

Two Chairs In Print

Issue 13

A Pile of Books



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Colophon

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Transcription Episode 13

Introduction

David:

Hello and welcome to episode 13 of the second season of Two Chairs Talking. My name is David Grigg and I'm joined, as always, by my good friend Perry Middlemiss. How's things in the new year, Perry?

Perry:

Oh not too bad, thank you David. I'm glad that the silly season is over. It doesn't, it's not quite as silly as it used to be. When I was a working gent and having to go off to all those Christmas functions and work out who I had to give presents to, or who had to be nice to, don't have to do that so much anymore.

David:

No.

Perry:

I've just got to look after the family, and that's the major thing.

Our 2025 Reading

David:

And I was going to ask you, have you made any New Year's resolutions? Because my New Year's resolution is to read a lot more books.

Perry:

Guess what, David? That's exactly the same as me. So we shall get into that because I didn't have a very good year last year reading books at all.

David:

No, me neither.

Perry:

It was a shocker for me. I read a grand total of 42 books during the year, which is less than one a week. Given that a couple of years back I was up over a hundred for the year, I had a bit of a think about what happened. This is my worst reading year since 2013. And I really only started to take keep records properly around about 2013. I know a lot of other people have kept them for donkeys' ages, but I've kept them for about the last thirteen or so years.

I know that there's been an increase in the number of movies that I've watched this last year because I made a specific point of thinking at the end of last year that my New Year's resolution was that I was going to watch more films. Either at home or in the cinema, and I've certainly done that. And I'm wondering whether that was what caused the drop-off in the number of books read because looking back on it, I think I actually read more books per week, up to about at least two a week while I was away on holidays in South America. So, I wasn't being distracted by all the other things that were floating around. And, you know, you're just putting aside the idea that you've got time at the end of the day, or first thing

in the morning, or even on the bus sometimes, because you know that can get a bit tedious. There were a few places, even though I'd never seen the place before, this two or three kilometres looks exactly the same as the last two or three kilometers, and you can actually pick up a bit of time reading. There's only a certain amount of hours in a day that you can allocate to either reading or watching media of any sort. So, you know, basically that's probably what it is. It's probably just me watching a lot more films than I have done over the past.

David:

Certainly the same for me. I've been watching a lot more TV, you know, films and TV series on TV than the previous years, and there's a reason for that, but I won't go into it. But I've certainly been trying to fill in the evenings a bit more, and so that tends to be, rather than reading, tended to be watching something fairly mindless on the television. So yeah, I only I only got through 44 books, so I beat you by two, but that was all.

Favourite Books of 2025

Perry:

Well, I think that's going to mean that this episode, David, in which we are going to be talking about our best books of 2025, it's going to be a lot shorter than they have been over the last few years when they've run to a couple of hours. We're not going to go that long this time, I don't think.

David:

Our listener will be very pleased to hear that.

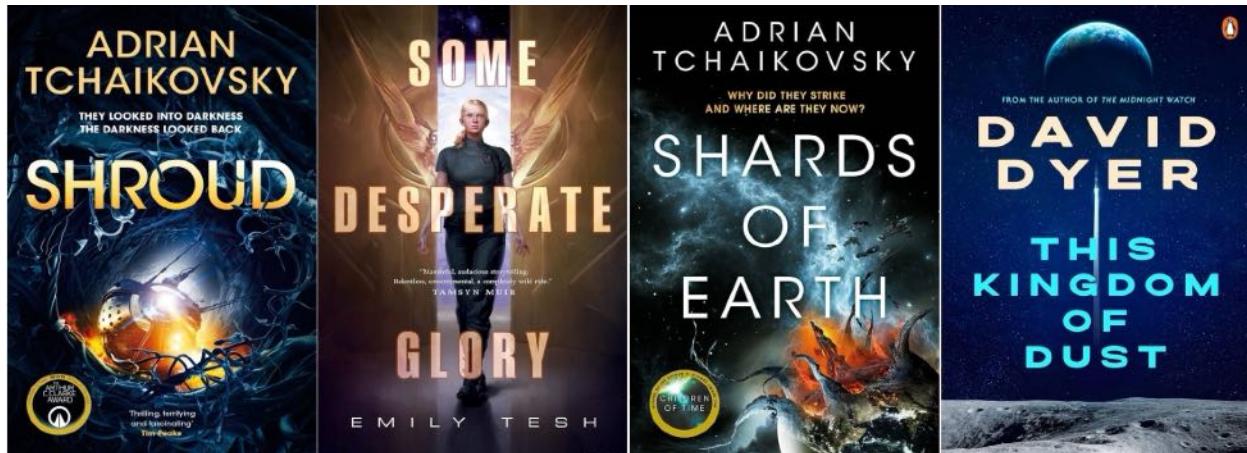
Perry:

Oh, I think they probably will be. So anyway, shall we move straight on in?

David:

Let's do it. What genre are we going to start with?

Perry's Favourite SF books of 2025



Perry:

Well, let's go with Best SF first, and I'll kick us off.

I read eleven books this year that I would label as being SF, and I'm going to cheat. I was only going to give my best book in each category this year, but I'm going to cheat here for a very good reason. I'm actually going to cheat a couple of times because I gave the same score to the top two books in this particular category. And also same thing happens further down as we'll get to later on in the episode.

But my two books this year that I thought were the best SF novels I read were *Some Desperate Glory* by Emily Tesh and *Shroud* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Now I'll talk about these separately and then you can probably come in and let me know whether you think I'm right or wrong or whether you'd disagree.

So *Some Desperate Glory* by Emily Tesh. [It] won the 2024 Hugo Award for Best Novel. Not always a prime indicator as to the worth of a book these days, because anyway for whatever reason but this one certainly was. This is set in a distant future where humankind has been defeated in an interstellar war by an alien race known as the Majo. Earth has been totally destroyed and humans are now either integrated into the Majo society or living on a small number of outposts. One of these is the separatist Gaia. The station is run along strict militaristic lines, rather like ancient Sparta. Every citizen on the station is valued according to how they can help achieve that aim, that is, that to overthrow the Majo society and to build the station up into a militaristic society.

Now women are mostly relegated to the role of human incubators and any "defectives", and I'll put that in inverted commas, being discarded rather like Sparta. Now the main character of this book, Kyr, is a young woman who attains high combat training scores but is still assigned to the nursery on graduation. So she's not very impressed with this and rebels and escapes the station, leading her into a confrontation with the vast AI that oversees the Majo. This is an example of 2020's Space Opera with a lot of consideration given to gender politics, fascism and the role of AI, all wrapped up in a rather engaging action thriller. I thought it was pretty good. I gave this one 4.3 out of 5, the same score that I gave *Shroud*.

