



Selected Book Reviews

The Barbed-Wire University: the real lives of allied prisoners of war in the Second World War by Midge Gillies

ISBN: 9781845136291

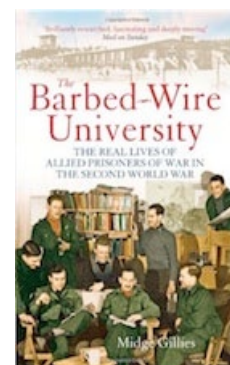
Reviewed by **Naomi Phillips** from Solihull College

Mention Prisoners of War and most people will call to mind tales of daring escapes made by men such as Douglas Bader and those represented in 'The Great Escape' starring Steve McQueen. What isn't so talked about is how those who didn't escape passed the boredom of their hungry, uncomfortable, captive existence.

'The Barbed Wire University' by Midge Gillies is the fascinating story of the day-to-day life of Allied Prisoners of War during World War II. The book begins with the prisoners held in Europe and tells of cricket played in a castle moat, golf where only very shallow bunkers could be used in case any prisoners were to hide in them, secret Masonic meetings, theatrical plays, Red Cross parcels (and the many alternative uses for their packaging and contents), lectures, and exams being sat for qualifications recognised back home.

The book then moves to the prisoners held in the east and takes on a darker tone: the camps there, where prisoners were faced with forced labour and plagued with dysentery, malaria, and nutritional deficiency diseases such as beriberi, made those in Europe seem like holiday camps. But aside from the beatings and deaths, the prisoners made use of what time and materials they had to mentally escape their surroundings. They sustained themselves by farming small patches of land, bartering with the locals, and performing operations with improvised equipment, and they occupied their minds by producing art and music, reading whatever books they could get hold of and giving, and giving and taking lectures on as many subjects as there were teachers and students for. Many 'universities' were set up and run in the camps, with the drawing up of detailed timetables themselves part of beating the boredom. In these universities prisoners studied agriculture, mathematics, literature, and economics (amongst other subjects) and became fluent speakers of foreign languages.

The author, whose father was a POW, draws on a number of sources including surviving papers (diaries, news bulletins, recipe books, etc.) and interviews with survivors, and writes with in a clear style, but although the book easy to read (in terms of writing style, though not always in content), it is never sensationalist, and at each sitting the reader begins to feel they know the people in its pages and understands the grinding boredom and gnawing hunger, that is until they slip the bookmark in, place the book down, look around, and are jolted back to their luxurious reality and they realise they could never really understand; but the exploration is a fascinating one, and the reader is forced to think about their own life as well as the lives of the prisoners: the book does not moralise, but the reader does become acutely aware of what they take for granted in their own life. This provides much to reflect on and I would recommend it to anyone.

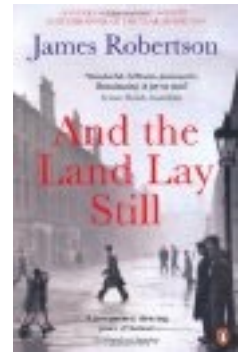


'And the Land Lay Still' by James Robertson

ISBN: 978-0141028545

Reviewed by **Duncan Wright** from ESMS (Erskine Stewart's Melville Schools)

Standing at 670 pages it would be easy to be scared of reading this book. To read something this large requires a certain devotion, not to mention a large amount of time. But for those who undertake to read this novel from James Robertson they will be richly rewarded. Every page is to be treasured as Robertson magnificently weaves together 60 years of Scottish political, social and cultural history.



The main thrust of the story centres around Michael Pendreich a photographer who is forever living in the shadow of his father, also a photographer. With his father dead Michael prepares an exhibition of his Father's work allowing him to reflect on both the relationship between him and his Father, and also the scale of his Father's work. The photographs that form the exhibition provide a link to the rich tapestry of characters that inhabit this book.

Characters from all walks and classes of Scottish life feature in the novel with Robertson cleverly intertwining their stories as the book progresses. As we revel in the detail that Robertson gives us on each individual, the iconic moments of Scotland's post war history are played out before us. Sometimes we are given a birds eye view of these moments whilst at other times, they merely play out in the background of family life.

The list of characters in the book is sizeable. The enigmatic Jean Armour provides a link between Michael and his Father that the two of them were never able to establish. Don Lennie is the industrious working class Scot and World War Two survivor. David Eddlestane is a young Tory politician with an unusual sexual fetish, whilst linking each of the parts of the book is the mysterious wanderer handing out small white pebbles to those he meets. There are many others, each woven by Robertson into the book and Scotland's history expertly.

The plot at times can be a little difficult to follow as it sidesteps, moves backwards and jumps around rather than sticking to a steady course through Scotland's post-war history. This doesn't distract the reader too much though and despite the aforementioned length, the pages fly by such is the quality of the writing.

This is an important book which in time will be marked as one of the most important in Scottish Literature. Not only does it record the post war history of Scotland but it discusses the very nature of Scottishness. The political arguments for and against independence are played out across it's pages but not in the style of a party political broadcast but in a much more subtle fashion. This book is an exploration of Scottish identity and what it means to be Scottish.

Robertson has created an engrossing, hugely ambitious, but delightfully satisfying novel which is a pleasure to read from beginning to end. As Scotland moves towards a vote to decide on Independence it should be required reading for anyone who wants to know what it means to be Scottish.

