

Best reads of the year: Top writers reveal the books they loved in 2022

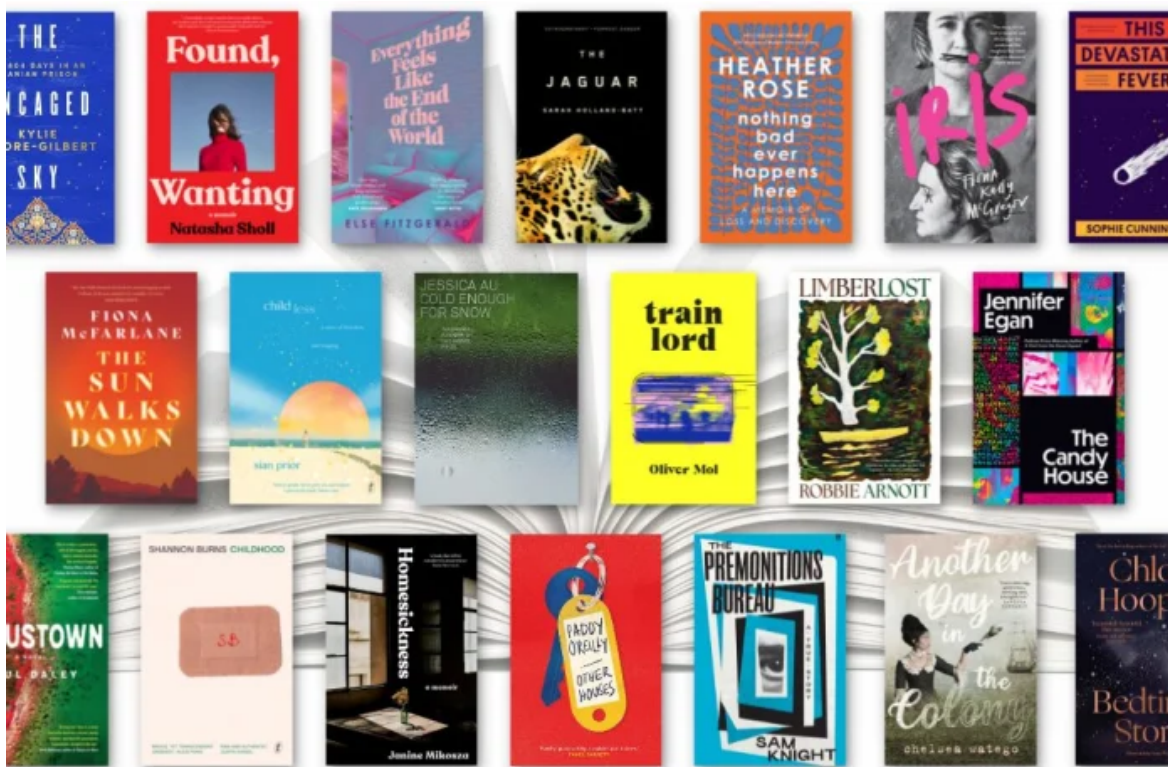
theage.com.au/culture/books/best-reads-of-the-year-top-writers-reveal-the-books-they-loved-in-2022-20221129-p5c2bx.html

December 8, 2022

Review

Helen Garner, Tim Winton, Jonathan Franzen, Jane Harper and more tell us what they've enjoyed reading over the past year.

December 9, 2022



A selection of the year's best reads, as chosen by leading Australian and international authors.

Just in time for Christmas, we asked a selection of authors from home and abroad to tell us about the books they enjoyed most this year.

Don't forget to tell us about your favourite reads of 2022 in the comments section.

The Booklist is a weekly newsletter for book lovers from books editor Jason Steger. Get it delivered every Friday.

My reading year has been dominated by non-fiction, and I've felt myself particularly drawn to books which examine complex and difficult subjects with nuance and depth. I really enjoyed Natasha Sholl's darkly funny memoir *Found, Wanting* (Ultimo), which explores the messiness of falling in love again in the shadow of grief and loss. In *Bedtime Story* (Scribner), Chloe Hooper takes us on a beautifully written and illustrated journey

through centuries of children's literature as she prepares her young sons for news of their father's cancer diagnosis. I was similarly moved by Sian Prior's *Childless* (Text), which charts the author's journey to self-acceptance while navigating society's expectations of women and motherhood.

Kylie Moore-Gilbert's memoir is *The Uncaged Sky* (Ultimo).