Now we spoke about this particular novel, *Shroud*, by Adrian Tchaikovsky fairly extensively on episode 7 in July last year, David, and I think we both liked it, as I recall. It's possibly the best first contact novel I've read in years. The novel is set

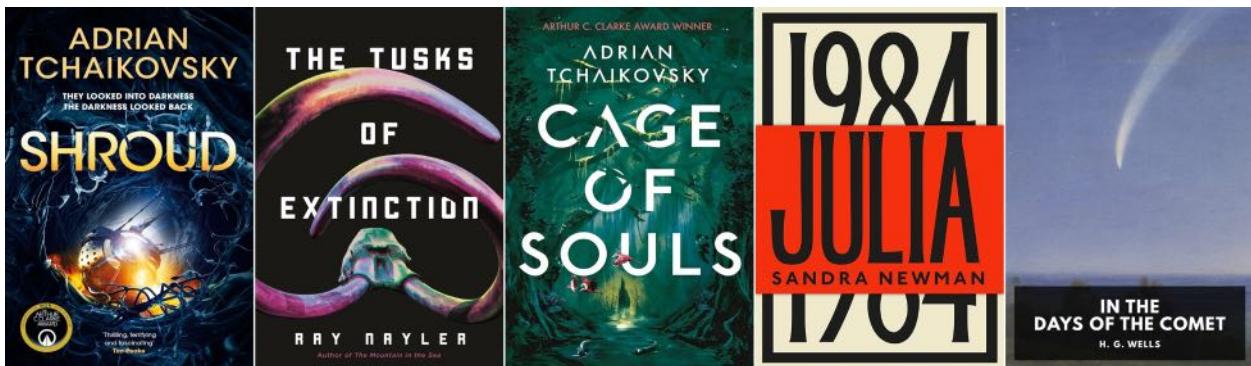
on a tidally locked moon of a super Jovian planet in a distant solar system. Space opera again, David. Good stuff. The planet is completely dark with an optically opaque atmosphere. And Tchaikovsky introduces an alien that communicates via electromagnetic waves, which does its best to communicate with a pair of marooned humans that have crash-landed on this planet. They've attempted to get back to the human base on the other side of the moon. I should say moon, rather than planet, but it's big enough to be a planet. Anyway, so they need to move across the surface from one side of the moon to the other in order to get back to the human base to be able to rejoin their colleagues. And this novel follows the journey of these two humans across this dark alien landscape. It tells the story from the points of view of one of the humans and one of the aliens. It does it very, very well.

I was very impressed with this, and I thought that Tchaikovsky really got stuck into hard science fiction here. Really did a good job. So I thought this was pretty riveting stuff, and also gave it 4.3 out of 5.

Now, so that's my SF, but I've got two honourable mentions that I'd like to list, and I won't talk about them very much. One of these is *Shards of Earth* by, guess who, Adrian Tchaikovsky. He seems to be everywhere. This is the first novel in the authors' series titled *The Final Architecture*. I think there are four books in that series. I'm not sure. This is another big sprawling space opera, winner of the BSFA Awards, a British Science Fiction Association Award for best novel in the year that it came out. I gave this one 4.2, just a touch under the two winners.

The other one, *This Kingdom of Dust*, by David Dyer, which is a reimagining of the Apollo 11 mission in 1969. We discussed this book on the podcast in March of this year, and I gave that 4.2 out of 5 as well. So, out of the what was it, 11 SF novels I read I've got four that I would highly recommend. There's probably a couple of others, but those in particular were the best of the ones that I read this year, David.

David's Favourite SF books of 2025



David:

There you go. Well, you've stolen my thunder a little bit.

Perry:

This is always going to be the problem here, where we should tell the reader that we don't actually check each other's lists before we get into this, which is probably a bit of a problem.

David:

So I'll work my way up from number three to number one, which I like to do that, so I won't make this too long, but anyway. So, number three on my list was *Cage of Souls* by, guess who, Adrian Tchaikovsky.

Perry:

We really have to find somebody else to read, David, I think.

David:

Yeah, yeah, that's right. But he's just such a good writer. This one I guess you certainly wouldn't call this hard SF. It's not space opera.

It's basically a long way in the future. Humans are pretty much the same as they always were, but animals have evolved, and so there's all sorts of kind of monsters around. It really focuses on a particular guy who's being taken, as the book opens, he's being taken up the river in a ferry to be put on a prison island. So it's how he got there, why he's been imprisoned, and what happens to him afterwards, of course, is all what happens unfolds in the story. But I thought it was very enjoyable and very engaging and thought-provoking like a lot of Tchaikovsky's books are. So that was good.

Number two on my list was *The Tusks of Extinction* by Ray Naylor, which again we talked about on the podcast. What would you say about that? It's set in a slightly future Earth where they've managed to recreate woolly mammoths and it's really a lot about the problems with poaching for ivory, which starts off with this young woman who's trying to stop African elephants being poached for ivory. But then we moved through various stages and now we have these woolly mammoths which are being created. But of course, they've got some fantastic ivory to be harvested by poachers too. So how do they defend against that possibility? So that was good.

Number one on my list for science fiction was *Shroud* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. So I won't say any more about that, except that yes, I really enjoyed that too.

Perry:

Well, I just recently read another of his recent books, *Service Model*, which is about a well, a robot that goes rogue and then tries to work out what its real place in the world is. While it's okay, I don't think it's up to the standard of *Shroud*. Maybe he's putting out too many books. I'm not sure. Anyway, we'll keep an eye on him because I've still got a lot of his back catalogue to get through and you know there's a fair bit of that to read and he's very prolific.

David:

Yes, indeed. Be before we leave SF, I've got a couple of honourable mentions too, one of which you'll groan at because I know you didn't like it, which was *Julia* by Sandra Newman. which was a feminist retake on *1984*.

And out of the box, *In the Days of the Comet* by HG Wells. which I produced for Standard Ebooks, which is intriguing. It has a theme pretty much like the new T V series *Pluribus* in that green vapors... a comet hits the earth and green vapors spread everywhere and change human consciousness for the good in this in this book. It's worth reading. So that's all my SF.

Perry:

Yeah, I've got to go back and get into some of the old H. G. Wells stuff at some point. I read a lot of it when I was younger, but I haven't reread it in probably 50 years or so. And of course it's all just faded completely. Some of them, some of them like *The Invisible Man*, *The Time Machine*. That sort of stuff. *War of the Worlds*, you know the basic stories of them because they've been hashed over in the media everywhere, but don't know that one. I don't remember that one at all.

David:

No, it's a one of his lesser-known books, but it's worthwhile. Free e-book, of course, through Standard Ebooks.

Perry:

Okay, all right, and in much better shape and much better format than Project Gutenberg.

David:

Well, we started with their transcript and just made it better.

Perry:

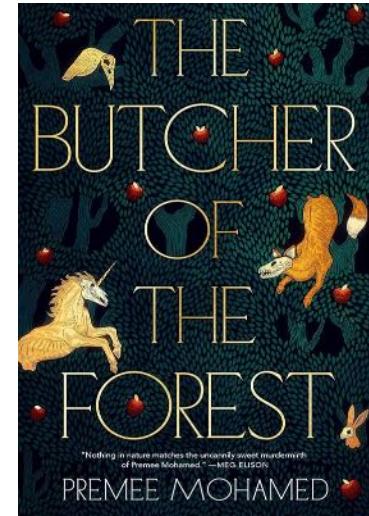
Just made it better, but that's good.

Perry's Favourite Fantasy books of 2025

Perry:

Okay, so next genre, Fantasy. I only read seven books in the Fantasy genre this year, and I've really only got one that I would want to talk about and that's at the top of my list. But even there it doesn't make four out of five, David. Not quite.