Queen Emma and the Vikings by Harriet O'Brien

ISBN: 978-1596911192

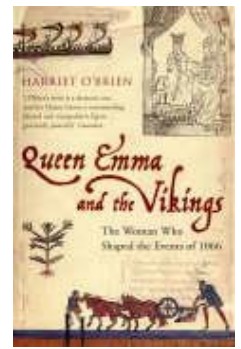
Reviewed by **Rebecca Wilson**

This non-fiction book starts off on a surprisingly narrative and almost fictional note in that it sets the scene of how young Emma, daughter of the Duke Richard of Normandy was set upon a ship to England to marry a man double her age and seal a strategic alliance against the growing strength of the Vikings. Some people may not like this narrative introduction but I think it adds that extra sparkle and almost depth to the text as it helps the reader imagine what Emma must have been like as each chapter and section goes through the key areas of history and introduce key characters that had a major influence not just on Emma's own life but of course the very history of English rule.

Emma is one of those forgotten queens who sadly reigned not once but twice (as well as strongly in the background of two of her son's reigns - Harthacnut and Edward (the confessor's early rule)) but also in a period of history not often talked about or featured in historical literature both non-fiction and fiction. That is the period before 1066, when King Ethelred the Unready (ill-counceled) was in power and the time when England was actually under Danish rule and formed part of a large Scandinavian empire under King Cnut (or Canute if you prefer).

The reader will learn an awful lot not just about Emma but about the world and society she grew up in and will realize that Emma show's the inner strength, cunning and social survival skills that shone through in Queen Elizabeth 1st in the sixteenth century and equally Queen Victoria in the nineteenth century. But I am pleased to say that not one jot of this book is dry or boring. Each chapter is interesting, enriching, enlightening and even entertaining as the first.

If you wish to understand better the background behind 1066 well why not start from where it truly all began, with a similar battle of wills for the throne of England - before Godwineson vs Hardrada vs Duke William it was Swein/Cnut vs Edmund Ironside and the current King Ethelred who held a shaky stability. And weaving between these great men was one woman who was a foreigner herself - Emma of Normandy who outlived them all.



The View from Lazy Point by Carl Safina

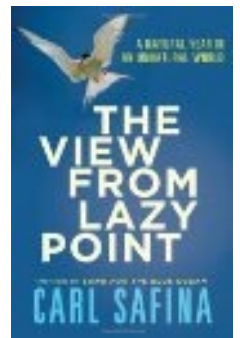
ISBN: 978-1250002716

Reviewed by **Julian Dawson** from ARUP

It is not often that you can genuinely say that a book persuades you to look at the world in an entirely new way. But *The View from Lazy Point* will resonate through your mind long after you have read it.

Carl Safina's book carries both stark warnings and a loving celebration of planet earth. It takes us in the course of a single year through the minutiae of his daily nature rambles in his beloved Lazy Point on the Atlantic coast of New York state. These are interspersed with his visits to Alaska, Svalbard, the Caribbean, Palau in the Pacific, and Antarctica. There he explores the environmental problems and solutions present in each of these flung corners of the globe. Safina follows in a long line of nature writers from Gilbert White and Thoreau, and has been named by the Audubon Society one of the leading conservationists of the twentieth century. His lyrical writing brings to life the winter ducks that visit his local coast, including the scoter and eider ducks that behave like an everlasting conveyor belt as they dive for food offshore. But then immediately he expands his eye to the whole planet and the interactive ecologies that sustain it despite the best attempts at man to upset the balance.

His premise is a strong one, that human beings are still living to values of finance, wealth creation and attitudes to ownership that were essentially established in medieval times. Our technology and scientific understandings might have developed, but our other values have been left behind. And, in a self-confessed quasi-religious attitude he strongly argues that the only way to save the planet and ourselves is by being led by compassion in all things. For instance, where human rights are trampled, he states, the natural world is equally suppressed. Ultimately what could have been an angry exposition, at Safina's hands becomes both a paean of praise at the world's beauty, and an exhortation for us to each play our part in saving the world for our children and grandchildren.



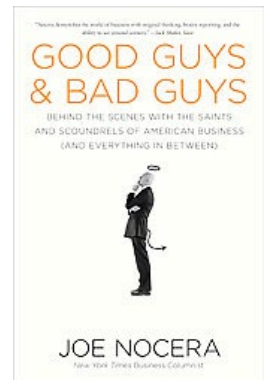
Good guys and bad guys: behind the scenes with the saints and scoundrels of American business (and everything in between) by Joe Nocera

ISBN: 1591841623

Reviewed by **Helena Dean** from Greenwich School of Management

Although reading books about business and finance might sound uninteresting and boring, Good guys and bad guys: behind the scenes with the saints and scoundrels of American business (and everything in between) is one of the most enjoyable non-fiction books I have read in a long time. This book has completely changed my opinions about big corporations and opened my eyes to the exciting and adrenaline filled world of Wall Street, finance and mergers & acquisitions. Nocera, a business journalist with the New York Times, demystifies the American business world in a way that is interesting and humorous and leaves you wanting more. I have learnt so much from this book including the world of hostile takeovers, the fact that Steve jobs is not the saint he is always painted to be, the Wall Street darlings who fall hard due to illegal dealings and the mysterious world of hedge fund managers.