I inhaled *Sea of Tranquility* (Picador), the latest from Emily St John Mandel, about a woman who wrote a book about a pandemic. Chris Flynn's *Here be Leviathans* (UQP) just keeps giving with stories that entertain and make you think. I was moved by Carol Major's *The Asparagus Wars* (Spineless Wonders), a beautiful memoir about motherhood and grief, and Robbie Arnott's *Limberlost* (Text), a coming-of-age story set in Tasmania during WWII – sentences sublime. Ten years on from Julia Gillard's "misogyny speech", *Not Now, Not Ever* (Vintage) recalls that threshold moment in Australia when we were shown it was possible to call out sexism and misogyny and be heard. Each essay offers reflection and good reasons to keep speaking up.

Pip Williams' *The Bookbinder of Jericho* (Affirm) will be published in March.

Caroline Elkins' *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (Bodley Head) is a difficult read for anyone who might take the view that the empire built railways and managed things in a faintly comic, oddly cack-handed kind of way. Her book makes clear that the Empire was deliberate, violent and vicious. She writes with barely controlled rage, offering fact after footnote after fact. Darryl Pinckney's *Come Back in September: A Literary Education on West Sixty-seventh Street* (Riverrun) describes a young man's education at the hands of the great Elizabeth Hardwick, essayist and novelist and professor at Barnard College in New York, a figure at the very centre of literary life in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. Pinckney, as a young gay man, enjoys low life as much as high culture, but what he does most in this beautifully written book is notice everything around him with care and sharp attention.

Colm Toibin's most recent book is *A Guest at the Feast* (Picador).

I love a book that grabs you by the wrist and pulls you into a corner, draws you into intimacy by the sheer power of both its storytelling and language. For me, this year, that book was *Didn't Nobody Give a Shit What Happened to Carlotta* by James Hannaham (Europa). The title might strike some ears as rude; don't be fooled – it's a deeply humane and profoundly affecting novel about America's carceral system, urban gentrification, and the will to survive.

Rumaan Alam's most recent novel is *Leave the World Behind* (Bloomsbury).

The best book I read in 2022 was *We Come with This Place* (Bonnie Echo) by Debra Dank. This is a heart-stopping voyage into bush Aboriginal life, philosophy and history. Dank's grandmother was a Law Boss for her Gudanji Country; her father literally ran for his life from frontier violence. Her memoir of growing up on remote Queensland cattle stations, drinking from sacred hidden rock-wells, educated by correspondence school and

living in a caravan it was illegal for her Aboriginal parents to own, will surprise, delight and astound you. Also highly recommended, *The Strangers* (UQP) by Katherena Vermette, a Canadian First Nations epic novel of a foster child finding family in the face of addiction and incarceration.

Melissa Lucashenko's most recent novel is *Too Much Lip* (UQP).

Jenny Offill's *Weather* (Granta) was my standout novel – hilarious, acute and moving, set in Brooklyn and written in almost Twitter-brief paragraphs, it makes grand comedy and tragedy of crazy modern daily life. I was enthralled by Bernadette Brennan's *Leaping into Waterfalls* (Allen & Unwin) about the dauntless writer Gillian Mears, who went places – in writing and life – with abandon, curiosity and courage. I devoured Jessica Au's *Cold Enough for Snow* (Giramondo), a meditative, mesmerising novel and Geraldine Brooks' masterful and passionate *Horse* (Hachette). I loved Paul Daley's *Jesustown* (A&U), about a washed-up outsider visiting a remote settlement and struggling with the legacy of our past, and also Don Watson's *The Passion of Private White* (Scribner) about a Vietnam Vet's lifetime's commitment to the people of Donidji, in East Arnhem Land. And I've been delighted by an advance copy of Tom Hanks' *The Making of Another Major Motion Picture Masterpiece* (Cornerstone) a sweeping behind-the-scenes story of the making of a movie and the America it came out of.

Anna Funder's novel *Wifedom* (Hamish Hamilton) will be published in July.

I was profoundly moved by *The Persuaders* (Allen Lane) by Anand Giridharadas because it is full of counterintuitive wisdom for repairing a broken world. In a cynical and hate-filled culture, what would it take for us to become persuaders? The beautifully written profiles in *The Persuaders* are affecting and urgently needed because our world can no longer wait. *The Man Who Broke Capitalism* (Simon & Schuster) by David Gelles is a compelling read for anyone who wants to understand how we got into this terrible mess around the world, where businesses rarely value people and common sense. Gelles writes compellingly of Jack Welch – perhaps America's most venerated business leader – who guided other leaders to privilege short-term thinking and the quick buck over good and lasting corporate growth.

