Two Chairs In Print

Issue 1

The Books! The Books!

Introduction

"What is this thing?" you may well be asking.

Well, put simply, it's a fanzine comprising transcripts of our regular podcast *Two Chairs Talking.* Some folk can't, or don't wish to, listen to the audio version, so we intend to publish issues of this fanzine containing the transcripts within a few weeks of the release of each episode of the podcast. And yes, we're starting way behind, which is why we're issuing three issues almost at once, in order to catch up. But in future you can expect to see an issue roughly once a month.

We do welcome comment, both to the audio version of the podcast and to this fanzine. You can email us at **twochairstalk@gmail.com** and we'll both get to see what you have to say.

— David Grigg

—Perry Middlemiss

Colophon

Two Chairs in Print is published by David Grigg and Perry Middlemiss.

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the members of the
Wurundjeri Willum Clan and the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park and Hawthorn, Victoria, and we pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

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The Books! The Books!

Season 2 Episode 1: January 22, 2025

Introduction

David:

Hello and welcome to the first episode of the *second season* of our podcast, *Two Chairs Talking*.

My name is David Grigg and I'm joined, as in years of yore, by my good friend and colleague, Perry Middlemiss.

Hi, Perry. How's the new year treating you?

Perry:

Not too bad, thank you very much. Second season; oh my God. Hopefully the second season goes as well as the first, because I think, what was it, 103 episodes in the first season?

David:

102, I think we made it to. A couple of special episodes.

Perry:

102, all right. So a number of them were specials and that was all right, but interesting that we got through that many up until about a year ago.

So, what does the second season mean for you? What are we implying here, David?

David:

What are we implying? I think we're implying a second take at it. We're going to do things a bit differently this time around, I think that's the idea. Just to have a bit of a different spin and try to make it, you know, try to major on the things which were good in the last season and improve on them.

Perry:

Well, well, learning from experience?

David:

Yeah.

Two Chairs in Print Issue #1

Perry:

What a shock. What a shock.

I think it's actually a very good idea that we pick up things that worked well in that first major run and utilise those and see what we can do to improve again, if that's at all possible.

So, well, let's just kick off rather than chatter on for ages and ages and ages.

Best Books Read in 2024

Perry:

This particular episode, we're going to be talking, as we usually do, and have done in the past, talking about our best books of the previous year. That is of our reading year for 2024. Some of the books that we cover will have been published in 2024, but we're not here to give you the best books that were published in that year, it's what *we* have read in that particular year.

So how, how overall was your reading year, David?

David:

Well, I didn't read as many books as I had intended to. I had set a Goodreads target of 75 books and I only got to 64. But as you know, there were reasons behind that. But actually, in general, my reading rate has slowed down, I think. I actually have yet to finish any book this year [2025]. So that's made me some way behind the target this year.

Anyway, in terms of reading, though, there were some good books, some very good books, I will talk about those as we go through. The quality of the books was good, but I just didn't get to as many as I had hoped.

Perry:

Talking about Goodreads as we do most often because as long term listeners to this podcast will know, we both use Goodreads to keep track of our reading, and you can find us there fairly easily.

I fell away quite a lot last year and I'm not terribly sure why, although I think I have some ideas. I think part of it was that we weren't doing the podcast, David.

David:

That's true.

Perry:

I actually think that there was a certain point where having that deadline and you have to basically get through things and you have to allocate time. So I've got to put time aside because David's told me I have to read this book for this particular episode, and I better get on with it. And not having that, you know, whipcracker behind me, I fell away a bit. I was having a look at the numbers and in 2022 I read 83 books and in 2023 I read 90. But last year I dropped away to 66. I had set myself a target of 100 and got nowhere near it.

But I still think I should aim for 100. I still think that's, you know, aspirational. I do know that chances are at the moment I'm never going to get to it because I'm also concentrating a lot more on catching up with my film watching, which is one of the other major reasons why I think my book reading fell away; that I've been watching a lot more films, not so much more television, but a lot more films, but we'll talk about that in a future episode.

David:

Yeah, yeah. That was the case for me too. Because I've been watching a good deal more television than I ever have before. So, that's certainly cutting to my reading time.

Perry:

Well, I think we both realise that we allocate certain amount of hours per week, not specifically, but the way your life works during the week, you have a certain amount of time available for that entertainment side of things, either film, television or books. And late at night after dinner, if you decide you want to sit down and watch a movie, and if you end up wanting to watch something like *The Irishman* by Scorsese, which I'm halfway through, that's three and a half hours. You can forget anything else that night, you're not really going to be reading any books at all. And so I find that once I get into watching television or watching a movie, I find it difficult to say, OK, well, I've stopped that now, I'll go back over and read a book. So I've either got to read or I've got to be watching and splitting the two sometimes can be a little bit difficult. So time spent on one takes away from the other. But that's OK. We've just got to balance things all the way right through.

Anyway, well, shall we get into it? Why don't you start us off with what was your best SF of last year? Tell us how many how many how many books you read?

Science Fiction / Fantasy

David:

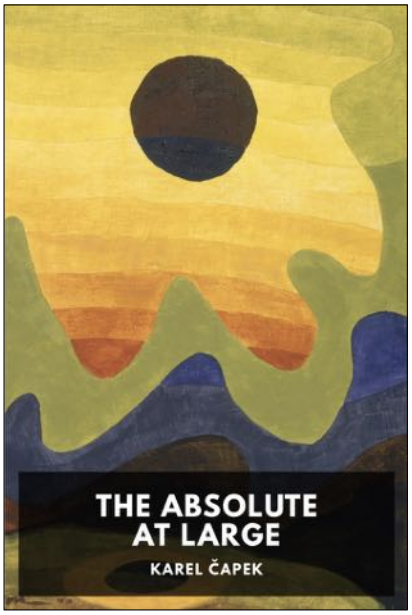
Well, I read very little SF and fantasy last year, to such a limited extent that I had to start scratching to get five books to talk about as my best five. And two of those were things I produced for the Standard Ebooks organization. So are we going to count up, do you think, to our best?

Perry:

You can go up to number one and you don't have to do five in each category, I don't think. Well, there's some that I can't, because, basically, I didn't read five of the category.

David:

OK, well, in that case, I'll start with my number five. So my number five was *The Absolute at Large* by Karel Ĉapek, Czech writer. He's the guy who wrote the play *R.U.R*, which introduced the word "robot" into the English language. This is a book I did for Standard Ebooks. It's a satirical novel and it really pokes a finger at society, capitalism and religion. He wrote it in 1927 and it's set a few years ahead of that in the book. The basic premise is, there's the invention of an atomic engine which converts matter into energy, producing an unusual side effect or an unusual waste product. And the waste product is divinity or God. This excessive divinity in the world causes all sorts of very unfortunate side effects on society and it leads eventually to total chaos and all sorts of problems. It's very amusing and a clever, clever thing. So that's my number five.

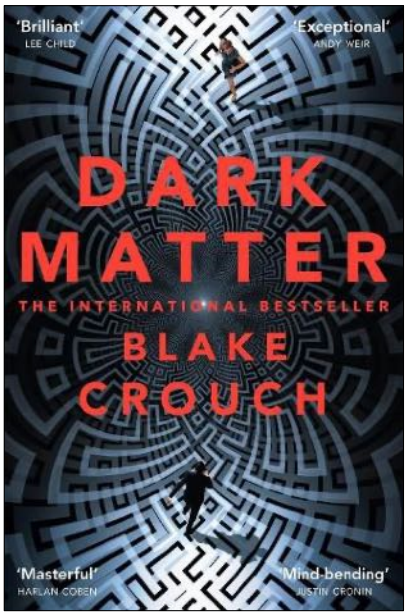


My number four was another book I produced for Standard Ebooks. This was a whopper, this was a huge book, let me check how many words... 340,000 words.

What it is is the Short Fiction of H. Beam Piper. You remember H. Beam Piper, wrote some very famous books like *Little Fuzzy*, which I also produced for Standard Ebooks some years ago. Anyway, this was a collection of all of his short fiction. Most of his, in fact, all of his fiction, I think, fell into the public domain because in America at the time you had to renew your copyrights, otherwise they fell into the public domain. But he committed suicide and didn't renew his copyrights. And so basically everything he wrote is now in the public domain.

So I put together this collection of all of his short stories, adding up to 340,000 words, I think it's 27 stories, most of which are novellas or short novels. And you know his kind of writing, a a bit of tongue-in-cheek humour and he had this concept of Paratime where you have multiple parallel timelines and people could move between these parallel timelines and in fact trade between them. That was a lot of fun to put together.

All right, so moving beyond the things I did for Standard Ebooks.



Number three is a book called *Dark Matter* by Blake Crouch, which is a fast-paced thriller with a clever science-fictional concept. It has been turned into a TV series by Apple TV which was a pretty good translation of the book, I thought.

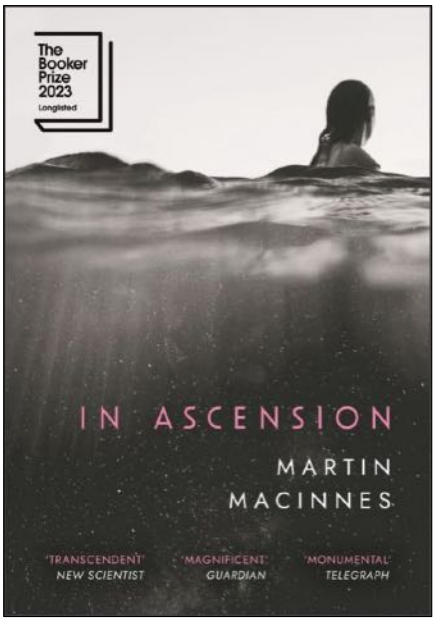
It basically takes the idea of quantum entanglement and multiple timelines. This guy Jason who's a physics teacher in Chicago gets abducted one night, violently abducted, and he's injected with some strange substance, falls asleep and then wakes up in this place he doesn't know. It seems to be a large research facility. He's surrounded by all those people who seem to know him and they're overjoyed by his return and they demand to know details of what he experienced. But he's got no idea what they're talking about. So he claims his memory is blank, but they keep pushing at him and they get more and more angry with him because he doesn't let them know what happened. But eventually, without giving away too many spoilers here, he escapes and the novel focuses on his desperate journey to return to his family in Chicago. So it's really about the choices you make in life. It's about how your life depends on little changes that you make in it and whether you make a bad choice further back in time, which then has an impact on your future life. It's an interesting story and I'd say the TV series was pretty good too.

Number two on my list, a book by an Australian author, Sarah Foster, called *The Hush, a*nd it's an excellent bit of near future SF. It's set in England a few years from now where a right wing government has started to surveil people much more intensively. It mandates that everyone has to wear a digital watch which reports tracking information and listens constantly to what people are saying. Removing these watches for a few more minutes is a crime. That's one aspect of the story, but the main story follows these two people, Emma, and her daughter, Lainey. Emma, as a midwife, is facing a great difficulty at work because a mysterious syndrome has caused babies to die at birth. Many babies die at birth despite all medical intervention, and there's no particular reason or indication that this is going to happen. These deaths shock everybody and the government therefore intensifies surveillance, particularly with a focus on reproductive rights. So it bans abortions and it requires that even pregnancy tests, if you buy one,

you have to have that reported by the chemist. Also on top of that, pregnant teenage girls have gone missing as well as their parents.

So in that context, Emma's daughter, Lainey, who thinks she's pregnant, steals a pregnancy test with the help of a friend. Then we have all these complications and she ends up having to flee the country and her mother is desperate to try and find her. It's good. I liked it. I like the way that the author shows this gradual shift into this authoritarian surveillance society where people accept increased observation, and harsh laws are justified in order to, "protect life". It seems all too plausible, particularly looking at the way things are happening in the United States with the desire to control women's lives and their bodies.

So yeah, I definitely recommend that one. As I say an Australian author.



And number one on my list was a book called *In Ascension* by Martin MacInnes. It's basically set in the near future again. Climate change is causing chaos. Heat becomes unbearable in many regions of the world. Coastal cities are being flooded and yet, they still have coal-fired power plants which are emitting pollution and causing more and more problems with the climate. We focus on a particular character who's born in the Netherlands and she has had a tough childhood being subject to violence from her father. She becomes a scientist who's interested in algae, waterborne life, and particularly she develops a method of using algae to create food supplies. But strange things happen. She gets on board this expedition ship which goes out to mid-Atlantic and something weird has happened in the middle of the Atlantic. Undersea cables have been snapped. A huge pit seems to have opened up beneath them which is now as deep or deeper than the Mariana Trench. Anyway, they manage to send down a probe which pulls up samples from the depths which have algae-like materials. Anyway, she ends up in a space expedition because there's been some contact with an alien species. She gets on this expedition because of her expertise of using algae as a food source which they're going to use on this expedition which is going to take months and months and months. It's very hard to summarize it all well. But really the thing you need to know is that the quality of the writing is just superb. Every moment you're being asked to stop and think about what he's been saying and digest it. There are also some mysteries in the book, many of which are never fully resolved. But it doesn't actually matter because the questions which arise are by themselves interesting and stimulating. So that's my science fiction book. It was long-listed for the 2023 Booker Prize but it didn't make the shortlist. But I thought it was very good and I'd actually like to go back and read it again but who has time to do that?

Perry:

Well, you might have to later on if we decide to concentrate on it. It might be one that we could have a look at later on in the year. We'll see how that goes.

David:

I have an honourable mention here. The honourable mention is also a thing I did for Standard Ebooks which is *The Food of the Gods* by H.G. Wells. Again, a satirical look at society where humans and animals grow vast. There's something

which makes them grow super big and it's a satire. It's quite fun.

So that's my list of SF for the year.

Perry:

Well, it's interesting that you have read some recent material because I'm only going to talk about four books and none of them are recent at all as you will find out. I didn't actually catch up with any recent SF last year.

Oh no, I did read one which we will come to right at the very end and we'll talk about that and explain why we've added that on at the end.

So I'm going to deal with four and you know how I like to rate things, David, out of five?

David:

Yes, yes.

Perry:

It helps me to put things into context and I sometimes wonder at the end of the year when I look back over it and I go, "Why the heck did I give it that rating?" But I suppose there was something about it at the time and I don't like to go back and change them. I might adjust them, as I'm writing the review, up 0.1 or down 0.1. But I don't like to adjust them terribly much because to me the reading experience is what you've got directly after you've finished reading the book while you start thinking about it and while you're writing a review. Things should start coming together and you should have a pretty good idea of what the number rating is going to be.

So these are the ones that I've put in.

Now I'm saying this because there may be a bit of a shock here in what my favourite SF novel of the year was, but we'll get to that.

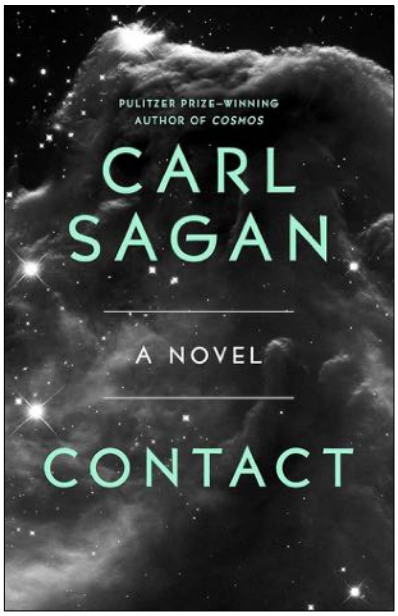
So, equal third, because those I said I've only got four, Two equal thirds at 3.6 out of five, were *Contact* by Carl Sagan and *The Year of the Quiet Sun* by Wilson Tucker.

David:

Yes, yes.

Perry:

Okay, so *Contact*, Carl Sagan.



