privileged daughter (1953), Thomas J. Scott, a painter (1950), and most centrally, Jarret, a slave (1850-1975).

Notably, the chapters about Thomas Scott are written in first person but most importantly, the chapters on Jarret, are generally titled Warfield's Jarret, Ten Broeck's Jarret, and Alexander's Jarret, as he changes hands as the property of various slave owners.

Most of the historical characters in this book are real people and Lexington, the thoroughbred racehorse, is legendary—having won six of its seven races but more significantly, becoming the most successful sire in North America in the 1800s.

I know nothing about horses but the details about horses and Lexington, the most famous American horse (think Pharlap status), are fascinating. Yes it's about horse racing but please don't let a dislike for this activity stop you from reading this novel.

One part of the novel didn't sit so well with me, and that's in the tragic incident at the end of the book. The incident certainly rang true but Jess' response did not. Still, that's a minor flaw in a magnificent work of grandeur and detail.

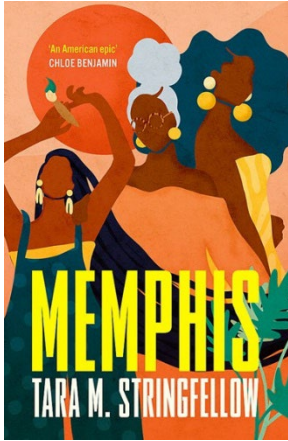
Do yourself a favour and immerse yourself in this wonderful book.

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)



October 2022

Memphis

by Tara M. Stringfellow

I loved this book! And I hope you do too.

Tara M. Stringfellow gave up a career as a lawyer to undertake a degree in poetry and then became a teacher. One of her poems while studying, about a woman in an abusive relationship, became the basis of this novel. Stringfellow's grounding in poetry means that every sentence has a purpose. There is no excess or puffery here.

It is important to note that *Memphis* is not an unrelenting narrative of generational abuse. Neither is it a saccharine novel. There is a great deal of pain, racism, cruelty, and grief but there is strength and hope aplenty too.

The novel tells the story of three generations of North women who live in Memphis, the city that Stringfellow calls home. From grandmother Hazel, her daughters Miriam and August, and Miriam's daughters Joan and Mya, the novel covers seven decades of their lives and loves from 1937 to 2003. There are many parallels with Stringfellow's own life.

While not set in the Trump era, it was motivated by it.

"I was angry, and I needed the space to write something longer than a poem," Stringfellow said. "I was really sick of the MAGA hats—I was sick of racist white folk telling me and mine who made this country great when I know damn well, it's black women. That is the biggest farce and lie that I live in. I was sick of looking at all these confederate monuments, and I wanted to make a monument to my family. And so I decided to write a book about my family."

Divided into three parts, the short chapters are named for and focus on a year in the life of four of the women—Joan, Miriam, August, and Hazel. The narrative is not chronological. Part 1 begins in 1995 and looks back to two earlier decades. Part 2 spans from 1997 back to 1937, and Part 3 covers 1968 to 2003.

Joan, who like Stringfellow, follows her dream along a creative path rather than the expected one, is the only character who speaks in her own voice. She is the key character in the novel and is no stranger to trauma. She is a keen observer of life in this black neighbourhood and especially the women in it and she epitomises the resilience those women display.

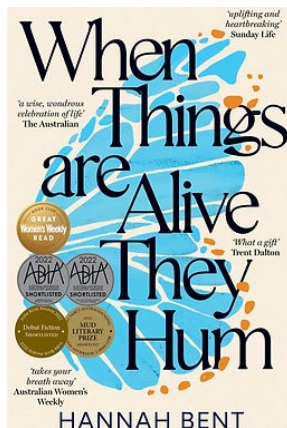
I really hope you read it and enjoy it as much as I did. One of the best books I've read this year.

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

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September 2022

When Things are Alive They Hum by Hannah Bent

What a fabulous book!

This one will make you smile, it may make you weep, and it will surely make you think.

Marlowe leaves her post graduate studies into butterflies in London to rush back to Hong Kong where her sister, Harper, is very ill. Harper has Down Syndrome (or as she call it, “Up Syndrome”) and as is common with this condition, her heart is weak. As a baby she had surgery and now in her 20s, only a heart transplant can prolong her life. But having Down Syndrome means she’s not likely to qualify in Hong Kong.

The sisters’ Chinese mother died of cancer when the girls were young and their English dad has partnered with Irene or “The Stepmonster” as Harper and her boyfriend Louis call her. Harper lives with her father, Irene, and grandmother Wai Po.

Hannah Bent is a Sydney writer who was born and raised in Hong Kong. She has a Masters in creative writing, and has studied film directing and screenwriting. Her writing—like Harper’s heart—just hums.