Min Jin Lee's most recent novel is *Pachinko* (Head of Zeus).

All This Could Be Different (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), a first novel by Sarah Thankam Mathews, follows 22-year-old Sneha, a recent college graduate and native of India, working a corporate job in the American Midwest (specifically the Milwaukee, Wisconsin of 10 years ago). Mathews fearlessly, brilliantly describes Sneha's lust, ambition, anxiety, and confusion as she dates, makes and fights with and makes up with friends, and becomes increasingly disillusioned about her boss. The writing and insights are impressive, but the real feat is that an indictment of American labour issues and bigotry feels so organic and entertaining. Ultimately, Sneha's story is a deeply nuanced portrayal of how painful and thrilling it is to be a person in the 21st century.

Curtis Sittenfeld's latest novel, *Romantic Comedy* (Transworld), will be published in April.

Whether, in this year of turmoil, I sought them out, or they found me in moments of synchronicity, 2022 was filled with books of both calm certainty and exquisite transportation. Jessica Au's *Cold Enough for Snow* (Giramondo) was all composure, both in the elegance of its composition and in its meditative examination of a mother-daughter relationship. It is outstanding. I loved, too, the profundity of Heather Rose's memoir, *Nothing Bad Ever Happens Here* (A&U), and the wisdom in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Penguin). Equally potent (although decidedly less peaceful), was *Iris* (Picador) by Fiona Kelly McGregor. It dragged me out of this worrisome time with the most extraordinary evocation of 1930s Sydney I have ever encountered.

Hannah Kent's most recent novel is *Devotion* (Picador).

A worthy American press, Archipelago Books, recently sent me a novel with an inauspicious title (*A Guardian Angel Recalls*) by a Dutch writer (Willem Frederik Hermans) I hadn't heard of. I decided to politely read five pages. Next thing I knew, I was a hundred pages in. The novel, newly translated by David Colmer, is set in the first days of Hitler's invasion of Holland. The main character, speeding in his car to help a Jewish refugee flee the country, hits and kills a little girl and hides her body. The ensuing story is part thriller, part family novel, part metaphysical investigation, and also, unexpectedly, part comedy. I've since learnt that Hermans is considered one of the great Dutch writers of the 20th century. *A Guardian Angel Recalls* (Pushkin Press) will give you an idea why.

Jonathan Franzen's most recent novel is *Crossroads* (HC).

Fiona Kelly McGregor's *Iris* (Picador) about 1930s sly-grog Sydney is vivid and compelling, while debut novel of the year for me was Irish writer Louise Kennedy's *Trespasses* (Bloomsbury), a moving portrayal of transgressive love during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. I raced through Paddy O'Reilly's powerful and captivating depiction of class in *Other Houses* (Affirm), and Emma Viskic's *Those Who Perish* (Bonnier Eco) – her writing as immaculate as ever. Three non-fictions were also standouts: Janine Mikosza's brilliant and original memoir *Homesickness* (Ultimo); Sian Prior's *Childless* (Text), exploring the grief and consolations of childlessness; and Chelsea Watego's *Another Day, in the Colony* (UQP), a book whose insights into colonialism are personal and profound. I loved them all – and so many others.

Lucy Treloar's most recent novel is *Wolfe Island* (PanMac).

This year has been, for me, a standout for Australian literature. There are so many that I only have space to list them here, but I loved each of these varied and wonderful Australian books, and highly recommend them all: *The Lion in Love* (Finlay Lloyd), short fiction by Kevin Brophy; *The Jaguar* (UQP), poetry by Sarah Holland-Batt; *Homesickness* (Ultim), memoir by Janine Mikosza; *Forty Nights* (Ultimo), fiction by Pirooz Jafari; *Everything Feels Like the End of the World* (A&U), short fiction by Else Fitzgerald;

Australiana (Ultimo), fiction by Yumna Kassab (Ultimo); This Devastating Fever (Ultimo), fiction by Sophie Cunningham; The Sun Walks Down (A&U), fiction by Fiona McFarlane.

Emily Bitto's most recent novel is Wild Abandon (A&U).