Most of us have seen the film, I think. If we haven't we should have. So this is Sagan's only novel, I believe, and only SF novel. I think that he started to try and write it as a screenplay, but couldn't get it together and decided then to release it as a novel, which was then picked up later on and made into the film with Jodie Foster and Matthew McConaughey.

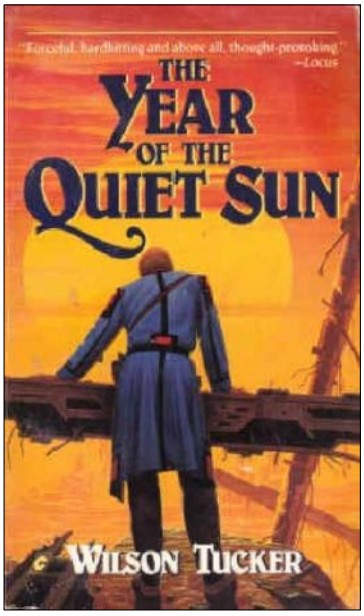
Now this is Sagan's exploration of how first contact with aliens impacts his main character and also impacts the world, because what ends up happening is that the signal that humans receive from the aliens seems to be a blueprint for a machine, though the very first thing that they receive has a video embedded in it, and the video is of, I think, the opening ceremony to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where Adolf Hitler was the main protagonist in that particular video. And that's a bit of a

shock, but when you look back on it, it seems to be quite reasonable, because that was the first major television broadcast with any sort of power. And so the aliens have picked this up first and it was basically sent back to say, “See, we’ve got your first video broadcast, and here it is."

Anyway, the humans basically work on building the big machine that is there in the blueprint.

And of course, things go wrong. There’s people trying to blow it up and do all the rest of it. But in the end, they complete it and Jodie Foster takes the journey. Interestingly, the film has only the Jodie Foster character taking the journey. The book has four or five people taking it, which makes a very big difference in the influence and the outcome of the story, the way I saw it. I still find the whole thing hard to understand and hard to follow, why the aliens would basically say, “Well, we’re only going to give you one shot at this, and then you have to go back and try and convince everybody.” And there’s no proof. I don’t know.

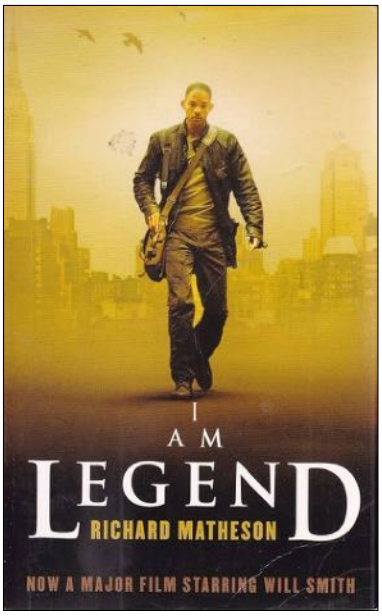
I was let down by the book, by the ending for this particular book. Otherwise, look, it’s a classic. It’s considered, of course, to be a major classic within science fiction, by those people outside the genre who look on it and see how big an impact the film had and the impact that Carl Sagan had. And so therefore, it’s worthwhile going back to it, and I’d never read this before, and I decided that it was probably time for me to catch up with it. I’m glad I did. I don’t think I’ll ever reread it again, because I just think that there’s a number of problems with it, but it’s certainly worthwhile reading.



Now, Wilson Tucker, *The Year of the Quiet Sun.* Wilson Tucker was more well known as a science fiction fan, rather than a science fiction writer, but he did write a small number of novels, and the bulk of them are generally pretty good, basically above average. Now, *The Year of the Quiet Sun* is a time travel novel which starts in June 1978 and follows the commissioning and use of a time displacement vehicle, time machine, by the US Bureau of Standards. So the Bureau has been set up by the US President and by calling it the US Bureau of Standards, it gives it such an innocuous name that nobody really knows what the hell’s going on. The President basically approves and gives all the money for the use of the time machine, and typically puts a bit of his political spin on it by basically wanting the first mission to go forward a few years to see if he gets re-elected in 1980. Now, you can look at it and go, “Oh no, this wouldn’t happen,” and now you look at it from what it is at the moment, and you know full well that’s exactly what politicians would do. So they do that, they go forward, they go forward to 1999, and then they go beyond the year 2000, where the political situation has become very dire indeed. It’s an interesting book, certainly a nice little twist on, or an exploration of some of the things and options around time travel. If you’re going to read across the time travel sub-genre, you pretty much have to have this one in your list, otherwise you’re really going to be missing out. So, an interesting book, but not super spectacular in my view, but I really enjoyed it.

Number two, *Camp Concentration* by Thomas M. Disch, which I gave 3.7 out of 5. My problem with this one, although it’s considered to be one of the great 1960s SF novels, I found it rather laboured with a lot of padding around a short story.

But luckily the novel is also rather short, and it deals with an experimental program where a certain number of prisoners are infected with, I think the syphilis virus, which has been adapted and is used as a carrier to try to get people to have high levels of intelligence. The difficulty is that the intelligence works for a while and then starts falling away, and the people that have been infected ended up dying fairly quickly. The main character in this particular book is another prisoner who seems to be a prisoner of conscience, but is also a poet and has been put into the program in the prison so that he can observe and write about it and come up with a survey about basically what's going on. This is very much influenced by the 1960s Vietnam War in America, so you could almost take this as being a Vietnam war novel that doesn't actually deal specifically with the war itself. It's one of those books that has, as I said, has got a very high reputation, and I just felt just a little bit let down by it. Maybe if I'd read it at the time, I may well have been blown away. Now maybe I'm just getting old and cynical David, and I'm not really as enamoured of this stuff as I might well have been way back when.



And my best book of the year, and this is one this is where it's going to shock you, is *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson. Another one, another old one, which I gave 3.8 out of 5 for. Now, so obviously, I've given no books, no SF books for the whole of the year, a rating of 4 or more. So it was a rather quiet and slow year for me.

Anyway, so this book where most people will know what the story is, it's been filmed at least three times, or the basic plot's probably been utilised quite a few times. Our main character Richard Neville is living in Los Angeles in 1976, and he's the last man left alive and uninfected after a deadly plague has ravaged the whole of Earth. And all the other "humans" that are alive are there as sort of vampires that are trying to get to him to infect him. Because they are of the view that the previous world was a complete and utter mess. The plague was sent by whoever, maybe God, to clear out the whole of the rest of the world and restart everything all over again. Now, it's a short novel, which can be a good thing. All of these were reasonably short, which is great, because they basically get on with things and don't faff about over the place and go off on tangents that you think, well, this is going away off the plot. This one sticks to it, deals with the problems of loneliness, madness, depression, undue short-lived elation, a longing for human contact and sexual release, and they're all handled pretty well. And it's the ending is really well done, I thought. Now you can see this is a mixture of horror and SF, and writers like Stephen King have called Matheson an inspiration. And it's certainly worth reading this book if you've watched the film adaptations. You need to go back to the original source sometimes to have a look at it, to see what was there originally, so that you can see how the filmmakers have adapted things and changed it for their own ends. The most recent version of this was filmed with Will Smith, and there's a lot of things that are taken from it, but not exactly the same. Anyway, it's certainly worthwhile going back and having a look at this one.

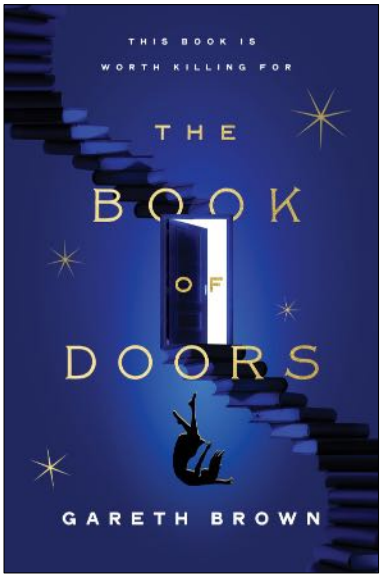
Now, I know, David, that you hadn't read any fantasy for the year…

David:

Nothing at all.

Perry:

Nothing at all. So I'll carry on. I only read two fantasy novels for the year. So both of those are on my list. And by fantasy, I'm also including horror in this one, as you'll find out.



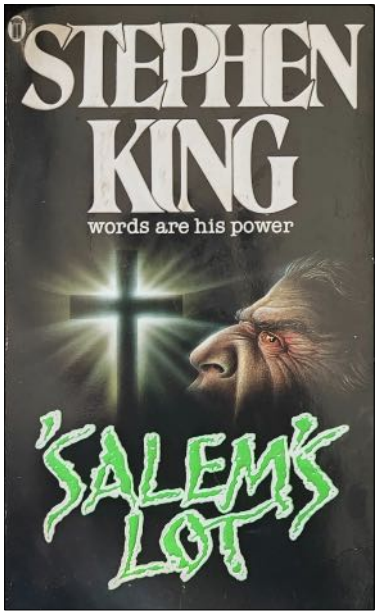
Now, the first one of these is *The Book of Doors* by Gareth Brown. 3.8 out of 5, I gave this. I'm a bit of a sucker all the time for novels that have "The Book of Something" in the title. I don't know why. I just think, you know, maybe this will be interesting. So I picked it up. Now, this is a contemporary fantasy novel, which is also a debut by this particular author, and it's quite intriguing. It deals with the actual Book of Doors. It is a physical book within this particular novel that has certain powers that will allow you to utilize it if you're carrying it to open any door that you know of and step through it. So, for example, the main character here is a young woman who is given the book by a gentleman who has it, who dies and leaves it to her. And when she thinks at one point about a holiday that she'd taken in Europe and a particular place that she was staying somewhere in Tuscany, she walks through the closet door and suddenly there she is out in the street, outside her *pensione* in Tuscany, which she is able to walk around and then walks back through the door again and gets back into her apartment. She [stops thinking] about Tuscany, opens the door and there's the closet. So she realizes that she's able to manipulate doors.

There's, of course, people that want these things, because it means that once you've been in a place you can get anywhere you want to go. And so that if you've been inside a secure environment, you can get back into that again by just thinking about the door that you went through and the area on the other side and just walking straight through it. But it also means that if you do things properly, you can utilize it to travel in time because you travel back to where you were when you went through that particular door. And the interesting thing about this particular novel is the Book of Doors is not the only book. There are a whole heap of other books and there are a whole bunch of people who know about these who, underhandedly, are trying to obtain these particular books. There's a certain group of people who are trying to accumulate the books for their own nefarious ends, and another group, which our main character joins, who are trying to bring all the books together to keep them separate so that nobody can actually use them and, in fact, try to work out whether they should be destroyed because some of them have, like, one of them is the Book of Matter, which allows you to change whatever you touch into whatever you like so that you can change a solid object, including a human, into liquid or a gas. So you can use it to kill people, but you can also change, you know, whatever you've got there into anything else. So some of them are vastly powerful and, in the wrong hands, could cause a lot of problems. It was an interesting [novel]. It fills in a lot of background about the books themselves. It all comes together at the end. I thought this was a pretty good debut. It came out last year and I think that, you know, I think he handed it well all the way through.

I always have a bit of a problem about blurbs on books that say things are a page turner, but I actually found this one was. He's got a very good use of cliffhangers at the end of chapters and then jumps to a different point of view or a different area. And so you have to, well, I wonder what happened back to that one and

then picks up that and then gives you another cliffhanger.

So technically he writes well. It's a an action thriller within a fantasy world. But it's basically the fantasy world is the world that you and I know as we as we sit here at the moment. It's just got something in and around on the top of it. So interesting stuff and I enjoyed it.



My best fantasy and horror novel of the year was *Salem's Lot* by Stephen King.

I haven't read this for quite some time, it's King's second novel or second published novel, let us say, after *Carrie*, which a lot of people might know or have seen the film of. There's been a couple of versions of that particular book. There's also been a couple of film or TV versions of *Salem's Lot*. I believe there's just a new TV version out recently, which one of the Facebook groups I'm on weren't overly impressed with it, but I must go and have a bit of a look at it.

This has got all of the elements that of a Stephen King novel that we have come to know: small town in crisis, lots of different characters, existential evil that's turned up and how it all comes together. But he also gives you little vignettes of people off to the side that are in the town that, while they're associated with the story they don't actually advance the plot very much. But over two or three pages he will write a small piece about what happens to a particular person, and you can actually see how well King writes when he does that. Sometimes it's a bit clunky, but this is only his second novel and he was able to develop that all the way right through. If you like King's work, you really need to go back to this to see where it all started. And a lot of people say this is one of their favorite novels of King's.

It's pretty good. It's not super great, but it is pretty good stuff. And I would suggest that if you're at all interested in Stephen King that it's worthwhile going back and having a look at this one.

David:

I should look at it.

Perry:

Right. Right.

Crime

Perry:

Let's move on to Best Crime. Do you want to tell us what yours was?

David:

Okay. So we agreed that we were going to split this discussion this year into two separate categories for crime and thriller. I don't know about Perry, but my criteria for deciding which book goes into which genre is that I figure a crime book has got to have some sense of "who done it" to it, whereas a thriller doesn't. That's my criteria anyway.

All right. Now you're going to get bored with me saying this, but number five on my list is yet another book I did for Standard Ebooks called *The Man in the*

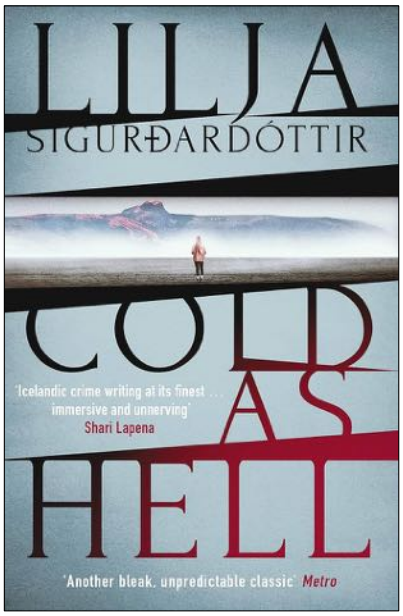
Queue by Josephine Tey. This is Josephine Tey's first, I'm not sure it's her first book, but it's her first book featuring this particular character, Inspector Alan Grant of the Metropolitan Police.

Just very brief summary of the plot. There's a long queue for a show at a theatre and everyone's standing in line and a young man collapses. Everyone's crowded together and he doesn't fall immediately. He eventually falls down and it quickly transpires that he's been stabbed in the back by an unknown person.

Inspector Grant is soon on the case, but it's deeply puzzling because at first not even the identity of the victim is known and they can't figure out who this person is. He's got nothing on him to identify himself.

The solution when you get to it, I thought was a bit weak and it really wasn't, the solution doesn't come through the efforts of Alan Grant really. But I thought it was a very readable book and it's the first in a series featuring this character, and some of the others are pretty good, including a very famous one called *The Daughter of Time*.

Alright, so that's that one. We're off the Standard Ebooks line, you'll be pleased to know.



So number four on my list is - I'm going to have trouble with the pronunciation of this author's name, so please, Icelandic listeners, please forgive me. This is *Cold as Hell* by Lilja Sigurðardóttir. It's translated from the Icelandic by Quentin Bates, who does a lot of translation from the Icelandic.

Now, I really had really enjoyed an earlier trilogy by this Icelandic writer, which in fact I'm going to talk about under the thriller [category], and that was Reykjavík trilogy, but I'll discuss that when we get to it.

Cold as Hell is the first book in a series about Áróra Jónsdóttir, a criminal investigator. Sorry, she's a finance investigator. Initially, in a finance job in the UK, she's urged by her mother to return to Iceland to find her missing older sister, Ísafold. Although she hasn't been on speaking terms with her sister, she reluctantly agrees after a lot of pressure to go to Iceland and have a look, try to figure out what's happened to her. So she talks to a lot of people. She talks to Ísafold's abusive boyfriend, Bjorn, who she's had trouble with in the past. And Bjorn just claims that Ísafold simply left him, you know, broke up with him and left to go to England. But pretty obviously, Áróra doubts that and continues to investigate.