Throughout Good Guys and Bad Guys, you can tell that the book is not written by a Wall Street businessman but by someone who observes and is passionate about business which to me is the reason why this book was so interesting. I think one of the things that struck me most in this book is that often the biggest business decisions in life are not based on logic, talent or intelligence but actually ego and a need for a power. Reading stories like these are, in my opinion, extremely important for everyone to read to see where others have fallen and the dangers of possessing great responsibility. As you can probably tell by now, I absolutely loved this book and more importantly I love how much it has educated and improved my knowledge so much so that I have even been able to have conversations about hedge funds and shares since reading it!



The Plague and I by Betty MacDonald

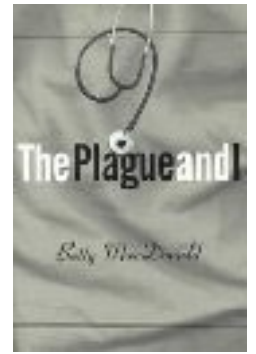
ISBN: 9780704102545

Reviewed by **Alison Sime** from Woodmill High School

This book would be my choice were I ever to be on Desert Island Discs! Betty MacDonald wrote during the 1940's and 1950's about her life in Seattle. I love all her books- 'The Egg and I', 'Onions in the Stew', 'Anybody Can Do Anything' - but my favourite is 'The Plague and I'. It is an account of Betty MacDonald's struggle with her health when she contracted tuberculosis. This was at the time when the survival rate for anyone contracting TB was low. Betty MacDonald had to leave her home and family to live in a sanatorium. Despite the subject matter, this is one of the funniest books I have ever read. It's laugh-out-loud, uproarious, tears streaming down your face funny. It manages to combine the poignancy of the literally life and death situations with warmth and humour as she describes the disease, the sanatorium, the other patients and the staff. She catches the mood of that era and captures the atmosphere of what it must have been like to face what was thought to be a terminal diagnosis.

My Mum recommended this book to me when I was in my teens-a long time ago!. She loved reading and libraries and instilled in me her enthusiasm for the written word. She died 27 years ago when she was just 60 in December 1986 so inevitably I think of her even more at this time of year. This book invokes memories of her sitting reading, laughing hysterically at parts of it and reading snippets to me. I read the book myself and loved it. The book embodies for me what reading is all about. It's not just a beautiful story, well written and entertaining. It's the fact I have special memories of a connection made through a book-a shared experience and that for me is what reading is about -the pleasure of reading and sharing your love and enthusiasm for a story with someone else.

Even though this book was written a long time ago, I re-read it often and it never ever fails to make me laugh.



The Call of Cthulhu and other Weird Tales by H.P. Lovecraft

ISBN: 9780143106487

Reviewed by **Michelle Harradence** from Sir George Monoux College

Lovecraft is often touted as the father of modern horror or an inspiration for many other great writers of the genre. I wanted to find out what the fuss was about and I picked the above title up from my local bookshop and dived in.

The first thing that surprised me about these stories was that some of them were published as early as 1916 in pulp magazines such as “Weird Tales”. The sheer imagination and scope of his fantastical worlds seem quite amazing for the time they were written and they must have been quite shocking to the audience of the day. Conventional beliefs and rationales are thrown completely out of the window by the author as he gives you a glimpse of his other worlds. We are taken to dark depths where fantastical and mostly malevolent creatures live either waiting to awaken from dark dreams or to take the protagonist on truly strange journeys which cause them to question their own sanity and the sanity of the world they think they live in.

The Call of Cthulhu is arguably the most famous of Lovecraft’s tales, spawning many role play games, comics and spin-off movies. It deals with secret rituals and curses passed down the generations that seek to awaken dark gods and monsters from under the sea. We get the full picture slowly woven through the years and different generations, always there is a sense of dread in the background that the sleeping monster might finally be roused to the detriment of the world at large. A truly creepy “what lies beneath” tale and it is well worth a read in its own right.

Lovecraft was also responsible for creating the famous Re-animator story, which ended up being made into a cult horror film series. Dr Herbert West seeks to cheat death with science but instead of stitching something together with old parts as in Frankenstein, he actually seeks to rekindle the flame of life in a freshly deceased person. Gruesome stuff indeed; especially as Dr West becomes more and more desperate for only the “freshest” of subjects. Overall I enjoyed reading Mr Lovecraft’s twisted tales and can now appreciate why authors speak of him as an inspiration of the modern genre. Even though the language of the texts can be a little challenging at times it’s worth it. I would recommend anyone with even a passing interest in horror to look him up, but maybe keep the lights on in the room while you do!

“Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.

In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.”

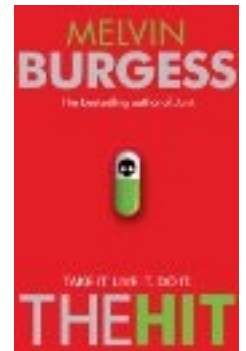


The Hit by Melvin Burgess

ISBN: 978-1908435330

Reviewed by **Duncan Wright** from ESMS

Melvin Burgess is regarded as one of the best writers in contemporary children's literature. He is also one of the most controversial and in his latest novel *The Hit* he demonstrates both his skill as a writer and his willingness to make us more than a little uncomfortable when we read one of his novels.



The idea behind *The Hit* is in itself fascinating. The original idea for the book was formed by a group of A-level Philosophy students and their tutors before being taken forward by Chicken House publisher, Barry Cunningham. Due to the subject matter of the book, and it's somewhat unusual birth, Cunningham approached the author he knew wouldn't mind working a bit differently and who wouldn't mind dealing with the controversial idea at the centre of the book - Burgess.

