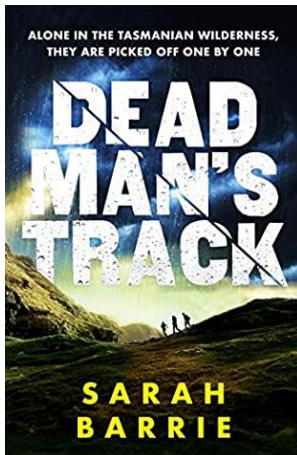


November 2020

*Dead Man's Track*

by Sarah Barrie



If you like thrillers and especially those set in Australia, then this book is one for you.

Author, Sarah Barrie, has worked as a teacher, vet nurse, horse trainer and editor. Experience in at least some of those careers resonate in this fast-paced suspense-filled novel set in rural Tasmania. Sarah lives on the central coast of NSW yet writes so convincingly of the rugged landscapes of Tasmania that you would be forgiven for thinking that was her home.

The main character of *Dead Man's Track* is Tess Atherton, a tour guide, rescue volunteer, and horse rider who is haunted by the death of a hiker who did not follow her advice. Added to her post traumatic stress is a controlling partner and a senior police sergeant, Jared Denham, whose life she had saved and to whom she is attracted.

This is a crime thriller primarily, not a romance. Throw in a pawnshop dealer, a young man struggling to care for his dementia-ridden grandfather, a manipulative ruthless mate, and a series of escalating crimes and you have the recipe for the final drama of the book.

The words on the cover state 'Alone in the Tasmanian wilderness, they are picked off one by one' but this section of the book is the climax that comes towards the end of the novel.

The characters are vividly drawn, the thoroughly believable story lines are interwoven and the setting is at the same time, attractive and scary. It's the whole package.

Indeed, the unforgiving rugged landscape with its unpredictable weather is as much a character as any in this novel. It especially comes into its own in those final sections as it dwarfs the young people trekking through it under Tess's guidance as they face the most horrific of circumstances and an unknown menace.

This is a pacy Australian thriller that you will find hard to put down.



Cheers

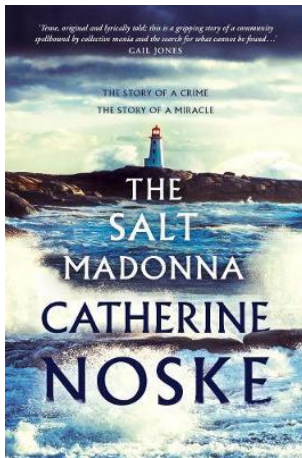
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)

October 2020

***The Salt Madonna***

by Catherine Noske



This is one for those of us who love a crime novel while relishing a beautiful literary style and a touch of the unexplained. As a bonus, this is an Australian novel where the sense of time and place will resonate with readers.

While completing her PhD on the theme of 'home' in literature, Catherine Noske started this, her first novel, ten years prior to its 2019 publication.

The novel is set on Chesil, a small imaginary island off the Western Australian coast. The title comes from the large wooden Madonna erected by an early settler at the entrance to the harbour. Hannah Mulvey is a sixth-generation descendant of the settler and grew up on the island. She returns to care for her mother and to take up a teaching position at the small three-teacher Kindergarten to Year 9 school. Hannah's class of year 7-9 students has amongst its four year 9 students, one girl, 14-year-old Mary.

The people of this small island are linked by history, religion, gossip, secrets and efforts to make a living. The only well-to-do landowner is now growing grapes while there are feeble attempts to attract tourists from across the bay. The sense of 'home' and returning to a small remote place of childhood where everyone knows your story, is a fundamental part to the novel.

All the characters are beautifully drawn—from the widowed priest struggling with his loss, Hannah's dying mother Ellen, the pubescent Mary, and the enigmatic men that surround them.

The novel has been described as Australian Gothic and has a touch of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* or *The Dressmaker* about it.

*The Salt Madonna* is a beautifully structured story with chapters divided by months and their significant Christian days. Hannah is not only the major character but also a diarist who, through her first person brief interjections, reflects 16 years after the events. In those reflections, Hannah struggles with her own ability and hesitancy to tell the story and how her actions could have changed its outcome.

This is one of the best books I've read this year and recommend it highly. Like many, I look forward to Catherine Noske's second novel.