The plot was a bit slow, I thought. Áróra should have worried much earlier than that Ísafold was dead and suspect Bjorn of foul play, but she doesn't. It takes quite a while before she gets to that point. But nevertheless, there's an interesting twist to the story with another character who are definitely meant to think could be the person involved.

So I quite enjoyed it, but not quite as much as the the Reykjavik trilogy that we'll talk about in a bit.

Number three on my list is *Yellow Face* by Rebecca F. Kuang. She's written a few things. The *Poppy Wars* trilogy, which I haven't read, and *Babel*, which I have read, and thought was very good.

Anyway, this is not fantasy or SF or anything. I've put it into the crime category,

but you might say this isn't really crime. Maybe you could call it literary. I don't know. Literary would be appropriate, given that it's almost entirely about writing and publishing. But at its core, it's really basically a white-collar crime story where the crime is the unusual one of plagiarism and fraud.

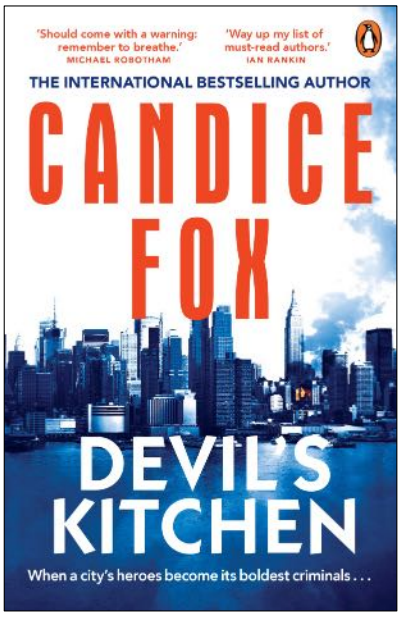
So the book is narrated by June Hayward, a young White aspiring writer who is envious of her Asian friend Athena Liu, who's had tremendous literary success. Now, when Athena dies by accident one night, June finds a typewritten manuscript on her friend's desk, a manuscript which Athena had not yet shared with her agent or publisher. Temptation strikes. And June takes the manuscript. A few months later, after having done some rewriting and some additional research, June sends the book to her agent with her own name on the cover page. It's not long before the novel, titled *The Last Front*, finds an enthusiastic publisher. Finally a year later, it takes so long to get things published, a year later the book finally arrives in bookstores amidst a blaze of publicity. And it's then that things start to go wrong because exposure looms.

And there's also quite a bit of criticism of the publishers and this character, June, because there's this sort of reverse racism going on: the publisher actually changes the name of the author from her full name, June Hayward, to June Song. Song happens to be this character's middle name. So this published by June Song, which sounds Asian. They don't make a huge thing about saying that she's Asian, but obviously the impression that you meant to have is that she's Asian. So there's quite a bit about reverse racism and there's quite a bit which is critical about how the publishing industry works.

So yeah, I thought it was a pretty good read. Not great, but pretty good.

So that's that. Number two on my list is *Devil's Kitchen* by Candice Fox, Australian author who we're quite fond of, Perry and me. Certainly I've been a big fan of her work, particularly her earlier books which are set in Australia. In recent years, probably driven by the need to address a bigger market, she's been writing books set in America. Some of those have been very good, for example *The Chase*, which I thought was great. Others were just okay, but lacked a bit of something like *Fire With Fire*, which was another recent book.

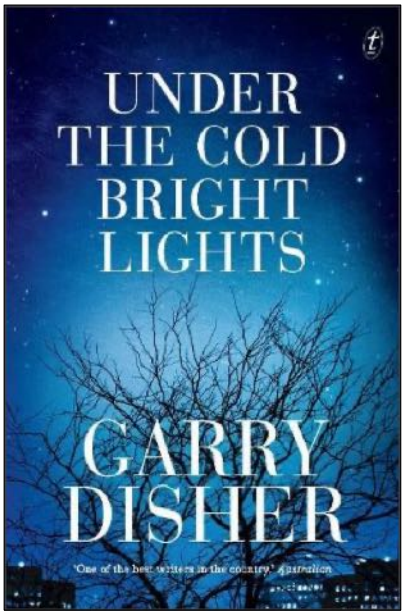
Anyway, *Devil's Kitchen*, I thought was a cracker. There's a rogue team of firefighters, led by a man who survived the collapse of the Twin Towers in 9/11. And he has got a team which is secretly carrying out audacious robberies in New York using the cover of their official job. There's some ways they do this, but basically they get into places and they case them out as part of what they're doing, so they can set things up for them coming back to do a robbery.



One member of the team whose girlfriend and child have mysteriously disappeared suspects the others in the team of foul play, getting rid of her. And he talks to the FBI and betrays the secret, but he still keeps operating under cover. So there's great tension as to whether he's going to get exposed or not.

So this was a real page turner. Lots of twists, very well done. Certainly one of the best books by her I've read in recent years. So that was good.

Number one on my list, best crime, was a book called *Under the Cold Bright Lights* by someone we know well,



Garry Disher. He is certainly an author who Perry and I are both very keen on. So I thought it was an excellent piece of crime fiction.

As in his other novels, the focus here is more on the life and relationships of the main character, rather than on the mystery elements of the plot. In fact, in this book, there isn't much of the classic "who done it" element, though there is a bit, which is why [I'm putting it] in crime not thriller. It's really, it's just dogged and patient police procedural work, which leads to the answers.

One thing I like about Disher is that he's got this lovely ability to run several different threads of story at once, yet unite them into a strong and compelling narrative. So I don't want to really summarize the plot too much, but the main character is this guy called Alan Auhl, he's an acting Sergeant, he's an ex homicide detective in his late fifties, who's returned to the police force to join a cold cases unit. Now, despite younger officers snide comments and jokes about his age, keep talking about bringing out a walking frame and so on, Auhl is skilled and gradually, is gradually able to build respect.

Again, I'm not going to summarize the whole thing. In the book, he handles two official cold cases and one unofficial case, which is supporting a young mother who fled an abusive husband. He's driven to do this, by his anger at the arrogance and privilege of men who escape justice. And all of this is set in and around Melbourne, where we live. So for me, there's a real sense of familiarity with all the locations that come up in the story. That adds a great deal, I think, to the interest and veracity of the story, if you're in a place where the book has been written.

Top notch, I really enjoyed it.

And that's my crime. I do have an honorable mention: *The Roommate* by Derva McTiernan, which is a Cormac Riley novella. Which was okay.

Perry:

All right, okay.

Crime fiction was probably the genre that I read most novels of in 2024, I read 18 novels. Again, I've got, well, I've got two at equal one and three at equal third. I'll just start at the top of my equal thirds.

I'll read all three out so that you know what they are, I gave them all 3.8 out of five. And those three are, *The Bone is Pointed* by Arthur Upfield, *One Corpse Too Many* by Ellis Peters, and *Sanctuary* by Garry Disher.

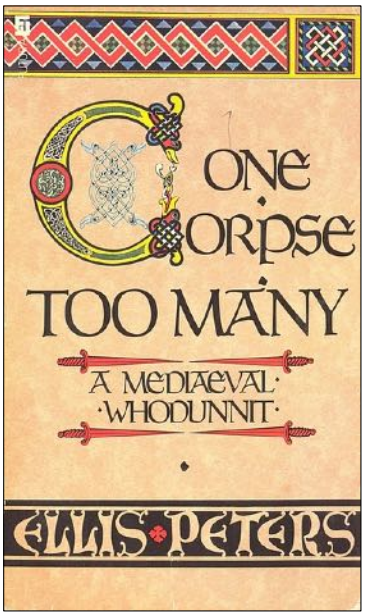
So *The Bone is Pointed* is, I think it's probably about the, what is it, the sixth of the author's novels about Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte. One of the better ones. Every now and then, Upfield gets a little bit carried away with the scenery and the area and doesn't really handle the puzzle and the mystery in the middle of the novel as well as he might. But here, this one is pretty good. It's set in that area around the intersection of the borders of South Australia and Queensland. A white overseer has gone missing and has completely disappeared. Normally what happens in these particular books, Boney is asked to come in some months after the crime has been committed. In this case, Boney comes in fairly quickly

after this gentleman has disappeared because they basically can't find him. And even before he arrives at the scene of the crime, because he's now come in as Inspector Bonaparte, he normally turns up in disguise, but in this instance, everyone knows exactly who he is. He turns up, finds out some information very quickly, but then it all slows down because he comes to realise that the body has been completely hidden in such a way that it cannot be found, but he knows pretty much around about where the body has been hidden. He just can't find it. This has probably one of the first descriptions of the bone pointing ceremony and its impact on those people who are affected by it.

There's always a bit of a question about Upfield as to whether he was a racist writer, but you have to come to the realisation that Upfield considered that the most intelligent and best person in each of his novels is Bonaparte. And he skates across both worlds, the white world and the black world inside Australia, and for what I can see, yes, there are characters in the novel who are racist, but that was the case back then. You can't basically say, oh, well, this character used the N word, therefore the novel's racist. No, he's just reporting about the fact that this particular group of people utilised that vocabulary and had these racist views, but that does not mean to say that the *novel* is racist. You've got to be able to say this is a piece of actual reporting about what people were like at that particular time. I've been trying to keep an eye on it as best I can, and every now and again there might be some things that, well, there's some language that is used by Upfield, which we would no longer use, because we would consider it to be derogatory and prejudicial. But the novel was written back in the 1930s, and you have to look at novels of that time as being different from what's available now, or what's applicable and acceptable now, and you can't judge them by exactly the same levels of morality that we use now. You have to look at them and keep an eye on it and give them a little bit of leeway based on the fact that they were written at that particular time.

If you don't want to do that and you don't like that because you think it's going to upset you, don't read the book. But just be aware of the fact that it deals with a lot of Indigenous relations with whites, and therefore it can be problematic. I thought he handled it pretty well, and I like his stuff, but then a lot of other people don't, but I do.

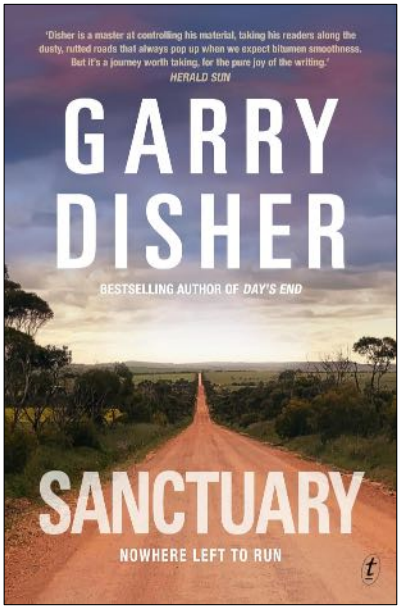
One Corpse Too Many by Ellis Peters, this is I think the second of the Brother Cadfael books, set in 1138 in the middle of the Anarchy, which was like a civil war in England and Normandy over the succession to the English throne. The only legitimate son of Henry I William has drowned, and therefore Henry I was supposed to be succeeded by his daughter Matilda, but Henry's nephew Stephen has seized the throne, and then it's just a fight between the two of them. This particular novel is caught up in the middle of this war. A whole lot of people have been executed by the invading forces, but when they go to count the number of corpses, there is one too many, and then it's just a matter of who is it, who has been killed, and who did it.



These are generally pretty good stuff. Adapted for television back in 1994 with Derek Jacobi in the lead role. You know, you're going to get a decent mystery, you're going to get a good sense of what was happening at the time with these particular novels. Worthwhile working

your way through. I'm trying to read maybe one or two of these a year, and really enjoying them. I put them with the Grafton novels, you know, that basically give you a form of a comfort read, but you know you're going to get something decent out of it, and you might actually learn a bit about English history. And if you just skate over the top of it and don't go looking it up, because I didn't know very much about the Anarchy, but when I basically read this book, I went and looked it up on a few places and I thought, "Oh, well, I've learnt something out of this, and that's not such a bad thing."

Equal Third again, *Sanctuary* by Garry Disher.



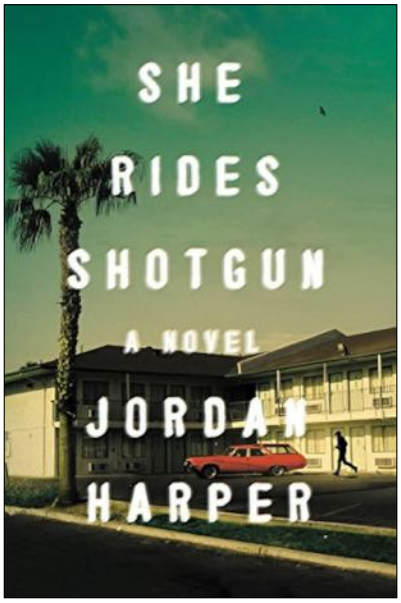
This follows a new, or is it new, because I'll explain in a minute, character from our friend, Australian, Melbourne, or Victorian based detective writer, Garry Disher, that you spoke about just shortly ago. This one follows the female equivalent of his Wyatt character in a sense, in that she is a lifetime burglar who has learnt how to go for the expensive small stuff that she can dispose of fairly easily, but she realises that she's being followed when she recognises somebody at a convention, a stamp collecting convention in Brisbane when she decides that she wants to steal something, gets it, and then goes on the run and ends up in a fictionalised Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills,. Then she gets herself a job at an antique dealers because she has a lot of knowledge about antiques, because she has to know which ones to steal. If she finds that she's got something in a house that is small, that looks good, it might look good, but it might be crap, she has to have the knowledge about what is good and what is not and what is worthwhile stealing. Excellent stuff.

I hadn't realised, until I listened to a podcast the other day with an interview with Garry Disher, that this particular character has actually been mentioned in a previous book of Garry Disher's. She turns up in the background of one of the Penisular series with Detective Chaliss, who is trying to catch a burglar who believes he's female, but he never basically is able to catch this particular woman and she moves on and the burglaries stop. And that's the woman that we're dealing with here. She's referred to a lot in the book as Grace, but we're never terribly sure whether that's her name, so that's why I haven't given one. As usual, Disher does things very, very well. *Sanctuary* I really liked. It's not, I mean it doesn't blow your head off in terms of how good it is, but look, this is a really competent and well-written novel. It gives you a good view of a woman in distress, but she's also intelligent and resourceful, and I think he had a lot of good fun writing it.

I've heard rumors that he's interested in writing more with this particular character, although I can give you some inside dope that the next Disher novel will be back to Paul Hirschhausen. He's done another one of those.

Moving on, the next two equal first. Two completely different novels, both of which I gave 4.2 out of 5 to. One is *She Rides Shotgun* from a couple of years ago by a new author or a new author to me called Jordan Harper, and the other one is *Red Harvest* by Dashiel Hammett.

She Rides Shotgun: fantastic debut this, really good. Crisply written. In my review I put a question about "adverbs, who needs 'em?" He's basically cut this to the



bone, absolutely, and it just *goes* it really does. It's about a guy that's in prison, he kills somebody in prison only a day or two before he is due to be released because the guy put the hard word on him to say, "You're going to help us when you get out?" He said, "No, I'm going straight. I've got a daughter to look after." "Nah, you're going to help us or else you're going to be in trouble."