Told in a dual narrative by teens Adam and Lizzie *The Hit* is set in a near future where Manchester is on the brink of revolt and there is talk of revolution in the air. Revolution and anarchy is being fuelled by a new drug that is flooding the streets - 'Death', a euthanasia drug that gives you the best week of your life - before killing you. Looking for an easy way out from his self-proclaimed 'rubbish life' and still trying to come to terms with the death of his brother Adam succumbs to the lure of 'Death'. However despite an initial euphoric rush Adam soon realises that life may indeed be better than death.

The whole concept of 'Death' is exceptionally clever and is an amazingly powerful 'hook' into the novel. Once the reader is 'hooked' Burgess takes them on a relentless, adrenalin fuelled adventure through the streets and industrial wastelands of Manchester. As we move between Adam and Lizzie's story we see the effect their actions have on each other and the story at large. The book is full of twists and we are kept guessing right up until the final chapter about the final outcome of the book.

Burgess has created a novel which covers a number of issues relevant to teenagers today; drugs, friendship, sex, politics and of course euthanasia. He writes about these issues in a way that teenagers can relate to whilst at the same time he makes them think about the moral and philosophical impact of what happens in the book. The issue of drug taking is not glamorised in anyway in the novel and readers are left with many questions to consider about the impact of drugs on society.

Despite this there will be some who will find this book controversial. For me Melvin Burgess should be required reading for every teenager in the UK. It's books like *The Hit* that can turn teenagers into readers.

The Etymologicon by Mark Forsyth

ISBN: 9781848313071

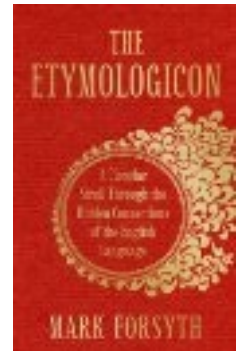
Reviewed by **Jackie Behan** from Bridgwater College

I have always loved words. From an early age I devoured books, in fact anything in print, and I was always intrigued whenever I came across a word or phrase that I did not understand. I could not wait to research the meaning and then try to use it somewhere for myself, often in completely the wrong context, but at least I tried.

Mark Forsyth's book makes a fascinating read. It is so much more than a reference book. He writes with humour and intelligence about the origins of words and manages to make some wonderfully witty connections along the way. My eldest daughter introduced me to the work of David Crystal when she was studying English Language and his books reignited my interest in the subject. More recently when I discovered Mark Forsyth's blog, published as the "Inky Fool", I was delighted. The blog went on to be published as "The Etymologicon", and I was first in the queue at the bookshop.

Mark Forsyth manages to link words from across many cultures and it is fascinating to discover how some of our most common words have origins in exotic or unusual places. Some readers may be put off by the occasional lapse into schoolboy humour, however I would argue that this makes for a more light-hearted read. For example, who would have imagined that the word "feisty" comes from a word meaning "fart"?

For what initially appears to be purely an informative reference book, Mark Forsyth has written a clever, often laugh out loud little book that anyone with the slightest interest in the English language will love. I am hoping that "The Horologicon" by Mark Forsyth will be in my Christmas stocking this year...



Death at Le Fenice (Brunetti Series - Book 1) by Donna Leon

ISBN: 978-0099536567

Reviewed by **Sally Gibbs**

Last summer we visited Venice for the first time. In amongst the Venice travel guides in my local library there was a guide to Brunetti's Venice. This led me to Donna Leon's Commissario Guido Brunetti series of crime novels. What a find! I love to read novels set in our holiday locations.



All the stories in the series are set in and around Venice, and having visited it is easy to visualise where the events take place. This is not essential, however, and most of the books have a detailed map at the front to help the reader negotiate the canals and calles (walkways). Venice itself is a major element in each story, and the Commissario's feet can take him anywhere in the city with little engagement of his mind.

One of the joys of the books is Brunetti's family. He adores his wife and their relationship is hugely entertaining. I could almost feel jealous as I am a little in love with him myself. As the series progresses so do his children. We follow them from youngsters, to teenagers, to university students. Another development as the series moves on is Guido's relationship with technology. Early on he is baffled by the computer which his boss's secretary Signorina Elettra uses (illegally) to aid him with his enquiries. It is amusing how he learns to overlook how she gains important information, and how all the police officers hold the Signorina in the greatest respect. She is a truly colourful character. There is an on-going theme involving the mistrust of northern Italians towards those from the south, especially Sicily and Naples. Venetians only completely trust locals who speak the Veneziano dialect. Corruption rears its ugly head at some point in most of the plots.

The Commissario is wonderfully long-suffering - with the numbskull plodding junior police officers, the unfathomable nature of Italian politics but especially with his all-style-and-NO-substance boss. The scenes with Vice Questore Patta try Guido's patience to the limit and are often the most comic. Brunetti is highly educated and capable, and we are let in on his inner thoughts and feelings. Several of the novels end with the utter frustration of the Commissario knowing who committed the crime but being hamstrung to bring the culprits to justice. Fascinating. Brunetti's right hand man Vianello gains promotion from sergeant to inspector as the series unfolds. They have a great working relationship and know they can completely trust each other when others around them in the force are dodgy or dangerous. There is an exquisite moment when Brunetti realises just how much Vianello means to him.

These are books which I devour then feel that nagging sense of loss when they end. So far I have read 13 out of the 22. I can't wait to read the rest. Anyone who enjoys well-written detective stories with excellent characterisation set in fabulous locations should try these books.