I've spent the past couple of years making a documentary, so my reading has been largely restricted to science papers, but I did manage to squeeze a couple of treats in this year. Two of them horsey, as it happens, and both inspired by real people. Robert Drewe's latest novel, Nimblefoot (Penguin), about a young "pedestrian" racer who goes on to be a jockey and a fugitive, is a bag of picaresque fun. It's lovely to see an old hand enjoy himself so thoroughly and masterfully. I also read a chiselled little gem by American writer Kathryn Scanlan called Kick the Latch (Daunt Books). It's about a horse trainer called Sonia and told in her unforgettably downbeat voice. Such poise and economy – I can't remember a novel about work that's impressed me so. And of all the climate-related books I found this year, one stood above the rest. Joelle Gergis' Humanity's Moment (Black Inc) is clear-eyed, wounded, humane and above all, honest. Not many books feel necessary, but here's one that qualifies.

The film adaptation of Tim Winton's Blueback by Robert Connolly opens in cinemas on New Year's Day.

I found reading tough this year but Liminal's book of non-fiction essays Against Disappearance (Pantera) stretched my brain in new ways. As did Kathryn Savage's beautiful book-length essay about US Superfund sites, brownfields and bodies called Groundglass (Coffee House Press). I enjoyed Jennifer Egan's The Candy House (Little, Brown) and gobbled up Elizabeth Strout's Lucy by the Sea (Penguin) in hours. I loved the voice and pace (and, well, everything) in Cold Enough for Snow (Giramondo) by Jessica Au and the power packed in Small Things like These (Faber & Faber) by Claire Keegan.

Victoria Hannan's most recent novel is Marshmallow (Hachette).

Train Lord (Michael Joseph) by Oliver Mol is a memoir about writing, physical pain and working on the railway – a compelling combination. Mol's powerful book is peppered with train stories; harrowing, funny, idiosyncratic – I couldn't get enough. Desire: A Reckoning (Text) by Jessie Cole is also a memoir, beautifully told, about sexual desire, and thwarted love, against a backdrop of climate crisis – a moving intersection. Liberation Day (Bloomsbury) is George Saunders' new collection of short stories. Wildly inventive, playful, unpredictable, and crackling with energy. I discovered Saunders when I read the very generous A Swim in the Pond in the Rain (Bloomsbury) – it reassured me more than any other book ever has, about writing. Thank you, George Saunders.

Sofie Laguna's most recent novel is Infinite Splendours (Allen & Unwin).

Every so often you just want to spend time with someone you like and let them shoot the breeze about stuff that interests you both. Like writing. Lee Kofman's The Writer Laid Bare (Ventura Press) is an intimate look at the process and what the author brings to it.

And popular music: Bob Dylan encouraging a fresh look at songs familiar and obscure, in his characteristic style, in *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (Simon & Schuster). And neurodiversity: Pete Wharmby's *What I Want to Talk About* (Jessica Kingsley) is as fine a description of the experience of autism and the obstacles facing autistic people as I've seen, wrapped in an exploration of his Special Interests, from Lego to the Titanic.

Graeme Simsion's *Creative Differences and Other Stories* (Text) will be published in January.

Tasmania lay at the heart of most of my favourite books of 2022. *Waypoints* (Puncher & Wattmann) by Adam Ouston is a literary spectacle of aerial acrobatics that seamlessly ties Houdini's little-known attempt to fly across Australia with the disappearance of MH370. I was completely unsettled by Adriane Howell in her genre-busting *Hydra* (Transit Lounge), with its story of a disgraced antiquarian escaping to the outskirts of a possibly haunted military base. And if there's such a thing as speculative gothic fiction, Brendan Colley nails it in *The Signal Line* (Transit Lounge) about a ghost train that appears in Hobart, depositing a slew of very confused passengers. Further afield, Jenni Fagan's *Hex* (Polygon) is a compellingly unhinged reimagining of the Scottish witch trials. Alas, not much can be said of my most anticipated book of the year (decade/century), Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* (Picador), which turned out to be a disappointingly middling affair.

Bram Presser is the author of *The Book of Dirt* (Text).

In this strong year for collections I've been struck by the power and the restlessness of the short form, which so perfectly reflects apocalyptic times. Else Fitzgerald's *Everything Feels Like the End of the World* (A&U) is the standout post-human climate fiction – read it from beginning to end for its epic build. Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (Bloomsbury) transcends form through a linked pandemic narrative – exquisite in prose and speculative feats. *The Burnished Sun* (UQP) by Mirandi Riwoe is a realist beauty that decentres dominant narratives and completely gripped me with every story. While Chelsea Watego's stunningly crafted *Another Day in the Colony* (UQP) is a vital collection of essays speaking to First Nations people while reckoning with colonial violence – I couldn't put this book down.