So he finally gets out and as soon as he gets out he steals a car and goes and picks his daughter up from school. He then takes the daughter around to his ex-wife's house only to find that his ex-wife and her current partner are both dead in the house. So the guys that threatened him in prison are already after him. And so he's on the run. So he's on the run with his 11-year-old daughter who basically demands to know what's going on. So he tells her and she says, "Well, I'm coming with you and I'm going to help you out." This guy decides that the only way that he is going to be able to defend himself and his daughter is to go on the offensive, to go chasing the people that are chasing him to get to them first. It's wonderful stuff. It really is. It's really cut, it's sparse writing, but it's just there. It's got everything in it. I think it won one of the major awards, Edgar Award or one of those for best first novel. He's really one of those up-and-coming crime authors that you need to watch in the US. It will make a fantastic film and I'm sure somebody's taken it up and is going to be making an adaptation of this. This is one of those ones to put on your must read list. He's on my must read list now. I'm going to be following up everything that he's written.

David:

What was the author's name again?

Perry:

Jordan Harper. So this is *She Rides Shotgun* by Jordan Harper. He reminds me a lot of S A Cosby from a couple of years ago you would have remembered me talking about him quite a lot, because I think he's fantastic. Author to watch.

Red Harvest, equal first to this one. This is the first of the Continental Op stories by Dashiell Hammet. It's one of the all time great crime novels, this one. And really one of the ones that changed the face of the genre forever. And it may not have been the first one to shift the emphasis away from cozy little murders in drawing rooms over to the ones where there's a lot of blood and guts, but if it wasn't the first, it was one of the best of the first batch. And it's had so much impact all over the place. You can see its impact everywhere. You can see it in the films of Kurosawa with his lone samurai, *Yojimbo*, etc. It's been made into, well, it's got an impact on *Miller's Crossing* by the Coen brothers. And in fact, there's a particular line in this book where the main character, who's the main first person point of view narrator, so you never know his name, he just referred to as "you" or the Continental Op. He talks about having to get out of the town that he's in because there's so many dead bodies flying around that he's turning "blood simple". And that was the title taken for the Coen brothers first film, *Blood Simple*.

It's been filmed a few times. I know there was a Bruce Willis film that was made about this. As I said, *Miller's Crossing*, *Yojimbo*. It's one of the great crime novels that you really need to read because everything changed after this. And I look back on it and I think, why don't I give it 4.2? Maybe I should have given it more.

There must have been a reason. Anyway, that's it.

No honourable mentions because all the rest of them were less than 3.8.

But I would heartily recommend *She Rides Shotgun* and *Red Harvest*.

David:

Yeah, they both sound good. I haven't read *Red Harvest*. So I should.

Perry:

Yeah, you should.

Thrillers/Spy Novels

David:

All right. So we're on to Thrillers.

Perry:

Thrillers or Spy novels.

David:

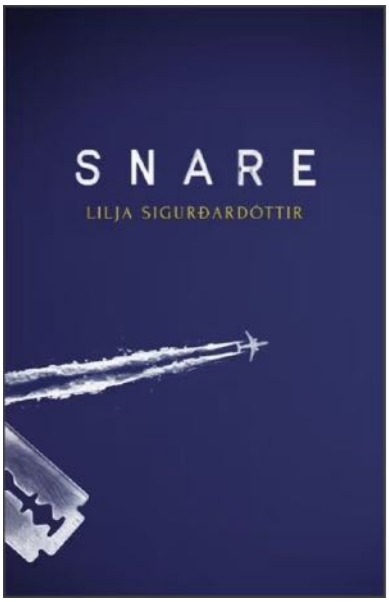
I think mine are all just thrillers. Anyway, we'll see.

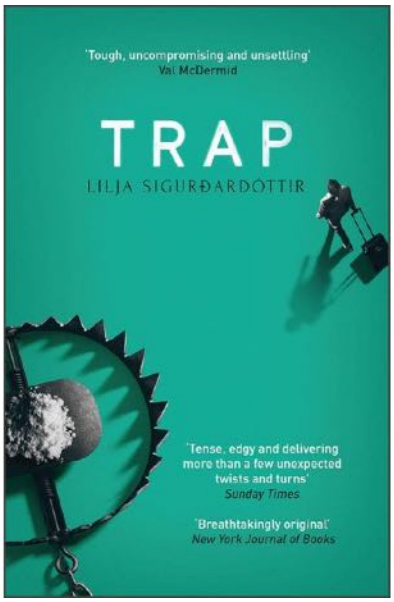
Now I'm going to start with something that Perry might object to, but I'm going to talk about the *Reykjavik Noir* trilogy by Lilia Sigurðardóttir. Again translated from the Icelandic by Quentin Bates.

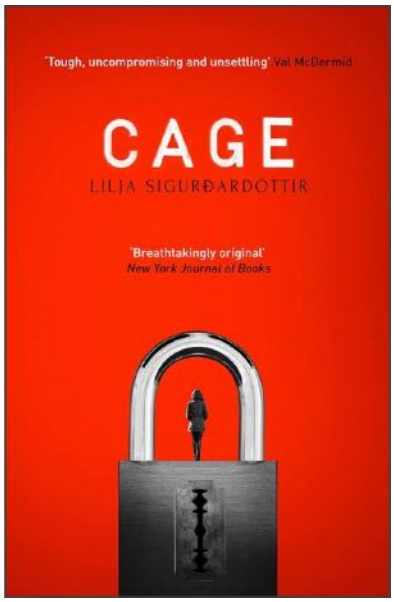
Now I'm kind of going to treat this as one book, so I don't have to take up three slots on my list of bests. But really, I'm just going to talk about the first one anyway. So it's fine, but I'll just allude to the others.

So the trilogy itself is composed of the novels *Snare*, *Trap* and *Cage*. And it's all really about entrapment in the drug trade and also the Icelandic financial scandal of some years ago. There are two main characters, Sonja and Agla, who are in a fraught same-sex relationship. Sonja, we discover, has been snared by drug dealers and forced to become a courier bringing drugs into Iceland. The book is how she gets snared by this group of drug dealers. And it's very plausible how she gets hooked in.

She's very unwilling to be involved and she desperately attempts to escape from these dealers throughout the story. Now, on the other hand, Agla has been involved in serious financial crimes and she's facing investigation. She's







currently being looked at for market manipulation, but she's actually done much worse than that. And she hopes that those other more serious crimes stay hidden.

So look, I just thought this were great. They keep you deeply involved. They've got flawed characters who are committing serious crimes. Sonja's problems and turmoil are immediately engaging. And she's got a young child as well, which adds to the pressure. But the character Agla is initially pretty unlikable, really. But through the series of the trilogy, in the last book, *Cage*, the story takes an unexpected turn. And by the end of the trilogy, your feelings towards these characters are reversed.

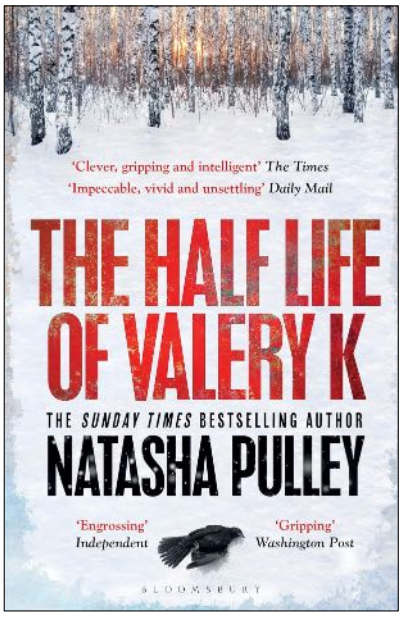
So look, I just thought they were great. I read all three, one after the other, without pausing. I highly recommend it.

Now, number four on my list is *This Kingdom of Dust* by David Dyer. Now, I'm not going to talk a lot about this because Perry and I are going to talk about it in a future episode together. So I'm going to call it a thriller, even though you might think it should be science fiction, because it features astronauts landing on Earth's moon. Despite the setting, the only thing speculative here is a plausible twist to an actual historical event.

So the novel is about two American astronauts, Buzz and Neil, on the Apollo 11 mission, who successfully land on the moon. There are also chapters about a writer named Aquarius, who's trying to write a book, or a series of articles which turn into a book, from the perspective of those people left behind on Earth, particularly the astronauts' wives and children.

All sounds very familiar. The twist is that, unlike in the real history, something goes wrong. Now, the book's strength really is turning the known true story, which everyone knows the details of, into a thrilling and almost nail-biting read. And it does speculate convincingly about what might have happened in different circumstances. I did have a problem with the ending of the book, but again, I'll talk about that in more detail, if Perry and I chat about the book in a future episode of the podcast.

Number three on my list is *The Half-Life of Valery K* by Natasha Pulley. Natasha Pulley's been writing for some time, and she wrote a book I really enjoyed called *The Kingdoms*, which was science fiction, fantasy, whatever. I liked that a lot, but this isn't science fiction or fantasy at all, it's pure thriller.



It's set in 1963, and it follows a character called Valery Kolkanov, who's a biochemist, who's imprisoned, as the book starts, is imprisoned in a Soviet gulag, and he's been serving six years of a 10-year sentence. But after six years, he's transferred to a place called City 40, which he's told is a radioecological research facility, where he'll spend the rest of his sentence as a "prisoner scientist."

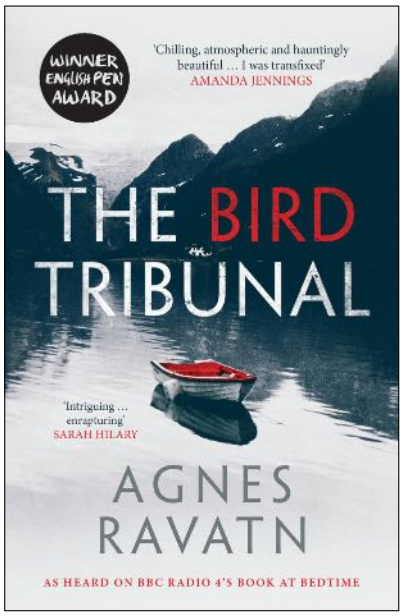
Now, this facility studies radiation effects on animals and plant life exposed to low-level radiation from six nuclear reactors in the area, which generate plutonium for Soviet nuclear weapons. So therefore secrecy is strict, and communication outside is punishable by death. Kolkanov is intelligent and curious, and he starts to doubt the information he's being given by the head of the facility, finding inconsistencies such as high radiation levels in the forest, not low level, but high

radiation levels, and also in a residential area where workers' families live, completely unaware of the damage that they're accumulating.

Worse still, during a sampling trip, Kolkanov finds a dead body with severe radiation exposure. And as he begins to uncover the truth, there's also a queer, romance subplot developing, involving his growing affection for the plant's security officer. Kolkanov must struggle to hide his feelings, obviously. In Soviet Russia, this would be punishable by death.

Now, it turns out that City 40, maybe not under that name, but is a real place, and what occurred there is actually true history. The author provides details of all that in a very interesting afterword.

Look, I like this a lot, although I wasn't totally convinced by the ending of the story, which seemed to taper off rather more gently than I thought it had been leading up to, but nevertheless, it's still a very, very enjoyable book.



Number two on my list is *The Bird Tribunal* by Agnes Ravatn. It's translated from the Norwegian by Rosie Hedger. And this is one of those books with a fairly straightforward plot, but considerable psychological depth, I thought. And it stayed with me for quite a while after I finished reading it, and I was thinking about it afterwards.

The story is told from the point of view of Alice Hagtorn, a woman in her early 30s who's just arrived at a house in rural Norway. She's taken a job after responding to an advertisement for a cook and gardener, expecting that she'd be there to help an invalid. But she's very surprised when she arrives to find that the owner, Sigurd Bagg, is a tall, strong, but taciturn man. Bagg gives Alice brief instructions on meals and garden tools before leaving her to it. However, Alice has misled Bagg about her gardening experience, of which she has none, and is therefore struggling in her first few weeks.

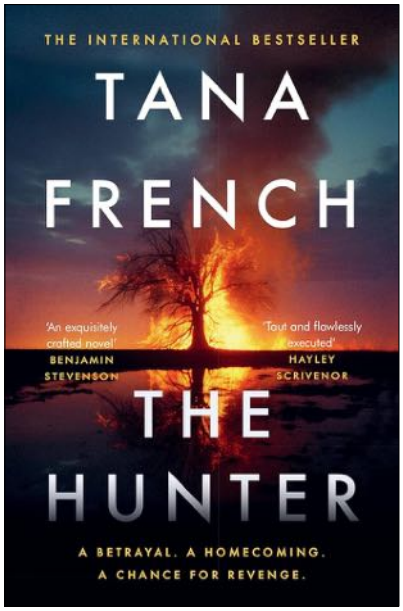
The reason that she applied for this job was to avoid public shame of an event which we learn about later, but she's apparently quite well known for and shamed for something that happened. So the book focuses on Alice's relationship with Bagg, her efforts to understand him, and her attempts to elicit any kind of warmth from him, despite constantly feeling that she's on the brink of disaster. Something's wrong, she has this uneasy feeling all the time about him. There are several crisis points, and at one point she tries to run away, but she realizes when she does it, she's really nowhere to go to, because she can't bear the thought of being shamed for what occurred. Again, I won't give the details of that.

Then we come to the ending, which is kind of predictable, but still you get a big shock when it happens.

Yeah, look, I like this a lot, deeply engaging and intriguing, makes you think and lives with you for quite a while afterwards.

All right, my number one on my list is *The Hunter* by Tana French, and this is a sequel to French's *The Searcher*, published in 2020, which I really liked a lot. Both books are set in a village in Ireland and feature many of the same

characters between the books.



The main focus is the retired Chicago detective Cal Hooper, who settled in Ireland after the death of his wife, and Trey, a wild teenager who Cal has taken under his wing and for whose well-being he feels responsible. In this book, Trey's father has returned home after being four years away, abandoning his family four years ago. He's been in England apparently, and Trey is dismayed by his return, and would love to see the back of him again sooner rather than later. He's a shady character, and it soon emerges that his decision to return to the village isn't because of any kind of remorse for having abandoned his family, or any feelings of good will towards them, though this is what of course he professes, that he's come back for the love of his family.

But no, no, the reason he is real back is that he has a get-rich scheme in mind. Cal Hooper looks at this with great suspicion and starts to try to work out what's really going on.

Young Trey is a fascinating, complex character, and her long-simmering resentment against both her father and the people of the town because of incidents in the previous novel, which I won't go into now, greatly complicate Cal's efforts to put a spike in her father's plans.

So look, this is excellently written, great handling of tension and conflict, and very interesting characters and relationships, what's not to like?

So that was my number one.

I do have an honourable mention.

That's *The Other Wife* by Michael Robotham, an Australian author, writes some good stuff, and I thought *The Other Wife* was particularly good, but didn't get onto my number five best five list.

So that's my thrillers.

Perry:

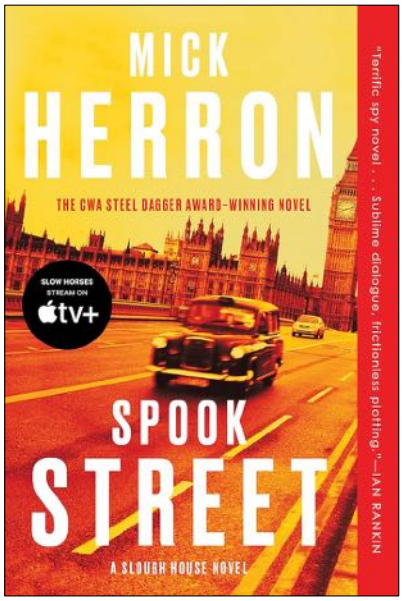
Okay, both of my thrillers are actually Spy novels, really.

The first one, well, number two. I should say I only read six in this particular category.

Number two, *Berlin Game*, the first of the *Game, Set and Match* trilogy by Len Deighton. Now, the author writes a pretty good story here, and Bernard Sampson, the lead character who ends up being the lead character in nine novels, I think, all up, he comes across as an interesting character, though we have to be wary of what he tells us, because a lot of what goes on, he's only giving you part of the story, and only the part that he wants you to know about. So he's a bit unreliable. Seems like a good guy, but the longer you go on, you start thinking, "There's something going on here that we're not terribly sure about."