**Highly recommended.**



Cheers

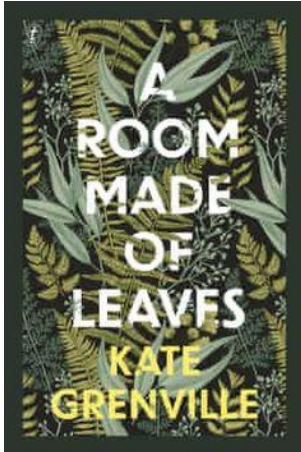
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)

**September 2020**

***A Room Made of Leaves***

**by Kate Grenville**



Late in this wonderful novel, Kate Grenville writes 'This story...may appear to speak with authority, but might it be nothing more than the mischievous invention of a sly old woman?'

Who is the 'sly old woman'? At first reading, the words are about Elizabeth Macarthur, the wife of the famous John Macarthur, reported founder of the Australian wool industry. But the words might also be intended as a description of the author herself.

Typical of the era, little was written about the wives of the men who have become household names in Australia. Kate Grenville has set about to change that, albeit in a work of fiction. She has taken the scant letter writings of Elizabeth Macarthur as her 'inspiration and guide' and cleverly woven a story that not only provides a rich picture of a woman of wit, cunning and passion but of the less-than-attractive John Macarthur, a man driven by pride, ego and greed with little business acumen or sensitivity.

The letters from which this book developed are reproduced in the book's Endpapers. Elizabeth Macarthur's spiky cross-written letters are difficult to decipher and are held in the Mitchell library but according to Grenville, give little away about Elizabeth's life or feelings.

In this time of COVID-19, the book was launched via Facebook on 8 July when Kate Grenville spoke about the research she undertook to write the book. Throughout the novel, the prominent historical people of Sydney and Parramatta are more than just a passing parade of characters; they have significant roles within the story.

The book is written as if it's a secret memoir. But there's no pretending that this is real.

'Do not believe too quickly!' might be the words of Elizabeth Macarthur but they are also Kate Grenville's words.

In the introduction, the author describes herself as the 'transcriber and editor' who purports to have found a box of Elizabeth Macarthur's diaries 'The pungent true words I was never able to write'.

Text publishing, in promoting the book writes, 'Marriage to a ruthless bully, a secret romance, the search for power in a society that gave women none: this Elizabeth Macarthur is sly, smart, cunning and sexy.'

In her Author's Note at the end of the book, Kate Grenville writes 'this book isn't history. At the same time it's not pure invention.'

I couldn't put this down. Its voice is true and even if the story is not, I could imagine it as being so.

Highly recommended.



Cheers

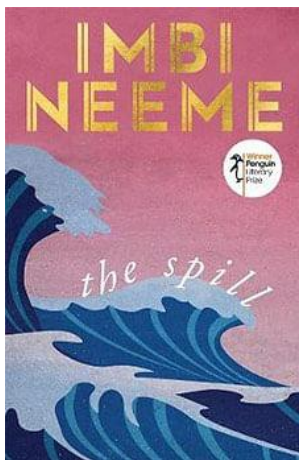
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)

**August 2020**

***The Spill***

**by Imbi Neeme**



Did you have a spill? You don't hear that expression often anymore but when I was young, my grandmother used it to describe a fall. A spill has so many meanings - spill liquid, spill positions, spill dam, spill the beans.

This debut novel by Imbi Neeme connects all those meanings in a beautiful cascade that spills onto the page. Nicole and Samantha are Tina's very different daughters, described by Imbi Neeme in last month's [Regional Library Readers Book Club](#) via Facebook, as being elements of her own personality—Samantha like ice that slowly melts and Nicole like steam that condenses to water.

The book opens with the chapter *After the Spill*. It's 1982 and Tina and her daughters have had a car crash. They are in rural Western Australia and Tina has been drinking. Husband and father Craig arrives from Perth to collect them. Half way through the novel there is the brief chapter of *The Spill*, describing the accident in more detail and the novel concludes with the final chapter also from 1982, *Before the Spill*.

The bulk of the novel is divided into chapters written in the first-person voices of Nicole and Samantha, interspersed with numbered '#Pieces' dating from 1974 to 2018, that are like jigsaw pieces that fill out the story of this fractured family piece by piece.