Marie Antoinette : The Journey by Lady Antonia Fraser

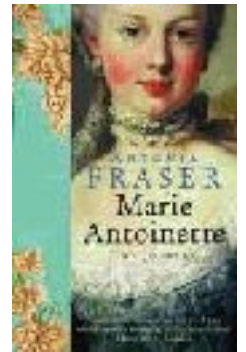
ISBN: 075381305X

Reviewed by **Daisy Johnson** from Henley Business School University of Reading

It's easy to prejudge Marie Antoinette in a way. "Let them eat cake" The foolish foreign Queen who played at being shepherdesses in La Petit Trianon whilst outside, her people starved and revolution stirred.

But that's not all she was. Not by a long shot. Fraser's stunning biography rips Marie-Antoinette from the shadows of cliché and stereotype and gives us a woman. A foolish woman, yes, but also an idealistic and brave woman and, it has to be said, as much as a victim as anyone else. It's hard not to empathise with the young Antoine, sent away from her family, stripped nude on the border of France (so that she brings nothing of her former identity with her), and marrying a nervous, shy husband. Letters from Antoine's mother continue to arrive, urging her to dynastic ambition and politicising, and every step Antoine takes in Versailles makes more people watch her and judge her. It is not an easy life and it is not a life that, it seems, was ever wholly in Antoine's control.

Fraser's biography is beautiful, sympathetic, vivid and yet intensely precise. She balances her book superbly between Antoine's early life and her late, tragic, fate. This book has the subtitle of 'The Journey' and it's possibly the most precise subtitle ever in the history of subtitles. Antoine was on a journey. And it's in this book that we get to see her journey, to feel it, and to realise that in a way, she's still not reached the end of it. Marie Antoinette lives on.



The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry by Rachel Joyce

ISBN: 9780552778091

Reviewed by **Cara Clarke** from North Warwickshire & Hinckley College

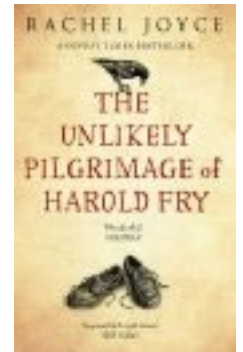
I read this after asking for book recommendations on Facebook. One of my friends had read it because it was part of the Richard and Judy 2013 Book Club, and I downloaded the e-book version on her say so. In turn, it was read by three of my other friends after I raved about it on Facebook.

I won't include any spoilers, but the basic storyline follows Harold Fry after he receives a letter from a friend. He decides to visit this friend, but instead of travelling by car he walks instead. He walks almost the length of the country. The book focuses on the journey rather than the destination.

I was immensely touched by this book. Not so much the overall plotline – that's pretty straight forward – but more so the finer details. The author uses Harold's journey to look at the smaller things in life, and as Harold continues walking he realises (along with us readers) that most of what we now deem as necessary is in fact completely unnecessary. Harold really goes back to basics and discards the clutter of daily life.

I felt Harold's journey to be incredibly liberating. Usually, when I leave work I rush to the car, head down, coat closed, desperate to beat the traffic on the motorway. On one particular day, I thought of Harold as I left the building and decided to follow his lead. I didn't do anything as drastic as walk to Scotland, but I took off my coat and felt the breeze on my arms. As I walked across the car park I held my head high, looked at the flowers in the hedgerows and listened to the birds. I felt I was surrounded by peace and serenity at a time when I usually feel harassed by the prospect of joining the motorway's rush hour madness. My mood instantly lifted.

Despite being an avid reader, this is one of only a handful of books to have touched my life to such an extent. It is so easy to get distracted and caught up in the hustle and bustle of modern life. This book reminded me that we are surrounded by beauty, if only we can drag our eyes away from our smartphones to see it. A simple message, but one we could all do with being reminded of occasionally. This book is that reminder.



The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

ISBN: 186230291X

Reviewed by **Karenza Passmore** of North East Religious Learning Resources Centre Ltd

This is a stunning read. The style is original, the narrative beautifully crafted and the characters individuals who continue to walk with you long after the last page has been read. The complexity of human experience is laid before us by Death through the relationships of a child, Liesel Meminger, a German refugee in Munich during the Second World War.

Words.... The power of words that are said and unsaid, written and read.

I finished this book on Christmas Day last year: a day when Christians celebrate the power of the word made flesh. That seemed very appropriate timing.



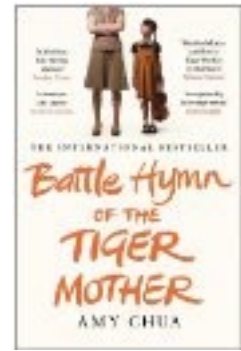
Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother by Amy Chua

ISBN: 9781408822074

Reviewed by **Susan Cross**

This book shows the relationship between a Chinese mother and her two teenage daughters who were born and bred in America, her Jewish husband, her two dogs, her rather strict parents and her two sisters. It looks like a book on the differences of the Chinese and Western child upbringing philosophy. However, it is more than that.... It's also an autobiography and therefore a lot of stories inside could be very close to any reader's heart. I kept thinking to myself "...this is what I would do if I had children!" when reading some of the disciplinary methods the author used.

It is a heart-warming, funny and interesting book. The dialogues between the author and her two daughters are hilarious. I would recommend this book to anybody aged 13+.