Laura Jean McKay's *Gunpowder* (Scribe) will be published in August.

Hats off to Australia's female scholars who continue to research and write brilliant works of cultural, political and literary history even though their chances of being displayed in an airport bookstore or promoted through a Summer Reading Catalogue are wafer thin. If military and matey history are not your go, try *Staging a Revolution* (Upswell) by Kath Kenny, *My Tongue is My Own* (Black Inc) by Ann Marie Priest, *An Uncommon Hangman* (NewSouth) by Rachel Franks, *Indelible City* (Text) by Louisa Lim (Text), *My Giddy Aunt* (Upswell) by Sharon Connolly and *Boundary Crossers* (NewSouth) by Meg Foster. Fearless, fascinating accounts of rule breakers, rule makers and rule enforcers. Happy summer reading.

Clare Wright's most recent book is You Daughters of Freedom (Text).

Far and away my favourite novel of the year is Joanna Quinn's The Whalebone Theatre (Fig Tree). It's a gorgeous book, following the lives of three half-siblings from the '20s and through World War II, the same canvas Kate Atkinson has used to such great effect. Love, grief and comedy in perfect balance: it's hard to believe that this accomplished novel comes from a first-timer. A more experienced practitioner is John le Carré, whose collected letters, A Private Spy (Viking), make for a mesmerising read. From eager-to-please schoolboy to world-class novelist, the life's all here. One last gift from one of our finest novelists – though, intriguingly, there are glimpses of as-yet-unpublished final fictions ...

Mick Herron's most recent novel is Bad Actors (Baskerville).

There are no heroes and villains in *The Uncaged Sky* (Ultimo), this powerful story of Kylie Moore-Gilbert's days in an Iranian prison, but only human beings. The depth of Moore-Gilbert's empathy for the human condition is extraordinary; even her tormentor, the torturer, is revealed by her to be a fellow human being, and not simply an object worthy of her lasting hatred. This author is incapable of hatred, is incapable of simplifying her experience and reducing it to the commonplace stereotypes of good and evil. She avoids the traps of such reductionism and sees deeply into the complexity of the human tragedy, and she writes of it with the compelling clarity of genius.

Alex Miller's latest novel is A Brief Affair (A&U).

The great Barbara Ehrenreich, who we lost this year, said there's a vast difference between "positive thinking" and existential courage. The books I've loved in 2022 share that quality of existential courage: Chloe Hooper's exquisitely-observed *Bedtime Story* (Scribner); Anita Hill's feat of clear-sighted synthesis, Believing: Our Thirty Year Journey to Ending Gender Violence (Penguin); Jackie Bailey's unflinching, *The Eulogy* (hardie Grant), and Anna Spargo-Ryan's *A Kind of Magic* (Ultimo), reframing redemption. The best non-fiction refracts reality, allowing us to see the human and natural world anew: the stellar Astronomy: Sky Country (Thames & Hudson) Krystal De Napoli, Karlie Noon & Marge Neale; Caste: The Lies that Divide Us (Allen lane) by Isabel Wilkerson, and The Premonitions Bureau (Faber) by Sam Knight. Last, a novel that made me better at writing and living: Elizabeth Strout's glorious Oh William! (Penguin).

Sarah Krasnostein's most recent book is The Believer (Text).

Tasmanian writers remain ascendant. Ben Walter's What Fear Was (P&W) is a hymn of place, a bravura display of sentence-smithing, exploring his island and knotty humanity. Robbie Arnott's dignified and surprisingly conventional *Limberlost* (Text) is a gem. Adam Ouston's ambitious, Lissajous-curved *Waypoints* (P&W) chases its protagonist's varied obsessions down fabulous rabbit-holes. Jock Serong's The Settlement (Text), set in Van Diemen's Land and Flinders Island, is a powerful evocation of colonialism with a reverberant message. Proving there are also good books beyond Tasmanian shores,

Fugitive (Upswell) by Simon Tedeschi is a shimmering meditation on performance, identity and music. I was gut-punched by the rawness and courage of Sian Prior's *Childless* (Text), its honesty a brutal gift.

Michael Winkler's *Grimmish* is published by Puncher & Wattmann.

