

In short Non-fiction



ARE WE THERE YET?
By David Smiedt
UQP, 302pp, \$22.95

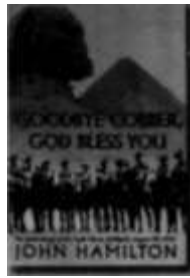
It is now so rare to come across a worthwhile piece of travel writing that there is an immediate inclination to fall about a good book's neck and weep with joy. This, for those who want to know lots of really useful information about South Africa, both past and present, is a true delight.

David Smiedt's family, driven by their distaste for apartheid, emigrated to Australia in 1989. Smiedt returned in 2003 determined to be inquisitive, objective, informative and suitably sceptical. Smiedt finds that Johannesburg, the city of his childhood, has been turned into a place of car-jackings, robberies, murders, decaying urban wastelands and humanity teetering on the edge of chaos.

Then Smiedt heads north to the garish and vulgar Sun City and old Boer towns such as Pietersburg and Louis Trichardt. Suddenly the vision of hell changes. Smiedt, with his tongue firmly in his cheek, offers some of the sharpest, wittiest and most genuinely funny observations you'll find in contemporary travel writing.

Add to this his ability to weave the history of the country effortlessly into his text, and to counterpoint contemporary events with his charmed (if guilty) early life under apartheid, and the result is a very fine, and very entertaining, introduction to modern South Africa in all its glory and complexity.

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GOODBYE COBBER, GOD BLESS YOU
By John Hamilton
Macmillan, 365pp, \$30

Given that World War I broke out a little under 14 years after Federation, it is not surprising that historians see Australia's involvement as one of our primary nation-defining moments. Certainly, we continue to have a seemingly insatiable interest in our involvement.

This is really the story of one battle. Through brilliant use of letters and contemporary accounts, John Hamilton recreates the madness that was the attempt to take the Nek on the Gallipoli Peninsula. On August 7, 1915, the 3rd Light Horse Brigade, were ordered to attack the Nek, which was heavily fortified.

Wave upon wave of men, all of them knowing that they were going to a certain death, went "over the top" and were duly mown down by Turkish machine-gunners and artillerymen.

This book perfectly captures the ambiguity of war.

The intermingling of blind heroism, the preparedness to give up a life in its prime for a purpose which is barely understood and the unforgivably ugly madness of those who send young men to war, are captured with a rare immediacy.

Of particular interest is the way Hamilton captures the enthusiasm, patriotism and jingoism that drove Australia's involvement in this most pointless of all campaigns.



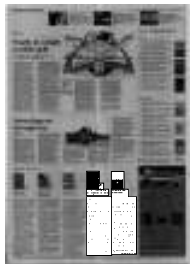
ABBA: UNPLUGGED
By Karl French
Portrait, 287pp, \$34.95

Here, at last, is a model of how to write a good, intelligent biography of a pop group. It probably helps to be a fan without being a sycophant and, in the case of Abba, to have around you people who lived in Sweden in the 1970s and people who can understand and translate Swedish.

Of course there have been dozens of books written about Abba. There have also been movies and TV documentaries. Karl French has simply read everything available and distilled it into a sober, considered, non-hysterical and largely descriptive account of the history of a group that both dominated pop charts through much of the 1970s and, miraculously, managed, particularly through the success of *Mamma Mia!*, to endure, with much affection, into the 21st century.

Here are clear accounts of the careers of Agnetha, Bjorn, Benny and Anni-Frid before they came together. Here are the early challenges and the successes. And here is a good account of the years when Abba were absurdly successful. French has found a mode of writing that is perfect for this kind of biography. He never degenerates into breathless prose. He never succumbs to idle adulation or histrionic eulogies.

If I were an Abba fan I would love this book because it presents a plausible, interesting and accurate picture of the history of the group.



AUSTRALIAN INSPIRATION
By Cliff Green with Jim Fogarty
Lothian, 187 pp, \$34.95

Since 1913, Britain's Royal Horticultural Society has been holding the Chelsea Flower Show annually. It's an eccentric, very British activity where enthusiastic gardeners design miniature gardens, build them, display them and then hope to win a medal for their efforts. It is suitably posh and arcane, with the Queen inspecting each year and the judges mooching around and evaluating entries with clipboards at the ready and faces suffused with serious expressions of high-minded discrimination.

So what were a group of Melbourne gardening eccentrics doing taking an entire Australian show garden - complete with eucalypt logs, redgum sleepers, two four-metre-tall snow gums - to Chelsea? This is the story of a garden named Australian Inspiration, the people who created it, the problems involved in shipping and constructing it, and its final and glorious gold medal success.

In reality this 187-page book should probably have been a weekend magazine article but Cliff Green, who wrote the screenplay for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, is a skilful writer and he knows how to sustain reader involvement and spin out a story. There are interesting profiles of the people who created the garden, lots of information about the difference between a real garden and a show garden, and endless gardening tips and asides.



A TIME OF SECRETS
By Mike Bowen
Pie in the Sky Publishing,
191pp, \$24.95

This is a strange, messy book which has, at its core, a fascinating story about an Irishman's emigration to Australia after an adolescence of non-stop bonking. Bowen grew up in the west of Ireland. His family was poor. He became a commercial traveller and most of the early section of the book concerns his bad early marriage and his rampant sex life on the road. He falls hopelessly in love with a girl called Serica but Ireland in the 1960s is not a place where divorce is possible and when she finds out that he is married her ardour turns to fury.

In a state of some sexual confusion, Bowen leaves his wife and buys a ticket to Australia. In Melbourne he becomes a successful car salesman, falls in love with an Irish woman, gets an Australian divorce from his first wife, remarries, and climbs the ladder of modest suburban success. After 12 years he returns to Ireland, renews acquaintances, cries in his beer with his old lovers, and makes peace with the world.

If this had been better written it could have been a runaway bestseller. Sadly mistakes and inconsistencies abound. It also contains a magnificent mixed metaphor: at the very beginning, Bowen writes, "I am prepared to put my cards on the table, warts and all, and let he who is not guilty cast the first stone."

Reviews by Bruce Elder