Revolution by Jennifer Donnelly

ISBN: 9781408801512

Reviewed by **Alison Sime** from Woodmill High School, Fife

In my job as a school librarian, hundreds of books pass through my hands and sometimes there is a special one that I want to have and to hold for myself. 'Revolution' is such a book and I bought my own copy because this is a book to keep and re-read. It was published in 2010 and I was so moved when I read it that I emailed Jennifer Donnelly to tell her. She wrote a lovely email to thank me saying what a wonderful job school librarians do. Appreciation at last!

She was inspired to write this story after reading some years previously an article in the New York Times. In the article there was a photograph of a bell jar containing a heart which was being DNA tested because it was thought to be that of the son of Marie Antoinette and Louis the Sixteenth. Revolution the story of two girls-Andi who lives in present day New York and Alexandrine who lives in Paris at the time of the French Revolution came from the seed that article planted.

The story is set in December and it tells of the struggle of the two teenage girls centuries apart. Andi and her family have been deeply fractured and torn apart by grief after the accidental death of her younger brother. Her Dad has left home and her Mum, an artist, cannot function as she struggles with serious depression. Andi is a straight 'A' student but she feels responsible in some way for her brother's death and although trying hard to look after her mum, she has lost the will to live. A talented musician, her passion is music. Her Dad, is horrified to discover how ill her Mum is and how Andi is in danger of being expelled from school with failing grades. He arranges for the Mum to be admitted for treatment to a hospital and insists Andi accompany him to Paris. Her Dad is a geneticist and is going to Paris to join a team of scientists DNA testing a heart to see if belonged to Louis Charles one of the sons of Louis the Sixteenth and Marie Antoinette. Andi is researching a composer called Mallerbeau and discovers a guitar case with a secret compartment hiding a diary belonging to Alexandrine. The thread that links the two girls is they are both grief stricken over the two young boys-Andi over her brother and Alexandrine over Louis Charles who has been thrown into prison and is being kept in appalling conditions by Robespierre.

Through the two stories we learn there is always a light at the end of the tunnel and even though the outcome may not be what you want, life offers opportunities and it is worth it to make a difference even if you only do one thing. This engrossing, romantic story is very appropriate at this time of year with its strong message of hope.



A Pair of Blue Eyes by Thomas Hardy

ISBN: 9781853262777

Reviewed by **Terry Peers** from Bridgwater College

A pair of blue eyes is one of Hardy's earlier novels, coming just before his popular success *Far from the madding crowd*. It begins with the visit of a young architect, Stephen Smith, to a remote village on the north Cornish coast where he has been appointed to work on the restoration of the church. There he lodges with the vicar and in this idyllic surrounding falls in love with Elfride, the vicar's daughter. However, the revelation of Stephen's humble origins causes Elfride's father to oppose the match and an abortive attempt at elopement produces far-reaching consequences for the unworldly Elfride. The central love affair develops into a love triangle as another suitor for Elfride appears on the scene and the question of who will win her hand becomes the main plot of the novel.

Some of you will recognise the autobiographical aspect of this story: Hardy was a young architect who was sent on a commission to assess the church of St Juliot in north Cornwall prior to restoration. Here he met the rector's sister-in-law, Emma Gifford, who later became his wife. The opening chapters depicting the village, the church and the central characters and adventures of Stephen and Elfride are lovingly described for the reader, making it clear this was a very special time in Hardy's life, (this contrasts with the conclusion which to me appeared rushed). It is worth mentioning that this book was first published in serial form as this influences the novel's structure, including as it does the original "cliffhanger" with its surprisingly risqué resolution involving ladies' foundation garments (that's right, don't leave this one around for your wife or servants to read).



Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children by Ransom Riggs

ISBN: 9781594746031

Reviewed by **Jemma Hines** from Bedford College

Peculiar it most definitely is, and a sense of foreboding I've only ever before experienced when delving into the suspense-filled pages of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Any sense of normality is soon forced to take a back seat in this strange and yet addictive work of contemporary fiction as you are hurled along on Riggs's anticipation express, only stopping to shiver at the chillingly odd descriptions of Miss Peregrine's wards and disturbing black and white photographs that play with your sense of reason from the very first chapter.

Whilst a Welsh island is not the most obvious setting for a haunting adventure of fantasy and menace, it works so well, that once you have decided to accompany Florida-born Jacob on the disturbing journey into his grandfather's troubled past; you will soon develop an uncomfortable aversion to the sinister setting for Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children. Jacob struggles to deal with the difficulties of modern life, preferring to believe in Grandpa Portman's tales of adventure and shadows. However, his mind is an inquisitive one and so, after hearing his grandfather desperately breathe his last words of warning following a brutal attack in the woods, Jacob decides to follow up the stories of conspiracy, abandonment and a life running from malevolent shadows. As he becomes entangled in a dangerous world of conflict, chase and confusion, Jacob begins to uncover the truth about his unorthodox grandfather, the quaint Miss Peregrine and the bizarre group of orphans who shared their tumultuous younger years. All is not always as it seems; and indeed, it is not often I could recommend a fantasy book to adults, but this is a thrilling psychological joyride that makes it an indulgence not to be missed.