Anyway, so this is *The Butcher of the Forest* by Premee Mohamed. This is a novella and it was the finalist of both the 2025 Hugo and Nebula Awards. Now, Premee Mohamed has given us a variant here of Hansel and Gretel fairy tale, but with added blood, viscera, and horror. So she's basically updated it as best she can. And I was especially taken with her descriptions of the other world inside the forest that she deals with, where she uses the descriptions of smell as well as sound and visuals. to conjure up a land none of us would willingly enter. I thought it was a strong and an effective fantasy. Could almost be down at the horror end, but I've included all my horror books in the fantasy genre this year. I gave this one 3.9 out of five. That's basically the only thing that I would recommend. We did read *The Saint of Bright Doors*, a big, big, big fantasy novel during the year, but I wasn't taken with that one, so that's not included here at all.



David:

Yeah, it doesn't appear on my list, I can tell you.

Perry:

Yeah, okay. I didn't think it probably would be.

David:

All right. Well, are you done there? Do you have any others?

Perry:

Oh, I'm done. Completely done with fantasy. Didn't get much out of that at all.

David's Favourite Fantasy books of 2025



David:

Well I've got four books I'll mention.

So number four on my list was *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street* by Natasha Pulley. She's an author who I find very interesting. She wrote a book called *The Kingdoms* a few years ago, which I really liked. She also wrote a non-fantasy, non-SF book called *The Half-Life of Valery K*, which is set in a Soviet scientific camp associated with nuclear reactors, which are making plutonium for nuclear weapons. Very interesting book.

Anyway, this particular one, *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street*, is fantasy. It features, among other things, a clockwork octopus, which is used as a pet by the watchmaker. It's interesting, I won't talk at any great length about it. It's set in the Victorian era, late Victorian era, and the watchmaker himself is actually Japanese. He's an interesting character. It's an interesting book, but I won't talk about it at length now.

Number three on my list is a very, very short book, which is really just actually a short story, but it's produced in a book format, which is *The Wood at Midwinter* by Susanna Clarke, who you might recall wrote *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, and *Piranesi*. This is just a short story, but I love her so much as a writer, I had to have it. It's beautifully illustrated, though. It could be a nice little gift to give someone: hardbound, very nice.

Number two on my list is the last book of a trilogy. That's *The Last Song of Penelope* by Claire North. She's been writing a trilogy about the Odysseus myth, and [giving] a very feminist take on it. She focuses very much on Penelope, Odysseus' wife who is left behind to look after the island of Ithaca and its people. Yeah, I liked it a lot. So that was the last book in that series.

Speaking about trilogies, I'm going to actually nominate the entire *Book of Dust* trilogy by Philip Pullman as my number one choice for Fantasy for the Year. I'm not going to talk about it at any great length, but it's a continuation or an extension of his original trilogy *His Dark Materials* and features the same character Lyra Bellaqua or Lyra Silvertongue as she's now called. It was just very entertaining. So that was that.

Perry:

So the first book of this trilogy was out some years ago.

David:

Yes, that's right. I re-read them all [this year].

Perry:

It was actually a prequel to the main trilogy, wasn't it?

David:

That's correct, yeah, yeah.

Perry:

Yeah, and then the last two are sequels?

David:

Sequels, yeah, Lyra is [now] a young woman, she's like nineteen or twenty, I think. And being a student. So it goes on from there. So, yeah, I put the whole trilogy down because I read the entire trilogy again during the year. I read the first two books again and then read the third book which has just come out. So yeah, I would recommend that, certainly recommend that if you're a fan of *His Dark Materials*.

Perry:

Did it get to two thousand pages, all up?

David:

All three books? There are about six or seven hundred pages each, so nearly two thousand [pages], yeah.

Perry:

Yeah pretty close, I would have thought. Yep, well that's a fair bit of reading. You could have added another six books onto your total there, David, for the year. So you would have hit 50 for the year. There you go.

David:

That's a good idea, but I didn't.

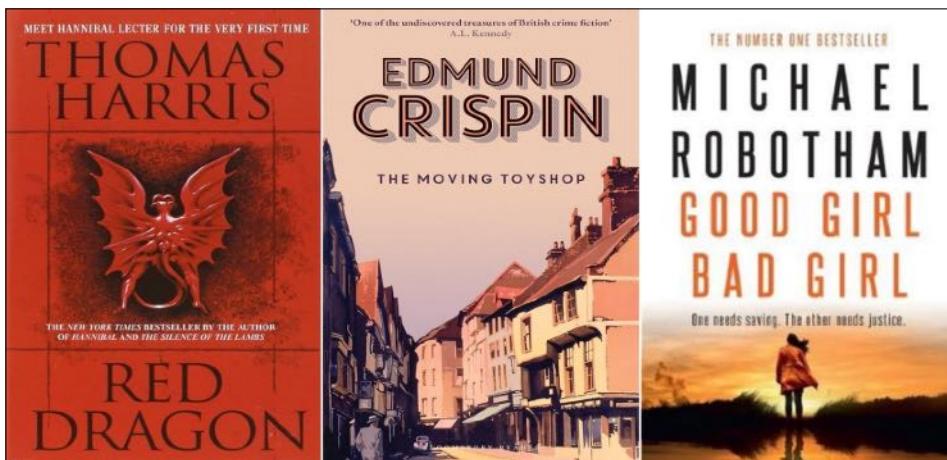
Perry:

Oh, okay, so all done with fantasy?

David:

All done with fantasy for me.

Perry's Favourite Crime books of 2025



Perry:

Alright, okay, so best crime then. Again, I only read seven here, and I'm going to mention three books.

My best for the year was *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris. This is Harris' first novel to feature Hannibal Lecter. The one that's generally forgotten. Now, Lecter, of course, is that brilliant cannibalistic serial killer made famous by his depiction by Anthony Hopkins in Jonathan Demme's 1991 adaptation of the sequel to this novel, *The Silence of the Lambs*. Now, this particular novel was made into a film called *Manhunter* sometime back in the 80s. But then was after *The Silence of the Lambs* did so well and was remade, I think as *Red Dragon*, with Anthony Hopkins as Lecter again.

Now, in this particular novel, the main lead detective Will Graham, who was responsible for Lecter's capture three or four years before this novel begins, is faced with another serial killer and decides to visit Lecter in order to get some insight about this new killer. And that turns out to be a really big mistake.

I think this is an excellent piece of work. Harris pulls off a really remarkable trick here, having his most malevolent and most nuanced character offstage for the bulk of the book. But it just hangs over the top of the whole thing. You know that when you read the difficulty is you can't come back and read this for the very first time *not knowing who Lecter is*. If you could do that, it would be interesting to work out whether Harris carries that feeling that Lecter is this big malevolence that's over the top of the book the whole way. Unfortunately that's a river that we can't step into again because it's completely and utterly gone. So I just hope that if people haven't read it and don't know much about Hannibal Lecter, other than maybe just the name, maybe they should come back and start with this one. You really do need to read this one if you want to get the full Lecter story because this gives a lot of the background and leads into *The Silence of the Lambs*. So I gave this one 4.3 out of 5.

My honourable mentions for crime novels were *The Moving Toy Shop* by Edmund Crispin. It's a classic from the golden age of detective novels of the 1940s. Lots of humour, adventure, derring-do set in Oxford. Wonderful stuff. It just keeps on rolling and it's, it's quite light, there's not much to it, but it's just handled very, very well, and I really quite enjoyed it.