In this beautiful novel, sisterly love, responsibility, and grief are important themes. Chinese medicine and beliefs clash with western medicine too but it’s the ethical issues that create the biggest dilemmas in the narrative. Who has the right to determine the health choices for an adult with Down Syndrome? What rights do a person with an intellectual disability have?

Harper is a joy! She loves writing stories, has a directness in her communication that disarms and simply loves life.

What struck me in this book is the authenticity of Harper’s voice, the chapters under her name are spoken in her words. Her stories are written in her spelling and style. In every way, she rings true!

It was only after I finished this book and read Hannah Bent’s author notes that I saw an acknowledgement of Camilla. Further searching led me to an article about Camilla, the

author's sister who has Down Syndrome. It is evident that not every issue in this novel has arisen in Camilla's life but in following the darker pathways in the novel, Hannah Bent has delivered an important and highly readable book that will have you thinking long after you close it.

Please read this book. I am confident you'll love it as much as I do.

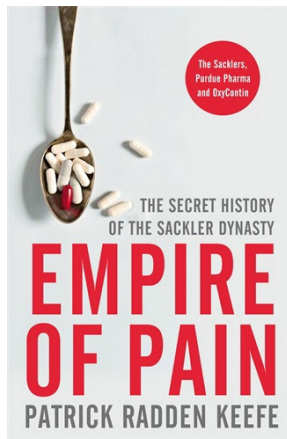
5/5



Cheers

Jenny

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August 2022

Empire of Pain: the Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty

by Patrick Radden Keefe

This big book is classified as a biography, being the story of the Sackler family and their company Purdue Pharma and their most infamous creation, OxyContin. But in A Note on Sources at the end of the book, author Keefe describes the book as 'a work of narrative nonfiction'. This seems an unusual distinction especially as no details are invented or imagined, quotes are all sourced

and thoughts and feelings are attributed based on directly described reports.

However the book is eventually classified, it's a riveting read. Most of us will have heard of the powerful opioid OxyContin. Indeed some of us will have been prescribed it. This book and its detailed analysis of the ruthless marketing behind this most addictive of drugs will be an eye-opener.

Arthur, Mortimer, and Raymond—the three sons of Isaac Sackler, an Austrian-born grocer and his wife Sophie—were destined to make their mark on the world. Through education and hard work, all three brothers acquired medical qualifications, real estate, and a business empire in pharmaceuticals. They recognised that developing and marketing drugs, especially those with a patent, were more lucrative than medical practice. The money-making potential of OxyContin and other drugs developed by Purdue Pharma led the Sacklers to 'train people (drug sales reps) to lie about the product' to the doctors whom they promoted the product. In doing so, the sales representatives gave incentives to prescribing GPs, while denying the drug's addictive potential. They blamed those who became addicted, overdosed, or died from it as being misusers of a safe product.

Not only were the Sacklers determined to build a financial empire, but they wanted to be

regarded as major benefactors to the great cultural and educational institutions in the USA and around the world—with names in the walks of museums, galleries, libraries, and halls of learning.

While they became one of the richest families in the world, the Sacklers direct links to one of the most addictive drugs ever developed was largely unknown. Most people in the USA and around the world still haven't heard of the Sacklers.

Keefe's book tells the story of three generations of this extraordinarily powerful family, its drive, its influence, its ruthlessness, and its impunity.

The book is more than 500 pages and includes more than 50 pages of detailed reference notes and 20 pages of index.

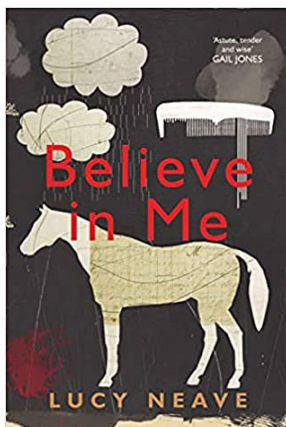
Despite the heaviness (in topic and in size), this book is extremely readable. I found it fascinating and I think you will too.

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)



July 2022

Believe in Me by Lucy Neave

I have no recollection of where I heard of this novel but I'm so glad I've read it.

The general theme of *Believe in Me* is the mother-daughter relationship between Sarah and her daughter, Bet.

Sarah aged 18 is sent by her own mother, Greta, in the 1970s from Ploughkeepsie New York, to accompany a 40-year-old married missionary to Idaho. When Sarah is raped and becomes pregnant, her mother sends her to relatives in Sydney who place her in a home for unmarried mothers.

Many years later daughter Bet tries to understand her mother's past, and the life they shared. But can any daughter fully understand her mother? Especially when that mother feels she's inadequate while feeling betrayed by her own mother.