It deals with basically problems of Berlin, during the end of the Cold War era. The only downside of the book is it reads like a lesser *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* version. There are a lot of similarities, but enough differences to set up the rest of the series. I'm not going to go into a huge amount of detail, but basically I think I'm going to have to leave this to the end after I've read the whole three, I think to cover them properly so that I can follow the flow of it all.

I gave this one 3.8. It's certainly worth a read. As I said, Deighton writes a pretty good story and is worthwhile following.



The best of the ones that I read this year was *Spook Street* by Mick Herron. I gave this one 4.0. It's number four of the Slough House series, and in fact is the source material for the most recent season of *Slow Horses* that people should be watching on Apple TV with Gary Oldman in the lead role as Jackson Lamb.

In this particular novel, somebody has tried to kill River Cartwright's grandfather, and so he, River, sets off to France to try and discover who and why that is. But first he's basically got to get his grandfather out of the house that he's been living in for quite some period of time and put him with somebody that he thinks is going to make his grandfather safe. Pretty good stuff. I know that there's some people around who say that Mick Herron's not really a great writer. I don't really care. I like the stories. I think they tick along pretty well. There are a lot of storylines here which all go around all over the place and slowly coalesce and come together over the course of the novel. All of the old favourite characters return, though as seems to be usual with Mick Herron's, one of those characters is not going to make it through to the end. This is another very good entry in this highly entertaining series.

If you like the TV series, I suggest that you read the source material. You will notice that there are a lot of differences, mainly due to the amount of time that Jackson Lamb is up front. That's understandable given that he's the main character of the TV series. If you're going to be paying Gary Oldman a fair amount of dosh to actually play that particular role, it's probably not a bad idea if you have him on screen for a bit more than would be reasonable for the time that he has in the novel. Good stuff. I really like that *Slough House* series. I can get a good laugh out of it. I can also get a really quite good sense of a good story well-told, in my view.

David:

Yeah, I thought it was great too. I'm actually surprised, listening to you talk about it, to think to myself, did I not read any Mick Herron during the year? I think that's true. I don't think I could have read one because it's not on any of my best lists. I must not have read anything by him during all of 2024. So it's a bit surprising I must get back to it.

Perry:

Well, you're going to have to if you're going to keep watching the TV series. I read the other day that either they have started or they have wrapped the filming of season six. So there's two more coming out next year.

David:

Do you think it's worth reading the book first or watching the TV first? I find it very hard to decide. Do I keep going with reading the books? Or do wait for the TV series?

Perry:

I'm going to keep reading the books first. So I'm going to basically get to number five and number six pretty quickly. My wife just plowed through them all when

we were away on holidays; read the whole lot as e-books; so she's read all of them. And if I don't keep up, I'm in trouble.

David:

There are nine. There are plus a couple of novellas or three novellas.

Perry:

There's a number of novellas that slot into the middle, which act as background and probably best to try and read in sequence. I, of course, have just been picked him up willy-nilly down at the library and read them and realised, oh, I shouldn't have read this one yet because I had it out of order.

David:

Because they exposed that someone was missing. Yeah, yeah, yeah, never mind.

Perry:

It doesn't matter. Just read them and enjoy it. You know, you sometimes you can't basically get things completely right all the way right through. It doesn't matter. They are good stuff, they're really very enjoyable. And in many ways, they are the series of the moment, either in television and print. So best to keep up. And if you haven't, haven't started, get on to it now.

David:

Absolutely. Sure.

Historical Fiction

Perry:

So, David, you're going to move on to best historical fiction, which I'm going to ignore because I don't have any. So if you'd like to…

David:

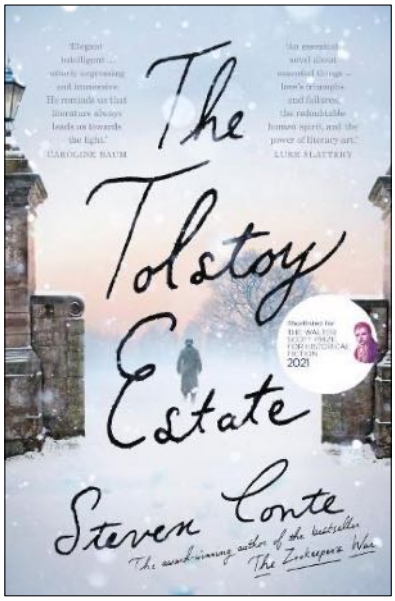
I've only read four books in this in this category. So number four on my list is *After Alice Fell* by Kim Taylor Blakemore. And this is set during the Civil War in the United States, but it doesn't focus on the war at all. It's just there in the background. And it really focuses on a domestic psychological drama.

It's told from the point of view of a woman called Marion Abbott. She's been acting as a nurse during the war. And she's just come back to find that her sister, Alice, has died. She apparently fell or jumped from the roof of a mental asylum. Marion is guilt-ridden by this because she left Alice with her brother and his wife so that she could go off to help with the war. But this brother and his wife couldn't handle Alice's craziness. And they committed her to the asylum without Marion knowing.

So Marion's furious and she seeks redress questioning how Alice escaped her locked room to reach the roof so she could jump off it. And the asylum manager and the police just keep dismissing her concerns, but she gradually manages to approach the truth, which is far darker than she had imagined, leading to dramatic consequences for everyone involved.

I quite liked this, though I felt that the first half of the book drags a little and spent a bit too much time dealing with Marion's recriminations of herself before the action really started to take off. But when it did, I thought it was good. It had a bit of a trick ending, which I felt was a bit of a cheat, but not bad.

Number three on my list is *The Tolstoy Estate* by Stephen Conte. Who is an Australian author, by the way. Now the main character of the book is Captain Paul Bauer, who is a 40-year-old surgeon in the medical battalion of the Third



Panzer Division, part of Operation Barbarossa, which was the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941.

So this battalion arrives at a stately home, which is the ancestral estate of Leo Tolstoy, where he wrote *War and Peace* and *Anya Karenina*. But despite its historical significance, the Nazi battalion just occupied it, set up the hospital there. And this actually all happened, apparently, a real true story.

Now upon arrival there, the Germans are confronted by Katarina,who was the head custodian of the site, which is like a tourist site, whatever the equivalent was back then in the war. It is a place of great historical significance to the Russian people. And she's furious, of course, about the damage that this battalion are causing to the place.

Now Paul, Paul Bauer, who speaks some Russian, is ordered to translate. And because of this, an unlikely relationship slowly develops, very slowly develops, between Paul and Katarina, who have in common their passion about Tolstoy, and in particular about his novel *War and Peace*. Paul is a kindly man who's devoted to his surgery, and he's very frustrated at his superiors, particularly by their underestimation of the severity of the Russian winter on their troops.

So that's the core of the book. It's an unusual but ultimately convincing, I thought, a very touching love story between these two people, along with quite a lot of true and fascinating history. And really the links between this story and Tolstoy's masterpiece of *War and Peace*, which of course is about the invasion of Russia by an outside force. The threads of comparison run through the book and make it really fascinating.

I really enjoyed it a lot. I thought it was great.

So I definitely recommend that one.

Number two on my list is *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah, which is a very moving story, I thought, of two French sisters, Isabelle and Vianne, during World War II, when Germany invades and occupies France. I've been reading quite a bit about the war, I suppose. And this story centres on the horrors of the occupation and the struggles of these two sisters, as well as their strained relationship with each other and with their seemingly cold and distant father.

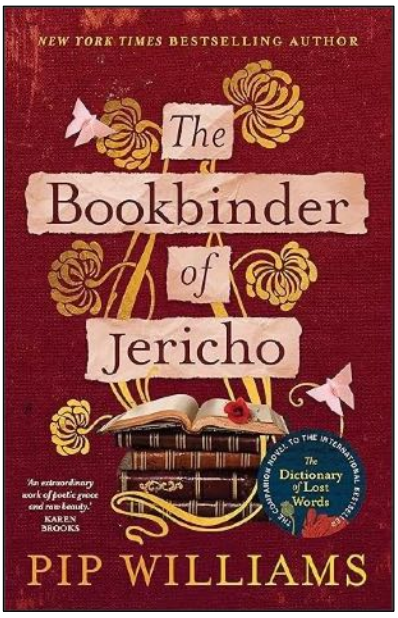
As the book opens in 1940, Vianne tries to avoid trouble with the occupying forces, but her life becomes increasingly disrupted by the Germans. She has to put up with a German [officer] living in her house. He's billeted in her house and it causes great strain. So initially she's trying to maintain her normal life, but circumstances and her conscience eventually compel her to take risky actions for herself and her daughter.

Isabelle, the younger sister, however, is fiercely opposed to the Nazis and becomes deeply involved with the French resistance. And eventually she becomes so involved that she starts to help a series of downed Allied airmen, people bailed out of bombers and so on that have been shot down, to, she helps them escape France by a very dangerous journey over the mountains into Spain, where they can reach the British consulate there.

There's a note at the beginning of the book which highlights that much of the

novel is inspired by true stories of women who displayed remarkable heroism. And unlike men's heroism, which is widely celebrated, the heroism of women like these has often been overlooked and underestimated.

So this is a terrific book, highly recommended.



And at the top of my list, number one on my list, is *The Bookbinder of Jericho* by Pip Williams, again an Australian author. And this is kind of a sequel to Pip Williams' first book, *The Dictionary of Lost Words*. It shares a number of characters, but not the main protagonist. So the protagonist of this book is a young woman called Peggy Jones, who works in the bookbinding department of Oxford University Press at Jericho College in the early 1900s.

As it turns out, she is one of a pair of identical twins, but her sister, Maude, perhaps due to birth trauma, is mentally different. There's something wrong with her mentally, or certainly different about her mentally. Maude can only speak simple words or echo someone else's phrases. And Peggy feels responsible for Maude, but that's often at the cost of her own ambitions.

So in their jobs, Peggy and Maude fold and assemble printed sheets at the press. But Peggy, who longs to read more, occasionally takes home damaged parts of academic works, building a fragmentary library in their narrow boat on the Oxford Canal where they live. She looks longingly at Somerville College, which is one of the few Oxford colleges for women, knowing that she can never expect to attend there, though she longs to.

Now the Great War begins in 1914, and many male workers at the press volunteer to fight, theoretically opening up opportunities for Peggy, but because she's constrained by her responsibilities to Maude, she feels little changes for her in practice. The burgeoning suffragette movement is also put on hold because of the war. However, when Belgian refugees and injured soldiers arrive in Oxford, Peggy volunteers to help. And this starts to form important connections that will change her life in very important ways.

Look, I thought this was deeply moving and engaging read, which I enjoyed a great deal. The characters, the setting of Oxford and the milieu are all very well depicted and very interesting. And a fascinating note by the author explains how she came to write the story based on her researches for her first book.

Yeah, so definitely recommend you this. Number one on my list. No honorable mentions.

Children's Literature

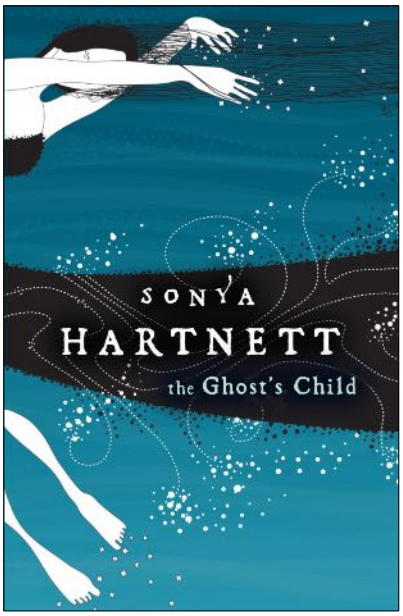
Perry:

Okay, thank you for that, David. Moving on then, so we'll go to...Well, this is always a problematic sub-genre, the children's/YA category, because sometimes you could say, well, this is a fantasy novel or it's a science fiction novel, or it shouldn't be considered to be young adult.

But anyway, what the hell, we decided that we'd include this particular sub-genre, if you like, in our listing for this episode.

I read three novels which I would consider to be young adult novels during 2024.

My second, so I'm only going to talk about two of them. The second that I have on my list is *The Ghost's Child* by Sonia Hartnett.



Sonia Hartnett is a Melbourne writer who we haven't heard very much of. She seemed to basically disappear for almost 10 years and has only just come back recently with a children's picture book a couple of years ago, but still hasn't returned to anything like she was producing prior to going away. Now this novel, *The Ghost's Child*, deals with, well, it's only, firstly, I should say, it's only a rather short novel, but an excellent one. The main character, Matilda, returns home one day. She's rather elderly and finds a young boy sitting in her lounge room. She doesn't know how he got in there and doesn't know who he is, but she starts talking to him, and at first, though, she's a little wary of him, especially after he declares, "I have bad news for you". And she engages him in conversation and slowly begins to tell him the story of her life. And it's a fascinating story whereby she's met a magical character, but was unable to carry on a relationship with this particular character because he wanted to be free and not bound by human earthly relationships. It's a slender but wonderfully elegant novel, fantastical in only fleeting ways and richly embdued with the life of Matilda in all its phases.

And I would heartily recommend that people read Sonia Hartnett's work. She seems to have been a little bit forgotten recently because she's not out there bringing out new work every year or two, which is a real pity because a lot of the stuff that she's written in the past has been just fantastic. But she's just faded out of view recently. I saw this one on the shelf and I thought that it was about time I read it, and I'm very glad that I did.

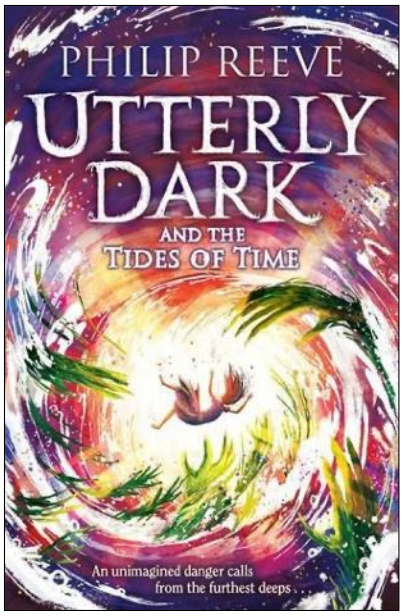
My number one book at 4.1 out of 5 is *Silver on the Tree* by Susan Cooper. This is the fifth and final of the *Dark is Rising* sequence. Not the best of them, but still worthwhile. And if you get down to number five in a five book series, you pretty much better finish it off. In this instance, Will Stanton, who's been the major character all the way right through this series, and Merriman, the other one, these are two of the last Old Ones, as they are called. The two of them, along with Bran, the time-displaced son of King Arthur, which you find out about, gather together allies and weapons for their struggle against the Dark, which is Rising. And now they are helped in their quest by the three Drew children who have appeared in the previous books as well.

While there are some interesting set pieces here, there's little in the way of anything new or little in the way of any tension. And the book suffers from that, I think. The prophecies that have circulated through the previous five volumes finally come together and the end is reasonably predictable and rather slow in arriving. So while it's a bit of a disappointment in terms of the ending of the series, it still caps off one of the seminal works of young adult fantasy from the 1970s. And it's certainly one that I would recommend that people get into and start to read. The first couple of books were fantastic. As I said, it doesn't maintain that quality all the way right through the series, but still worthwhile reading, absolutely.

And that's mine.

David:

It does say something about my reading that *all* of the books I read in this genre during 2024 were written by the British author Philip Reeve. But there are reasons for that.