And the other one, *Good Girl, Bad Girl* by Michael Robotham, which was the winner of the Crime Writers Association Gold Dagger Award in 2020. This is the

first of the author's Cyrus Haven series of novels. It's really the set of the strange demented characters in the book that stay with you after you finish this novel. I think I've got to eek this out. I'll try and read one of his in this series every year. I think if I read three or four of them in a short space of time, I think it would start to lose its impact. But yeah, so I gave this one 4.0 out of 5.

So they're my three in the crime genre.

David:

Ah, there you go.

Perry:

David?

David's Favourite Crime books of 2025



David:

Okay, so I'll start with number three then. So my number three was *The Unquiet Grave* by Dervla McTiernan, who's a writer... we've enjoyed her books in the past. So it's another Cormac Riley book. And I found it very good.

It starts with the discovery of a body in a bog in Ireland. You think, oh, yeah, you know, we've heard the story of the prehistoric ritual killings and so on, and the bodies being found preserved after many, many centuries because of the conditions. But this is actually a fresh body because it's wearing underpants. So they decide it's a recent murder and [the book] goes on to discover why that's the case. It's very clever. There are three story threads to it, which she weaves together pretty cleverly, I thought. So I really enjoyed that one. So that was that one.

Number two was a book by Kate Atkinson, who's one of my favourite writers, *Death at the Sign of the Rook*. This again features one of those [continuing] characters that run through a series. It's a character [called] Jackson Brodie, which I think you saw the TV series and liked the character?

Perry:

Yep, yes, I did.

David:

Yeah, well the books are extremely good. The thing I liked about this was that it reintroduces my favourite character from these books (other than Jackson Brodie), which is a young girl, a young woman called Reggie Chase, and she's the standout character in the book *When Will There Be Good News?*. But she's now grown up and has joined the police force in Yorkshire and she's now graduated in this book to be a detective.

It's kind of a bit of a farce, kind of deliberately so. It ends up with all the main action happening in an old mansion where they're hosting one of those mystery parties where people take on characters and there are actors pretending to murder other characters — it's one of those mystery staged events. But of course, there are some *real* things happening. That's good.

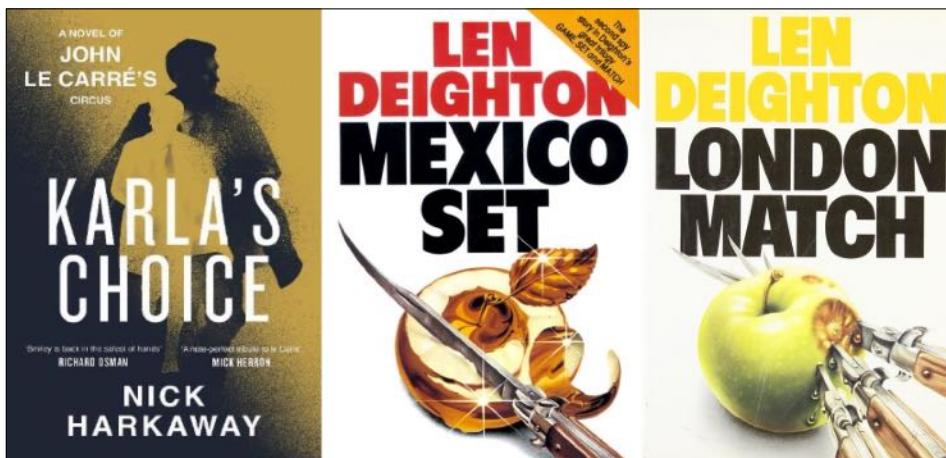
Then, number one on my list was *The White Crow* by Michael Robotham. Again, as an author we've both enjoyed his books. This is actually the second in a series, although I read it first, featuring a young police officer, Philomena McCarthy. She's just started in the police force, but her time in the police force is made very, very difficult because her father and all her uncles are criminals. They're career criminals. Most of them have been in jail.

So this one's nice. It starts off with this officer, Philomena, spotting a very young child out on her own at night, and she manages eventually to coax the child out of where she's hiding. Then her heart sinks when the young girl tells her that she's been trying to wake her mother and she can't wake up her mother. So, you know, we go on and we of course discover that the mother has been murdered. It goes on from there. But it's very entertaining. This is a clever premise, I think, of the police officer with a criminal family behind [her]. So, yeah, that was my number one. I don't have any honourable mentions. I could mention *I Hear the Sirens in the Street* by Adrian McKentie, which I re-read during the year, but that's about all.

Perry:

Okay. Alright, well it sounds like a good bunch.

Perry's Favourite Thriller books of 2025



Perry:

Alright, moving on to the thriller genre. Now this one could be action novels or it could be spy novels. Mine are all going to be spy novels.

Well, all of them, but I've got a winner and a couple of honourable mentions. My best thriller of the year was *Karla's Choice* by Nick Harkaway, which we spent a lot of time discussing in May last year, David.

Now, Nick Harkaway, as you recall, is John Le Carré's son, so his name is Nick Cornwell, but he has written a number of novels under the name Nick Harkaway, and he's written this book, *Karla's Choice*, also under the pseudonym. It's basically a sequel of—it's not quite a sequel because it fits in the middle—anyway, it's a novel that fits into the George Smiley series of novels that his father wrote.

Now, this one is set a few months after the end of *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* and attempts to answer the question of how Karla, the main opponent of Smiley all the way through his novels, how Karla went from being a lowly intelligence officer facing a possible bullet to [being] the head of Moscow Central. Harkaway does an excellent job with the imitation of his father's voice in this. Killer book. So good that it's easy to forget that Le Carré died in 2020. It took a little while to get rolling at the beginning, but once it kicked off and really got into it after about 40 or 50 pages, it was fantastic. And I just thought that, you know, it's almost as if Le Carré had made some notes and Harkaway just filled in the gaps. But it did a very good job with this one. And I give this one 4.3 out of 5.

My honourable mentions go to two other spy novels, *Mexico Set* and *London Match* by Len Deighton. These are the second and third novels of the author's first trilogy of Bernard Samson novels. There are nine novels in all here, David. So three trilogies. This is the *Game, Set and Match* [trilogy]. And then I think there's *Hook, Line, and Sinker*, and *Faith, Hope, and Charity*, I think. They are the three trilogies. Not sure exactly the order, but this is the very first one.

Now, Deighton's probably second only to Le Carré when it came to exploring the spy world of the Cold War of the 1970s and 80s. These two are excellent and so good that I actually read them back to back, which is something that I don't do, as I said earlier, but I just felt that when I was away on holiday, they just seemed to fit exactly what I wanted. I read *Mexico Set* and thought, yeah, look, I really do need to know what's going to happen in the second part of this. It is dealing with a mole inside British intelligence, somebody who's very close to Bernard Sampson, as we find out. Then what are the implications of that for both him and

for the mole? So they're excellent stuff, and I really, really enjoy them, and I can recommend them to anybody.

David:

Yeah, I haven't read any of his work.

Perry:

So I'm really looking forward to going on and reading the next couple of trilogies, which I'll probably get stuck into when I'm travelling again. Seems to work. So they're my best thrillers of the year, David. Yep.

David's Favourite Thriller books of 2025



David:

Well, I have to say, again, you've pipped me a bit in that *Karla's Choice* is also on my list, but it came in at number two on my list. The interesting thing, out of the five that I've nominated, *Karla's Choice* came in number two but every other book on the list was written by Mick Herron.