Set both in the USA and in Australia, the novel captures the political and social conditions of the 1970s and 1980s in both countries. In Australia, Gough Whitlam's

government is on the brink of collapse, the environmental movement is engaging around the Franklin dam, and feminism is emerging.

Juxtaposed with the contemporary conditions are frequent references to religion and associated imagery that are significant aspects of Sarah's life and the relationships she forms with a variety of men. There is also powerful mothering imagery as veterinarian Bet, delivers a foal from a dying mare and attempts to put the foal with another mare that lost its foal.

Lucy Neve lives in Canberra where she teaches creative writing, but has also spent time living and teaching English in the USA—including New York. *Believe in Me* is her second novel, but she's most prolific in the novella and short story genres. Her experience writing in a shortened form strengthens this novel where the chapters are rich without excess.

The book is deeply moving as it explores intimate family relationships, dependency, and the challenges of a single mother through both Bet's first-person narrative, and Sarah's third-person story. None of the main characters is drawn with simplistic brush strokes and most—while flawed—elicit the reader's compassion.

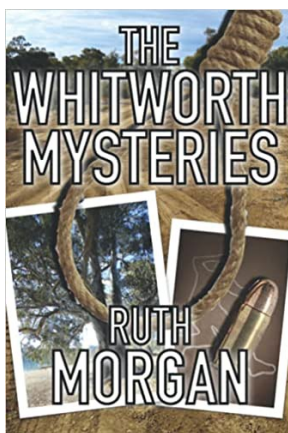
This is one of the best books I've read and I cannot recommend it more highly to you.

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)



May 2022

The Whitworth Mysteries by Ruth Morgan

In *Miss Tarrant's Revenge*, Ruth Morgan writes 'Claire Harris was a writer.' One could easily also say 'Ruth Morgan IS a writer.' *Miss Tarrant's Revenge* is one of 23 short stories in this anthology by Lismore author Ruth Morgan, a member of Rainbow Writers who enjoys writing short crime stories with a romantic link.

The stories in *The Whitworth Mysteries* are not always about a crime and there is only a little romance. There however is a strong thread of police corruption through many of the stories that link characters on both sides of the law. While each of the stories can stand alone, it is best to read them in order to create an overall picture of those stories in which

previous characters appear.

The stories in *The Whitworth Mysteries* vary in length from three to 30 pages and in every short story, there are no excess words. The writing is purposeful and evocative. Whitworth is an imagined town in south western NSW on the Murray River. The river itself is a major feature in many of the stories as are the huge river red gums, saltbush, dust and heat. I imagine that Ruth Morgan spent some time in the area around Echuca or Mildura. Her skill in evoking the senses reflects her strong commitment to grounding her characters in the landscape. The characters are well drawn and the main characters are as complex as are most humans. Many are police and some of those are corrupt so trust, betrayal, revenge and righting wrongs are all strong themes in many stories. There are also several quirky stories and a fair share of gunfire and murder. Twelve year old Chloe wields no gun but she will stay with you long after finishing *Ready, Set, Go*.

In *Miss Tarrant's Revenge*, Claire assesses the short story she has written for a competition. 'The voice is strong, the character arc convincing, the ending well developed- all things a short story ought to be.' The same could be said about *The Whitworth Mysteries* by Ruth Morgan. A terrific collection of stories by a very talented local writer!

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

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April 2022

The End of Men by Christina Sweeney-Baird

Despite the title, this novel is not a rant against the patriarchy although there are some subtle references to the struggles of the few remaining men and the need for a government departmental office for Men.

In the genre of speculative fiction (think *The Handmaids Tale*) everything in this book is possible. Christina Sweeney-Baird wrote *The End of Men* in 2018/2019 little knowing how relevant the book would be in 2021 when it was published. The novel is set in 2025 and covers six years from the outbreak in Scotland of a new virus that is killing men to the 'new normal' of life post virus. Beginning with a fever, the virus results in death within days or even hours, yet strangely women who can be hosts, are asymptomatic.

Reading this book in the second year of COVID19, the parallels are remarkable. Isolation, death of loved ones, food shortages, closing of borders, the race to develop a vaccine and more are there and writ extra large. There are sections in the book reflecting the stages of the pandemic- Before, Outbreak, Panic, Despair, Survival, Recovery, Strength, Adaptation and Remembrance, that sound very familiar to the stages we are experiencing with our COVID19 pandemic.

The characters in this book are predominantly women. The brief chapters headed with their names and locations relate their personal and professional lives as the days pass after Day Zero. They are doctors, journalists, child care workers, scientists, hostel owners and more. They live all over the world and each is affected by the virus. Their stories are powerful and usually very sad. I found the decision of some mothers to avoid touching their baby sons, and in one case moving a teenage son into isolation in a shed away from the house, heartaching.