All right, so number three on my list is *Utterly Dark and the Tides of Time* by Philip Reeve. And this features a young girl whose odd name is Utterly Dark, who lives on one of the fictional Autumn Isles to the west of Britain during the Regency period in England. And this is the third book in the series. So I think it's okay to give spoilers to the first couple of books. You should read them all.

In the first book, Utterly is revealed to be the daughter of the Watcher of Wildsea, Andrew Dark. His job is to watch over the ocean in case a terrible sea monster appears again. Now, we discover eventually in the first book that her mother is in fact that very sea monster, or human incarnation of the sea monster, the Gorm. Monster that she may be, the Gorm has motherly feelings towards Utterly.

In the second book, Utterly has to seek the Gorm's help to save her friends from the terrible Hunter in the Underwoods. But to do so, she has to promise to leave Wildsea and go and live with her mother under the sea.

So here we are in the third book, and Utterly has to fulfill her promise. And so she travels, goes into the ocean, and she travels with her mother through the oceans. And the Gorm takes her to see temples and sacrifices to herself, the Gorm. Some terrible sacrifices too. But the Gorm also shows Utterly how to range through time. She says, "Time is not a river, it is a sea." I thought that was a nice line.

And during one such journey, Utterly becomes trapped nearly 160 years in her future, which is not even our present day, but it's like the 1980s, at the mercy of a creature possibly more powerful than the Gorm itself.

So look, I thought this was real page turning stuff for young readers. And I'm 73 years young. So forget your Harry Potter's, this is much better stuff in my opinion. Highly recommended if you're looking for a gift for a young person in the 10-13 age group. And indeed, I gave all three books in the trilogy to my granddaughter for Christmas.

Okay, kind of number two on my list, or if you like, this can be, you know, two to four, or whatever, and the previous one could be number five. This is the *Mortal Engines Quartet* by Philip Reeve, and this was a re-read, and I'm not going to talk very much about it at all.

So four books in the series. It's aimed at middle school readers a bit older than the Utterly Dark audience, I would have thought. And it's SF set in the far future on a devastated earth where, yeah, okay, it's got a ludicrous premise, but it works, he makes you work. The premise is that in this far future, cities have become mobile on vast traction engines, and they roam around hunting down smaller towns to gobble up their parts.

But it's also, the series is also the tragic love story of Tom Natsworthy and Hester Shaw. And after terrible battles between the cities and the anti-traction league, who are trying to stop the mobile cities, it ends on a sad but heartwarming note.

So that's all I'm going to say about that, it's just great stuff.

It's a re-read, so I'm not going to talk about it in much detail.

Number one on my list was a new book to me, but it's the start of another series called *Railhead*, again by Philip Reeve. And it's the first book in a series of science fiction novels, again for middle school readers, I would have thought, set in quite a different universe than the *Mortal Engine* books, but like them set in the far distant future.

But in *Railhead*, the human race has spread out among the stars and colonised many planets and encountered a number of alien species. And the twist is though, that humanity has been able to do this, because these planets are interconnected by a *rail network* built millennia ago by strange beings called Guardians. And trains run on these rails, which are ordinary rails, but the rails lead through portals through which they can make instantaneous leaps from one world to another. Forget your relativity and speed and light, all that stuff. Don't worry about that. The trains themselves, moreover, are sentient and intelligent and take an active role in the story.

So against this setting we're introduced to young Zen Startling, who is a petty thief. At the start, when he's on the run from one such robbery he carries out, he finds that he's being followed by someone. Who is following him and why you eventually find out. And when you find out, this takes him on a high stakes adventure, which ultimately leads to a catastrophic conclusion.

Really good stuff. I'm looking forward to reading the other books in this series, but because I bought the three books in the trilogy for my grandson for Christmas, I'm going to have to borrow them back.

So here we are.

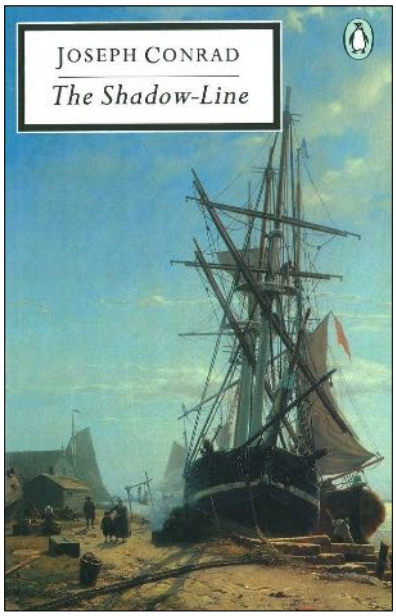
And no honorable mentions in that category.

Literary/Non-Genre

Perry:

Okay, so let's move on then to what we might refer to as literary, or let us say non-genre fiction.

Some of the ones that I'm going to be talking about could fit into a historical fiction category, but I don't split them that way, each to their own.



Now, I read 17 novels that could be considered to be literary or non-genre. There are six that fitted into my best of this particular year, but I'll skim through most of them. The four that are equal third at 4.0 out of five, are *The Shadow Line* by Joseph Conrad, *The Wasp Factory* by Ian Banks, *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julia Otsuka, and *The Conversion* by Amanda Lowry.

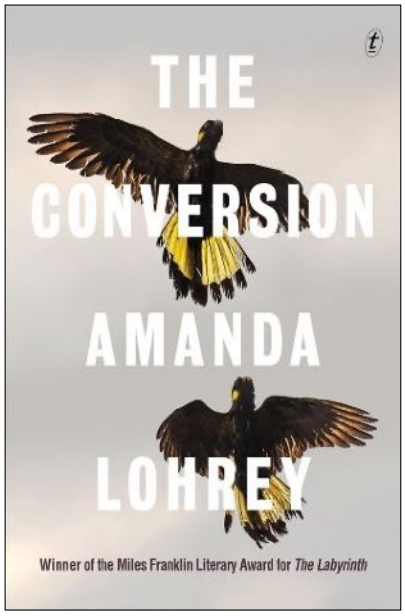
Now, *The Shadow Line* is a short novel or novella by Joseph Conrad, and it deals with Conrad's first command of a ship. There's a quasi-supernatural element in this particular story, but basically only because one of the major characters on the ship, I think he's first mate, is concerned that the ghost of the previous captain of this particular ship is stopping

them from leaving an area of the Gulf of Thailand, or Gulf of Siam as it was then. But there's a classic Joseph Conrad technique of telling the story to somebody else later in life. It's one of those ones, you know, a bit like *The Man Who Would be King*, where basically people are telling the story to somebody else. It's not being told from an omnipotent narrator's perspective, it's actually being narrated by somebody within the story, as a story that they are telling to somebody else. Good stuff, enjoyed it, I like Conrad's shorter stuff, and hopefully we'll be able to get to one or two others of his later this year.

The Wasp Factory by Ian Banks, the first novel by Banks that he had published, not the first one that he had written, but the first one that he had published. This one and a couple of others that he wrote soon afterwards, were considered in some ways to be almost gothic horror style. I've put it in the literary one because it's just where I ended up with it. It basically deals with a very dysfunctional family on an island off the coast of Scotland. The main character is a strange person who is basically living in the shadow of his older brother, who is off in jail, and then we find out that his brother is broken out of jail and is attempting to get back to the island, and we don't really know why. But our main character is trying to stop him, trying to fend him off to make sure that he doesn't get there. Interesting stuff by Banks, and it showed you very early on his excellent writing style and his way of being able to bring the gothic into the real world. It was a bit of a strange revelation, this one, so very interesting.

My next one is *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julia Otsuka. This is set during the 1920s up until the Second World War. It follows a large number of young Japanese women who were sent over to America to become the wives of Japanese men who had already migrated and were working there. So they're picture brides. They basically arranged marriages, promised in marriage based on a dodgy photo that had been sent over, and even dodgier promises of wealth, home and a bright future in America when they got there. This novel, short novel, tells their story. Well, all of their stories basically, from the initial departure from Japan to the arrival of America, the meeting with their husbands and what happens to them afterwards. Now I say it tells the stories of all of them because the book is narrated in the third person. So the narrator is "we", "we did this" and "we did this and this and this", and it covers a lot of different stories all put together as sort of an amalgam. When you first start reading you think, oh, this is going to go on and this isn't going to work. Actually it does work. It does all come together very, very well and it actually makes sense. And the good thing about it is the author decided to keep this book short. I'm not sure how many pages this one is, but not many, 130, 140. So it's a novella or long novella, short novel. You can basically sit down there and read this in one sitting and that's probably not a bad approach because that way the style will just basically sit in and you won't go out of the story, but you'll just stay with it and just flow all the way right through it. Quite an excellent examination of immigration in America and by implication immigration in Australia, really.

My next one, *The Conversion* by Amanda Lowry. We read one of Lowry's novels a couple of years ago, *The Labyrinth,* which won the Miles Franklin Award, which was absolutely excellent. This one is almost a companion piece in some ways because it deals with a similar sort of character. She and her husband had been visiting somewhere, which looks and reads like a fictitious Hunter Valley in New South Wales. They come across a small town, the husband decides that he really likes this church, wants to convince the wife to buy it, convert it into a house, but they decide not to.



And it's only after he dies that she realizes that he had been travelling up to there on a regular basis. And looking into the prospect of getting the whole thing converted. She's at a loss after he dies and decides to take on the project and convert it, and this is the story of what happens to her while she does that, how she goes about doing it, and how she turns a space which was not designed to be lived in, but only to be transitorily visited, into a house and how she integrates into the local community. Excellent stuff as usual. As I said, not quite to the level of *The Labyrinth*, but still worthwhile reading.

Staying with another Australian woman writer, *Sorry* by Gail Jones, which I gave 4.2 as a rating. Now there's a beauty and simplicity to Jones's writing. She's a West Australian author.

A lot of people I've talked to have no idea about her, but yet she's written probably 10 or 12 novels. The bulk of which have been nominated either long listed or short listed for the Miles Franklin Award. She's won a number of awards in Western Australia. I like her stuff a lot. I think that she deals with a lot of contemporary issues. This one deals with the stolen generation, race relations, themes of memory and loss, broken families that are separated with isolation and despair. The title of the novel is a telling reminder that at the time that this was being written the Australian government, around 2006 or 2007, did not have the integrity to offer an apology to the shameful treatment that was given to the victims of the stolen generations. That would finally arrive in 2008, believe it or not, 16 years ago. So about a year after this book's publication. So you can maybe look at this as being the writer's attempt to step up in the place of the government and put forward just a simple word, "Sorry". But it's so evocative and this is an excellent, excellent examination of that problem.

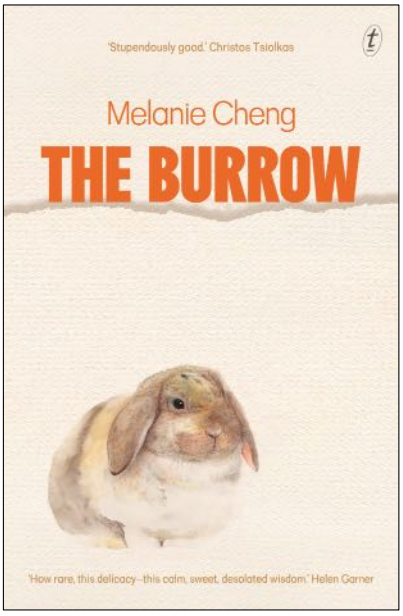
My best literary novel for the year, another Australian woman writer. There are so many of them now who are writing such excellent pieces of work. And my best literary novel of the year was *The Sitter* by Angela O'Keefe. This won the New South Wales Premiers Literary Award for Best Fiction last year. Her previous novel, *Night Blue*, told the story of Jackson Pollock's painting *Blue Poles* from the point of view of the painting. And while I thought that the book, that book was interesting and very, very readable, it did have a few problems. It was split into three novellas, the first and third being told from the point of view of the painting. The second one being told by, from the point of view of a biographer who is writing the history of the Jackson Pollock painting. This one has the same sort of structure. There are three novellas, structured around the research of Australian writer, known only as The Writer in this novel, who's travelled to France to gather material for the biography of Marie-Hortense Cézanne, who is the wife of the French painter Paul Cézanne. And this particular woman sat for 27, 29 portraits by her husband. But we know very little about her other than the fact that she was Cézanne's wife. So this woman has decided that she's going to write a biography of her. She travels to France in the early 2020, just before the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and although she tries to take reasonable precautions, she's stricken with the disease and spends some time lying in bed. Now, around this time, as a result of this particular disease or just coincidentally, Marie-Hortense herself materialises into the novel and starts to

narrate the novel. She's looking over the shoulder of the writer as the writer is writing up her life and occasionally even lifting up the lid of the laptop and being able to read inside the laptop the story of all the notes that are there. And she's making comments about the writing process. She's as fascinated by why this woman would want to write a biography of her as she is by the fact that she's actually materialised and can't quite work out how this is all as it's all come about. So as the novel progresses, the author slowly, because she's basically been contacting her daughter back home in Sydney and the daughter is trying to ensure that her mother that's there in Paris has everything she needs while she's in isolation and quarantine.

The writer slowly starts to change the emphasis of what it is she's starting to write and decides that, yes, the biography is important, but there's something else that she needs to write. And you're not getting very much of an idea what it is, but Marie-Hortense is still there and is still interested in what the writer is coming up with and starts to see parallels as well between her life and what it is that this author is now writing. I thought this was a progression on what O'Keefe done with the previous novel, though I would like to see her change the structure. I don't want her basically writing her next novel, which is three novellas with the first and third narrated by the same person, and the one in the middle is a different but narrated by somebody else. Even so, I still think these two books are really quite excellent and need to need to be read. But I think of Ishiguro who wrote *A Pale View of Hills* and what was the other one, *An Artist of the Floating World,* which are rather similar in outlook and style as their first two and then moved on to something a bit more later on in terms of *The Remains of the Day*. So, still writing same themes but basically shifting the location and shifting the emphasis. Hopefully this writer can kick ahead and do something like that because they're pretty bloody good and I think that they're worth watching.

David:

All right, so my number five for the literary category, is *The Burrow* by Melanie Chang. Again, an Australian writer, in fact, the book was published by Text Publishing and with a nice cover by W.H. Chong, our friend, with a beautiful watercolor by Phil Day of a rabbit. So, like that timid creature on the cover, this is on the surface a very quiet, understated book. But of course there's a lot going on beneath the surface down in the burrow.

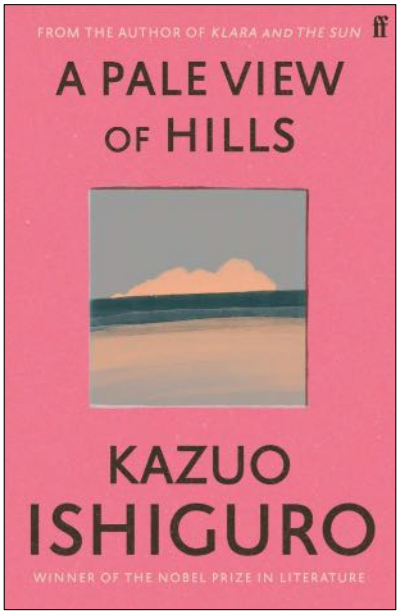


It's set in the suburbs of Melbourne during the Covid pandemic and the lockdowns. And the story focuses on a family struggling in the aftermath of a tragedy which was the death of a child. And the book opens with the family acquiring a baby rabbit as a pet.

I won't go into a lot of detail. Each chapter is told from the point of view of a different character in this family. There's a family of five people, I think. There's even one chapter from the point of view of the rabbit. But each chapter is told from the different point of view of these characters and it provides really interesting insights into the strained relationships of the family and how they're dealing with the tragic death of this child. And guilt, remorse and suppressed anger of vibrating between them all, between all the adults in the novel. And they all have a negative impact on the young daughter of the family, Lucy.