The Premonitions Bureau (Faber) is journalist Sam Knight's bizarrely moving story of a British psychiatrist's obsession with ordinary citizens who are gifted (or cursed) with the power to foretell disasters. *Life With Birds* (Upswell) by Bronwyn Rennex is "a suburban lyric" whose formal freshness and sweetly bent wit are shadowed by the mystery of her father's experiences in the Vietnam War. Jayne Tuttle's two linked actor-in-Paris memoirs, *Paris or Die* and *My Sweet Guillotine* (Hardie Grant), start merrily and step off the edge into calamity, in writing that is joltingly alive, beautiful and terrifying. My year's stand-out is Shannon Burns' shattering *Childhood* (Text), a work of unsparing self-depiction, coolly detached and brilliantly analytical: a nightmare recounted by a calm and sophisticated intelligence.

Helen Garner's most recent book is *How to End a Story: Diaries 1995-1998* (Text).

Always so grateful for the experiences the best books bring you. Being neck-deep in Hannah Kent's aching and illuminating *Devotion* (Picador) and then sitting right beside her on a stage in Newcastle as she read a passage from it with such heart and feeling that I felt like I was at a Joni Mitchell concert. Chuckling in a kind of gentle awe with every unexpected turn in Bobby Palmer's *Isaac and the Egg* (Headline). Having just read Bryan Brown's frequently hilarious collection of crime yarns, *Sweet Jimmy* (A&U), and then watching him on a stage in Byron Bay as he gave 500 or so people some rib-obliterating insights into why all those morally questionable characters feel so real. Then driving back and forth to high school with my daughters listening to Sinéad O'Connor via audiobook read her incredibly sad but sometimes sweet *Rememberings* (Penguin). Nothing compares 2 books!

Trent Dalton's most recent book is *Love Stories* (HarperCollins).

Cold Enough for Snow (Giramondo) by Jessica Au stayed with me for weeks after I finished it. It's a short, subtle novel that captures the nuances of relationships and memory in a way I've not encountered before. I find it hard to fully articulate what I love so much about this book (usually a good sign) so I'll just say this: it's quietly brilliant and it left me aching. Another slim novel I adored was *Waypoints* (P&W) by Adam Ouston. It follows Bernard Cripp as he seeks to recreate Houdini's historic attempt at a controlled flight in Australia, but as the pages build the narrative flies off on tangent after tangent, following Cripp's obsessions, fears and passions. It's a hypnotic and intricately layered story, told with masterful control. Also, it's very funny.

In non-fiction, two memoirs burned bright in my reading year: *Childhood* (Text) by Shannon Burns and *Train Lord* (Penguin) by Oliver Mol. *Childhood* details Burns' harsh, continuously uprooted adolescence in Adelaide and brings a powerful, textural quality to

his relationships and experiences. It's a terrific book. *Train Lord* follows Mol as he takes a job as train guard, partly as a way of dealing with (and avoiding) a series of unbearable migraines that are preventing him from writing. It's shaggy, imperfect, raw and glorious; at times it feels like Mol is opening his veins onto the page.

Robbie Arnott's most recent novel is *Limberlost* (Text).

For me the book of the year was Fintan O'Toole's *We Don't Know Ourselves* (Head of Zeus), an intensely personal history of Ireland since his birth in 1958, dubbed by one critic "a myth-dispelling masterpiece". As witness-participant O'Toole takes us through the dramatic transformation of a closed, brutally repressive, misogynistic society, dominated by an alliance of the Catholic clergy and the IRA, to morph into a progressive member of the EU. The book is a tour de force, as emotionally wrenching as it is funny and furious, enthralling as any fiction. A perfect fictional companion for O'Toole was Claire Keegan's Booker-shortlisted *Small Things like These* (Faber), her subject as small as his is sweeping, yet touching the same nerve and eliciting the same admiration.

Cassandra Pybus' most recent book is *Truganini* (A&U).

My bookshelf was happily packed with page-turners this year, including Benjamin Stevenson's dazzlingly fresh take on classic crime, *Everyone in My Family Has Killed Someone* (Penguin), and Sally Hepworth's deliciously dark and twisty domestic noir, *The Soulmate* (Pan Macmillan). There were fantastic reads to be found across the genres: Miranda Luby's debut young-adult novel, *Sadie Starr's Guide to Starting Over* (Text) was smart, sensitive and gorgeously moving, while I raced through Blake Crouch's stylish sci-fi thriller, *Recursion* (Pan Macmillan).

Jane Harper's most recent novel is *Exiles* (Macmillan).