So two of them were Slough House books, *Joe Country* and *London Rules*. And the other two were Zoë Boehm stories.

Number one on my list was *Down Cemetery Road*, which was his first novel. I just think that's excellent. Number five on my list came in as *The Last Voice You Hear* by Mick Herron. I don't know, I can't say much about it other than they're just well worth well worth reading, and there are TV series is based on both of [these series] now on Apple TV.

I wasn't all that impressed by the TV series of *Down Cemetery Road*, which I thought was a bit disappointing.

Perry:

I think it had a poor ending.

David:

Yeah, I agree about the ending. The last episode was terrible, I thought, and it deviated enormously from the book, not to a good advantage, I thought it was poor.

Perry:

Well, it's interesting that I was reading something from George Martin the other day where he was talking about how isn't it funny that when you go and get a novel of yours adapted—he was talking because he's a writer and he's talking about having his novels adapted by other people—and whenever you have the novels being adapted by somebody else, either the scriptwriter or the producer or the director thinks they know more about the novel than you do, [even though] you're the author, and thinks they can improve on it. As he said, nine hundred and ninety nine times out of a thousand, they are wrong. That is probably correct.

I mean, generally what happens is the novelist will spend a lot longer working everything out and if you're going to pick up the book, and you picked it up for a particular reason, changing it completely around you know, seems a little odd. I know that in *Down Cemetery Road*, it struck me as being peculiar that there was a whole slab in the beginning with Zoë's husband—Joe, is it?—who was doing the first initial investigations. He's really barely in the TV series at all. And yet he's a fairly major character early on. They obviously decided that the lead was going to basically be the one who was going to be through it all the way right through.

David:

Well, they're paying Emma Thompson, so I guess they wanted to do it. In the book she doesn't appear until quite late in the piece.

Perry:

Well, they had to make sure that she was going to be the one that [they focused on]. Yeah, I was talking to my wife about this when I was reading it and saying that oh I don't know how they're going to make a TV series out of this where she's only in it for a little bit here and a little bit there and then she's in it for about the last third.

David:

Yeah, yeah.

Perry:

Anyway, there we go.

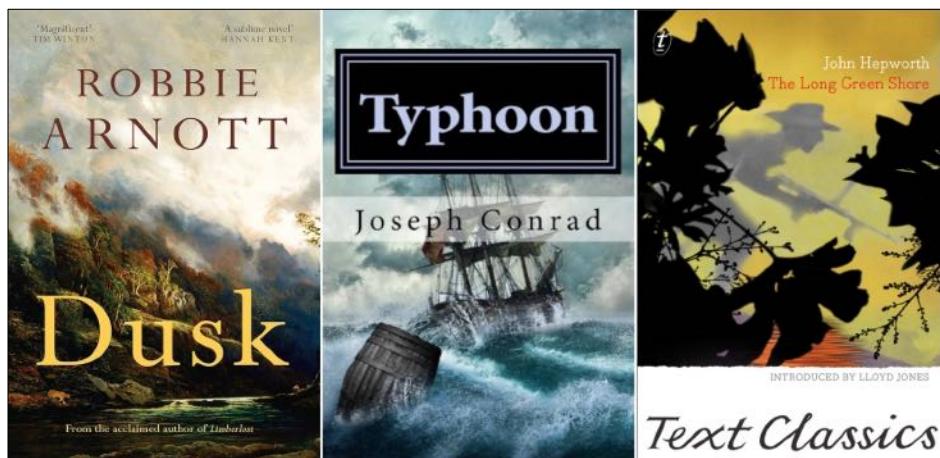
David:

I thought it was a pity, considering what a good job they made of *Slow Horses*.

Perry:

Yes, yes. Anyway, hopefully the TV series will improve as we move down the track.

Perry's Favourite Literary books of 2025



Perry:

Okay, so my next the next category we're going to get to is best literary, David. And I, unfortunately for you, have a three-way tie here, David. Unfortunately. Oh yeah, sorry about that. But I won't give you any honorable mentions. I'll just do the three-way tie.

The first of these is *Dusk* by Robbie Arnott. All of these were given a 4.2 out of 5. Now we discussed this novel extensively on the March episode in 2025, and it's a bit of a move away for Arnott. He shifted publishers and genres with this book, but he's kept the locale of the Tasmanian landscape that he obviously loves and writes about so well. It's set in the late 1800s in Tasmania. It follows the story of the Renshaw twins, one male, one female, who attempt to capture or kill a wild puma for a very large reward. These pumas have been introduced to kill off the local deer, but have decided they really like the sheep a lot better, and the local farmers have decided that they really need to get rid of this puma, so they put a reward out.

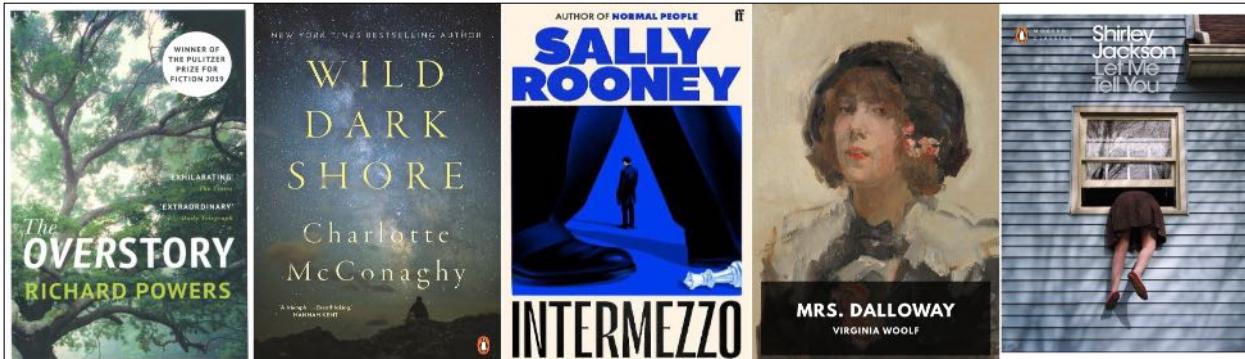
Now, this novel reads like an Australian Western, with many of the standard stereotypes of that genre displayed here. But Arnott, of course, being Arnott, is able to add a degree of depth to the stories told here, both background and foreground, and it very much raises the book above any standard pulp offering. So I think it's really quite a good book. Really enjoyed it.

Second one, a novella, *Typhoon* by Joseph Conrad. This is Conrad's classic novella about men battling away through a typhoon —what you and I would call a cyclone in Australia, David — in the Far East in the late 1800s. His depiction of the men and their ship in peril as they travel closer and closer to the eye of the storm is harrowing and downright scary. You have to remember that Conrad was writing this in English, his second language. So he's just a complete... he's just extraordinary. He's a master of both stories of the sea and the novella length. It's a big question: do you think there are any better writers about men at sea than Conrad? Maybe O'Brien? I don't know. But he's just so good at this sort of stuff. It really is really good. We talked about this novella in the April episode in 2025. And I'd recommend people read this. It's reasonably short, 120 pages. You can sit down, you can read it in a day. Excellent stuff.