Towards the end of the book these buried secrets and resentments finally come to light and they're put into words which can't be taken back and shake up the characters' relationships as never before.

Definitely recommend it.



Now, my number four is a book you just mentioned, *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro. This is his debut novel published in 1982. It's certainly a book which you puzzle over for days after you've finished it. I'm still puzzling over it really.

And I'm not alone in my reaction, as according to Wikipedia, The New York Times called it "infinitely mysterious".

So, the story is told by Etsu-ko, a Japanese woman who married an Englishman and who is now living alone in a large state in rural England. She's grieving the death by suicide of her eldest daughter Kaiko a few years previously. A visit by her younger daughter spurs Etsu-ko to recall her life in Nagasaki in Japan only a few years after the end of the Second World War and of course not long after the atomic bombing of that city. In particular, Etsu-ko thinks of a woman she befriended called Sachiko and her young daughter, Moriko.

Moriko is a strange, withdrawn child yet Sachiko appears to pay the child little attention, doesn't send her to school, and leaves her alone for long stretches of time, much to Etsu-ko's concern, but these concerns are brushed off by Sachiko.

There are strange parallels that you start to realise between Sachiko and her disturbed daughter, and Etsu-ko and her own daughter, Kaiko. You're left with many questions. Etsu-ko's account is clearly suspect. There's something's going on that isn't right. There was one particular point, I was actually listening to this as an audiobook and there was one point where I was *literally* stopped in my tracks, because I was listening to this audiobook as I walked and I literally stopped dead and thought, "*What* did you just say?"

Very interesting. You [wonder] how much of what really happened has been left out or distorted. Some of the possibilities are really disturbing.

So I thought it was fascinating, intensely puzzling but very good, amazing writer.

And then I roll on to another book by Kazuyo Ishiguro. This is *The Remains of the Day*, which I know that Perry has talked about before. It was made into a very well known and successful film with Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. It won the Booker Prize in 1989.

I enjoyed it greatly.Certainly deserved the awards and the attention that it did, I thought. But nevertheless, I'm struggling to work out what I could say about it.

On one level, it's a very simple story. It's just told from the first person point of view of an older man named Mr Stevens, who has been in domestic service and the Head Butler at Darlington Hall for many decades from before the Second World War into the 1950s, which is when the book is set.

In 1958, he takes a short holiday to drive to the West Country of England. And during the trip, he reminisces about his life and reflects on what it means to be a great butler. These reminiscences are the puzzling heart of the book. Stevens

obviously lacks self-awareness and the ability to recognise how he appears to other people. He's fully embraced the persona of the professional disinterested servant, often reacting abruptly and coldly to ordinary people. He struggles with humour and banter, seeing this only as a professional shortcoming that he's not able to do it.

Now, early in his time at Darlington Hall, Stevens employed a woman called Miss Kenton as the housekeeper. And their interactions are always, according to Stevens anyway, professional. But, we can see that, even from his own account, we can see that she must have found him exasperating.

Miss Kenton, who left to go and get married, is the main reason that Stevens heads off to the West Country of England. He thinks that he might persuade her to return to the hall, but as you listen, as you follow his account, it seems increasingly unlikely as the book goes on.

At the end, there's an underlying trait of deep regret and sadness, and leaving us with an impression of a wasted life.

A magnificent piece of writing, I enjoyed it a great deal.

But it's only number three on my list, am I saying? [I should have ranked it higher.]

So number two is a book by Australian author, well, actually an Irish author who now lives in Australia, came here when he was young. And this is *The End and Everything Before It* by Finegan Kruckemeyer. This was one of the best books I've read in years. Simply a joy to read.

Very complicated, in a way. It's easy enough on the surface to talk about. So the title, *The End and Everything Before It*, it's about death—the end—and life—everything before it. It's about grief and loss, cruelty and love, about what it means to live a good life, about redemption. More than anything, as you'll find out at the end, very end, it's about the miraculous strength of a mother's love for a child.

There's a real mythic feel to the novel, particularly at the start, a heightened sense of unreality, a sense that you're being recounted a legend, a story for the ages. In many ways it reminds me, in a very positive way, of the writing of fellow Australian Robbie Arnott, particularly the latter's novels *Flames* and *The Rain Heron*.

It's not a book, though, that's easy to describe in any detail, without giving too much away. I don't want to give away that very clever underlying concept, but I liked it so much that as soon as I finished reading it, I turned around and immediately started again, because you get to the end, you say, "Oh, I see!" and then you go back and to see how it played out.

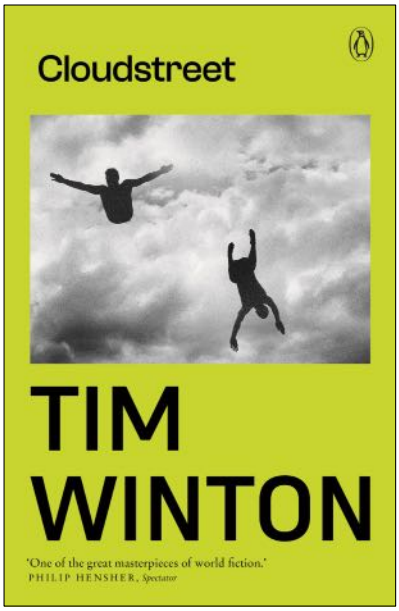
I thought it well repaid that close attention, though, of course *you* don't need to do that, you don't have to read it twice in order to enjoy it thoroughly on the first read. I'm glad I read it twice, because on the second reading I could understand better the bones of the book, how it was put together.

So look, that was fantastic. Full of wisdom, poetry, humour, sadness and magic, I'm really surprised that it hasn't seen more attention, hasn't been, you know, put on award lists and things, it surprised me.

I thought it was terrific. A real pleasure to read, highly recommended.

And that's only my number two, Perry.

Number one is what's now a very famous book by a genuine Australian author, *Cloudstreet* by Tim Winton.



Hard to say much about this too. I mean, it's indeed a great piece of Australian literature that's hard to do justice in a review. A simple description would say that it's the story of two families in Western Australia who both in different ways suffer a tragedy, in the closing years of the Second World War.

Both families end up moving from rural areas of Western Australia to a suburb of the capital city of Perth, and they begin living together in the same rambling old house in Cloud Street. One family as land-laws and the other as their tenants. And we follow their stories over a period of 20 years from the end of the war up into the 1960s as their children grow up and start families of their own.

But that's a very bald, extremely bald summary. What it really is is a sprawling raucous, often very funny, occasionally tragic, and at times a mystical, epic family story. The major characters are rich and interesting and their stories are deeply engaging. And one character above all is fascinating, the house itself, which seems to have moods, loves and dislikes of its own, as well as a couple of ghosts.

Now the love of all these people for each other, their general fatalistic cheerfulness, their humour, their zest for life in all its blooming, buzzing confusion, stands out above the miseries they sometimes endure, and there are some delightful touches of fantasy within the story.

As a picture of working-class Australian life in the post-war period, *Cloudstreet* is wonderful and it's tremendously entertaining to read. It's been on my list to read for a long, long time, [and I'm glad I eventually got around to it].

Highly recommended.

There we go.

Honourable mention, *Stambul Train* by Graham Greene. First Graham Greene I've read, actually.

Perry:

Oh, okay. Well, there's a lot of other Graham Greene's you should be getting to.

David:

I know. I've got a collection of them, one of those Octopus anthologies.

Perry:

Yeah, yeah, I know the ones. Interesting to note that we both chose Australian authors as our best literary fiction of the year.

David:

Yeah, absolutely.

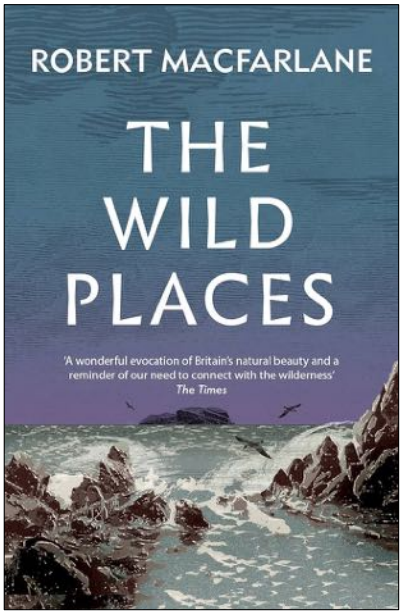
Non-Fiction

Perry:

So, moving away from fiction now, we'll go to non-fiction before we get to our overall picks. So, we're getting near the end of this never-ending episode.

Okay, best non-fiction. I've only got two because I only read two non-fiction books for the year. Yeah, you probably read heaps, but I only read two.

So, my second best, *The Wild Places* by Robert McFarlane, 3.6 out of five. This is a collection of essays McFarlane wrote as he sought, found and explored those places that he had longed for. He was living in Cambridge at the time and he was looking for basically, as the title says, wild places in the UK. So, he mainly heads to the far north of Scotland, Ben Hope and the islands and wilder places of Wales, Devon and Cornwall. But he also finds wild places closer to home on the salt marsh along the Essex coast and on a storm-swept, shingle island off Norfolk.



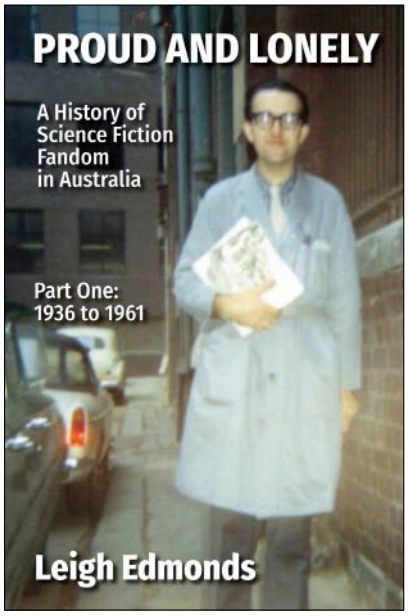
I really like the way that McFarlane writes. He just seems to be able to give you a really wonderful sense of place in terms of what he's seeing and what he's describing. He puts himself into the middle of it. So, it's not a matter of standing back from the place that he's talking about, he's actually being fully immersed right into the middle of it. That makes a big difference as far as I'm concerned. Now, this may not be as revelatory as a work as his first, which is *Mountains of the Mind,* which I read a couple of years ago, but it's still a wonderful collection of writing about the natural world, but one of the best in the field. I'm slowly working my way through McFarlane's books and I think they're fantastic.

But my best nonfiction book of the year was one that has a connection to this podcast from a couple of years ago. And that is the book *Proud and Lonely* by Leigh Edmonds. Now, to give you this full title of this particular book, *Proud and Lonely: A History of Science Fiction Fandom in Australia from 1936 to 1975*. This is Part One from 1936 to 1961.

Now, long-term listeners to this particular podcast would have heard a couple of discussions we've had with Leigh Edmonds over this particular book. Or they can go to the Fanac Zoom series of discussions where I've interviewed Leigh about this particular book.

Now, I should point out to people that don't really know this terribly much: this is not a history of science fiction, modern or otherwise, but about science fiction *fandom* in Australia. That small community that David, you and I consider ourselves to be a part of. It's about the way that Australian readers of science fiction came to find and acquire their reading material from the first time we could actually look and point at what we might consider to be modern SF, dating from the late 1920s with *Amazing Stories*. It doesn't go into the details of the history of SF in terms of whether it was, *Frankenstein* was the first book or whether it was the Greek myths or whatever. It doesn't matter. What we're talking about here is what people inside Australia, the readers of science fiction in Australia, how they found their reading material and how they actually identified other readers of SF, how they formed clubs and organised conventions where they could meet and discuss their favourite genre of literature. I find it fascinating stuff. Basically because it really tells an earlier version of my history in terms of the way that I came through.

Now, the title of the book itself is based on a major quote that was attributed to Rick Sneary by Bob Tucker, Wilson Tucker, which runs, "It's a proud and lonely thing to be a fan." And as David, you and I would know that it is a proud and lonely thing. When we were growing up back in the 60s and 70s, you weren't terribly sure whether there was anybody around who was reading science fiction. But as you get older and you start talking to them, you realise that they were all



in the same, exactly the same boat. They were reading a lot of science fiction because it was just a part of the literature that they were really interested in at the time. They just didn't want to tell anybody because they thought they were going to be made fun of, as some of us were in the past, and in the end we just decided, well, we've just got to wait it out. And now we live in a science fiction world. And all these people are basically saying, "Oh, have you read this?" And you go, "Yes, about 40 years ago." "Oh, okay." And they're suddenly realising where the world has gone to. "Oh, so this is what you guys were talking about all those years ago." "Yes, this is it." But this [book] is about the community of science fiction fandom in Australia. How it interacted with the rest of the world and how it came to find itself within Australia. Wonderful stuff. I really, really enjoyed it.

The next volume of this will be a few years away because Leigh is still in the process of researching it and he's going overseas in the next couple of months to do a bit more research. That will take the history up to 1975. I asked him why he wasn't going to be continuing it beyond that because he said, and he said, "Because it just goes everywhere after 1975." After the first Aussiecon, the first World Science Fiction Convention [that] was held here in Melbourne in 1975, things just exploded in science fiction fandom in Australia. Everybody realised that were all these other people around that they could actually talk to. And it just went off in vast numbers of different directions and he said, "It just becomes way too complicated to be able to follow." So he's going to finish it in 1975 and I really look forward to it and I can recommend this book.

David:

Excellent, excellent.

All right, well, I read a *lot* of non-fiction last year. I think it's something like 15 books of non-fiction. Certainly a lot. It was all top-notch so it was hard to pick the best five out of it.

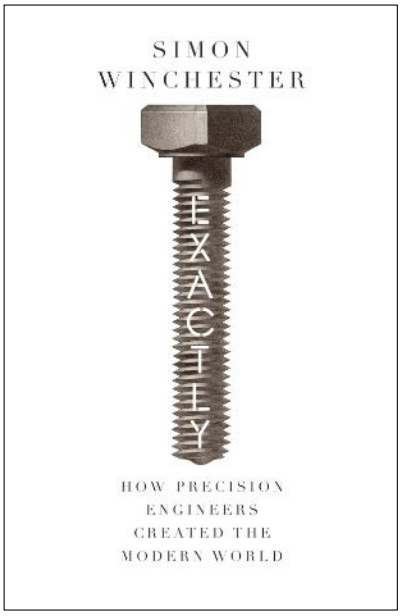
Anyway, number five on my list was *Dreyer's English* by Benjamin Dreyer. It's subtitled, "An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style." Now, this isn't normally the kind of book you'd read from cover to cover, as it's more of a reference book that you'd consult when you want to look something up. But Dreyer has such an engaging, amusing style that I found myself doing just that, reading it from cover to cover.

Now, he's spent most of his life as a copy editor working from Random House, which is now part of Penguin. So he talks about good writing from a very practical, rather than theoretical point of view. And he's got many interesting and very funny anecdotes of his dealings with authors. So throughout the book there's a really, a very light approach.

It's not didactic [or pedantic], but it's still firm about the things that he considers important. He had me hooked in an early chapter when he talks about the Grammar Police pulling you over to the curb over some textual transgression.

I liked it. So yeah, this is going to sit in on my bookshelf as a reference book for a long, long time.

Number four on my list is a book called *Exactly* by Simon Winchester. And the



subtitle is, "How Precision Engineers Created the Modern World," which is an almost perfect summary of the book.

Winchester has written heaps of books, such as *The Surgeon of Crawthorne*. [Something like] 30 books he's written, apparently. Now this one is packed full of fascinating facts as he delves into the history of how engineers and inventors developed their understanding of how important *precision* in measurement and manufacture is, and how it could be achieved and increasingly bettered. And this really becomes the basis of our modern world.