Fiona McFarlane's *The Sun Walks Down* (A&U) is a stupendous reworking of the lost child story that brings a 19th-century outback community to life with almost casual brilliance. McFarlane's characters are mesmerising, her vision is inclusive and her prose is electrifying. This magnificent novel is destined to be a classic – read it now. *Shirley Hazzard: A Writing Life* (Virago) by Brigitta Olubas is a capacious treasure-house of incident and detail. It takes us from Hazzard's Sydney childhood to her travels in Italy and her many literary friendships. A glorious treat for Hazzard fans, this illuminating biography is also a gift to readers as yet unacquainted with Shirley the Great. *The Jaguar* (UQP) by Sarah Holland-Batt is another virtuoso collection from a remarkable poet. It delights and impresses with its range of forms, its deep compassion, and its flawless command of image and line.

Michelle de Kretser's most recent novel is *Scary Monsters* (A&U).

My read of the year was *Tongerlongeter: First Nations Leader and Tasmanian War Hero* (NewSouth) by Henry Reynolds and Nicholas Clements, an astonishing account of three decades of organised resistance by Aboriginal Tasmanians to the British invader. Many histories give an account of Indigenous dispossession as one of passive victimhood; this

one tells the story of warrior nations that fought back. So prolonged was the Tasmanian war, so great its impact on white settlements that it influenced British colonial policy thereafter, including in New Zealand. Clements is a natural storyteller and Reynolds is at his eloquent and acerbic best. Theirs is one of the great untold Australian stories and a compelling case for a long overdue Indigenous war memorial. If you feel you might be ready to give up on poetry try Sarah Holland-Batt's collection, *The Jaguar* (UQP). The Jaguar is an actual car that her father bought in his decline from Parkinson's disease but it wouldn't matter what the poems were about, it's her artistry that is exhilarating.

Amanda Lohrey's most recent novel is The Labyrinth (Text).

My book of the year is the short-story collection, *How to Gut a Fish* (Bloomsbury), a debut by Irish writer Sheila Armstrong. With opening lines such as "the moon is always one second old", each story is absorbing on every page. Peter Doyle's *Suburban Noir: Crime and Mishap in 1950s and 1960s Sydney* (NewSouth), extends his fascination with the relationship between the underbelly of Sydney and the photographic documentation of crime scenes. A must for crime buffs. Julie Gough is one of Australia's most important artists. Her body of work, documented in *Tense Past* (Tebrikunna Press) interrogates colonial violence and the myths of terra nullius. It is a vital work in search of truth over lies.

Tony Birch's most recent book is Dark as Last Night (UQP).

I was genuinely frightened, this year, by two knockout debuts: Scott McCulloch's brutal, apocalyptic novel, *Basin* (Black Inc), and Katerina Gibson's sardonic, surprising *Women I Know* (Scribner). I loved too, Chris Womersley's fabulous *The Diplomat* (Picador) and Sophie Cunningham's *This Devastating Fever* (Ultimo) – a triumph of tone and lightness (in Calvino's sense of the word).

Many of my favourite books are more like mists than stories – atmospheres you move through and emerge from changed, although who knows how. Jessica Au's *Cold Enough for Snow* (Giramondo) was such a book. From elsewhere there was Gwendoline Riley's *My Phantoms* (Granta): genius! And Alejandro Zambra's *Chilean Poet* (Granta), which was both thrillingly traditional and refreshingly contemporary at the same time.

Miles Allinson won the Age fiction Book of the Year Award for *In Moonland* (Scribe).

The Sun Walks Down (A&U) by Fiona McFarlane is the best novel I've ever read about 19th-century Australia. A tense search for a lost child unfolds with rising dread against a landscape of harsh and radiant beauty, amid lives as tangled as barbed wire. *Sorrow and Bliss* (HarperCollins) by Meg Mason is unique and improbable: a witty novel about depression that's also a searching examination of love and its limits. *Worn: A People's History of Clothing* (Allen Lane) by Sofi Thanhauser is an ardent argument wrapped in a gripping travel adventure that exposes the true cost of the clothes on our backs.

Geraldine Brooks' most recent novel is *Horse* (Hachette).