Like many stories and events that families share, the memories and perceptions of events vary from person to person. We bring our own experiences and explanations to those experiences and over

time, the truth becomes more filtered. Nicole and Samantha each bears the scars of that car accident and the family dynamics around it that continue to have effects in their own lives and relationships. It's only as adults that they begin to share their stories and sort out their conflicting memories and emotions.

Imbi Neeme came to fiction after many years as a blogger of *Not Drowning, Mothering*. It shows. Her descriptions of the complex relationships of mothers and daughters will resonate with all women. *The Spill* is a story of love and hate, trust and mistrust, things said and unsaid—it's a deeply affecting description of a family finding its way to the truth. And the members finally can claim 'we got there in the end'.

You will care about these characters.

Highly recommended



Cheers

Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)

**July 2020**

***Untethered***

**by Hayley Katzen**

What tethers us and our heart strings to place? Where do we feel we belong and how do we know when we are 'home'? These are the themes of Hayley Katzen's memoir *Untethered*.

Hayley has lived among us in the Northern Rivers since the mid 1990s and clearly 'belongs' here but it took a couple of decades for her to feel that this was her place.

Hayley came to Australia from a privileged Jewish life in South Africa. While her father had an interest in farming, it did little to prepare Hayley for what was to become her life—on a self-sufficient rural property surrounded by Ewingar State Forest south of the Bruxner Highway west of Tabulam. The tug of the connection back home to South Africa is also apparent through trips to celebrate weddings and funerals.

This beautifully written memoir grew from a collection of essays. Hayley had been a law lecturer at Southern Cross University with a home in the Byron hinterland when she met and fell in love with Jen. Jen's life apart from occasional trips to cattle sales, to sell her eggs or hay or to the big smoke of Lismore for Tropical Fruits parties, is all about cutting timbers to build her home, fencing, castrating calves and fighting bush fires.

Hayley's move into Jen's world constantly reminds her that she doesn't really fit. From pulling up whole silver beet plants to being unable to split firewood or dig a post hole, Hayley is challenged by not feeling useful and not wanting to be the 'wife' who cooks and tends the house. Then there are challenges of getting to know and fit in to the community around her—complete with people whose speech she finds impossible to understand.

I found this book totally absorbing. It flows beautifully with subtle changes of mood, insightful descriptions and a hugely generous revealing of the author's fears and insecurities.

As a teacher, I found the description of Hayley's encounters with a worldly 12 year old girl at the local school who asks 'Are you a lesbian?' to be perfectly written. There is much to delight in recognising places, events and names of locals too. The descriptions of the early stages of the anti CSG movement will bring back lots of good memories for many readers.

This is a memoir about love, belonging and what makes us feel we are home. It is not all sweetness and light but is certainly rich and dense—and one to savour.

Highly recommended.



Cheers

Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)

**June 2020**

***In the Clearing***

**by J.P Pomare**



Wow! Just Wow!

If you like an intriguing thriller then you'd have trouble finding a better one than *In the Clearing* by J.P. Pomare.

Set in Australia, this is a contemporary novel inspired by the well known real life story of The Family, a sect operating in 1960's in The Dandenongs in Victoria led by Anne Hamilton-Byrne.

While this is a different story, the power a sect leader has over its members forms the basis of this novel. *The Clearing* is the name of the property that is home to Adrienne, her acolytes and the dozen blond haired children she has gathered around her and who call her Mother. These children's names all start with A and it's the young Amy whose diary entries alternate as chapters in this book. Through Amy we get an understanding of the fearful distrust of the 'outside' world that is engendered in a controlling sect.

The other narrative throughout is from Freya, a private, protective and fierce single mother of an absent teenage son and seven year old Billy.

This book is no simple linear mystery. It has more twists and turns than your average thriller. The two characters' stories twine around each other seemingly without touching in a double helix-like complexity. Having read *Call Me Evie*, Pomare's previous and first thriller, set in Australia and New Zealand, I knew to expect many twists but in this his second novel, intrigue is taken to a whole new level.

If you enjoy contemporary crime fiction with an emphasis on family relationships, you will love In *The Clearing* and go searching for *Call Me Evie* too.

Highly recommended.