Now each chapter of the book starts with a number representing the amount of tolerance achieved by the [developments] in that chapter. So it starts back with the days of the steam engine and getting that so that steam didn't leak everywhere from the pistons in it. The lower the tolerance, the better. We start chapter one with tolerance of 0.1, which I think it was one of James Watt's steam engines was able to achieve that tolerance. Each subsequent chapter, drives down that tolerance as new techniques and materials that are developed, until in the final chapter we reach an astonishing tolerance of 0.00000000000000000000000000000001, an incredible 10 to the minus 35. Yet that incredible precision is required in systems like LIGO, which is used to detect gravitational waves. And this is equivalent, according to the book, of measuring the distance to Alpha Centauri A to within the width of a human hair. That's astonishing.

Anyway, highly entertaining. In fact it was so interesting. I actually bought it again, I bought a copy to give to my grandson who's interested in such matters.

Number three on my list is *The Lost City of Z* by David Grann. I've raved before about how good David Grann is as a journalist and author of nonfiction articles and books.

And this book just confirmed the view. And it's also quite extraordinary the lengths to which this middle-aged unfit American is prepared to go to research and background his stories. In this case he travels to the Amazonian jungle to pursue the fascinating story of the British explorer Percy Harrison Fawcett, who disappeared in 1925 while exploring the Amazon.

Fawcett had become convinced of, in fact, obsessed by the idea that the Amazon basin once boasted an advanced civilization which had built at least one major city housing many thousands of people, and he gave this speculated city the enigmatic name of Z.

Now in other hands, the story could have been merely a recitation of facts, but David Grann really knows how to tell a gripping narrative. Terrific stuff. Highly recommended.

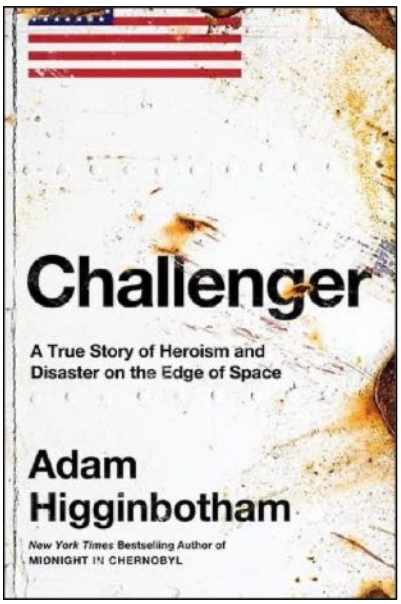
Number two on my list is *Shakespeare, The Man Who Pays the Rent* by Judy Dench. This was a terrific Christmas present from my wife at the end of 2023. It's comprised of a long series of vastly entertaining discussions, a series of interviews, between the wonderful British actress Dane Judy Dench and the actor and director Brendan O'Hay who's known her for decades. Conducted over a period of four years, the interviews focus almost entirely on her experiences in

playing Shakespeare in the theatre, but naturally it covers much more ground than that, including her relationships with other actors, her husband and fellow actor Michael Williams, her thoughts on rehearsals, costumes directors, and the acting profession in general.

Throughout the book, Dench comes across as a warm, very funny and often outspoken personality, and her close friendship with O'Hay is obvious in the back and forth of the discussions. Each of the Shakespeare plays in which she's performed is discussed in some detail, to such an extent that even if you haven't seen or read a particular Shakespeare work, you'll have no trouble following along with a great deal of interest. Dench seems to have a remarkable memory and remembers many of the key lines of dialogue from the plays under discussion.

So I devoured this book in about four days after Christmas. I enjoyed every bit of it, definitely recommended.

And my final book is *Challenger* by Adam Higginbotham.



Adam Higginbotham wrote a truly excellent and deeply researched book about the Chernobyl disaster. It's called *Midnight in Chernobyl*, which I thought was really good. Now he's taken his forensic eye to the loss of the Challenger space shuttle. And working up to that tragedy, he covers much of the American space program and the workings of NASA and its subcontractors. He starts almost inevitably with the awful disaster of Apollo 1, which killed three astronauts in an inferno within their capsule. While lessons were learned from that event, a cavalier attitude to risk continued at NASA as they moved into the post-Apollo era.

Parts of the story are infuriating. The desperate yet futile attempts by engineers at Morton Thiokol, the makers of the Shuttle's solid booster rockets, to have their serious concerns about the dangers of launching in cold weather accepted by the superiors, but they were ignored. Parts are very saddening as Higginbotham looks at the background of all the crew members who were lost, such as Krista McCauliffe, a teacher who was being promoted strongly as the first teacher in space.

Higginbotham writes so well and so clearly this book is as gripping as any thriller, even though we know the sad conclusion of it.

Filled with fascinating detail, the book's over 500 pages long, hundreds of notes and sources. It's a great read, highly recommended.

And that's my best book in that category. There we are.

Overall

Perry:

I think we've gone through all of our categories now.

David:

We have. Very long.

Perry:

Very long. But let's go to our best overall, shall we? Five down to one. I'll do five first, then you do five and we'll count down. How about that way? We've talked about these books earlier, I assume. I don't think you're going to spring anything new on me, are you, David?

David:

I don't believe so.

My number five is *The Bookbinder of Jericho* by Pip Williams, which of course we've discussed. Number four was *Shakespeare, The Man Who Pays the Rent* by Judy Dench. Number three is *Challenger* by Adam Higginbotham. Number two, you won't be surprised to hear, was *The End and Everything Before* It by Finegan Kruckemeyer. Number one, of course, was *Cloudstreet* by Tim Winton.

And that's my list.

Perry:

Mine is number five, *She Rides Shotgun*, debut novel by Jordan Harper. Number four, *Red Harvest*, another crime novel, but this time by Dashiell Hammett. Number three, *Sorry* by Gail Jones. Number two, *Proud and Lonely* by Leigh Edmonds. And number one, *The Sitter* by Angela O'Keefe.

So my top three were all Australian authors, which I am pleased to see. I think that's quite good.

Now, I thought I ran this past you a little while ago, David, and asking you whether you were interested in doing this, about your biggest disappointment of the year. By that I meant the one that you thought might be really good and turned out to be either a stinker or you were just completely disappointed with. Do you have a book that fits that category?

David:

I didn't prepare for this, Perry. I'm terrible.

Perry:

Oh, sorry, I didn't put it on the run list.

David:

You did put this to me and I forgot to look it up.

Perry:

Do you want me to go first while you look it up?

David:

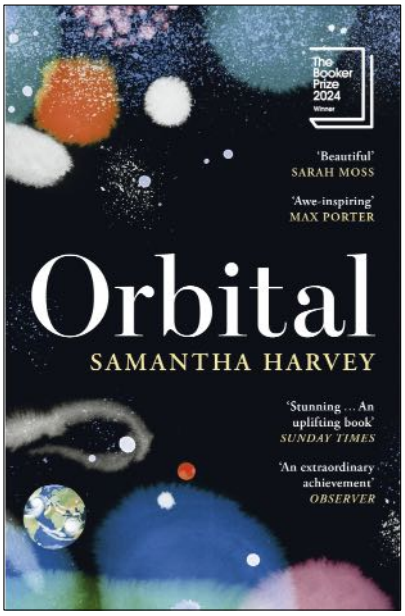
Yeah, yeah, you do that. So your disappointment of the year.

Perry:

My biggest disappointment of the year, *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey. This won the Booker Prize, there's no longer the Man Booker Prize, but the Booker Prize this year. And I'd heard very good things about it. I had great expectations that somebody who had written a literate, interesting novel, a science fiction novel. Now this short novel is actually set on the International Space Station and it follows a day in the lives of the six astronauts that are stationed there. It shows them working, sleeping, eating, relaxing, looking at the windows and thinking. And that's about it.

David:

That's it?



Perry:

That's it.

My idea of a story is one that contains characters within a narrative structure where events progress from the beginning to the end of the story. They can go off at all sorts of random bits. It doesn't even have to give me a conclusion. But here none of that happens. The most dramatic things that occur are the death of the mother of one of the astronauts and the launch during the day of four U.S. astronauts for a mission to the moon. And both of these are observed from a distance and have limited or no impact on the station astronauts. Yes, it does on the one whose mother has died. But it doesn't really go into very much detail about that. This reminds me of *Cold Enough for Snow* by Jessica Au from a couple of years ago. Beautifully written but completely forgettable when you finish it. And some people want to attempt to describe this as a prose poem. But only because it barely seems like to be a novel at all. This is reporting. This is journalism. It just tells you a story, and I mean story in a journalistic sense, of what happens to people on a spaceship. None of the characters is any different from the beginning of the novel to the end of the novel. And there is no dramatic tension. There is no dramatic progression from start to finish. I was really disappointed. And if this and *Cold Enough for Snow* is what people want to read, because nothing happens, "I don't want to be examined," "I don't want to be confronted by anything that goes on". I'm not interested in fiction of this type, David, it's not what I…I learned nothing from this. Not a bloody thing. I read it and I was… Don't want to know. Just don't want to know.

David:

All right. Well, there you go. Well, I had been playing to read that but now I won't.

Perry:

Look, the one good thing about this book, it's short. You can sit down and read it in a sitting and I'd suggest you do that and then tell me what you think about it. I've had people tell me that they think it's one of the best books written last year and in that case, it's not a book that I want.

It's not… No.

David:

Have you ever read a book called *The Wanderers* by Meg Howey?

Perry:

No, I don't think so. It sounds vaguely similar but that was…

David:

I actually rather liked that. I lent a copy to my friend Carey who didn't like it at all. But it had similarities to *Orbital*, So, yeah, I should read that just to compare it with *The Wanderers*.

Okay. So, *my* disappointment for the year was a book called *Radiant Heat* by Sarah Jane Collins, who is an Australian author.

It starts in rural Victoria in the midst of a bushfire. And this woman's house is

about to burn down. She's in the bath with wet towels over her head and all that sort of thing. But the thing which threw me off initially, which is only a trivial thing I know, but it certainly jolted me out of the reading, was that all the temperatures were given in Fahrenheit. You think, what? It's Australia. Well, okay, the book was published in America. Americans, you know, they need to have things, have to be spoon fed, I suppose.

Sorry, excuse me, American listeners.

But it went downhill from there. Basically, it was one of those stories where it only works because the protagonist acts stupidly all the way through. If she didn't act in stupid ways, the book wouldn't have a plot. She just keeps doing incomprehensibly silly things, and you think: "Don't do that. You're an idiot!" That's not a good basis for a story, I think, because you know, people are not this stupid.

No point going into detail, [just a quick background]. There's a terrible bushfire. She survives the bushfire, gets out of the bushfire, and finds that there's a car in her driveway, someone else's car in the driveway. Inside that is a woman who's died because of the radiant heat from the bushfire. She doesn't know who this woman is, but the woman's got her, the protagonist's name and address in her purse.

Anyway, I won't go into any details about that. But all these stupid things that she keeps doing, I'll give you an example. Late in the book, she's in her car, she's driving, and she sees a snake, a brown snake, on the road ahead of her. Now, I don't know if you know, that brown snakes are the most venomous snakes in the world. They're very deadly.

Now, she's safe in the car, easily able to drive around or over the snake. No, *she stops and gets out of the car*. She hasn't got anything to kill the snake with, and she has to resort to throwing rocks at it. *Why didn't she stay in the car?* Maybe it's mostly some sort of metaphor with what else goes on…

So, that was my biggest disappointment of the year.

Perry:

Yes, I would be a fairly big disappointment to me as well, by the sounds of things. It reminded me when you were talking about that, of those horror movies where people start walking around it without turning the bloody lights on. You think, "What the hell are you doing?" I don't know about anybody else, but I walk into a dark house, I turn the light on straight away. Because, especially if… It doesn't matter even if I think I know where all the furniture is, I'm going to walk into it. I don't know about you, but I don't like walking into things and banging my shins on a piece of furniture. Put the light on. You can always guarantee that they're going to do something dumb like that, and it just drags you out of the story and just wrecks it.

Anyway, I think we're done.

So, we'll finish up and talk just briefly about next episode. We are going to be doing another one in another month. That will be our list of best film and TV of 2024. Hopefully, it probably won't run for as long as this one does.

David:

It definitely won't run as long as this, because even though I've watched a lot more TV, it's not a lot.

Perry:

First time back, we've tortured our listener far too much this time, David. So, I

think that's probably best if we just take it a little bit easier next time around.

David:

Indeed.

Perry:

Alright, okay. Well, that case then, I will see you in a month's time, and we shall discuss our film and television, David.

David:

We will indeed.

Perry:

Okay. See you then.

The Lists

David's Best Books of 2024

Science Fiction and Fantasy

In Ascension by Martin Macinnes
The Hush by Sarah Foster
Dark Matter by Blake Crouch
Short Fiction by H. Beam Piper
The Absolute at Large by Karel Čapek

Crime

Under the Cold Bright Lights by Garry Disher
Devil's Kitchen by Candice Fox
Yellow Face by Rebecca F. Kuang
Cold as Hell by Lilja Sigurðardóttir
The Man in the Queue by Josephine 'Tey'

Thrillers/Spy Novels

The Hunter by Tana French
The Bird Tribunal by Agnes Ravatn
The Half-Life of Valery K by Natasha Pulley
This Kingdom of Dust by David Dyer
Reykjavik Noir trilogy by Lilia Sigurðardóttir

Historical Fiction

The Bookbinder of Jericho by Pip Williams
The Nightingale by Kristin Hannah
The Tolstoy Estate by Stephen Conte
After Alice Fell by Kim Taylor Blakemore

Children's Literature

Railhead by Philip Reeve
Mortal Engines Quartet by Philip Reeve
Utterly Dark and the Tides of Time by Philip Reeve

Literary/Non-Genre

Cloudstreet by Tim Winton
The End and Everything Before It by Finegan Kruckemeyer
The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro
A Pale View of Hills by Kazuo Ishiguro
The Burrow by Melanie Chang

Non-Fiction

Challenger by Adam Higginbotham
Shakespeare, The Man Who Pays the Rent by Judy Dench
The Lost City of Z by David Grann
Exactly by Simon Winchester
Dreyer's English by Benjamin Dreyer

Overall Best

Cloudstreet by Tim Winton
The End and Everything Before It by Finegan Kruckemeyer
Challenger by Adam Higginbotham
Shakespeare, The Man Who Pays the Rent by Judy Dench
The Bookbinder of Jericho by Pip Williams

Most Disappointing Read

Radiant Heat by Sarah Jane Collins

Perry's Best Books of 2024

Science Fiction

I Am Legend by Richard Matheson
Camp Concentration by Thomas M. Disch
The Year of the Quiet Sun by Wilson Tucker / *Contact* by Carl Sagan

Fantasy

The Book of Doors by Gareth Brown
Salem's Lot by Stephen King

Crime

She Rides Shotgun by Jordan Harper
Red Harvest by Dashiel Hammett
The Bone is Pointed by Arthur Upfield
One Corpse Too Many by Ellis Peters
Sanctuary by Garry Disher

Thrillers/Spy Novels

Spook Street by Mick Herron
Berlin Game by Len Deighton

Children's Literature

Silver on the Tree by Susan Cooper
The Ghost's Child by Sonia Hartnett

Literary/Non-Genre

The Sitter by Angela O'Keefe
Sorry by Gail Jones
The Shadow Line by Joseph Conrad
The Wasp Factory by Ian Banks
The Buddha in the Attic by Julia Otsuka
The Conversion by Amanda Lowry

Non-Fiction

Proud and Lonely by Leigh Edmonds
The Wild Places by Robert McFarlane

Overall Best

The Sitter by Angela O'Keefe
Proud and Lonely by Leigh Edmonds
Sorry by Gail Jones
Red Harvest by Dashiell Hammett
She Rides Shotgun by Jordan Harper

Most Disappointing Read

Orbital by Samantha Harvey