This year has been intense. I've found myself reaching for collections, anthologies and novellas — things I could enjoy in snatches and grabs. I read Eda Gunaydin's *Root and Branch: Essays on Inheritance* (UNSW Press) on a fleeting work trip to the US. It's clever, unstintingly self-aware, and very funny. Bernadette Brennan's biography of Gillian Mears, *Leaping into Waterfalls* (A&U), prompted me to revisit some of the late writer's short fiction in *Fineflour* (UQP): the story *Mothers and Old Lovers* is forever seared into my brain. The Liminal anthology *Against Disappearance: Essays On Memory* (Pantera) is blistering and gutsy. Lastly, I've read Robbie Arnott's *Limberlost* (Text) twice already. Calling it (hopefully not cursing it) for next year's Miles Franklin shortlist.

Jennifer Down won this year's Miles Franklin award for *Bodies of Light* (Text).

My favourite reads covered the past, the surreal and the domestic. My historical pick, Caroline Petit's sweeping *The Natural History of Love* (Affirm), follows a 19th-century French naturalist and his lover from the wilds of Brazil to early Melbourne. For the surreal, Rhett Davis' *Hovering* (Hachette) is an original and blackly funny story of a guerrilla artist who returns to her home city where streets, buildings and entire suburbs are no longer fixed in place. And I envy everyone yet to read Paddy O'Reilly's *Other Houses* (Affirm). My heart broke for cleaner Lily as she searches for her partner, mixed up with the wrong people for the right reasons. It's as gripping as a thriller yet so tender.

Toni Jordan's most recent novel is *Dinner with the Schnabels* (Hachette).

I read classics early in the year — including *Anna Karenina* and *Oscar & Lucinda* — getting an extra kick in the prose from a COVID-induced fever. But the best new books I read (without hallucinating) included Robbie Arnott's *Limberlost* (Text) which further underlines his mastery of nature writing; and *Jesustown* by Paul Daley (Allen & Unwin), a scarifying tale of missionary colonialism. On Asia, I devoured *Indelible City* by Louisa Lim (Text), a punk history of Hong Kong; the futuristic noir of *36 Streets* by T.R.Napper (Titan) and *The Shortest History of China* (Black Inc) by Linda Jaivin, which supplied deep context to debates I hadn't properly understood. In crime, I loved Margaret Hickey's *Stone Town* (Penguin); and for something different — and vital — *Patting the Shark* (Penguin), surf journo Tim Baker's brave prescription for living well with advanced prostate cancer.

Jock Serong's most recent novel is *The Settlement* (Text).

For much of her remarkable life, Danielle Laidley felt compelled to conceal her authentic self. Then, in a cruel and craven breach of privacy, her truth as a trans woman was publicised without her consent. In her beautiful memoir, *Don't Look Away* (HC), Danielle reclaims her narrative, defines her journey, and tells her story on her own terms. It's an inspiring, disarming, and deeply moving book, and it deserves to be widely read. I simply cannot recommend it enough.

On the fiction front, Wildflowers (A&U) by Peggy Frew seized my heart. It's a confronting, generous, infectious, acutely observed novel. I'm a glutton for short-story collections, and this year was a cracker. The standouts for me were the inventive and humane *Everything Feels Like the End of the World* (A&U) by Else Fitzgerald and the tenderly wistful, dryly funny, distinctly Australian *Scorcher* (Modernister) by Tim Ross.

Craig Silvey's most recent book is Runt (A&U).

The most interesting book I read this year was Devil-Land: England Under Siege 1588-1688 (Penguin) by Clare Jackson, which, as it says on the tin, is a history of England from the Spanish Armada to the Glorious Revolution. What makes this book different is the perspective. Jackson throws the Whig interpretation of history in the bin and views England with the jaundiced, amazed European eyes of the time, who saw the country as a crackpot failed state filled with pamphleteers, religious nutcases and regicides. Jackson's breathless and entertaining study, reminiscent of Polybius, reminds us that states can rise, fall, rise again and fall again with alarming contingency.

Adrian McKinty's most recent novel is The Island (Hachette).

The Booklist is a weekly newsletter for book lovers from books editor Jason Steger. Get it delivered every Friday.

In case you missed it: the culture stories that start conversations

For decades depictions of sex in Hollywood have studiously avoided focussing on a woman's actual sexual desires and pleasure. That is, until two female directors changed that this year.

Mildura, six hours drive north-west from Melbourne, is used to being overlooked. So, why did US band Kings of Leon choose this town – better known for its production of citrus fruits – to be the kick-off of their Australian tour? And how long did it take locals to realise this was not a practical joke?

Sunkissed, behind aviator shades, on a yacht with the Italian coastline behind, is Dominic West too handsome to play Prince Charles in the fifth season of *The Crown*? Fans definitely think so.

Read more for free. Register or log in now to unlock more articles.