Cheers

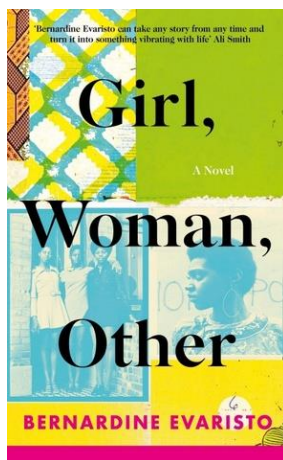
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)

**May 2020**

***Girl, Woman, Other***

**by Bernardine Evaristo**



When the long list for the [2019 Booker Prize](#) was published, I immediately reserved those I had not read from our wonderful library. This book was the final one to arrive and from the start I was enthralled.

The first thing to notice by reading the blurb and seeing the index is that the book chronicles the lives of 12 British women. Most of them are black and they range in age from a ten-year-old to elderly women. Some are related by birth, others by circumstance but each has her (or their) own story and they overlap.

The second thing you notice when you start reading is that there are none of the usual sentence markers- no capital letters except for proper nouns such as character names, no full stops, no quotation marks and occasionally the dialogue is printed almost like poetry with unusual line design.

But it's the stories that will enthrall you. The 12 women live in different decades and share their stories of racism, feminism, politics, non-conformance, diversity, class, sexual identity and more. I was particularly drawn to the stories of school girls Yazz and LaTisha and their teacher Mrs King. We get to know these three and all the other women through each other's eyes and then the real story of their lives, hopes and fears is revealed.

It's a fascinating, thought provoking and beautifully crafted novel that provides an unusual view of British social history. The final chapter brings some of the women and their stories together at a party. The epilogue brings three others together in a different way as the years are 'swiftly regressing until the lifetimes between them no longer exist'

When I heard (with 80 pages left to read) that the novel shares the 2019 Booker Prize with Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, I was thrilled. It's a very worthy winner.

Highly recommended.



Cheers

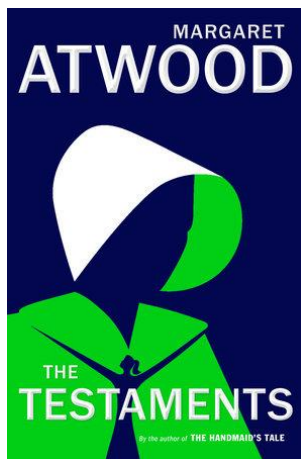
Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)

**February 2020**

***The Testaments***

**by Margaret Atwood**



Unputdownable!

This highly anticipated book will grab you from the first page.

Thirty four years after *The Handmaid's Tale* was published, Canadian author Margaret Atwood has written *The Testaments* that takes us back to Gilead and its dystopian world.

The book interweaves the stories of three main characters over a period of approximately 10 years. Their stories are told in chapters of first person voices that alternate throughout the book. When we meet Agnes, she is a young girl who has lived her life in Gilead and, when she is thirteen, she is to be married to a Commander. The second major character is Aunt Lydia, that powerful and complex personality from the original book. We hear much more of Aunt Lydia's pre-Gilead life and the



horrors of her recruitment. Daisy, the third story teller, is a teenager living in Canada who finds out she is not who she thinks she is and is recruited by the Pearl Girls to go to Gilead.

Like most people, I had read *The Handmaid's Tale* when it was first published and then binged on the magnificently produced TV series, the later seasons of which moved on from the original book. Atwood had been closely involved in the production of the series and in the acknowledgements at the end of this new novel, she pays tribute to the writers and actors from the series for respecting one of the axioms- that no event is allowed into the series or the novels that does not have a precedent in human history. Atwood refers to *The Handmaid's Tale* as 'speculative fiction' making both books more chilling.

*The Testaments* takes up the story of Gilead, 15 years after the end of the TV series where June (Offred) flees Gilead with Baby Nicole. June herself appears briefly but without name at the end of the book.

The story is compelling and complete. The last chapter takes us to a symposium on Gilead in the year 2197. The transcript of the symposium neatly ties the ends together and concludes satisfyingly.

It is not necessary to have read *The Handmaid's Tale* to appreciate *The Testaments* but viewing of the TV series (available free on SBS on Demand) before embarking on this new book will certainly enhance the reading experience.



Cheers

Jenny

[Reserve it here!](#)