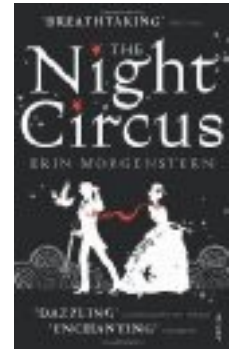


The Night Circus by Erin Morgenstern

ISBN: 9780099554790

Reviewed by **Judy Powles** of Spurgeon's College

This title was one of those books on a "staff-recommendations" book shelf in a local bookshop. The cover was so unusual and attracted my attention immediately, as did the short review by the staff member. At the time I was doing a great deal of travelling on public transport so, rather than buying the paperback, I purchased the e-version for my Kindle. However the true test of a good read to me is when the desire to have "the real thing" in one's hands takes over.



After completing the e-book and feeling that sense of loss (I am sure many of you know what I mean by that), I just had to go out and buy the print version so I could enjoy the feel of the book in my hands and to be able to flick backwards and forwards trying to get to grips with the different dates and places and the way the story moves from one character and set of events to another. I wanted to immerse myself in the fantasy world of Le Cirque des Rêves, The Circus of Dreams.

The opening section, with its tantalizing title "Anticipation" begins: "The circus arrives without warning. No announcements precede it. ... It is simply there, when yesterday it was not.... "

And ends:

"Now the Circus is open. Now you may enter."

And this is where the reader starts to become absorbed in the magic exuding from the pages, with the wonderful descriptions of the sights, sounds and smells of the night circus. Magic and illusion form the basis of the plot, as we follow the story of the two rival magicians and their two innocent protégés, Celia and Marco, who have to play out the mysterious competition instituted by their seniors. The book is written in the present tense throughout, helping to promote the illusion that the action is happening as the reader turns the pages.

There are many, many reviews to be found on Amazon and elsewhere which are far better written than this little offering and go into far more detail. Many people loved the book as much as I did, but it is worth pointing out that it clearly is not to everyone's taste! Enter the circus for yourself and see if you agree with me.

The Revolt of the Pendulum: Essays 2005-2008 by Clive James

ISBN: 9780330457392

Reviewed by **David Salvesen**

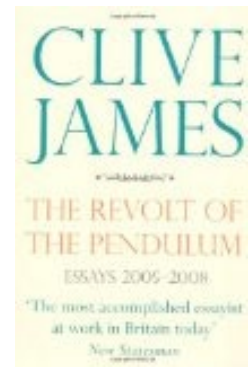
Sometimes life seems too busy to read a single subject non-fiction book. Quality newspapers or journals may offer shorter alternatives, but can be too topical and lacking thoroughness. I hadn't thought of collections of essays before, but then my mother-in-law (a retired librarian) picked up *The Revolt of the Pendulum* in a book sale thinking I would take to it: she was right.

Those that know Clive James's voice will immediately hear it throughout this volume. If you didn't like him on the box, then perhaps you won't survive here despite the breadth of his learning and his erudition, which were disguised on the TV. For me his voice was so clear that for once I found my lips didn't move as I read.

The range and scope of these 45 essays written over four years (2005-2008) is remarkable. Those on literature run from Elias Canetti (who?) to Nathan Zuckerman, taking in Denis Healey and Camille Paglia on the way. I am generally lost by poetry and haven't the range to follow his discussions of literature, yet I learnt a little, was entertained and finished wanting to find out more on each subject.

There are more essays on the broad field of culture sweeping from the English language to films (and film reviews), the sources of famous phrases, 'Made in Britain', Tommy Cooper and touching on a more negative aspect of James's own TV career before moving on to examine the careers of others. A later section entitled *Handbills* covers other aspects of his career. The art and literature of his Australian homeland feature in a series of its own, before he dashes on to racing drivers and 'Absent Friends'.

Clive James understands how to use language in the way that a poet must and an author may. His phrases are never as casually constructed and superficial as they at first seem. This is just as well since essays on the rules of grammar or the abuse of metaphors would be at risk of ridicule otherwise. His prose carries you along too, not so much on the crest of a wave as atop a deep ocean roller. Thus his essays make up a book that is not just a stimulating and enjoyable when first read, but which should then claim a worthy place in anyone's smallest room.



The Fault in Our Stars by John Green

ISBN: 978-0141345659

Reviewed by **Duncan Wright** of ESMS (Erskine Stewart's Melville Schools)

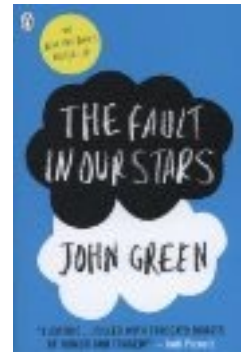
John Green and his band of 'nerdfighters' are something of an Internet phenomenon. Colonising websites, blogs and twitter with the #DFTBA acronym (Google it if you don't know what it means) they are quite a force of nature. As a result of some particularly excited tweets from some of his fans 'The Fault in Our Stars' came to my attention. Librarian colleagues, unable to believe I hadn't read any of John Green's previous novels told me, "I had to read this book".

I now echo what those colleagues told me. You have to read this book. This is a wonderfully written, heart-wrenchingly sad, yet at times gloriously funny book. When writing about such an emotive subject as Cancer it would be easy to fill a book with stereotypes and clichés. However this novel is quite the opposite and Green should be commended with the approach he has taken to writing a novel on this subject.

From the first moment we meet Hazel, describing the Cancer support group her parents insist she attends, we are engaged with her. She's smart, funny, and although she's dying from Cancer, the last thing she wants is for us to feel sorry for her. It's at the support group that Hazel meets the enigmatic Augustus. Arrogant and self-assured, Augustus is in remission, is in Hazel's eyes gorgeous, and to Hazel's surprise, is interested in her.