The other one that I wanted to [talk about], the last one of the three, is *The Long Green Shore* by John Hepworth, an Australian novel set during the Second World War. Originally written in 1948, it wasn't published until the mid-1990s. Which is a real pity as it would have fared better over time to have been published soon

after the Second World War that it depicts. Hepworth's novel follows the war adventures of a group of Australian soldiers fighting against the Japanese on the north coast of New Guinea in the dying days of the war. Now, everybody is sick of this. Everybody in the novel is sick of the war. The Australian [soldiers] just want to end the war and go home, basically try and get there and get home intact. But the Japanese soldiers refused to surrender. Now mostly the Australians sit around drinking, playing cards and hoping the Japanese will sit and do exactly the same until the war's over. But of course that doesn't happen, and there's just one last push up the coast. Even as rumors circulate that a big bomb has been dropped on Japan and that things will be over soon. But it's an excellent piece of work, this. I really enjoyed it. It's part of the Text Classics from Text Publishing, I gave this 4.2 out of 5, like the other two in this in this category, I thought it was excellent.

David's Favourite Literary books of 2025



David:

Well I read quite a lot of literary or non-genre fiction through the year, so I've got a good five books I'd like to talk about. Number five on my list, working on the way up, working up from the bottom. Number five on my list was a collection of short stories and essays by Shirley Jackson. and it's called *Let Me Tell You*. She's just a wonderful writer. So I've read quite a few of her short stories. I've read two of her novels. So it was it's good to get this new collection. It's put together by her children. She was an extraordinary writer, really, and it's terribly tragic. She died in her fifties, of cancer, I think. But in that short life she was able to raise four children, run a household, deal with an adulterous husband, and still write a huge number of stories and novels. So she's a great writer, so I won't go into any detail about any particular story, but it's well worth reading the collection if you're a Shirley Jackson fan.

Perry:

So when was this collection published?

David:

Just last year.

Perry:

Oh, okay. So is it stuff that's appeared in any of her other collections?

David:

It's mostly stuff that hasn't. Or they've appeared in obscure collections or whatever. So you won't see any of the very familiar stories like "The Lottery" or "One Ordinary Day with Peanuts", for example. I've actually got the Library of America collection of her work and those are in there.

Anyway, number four on my list was *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, which I thought was really interesting. It's all told as a series of streams of consciousness which kind of merge into each other. Focusing on one particular character and what they're thinking, and then almost within a paragraph, you're reading what another character is thinking, and then you go on with that other character. I don't have time to talk about it in detail, but it's really interesting. Set between the World Wars in London and there's one particular character who's very interesting who's a soldier who fought in the in the First World War and has obviously come down with what we would now call PTSD. He's suffering greatly and so is his Italian wife, who he has brought back to England with him, and she's trying to trying to deal with his increasing insanity and it's very tragic. But that's only one little part of the whole novel. It's quite a short novel.

Number three on my list was *Intermezzo* by Sally Rooney, who you might remember wrote *Normal People* and a number of other well regarded books. This was great, about a chess Champion and his brother, it's really about the two brothers and their relationship and their relationship with women, is what the whole thing's about. But that's very, very well written.

Number two on my list is a book I raved about in our last episode, which is *Wild Dark Shore* by Charlotte McConaghy. And I talked about it in our last episode, so I won't talk about it at any great length here. But again, it's a novel about character, and the relationships between characters, relationships between parents and children, [between] men and women. It's set on this remote island on the way to Antarctica.

Number one on my list is all about trees. It's *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. It literally is all about trees. Well, it's all about people and trees, people and their relationship to trees. If that sounds not interesting, you're wrong, it's really, really interesting. I think there are, there must be about six or seven individual characters. You start off with their individual stories and then, of course, eventually their stories come together and they get involved with trying to defend the forests against logging and get into trouble. So that's very well worth reading. I certainly highly recommend that.

In fact, I recommend all of those books, but *The Overstory*, *Wild Dark Shore*, *Intermezzo*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Let Me Tell You*, all very good books.

Perry:

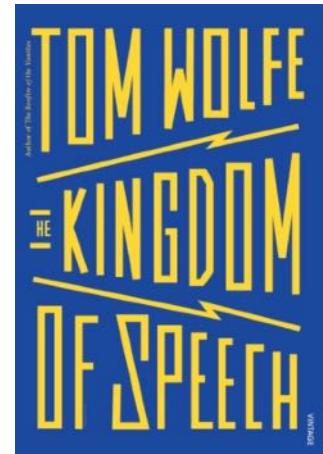
Okay. All right, that sounds pretty good. A very varied set there. Yeah, which is good, which is what we want. Maybe that's what might spark us on to read a bit more if we spread our wings a little bit more widely and try and find things and don't stay with books that we don't like. Maybe that's the other thing. Maybe that's the way it goes.

Perry's Favourite Nonfiction books of 2025

Perry:

So, where to now? Best nonfiction? All right, okay. Again, because of the number of books I read during the year, I only read one nonfiction book this year, so this will be the one that I talk about.

The book is called *Kingdom of Speech* by Tom Wolfe. Now, the Tom Wolfe here is that member of the new journalism movement, known mainly for such books as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and *The Right Stuff* about the NASA astronaut program of the early 1960s. Here Wolfe tackles a problem with the theory of evolution. Wolfe contends that not enough emphasis has been placed on the evolution of the power of speech. and how this forms the major difference between humans and the other animals. Wolfe here gets stuck into Darwin in a big way for stealing or dismissing the original research of Alfred Wallace. If you remember, there was the two of them working on things at the same time and Darwin ended up being the star, and Wallace's almost forgotten.



[Wolfe also] gets stuck into Noam Chomsky because he basically—Chomsky this is—sticks firmly to his idea that all languages are based on a mechanism called the language acquisition device, and he sticks to that even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Now, Chomsky, of course, disliked Wolfe very much indeed because he thought that a lot of his arguments were superficial and superfluous. There's a certain point that, yes, that is true. It is very thin on the ground. It does raise some interesting questions, but doesn't unfortunately set out to answer them in any big way.

So the book's an interesting take on a fundamental question of evolution. But I think it's rather let down by the author's runaway new journalism style, which seems a little forced at times. If you're trying to make an intellectual argument, you don't want to... I don't know, it just didn't sit right with me with the style. If you're reading Tom Wolfe because you read Tom Wolfe, well then you know that's exactly what you're going to expect and what you're going to get. I just didn't think it was the right way to run it with this. But I did think it was interesting.

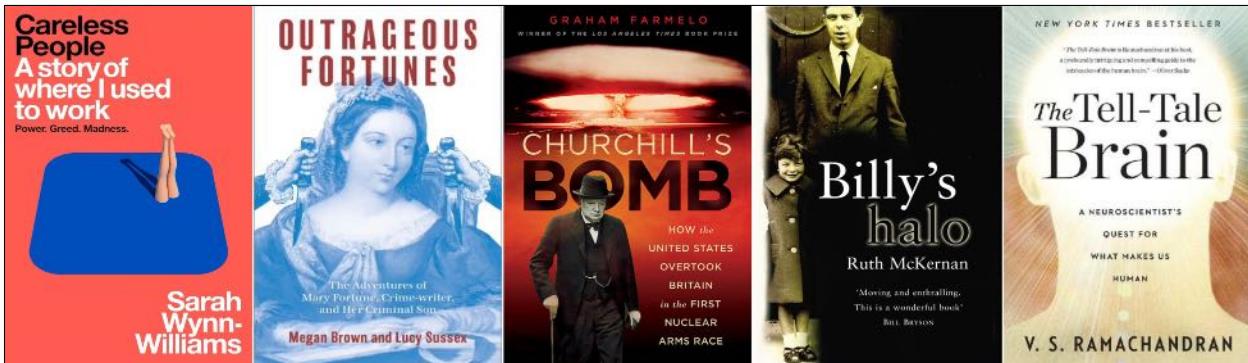
And I think it raises some very peculiar questions about how Homo Sapiens came to have the gift of language. I suppose the question is, did the Neanderthals? I don't know. And I don't think we'll ever know. I mean, we can surmise. In terms of what the skull looks like and what the tongue and the brain look like, and maybe work out whether it's similar enough to what we've got at the moment. Maybe that might mean they did have the gift of speech. But we don't really know. We don't really know at all. It's probably well, it's the only way that we can communicate properly over distance and even face to face as well as we do. or as badly as we do, but at least we have the gift. But how do we get it? This is the question.