Some men are immune and with their severely reduced numbers, populations not only decline but pregnancies too. The remaining men face their own challenges including pressure to produce and discrimination.

This is Christina Sweeney-Baird's first novel and I found it riveting. Read it for the parallels with COVID19 or simply as a great story. There is humanity, poignancy, sadness and surprisingly some humour too.

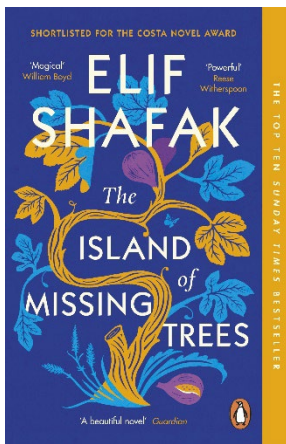
I do have an issue with the tag on the cover of my version that reads 'only men carry the virus' because clearly the novel says otherwise but that's a minor quibble with the publisher rather than with the novel itself.

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

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March 2022

The Island of Missing Trees by Elif Shafak

This is a beautiful book! The writing is heart lifting and the story is superb.

Set predominantly in 1970s Cyprus and in recent decades in London, this magnificent novel tells the story of teenagers Kostas and Defne. Theirs is a Romeo and Juliet story of love across a cultural, ethnic and religious divide. Kostas is Greek and Christian and Defne is Turkish and Muslim.

They meet secretly at a tavern where a huge fig tree grows—indoors.

Decades later, their daughter Ada is struggling in her senior years in a North London high school knowing little of her parents' past or about Cyprus until her aunt arrives unexpectedly. She brings with her the sayings, superstitions and the recipes of Cyprus and unsettle the household's status quo.

The novel switches between the present and the past as the story of Kostas and Defne is revealed along with the history of Cyprus and its occupation. There is history and language in these pages but embedded subtly into the narrative. Similarly Kostas' deep knowledge of the natural world including plants, butterflies and birds is threaded seamlessly throughout the story.

A key character with a voice and insights into these happenings are the Fig Tree in the tavern in Cyprus and the fig tree that grows in a North London yard. Slowly the Fig Tree reveals secrets it has observed or heard from the people insects, birds and animals that visit or colonise it.

Elif Shafak has written a truly evocative story. There will be passages in it that you will re-read for their eloquence and deep meaning.

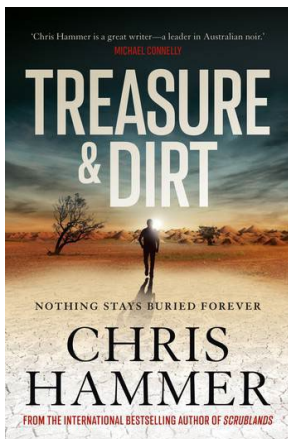
This is a book that both highly readable and one to savour.

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

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February 2022

Treasure and Dirt by Chris Hammer

Australian outback noir is now a well-established genre and Chris Hammer is a central figure in the crime writing landscape. *Treasure and Dirt* is his fourth novel and this time we have a new central character, Detective Sergeant Ivan Lucic, who has travelled to Finnegans Gap in the remote NSW opal fields to investigate a murder.

Finnegans Gap is a fictional small community not far from Lightning Ridge and is loosely based on that unusual town. Quirky characters abound just as they do in Lightning Ridge today. The 'mayor' of nearby Deadman's Well with his opal tooth wears a tutu as he sucks on a beer at any time of day. As in his other books, Hammer gives some of his characters equally quirky names such as Bullshit Bob, Trevor Topsoil, and Cyril Flange. This nod to a Dickensian style is one method of differentiating his characters but Hammer also has a way of making the large number of personalities in his books memorable.

There are several references in this new book to previous characters such as journalist Martin Scarsden, but this book is a new stand-alone story. Like Martin and many lead characters in modern crime novels, Ivan Lucic has his frailties as does his fellow investigator Detective Constable Nell Buchanan. It remains to be seen whether either Ivan or Nell appear in a future Hammer book. There are hints enough of hidden complexity in both to make that a possibility.

If you've been to Lightning Ridge, you'll quickly absorb the unrelenting heat, flies, and dust that hit you in the face at every page of *Treasure and Dirt*, but even if you haven't been there, this book will bring that unusual place to life for you.

There are plenty of twists in *Treasure and Dirt's* primary narrative plus there's the shadow of corrupt behaviour among the local and visiting police and a weird local cult led by The Seer. And of course, there are secrets, business deals, and money aplenty. This new novel is further confirmation of Hammer's position as the current king of crime writing in Australia.

It's a great read.

5/5



Cheers
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)