The journey that Hazel and Augustus take from this moment on will envelope you as you watch their fledgling relationship develop into a beautiful romance. Trying desperately to do everything any other teenagers in a relationship would do, and yet at the same time coping with the pressures and demands of living with cancer is evoked wonderfully by Green.

Green does not want us to feel sorry for Hazel and Augustus, rather he wants us to see them for what they are, two teenagers experiencing love for the first time. For anyone who has suffered the effects of cancer this must be a battle they face every day - for people to see them as themselves not as someone who is fighting to stay alive.



The Boy on the Wooden Box by Leon Leyson

ISBN: 9781471119675

Reviewed by **Theresa Clark** of Wollaston School

This powerful biography is aimed at a young adult audience, but is a true 'cross-over' book.

As a child, Leon lived through the Nazi occupation of Poland in the Second World War. He tells his story in the first person, returning to his childhood memories of ghettos and concentration camps, often having to cope on his own, as his family became separated. Leon witnessed and experienced terrible brutality at the hands of the Nazis. He needed lots of determination and luck, just to find enough to eat was difficult, but he also explains how he had to become invisible to survive. Good fortune eventually came through an unexpected source, a Nazi called Oskar Schindler. Leon was the youngest person on 'Schindler's List', a group of Jewish workers, who Schindler insisted were vital workers in his factory, and could not be sent to the death camps. Almost 1200 Jews were saved from almost certain death by the efforts of Schindler, a story retold in the film 'Schindler's List'.

Leon's story is one that is difficult to read, but difficult to stop reading too. His is a first-hand account of the terrible events of that time, and how the daily life of the Jews became almost a lottery of who would survive and who would not. I found myself engrossed, often reaching for the tissues and desperately hoping that Leon's lot would improve. Leon hardly spoke about his experiences until 'Schindler's List' was released, he thought it wouldn't be interesting enough, how wrong he was. The Holocaust is an episode in history that must not be forgotten, this book is making sure it is not forgotten. It's a tragic tale, but uplifting too, a must-read in my opinion.



The Blasphemer by Nigel Farndale

ISBN: 9780552776172

Reviewed by **Fiona Lawes** of Bracknell & Wokingham College

The Blasphemer is set in the trenches of the First World War and the present day. When I read the synopsis I did not picture the story line that would evolve. You feel you are looking into the lives of the soldiers and the dreadful conditions that they had to endure, the harsh brutality of death, the camaraderie that they found, and the mental anguish that they suffered. You become emotionally involved with the characters, and feel transported to a time and place that is becoming a distant memory, but one that should not be forgotten. Equally as moving is the present day story line. The knowledge, that in similar circumstances you would have undoubtedly reacted in the same manner, and would question your behaviour after the event. The impact your decision would have on your family and friends and colleagues, and the guilt that would forever remain with you. As the story line develops and new themes are introduced, including terrorism, you are further challenged. Do you only see the clothing that someone is wearing, or can you see beyond this and see the person underneath? Despite finding this book quite difficult to read, it had some heavy descriptive passages, and the jump from past to present is not really to my taste, it was however emotionally moving. The penultimate ending was unexpected, but satisfying, and was the story line that I found most fascinating. Although I personally found the final chapter rather disappointing, it lacked a good conclusion, in my opinion this is an interesting book, and it challenges you to ask yourself what would I have done?



The Professor of Poetry by Grace McCleen

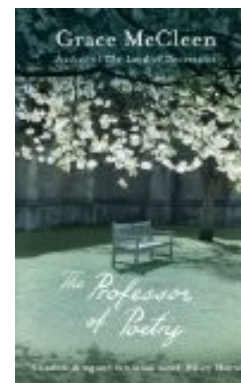
ISBN: 9781444769951

Reviewed by **Alison Salvesen**

I use novels as a means of escape from the pressures of work (as a lecturer) and to broaden my horizons (beyond the Oxford ringroad). So I was initially disappointed to find, some pages into the book, that this one was about a middle-aged professor of literature in London who decides to carry out some research for her book at her former undergraduate university (unnamed, but guess which one).

However, the book proved to be a wonderful read. Professor Elizabeth Stone is a compelling and entirely believable character, an emotionally stunted, awkward loner who uses her academic work as a shield against the world. 'Detachment' is her watchword, whether in an academic context or in her personal life. Forced by serious illness to reflect on what she has spent her adult life running away from, primarily the early loss of her mother, but also a fraught relationship with her admired tutor thirty years previously, her failure to produce what she hoped would be a brilliant study of poetry leads to late-flowering personal happiness.

Particularly poignant passages include Elizabeth's memories of childhood by the sea with her mother, descriptions of the joy of reading, and of her inner life while she undergoes the chemotherapy that prevents her from immersing herself in work. The author's familiarity with the study of Eng. Lit. is clear (there are many references to both Milton and Eliot), and the unfolding of the central relationship occasionally echoes the tensions between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester. The accounts of Oxford interviews and undergraduate life in the early 1980s are uncannily accurate, considering that the author is twenty years too young to have experienced these herself. The novel convincingly weaves together the three strands of Elizabeth's childhood, life as a student, and her return to Oxford many years later, as she reflects on the painful events she has avoided thinking about for so long. The eventual resolution should satisfy most readers but carefully avoids tying up every loose end.





Happy New Year