Now, I'm not saying that it's, I mean, I know there's an answer in there in evolution somewhere. Evolution, biochemistry in the physical, purely and simply, in the physical arrangements of Homo Sapiens. There's no external agency here that came down and tapped us on the head with a wand and said, "There, you can speak now." None of that sort of stuff. But where did it come from? I don't think that's really been fully answered yet. And I was I'm also I'm

halfway through the book *Sapiens*, which was a big book from 10, 12 years ago. And I thought "Oh, well, I wonder what he has to say about this in terms of speech." He just skips over it because there's no real explanation for it and he can't find one. And I'm sitting there looking for it, and suddenly I think, hang on a minute, he's completely skipped all that. Interesting. Interesting. I'm going to have to do a bit more reading about this, David. It's starting to intrigue me a little bit.

So, this was an intriguing book that I just happened upon that somebody had mentioned to me and picked it up cheap and glad I read it. But. Yeah. Anyway, Tom Wolfe, there we go.

David's Favourite Nonfiction books of 2025



David:

Okay, well I'll start with my non-fiction again from number five working up and as it happens, the number five on my list is called *The Telltale Brain* by V. S. Ramachandran. That's all about how the brain works and how speech works and all that sort of thing in the human brain. So that's a good connection. This is actually...

Perry:

Maybe I should be reading that to work out whether there's any connections here.

David:

...I can lend you a copy if you like. I read it some years ago.

Number four on my list is a book that no one will ever have heard of, I think, called *Billy's Halo* by Ruth McKernan. It's really about her father's death: well about her father and about his death and from the medical point of view she has a medical degree I think. It's really understanding what was going on with him and why and how that connected with the rest of his life. That's quite an interesting little interesting book.

Number three was *Churchill's Bomb* by Graham Farmello. This is all about the English development of the atom bomb and why the Americans got in there first and pushed the English to one side, mainly because of silly decisions by the British government at the time—who were in the middle of a war, of course, and so they were somewhat distracted—but they didn't have any faith in the scientists from Germany and Eastern Europe that had come across as refugees. “They're aliens, we can't talk to them, we can't use them.” Yeah, but the Americans were very happy to take them and run on from there. So it's quite an interesting book. Also it's about the excessive influence of one particular British scientist on Winston Churchill who depended on this guy way too much. Lindemann, I think, Professor Lindemann. Churchill just, you know, believed everything that came out of this guy's mouth and put all his faith in him, [which] was generally misplaced faith. Anyway, interesting.

Number two in the book is by someone you may have heard of, by Lucy Sussex and Megan Brown. *Outrageous Fortunes* which is a biography of a crime writer in the Victorian era in Australia, in Victoria, called Mary Fortune, and about her writing and about her criminal son, George. Very good book, well worth reading.

Number one on my list is called *Careless People*, subtitled *A Story of Where I Used to Work*. And where she used to work was Facebook. So it's a very interesting book about Facebook. It has some damning things to say about Mark Zuckerberg, and his sidekicks and it's very good. Facebook—Meta, I should say—tried to ban the book or get it to... I think they managed to stop any publicity for

the book in the United States somehow. But they wanted to suppress it, that's for sure. But they weren't able to. So that's kind of essential reading. I think people should read that. Okay, that's all my non-fiction.

Perry:

All right, okay. All right, where do we go from here?

David:

Do you have any other categories, other things that don't fit into anything else?

Perry:

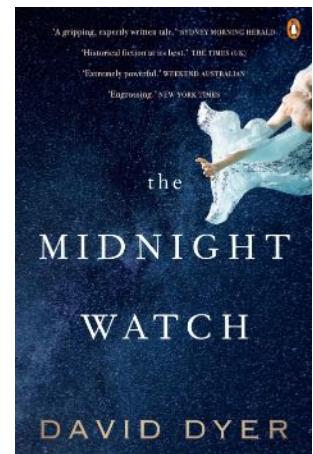
No, I don't have anything. Others, any other category? What about you?

David's Favourite Historical books of 2025

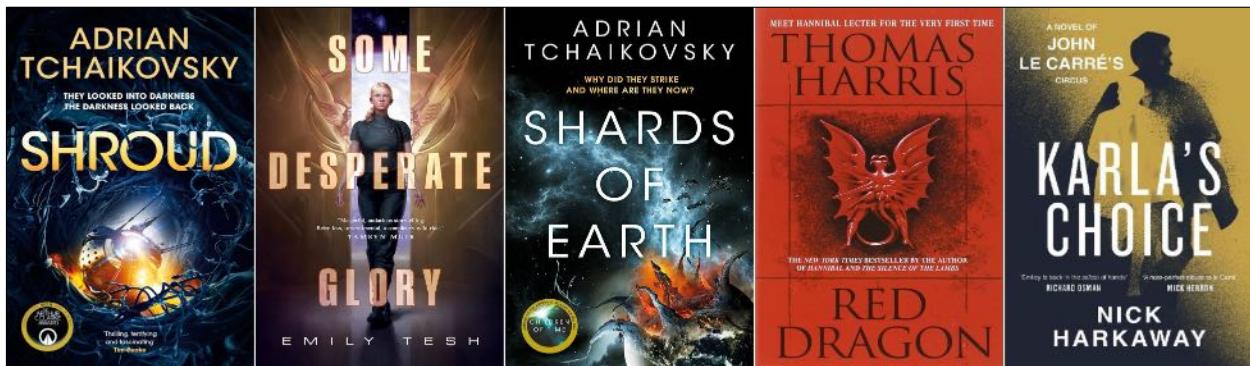
David:

I just have one book which doesn't fit into any of those categories, really historical fiction, and it's by David Dyer, who wrote *This Kingdom of Dust*, which I read in 2024, so that's why it didn't get on my list this year. It would have, otherwise.

But *The Midnight Watch* is non-fantasy or non-SF. It's pure historical fiction, and it's all about the ship that saw the flares from the Titanic when as it was sinking and they did nothing. There are whole books about why that happened and why they did nothing and how it all came to be. So it's very interesting. This was the ship that was actually closest to the Titanic at the time. A ship called is it the *Carpathia*? I can't remember. No, that's another, ship. It was the *Californian*, I think. I should read the book again. Oh, I should look up my notes again, which I haven't got in front of me. But anyway, regardless, it's a very interesting story to follow up. So, yeah, that's all my genres covered.



Perry's Favourite Overall books of 2025



Perry:

All right, all right. Well I think we got through the lists a lot quicker this year. I think we were probably well into the hour and a half almost, hour and three quarters last year dealing with all of our multitudinous lists and all the books on them. Good that we've actually been able to get through things down to the end, where we're going to talk about our best overall books of the year, and just from five down to one. Do you want me to go first?

David:

Yeah, yeah, sure.

Perry:

Alright, okay. So my five best of the year were number five, *Karla's Choice* by Nick Harkaway. Number four, *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris. Number three, *Shards of Earth* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Number two, *Some Desperate Glory* by Emily Tesh. And the best novel that I read last year was *Shroud* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. So Tchaikovsky got two on the list and the top three are science fiction, which is a bit odd, because it's not normally the way for me these days, but I thought all those three were pretty good.

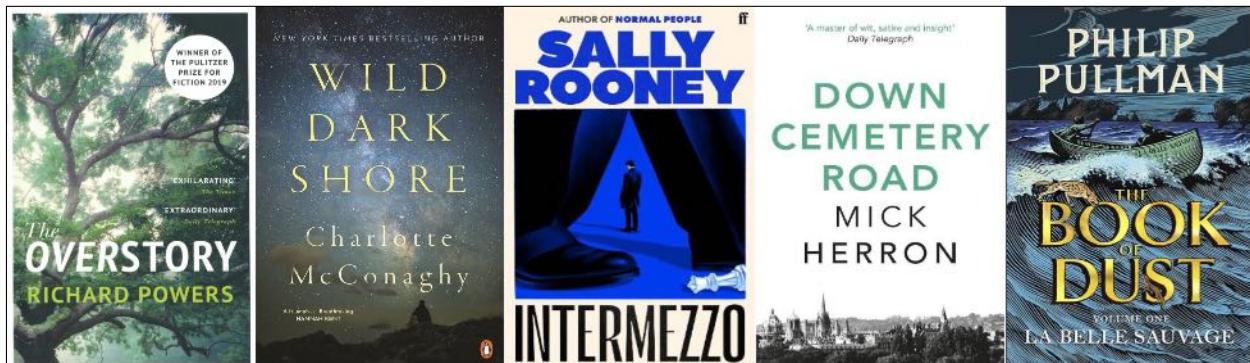
David:

Well, it's interesting because if I had extended my list to number six *Shroud* would have been number six, but that would have been the *only* science fiction work on my list.

Perry:

Okay.

David's Favourite Overall books of 2025



David:

So we'll start with number five. I guess I'm cheating in that it's three books. Number five on my list is the *Book of Dust* trilogy. Number four is *Down Cemetery Road* by Mick Hearn, which I think is terrific. Number three, and then now we're back into my literary list. Number three was *Intermezzo* by Sally Rooney. Number two was *Wild Dark Shore* by Charlotte McConaghie. And number one was *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. That was the best book I read throughout the year.

Perry:

Okay.

David:

But it came, *Wild Dark Shore* came very close to pipping it up the post.

Perry:

Yeah, [you've] been telling me a bit about this one, so I'm going to have to have a bit of a look at it.

David:

Yeah, she's a great writer. I mean her previous book, *Once There Were Wolves*, is also very interesting. That's kind of a kind of a crime novel. Yeah. Yeah, she won the Davitt Award for *Once There Were Wolves*. Yeah, so it's a crime novel. This isn't... oh, maybe you could call it a crime novel.

Perry:

Alright, well I guess we'll find out when it gets nominated for any of the genre awards.

David:

We will, we'll see. We'll see if it gets a [nomination] for the Ned Kelly or for the Davitt. Yeah, it'd be interesting.

Perry:

Yeah, so that way that's that's one way of telling whether it fits under the genre categories.

David:

If not, it should be nominated for the Stella or for the Miles Franklin.

Perry:

Oh, okay. All right. It'll be interesting to see. They won't be out until later in the year. I think the first one that's come out so far is the Victorian Premiers Awards.

I think that's the first one, but I can't remember what's on it. But anyway, we shall probably have a look at those, have a bit of a chat about them as they come up, because we like to try and keep on top of what's happening in the literary world out there.

Controversies in the Literary World

Perry:

It's a bit odd that we have the literary world hitting the headlines as it has over the last month with the cancellation of the Adelaide [Writer's] Festival. I'll only say this about that, David, in that I can't quite work out how anybody would not have realized what the outcome was going to be, given that Bendigo was only about four or five months ago.

David:

Yeah, that's right, they took no lessons from it.

Perry:

They took absolutely no lessons whatsoever and so you can't go with the idea of protecting people from being offended. If you tell them there's a possibility of them being offended before you start something, if they are offended, well, then it's up to them. You know, no offence is meant, but offence is taken, not given. So, in this instance, so basically, if you're going to be offended, go off and do something else. Don't go to the panel.

David:

Yeah, no one had to go to the panel.

Perry:

If you think that, oh, I'm not going to like this person, I'm going to go along there, and I'm going to be offended, and then I'm going to scream and yell, well, tough. You know, you takes your chances. It's a bit like sort of saying, Well, I'm offended, but this pizza has had so much chili on it. Well, we call it a chilli pizza. So, and then it's got three chilli bits at the end of it [on the menu]. So you were forewarned, and if you're going to be forewarned, don't complain. Anyway, that's all I'll say about that. I just thought it was particularly peculiar that sort of thing happened at all.

David:

Okay. Yeah.

Windup and Next Episode

Perry:

Anyway, next episode. Okay, well, next episode. We've covered our, as we do at the beginning of every year, we look at our best books of the previous year. Then in the next episode, we'll look at our best film and television. And I have a lot that I'm going to have to talk about.

David:

This is going to be a long episode, I think.

Perry:

It could be a long episode.

David:

I also watched... I mean you watched a hundred and something films, but I when I counted up, I actually watched eighty films myself. So that's very unusual for me.

Perry:

That's to me, that's about the equivalent of 40 novels? Because you're talking about, well, let's say you're talking two, let's say you're talking about an average of two hours of film. You know, four hours. Could you read a book in four hours? Yeah, okay. So let's say it's 50 books a year. So if you look at it from that perspective, if we said, oh, we read 50 books in the year, we go, well, that wasn't very many. But you're spending a lot more time reading a book than you are watching a film.

David:

Oh, absolutely, yeah.

Perry:

But it is that film, as I've said, is basically the great new art form of the 20th century that's carried on into the 21st century. And yes, it can be superficial, but it could also be very profound and show you things that you weren't going to see or even think of. As they say, a picture's worth a thousand words.

So you can put a lot into it, you can interpret things in a lot of ways and I've enjoyed the films—well some I thought were just not very good at all and didn't enjoy them. I was also at the cinema where I went to one film that I thought was terrible. The person next to me said that they thought it was one of the best they'd ever seen. So you can have that. You can have that big difference. That's fine. That's the good thing about art. You've got your point of view, I've got my point of view. We can head butt or we can agree. Of course, all the best conversations come out when you disagree. Because you start talking about things you liked or didn't like, and the other person goes, Oh, I hadn't thought of that. Or no, I disagree. It's great, it's good for that. So that's where we'll be next time, David, in about a month's time. We shall be talking about our best film and television of 2025.

David:

Indeed.

Perry:

And I think we're done here. All right. Thanks, David. Okay.

David:

See you next time.